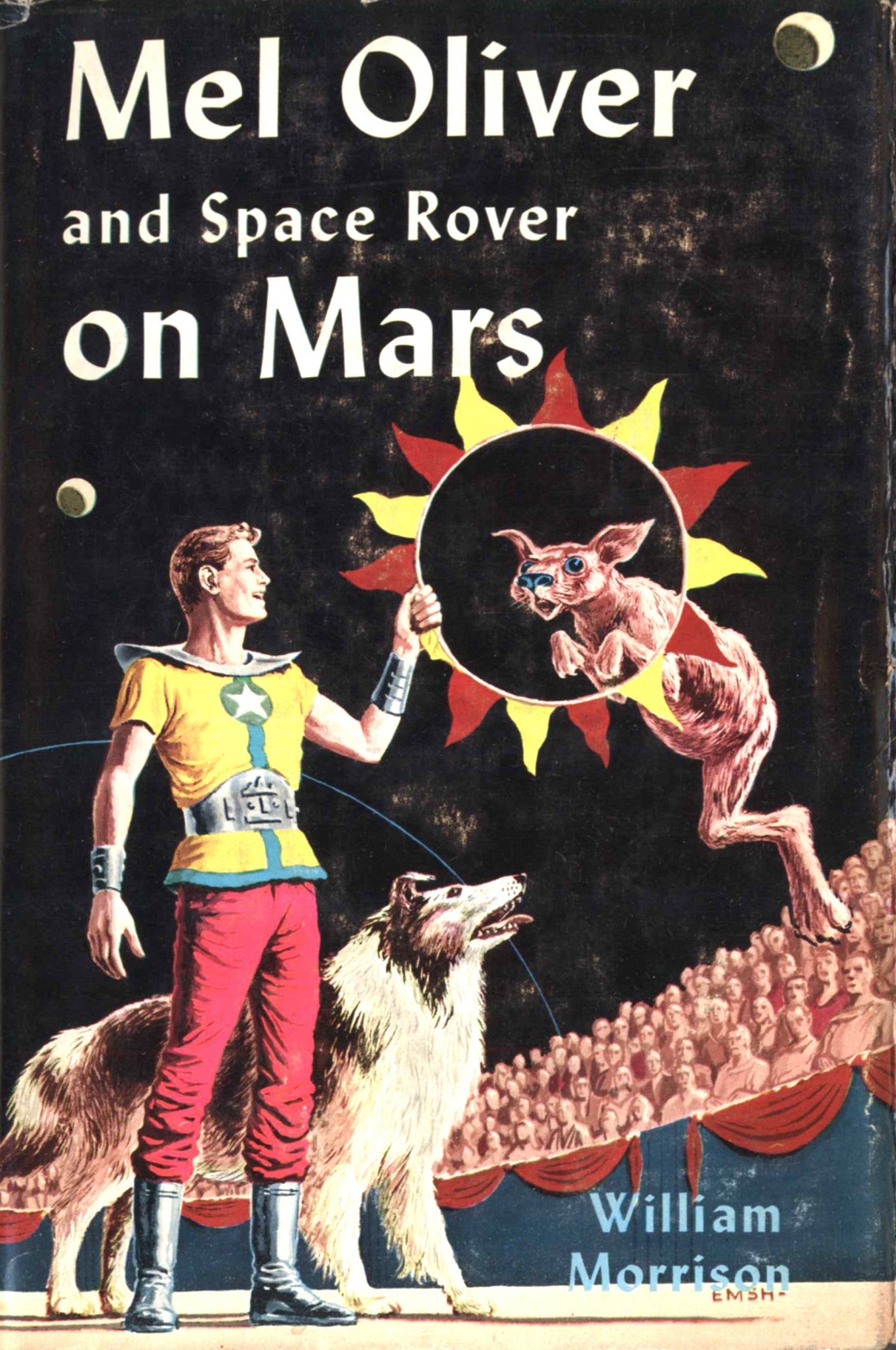
# Mel Oliver and Space Rover on Mars



William Morrison

**$2.50**

# MEL OLIVER AND SPACE ROVER ON MARS

by William Morrison

In the first of a new teen-age science fiction series you'll meet:

MEL OLIVER—the seventeen year old adventurer who stows away on a spaceship bound for Mars. On Earth he had fled from city to city, working at odd jobs, because somebody he didn't know tried to kill him. From one job to another danger followed until he finally decided to stowaway on a spaceship and go to some other planet where whoever or whatever was behind the mystery would never be able to find him. On board the ship he meets—

SPACE ROVER—one of the big, specially-bred, intelligent collies who is hiding in the depths of a spaceship closet. For some unknown reason Space Rover has stowed away on the ship along with Mel. On the journey Mel and the dog meet two of the strangest persons on board the ship—

BOLEM TURINO—the Martian strongman, raised on Earth, whose massive yard-wide body more than once stands between Mel and death during the rest of the trip and in the strange blister-cities on the Red Planet.

HAKIN—the marvelous Venusian Rubber Man with a body that can stretch until it is eight feet tall or contract so that it is shorter than the squat form of Bolem Turino. Hakin's unique powers also are an invaluable aid to Mel in helping to unravel the mystery centering about the boy.

*(continued)*

When someone mysteriously releases the animals of the interplanetary circus on board the ship, Mel and Space Rover's courage in helping to round up the ferocious animals is rewarded when they are adopted by the circus to work at a tumbling act. Practicing for the performance to be given on Mars, Mel meets some of the amazing creatures in the circus—

KABROR — the comical, three-legged creature from another world with a very unusual means of protecting itself.

THE ROBOT—dressed like a man and used to train a huge Bengal tiger.

Engrossed in the wonders of the circus, Mel has little idea that the spaceship is speeding him not only to the circus-performance on Mars, but also to the startling climax of the many mysterious attempts on his life.

*Mel Oliver and Space Rover on Mars,* the first in a new series of teen-age science fiction novels by William Morrison, is sure to be a favorite not only with young people, but also with those who are young no matter what their age.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MORRISON, although this is his first science fiction book, is well-known for numerous stories in the better science fiction magazines. Possessor of a doctor' degree in chemistry, his versatility is also shown by his ability to write a popular television show for children; produce a non-fiction book, *Let's Meet the Ballet* (under his real name of Joseph Samachson and in collaboration with his wife); and translate extremely technical scientific papers.

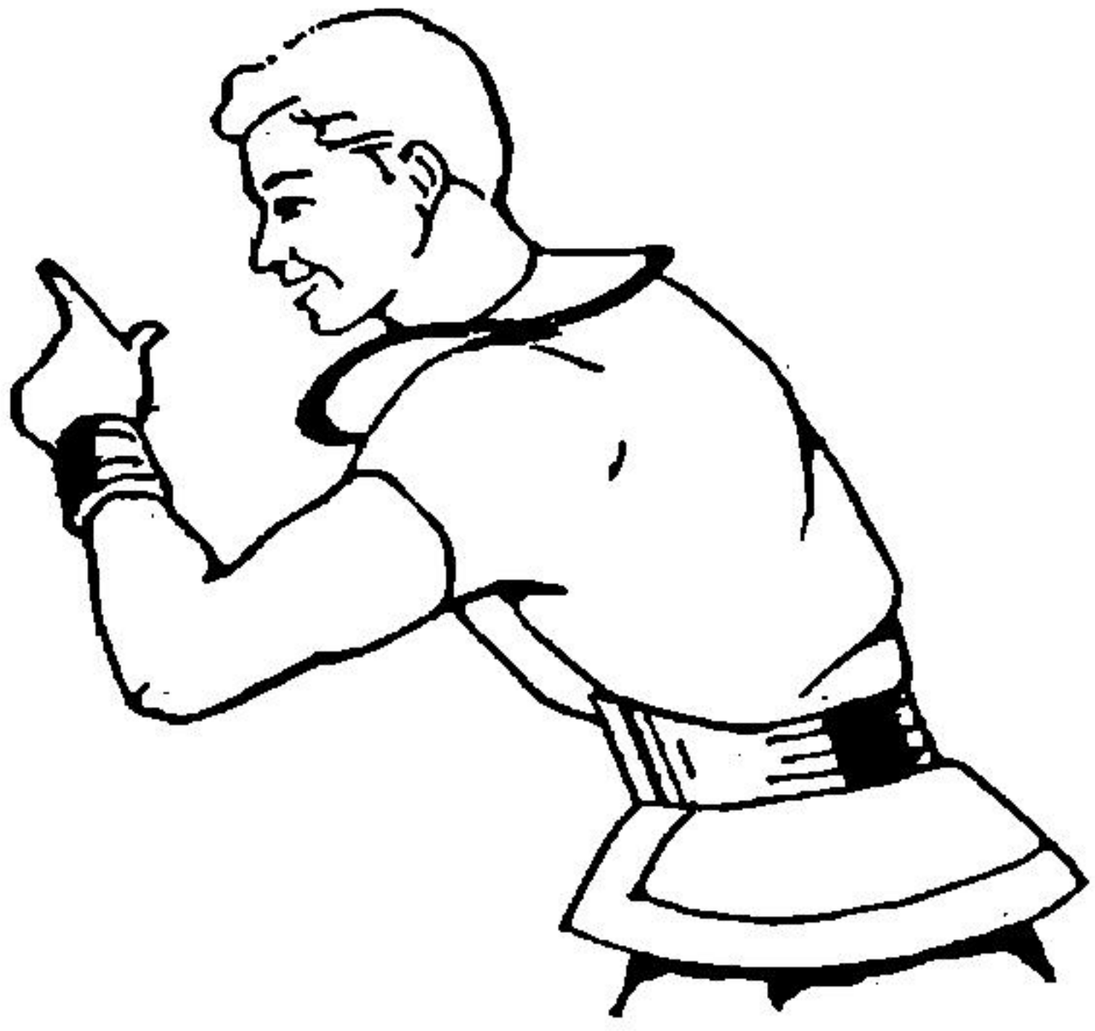
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*MEL OLIVER AND SPACE ROVER ON MARS*



GNOME PRESS, PUBLISHERS

# Mel Oliver and Space Rover on Mars



*BY WILLIAM MORRISON*

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# CHAPTER I

## *TWO STOWAWAYS IN SPACE*

HE WAS going to be caught. Not long from now, he knew, he was going to be trapped and thrown into the brig. The only question was what to do before then.

The ship was still picking up speed, not as rapidly as during the takeoff, but at a steady acceleration of almost half a gee, so that if it kept up at this rate, in a few hours it would be going dozens of miles a second. Earth was already a thousand miles or more behind him. Whatever else they did, they couldn't send him back now.

Mel Oliver took a deep breath, listened carefully for a moment, and then, fighting against the acceleration which pushed him back, crawled out from behind the crate of supplies where he had stowed away. The crate itself was firmly

clamped to the floor, so that no matter whether the ship speeded up or slowed down, it wouldn't shift around.

He wouldn't be able to hide long. With the takeoff only a few minutes behind them, the Captain and the engineers might still be busy checking the engines, making sure that the atomic fuel was disintegrating properly, that the ship was on its carefully calculated course. But soon they'd get around to estimating the air being recirculated through the different compartments, they'd take readings of the temperature all through the ship. They'd detect the extra air he was using up, the heat his body was giving off. They'd know a stowaway was aboard, and they'd find him.

What should he do before then?

A message, he thought, I have to send a message to Mars. I don't have any money, but if I walked up to the ship's operator and just pretended I was a passenger—

He shook his head. The radio operator would look at him and see at a glance how young he was. Just a kid, everybody called him, not a man at all. Not quite old enough to vote, even under the new laws that lowered the voting age to eighteen in many places. And what would a kid like him be doing on this ship? No, that wouldn't work. He'd have to think of something better.

A door opened, and he slipped back behind the crate. Were they aware of his presence already?

A man's voice, which seemed to slur its words in a peculiar way, said quietly, "There is no one around, O Powerful One. We can talk here."

A deeper voice replied, a voice that seemed to rumble like a peal of thunder in the ship's hold, even though its owner tried to keep its tones soft. "What is there to talk about? We know we can expect their dirty tricks. We'll just have to be ready for them."

"Perhaps we should warn our noble Captain."

Mel couldn't see them, but he knew that the man with the deep voice must be shaking his head. "No good. He'll just be mad at us for causing him trouble."

"But if we tell that he has a pair of Suspicious Ones on board, he will be forced to act."

"We don't know who the passengers are. And he isn't going to investigate the whole list, just on our say-so. No, we'll have to keep this to ourselves, and watch out for trouble."

So I'm not the only one who's worried about what's going to happen, thought Mel. For a moment he wondered who the two men were, and what kind of trouble they were afraid of. Then, as the door opened again and he heard them leave, he dismissed them from his mind. The important thing right now was that his presence here was still unsuspected.

As he crouched behind the crate, he began to have a curious sensation, as if somebody had tilted the ship beneath him. That was absurd, of course. He held on to the crate and looked around. Nothing had changed, and yet—

Then he figured it out. So long as the ship was accelerating, he could feel a pressure toward the stern, toward the place where the Earth lay. That pressure, due to the inertia of his body, took the place of gravity, gave his body weight. It made the difference between *up*, which was forward, and *down*, which lay toward the rear. But now the acceleration was decreasing, not all at once, but slowly and gradually. Down wasn't quite so strongly down. And to make up for the loss in feeling of weight, a new force was being applied. The pilot had begun to rotate the ship, to spin it about its long axis. As the ship spun, everything in it was pushed out, away from the center. A new *down* came into existence, directed toward the hull, away from the long axis.

As acceleration decreased, the spin would be increased. The artificial gravity wouldn't reach one gee, even at the hull, but after a while it would be possible, where Mel was, to move back and forth along the corridors that ran the length of the ship without holding on to the hand grips. Even now, walking was no more difficult than climbing a gentle slope. He would have to remember, though, that near the central axis of the ship, the artificial gravity would be close to zero.

He came out from behind the crate again. It was going to

be monotonous, as well as foolish, waiting here for somebody to find him. He'd simply have to take a chance, he told himself. Somehow he'd have to get that message to Mars. Suppose —suppose he walked up to the ship's radio operator not as a passenger, but as a member of the ship's crew. Suppose he got hold of a uniform somehow, and put it on. He could go up to the radio operator, hand in a written slip of paper, and say, "Passenger asks that this be sent to Mars at once, sir."

After the message was sent, they'd find out that something was wrong, they'd look for him and throw him in the brig, but by then he wouldn't care. The message would have been delivered. He grinned at the thought. That was it. All he'd have to do was to find a spare uniform. The lockers that opened off the corridors contained all sorts of material. If he was lucky, he'd find what he wanted in one of them.

And maybe, if he was *extra* lucky, he'd find something to eat. While he had waited for the takeoff, and then had crouched behind the crate, in fear of discovery, he hadn't realized it the way he did now. The fact was that he was hungry. His stomach was complaining, and he felt weak. How long since he had last eaten? Almost a day.

Well, he was used to not eating. He tightened his belt another notch. Even if they did capture him, he thought, there'd be that one advantage—they wouldn't let him starve. The ship's acceleration was much less now, and his body felt light. Yes, it was becoming much easier to move. He climbed over to the door, and hesitated. No sound from the corridor. He threw the door open and looked out.

The next moment he had closed the door behind him and was making his way down the corridor, using the hand grips just to balance himself.

He stopped at the first door he came to. This looked like a closet right here. Or did it? Sometimes it was hard to tell a closet door from the door to a stateroom. Were there staterooms in this part of the ship? It would be terrible if he guessed wrong and got into some passenger's quarters by mistake.

He put his hand on the knob and began to turn it slowly. But the knob didn't give. After all his worry about it, the door was locked.

He kept on down the corridor to the next door. This one wasn't locked. He took a deep breath and pushed it open.

The room or closet, whatever it was, was dark. He snapped his fingers, and with the sound, the light went on. He saw that the place was in fact a deep closet. Electrical floor-sweeping and cleaning machines were piled up haphazardly in one corner, driven there by the force of the takeoff, and a group of plastic cans had fallen on top of them. Against the wall hung not a row of uniforms but a confused mass of coveralls, probably used by the ship's crew when they had some dirty work to do.

Maybe there was a uniform behind the coveralls. He went over to the wall and began to toss the clumsy garments aside. At this moment he heard a sound—the sound of footsteps—in the corridor outside. He snapped his fingers hastily, and the light went out again. Then he dropped down, pulling a pair of the coveralls over him.

The footsteps had stopped. Then they began again—or was that another pair which had come to join them? Somehow they seemed heavier than they had done before. Yes, that was it, he decided. Two men talking in the corridor outside the door. Mel hoped that neither of them took it into his head to look into the closet. He was beginning to feel hot under the coveralls, to find difficulty in breathing. He twisted around, trying to lift part of them off in order to get more air. His hand swung around and—

That wasn't plastic he felt. Neither the hard plastic of one of the cans nor the soft plastic of the garment over him. It was too soft and smooth. It was fur.

Living fur, too. But silent. Some animal, some creature he hadn't even suspected, was hiding there in the darkness of the closet, had been hiding from before the ship took off. He caught his own breath and listened. But there was no sound from the animal. Not a movement, not a twitch of the

fur under his hand. Nothing, except suddenly a low, a very low growl.

He took his hand away, and felt his heart beating painfully, with even more excitement than it had beaten during the takeoff. He had no idea what sort of beast was here in the closet with him. If it attacked, it might tear him to pieces in a matter of seconds.

The feet outside moved, both pairs. The men were going away. He snapped his fingers, and the light came on again. Throwing aside the mass of coveralls, he stared at his companion.

A dog, by Pluto, a dog. A big powerful beast that looked like one of the new collies that had been bred the last twenty years. A beast with jaws that could rip apart even a bigger man with one bite, and yet with a wistful look on its face that made it look almost human. The dog was staring at him, waiting to see what he would do.

"Hello, fellow," he said, keeping his voice low. "You a stowaway too? Or do you belong to somebody on this ship?"

The dog couldn't answer, of course. The only reason Mel talked to him was that he hadn't talked to anybody for so long. He couldn't actually talk to himself, that would be crazy. But talking to the dog was different. A dog was an audience, it could sympathize with what you had to say, even though it didn't understand a word.

The funny thing, however, was that this dog did seem to understand. During the last century, Mel knew, some breeds of dogs had been getting smarter. They couldn't talk, because their throats weren't built for it. But some of them understood a lot. And maybe this was one of the smart ones.

"You do understand me, don't you, boy? I wish I knew your name. Mind if I take a look at your collar?"

He stretched out his hand, and the dog understood what he wanted to do. It didn't move away. And Mel found that it wasn't wearing a collar.

"No collar? Then you don't belong to anybody here. You

*are* a stowaway, aren't you? Why? Are you looking for someone? Or running away from a dog catcher?"

The dog's head moved sideways.

"You're shaking your head, aren't you? I wonder why you really are here. Anyway, you understand a lot. I'll bet you understand how I feel, too. I haven't had anything to eat or drink for a couple of ages. And you haven't either, have you? How did you get into this closet, anyway? Turn the handle with your teeth? Yes, that must have been it. You're a smart dog, you're smart enough to have done that."

The dog was looking at him in a questioning way. "You want to know why I'm talking so much, don't you? I don't usually chatter away like this. I'm the quiet kind, at least that's what they told me in the orphanage they sent me to after my father and mother died. Maybe it's because I never had the chance to talk to somebody who could understand me before. Dog or man, you're the smartest animal that's ever listened to me."

The dog seemed to nod.

Mel grinned. "Think you're pretty good, don't you? Well, you are. I like you a thousand times better than I liked that old Mr. Pringsheim, who ran the orphanage. I like you better than anybody I ever met."

Footsteps outside again. He snapped his fingers, and the light went out. This time he deliberately put his hand on the animal's head. The dog came closer to him.

Once more the footsteps died away. "We'll have to get out of here, fellow," said Mel. "We'll have to find something to eat and drink. And I have to send a message to old John Armstrong on Mars. He used to be my father's friend, he can help me. Now, you stay here and don't make a sound. You know what'll happen to us if they find us, don't you? They'll throw us in the brig—"

The dog seemed to shake his head under Mel's hand.

"No? You're wrong, boy. 'Boy.' I don't like that. You must have a name. What is it, Tippy? Prince? Rover?" Then

a sudden suspicion hit him. "Not Queenie or Duchess, by any chance?"

The dog just looked at him, as if disgusted at his stupidity.

"Okay, you don't have to look like that. I was just guessing. You don't care what name you have, do you, so long as it's a boy's name? Well, I think I'll call you, 'Rover.' It's a good old dog's name, and if ever any dog deserved it, you do. Quite a rover you are. A space rover. You start off from Earth and go to Mars, and maybe after that the asteroids, and Jupiter, and Jupiter's moons. You'll get around—if they don't find you first and throw you in the brig."

Again the dog seemed to shake his head, and suddenly Mel realized what the animal might have on its mind.

"You mean that they don't throw dogs in the brig? What do they do with them?" He paused for a minute, and then said shakily, "I see. On a ship like this space is too valuable to waste on dogs. You eat food and drink water and breathe air that could be used by humans. So they have no use for you. And if they find a stowaway like you, they simply toss him through an airlock, into empty space. You explode at once, of course, because of the air pressure inside you. And nobody cares, because you're only an animal—"

He cut himself short. "No. You're more than an animal. I don't know why you're aboard this ship, but I won't let them do that to you. I won't."

Mel snapped the light on again and stood up. This time he didn't tilt so much as before. He began to search once more through the mass of coveralls. "No uniforms. But maybe I can wear one of these things. Make believe I've been working around the engines. Smear my face with grease, just to help the idea along. And after I get that message sent to Mars, I'll toss this aside again, and dig up something to eat and drink. For both of us."

He picked out a pair of coveralls that didn't seem much too big for him and began to slip it over his clothes. By the time he was finished, he didn't have to worry about greasing his hands and face. The coveralls had done the job for him.

"Stay here, Rover. Don't let out a peep."

On a piece of paper he dug up from his clothes he wrote out a message. Then he snapped out the light and slipped into the corridor. With growing confidence he set off down the corridor as if he owned it. The ship seemed just a little tilted, and he didn't have to hold on to the hand grips at all.

A couple of passengers, a man and a woman, were coming from the other end. Mel allowed himself to glance casually at them as he passed. They were smartly dressed, wearing new Martian-style clothes that made them look like ancient Puritans, and they were too busy talking with each other to spare a glance at him.

At the next corner there was a three-way intersection. A ladder led up toward the central axis and down toward the hull. Another corridor led in a circle around the axis, connecting the lengthwise corridors. Here, on the walls, he found directions in glowing letters: ENGINE ROOMS, CAPTAIN'S CABIN, DINING ROOMS, RECREATION ROOM. But the one direction he wanted wasn't there. There was nothing about the ship's radio operator.

That, he thought, was odd. Or was it? Maybe passengers weren't supposed to have anything to do with the radio operator. Not directly, anway. Maybe if they had any messages to send they were supposed to do so through a ship's officer.

But that still didn't help him locate the radio operator. Or did it? Let's do a little thinking about this, Mel, old boy, he told himself. You wouldn't have the radio transmitter located near the ship's engine room. Suppose something went wrong with the atomic motors, suppose radiation got through the shields and the ship had to send out a call for help? The radiation near the engine room would blanket all the messages, and the ship would be out of luck. No, the best place for the radio would be someplace up front, where there would be least interference from the engines or the blasting jets. And it so happened that the Captain's cabin was up front too. That, decided Mel, was the place to look.

I'm an invisible man, thought Mel. When you put on a

pair of greasy coveralls and you get your face all greasy too, nobody pays any attention to you, except maybe to edge away a little for fear of getting greasy too. He walked down the corridor and past the Captain's cabin, and nobody even spoke to him. Nobody noticed that he was just a kid, pretending to be a crewman.

He found the radio operator's cabin, as he had expected, just two doors away from the Captain's. The radio operator was busy, although not at his work. He had a form sheet in front of him, and he was trying to pick the winner in the next Interplanetary races for space yachts.

He was frowning when Mel came in, and muttering something about the Star Racer being faster in a straightaway, and harder to maneuver. He didn't even lift his eyes from the form sheet to see the newcomer.

Mel shoved the piece of paper toward him, and the radio operator took it absently. "Captain says to send this right away," growled Mel, trying to make his own voice hoarse and gruff. "Big shot passenger wants it done in a hurry."

"No rush," said the operator absently.

"That isn't what he says. 'Snap into it, Mister,' he tells me, 'Get going right away.' " Mel turned and began to walk out. For the operator's sake he grumbled a bit, trying to sound resentful. "I don't see why he had to get *me* to do this. I got enough to keep me busy."

Outside the cabin he took a deep breath of relief. The operator hadn't suspected a thing. The radiogram would be sent. Now what he had to do was get back to his closet and get rid of these coveralls.

It was just at this moment that he heard a sudden scream from a woman passenger. And then an outburst of barking.

It's Rover, he thought excitedly. They've found Rover. They're going to throw him out into space!

He rushed down the corridor in the direction from which the barking came.

# CHAPTER 2

# *WILD BEASTS ON THE LOOSE*

A CREWMAN and an officer were standing near the open doorway of the closet. A little further away stood a dignified, middle-aged woman passenger, the one who had done the screaming. In the closet the barking had given way to threatening growls.

The officer had his hand on his gun, and Mel yelled in panic, "Don't shoot!" Then he dashed past the officer and stood in front of Rover, with his arm around the dog's neck.

"Who's this man?" demanded the officer.

The crewman was puzzled. "Don't know him, sir."

"You ought to know him. He's from the engine room, isn't he?"

"Looks that way, but—say, he isn't a man at all. He's just a kid."

"Out of the way, Son," said the officer. "We have no room on this ship for stowaway dogs. And this one is dangerous. He attacked that lady."

"He didn't! He wouldn't attack anybody!"

"He has a vicious look about him," said the woman. "Just look at him! He's so big and fierce. I mistook this door for the entrance to the upper deck and I was just starting to go in, when he leaped at me. I was terrified almost out of my wits."

She didn't have far to be terrified, thought Mel, but he kept that to himself. "I'll bet you scared him more than he did you," said Mel. "He was trying to hide. He didn't want to bother anybody."

More people were gathering about the doorway. Now another officer appeared, one with gold braid on his cap, and the first officer saluted. This was the Captain.

"What's the trouble, Masters?"

"We've found a couple of stowaways, sir. A boy and his dog."

The Captain said gravely, "What's your name, Son?"

"I'm Mel Oliver, sir."

"Mel Oliver. I see. You're the one who tried to send a message to Mr. John Armstrong on Mars, aren't you?"

"*Tried* to send, sir?" Mel's heart seemed to stop, then suddenly start up again, painfully. "You mean that the message wasn't really sent?"

"That's exactly what I mean. I'm afraid, Mel, that you don't know shipboard rules very well. The radio operator isn't permitted to transmit any message not signed or initialed by me. When he stared at that greasy slip of paper you handed him and saw that my signature wasn't on it, he phoned me. Of course there was no Oliver on the passenger list, and I told him not to send it."

"But you've got to send it, Captain!" cried Mel desperately. "It's important. It's a matter of life and death. I'll pay for the message."

"Do you have enough money on you to pay for it?"

Mel said slowly, "No, sir. But I'm sure Mr. Armstrong will let me have enough money."

"That's the man to whom the message was addressed?"

"Yes, sir. He was an old friend of my father's."

"And where is your father now?"

Mel said somberly, "He's dead. My mother and father were killed at the same time, in a space crash. I don't have anybody but Mr. Armstrong. And I didn't find out that he lived on Mars until just a short time ago. When I did find out, I didn't have the money to pay for passage. That's why I stowed away."

"Why are you so anxious to get to Mr. Armstrong? And what's this matter of life and death? Are you looking for somebody to take care of you?"

"No, sir," replied Mel proudly. "I can take care of myself. I've been taking care of myself since I was fourteen, when the orphanage sent me out to work for a farmer. It was hard work, but I managed. I've had jobs since then, and I've earned my own way. The reason I want to see Mr. Armstrong—"

"Well?"

Mel looked at the crowd around him. "That's my own business, sir," he said with sudden stubbornness.

"You say you've held down different jobs. Why did you change from one to the other? Why couldn't you save enough money for your passage?"

"There were reasons, Captain. Good reasons."

"And you don't want to tell them to me?"

"No, sir. Not now, anyway."

"You force me to guess at the reasons, Mel. And my guess isn't very favorable."

"I can't stop you from guessing, sir."

"What about this dog? When did you pick him up?"

"On board the ship, sir. He was a stowaway too. Please, Captain, don't order him shot or dumped overboard. I'll take care of him."

"You'll pay for his food and water and air?" asked the Captain.

"Later, yes, sir. When I get some money. He's a smart dog, Captain, and not vicious at all. He wouldn't hurt anybody."

The Captain said, "Do you know what the fare is for human passengers making the trip from Earth to Mars? Do you realize what it costs us for every pound of mass, dead or alive, that we transport from one planet to the other? No, Mel, we can't afford to carry non-paying passengers. Human stowaways are put in the brig and receive severe penalties when they arrive at our destination. As for dogs—" He shrugged, and turned to the officer who had been on the scene when Mel arrived. "Mr. Masters, dispose of this animal."

"But you can't!" cried Mel. "Captain—"

The Captain had turned his back and was already striding away. Masters said, "Out of the way, Son. You heard the Captain's orders."

He had his gun out again. Mel tried to hold on to Rover, but two crewmen grabbed him and dragged him aside.

But Rover wasn't waiting around to be shot. As the crewmen struggled with Mel, the dog dashed past them and leaped against the officer. The latter, with no chance to pull the trigger, staggered back, and Rover grabbed the gun in his mouth. The woman passenger who had first discovered him was screaming again. With the gun still in his mouth, Rover dashed down the corridor.

Passengers scattered out of his way. One of them, a fat little man, didn't move rapidly enough, and was knocked down. The whole corridor was in an uproar.

And then, as if that wasn't enough, other screams began to come from the intersecting corridor at the right. Screams and shouts, and—and roars, thought Mel. Roars as of enraged beasts.

In their excitement, the crewmen who had grabbed Mel loosened their grips. With a sudden effort, he tore free altogether and ran after Rover.

Another officer had pulled his gun and was shooting as

Rover rounded the corner toward the right, from which the new uproar came. Mel raced after the dog.

They had hardly gone a dozen steps, when Mel gasped and almost fainted. A frightening beast was rushing down at him on six huge feet. The whole animal was about seven feet long and four high, and its sides were covered with pink fur. It had a head, but no eyes that he could see. The great nostrils on the upper part of the head kept twitching, as if sniffing their way.

Behind it came a round thing about three feet high, that rolled like a drunken wheel. And behind that came a fearsome creature of a more common kind--a Bengal tiger.

The tiger leaped easily over the wheel, onto the back of the great pink animal. The latter let out a bray like that of a donkey, rolled over on its side, and kicking out with one of its heavy feet, knocked the tiger against the side of the corridor. The tiger's roars echoed from one end of the ship to the other, filling it so completely that Mel was conscious of no other sound.

Rover leaped forward, the gun falling from his mouth as he opened it. He barked furiously at the pink beast, which came to a frightened stop. Mel picked up the gun, ready to shoot at the tiger if the latter attacked. At that moment, a man raced around the corridor from the opposite direction. He was close to seven feet tall, and exceedingly thin. His clothes hung on him as if on a scarecrow. He had very long thin arms, and in each one he carried a gun of some kind. As the tiger leaped again, the newcomer fired. Smoke filled the air, and the tiger, snarling and choking, turned over in mid-leap. Mel's trigger finger hesitated just in time to keep from firing his own weapon.

After that, Mel was unable to tell exactly what was happening. Behind the tiger were other beasts, milling about, running into the walls and into each other. The tall man was joined by a man who was about a foot and a half shorter and three times his width. As the wheel-like thing tried to roll

past him, the wide man grabbed it and threw it down. It quivered for a moment, and then lay quietly on the floor.

All the time, Rover was barking, and dashing at the animals which were running toward him. One of them, a three-legged beast, tried to jump over the dog, but the corridor wasn't high enough, and Rover, launching himself in the air, knocked the creature down, but without hurting it. It uttered a shrill scream of fear, and leaped back.

The ship's officers appeared, with their guns, but the tall thin man prevented them from shooting. Gradually, with the help of Rover's barking, the wide man's powerful muscles, and the thin man's smoke and gas weapons, the animals were driven back. The two men and the dog followed, herding them into cages. The tiger was one of the last to go, but finally they got him into his cage, and dropped the transparent metalloid door in front of him.

The thin man said, "I am exhausted. Never, O My Friends, have I fought free from a more difficult situation." And before Mel's startled eyes he seemed to shrink half a foot.

An officer had appeared. He grunted, "You two ought to take better care of your animals."

The thin man said, "You do not think, O Sage Mr. Laughlin, that such creatures escaped from their cages by accident, do you? Or because we were careless?"

"That's exactly what I do think," said Laughlin.

"The thought is a measure of the deficiency of your brain, O Wise One. Is it not clear that some enemy let them out?"

"One of your passengers," added the wide man. "You'd better check your list."

Mel recognized their voices. The thin man spoke in soft slurred tones, the other in a deep rumble. They had expected trouble, and now they had found it.

"Don't try to pass the buck," said Laughlin. "We should never have taken the job of transporting those animals. They're more trouble than they're worth."

"Trouble? Not to you," said the wide man. "You and the

crew didn't stop them. All you would have done is kill them. We stopped them ourselves. With a little help from that dog."

They looked at Rover, who was standing there, panting, his tongue out. "Thanks for reminding me," said Laughlin. "I heard the Captain tell Masters to get rid of him. I guess it's my job now."

He was reaching for his gun again, when the wide man said, in his bass rumble, "You're not going to kill that animal, are you? Why, he's valuable."

"Not to us," said Laughlin dryly. "He'll use up food and air that we'd have to pay for."

"He *is* valuable," broke in Mel. He turned to face the thin man and the latter's partner. "He's a smart dog. Look how he helped you round up those animals, without hurting one of them."

"I saw him, O High and Mighty Mate, stop the three-legged kabror," said the thin man. "We all owe him much. If the kabror had found its way into the passenger's quarters, there might have been a most magnificent panic."

"What would the animal have done?" asked Mel.

"That," said Laughlin, "is none of my business. I heard the Captain give orders how to deal with that dog."

The wide man's huge right paw closed over Laughlin's more normal sized hand. "Just a minute, Mister. You're in a little too much of a hurry to use your guns. And they don't put you to sleep for a little while, but for good. I like this dog. He can be trained to do a lot of things."

"I told you there were orders from the Captain."

"He didn't give them to you. And anyway, maybe those orders can be changed. Suppose we were to pay this dog's passage?"

"I've got nothing to say about that. You'll have to talk to the Captain about it."

"Exactly what I'll do," rumbled the wide man, and went over to a wall phone.

Mel waited anxiously as the wide man spoke. Five minutes

later, a broad grin reassured him. The wide man said, "Done. We're paying for him, and he's going to stay alive."

Mel breathed a sigh of relief. Laughlin said, "I don't mind telling you that I'm glad it turned out this way. He's a nice-looking dog, and I didn't really like the idea of killing him." He turned to Mel. "Come along, Son."

"Where are you taking the lad, O Officious One?" demanded the thin man. "Is not the canine his?"

"The dog's a stowaway. So's this youngster. And his passage isn't paid for."

"It will be," said the thin man. "This time I myself shall talk to the Captain. Out of my way, O Underling."

But this conversation was not as short as the previous one. A dog, pointed out the Captain, might be smart, but he was just an animal after all, and he didn't know any better than to stow away. A boy, however, knew. He was well aware that stowing away was a serious offense, and by rights he ought to be punished.

After ten minutes, however, the Captain agreed to leave Mel in the care of the two men, and Laughlin went away empty-handed.

Mel said to the thin man, "Thanks, Mister." And to his partner, "And you too, for saving Rover's life. I'll pay you back some day."

"The dog has repaid us already," said the thin man. "Yes, O Rover of the Spaceways, it is we who are in your debt, not you in ours. We do not know why you have stowed away, but you have more than earned your keep, and if danger threatens again, as we fear it may, we shall be pleased at your presence amongst us."

His partner nodded. "I'm going to have another talk with the Captain and see if he'll check up on those passengers of his."

"That is what we should have done in the first place, O Powerful One," said the thin man. "Forgive me if I remind you that I made a suggestion to this effect."

"He wouldn't have paid any attention to us. Now, maybe,

he'll be more willing to believe us." He turned to face Mel. "Maybe it's a little late for introductions, but you'd better learn who we are anyway. I'm Bolam Turino. Came from Mars originally; joined a circus as a strong man, and spent ten years learning the ropes, before joining up with Hakin here in our own outfit. What's on this ship is only a small part of it. Hakin is a Venusian, as you can tell from his flowery language. The two of us are trying to get our animals to Mars. We expect to meet the rest of our crew when we get there. We've got a fair-sized circus, one to be proud of, if I do say so myself."

"I'm Mel Oliver," said Mel self-consciously.

"It is a pleasure to know you, O Fortunate Lad," said Hakin. Bolam Turino was standing between them, but without any effort at all, Hakin seemed to stretch his arm two extra feet, as he reached over to shake hands. "Greetings from the Rubber One."

"Hakin is billed as an India rubber man, but you never saw rubber do some of the things that he can do," said his deep-voiced partner. "But never mind us. You'll find out plenty about us just hanging around the circus. What's *your* trouble?"

"Yes," said Hakin. "You are no thief, my friend. Why did you make your way so slyly aboard this ship, when you knew that stowing away was a crime of more than minor magnitude?"

"I didn't want to," said Mel slowly. "But I *had* to get to Mars to see somebody. And besides, on Earth—"

"What was the matter on Earth?" demanded Bolam.

"Somebody was trying to kill me. And I didn't like the idea."

# CHAPTER 3

# *THE CIRCUS ON THE SHIP*

THEY were finishing dinner, and for the first time in days, Mel felt the sense of satisfaction that comes from eating a good meal when you're really hungry. The two circus men possessed a large store of animal food of all kinds, and Rover too had enjoyed himself. He now lay at Mel's feet, stretched out lazily without having to worry about being found and thrown into space. The ship's acceleration had been greatly decreased, almost to zero, and the absence of strong gravity produced a nearly weightless feeling that was a pleasure in itself.

Bolam Turino asked, "You're sure you don't mind, Mel, eating here in the circus quarters with us, instead of in one of the dining rooms?"

. . . 26

"I'd mind it if I had to eat in the dining rooms. I like it a lot better being with you fellows. Besides, they wouldn't let Rover into the dining rooms."

"They would not mind Rover so greatly, O Full-Bellied Friend," said Hakin. "It is we who disturb their petty minds. We have the aura of the circus about us, and they deem us freaks. When once we did go into one of the dining rooms, those present stopped eating to look at us. And do you wish to know the truth, my friends? They were the ones who seemed to me odd beyond words."

The wide man reached out with one of his big hands and absently scratched Rover behind the ears. The dog lifted his muzzle in enjoyment. "We *are* freaks," said Bolam. "Anybody that's out of the ordinary in any way is a freak. At least to some people."

"What I don't understand, Bolam," said Mel, "is how you got your strength. You're stronger than anybody I've ever seen on Earth. But Mars has pretty low gravity, and most of the people who grow up there don't have to develop their muscles a great deal."

"I didn't grow up on Mars. I was just born there. And then my parents moved back to Earth. At first I had a difficult time getting used to the new place. I suppose you've seen Martians who've returned to Earth after getting used to the gravity of a smaller, lighter planet. Just walking around, or even sitting, in Earth gravity, is exhausting for them. I felt that way at first too.

"But I was young enough to adapt, with a little help from my parents. They had me do special exercises, and the doctors gave me injections of drugs to stimulate muscle development. Usually the drugs have only a brief effect. With me, however, they continued to act much longer than usual, and I ended up like this. Just a freak."

"You don't look like a freak to me," said Mel. "I wish I was half as strong as you."

"I don't mind what I look like," said Bolam quietly. "I know what I'm like inside."

"And so do I, O Powerful One," added Hakin. To Mel he said, "There can be no more faithful friend. And the Wide One's unusual strength is indeed a comfort in time of trouble. It has saved our lives on more than one occasion. And it may save them again."

"I'm not looking forward to more trouble," said Bolam, frowning. "But I suppose we have to expect it. Whoever opened the doors of those cages—and I still don't know how it was done—is still on the ship, mingling with the other passengers. We haven't the slightest idea who the man is, and whether he's alone or not. But we do know that the man who sent him wants us out of the way."

"That is another reason, O Inquiring One," said Hakin to Mel, "for avoidance of the dining rooms and those parts of the ship which are frequented by the other passengers. It is an adventure fraught with danger to go there."

"But couldn't you put on a disguise?" suggested Mel. "I'll bet, Hakin, that you could make yourself even shorter than you are now. You could make yourself look altogether different. Nobody in the ship would recognize you."

Hakin grinned. "Our new friend's head is not as empty as the space outside the ship, is it, Bolam? You are right, O Scion of the Olivers, I can change my apparent size and even the cast of my features. Look."

Mel watched, hardly daring to believe his eyes, as Hakin twisted and shrank right there in front of him. From tall and thin he rapidly became short and squat, and at the same time, his features altered. Soon his face began to seem like a blurred copy of his partner's. He ended up looking like a younger brother of Bolam's, a little smaller and not so husky, but enough like him for the resemblance to be unmistakable.

"How am I?" he rumbled, sounding almost like Bolam.

The dog growled uneasily, and Mel said, "I know how you feel, Rover. I find it hard to believe myself."

Suddenly there was a sharp ripping sound, and Hakin groaned. His body began to change back quickly. "Alas, I must restrain my mimetic impulse," he said. "Each time I

give vent to my desire for change and expand my horizons, I rip my clothes."

Mel grinned. He could see Hakin's tanned skin through the holes that had been ripped, and now that the rubber man was tall and thin again, he seemed more like a scarecrow than ever. He said, "You'd better be careful about imitating Bolam."

"Never mind your clothes," said the wide man. "A couple of plastic patches will make them look like new. You can fix your suit in five minutes."

"Anyway," said Mel consolingly, "your disguise was perfect. I wouldn't have known you."

"It fools many," agreed Hakin with satisfaction. "But it is not perfect, O Flattering Friend. I cannot hold a face different from my own for more than five minutes at a time. And sometimes, when I am unusually weary, I also find it difficult to make my muscles retain their artificial form. Besides, to tell the truth, my friends, it *is* a nuisance having to worry about splitting my clothes. That is why the garments I usually wear fit so loosely. It is necessary for them to hang upon me like sacks in order that they may fit me when my body becomes like Bolam's."

He was back to his normal size now, and as Mel watched, he took from one of his pockets several plastic patches, which he carefully fitted to the torn spots in his clothes. When he had them in place, he pulled a little rip cord, there was a puff of smoke from the chemicals, and the patches fused into place.

"Now that I am once more well dressed," said Hakin, "I shall wander through the ship and see what I can learn. The wise man, O My Companions, lets pass no opportunity to acquire knowledge. Farewell, until we meet again, my friends."

When he started out toward the door that separated the circus quarters from the rest of the ship he was about six foot six. But at every step he shrank an inch, and as he left, he was only five foot ten.

Mel gazed after him. "Hakin is some disguise expert," he

said admiringly. "But I noticed one thing that might give him trouble. His voice isn't quite steady. And if he talks in that flowery way of his, he's sure to be spotted."

"You're not so stupid, Mel," said Bolam with approval. "His voice *is* the trouble. Just because his muscles can stretch so easily, he doesn't find it easy to speak in steady tones. But don't worry about his talking in a flowery way. He can be short and snappy if he wants to be. If he doesn't get excited and forget himself, and start talking too much, he shouldn't be caught."

"I can't help thinking," said Mel uneasily, "about those people who tried to ruin your circus. How did they get through that door?"

"I don't know," replied Bolam frankly. "I thought the door was foolproof, but it doesn't seem to have stopped them at all. That's why I'm afraid they'll try to harm us again. But come on, and I'll show you around. Then you'll have a better idea of what we're up against."

Mel didn't wait for a second invitation. He had never seen a performance by an interplanetary circus, and now he was getting a view of one from the inside. He followed Bolam down the corridor, and also without waiting to be asked, Rover in turn followed him.

"This part of our circus," said Bolam, "takes up about half the space usually reserved for freight. All interplanetary passenger ships, you know, carry freight too. Shipping space is too valuable to be wasted, and if there's a cancellation and no one is waiting to take the passenger's place, the cabin is filled with anything that needs rapid transportation. We pay higher than normal freight rates for our animals, because we not only take up space, but use air, food, and water. Not as much as you might think, though. Take a look at these cages."

Mel looked, and his first reaction was one of shock. There were at least two dozen small, transparent boxes, and inside each one, filling it almost completely, there was an animal

of some kind. "Isn't that cruel?" he asked. "Those cages are tiny. The animals don't have a chance to move around."

"They couldn't move if the cages were ten times as large. Notice that they seem to be asleep. We put them in suspended animation. You've heard of hibernation, haven't you?"

Mel nodded. "It's when an animal goes to sleep for a whole winter."

"Right. Well, a hibernating animal doesn't eat, and he breathes a tiny fraction of the air he'd breathe when awake. We can create artificial hibernation with most of our animals. They sleep through the distance from one planet to another. When we get to the end of our journey, we wake them up."

"How about the animals that don't sleep?" asked Mel. "There was that tiger, for instance, and all the others that escaped."

"We left them awake for two reasons. First, some of them can't be made to hibernate at all. And second, there are a few that we want to train. I'll show you later how we do that."

They walked along the corridor, and Mel and Rover both peered in through the metalloid cage windows. The tiger was pacing up and down restlessly, still excited by the great adventure of a little while before, when he had escaped from his cage and started to roam through the ship. Now he glared at them and roared, as if anxious to get out and tear them to pieces. The hair stood up like a ridge down the middle of Rover's back.

"You won't have an easy time training this one," said Mel. "He's fierce."

"It won't be as easy as with some beasts, but we'll manage without too much trouble," replied Bolam. The wide man seemed lost in thought for a moment. "Let me figure this out. We're accelerating very little now, and it'll be about ten weeks before we land on Mars and meet our circus crew. By the end of that time, this tiger will be a different animal. He won't dare make a move at me."

"That I'd have to see to believe," said Mel.

"You'll see soon enough. In fact, I'll show you right now."

"You're going in with him?"

Bolam grinned and shook his head. "I'm not so foolish. Even though I'm stronger than most men, I'm not really made of steel. That beast would tear me apart in five minutes."

"You can't train him from outside the cage, can you?"

"No. I'm going to send somebody in there with him. Somebody who *is* made of steel."

Bolam went to a closet and took out a black box. Mel noted that the surface was full of buttons and small switches, all of different shapes and colors. It was, in fact, an electronic control board. Bolam pressed one of the green buttons, and waited.

A door swung open—a closet door. And a man came out, a wide man, stepping somewhat stiffly. Rover growled as the man walked toward them, and Mel said, "Why, it's—it's you!"

"My twin brother," said Bolam. "And he's made of steel, as I said."

It was a robot, dressed like a man. Mel hadn't seen many robots, and he had a special reason for being interested in them. This robot approached the door of the tiger's cage and waited.

Mel watched as Bolam pressed more buttons. Red, green, and yellow, he noticed. The cage door opened and the robot went in. The door slid shut behind him.

The tiger leaped.

A purple button. The robot's arm shot out, and the striped beast went hurtling backwards, head over heels. At the same time, its fur seemed to stand on end.

Angry roars filled the entire room. The tiger leaped again, and once again was thrown back as easily as a man would throw back a kitten. This time, as the robot advanced toward it, it retreated to a corner of the cage and snarled defiance.

"In the old days," said Bolam, "the trainer would go inside the cage and use a whip or chair to make the animals keep their distance. With really ferocious animals, of course,

the method didn't work. And even at best, the animals were trained imperfectly. Once in a while they'd turn on their trainer and either wound or kill him.

"Our present method of training is more effective. It depends on what is known as reflex conditioning, which was discovered way back at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. You've heard of it, haven't you?"

"We had it in school," said Mel. "Something about a dog hearing a bell."

"Do they still teach it that way?" asked Bolam in surprise. "Schools don't change their methods very fast, do they? Anyway, conditioned reflexes were first studied in work with dogs. But what we've learned applies to all animals, at least of Earth type, and even to a large extent to Martian animals and to human beings. Young children learn very rapidly by reflex conditioning. As they grow older, however, and really become more human, they learn by conscious effort, by thinking about what they're doing. Some animals can learn that way too. Take Rover, for instance—"

The dog looked up at them at the sound of his name.

"Rover is smart, he can learn some things just from your telling him about them. But that tiger can't. He has to learn differently. And a lot more slowly."

The tiger, Mel saw, was lashing its tail, getting up its determination to leap again. Even from the outside of the cage, Mel had a tense feeling, a feeling of nervousness at being so close to so dangerous a beast. But to the robot there was no danger at all. The steel imitation of a man paused, and suddenly the tiger made up its mind and threw its body forward. Once more the only result was for the roaring animal to be thrown back, its fur bristling. This time, the roar was not quite the same as usual. It was almost a yelp, as of pain.

"That training robot," said Bolam, "is another me. At least as far as the tiger can tell. It looks like me, and since it's wearing my clothes, it smells like me. And it's teaching that tiger two things. First, that I can't be hurt. And second that I can cause pain."

"Pain?"

"Every time he's thrown back, that beast gets an electric shock. That's what makes his fur bristle. After a time he associates a man who looks like me with an unpleasant experience. He doesn't *think* about it. It's just like a mechanical memory that's pounded into his nervous system. The sequence becomes automatic. Jump at me—pain. As simple as that. He becomes conditioned against jumping."

The tiger was now actually slinking away from the robot. "This one's learning fast," said Bolam with approval. "And he wouldn't learn any other way. I shudder to think of what would happen to an old-fashioned trainer who got into a cage with him and tried to keep him off with a chair or whip. It would be murder."

"If you were to go in there now instead of the robot," asked Mel, "would he hurt you?"

"He might. So far he's had only this one lesson. What's needed now is to make the lesson sink in so deep that the tiger will never unlearn it, and give way to his natural desire to tear a piece off me. That means repetition, day after day. Meanwhile, I intend to go ahead with the next step. I'm going to teach him to sit."

The robot was following the tiger around the cage. When it got the beast in a corner, it stretched out steel hands. The tiger lashed at it, but the only result was another shock, and the beast cowered.

The robot seized the tiger and pushed him back on his haunches. "Sit!" commanded Bolam, and the command was repeated in the cage, in his own voice, through the robot's speaker.

The tiger tried to squirm away, but metal hands held him down. After a few seconds, the robot allowed him to get up again, then pushed him down once more as the command, "Sit!" was repeated. By the end of five minutes of this, the tiger was half squatting at command, and needed only a slight push to get him into a sitting position.

"He has already become partly conditioned to the word,

'Sit,' " said Bolam. "The next step is to complete the conditioning and then to condition him to a hand signal. As I say, 'Sit!' I'll hold out my hand low, palm down. After a while, the tiger will begin to associate that signal with sitting. But I think he's had enough for now. Animals shouldn't be trained too long at any one session."

"Can't you train them in other ways?" asked Mel. "Like, by giving them food every time they do something right?"

"Yes, that can be done. Especially with beasts that aren't ferocious. But sometimes it becomes a nuisance when you have to keep feeding an animal all through its performance, and it refuses to do what you tell it to unless it gets a reward."

He pressed another button on the black box, and the training robot marched out of the cage, to be sent back to its closet. Bolam himself regarded his steel duplicate as no more than a useful tool, but Mel couldn't rid himself of a feeling of awe. The robot was so lifelike, it actually did seem like another Bolam.

"There are some beasts," Bolam went on, "especially those that didn't originate on Earth, whose reflexes can't be conditioned very easily. Even on Earth, you know, there are insects and other animals whose behavior patterns are so largely inherited that training in any real sense is practically impossible. What we do with those is build an act around their usual pattern of behavior, so that they *seem* to be obeying commands, although actually they're doing what they would have done without the command anyway. For instance, suppose you had a three-toed Venusian *sloot*—something like a wart-hog—and you wanted it to dig in the ground and uncover buried treasure. You couldn't train it to do that in a million years. But all you have to do is bury a rotten egg in the ground. Then, just before the sloot is released, you order it to dig for treasure. It smells the egg, and immediately tries to get at it. To somebody who didn't know any better, it would seem to be obeying your command."

"That's how they use trained animals in 3-D movies, isn't it?" asked Mel.

"One of the ways. It makes the animal seem much smarter than it really is. Another way is to use a double."

"You mean a robot animal?"

"No, just another animal that looks like the first one. For instance, suppose you want to show a smart cat, one that can open a door, and play dead, and sit up, and do half a dozen other tricks. Now, cats are hard to train, even modern cats. You might get a cat to do one or two of those things, but not all of them. But if you use half a dozen similar cats, each with its own specialty, the 3-D audience won't know the difference. It'll think it's watching the same cat all the time, and give the animal credit for being better trained than any cat can possibly be."

"I guess you have to know a lot to handle animals right. How many training robots do you have?"

"One for me and one for Hakin," said Bolam. "They're expensive, and we don't have any spares." He grinned. "Thinking of becoming a trainer yourself?"

"I like the idea," admitted Mel. "Let me see. This green button makes the robot come out of the closet. This red one opens the cage door."

"You're a good observer," said Bolam approvingly. "How about *this* green one?"

"It sends the robot into the cage. I think that green is to move the robot as a whole. This yellow—I don't quite get what that does. I think that it directs the robot against the animal in the cage. And the purple makes it throw the animal back."

"Almost right," said Bolam. "The yellow controls a whole set of actions against the animal to be trained. If the animal attacks, electronic relays induce the movements that throw it back. The purple button controls the strength of the electric shock. Purple is used only for large beasts."

He put the box aside. "Later on," he promised, "I'll let you use this. And I'll show you some of the less dangerous beasts. Some are very friendly, and we don't have to use a robot with them at all."

In his interest in the training of the tiger, Mel had forgotten about Rover. Now the dog recalled Mel's attention to himself by a low almost inaudible growl. Mel saw that Rover's ears were standing up, as the dog moved slowly and watchfully toward the door of the circus quarters.

"Somebody's at the door," said Bolam in a low voice. Almost as he spoke, there came the sound of a buzzer.

"Maybe it's Hakin," suggested Mel.

"No, Hakin has a key. He wouldn't ring. And he wouldn't stand out there waiting before making up his mind to come in."

Bolam went to the door and spoke into the phone. "Who is it?"

"Third Mate Coggins, with a message from Captain Duval. He wants to speak to you, Mr. Turino. Your friend, Mr. Hakin, is in trouble."

Bolam pressed a button, and a screen lit up alongside the door. Sure enough, the square-jawed man standing there wore an officer's uniform.

Bolam demanded, "What sort of trouble?"

"Well, sir, it seems that Mr. Hakin accused a passenger of trying to kill him. And the passenger said he was drunk, and there was a fight. The other passengers who were standing around broke it up, but I'm afraid Mr. Hakin was injured slightly. Besides, the passenger preferred charges against him."

"I see," said Bolam coldly. "Who is this passenger?"

"I don't know anything about that. All that Captain Duval wanted me to do was tell you about it, and ask you to come to see him."

"I'll do that, all right," said Bolam grimly. "I want to talk to him as much as he wants to talk to me." He turned to Mel. "It's time we had this out," he said. "You stay here, Mel. Don't let anybody in."

"I won't," promised Mel, and Bolam pressed the button that controlled the door, and went out. Mel watched in the screen as Bolam and the officer moved off down the corridor.

The next few minutes went slowly. Rover had quieted down once they found the man at the door, but now, suddenly, he started to growl again.

"Take it easy, Rover," said Mel. "Nobody's at the door now."

But Rover didn't quiet down. "What's wrong, boy?" asked Mel.

The dog made strange whining sounds as he looked pleadingly into Mel's face.

"This is one of those times," said Mel, "when I wish you could talk. You're uneasy about something, aren't you?"

The dog's growling stopped. For a moment he stood near Mel, listening to something that Mel couldn't hear. Then he dashed off, past cage after cage, toward the other end of the circus quarters, away from the door. Puzzled, Mel followed him.

Instead of keeping on toward the next room, the dog stopped at the wall. "I don't hear a thing," said Mel. "Is there something on the other side?"

Rover's head moved up and down.

"You've got sharp ears, Rover. Sharper than mine or any other human's. If you hear something, it must be there."

Mel stared at the wall. It was of a gray alloy, and looked like any other wall he had seen in the ship. And no matter how hard he strained to hear, no noise from the other side registered on his own ears.

All the same, he was willing to stake his life on it that Rover wasn't wrong. Something was going on behind that gray wall.

Suddenly he was aware of a thin line of black that ran up and down for about three inches on the gray. As he watched, the line grew. And now he could hear a slight hissing sound.

He knew now what was happening. Somebody was cutting through the wall with a small atomic torch, the thin heat-blade slicing through the alloy as easily as if it had been made of cheese.

He began to back away from the wall. Unexpectedly, a voice spoke: "Hold it, you. Don't make another move."

At first he stopped in surprise. Then he thought, "That's nonsense. The man on the other side doesn't see me. He's just guessing that I'm here." And he took another quiet step away.

The voice growled, "I said to hold it. I'm sending an x-ray beam through the wall, and I can see you just as plainly as if I were looking through glass. And this gun I have can plug you through the alloy with no trouble at all. Stay put, kid, and lift your hands into the air."

He froze into place and lifted his hands as the man had directed. Another growl said, "That's better. Don't try to pull any fast ones, or you'll be sorry."

The thin black line, completing two sides of a square, began to slice through the third. In another minute or so, Mel knew, the opening would be completed, and the unwelcome visitor would come in.

# CHAPTER 4

## *THE CURIOUS KABROR*

WHOEVER had tried to wreck the circus before was now going to make another attempt. Hakin and Bolam Turino weren't here to stop him, and it was up to Mel to do the job. And he was helpless before the stranger's gun.

The third side of the square was completed, the fourth black line began to grow. Mel's mind worked feverishly. A wild idea came into it, was rejected, and came back. Maybe it would work, maybe it wouldn't. What had the man threatened? He'd "plug" Mel, not "blast" him. That meant he had a gun which shot not a ray, but some small projectile. That meant—

No use trying to figure out the details, he decided suddenly. He'd have to act fast, or the chance to act at all would be gone.

He threw himself suddenly against the wall, and began to run alongside it as fast as he could.

From the other side there came a sharp noise. The wall seemed to bang against him as if someone had hit it with a hammer. There came another hammer blow, and then another. But no bullet came through, no projectile to tear his flesh. He had guessed right.

If he had tried to run *away* from the wall, the man wouldn't have had to shoot at such a sharp angle, and the bullet, hitting the gray alloy, almost head on, would have torn its way through. But because of the way he was running, the man had to fire at him almost alongside the wall. The angle between wall and bullet path was too narrow, and the bullet couldn't penetrate. Instead of tearing through, it had bounced off, just as a flat stone could be made to bounce off the surface of a pond when thrown at a sharp angle.

Meanwhile he had reached the other end of the room, near the cages. He was reasonably safe now, he thought. But he wouldn't be in another few seconds, when the man resumed the business of cutting through the metal, and the square of gray alloy fell out of the wall. If there was any way to stop the intruder, he'd have to think of it in a hurry.

If he only had some weapon, something with which he could neutralize the man's guns—

He darted suddenly for the closet to which Bolam had returned the black box. A quick pressure of his trembling finger on the first green button, and the robot made to resemble Bolam came out.

That was his weapon, thought Mel. The robot would defend him.

Another green button, to direct the metal man down the room. In another moment Mel would press the yellow, in an effort to send it against the man breaking in. And then the purple to give the man a shock he wouldn't forget.

The robot was marching down the room toward the spot where the wall was being cut through. The black square was almost completed now, and as Mel watched, the atomic flame

sliced through the last three inches. The gray metal hung there for a second, then clanged into the room.

The man who stepped through the opening was wearing an officer's uniform. Mel noted with surprise that he was the same square-jawed man who called himself Third Mate Coggins and had delivered the message to Bolam a few minutes earlier.

Mel's mind hardly had a chance to absorb that fact and to wonder whether Bolam had walked into a trap, when the man caught sight of the robot. Mel enjoyed seeing the change that came over him. His face showed both alarm and shock. Mel pressed the yellow button and the purple.

The robot wasn't acting right. Instead of attacking, it came to a stop. The man, shrinking away from it in alarm, had time to pull his gun. And the next moment the gun began to pump bullets at the robot's metal body.

Mel could hear the *ping, ping,* as the bullets bounced off. So could the intruder, for he stopped suddenly, as if dazed. It was at that very moment that Rover, of whom Mel had lost sight, chose to leap at him.

Rover's full weight caught the man in the chest and knocked him over. Then the dog's jaws clamped on the arm that held the gun.

Unexpectedly, the robot moved into action again. Not against the man, but against the dog. To Mel's horror, its metal arms tore Rover away from the man and threw him against a wall, just as they had thrown the tiger. But the man didn't escape unscathed. Before they were torn away, Rover's jaws managed to rip off the sleeve of his uniform, and the gun went flying from the helpless fingers.

The robot was approaching the dog grimly again, when Mel hastily pressed the robot's "neutral" button. The bulky metal figure, less than a foot away from the dog, froze into a twisted, motionless statue.

The man had his fingers on the gun again, when once more Rover leaped at him. Man and dog were struggling fiercely, rolling over and over on the floor. Mel put the black

box down and ran toward them. He pulled the gun out of the man's fingers and hit him over the head with it. All the muscles of the man's body relaxed at once, and he fell back as limp as a rag doll.

Rover let go of the man's arm and Mel looked at him. The dog's tongue was hanging from his mouth, and he was panting for breath. It had been knocked out of him, thought Mel, not by the fight with the man, but by being thrown against the wall by the robot. And by the electric shock which the metal creature had given him.

"Are you all right, Rover?" asked Mel. He ran his hand over the dog's side. "No bones broken?"

Rover seemed to nod.

Mel stared down at the unconscious man. "Outside of that crack on the head I gave him, *he* doesn't seem to be hurt," said Mel thoughtfully. "You didn't bite him. I guess you've learned not to hurt human beings, haven't you, Rover? Maybe that's what went wrong with the robot. It was built to train animals, and to knock them around when necessary. But it was built *not* to act against human beings. That's why it wouldn't move against this fellow. I guess I'd have known that if I hadn't been so excited."

He scratched his head sheepishly. "It took me a while to realize, but I got there finally. I forgot that a robot doesn't have any real brains. It can't really think as well as you can, Rover. You wouldn't hurt the man, but you stopped him from hurting me. The robot not only refused to move against him, it attacked you, just because you were an animal."

The man stirred, without opening his eyes. "He must have known that a robot wouldn't hurt him," said Mel. "But in that case, why was he afraid of it?"

And then the answer came to him: "He mistook the robot for Bolam! And he didn't expect Bolam to be here." Mel nodded, pleased with himself for having figured that out. "Keep an eye on him, Rover," he ordered. "I'm going to take a look at the stuff he brought with him."

Mel approached the square opening that the man had cut

into the wall. On the other side of it he found a small atomic torch and an x-ray flashlight, as well as a pair of spectacles with an opaque screen for converting the x-rays into visible images. There was nothing to indicate who the man was, or what else he had intended to do. But that, Mel decided, was easy to guess.

He returned to the place where the man was lying. "Probably came here to wreck the circus," said Mel. "But there's just a chance that he had something else in mind. Just a chance that he came here to get me. Maybe I can find out by searching him."

He began to go through the man's clothes. In one of the pockets of the uniform jacket he found a wallet. This contained a few bills, but no mark of identification. There was still nothing to indicate who the man was.

The man groaned, and tried to sit up. Mel stepped back, on the alert. The man might be exaggerating the extent of his helplessness, waiting for an opportunity to turn the tables on his captors. Mel couldn't afford to take chances.

But the man didn't seem to be faking. The blow on the head that Mel had given him had not only knocked him out but left him, even now, dazed and slow-moving. He opened his eyes and glared at his captors, and at first the only thing Mel could read in his expression was hate. Hate because a boy and a dog had stopped him short. A second later his eyes seemed to narrow a little, and now Mel knew that the dazed feeling was beginning to pass, and the man had begun to think of getting away from them.

"Don't try it, Mister," he said grimly. "Rover can move faster than you can, and whatever you try to do, you won't make it. And this time, he might hurt you. He doesn't want to, but he isn't a robot, and if I tell him to, he'll do it."

"You're a fool, kid," said the man. "Maybe the two of you could keep me here if I was alone. But I'm not alone. I've got friends on this ship, and in a few minutes they're going to come looking for me. And you won't be able to stop them and keep an eye on me at the same time."

Mel bit his lips. "You might be right at that."

The man saw that he was worried. "You bet I'm right. The best thing you can do is let me go. I'll get out of here and I won't bother you again."

"I can believe that," said Mel. "You wouldn't bother me again—until you could come back here with those friends you're talking about." Suddenly he laughed. "I may not be old enough to vote, but I'm not the fool you think I am. Bolam and Hakin will want to take a look at you, and I have an idea they won't want to turn you loose. I'm holding you for them."

The man's expression, which had begun to be hopeful, now became surly. "It'll be too bad for you when my friends show up," he warned.

"I wonder about that. Maybe you have friends coming after you and maybe you don't. In any case, I'm not going to take any chances with a tricky customer like you. Stand up."

Slowly the man obeyed. And once more his eyes narrowed, as if calculating his chances.

"I'm telling you again, Mister, you'd better not try it," said Mel. "Rover, if he tries to get away, don't be so gentle with him. Stand still, Mister, and just in case you feel like starting something, take a look at my dog's teeth. Sharp, aren't they? Think about them while I finish searching you."

Mel's hands moved swiftly over the man's body. Stuck to the man's forearm he found a pencil gun, which he removed. Evidently, this was a tough customer, who came prepared for all kinds of trouble. There was no sign of any other weapon that Mel could see.

"Now, march. Straight down the room. And you stick close to him, Rover."

The man's face flushed with anger, but he walked slowly ahead of them until Mel's command halted him. Mel slid open the door of a small plastic-walled cage in which a furry animal was sleeping. "In here!"

"In there?" The man's voice showed how startled and furious he was. "In that cage? With that flea-bitten beast?"

"Why not? The animal's hibernating, he won't hurt you. I don't think he has fleas, but if he has they're hibernating too. And even if he were awake, I think you're more vicious than he is. I'll bet you'd bite him before he'd bite you."

"Look, you little fool, don't talk to me like that!" shouted the enraged man. "I'm not getting in there with that beast! There isn't enough room."

"There's room to sit. And maybe you won't have to wait long for Bolam and Hakin to come back. Get in."

"No."

Rover growled, and Mel said, "I suppose you want Rover to coax you. Show him your teeth again, Rover. And take a bite out of him, just to give him an idea of how it feels. Where would you like to get bitten, Mister, in the leg or in the arm?"

The man shrank away from Rover. "Keep your dog off me," he said hoarsely. "I'll go into the cage."

Mel smiled. "I thought you'd change your mind."

Cursing to himself, the man crawled in. Mel slid the door shut and locked it. "Thanks for telling me about your friends," he said. "I'll be watching for them."

He and Rover took their positions by the door that had been cut in the wall. He had the two guns he had taken from the intruder, and Rover was more alert than any man could be. If he were taken by surprise, Mel thought, it would be his own fault.

But there were no more visitors. Not until a half hour later was there any further sound from outside. And then, when his watch by the wall was interrupted, it was by Bolam and Hakin, who entered through the door.

Hakin looked woebegone, and Mel asked quickly, "What happened?"

"Far too much, O My Young Friend," said Hakin sadly. He stared at the cage, and his eyes popped wide open at sight of the man inside it. "But events seem to have taken place here too. Where did you snare this ferocious beast?"

"He cut a hole in the wall and came in. Rover brought

him down." Mel explained what had taken place, and the two men nodded.

"Of course a robot wouldn't attack a human being," said Bolam. "I thought you knew that."

"I guess I did, but I was excited and forgot. Anyway, everything came out all right. And I thought maybe you wanted to ask this fellow some questions."

"We do indeed, O Prudent One," said Hakin. "There are some questions we should dearly like to ask this new-found friend of ours. But we cannot do so now. Observe him."

"Why, he's sitting there quietly—say, he's asleep!" exclaimed Mel.

"Naturally, My Young Adventurer. A hibernating animal does not breathe rapidly, but he does breathe. And in a cage of this kind there is very little circulation of air. What air is present is gradually saturated with *hibernine,* the drug we employed to put the beast to sleep. The man has been breathing for a half hour now the hibernine that came from the animal's lungs. No wonder his rebellious impulses have been quelled."

"But you can wake him up, can't you?"

"That would require less than an hour," said Hakin. "The awakening process is simple. We need but take the dormant one out of the cage and leave him exposed to the pure air of our space ship. The hibernine will slowly be expelled from his system, and then all that will be necessary will be to shake him a little."

Bolam reached into the cage and dragged the man out. "This is the same one who said he had a message for me from the Captain," he observed.

"It was a fake message, wasn't it?"

"Sure," rumbled Bolam. "It was supposed to lure me into a trap. I suspected it at the time, but I didn't say anything to you about it or let on in any way because I wanted to find out what they'd do. I thought it was time we got a look at the space rats who were trying to wreck our circus."

"Well, did you?"

"Not much of a look. I had an idea they had caught Hakin—" The rubbery Venusian's face took on a sheepish look—"and so they had."

"My beautiful voice betrayed me," said Hakin sadly. "They heard me exchanging a few words with a passenger, and from the magic of the sounds I produced, as well as the wisdom of what I said, they deduced my identity. Then they ambushed me as I came around a corner, and to put it vulgarly, knocked me out."

"I'm not so easy to knock out," said Bolam. "Besides, as I told you, I was expecting a trap. I headed for the Captain's cabin and kept my eyes open. As it happened, it wasn't my eyes that saved me, but my nose. When I smelled something like Martian oranges, only a little sharper, I decided that I had better hold my breath for a while. Then, as I took a few more steps forward, I pretended to stagger.

"They grabbed me in a hurry. They didn't want to wait too long for fear some one would come along and spot them. The first thing they did was drag me into one of the staterooms. I didn't put up much resistance until we got inside the room. There, as I expected, I found Hakin. What a sad sight he was."

Hakin nodded. "I was indeed a portrait of dolor."

"After I found him, I gave them a little surprise of their own. I let them learn that I wasn't as weak as I had pretended. They didn't know how strong I was, and I had the pleasure of cracking a few crooked heads together. It was more fun than I had had in days."

"And you say that you didn't get a good look at them?" asked Mel.

"No. They had stolen an idea from you by dressing as crewmen and smearing their faces with grease. I knocked a couple of them out, but the others had guns, and I had to beat a quick retreat with Hakin. The noise of shooting, of course, aroused the ship, and I was able to get Captain Duval to do what we had asked him to do before—start investigating his passengers. Just to prove that his intentions were good,

he threw in an investigation of his officers and crewmen for good measure."

"The Delaying One will find nothing now," said Hakin gloomily. "The criminals have had too much warning."

"You forget that space on the ship is limited," said Bolam. "There aren't many places to hide, and the Captain knows them better than any one else does. Also, he knows his crewmen and officers. He's liable to dig up one or two of the men who attacked me. And if he gets one that will talk, he may get them all."

"Do you suppose that our Beautiful Sleeping Friend here will bare his soul to us?" asked Hakin, as he indicated the man Rover and Mel had captured.

"He may," said Bolam. "I'll try awakening him soon. First, however, we'll have to put that big square of metal back into the wall."

"There's an atomic torch he brought along," said Mel. "He used it to cut through the alloy."

"Fine," said Bolam. "I think I can adjust the flame for welding."

Mel and Rover kept their distance as the two men fitted the square of gray alloy back into the wall. Hakin held the square in place with two suction disks, so that it wouldn't fall through on the other side, and Bolam applied the torch along the edges. The flame wasn't as hot as when it was used for cutting. The temperature was just low enough to melt the alloy and let the edges flow together. When the job was finished, there was a slightly uneven line where the cut had been made, but except for appearance, the wall was now as good as new.

"That'll keep unwelcome visitors out," said Bolam. "Now to awaken our friend. Hakin, let me do the talking. What I want to say to this fellow I can say without flowers."

He picked the man off the floor and shook him like a terrier shaking a rat. The man opened bewildered eyes. "What—"

"Remember me?" said Bolam grimly. "I was supposed to

walk into your trap, and be caught. I walked into it all right, but I kicked it to pieces. What will Closker think of that?"

"I—I don't know what you're talking about."

"You were a little slow saying that," observed Bolam. "You know, all right. You were hired by Gard Closker to wreck the animal collection of our circus. How much did he pay you?"

"Nobody paid me anything."

"You mean you do wrecking because you like it? Don't try to tell me that. Who are your pals on board this ship?"

"I don't have any pals," said the man sullenly.

"We're not getting much out of you," said Bolam. "You'd better talk for your own good. My guess is that you're a professional crook either on Earth or on one of the other planets, and that your fingerprints and the retinal patterns of your eyes are on file. It won't be hard to get identification. And you've already been guilty of at least three crimes—impersonating an officer, breaking into our quarters, and trying to murder Mel here. You've done enough to be sent up for life, especially if you already have a criminal record."

The man licked his lips. "You can't scare me," he said. "Even if you put me in the brig, my pals will get me out before we land on Mars."

"I am always pleased to meet an optimist," said Hakin. "My own philosophy is to look on the bright side of everything. But it appears to me that I detect a contradiction in your words, O Crooked One. A moment ago you had no friends. And now they are getting you out of custody."

"They'll be lucky if they can keep out of the brig themselves," said Bolam. "The Captain's rounding them up right now."

The man's eyes shifted warily around as if looking for a way to escape. Mel said, "You ought to know by now that you can't get away. Rover can move a lot faster than you can. And he's just aching for the chance to get at you."

As if to emphasize his words, Rover growled, and the man

edged away from the dog. Hakin said, "This animal does not please you, O Stubborn One?"

"That confounded dog was the one who caught me."

"There are worse companions," said Hakin. He asked casually, "How, O Uninvited Guest, would you enjoy the companionship of Felis Tigris?"

"Felix who?"

"That is the name of our tiger. The happy beast you managed to let loose a little while ago. I think that his cage would be large enough to hold you."

"You wouldn't do that!" cried the man, his voice shaking.

"I wonder much," said Hakin. "When circumstances demand action, who among us knows what he will do? We wish you to speak—and you say nothing. Perhaps the tiger will loosen your tongue. Perhaps also, once he has made your acquaintance, you would be of little use to us. Still, one must take these chances."

"That would be murder!"

"Would it, O Sanctimonious One? I recall that you were willing to let the tiger loose on the passengers in the rest of the ship."

"I didn't mean any harm," whined the man.

"The Striped One means no harm either," said Hakin dryly. "He wishes only to approach you and be your friend. He desires to surround you with his friendship."

"You'll be pretty warm," said Bolam. "You'll have a living fur coat around you."

Mel looked from Hakin to Bolam, trying to decide whether they would really put the man in with the tiger. They wouldn't, he concluded. It was just a bluff to make the man talk. But it was a good enough bluff to make him sweat with fear.

"The tiger is a nice friendly beast," went on Bolam. "In fact, all our animals are friendly." He suddenly snapped his fingers at an idea. "Especially the kabror. How about the kabror, Hakin?"

Hakin's face brightened. "There is an idea indeed, O Man

of Mind and Muscles. I was forgetting the kabror. You are right, it is a nice friendly beast. He biteth not, neither does he scratch. He asks but to enjoy the warmth of human affection. The more I think of it, the more do I think the idea a wonderful one, O Bolam. We shall put this man-beast in with the kabror."

"No!" cried the man. "You can't do that!"

"We can. You make a sad mistake, My Timid Guest," said Hakin. "I fear that you do not really know what the kabror can do. That is why you shun him, and misjudge him so cruelly. When you get to know him, you will love him the way—the way he will love you," he concluded with a grin.

Bolam took a grip of the man's collar in his powerful hands and dragged the man to the kabror's cage. Mel saw once again the three-legged creature that Rover had prevented from escaping into the ship.

The man fought hard, but Bolam's grip was unbreakable. Hakin slid the door open, and the man began to scream. Bolam's face wore an expression of contempt as his arm swung forward and the man stumbled in. The door closed on his screams.

Mel stared uneasily at the beast inside the cage, for the first time taking a good look at it. He had seen kangaroos in the zoo, and except for the fact that the kabror had one leg less, this looked like a small kangaroo. The beast was about three feet high, and two of its legs were short and delicate, like arms, held close to its head. But the third leg, on which it leaped, was broad and powerful, taking the place of the kangaroo's two hind legs. The face was small, but wider than a kangaroo's, and the eyes were rounder. Just now they were regarding with considerable affection the newcomer to the crowded cage.

"What does the kabror do?" asked Mel.

"Nothing, O Seeker After Knowledge. He does nothing at all. A pleasant beast indeed is the kabror, a true philosopher of the animal kingdom. He but sits in his cage and loves his neighbor in his own way."

"Then why did you put the man in there?"

"The kabror has a great appetite. He likes to eat, especially human food—don't be afraid, I don't mean that he eats human beings. Just food that human beings eat. And sometimes he's afraid that some other creature will steal the food he wants. So he takes steps to protect the food. And what steps! I'll show you."

Bolam took from a locker what appeared to be a small piece of bread. "It's a special biscuit for some of our birds," he explained. "Actually, it's enough like bread to appeal to our three-legged friend." He opened the door to the cage and threw in the bread.

The kabror went over to the bread and sniffed it. The man shrank away, looking as if he expected to be tortured.

Mel wondered curiously what was happening inside the cage. Rover seemed uneasy and drew back. A second later, Mel understood why.

Something invisible hit him in the face and made his head jerk back. He said, "Whew, what a smell!" And he moved away from the cage.

"Yes, O Sharp-Nosed One," said Hakin with a grin. "This is a perfume to put all other perfumes to shame. In all the planets of the solar system, and in all their satellites, there is nothing like it. Have you ever, My Young Friend, smelled a skunk? Compared to a kabror, a skunk sheds the fragrance of a petunia. But the kabror, being of a gentle nature, does not use his odor to harm his victims. He employs it merely to protect his food. When one sniffs his scent, one loses the desire to eat. And even if hunger made eating necessary, swallowing one's food would still be impossible. Unless, that is, one happened to be a kabror oneself. Regard the happy beast."

The kabror was holding the piece of biscuit up in its small forepaws and nibbling joyfully at it. But Mel didn't feel much like looking. He said, "I can't take much of this. I want to get out of here."

"No need of that," said Bolam. He threw a switch that was on a small control board on the wall. "We prepared for our fragrant friend before we moved him in here."

Mel became conscious of a breeze around his head, and the smell weakened. A small motor was creating suction toward a grill in the ceiling, and the odor was being rapidly swept up toward it from around the cage. But it wasn't being swept up so much from the cage itself. There the odor must have been as strong as ever, for while the kabror nibbled the biscuit, the man inside was trying to hide himself from it in a corner, with his arm over his agonized face, as if hoping to filter the smell out through his sleeve.

Suddenly he took his arm away and tried to spring up, banging his head against the low top of the cage. "Let me out of here!" he cried. "Let me out!"

"You'll have to talk first," said Bolam grimly.

"I'll talk, I'll tell you anything. Only let me out!"

"Did Closker send you?"

"Yes, Closker sent me. He told me to stop you any way I could, even murder. But I didn't go in for that."

"Too much of a gentleman to commit murder unless you get paid for it," said Bolam dryly. "How did you let the animals loose the first time?"

"It was one of my crewmen who did that. When he went through here, he put a tiny electromagnetic pellet in each cage door lock. You didn't notice it, but once a current was sent through, the pellet pushed the lock to the left. We sent the current through by radio beam, from outside the same wall I cut through before." He choked. "Let me out of here and I'll tell you the rest!"

"If you get out, you might change your mind. You'll do your talking first," insisted Bolam. "How is it that we didn't notice the pellets?"

"You didn't expect to find them. After they opened the locks, they fell to the floor, and we disintegrated them by sending an extra surge of power through them. And once the

cage door was unlocked, all an animal had to do was push it accidentally, and it would open."

"A most ingenious scheme, O Sniffer of Heavenly Scents," said Hakin. "A tribute to the ingenuity of the modern criminal mind. No wonder we had no idea how the deed was done."

"Let me out of here and I'll tell you everything. Please," begged the man. "I can't stand it in here any more."

"That is most unfortunate," said Hakin. But he and Bolam exchanged glances. "Nonetheless, perhaps there *is* such a thing as a surfeit of delight. And if our Visiting One changes his mind and refuses to talk, we can always throw him back in again."

"He deserves to be thrown back," argued Bolam. "He was willing to let the kabror loose on the whole ship. And the ship's purification system wouldn't be able to deodorize the air, as we can do with our special setup. That smell would have been circulating and recirculating through the whole ship for days, until they could put up special purifiers."

"I know that full well, O Wide One," said Hakin. "But I think that our visitor has learned his lesson." He approached the cage. "I shall let you out of here, My Not Exactly Friend. But do not cease to impart your most interesting information, or you will return at once. Do you understand?"

"I'll tell you anything, anything, only let me out and don't send me back here!"

Hakin unlocked the cage, and the man stumbled out. A few steps away from the cage he took a deep breath, and then let the clean air out again with a sigh. Rover approached him and eyed him warily.

"Who are your pals?" demanded Bolam.

"Two are disguised as crewmen, and one is a passenger. The passenger is Asteroid Charlie—"

A sudden push tilted the ship, and sent it spinning around and around on a wobbly horizontal axis. Mel, like the others, was knocked against a wall. The cages, like all other objects classifiable as furniture or cargo, were clamped down, but

inside them the frightened beasts tumbled head over heels, and began to howl, roar, or whimper, as their nature dictated. Mel, shaken, fell to the floor. A second later he got to his hands and knees just in time to see the man heading for the door out into the main section of the ship.

# CHAPTER 5

# *MEL MAKES A FRIEND —AND LOSES HER*

THE only one who kept his head entirely was Rover. His paws slipped on the tilted floor, and the wobbling spin of the ship must have disturbed his sense of balance, but somehow he managed to move along without slipping in time to reach their escaping prisoner. Just as the man was rising from the floor to open the door, Rover's jaws clamped on to his left ankle.

The man yelled, but Mel said, "Good boy, Rover."

Bolam and Hakin were busy calming the excited animals, who seemed more terrified by their loss of balance than by anything else that had happened. When the two men saw, however, that no real physical damage had been done, they turned to their captive again. Bolam said, "Nice work, Rover,

in holding on to him. I think he's the only one of his gang we have left. I have an idea that the pals he was just telling us about have made their getaway."

He went to a wall phone and called the Captain's cabin. He spoke briefly, and without hearing the other end of the conversation Mel found it impossible to understand what was being said. After a while, however, Bolam explained.

"That bunch of crooks knew that their pal was caught, and they realized that sooner or later they'd be picked up too. Either he'd squeal on them, or the Captain would find them in his search. So they sneaked into a lifeboat and jetted away. They made a clumsy takeoff, and the reaction from their jets spun the entire vessel around."

"Do you think they'll make a complete getaway?" asked Mel.

"It won't be easy to pick them up in space. We can't follow them, and there are no patrol ships nearby. All the space ports are being notified, and if they try to land the lifeboat somewhere they'll be caught, but I have an idea they won't do that. They probably planned to take off and meet another ship in space. And it was probably arranged by Closker, the man who hired them."

"At least," said Hakin, "we still possess our Loved One here." He indicated the man held by Rover. "And he will testify against Closker."

Mel wondered who this Closker was. But for the moment, Bolam and Hakin were too busy with other things to explain.

"I'm afraid," said Bolam, "that his word alone won't convince the authorities. It'll be just his say-so against Closker's. And Closker is an important man. Besides, this character might even change his story later, and claim we forced him to lie under threat of torture."

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Mel. "Turn him over to the Captain?"

"We'd better," said Bolam. "We don't want to take care of him."

"If for no other reason than to give our noble Rover's teeth a long rest," agreed Hakin.

A short time later their captive had been placed in the brig. Mel took a deep breath. "Well, now that we don't have to worry about those crooks any more, I guess we can relax."

"Only until we land on the Red Planet, O Hopeful One," said Hakin. "Closker is persevering. He will be sure to try again."

"Why?" asked Mel. "Who is Closker, anyway? Does he hate you for personal reasons?"

"Personal and business," said Bolam. "Closker had the interplanetary circus field practically to himself for about twenty years. Oh, I don't say there wasn't any competition at all, but it didn't amount to much, and Closker was shrewd enough to see to it that it didn't grow. Some competitors he forced out of business by cutting prices. Others he bought out.

"When we went to work for him, he made us lots of promises. He never had a strong man as powerful as me, or an India rubber man as lithe as Hakin. He wanted to try us out for a while, to see how we went over, and then he said he'd raise our salaries to what we should be getting."

"We were of little knowledge then," said Hakin. "We accepted his word all too readily. Alas, it proved but a frail reed. I played many roles—sometimes a giant, sometimes a living skeleton. I can stretch to a height of nine feet when I so desire. Both My Strong Friend and I learned to play the clown. Yes, we were exceedingly useful to Closker. But our salaries did not grow. They remained stunted, and when we mentioned that unhappy fact to Closker, he never lacked an excuse. This was our miserable fate for two years or more. Finally, we expressed our dissatisfaction to him with some force."

Hakin paused, and Mel looked from one man to the other. He noticed that Rover, sitting alongside him, was listening, too, and he wondered how much the dog could understand. Rover looked as if he understood everything, but he just couldn't be that smart, thought Mel.

"He laughed at us," went on Hakin. "Closker, the Much Amused One, laughed heartily at us. He told us that he controlled the circus business, and that if we did not relish that fact, we might take our departure. There was but one other interplanetary circus that made tours then, and he announced that if this rival attempted to hire us, he would take steps to force the unfortunate ones out of business without delay. We could either accept the salary he was willing to pay us, or have nothing."

Hakin paused. "I was about to express my full opinion of Closker, the Disgusting One," he continued, "but Bolam, less hot-headed, restrained me."

"It doesn't pay to blow your top," put in Bolam. "Not with a man like Closker. A man like him doesn't scare, and he keeps his temper always. Almost always, anyway. If you lose yours, if you get to the point where you're so mad you can't think or see straight, he's got you where he wants you."

"The Powerful One has an advantage in keeping his temper," said Hakin. "His mighty muscles."

"I don't understand," began Mel. "What do muscles have to do with it?"

"What Hakin means," explained Bolam, "is that I'm so strong that I can afford to keep calm. If somebody pushed you in a crowd, even by accident, you might get angry and think he meant it intentionally. If somebody pushes me, or steps on my foot, I usually assume it was an accident. Nobody picks fights with a man that looks like me. Haven't you ever noticed, Mel, that it's the little guys you know who are the most touchy, and have the biggest tendency to wear a chip on their shoulders? It's the big husky men who tend to take it easy."

"I guess that's true," admitted Mel. "But you were telling me about Closker."

"What I was saying was that I kept my temper and made Hakin keep his. I pretended to be overwhelmed by Closker's words. I thought it over and said, yes, he had us in a spot, and there was nothing to do about it but accept it. Maybe

another man wouldn't have been able to fool him, but I was, because again my muscles helped. Closker didn't know me too well then, although he thought he did, and he figured that because I had big muscles, I was musclebound in the head too. That's a mistake a lot of people make. I let Closker make it without setting him straight."

"We continued to labor in the Treacherous One's circus," interposed Hakin. "But we began also to exercise our minds for our own benefit at the same time. We studied the economics of the circus, we learned how Closker secured his animals and his trained acts, how he arranged his tours. We noted how much applause the different acts received, we mingled with the crowds and listened to the way ignorant spectators spoke about us and our colleagues. We attempted to learn the secret of popularity. At the end of a few years we knew more about certain aspects of circus operation than Closker himself did."

"That sounds like boasting," said Bolam, "but it's true. Meanwhile, we made contact with acrobats and other performers whom Closker had cheated as he had cheated us. We saved most of our money, as much of it as he paid us. And when finally we felt that we were ready, we quit, and started a circus of our own."

He absent-mindedly scratched Rover's head. "At first, Closker cursed us, but didn't do anything about our circus. We were operating on credit, and he didn't realize how much we really knew. He figured that we owed so much, we'd soon go bankrupt. But we had laid out a profitable tour, and the money came in fast enough to help us pay off all our debts in plenty of time. We ended the first season debt-free.

"After that Closker began to take us seriously, which means that he began to play dirty tricks. Well, we were ready for him. We had seen some of the tricks he had played on other circuses, and we were able to take a few precautions. He wasn't able to hurt us, and we kept on making money and growing. By now he's really beginning to be worried

about us. He'll be even more worried when he sees how we make out on Mars."

Mel said, "I've never seen an interplanetary circus performance."

"Wait till you get to Mars with us, and you'll see something worth watching. Unless you're in a hurry to meet your friend, Mr. Armstrong."

"I guess I won't be able to get to him," said Mel. "He doesn't know anything about me."

"After that message you sent?" asked Hakin. "Come, My Young Friend, the man can surely read."

"But the message *wasn't* sent," Mel reminded him.

"Oh, there is something of which I have neglected to inform you, O Worried One," said Hakin carelessly. "After the Powerful One secured my release from the criminals, our noble Captain was blaming his own lack of intelligence for paying so little heed to our warning. Bolam and I encouraged his feeling of remorse for a time, and then said that we would forgive him if he would send that message for you. By now this John Armstrong must have received a radiogram informing him that you are on your way to Mars."

"Gee, you're a couple of swell guys," said Mel huskily. "I never thought—"

"Let this be a lesson to you, Young Friend," said Hakin gravely. "Always think. Take nothing for granted. Like Rover here, let your mind be prepared for everything. Even when he is asleep, this sensible beast remains on guard. Do you not, Rover?"

Hakin stretched out a four foot arm to scratch the dog's head. Mel said slowly, "I suppose I *have* been taking things for granted. Ever since I got on the ship, I thought I shook off whoever was trying to kill me. Now I'm not so sure any more."

"Do you have any idea who it is?" asked Bolam.

"I don't know. I haven't the slightest idea why any one would want to get me out of the way."

"Who is John Armstrong?"

"He was my father's partner. My father was an inventor."

"Alas, Unfortunate One," said Hakin.

"Don't get him wrong, Hakin, his inventions worked, and he sold them. Mr. Armstrong was more the absent-minded professor type, with his head in the clouds. He and my father were working on robots, trying to figure out better methods of control. I'll bet those training robots you own use some of the inventions they worked out."

"Surprise would be out of place," said Hakin. "Go on, Young Friend."

"That's why you might think I should have known that the training robot wouldn't attack a human being. But it's a long time since I heard my father talk about robots."

"Never mind apologizing," said Bolam. "What I'm trying to find out is why some one wants to take your life. When did the first attack take place?"

"When I was fifteen," said Mel. "And it wasn't exactly an attack. Nobody hit me over the head, or anything like that. I had left this farmer I had been working for and held down a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant, not far from a spaceport. I used to get my meals free. I remember being hungry one day and taking a synthetic roast beef sandwich. After a couple of bites, I realized there was something wrong. I found out later what it was. The sandwich was poisoned."

"What did you do?"

"I tried to tell the restaurant owner that there was something wrong with the sandwich, but he got angry. He said he served nothing but the best. Anyway, I knew that it couldn't be a mistake, and it was clear that somebody had tried to poison me. And I had no idea who it was. I was scared, and I ran away, without even waiting to collect my week's pay."

"The wisest thing you could have done," said Bolam.

"It took me a while to find another job. This was in a factory making transistors on an assembly line. I was an office boy. One day, when I went on an errand to deliver something

to a foreman, somebody tried to drop a crate on my head. It just missed me by an inch or two."

"You didn't see the man who did it? You still didn't know why?"

"No. The whole thing was a mystery to me. I hardly knew anybody in the place, outside the office, and I didn't have any fights with anybody."

"It was obviously," said Bolam, "not a personal enemy, in the sense that some one hated you. It was simply that you had to be got out of the way."

"Why should any one want me out of the way?"

"Suppose we guess. You say that your father had a partner. When he died, what happened to the business?"

"I don't know," said Mel. "I was too young to think of such things."

"Somebody thought of them. How about your father's friend, Armstrong?"

"I haven't any idea what happened to him. He was traveling for a long time. I tried to send him letters, but they were always returned. Then I heard he had settled on Mars, and I thought that if I could get to see him, I'd learn what everything was all about. But I had been forced to change my job so often that I couldn't save up any money to pay for my passage. That's why I had to stow away."

"Mr. Armstrong interests me," said Bolam. "When we get to Mars, we'll see what we can learn about him. Meanwhile, you should be reasonably safe on this ship. Especially if you stay in our circus quarters. And if Rover remains with you."

Rover looked at him at the sound of his name, and Mel felt a thrill of confidence. Rover had a nose for danger. It wouldn't be easy to get to him while the dog was around.

Hakin said, "In the meantime, My Muscled Partner, shall we proceed with our animal training? We did not bring the kabror with us merely that he might perfume the ship."

"Why *did* you bring him along?" asked Mel curiously.

"He can be taught to do clever tumbling tricks. And he

is practically odorless, unless one permits a fragment of the wrong kind of food to fall into his clutches."

The kabror had long finished his biscuit, and there was only a faint odor now in the space around his cage. Hakin unlocked the cage, and the animal hopped out. He seemed, as Hakin had said earlier, to be an affectionate beast, but Mel could not help drawing away from him, just in case.

"He knows already how to sit and how to leap into the air on command," said Hakin. "He is an apt pupil. Of much higher intelligence than the striped beast. Sit down, O Fragrant One."

The kabror sat down on its one hind leg.

"Up, O Martian Rose!" commanded Hakin.

The kabror leaped slowly into the air, and just as slowly came down again.

"Such acts are simple here," said Hakin, "so long as the gravity is low. That is one reason we prefer to train our beasts far out in space. Now we go on to something new. Up again!" he directed.

The kabror leaped again, and this time Hakin used his long rubbery arms to turn its body in the air, so that the beast completed a full somersault before landing. "And yet again, O Emitter of Sweet Smells!" he coaxed.

After five minutes the kabror could do the somersault by itself, and Hakin was highly pleased. Mel asked, "What will happen when he tries to do a somersault in Earth gravity?"

"There will indeed be difficulties," admitted Hakin. "But the kabror has the necessary physical coordination to overcome them. Note that in this present low gravity he does not permit himself to leap too high. Of importance is the fact that here in the ship he can learn what is required of him."

Rover had been watching the training session quietly, sitting on his haunches alongside Mel. Now he stood up and made talking sounds to Mel.

Mel said, "What is it, Rover? Want to be an acrobat too?"

The dog walked slowly out into the middle of the training space, then leaped into the air. He went a little too high,

thought Mel, almost scraping the ceiling as he turned upside down. Then he seemed to drift down again, landing softly on his feet.

"Not bad!" cried Mel. "That wasn't at all bad for a first try, was it, Hakin?" And Rover too looked at the rubber man for approval.

"Very well indeed, O Clever Canine," said Hakin.

"Now you try it, Mel," came Bolam's deep voice unexpectedly.

"I?" Mel grinned self-consciously. "I never tried a somersault in my life. Never had time for things like that."

"You can start having time right now. Come on, Mel. This ship is just the right place for you to learn and to acquire confidence."

"I'm no acrobat."

"No reason why you can't become one. You and Rover can put on an act together."

"And why not the Fragrant One also?" demanded Hakin.

"There's an idea," said Bolam. "A good act with the three of you would bring down the house. You've got nothing else to do with yourself on the ship, so you might as well practice. Your first show will go on in Marsopolis, and that should be easy. Mars has low gravity too—a little more than a third the gravity of Earth. Acrobats can get some really sensational effects there. Mars is a fine planet for practicing before an audience and gaining confidence in yourself."

"I still think it's silly," said Mel. "But I suppose it won't do me any harm to try." He walked slowly and self-consciously into the middle of the practice space.

"Do not use your full strength here, My Young Friend," advised Hakin. "Spring gently, without trying to turn in the air as yet. Learn what your muscles can do in this gravity."

Mel tried to obey orders, and made what he thought was a modest jump. He rose high into the air, and lifted his hands just in time to push into the ceiling and keep from bumping his head against it.

"It isn't the easiest thing in the world to adjust yourself,"

said Bolam. "The animals do it better than humans can, at first. But we get there eventually. Try again."

Mel tried again, not quite so forcefully, and this time he stopped rising about a foot short of the ceiling, seemed to hang motionless in the air for a second, and then began to fall again.

"Fine," said Bolam. "Now try the somersault."

At the end of a quarter of an hour, Mel was performing the somersault with all the skill and apparent self-confidence of an old-timer. And alongside him, Rover and the kabror performed with equal confidence.

"I think we've got the beginning of an act there," said Bolam.

"There is indeed an act, O Powerful One," agreed Hakin. "It will bring down the house on Mars. But much practice is yet needed."

"A couple of hours a day, at least," said Bolam. "The exercise will do you good, Mel. And you'll have something to keep you busy during the long trip still ahead of us."

"I wasn't worried about keeping busy," said Mel. "I thought I'd learn to be an animal trainer."

"You can learn that too," said Bolam. "But at first your learning is going to be limited to watching. It's going to be a long time before we allow you to handle the training robots. You'll have to learn a lot more about animals first."

In a little while, the kabror was sent back to its cage. Mel and Rover continued practicing for a time, until Bolam made them stop. Mel protested, but Bolam was firm.

"You're young, and your muscles don't feel tired, but all the same they're not used to this kind of exercise. Better go easy at first. You'll practice for a longer time tomorrow."

Mel took a short quick shower. He knew that the water would be purified and recirculated, but even so there was a sign up in the shower room asking patrons to limit their use of water to the smallest amount possible. And just in case the patrons were disinclined to pay attention to the request, the

showers were automatically adjusted to turn off after one minute.

More a sprinkle than a shower, thought Mel, as he dressed in clean clothes that Hakin dug up for him. The rubber man had a fairly extensive wardrobe. Seeing that he could alter the shape of his body so greatly, he could wear suits of widely different sizes, and one of his pet economies was to buy for a very low price a suit which had been badly cut, or a pair of shoes that didn't quite match, and couldn't be sold to ordinary customers. He could, of course, change the size of his feet more easily than the tailor or shoemaker could change the size of clothes or shoes. Lacking Hakin's ability to expand or contract his body, Mel was careful to pick out clothes that actually fitted him.

Hakin and Bolam were busy with their animals, and for the first time since he had stowed away, Mel was able to set foot boldly in the corridors of the ship, without fear of being caught. He was a passenger now, on just as good a footing as anybody else. And so was Rover, who followed him.

The ship was no longer accelerating at all now, all the feeling of gravity being supplied by spin, so that the *down* direction was straight away from the center axis, and it wasn't necessary for anybody to use handgrips. The ship would continue without acceleration for weeks, except in case of emergency.

The corridor down which Mel started was not far from the hull of the ship, and the gravity was about six-tenths of a gee. When they came to a ten-foot ladder that led farther toward the center, Mel at first hesitated, then decided to descend. Instead of round rungs, the ladder had fairly wide steps, for the convenience of the passengers, and Rover might have descended with their aid. But he didn't even try. Instead, he simply leaped down.

"That's easy enough," said Mel. "But how about getting up?"

There was no trouble getting up either. With the gravity

so low, Rover could leap up the ten feet without too much difficulty.

As they went in toward the axis of the ship, the gravity grew less. Rover adjusted to this fact without trouble, simply because he accepted it, without wasting time thinking about it. But Mel had to figure it out.

"This spin-type gravity," he told Rover, "depends on how fast we're moving in a circle. Have you ever watched a wheel turning? The outside of the wheel moves fastest, while the middle just turns, hardly moving at all. And the spaces in-between turn at speeds that are in-between. That means that we feel less and less gravity as we go in, and when we reach the axis of the ship, we'll feel practically none at all. We'll just float freely in the air."

Rover looked at him as if he understood, although Mel doubted whether he really did. Still, you could never be sure about Rover. In some ways, as Mel had already learned, he understood more than many people.

As they walked along the corridors, passengers eyed them curiously. Dogs were rarely seen aboard space ships. Sometimes wealthy passengers took them along, but most people considered the cost of transportation too high to be wasted on a mere animal.

Mel found that when you had a dog along, especially a handsome dog like Rover, it was easy to make friends. People stopped to pet him, and Rover, who had a quiet dignified manner, allowed them to do so, although sometimes Mel felt that if the dog had his rights, *he* would be petting some of them. He didn't feel that way, however, when a pretty red-headed girl stopped and said, "What a beautiful dog!"

She was about his own age or a little less, with lively eyes that seemed to be laughing at him even when the rest of her face wasn't. Mel felt suddenly tongue-tied. He muttered, "Rover's all right."

"All right? Why, he's handsome."

"He's a lot better than that. He's a smart dog."

The girl's eyebrows went up. "So you don't appreciate good looks? You prefer brains?"

"I didn't say that. It just depends on what goes along with the looks. Now, in a girl—well, anyway, Rover has a lot more than the way he looks. He's a real friend."

"That's something," she admitted. "Real friends aren't so easy to find." She patted Rover's head, and the dog stared gravely at her.

"He saved the ship from a lot of trouble," said Mel.

"You mean when those animals from the circus got loose? I didn't see it, but I heard the noise, especially when that tiger roared. That must have been terribly exciting for you. Weren't you thrilled?"

Mel's tongue seemed to have loosened up, and now his face loosened too. He couldn't help smiling. "Thrilled? Almost to death."

"I don't like the way you say that!"

"I'd have been really dead if that tiger had got at me. I can do without that kind of excitement."

"You're just an old sour-puss," she said. "I *like* excitement. What are you on this ship for?"

"I'm going to Mars."

"I know that," she said impatiently. "Everybody on the ship is going to Mars. What I mean is—what are you going to do when you get there?"

"Meet some friends," said Mel. He knew better than to talk about the trouble he was having with unknown enemies. "And if I have any time," he added casually, "I'll do a couple of acrobatic acts in the circus."

"Really? You mean to say that you're an acrobat? That must be thrilling!"

"You get used to it," said Mel, as if the idea bored him. He didn't bother to tell her that so far he had practiced for less than an hour and had *not* got used to it. "I guess it seems glamorous to outsiders. But if you're part of the circus, like me, it's just a lot of hard work. Practice, practice, all the time."

"I wish *I* were an acrobat. My uncle doesn't let me do anything. He says I have to act like a lady."

"Personally," said Mel, "I like animal-training better. Wait till you see what that tiger of ours can do."

"You do animal training too? I'm so jealous," she exclaimed, "I could just explode!"

"That wouldn't be ladylike," said Mel.

A man came down the corridor, a rather husky man of medium height. In his mouth he had one of the long expensive Martian cigars, that he chewed on rather than smoked. He said, "Betty, I've been looking for you. I found a piano keyboard and a sound system in one of the cabins. It's time to practice your music lesson."

"Oh, gosh, I thought that once we got on the ship I'd have a real vacation. I don't want to go over all those exercises again and again."

"You can practice an hour each day, and still have a vacation. Come on, now."

She made a face, and said, "You order me around just as if I were a slave." She turned to Mel. "Good-bye, maybe I'll see you again. What's your name?"

"Mel Oliver."

"I'm Betty—Betty Major. Mel Oliver, this is my uncle—John Major."

Her uncle stared at Mel from under thick brows almost as if he wished Mel weren't there. "Hurry up, Betty."

Then she walked away down the corridor, with Mel and Rover looking after her.

Mel said, "Not a bad-looking girl, is she, Rover? I guess it won't be so tough being on a ship with her after all. But that uncle of hers—there's something about him I don't like."

Other passengers were coming along, and one or two officers. Mel recognized Mr. Laughlin, the officer who had formerly wanted to get rid of Rover.

Laughlin smiled at him in a friendly way. "Having a good time?"

"Yes," said Mel, rather coldly. "No thanks to you, though."

"Still mad at me because of what happened with that dog? I can understand how you feel, Son. But aboard a space ship, a Captain's word is law to his crew. And we had our orders. If the Captain told me to, I'd walk out into space just as soon as I'd put a dog out. How do you feel about it, Rover?"

Rover looked at him quietly, and made no sound.

"You don't expect him to fall all over you, do you?" asked Mel. "He knows what you were going to do to him."

"Maybe he does. But he's taking things calmly. I think that Rover has sense enough to let bygones be bygones."

Laughlin moved off down the aisle, and Mel kept going. Maybe Laughlin had no choice than to obey orders, Mel thought, but he still didn't like the orders.

He passed some of the passenger staterooms, and from one of them there came the tinkling sounds of an old piano. Somebody practicing, he thought, maybe Betty. He had to admit that the way she was playing, if she was the one, was not inspired. But he saw nothing to indicate that it was really Betty. And there was no sign of her uncle.

Mel got back to the circus quarters without meeting any one else he knew or making any more new acquaintances. Bolam and Hakin were still busy with their animals, and he stood quietly aside and watched.

The next few days passed without particular incident. Mel and Rover practiced tumbling and somersaults, gradually extending the practice period to two hours. The rest of the time Mel helped Bolam and Hakin in various ways, feeding the animals, cleaning the cages, and doing whatever odd job needed to be done. One of the oddest was giving the kabror a bath. The animal didn't seem to like the water, but put up no resistance, and when Mel was done with him, the creature's fur was nice and shiny. And strangely enough, he had a rather pleasant odor about him.

"It wouldn't hurt to give *you* a bath, Rover," said Mel. "When's the last year you had one?"

For the first time since he had met Rover, the dog behaved unreasonably. He hung back, and Mel, grinning, said, "You're not going to get out of this. Come on, Rover, get ready to take your punishment!"

When he had finished with Rover, the dog looked as clean as the kabror. But he didn't appreciate his new condition. The first thing he did was to shake himself, splattering water over every one in his way. And then he ran away where Mel wouldn't be able to get at him, just in case Mel had any other bright ideas.

After Mel was done with his tumbling and his other duties, he wandered through the ship again, hoping to meet Betty. It was some time, however, before he ran into her again, and when he did, their meeting was not a pleasant one. It was Rover who could be blamed for that.

Mel saw her coming down a corridor, and almost automatically his face broke into a smile. Betty smiled in return, and when she had approached, asked, "How's the circus? And how are you doing with your tumbling?"

"Both fine," replied Mel. And then his attention was attracted to Rover by a low rumbling sound. "What's wrong, boy?" he asked.

"He's growling," said Betty.

"Maybe there's somebody suspicious around," said Mel. "Rover can smell something wrong long before it happens. When a man tried to wreck our circus, he was the one who warned us."

But Rover wasn't growling at anybody hiding in the corridor or staterooms. Suddenly he barked sharply, and there was no mistaking the person he distrusted. "Why, he's barking at me!" cried Betty.

For a moment Mel didn't know what to reply. "Maybe he heard you play the piano and is warning you to stop it," he said at last, trying to be funny. But Betty didn't laugh. "I—I don't know what's got into him," Mel stammered. "He never acts that way. Quiet, Rover!"

But Rover barked again, and then backed away from Betty as if to emphasize his distrust. Mel saw the girl flush.

"Well, if your dog thinks I'm a suspicious character, I'd better stay away from you," she said. "Good-bye." And she left with her nose in the air.

# CHAPTER 6

# *MEL MEETS AN ENEMY*

MEL was so stunned that by the time he tried to call after her it was too late. He glared angrily at the dog, and said, "Now look what you've done. You've practically accused her of being a crook."

It was the first time he had found Rover doing anything that displeased him. But the dog didn't seem to be ashamed of his behavior. Mel shook his head, and said, "The idea of your thinking Betty is a suspicious character. Maybe I've been giving you too much credit for being smart. You're pretty dumb after all, if you can make a mistake like that."

Later on, however, when he told Bolam and Hakin what had happened, the two men didn't share his feelings. The strong man said thoughtfully, "Rover's no ordinary dog. If he's suspicious, there's cause for suspicion."

"But, Bolam, what can be wrong with her? She's just an ordinary girl—I mean, she isn't ordinary-*looking*, but she wouldn't try to hurt us in any way. I like her a lot."

"I remember some of the women *I* liked," said Bolam. "You can't go by that."

"I still say she's all right," insisted Mel. "And that crazy dog has got it into his head that there's something wrong with her."

"Our Clever Canine is far from a condition of insanity," said Hakin. "And he does not merely *suspect* something is wrong, he *knows*. Do you not, O Wise Beast?"

The dog seemed to nod.

"I don't believe it," said Mel stubbornly. "Maybe Rover can't stand the low gravity. Maybe he's suffering from a kind of space madness."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Bolam. He paused reflectively. "The dog's been wandering through the ship with you. Does he ever leave you to go off by himself?"

"Now and then," said Mel. "He doesn't bother any one. The passengers are getting to know him, and nobody complains about his being around."

"He must have learned something during one of those trips," said Bolam firmly.

"A great pity," said Hakin, "that his many gifts do not include the power of human speech. What secrets do you preserve in your brute bosom, O Friend of Man? Reveal them to us and receive our eternal gratitude."

Rover naturally did not reply to this kind offer. But he continued to look as if he knew something.

"The passage of time will reveal all," declared Hakin.

"Never mind the passage of time," said Bolam. "Mel, you haven't seen any sign of anybody you know on this ship, have you? No familiar faces, no one whose mannerisms you recognize?"

"Not a sign," insisted Mel.

"Nothing to make you think that some one you are acquainted with might be on board? I'm worried about what

you told us, about somebody trying to take your life. I think we have no right to forget about that."

"Nobody's tried to hurt me in any way. And I'm sure that Betty wouldn't have anything to do with such a scheme."

"Don't be too sure of anything," Bolam warned him. "There's plenty you have yet to learn. Better to hurt that girl's feelings than to take reckless chances. You keep Rover close to you wherever you go. And when he's suspicious, you be suspicious too."

"Not of Betty," insisted Mel.

Hakin sighed. "O Stupid One," he intoned, "My Mighty Friend has uttered words of wisdom. For thine own sake, give heed."

"Another thing," said Bolam. "We sent that radiogram to John Armstrong more than a week ago. So far you've had no reply, have you?"

"No," admitted Mel.

"There's something wrong there."

"Mr. Armstrong was always very absent-minded," said Mel defensively. "He's that kind of inventor. Besides, maybe he isn't at home. Maybe he's traveling."

"That's possible," agreed Bolam. "Let us hope that we hear from him later."

But the days passed, and they didn't hear. In his wanderings around the ship, Mel encountered Betty once or twice, but she always turned away before he could approach her, and just to make sure that she didn't become too friendly, Rover growled at her. A feeling of coolness began to grow between Mel and the dog.

All the pleasure he had felt in the trip was now gone. And he blamed Rover for it. He began to count the days before the trip would end.

There was more than a month and a half yet to go. Space ship schedules between Earth and Mars, he learned, varied greatly. When Earth and Mars were not far apart in their orbits, the fastest ships made the trip in about a week. They continued accelerating after the take-off until almost the mid-

point of the journey, then began to decelerate, so as not to burst too rapidly into the thin atmosphere of Mars. By this method, the average speed was raised to a maximum, but both acceleration and deceleration used up atomic fuel, and the total fuel consumption was terrifically high. That was why only an occasional ship carrying important government officials or businessmen made the journey so rapidly.

The average passenger vessel continued to accelerate at a low rate for a few hours, as their own ship had done, and then began to decelerate a few hours before reaching its destination. If it tried to go too fast, too much fuel would be consumed. If it went too slow, not only would too much time be wasted, but too much food would have to be carried for the passengers. Only the large freighters, with enormously high cargo-carrying capacity and small crews, ever tried to get by on a near-minimum of fuel, crawling along on the edges of the space lanes at just high enough velocity to carry them from the orbit of one planet to the next.

Despite his misunderstanding with Rover, the dog continued to accompany him everywhere. Mel would have wanted to go through the ship alone, but Bolam and Hakin refused to let him. Whatever he thought about Rover, the dog was still a protection against threatened danger.

One day, however, he felt that he was just about fed up. He had seen Betty the day before, and she had turned aside, as she usually did, when she saw Rover at his heels. "Today I go into the ship alone," announced Mel.

"You are weary of Canine Company?" asked Hakin blandly.

"And how!"

"Perhaps today we shall permit Rover to remain behind. I shall accompany you through the ship instead. Perhaps I shall have the privilege, O Befuddled One, of viewing through my own dazzled eyes this paragon of feminine beauty who has bewitched you."

"She hasn't bewitched me or anything like that," said Mel. "I don't bewitch easy. But she's a nice girl, and Rover's

all wet about her being dangerous. And I'll be glad if you come with me. You'll have a chance to see her for yourself and know that he's wrong."

Hakin nodded. "Very well, my Unbewitched and Unbefuddled One. I shall accompany you, and in order that I may not attract the Fair One's attention to myself, and induce her to forget you, I shall not assume too handsome an appearance. I shall shrink myself to a mere six feet, and allow my face to assume the stupid expression of the average sightseeing passenger."

For the first time, therefore, Mel began to go through the ship unaccompanied by Rover. He and Hakin headed for the corridor where he had previously seen Betty. Here he hoped to meet her again.

But there was no sign of her, and Mel headed past the cabin where he had heard the tinkling of the old piano. To his great joy, he heard the same sounds again.

"That must be Betty," he said. "I think it's the same composition."

Hakin listened carefully. "Excellent," he commented. "Most excellent. My faithful ears tell me that the Beautiful and Bewitching One is no musician. You are safe from her music. It cannot possibly weave a spell about you."

"I've heard worse players," said Mel. "And I'm going to tell her that, too."

He knocked at the cabin door, and thought he heard a voice say faintly, "Come in." He opened the door, and entered, followed by Hakin.

A small girl sat at the piano keyboard. Without turning around, she asked eagerly, "Hey, Mom, is my half-hour up yet?"

Hakin laughed, and Mel looked at him in disgust. The girl swirled around and demanded, "Hey, who are you people?"

Mel said, "We're looking for an octopus who can play with eight hands. Your half hour won't be up till tomorrow.

You keep practicing." Then they got out and he closed the door behind them.

"You forgot to tell the Pretty One that she played well," Hakin reminded him.

"Never mind that. We're going to keep looking for Betty until we find her."

As it happened, they did not have to look much further. They met Betty coming around the next bend in the corridor, and although at first she started to turn away again, Mel ran after her and caught up with her.

"Look, Betty," he said. "I want to talk to you. And to apologize for the way that dopey dog of mine has been acting. I haven't got him with me today, so we can talk."

"I'm a suspicious character, and we've got nothing to say to each other," said Betty. "Aren't you afraid of danger when you're with me?"

"Oh, don't be childish." Hakin had come up and was gazing gravely at the girl. Mel said, "Betty, I want to introduce my friend, Mr. Hakin. Hakin, this is Betty Major."

Hakin said gravely: "How do you do, Miss—Miss Major." And then he turned to Mel and said, "Your dog was correct. You were fooled. But he was not."

Mel felt his face turning red. "What do you mean, Hakin?"

"He was correct in being suspicious, My Too Trusting Friend. Perhaps this young lady does not remember me, but I remember her. I met her first when she was a small child."

Betty said defiantly, "I—I suppose you know my real name. Is that why you're suspicious of me?"

"Is that not a good reason, O Indignant One? Why did you not use your own name? It was your uncle's idea to go under the name of Major, was it not?"

"Yes, he's making a business trip. And he didn't want to be annoyed by people who wanted his autograph—and—and things like that."

"I assure you," said Hakin, "that I shall not ask Your Esteemed Relative to acquire writer's cramp by inscribing

his autograph. That is, if I have the misfortune to encounter The Crooked One."

"You can't talk like that about my uncle!" cried Betty.

"I can say much worse about him, O Fair One. But there are things I prefer to say to his face. And I think," added Hakin, "that Fortune is now presenting me with my opportunity."

Betty's uncle was coming down the corridor, another Martian cigar clenched between his teeth. He stopped when he saw Mel and Hakin, and stared closely, and with special care, at the latter.

"You do not remember me?" said Hakin politely. "Let me recall, O Hirer of Thieves and Murderers, the nature of our last encounter. I began by acting thus."

And to Mel's astonishment, he stretched a long arm across to pluck the cigar from the startled man's mouth.

"Hakin!" cried Betty's uncle.

"Correct," said Hakin. "And how is the conniving Mr. Gard Closker today?"

# CHAPTER 7

## *WELCOME TO MARS!*

CONNIVING or not, Mr. Gard Closker was boiling with fury. His hand dropped to his belt, but Hakin's own hand covered his, and Hakin said quietly, "Let me remind you that this too happened before. And the results were unfortunate for you. Do not try to pull a gun, Mr. Closker. Do not invite history to repeat itself in so unpleasant a fashion for you."

The man hesitated sullenly, then let his hand relax, and Hakin took his own hand away. As Bolam had once said, Closker didn't easily lose his temper. And by this time he had recovered from his initial surprise. He growled, "You can't call me a hirer of thieves and murderers and get away with it."

"The truth is painful to you, O Sensitive Soul?" inquired Hakin politely.

Closker had regained thorough control of himself. He said, almost calmly, "It isn't true."

"Of course it isn't true," asserted Betty hotly.

"Let me then recite the facts, O Insulted One," said Hakin. "Enemies have released our animals and tried to create panic on the ship. One of these enemies has broken into our quarters and tried to shoot this lad here."

Both men looked at Mel, who nodded, and said, "That's right."

Betty said, "But Uncle Gard—"

"Do not interrupt," ordered Hakin. "After capture, this man confessed that he was hired by you, O Impresario of Three-Ring Disaster. And now I find you here under an assumed name. Are we to suppose that all this is but a matter of coincidence?"

While he was talking, Closker had become quite calm, almost good-naturedly so. He pulled another cigar from his pocket and lit it. Then he said, "Part of it *is* coincidence. Do you think, Hakin, that I'd deliberately take passage on a ship where I'd expect you to run into trouble? If I had hired anybody to harm you, the one thing I'd be sure to do is avoid your presence like the plague. When there's real dirty work afoot, I like to be at least a couple of million miles away."

"That much, I grant you, is in character, O Instigator of Difficulties for Others."

"You know something else that's in character about me too. I don't like to do things illegally."

Hakin smiled. He and Closker were so busy being good-natured, thought Mel, that if a stranger had come along he would have thought they were having a nice friendly chat. "We all do things we dislike to do," said Hakin. "Is it not so, O Slippery One?"

"Not if they're illegal. Mind you, I don't have much use for what some people call 'ethics.' If the law says that a thing

is allowed, I don't worry about whether it's 'nice' or not. If I have to do it, I just do it, and the nice-nellies can think what they please. I have to know what my competitors are doing, and I send men to look them over and report back to me. But that, as you know, is perfectly legal."

Mel noticed that Betty was biting her lips. "No matter what you call it, Uncle Gard, that's spying," she said. "I'm against it."

Closker turned coldly to her. "I didn't ask your opinion, Betty. You're only a child, and you don't know business methods. I'm handling this." Then he faced Hakin again. "I don't know whether the men you speak of were agents of mine or not."

"We have the word of one of them that they were. And are."

Closker said calmly, "But you yourself, Hakin, have called them thieves and murderers. My own opinion is that they are fools as well, to undertake such stupid things—and to allow themselves to be caught. Do you intend to take the word of such men against me?"

"Seeing that they have attempted theft and murder on your orders, my answer must be in the affirmative, O Twister of Words."

"You argue in a circle, Hakin. I say this again: I do nothing illegal, and I do not order my men to do anything illegal. I can't afford to take a chance being caught breaking the law. If they have done things they shouldn't, then it was on their own, in a foolish and criminal belief that any misfortune they might arrange for you would please me."

"Such a belief would indeed be criminal. But would you call it foolish as well, O My Generous Well-Wisher?" asked Hakin softly.

"Yes, because as I'm trying to get it through your head, I don't want to tangle with the law. I'd much rather have it on my side. If these men say I ordered them to harm you, they're lying. Turn them over to the authorities, and I'll see to it that they're prosecuted and sent to jail." He turned

again to his niece. "I think we've finished here, Betty. Come along."

Betty hesitated, then went with him without looking back. Her manner was dejected, and she walked mechanically, as if she had suffered a shock.

After a long silence, Mel said, "He certainly is a slippery one, Hakin."

"Slippery and shrewd, O Undeceived One. Perhaps he is telling the truth," added Hakin thoughtfully. "But not the entire truth. That is not in him. Perhaps he only told his men to spy. But he may have implied to them that if misfortune should befall our circus, he would be pleased with them, and be liberal with his rewards."

"Isn't there any way we can find out?"

"No, there he is on firm ground. His hirelings are criminals, and few would take their word against the word of a man like Gard Closker. Unless there is some record of his conversation with them, he is safe. And a man like The Slippery One does not allow such records to be made."

Mel said, "Rover seemed to know. I don't know how he did it, but somehow he learned who Closker was. That's why he warned me against Betty."

"Yes, as you already realize, Rover is a highly intelligent canine," agreed Hakin.

"All the same, I don't think that Betty had anything to do with her uncle's crookedness. She was even more shocked about it than we were. Rover wasn't really warning me against her. He was just telling me to beware of her uncle."

"It is a pity, O Loyal One, that the dog cannot speak, and tell you what he really meant. Remember only that she is inexperienced and easily deceived by one she has learned to trust. Recall how she aided him in his deception about his name."

Later, when they got back to the circus quarters, Mel found the dog waiting for them just inside the door. He took Rover's head between his hands. "You were smart, Rover, you weren't fooled by them, and you knew what you were

doing all the time," he said. "You did the right thing by warning me. But it's her uncle you were wary of, not Betty herself. Isn't that right?"

Rover gazed back at him steadily. Then his head moved slightly between Mel's hands.

"You're saying, 'yes,' aren't you, boy?" Mel wasn't sure exactly what Rover was indicating, and he hurried to interpret the dog's gesture the way he wanted to. "She wouldn't play us any dirty tricks. I knew it the first time I looked at her. She's a nice kid."

Rover didn't contradict him, and Mel remained happy in his belief.

Just how intelligent Rover was, Mel learned on one of the days that followed. Accompanied by the dog, Mel had wandered into the ship's lounge, where several passengers were relaxing. At one table, two men and two women were playing with magnetized cards. Nearby, in easy chairs, others were chatting casually. In one corner a boy of seven and a girl about the same age were looking at what Mel at first thought was a toy.

When the two children saw Rover, their faces lighted up. "That's a nice dog," said the boy.

"He's handsome," said the girl. She asked Mel, "May I pat him? Will he bite?"

"He doesn't bite," said Mel, and the girl stroked Rover's head.

The dog paid her hardly any attention. He was staring at the thing Mel had thought was a toy. On a huge table, tiny glowing spheres were slowly revolving in what appeared to be great circles. Suddenly, Rover stood up at the table, pointed with his right forepaw, and barked sharply.

The children shied away from him. But Mel said, "Don't be afraid. He just wants to tell me something." And he asked, with growing excitement, "Do you know what that is, Rover?"

The dog's great head nodded.

"Point to the place we came from," said Mel eagerly.

As Mel had hoped, and hardly dared believe would hap-

pen, the dog's paw pointed to the little green sphere that represented Earth in this model of the Solar System.

"Now point to the planet we're going to," said Mel.

Rover unerringly indicated the still smaller red sphere.

"And where are we now?"

The paw moved in the direction of the bar of light which represented the ship.

Mel swallowed hard and gazed at the dog. "So you knew what this ship was all the time. You knew where it was going. You weren't hiding from a dog catcher. You stowed away because you wanted to travel in space, to see Mars and the other planets yourself. Is that it?"

The dog nodded.

"Wait till I tell Bolam and Hakin!" exclaimed Mel. "They won't believe it!"

But Bolam and Hakin could believe anything that reflected credit upon Space Rover, and their lack of surprise almost disappointed Mel. "I'll have to tell Betty," he thought. "She'll insist on seeing Rover with the Solar System model herself."

Then he suddenly remembered that he wasn't doing much talking to Betty these days. And Betty certainly wasn't talking to him. He didn't see her again in the ship's corridors, nor did he catch sight of her uncle. Evidently both of them were avoiding contact with the rival circus.

He was disappointed also that during the rest of his trip he heard no word from John Armstrong in reply to his radiogram. He found it hard to believe that the man who had been his father's partner would have no interest at all in what happened to his partner's son. Armstrong must be away from home, he thought. He must be still unaware that Mel was speeding toward Mars.

Meanwhile, Mel continued his practice in acrobatics, starting the learning of a new trick every time he felt he had mastered an old one. In the low artificial gravity of the ship, the danger of accidents while practicing was small, and he went ahead with confidence. But he could not help wonder-

ing what would happen if he tried to do what he had learned in a gravitational field as strong as Earth's, for instance.

From time to time, Bolam and Hakin gave him lessons in animal training, and he studied the simpler books on interplanetary zoology that were to be found in the ship's library. After a while he began to have a better idea of the types of animals that were found on Mars and Venus, as well as Earth. Zoology books, however, were not written from a circus man's point of view, and it required considerable information from Bolam and Hakin to round out the picture of those animals that were useful to them.

And then, one day when Mars had become a large red disk in the forward viewplates, almost as large as the moon when seen from Earth, and he could just make out with the naked eye the various great deserts and mountain ranges, he found the floor tilting slightly under his feet. It took him a few seconds to realize what that meant. There was a new gravitational force on the ship, in addition to the spin gravity. This time it was directed forward, toward Mars. But it was not the gravity due to the mass of the planet. It was the result of a decelerating force applied by forward jets of the ship itself. They were gradually slowing up, getting ready to make the landing.

The next few hours passed in feverish preparations for disembarking on Mars. Bolam and Hakin checked on the probable landing time and sent half a dozen radiograms to their men, so that the circus property might be taken off the ship as soon as possible. Mel helped them whenever he could, but it turned out that there was less to do than he had thought. The last hour passed so slowly that he began to think they would never arrive, that they would be forever stuck in space.

Gradually, however, the spin gravity disappeared, and the gravity of the planet itself was added to that of deceleration. Slightly before this stage, all passengers were ordered to strap themselves in seats in their staterooms. The direction of up and down slowly shifted, as their own direction changed, and

different forces took hold of the ship and its contents. From a head-on course toward the red planet they veered to a tangential path, curving about more and more, until finally they hit the extremely thin atmosphere at only a slight angle. They descended in a sharp spiral, and Mel, who at the time was looking through a viewplate in the side of the ship, caught a glimpse of one of the two tiny Martian moons, he didn't know which, speeding in its own rapid journey about the mother planet. As they turned, he caught sight, far below, of a gleaming dome, white against the Martian surface, like a blister on the desert's face. Inside the dome was Marsopolis.

And then at last they were down, with the ship tilted again under him, and Mel knew that they had landed.

Bolam and Hakin laughed at his impatience to get out and set foot on the new planet. "What did you expect?" rumbled Bolam. "That you'd be able to walk right out?"

"I thought we'd get space suits. Or at least helmets."

"We don't wear space suits or helmets unless we can't help it," said Bolam. "What the crew is doing now is connecting the ship's air lock with the Blister air lock. That'll take another few minutes, but actually it's faster and more convenient than using space suits. Those things are a nuisance to put on and take off."

"The best thing would be to land inside a Blister," said Mel. "This way is a waste of time."

"Maybe some day we'll do as you suggest," replied Bolam. "But not yet."

"Not yet," agreed Hakin. "Restrain thy steeds, O Impatient One. There are but a few moments more to endure. Mars will wait."

Actually, it was no more than an additional ten minutes before the passengers began to leave the ship. Mel and Rover accompanied Hakin with the first group, to locate the circus crew, while Bolam remained behind on guard.

Through the ship's air lock, they entered a narrow tunnel which had flexible metal connections at each end. The total

length of the tunnel was no more than a hundred and fifty feet. After passing through it, they entered the Blister air lock, and then the Blister itself.

The Blister, as Mel knew, was one of about a score of domes scattered over the surface of Mars. These covered sometimes a city and its suburbs, sometimes a group of villages. The surface was a double layer, each layer composed of a transparent metal alloy, containing more than fifty percent iron. This allowed the sun's visible light to enter, along with most of the infra-red. It cut out only some of the more harmful ultra-violet rays, and the cosmic rays. At the same time, the double shell insulated the colony within from the cold atmosphere of Mars, and prevented the air inside from escaping and being dispersed over the entire surface of the planet.

Ordinary Martian air was too thin to be breathable. The air inside the Blister was also thin by Earth standards, but it would support human and other terrestrial life. The partial pressure of oxygen was about fifteen percent of an atmosphere, and the total pressure no more than a quarter of an atmosphere, recalculated to Earth standards. (The actual pressures, Mel knew, were less; the low Martian gravity, which affected so many things, made for a lower weight of air, and hence a decrease in pressure compared to the effect the same mass of air would have on Earth.)

Mars had very little nitrogen, at least on the surface, and the tenth of an atmosphere of inert gases that slightly diluted the oxygen was made up mostly of helium and argon, derived from native Martian ores. Mel's lungs felt a little strange at first, as they breathed this unusual mixture, but there was enough oxygen to supply his body's needs, and gradually he got used to it.

As a matter of fact, as Hakin pointed out, he had been getting used to it during the last few hours on the ship. "Before landing, O Impatient One," said the rubber man, "the composition of the air being circulated is changed. The percentage of oxygen is raised slightly, while the content of inert gases is greatly diminished. Otherwise there might be a sharp

decrease of total pressure on entering the Blister, and this might prove harmful."

"I didn't notice any change."

"You probably did, but very likely ascribed it to the change in gravity, My Negligent Friend," said Hakin.

Most likely he was right, thought Mel. But at this moment, a couple of men came up and greeted Hakin, and the latter gave them directions to go into the ship and meet Bolam.

Mel looked about him. The Blister was about a quarter of a mile high, and about ten miles by three in length and width. It was composed of great plates joined without seams, supported here and there by strong towers. Within the transparent double skin, all the essential activity of the colony went on. Mel saw a few hundred yards before him several rows of buildings, not too close together, and beyond them a long empty stretch before the next buildings began. The Blister, small as it might be compared to the total surface of Mars, had not yet been made uncomfortable by crowding.

At Mel's side, Rover suddenly raised his head and sniffed, and Mel's own gaze followed the direction where the dog's interest appeared to lie. What he saw in the distance seemed at first to be some huge shiny monster buzzing and crawling over the ground.

Then he saw that it was a kind of tractor, with a single man seated on top. The ground underneath them was a dull dark gray, with a slightly reddish cast. It felt yielding, and yet strangely sharp, like fine gravel spread over grass. The gray stretched in every direction away from them to the nearer edge of the Blister. But where the great tractor had passed, the ground became a dark brown.

Hakin had sent the two men into the ship, and was now waiting for other members of the circus crew. Mel asked, "What's that tractor doing?"

"It collects the iron, O Innocent One," said Hakin, rather briefly, compared to his usual manner.

"The iron?"

"Left by the ferriphilic bacteria and plants."

"I don't get that," said Mel. "Ferriphilic—?"

"The word, O Lad Ignorant of Science, means 'iron-loving,' and in particular, 'more-oxidized-state-of-iron-loving,'" explained Hakin. "The red color of most of Mars is due to the iron rust which is scattered over its surface. Iron rust, as you know, is an oxide of iron. These bacteria, and the small plants on whose roots they collect, together are able to withdraw the iron, which they use in their metabolism. At the same time, the oxygen is set free, increasing the oxygen content of the air."

"So that's where the oxygen comes from!" exclaimed Mel.

"Most certainly, O Perceptive One. Did you think it was imported from Earth? Later on, the plants excrete the iron in metallic form. If allowed to remain, it would rust again, withdrawing the oxygen from the air once more, and going through the cycle repeatedly. This is prevented by gathering the iron for use in building."

"That's a good idea," said Mel. "They get a double use out of the rust."

"Thanks to the Microscopic Ones," said Hakin. "But let us forget that for now. I see the rest of our men approaching. I shall take them into the ship, and we shall begin to unload. Come too, and bring the dog."

Mel was glad to be of help. There was a lot of lifting and dragging to do, although within the ship itself a conveyor belt brought the cages close to the air lock quickly and easily. From the ship's air lock to the tunnel, however, it wasn't so easy. Everything had to be moved by human muscles, although in the light gravity of Mars, little more than a third that of Earth, this wasn't as great a task as it at first seemed. They had trouble with only two of the animals—the tiger, and the huge pink-furred beast which had come charging down the corridors when the cage doors had been opened.

The tiger was the lighter of the two, but gave more trouble. Bolam would have found it easy enough to drag the cage along if the beast hadn't been excited by what was happening and paced back and forth uneasily, shifting its weight

around and making it difficult for Bolam to know where to apply his strength. There was some danger too, Mel felt, that the animal, in its excitement, would try to attack him through the slits in the cage. But the animal's experience with the training robot had conditioned it against such an attempt, and finally, Bolam was able to grunt and tug the cage down the tunnel and through the Blister airlock. The pink beast's cage followed more slowly, and with less excitement.

Finally, the circus equipment from the ship was inside the Blister, near a cluster of what looked like small metalloid huts. "Where do we take it now?" asked Mel.

"No place," replied Bolam. "We have a permit to put on a show right here."

"Here?" Mel looked around him. "Right out in the open?"

"Why not? There's never any change of weather in the Blister. No rain, no extreme heat, no unusual cold. The only reason for living indoors here is for the sake of privacy. That, by the way, is the purpose of those huts. Some are dressing rooms, others contain additional equipment."

"Do you not see, O Slow-Witted One," said Hakin, "that this is the most convenient place? When we are through with our exhibition here, we remove our property with little trouble through the airlock to a sealed jet ship, and then proceed to the next Blister for another series of performances."

They were right, as Mel quickly realized. He had always thought of the circus in terms of the stories he had read about Earth. There were tents, and side shows, and all sorts of acts that would be out of place here. Because of the difficulty of transportation, every act, every animal, must be of a kind to hold an audience's interest. There was no need for side shows, nor was there room for the chiselers and grafters who sometimes followed such shows around on Earth. But as Bolam had told him when they first met, the equipment and animals on the space ship were but a small part of the circus as a whole. Soon he would see the rest of it.

"When does the show start?" he asked.

"Tonight, shortly after the sun sets. That will be at 2:00 P.M., Greenwich Earth Time."

It was odd, thought Mel, to find them using Earth time here on Mars, where the slightly slower rotation of the planet gave a day more than a half hour longer than the one he was accustomed to. But there had to be some interplanetary time standard. The ship too, where there was no sunrise or sunset, only the continual beating of the sun's glaring light on the metal hull, had been run on Greenwich time, and they had gone to sleep and got up again on the same twenty-four hour schedule they would have used on Earth.

The men were setting to work now, and Mel pitched in, helping to set up the rows of seats. There was only a single ring, for it was felt that every spectator ought to see every act without having his attention distracted by too many other things going on at the same time. The total number accommodated at any one performance would be little more than four thousand. In view of the fact, however, that circuses were rare here on Mars, it was certain that sooner or later almost every one in the Blister who could spare the time would come to see a performance, and some people would come many times.

They had finished putting up about half the seats, when a boy a couple of years younger than himself, in an Interradio uniform, came over to them, yelling, "Call for Mr. Melvin Oliver. Call for Mr. Melvin Oliver."

"That's me!" cried Mel in excitement. "What is it?"

"You Melvin Oliver? I thought it was a man, not a kid."

"Cut out the wise cracks, half-pint," growled Mel. "Deliver your message."

"Long-distance vision call at 10:00. Over in the Communications Building."

"What time is it now?" demanded Mel.

"Nine-forty. You're a greenhorn on Mars, aren't you? I can tell by your clothes."

"Never mind my clothes," said Mel. This messenger boy was so busy minding everybody's business but his own that

he was a pain in the neck. "How long does it take to get to this place?"

"About five minutes. A dopey guy like you it'll take ten minutes. If you move fast, that is, and don't stand around gawking, like most of you tenderfeet."

"I'd better take no chances," said Mel, "and hurry right over there. And a good thing for you, Flash, or I'd take time out to teach you a little politeness."

"Yeah? I don't waste time being polite to kids."

"Button your lip, Loud-Mouth," said Mel, "or I'll put you in a cage with a few more of our animals."

The messenger boy brushed a speck of dirt from his uniform. "Hurry up, chum, you got a call coming to you. But before you go, better sign this slip."

Mel took the pencil that was offered him and rapidly scrawled his name. "Who's the call from?"

"Can't you read? It says here from John Armstrong."

"At last!" thought Mel, and he started to hurry off.

"Hey!" yelled the messenger boy. "Don't I get a tip?"

"Sure," said Mel. "Be polite to everybody, and you'll get along fine. That's the best tip I can give you."

Then he hurried off down the line of buildings the messenger boy had pointed out, with Rover walking alongside him.

# CHAPTER 8

# *KILLERS IN THE CIRCUS*

THERE wasn't as much time as the messenger boy had said there would be. Mel didn't waste any time gawking, but it was five minutes before the hour when he reached the building, and it took a couple of minutes before the girl in charge of the change booths could pay attention to him. Finally she motioned for him to go into booth number eleven.

"Wait for the red light over the screen to flash," she said.

Mel waited impatiently. The screen in front of him lit up, but remained blank. Finally, the red light over the screen flashed, and Mel said eagerly, "Hello, hello. Mr. Armstrong?"

An image formed on the screen—the image of an old man wearing glasses, his face thin and lined, his hair visibly gray

even on the screen. Mel recognized the face as vaguely familiar. The sight of it brought back memories of his mother and father, and for a moment Mel felt a lump in his throat. Then he forced himself to think of the man he saw on the screen. How many years since he had last seen John Armstrong? About eight or so. He hadn't realized that a man could age so fast.

The old man said, "So you are Melvin. Dear me, I've often wondered where you were. How are you, Melvin?"

"I'm fine, thanks, Mr. Armstrong. I've wanted to get in touch with you for a long time. But it took me a couple of years to learn you were on Mars. When I finally did locate you, I sent you a radiogram. That was weeks ago."

"Yes, I know. But I gave orders to my secretary, Mr. Gardner, that I was not to be disturbed by such things. I was doing an important piece of research, you know. I finished up recently, and he let me have your message. I knew when the ship was scheduled to land, and decided to call you, care of the circus."

"Well, I'm glad you finally decided to do something about it, Mr. Armstrong. What I wanted to talk about is kind of important, and I was upset because you didn't answer me. Somebody's trying to kill me."

"What did you say? I'm afraid my old ears don't hear any too well. Some one is trying to kill you?"

"That's right, Mr. Armstrong. I don't know why, and I thought you might be able to help me figure out a reason."

"Dear me, I am a peaceable man, and I abhor violence. I know no reason why any one should wish to kill any one else. Do you, Mr. Gardner?"

He turned to some one out of range of the vision tube at the other end. Mel heard a murmured voice, "I have no idea, Mr. Armstrong."

"You hear that, Melvin? Mr. Gardner has no idea either. I think that what you say is fantastic. You must be mistaken."

"I'm not, Mr. Armstrong. Fantastic or not, what I told

you is true. Maybe if we knew something about the property my father left, we could figure out a reason together."

"My dear boy, I shall always be glad to help a son of Thomas Oliver, whom I recall as the finest friend a man ever had. But when you speak of a reason to kill you—"

He half turned away from the screen, and for a moment, Mel had the idea that he had forgotten he was talking to some one. Mel heard a vague murmur, as if Mr. Gardner, at the side, was reminding him.

"Whenever you come this way, Melvin, be sure to drop in to see me. I live in Blister Number Seven."

"Thank you, sir." Mel didn't bother to tell him that he already had the address, or else he wouldn't have been able to send the radiogram. "We'll probably give a show there later this month."

"We? Are you taking an active part in the circus?"

"I'm part of one act. And I help around generally."

"I never expected such a thing of Thomas Oliver's son. By the way, Melvin—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Even with these spectacles, which I find much superior to the new plastic lenses, my old eyes do not see as clearly as they should. I am under the impression that you have a dog alongside you."

"It is a dog, Mr. Armstrong. His name is Rover. He's a very nice dog."

"I dislike dogs. I dislike them intensely. When you come to see me, Melvin, please leave the dog behind."

"But Mr. Armstrong—"

"Perhaps it is because I am allergic to dog-hairs. They make me sneeze and feel generally uncomfortable. You will have to be vacuum-cleaned before I can speak to you face to face. And you will leave the dog behind. Is that clear, Melvin?"

In his resentment, Mel didn't trust himself to speak. He nodded.

"Very well. Good-bye, my boy."

When Mel turned away from the booth and started back to the circus and his friends, he had a feeling of disappointment. It wasn't simply because old John Armstrong didn't like Rover, whom Mel had reason to consider more loyal than most human friends. It was because the old man seemed so absent-minded, so out of this world. He was even worse than Mel remembered him. He had such trouble getting into his head an idea of a kind he wasn't used to. He wouldn't be much help, feared Mel, in trying to find whoever it was that had made an effort to get rid of him.

And as for leaving Rover behind—"That's one thing I *won't* do," he muttered to himself. Rover showed his agreement by uttering a low growl.

Mel walked slowly back toward the site where the circus was preparing for the performance. On the way, he saw posters announcing the show. By the time he returned, the seats had been set up in a great circle, and two metal frameworks had been created for the trapezes and other aerial apparatus. A great metal screen shielded the circus itself from curious non-paying onlookers on the outside. Now the circus crew was putting in order the dressing rooms that would be needed by the performers.

Mel plunged in and helped. There was plenty of work to do. This circus had a small crew, compared to the crews of the old terrestrial shows, and every one who belonged here was expected to keep busy whenever there was something to be done.

It was not until just before performance time that most of the work was finished. And even through the performance itself, Mel knew, some of the men would keep on working.

A ticket booth had been set up, and the early arrivals were already coming in, looking around for the best seats. One feature this circus did have like its old-time ancestors, and that was the vending of things to eat and drink. Mel would have liked to go up and down the aisles, selling Martian bounce-corn, and floating taffy, and iron-flower soda, and all the rest of the delicacies with which the kids and

their parents liked to ruin their stomachs, but Hakin said, "Restrain your ambition, O Eager One. Have you forgotten that you are a performer in one of the early acts?"

"I thought I'd go on in the second half of the show."

"You are but a novice, O Stage-Struck One, or else you would know what is most suitable for you. While the spectators are fresh, anything will please them. They will laugh and applaud at the sight of you and your dog and your kabror tumbling together. But once their appetites are somewhat jaded, they will be aroused to enthusiasm by only the best, the most sensational of acts."

"I thought my act was pretty good," said Mel.

"It is not what you think that counts, but what the audience thinks, O Uncured Ham. Go to your dressing room and begin to limber up. You make your appearance soon."

Mel was disappointed. After the way Hakin and Bolam had spoken about his work before, he had almost convinced himself that he was one of the stars of the show, and now he found out that his act served only to warm up the audience, to put it in a good humor for the more sensational acts that were to follow. "Hakin 's wrong," he told himself. "We're a much better act than he thinks we are. Wait till he sees how much applause we get."

Rover followed him to his dressing room, where the kabror waited patiently in its cage. Rover and the three-legged animal didn't need limbering up, and they both watched with intelligently interested eyes as Mel did a triple somersault high in the air. "Wait till the audience sees that," he muttered smugly to himself.

He was so busy warming up and thinking of the triumph he would have that he missed the beginning of the actual performance. A master of ceremonies came out, dressed in the traditional top hat, boots, riding trousers, and tails—this was one of the things that hadn't changed much. After intoning a short speech of greeting, he cracked a whip. The whip broke into half a dozen pieces, and while the audience gasped, each of the pieces put out two pairs of wings and

flew away. The "whip" was nothing more than a rare Venusian bird-colony.

Then the first act came on. Mel peeked out through the door of his dressing room to see what looked like a quartet of clowns. Two of them were short and squat, and beneath these latter clown costumes he thought he recognized Bolam and Hakin, the rubber man in his contracted form. At least Hakin wasn't hesitant about taking his own advice and going on early.

Bolam and Hakin had a comic argument in pantomime, ending in a fight when Hakin threw himself against his enormously wide partner and bounced off as from a brick wall. The other two clowns joined in, supporting Hakin. The argument grew more violent, and Bolam tried to grab his partner. The first time he missed, succeeding only in pulling Hakin's pants off. The audience laughed, but Bolam tried again, and the second time he got a good grip. The other clowns came to Hakin's assistance and tried to pull him away. But the strong man had a good grip of Hakin's feet, and when the others realized this, each of them grabbed an arm and everybody pulled, while poor Hakin in the middle pantomimed great distress.

As everybody tugged at him, Hakin stretched and stretched. When he reached his full length, his arms and legs were each at least four and a half feet long. The audience was by this time screaming in excitement. Suddenly the two men holding his arms let go, and Hakin bounced at his partner like a rubber band that had been stretched and let go. Bolam, still holding on to Hakin's feet, was knocked down and began to roll away. Hakin stretched and contracted again and again, each time knocking Bolam down. In this way they reached the exit from the arena in a series of pratfalls, with the audience howling at each one.

Mel found it so funny that he forgot about his own act. The next moment, a group of girl bareback riders pranced into the arena on Martian zebras—handsome little beasts with six legs each and an even trotting gait. The girls didn't

have to do much except look pretty, but that was all they were expected to do, and at this stage the audience didn't ask for anything more.

Then a man came out to do a solo act on the trapeze, and as Mel watched, he began to get an idea of what Hakin meant. This fellow whirled around endlessly, leaped into the air and did somersaults before coming down again, jumped from one trapeze to another, which he caught with his teeth, and as Mel admitted, was terrific all around. The audience gave him round after round of applause. After a few such acts, no one would have much use for so tame a thing as a tumbling act like his own, even with a dog and kabror added.

Hakin came over to him and said, "You display your talents in the second act after this one, O Nervous Novice. Prepare yourself."

"Gosh, this fellow is wonderful," said Mel.

"Ordinary," said Hakin. "Wait, O Impressed One, until you see the other trapeze acts."

The trapeze artist was followed by more clowns. And then, before he knew it, it was Mel's turn.

Mel didn't know why it was, but suddenly the whole world seemed to change. It was as if an earthquake had struck the planet and made a wreck of it. Neither his eyes nor his legs worked properly any more. The audience seemed to tremble in front of him, the lights to blur and blend into one vast dazzling light. He stumbled rather than walked into the arena, and his legs felt as if they would collapse under him. That, he thought, was really silly. Mars had low gravity, there was no reason for him to feel as if he didn't have the strength to hold his own weight up. But none the less, that was the way he felt.

Some performers start worrying days before they go on, others are confident until almost the last minute. That was the way Mel was. He had been feeling so chipper--and now stage fright had struck without warning, just as he was about to go into his act. He felt that before those thousands of waiting spectators he wouldn't be able to move a muscle, that

while they all stared at him and wondered what he was doing in a circus, he was just going to stand out there like a statue.

But now the training he had gone through paid off. His muscles seemed to move themselves. He leaped, somersaulted, and landed on his feet without knowing how he did it. He could see the audience turn upside down, he could hear it as it broke into a roar of laughter at the kabror's funny expression, and cheered Rover's tumbling. But it felt as if everything was happening to some one else, not to him. He felt no closer to the scene than if he had been watching it on a television screen miles away.

At last his act was over, and with Rover trotting alongside him and the kabror leaping gracefully ahead, he ran out of the arena. Once in his own dressing room, he recovered almost miraculously. He could still hear the audience applauding (actually it was applauding the next act, but it had been applauding in exactly the same way for *him*) and he was sure that he had been a hit. "We wowed them, didn't we, Rover?" he said proudly. "We showed them an act they won't forget in a hurry."

Whether Rover agreed with him or not he never found out. The audience had suddenly hushed, and he peeped through the door to find out why. Bolam had come out, not as a clown this time, but as a strong man.

Bolam's strength was far greater than that of any ordinary human being, and here on Mars everything weighed only a little more than a third of what it did on Earth. If there ever was a place for a strong man act, thought Mel, it was a planet like Mars. Bolam lifted a Martian zebra and its pretty rider into the air with one hand, he supported and turned a merry-go-round full of children on a platform placed on his chest, he knocked a genuine Martian building down with a blow of his fist, so that the plastic bricks fell in a great heap. He was so impressive in his strength that Mel, who a moment before had been sure that the audience would never forget his own act, forgot it himself.

Then it was Hakin's turn, in an India rubber act, also

solo. He stretched, and shot like a bullet up to the trapeze, forty feet above the ground. He tied himself into a knot, or rather into half a dozen knots, all of them recognizable to the children in the audience from the illustrations in the Martian Boy Scout Manual. He bounced like a rubber ball, and he contorted himself into the shapes of half a dozen familiar animals. He didn't imitate any other human beings, though. The ability to do that was something he didn't want to publicize.

The audience was eating it up. In addition to everything else, Hakin had a warm friendly personality which came across to all the children and their parents watching him. They would go out, thought Mel, and tell their friends how wonderful the show was. There would be a full house, performance after performance.

From where he stood, his gaze glided over their rapt faces. Parents and kids, middle-aged men and women, grandfathers and grandmothers, kindergarten squirts and first-graders and second-graders and so on up to junior high school boys and girls in their teens, all were enjoying it. One fat man was laughing so hard that the Martian bounce-corn was popping from his open bag to the floor, just as if it were being bounced off the surface of a griddle. Near him a four year old was standing with mouth open, as if catching flies. It was a good thing for him that there were no flies on Mars. And not far from the four year old—

Mel had a shock. But there could be no doubt about it, that was the bulky figure and the hard crafty face of Gard Closker, sitting there calmly and appraisingly, making his judgment of the rival circus with his ever-present cigar in his mouth. And next to him sat Betty, looking neat and pretty, as if she didn't have a crooked uncle in the world.

What were these two doing here? The obvious answer would be that they had come to enjoy the performance. But Mel didn't believe that. Closker was undoubtedly here to see the kind of acts his rivals had collected, the size of the audience that had showed up. But was there something more?

Was Closker up to one of his dirty tricks again, one of the kind he himself would consider not "ethical," but perfectly legal?

From behind Mel there came a short angry growl. Mel turned quickly. Rover was crouched in an attitude of excitement, staring at the open entrance in the rear of the dressing room. Suddenly, he leaped across the room, but the door slammed in his face.

The dog turned and dashed toward the kabror's cage. He was too late. A powerful odor swept out and hit Mel in the face. It must have hit the dog too. But Rover didn't flinch. He snapped up the piece of twisted frankfurter that some one had thrown in, and then ran for the door.

"Wait a minute, Rover," said Mel. "If we take it away from him, he'll keep smelling up the place for hours. The only thing to do is give it to him and hope that he eats it fast."

He pulled the piece of frankfurter from Rover's unresisting jaws, and holding his breath, tossed it right into the cage. Then he got out and slammed the front door shut.

They hadn't expected trouble with the kabror, and there was no special air purifier ready. But it wouldn't take long to set one up, and if they worked fast, the beast's odor would be confined to a narrow space. If they worked fast, that was. If he could get to Hakin or Bolam, or even one of the circus crew—

Outside the dressing room, Rover was running slightly ahead of him, and the dog's leap took Mel by surprise. Rover was launching his body at the man around the corner before Mel even realized that the man was there.

The blast of the gun went off silently, shearing off the top of a wall. Smoke rose from the dog's singed fur. Then the man was down, his gun on the floor, with Rover on top of him, and the man's two desperate hands around the dog's thick throat, trying to keep the animal away.

It is not easy to strangle a dog and make him release his grip, especially a dog as large and strong as a collie of the

new breed. Moreover, this dog had been painfully singed, and knew that the usual rules about not hurting human beings didn't apply. Rover struggled to tear loose, and his jaws snapped on the man's arm, ripping the sleeve and tearing the flesh. The man cursed, and his own grip loosened.

Another second, and Mel had reached him. The boy dived for the blast gun, just as a metal bullet sang past his ear. The first man was not alone.

Before Mel could swing around with the blast gun he had grabbed, half a dozen more bullets were scattering around him. He felt a sting in his left arm, but no real pain. Not then. There was no time for pain. Rover had torn himself away from the man on the floor and was now whirling around to face this new enemy.

But the dog's motions were not as rapid as usual, and the newcomer wasn't waiting for him. He was running around the next corner, past the dressing rooms. Mel had hardly got a good look at him, and he wouldn't be able to recognize him again. Perhaps Rover—

Rover was panting harder than Mel had ever heard him pant before. He stood there looking after the man who had run away, but he made no move to follow. Instead, he collapsed onto the ground. It was not until that moment that Mel noticed the broad streak of red, staining the dog's fur and running down his side to the floor.

# CHAPTER 9

## *ROVER TAKES A REST*

THE man with whom Rover had been struggling lay even more quietly than the dog, his eyes staring at the ceiling. Mel had never seen violent death before, but he had an idea that this man was dead.

A circus crewman came running, with Hakin in clown costume not far behind him. "What has happened?" cried Hakin, so excited that Mel thought he had forgotten his flowery mode of address. "You are wounded, Rover is wounded—and who is this Departing One?"

"He looks already departed," said Mel. "I don't know who he is. But I can tell you what he tried to do, before he was shot by his own pal. Not now, though, Hakin. Rover is hurt badly, and needs a doctor."

"Yes, the dog is wounded. We must call our veterinarian."

With a choked feeling in his throat, Mel dropped down beside the panting dog and smoothed the fur on the great head. Rover didn't even open his eyes, but continued to breathe heavily through his open mouth.

A half minute later, to Mel's relief, the vet appeared. While he was examining Rover, Mel was able to explain to Hakin what had happened. He could see that through the greasepaint the rubber man's face was growing grim. "This, O My Youthful Friend, is again the doing of Gard Closker."

"I don't think so," said Mel. "I wouldn't want to defend anybody who hurt my dog. But we have to be fair even to him. He's in the audience himself, with Betty. I don't think he'd let his men try any dirty work while the two of them were around."

Hakin paused irresolutely. "Perhaps you are right, O Shrewd One. There is logic in your words. A pity this man here is no longer among the living. We might have questioned him."

"Maybe we can guess some of the answers without questioning. I don't think he came here chiefly to cause trouble in the circus. I think he came to kill me. And it was Rover who stopped him."

"What makes you think so, O Youth of Many Ideas? Did he not attempt to arouse the kabror to emit an evil fragrance?"

"I know, but I think that was just to get me to follow him and walk into a trap. He didn't go into my dressing room itself. I guess he started to, but was afraid to go ahead because of Rover. He just put his arm in and threw something for the beast to eat, knowing that I'd have to get out and would probably chase after him."

"You may be correct, O Actor in Love With Applause. I shall discuss the matter with Bolam."

The doctor who had been examining Rover now stood up. "His chest is slightly singed from a blast, and a bullet passed through the edge of his right lung. It's serious, but I

don't think he's in too much danger. I'll give him a shot of antibiotic complex and bandage him up, and his own body should do the rest. Mars, with its low gravity and dry air, is a pretty healthful place for man and beast, when they're not being shot at. Keep him in bed for a few days, and he'll recover."

He began to spread a salve carefully on the dog's chest. Then he remarked, "But how about you, Son? You're wounded too, aren't you?"

"Gosh, I forgot. You shouldn't have mentioned it, Doctor. Now that you've reminded me, my left arm's beginning to hurt. But I don't think it amounts to much."

"I'll be judge of that. Take your jacket off and let me have a look at it. Most of my patients may be dumb brutes, but I've treated plenty of human animals in my time too."

Mel noted that the doctor's examination was conducted almost without words. A man who was used to examining animals didn't get in the habit of asking how his patient felt, or listening to a story about symptoms. He simply went over the arm very carefully and made sure that no bones were broken.

"Just a surface flesh wound," he said finally. "It missed the biceps, so it won't cramp your style too much."

Mel waited impatiently while the doctor put a porous bandage on. He was more worried about the dog than about himself. He asked, "Aren't you going to put a bandage on *him*? He needs it more than I do."

"Hold your horses, Son." The veterinarian took a sponge of plastic wool and began carefully to wipe away the salve he had smeared on just a few moments before. The scorched hair from Rover's fur came away over a small area, giving the dog a bald patch on his chest. Then the vet began to put the bandage on. That was a lot simpler, as he remarked to Mel, than it had been in the old days. All he had to do was put on a series of porous strips that were flexible enough to give as the animal breathed in and out, but at the same time

wouldn't pull at the dog's skin or put painful pressure on the wound.

"You'll have to leave this on for a week," he said. "There's a healing promoter in the bandage strips themselves, and it'll speed up the formation of new healthy skin, at the same time as it prevents infection. The main thing, as I said, is to make sure that the animal rests. And sometimes that isn't easy."

"I'll see to that, Doc," said Mel. He patted the dog again, gently. "How are you, Rover, old boy? Feeling better?"

The dog wasn't panting quite so hard now, but his eyes were still closed. The vet said dryly, "My patients never say they're feeling better, but they get well. I've cured some customers that were hurt a lot more than this one. You have an animal cot for him, don't you, Hakin?"

"Yes, there is a suitable place of repose for the Injured One." The rubber man said to Mel, "You can leave him in our hands, O Faithful to Your Friend. Go back and see the rest of the acts."

"The rest of the acts?" Mel shook himself. "That's right, the circus is still going on. I thought it would be over by now."

"It is not even half over," said Hakin. "It takes very little time to shoot two men and a dog. The best acts are still to come."

"I don't want to leave Rover yet."

"He needs you not, O Oversolicitous One. Permit him to rest quietly, and you go."

Reluctantly, Mel allowed himself to be persuaded, and returned to his dressing room. An emergency air exhaust had been applied with efficiency, and there was little odor left. The kabror, Mel noted, was resting in his cage, the piece of frankfurter that had caused the trouble now digesting peacefully in his stomach.

Almost guiltily, Mel peered out at the arena. Somehow, it seemed wrong for him to be enjoying himself while Rover lay injured. He knew that it was nonsense to feel this way, but he couldn't help it.

It was the acts themselves that made him forget his feelings. Hakin was right, he admitted to himself, his own act couldn't compare with any of them, and if he had attempted to follow them, the audience would have been bored to death.

There was an animal performance that created a near-riot of laughter. For several weeks Mel had seen Bolam carefully training the great pink-furred beast which, along with the tiger, had been such a nuisance to move from the ship. What he hadn't realized, and what Bolam hadn't bothered to tell him, was that the performance of this beast was but part of a well-planned act which lasted for fifteen minutes.

The pink beast was a school teacher, wearing giant spectacles (over non-existent eyes). Its pupils were a dozen lively and very unscholarly monkey-like creatures, which wiggled, rather than sat, restlessly at their desks, their paws and their double-tails continually seeking to do some mischief. The great lumbering school teacher stood by helplessly as his "pupils" played tag, scampering around the walls and over the desks, tossed chalk at him and at each other, and smeared each other with bright paints placed in old-fashioned inkwells. A principal—a tall and stately ostrich-like bird, a foot-high formal collar failing to cover its long red neck—came in and quacked like a duck for order, only to retire in confusion when the pupils centered their attention on him.

Mel noted that it was especially the smaller school children in the audience who liked this act. And next to them in enjoyment were several men and women whom Mel suspected of being school teachers themselves.

By Earth standards—and these were the standards that Mel had known for most of his seventeen years plus—it was the acrobatic acts which were most impressive and sensational. And of all the acrobatic acts, Mel had never imagined one more spectacular than that of the Bellinis.

To the Bellinis, seven men and two girls, nothing in the way of leaps and turns was impossible. The low gravity of Mars put no difficulty at all in the way of giant bounds and

multiple somersaults that were entirely out of the question on his native planet. The red planet was an acrobat's showplace. You might think that in gravityless space, or on the surface of Earth's moon, where the acceleration due to gravity was only one-sixth of a gee, even more spectacular effects would be possible. Oddly enough, as Mel had learned from Hakin and Bolam, they weren't.

Take the Moon, for instance. With the same muscular force, you could leap twice as high there as you could here on Mars. But it would also take you twice as much time to go up and twice as much to come down. What you gained in height you lost in speed. Your whole act was performed in slow motion. And once you slowed down that much, you had a loss in effect, so that although you were actually throwing yourself around in space, it looked for all the world like an under-water act on Earth.

No, Mars had just about the right gravity to display acrobatic acts at their best. You had plenty of time to twist and turn, and at the same time enough speed to keep the audience from falling asleep.

There was another point that Mel, as a young acrobat, appreciated more than the audience did. You didn't need nets to catch a performer who missed his grip. On Earth a thirty foot fall would mean broken bones, possibly a fractured spine. Here a thirty foot fall was no more of a shock than an eleven foot fall would have been on Earth. But it wasn't just the increase in distance alone that made for safety. You could fall from sixty feet, and still land with little more than a bad jolt, because you had time to get set, to adjust yourself for the impact. On Earth it took you two seconds to fall sixty-four feet. Here it took you three and a half seconds, and you landed with about half speed.

Of course, thought Mel, you couldn't afford to get careless, even if the gravity was low. There were several cases on record of men who had fallen as little as five feet and broken their necks. Most of the credit for that, though, had to be given to potent Martian liquor, rather than to the pull of

Martian gravity. And none of the Bellinis drank, at least while on tour.

When the troupe finally marched out of the arena—all seven men and both girls balanced in an intricate twenty-foot high pyramid on the sturdy two feet of a single understander —Mel couldn't help joining the audience in applause.

He had thought that everybody in the troupe was young and handsome. The graceful poses, the glittering costumes, the bright greasepaint, and the litheness of performance had created that illusion. But when they came out of the arena and he got a good look at them, he saw that two of the men might be called middle-aged. One of them, in fact, looked as if he were in his fifties.

To Mel, this made the performance all the more remarkable. He said, "Gee, Mr. Bellini, you were swell. I never thought there could be an act like yours."

The man laughed. "Thanks, kid. Only my name isn't Bellini, and—say, you were on before, with that dog and kabror, weren't you?"

"That's right, Mr.—"

"Ferencz, Jan Ferencz. Old man Bellini died before you were born, but the act still keeps his name."

"It's good by any name."

"Not a bad act of your own. First time you ever went on?"

"I never even saw a circus before this," admitted Mel.

"Well, you started in by seeing the best. But I'd better get back to my dressing room. See you later."

The man disappeared, and Mel looked after him, baffled. He had thought that at least one of the Bellinis should be named Bellini. And the best bet for that had seemed the oldest of the troupe.

Another animal act was on, this time a group of lions and tigers. The robot trainer had done its work well, and all the beasts performed perfectly on cue. Their trainer carried a small wand, which the audience might think was just for the sake of appearance, but which Mel knew was capable of im-

parting a severe electric shock to any of the felines which forgot the lessons it had been given by the training robot.

As it happened, none of them forgot, and you might have thought, from the way they acted, that these wild beasts had never had a nasty, man-killing thought in their great handsome heads. But Mel—and the audience—knew better. It was odd, he told himself, that although Mars and Venus had their share of strange animals, some of them native to the two planets, and some of them varieties of more familiar beasts that had been brought in by early colonists, yet when you wanted a beast that was really ferocious, one whose mere presence was enough to give you goosepimples at the thought of meeting it face to face out in the open, you had to go to good old Earth for it. No matter what part of the solar system you were in, lions and tigers still had the old appeal of beauty and danger wrapped in a single lithe package.

His attention strayed from the act long enough for him to note the place where Betty had been sitting. She was still there. But her uncle was gone.

With sudden determination, he changed rapidly into his street clothes, and just at the end of the act, he slipped into the empty seat beside her.

"Hello; Betty," he said.

She glanced at him, then flushed and turned away. "I didn't think you'd want to talk to anybody suspicious, like me."

"You're not the one we suspect. It's your uncle."

"Thank you so much for your kind opinion of me and my family. Does Rover share it?"

Mel said slowly, "Rover is in no condition to have opinions. He's been hurt."

She look up anxiously. "What happened?"

Mel told her about the two men who had tried to kill him, and Betty turned pale. She said in a low voice, "Surely you don't suspect that my uncle had anything to do with that? He told you himself that he wouldn't hire men to commit crimes."

"No, I don't suspect him. These men wanted to get rid of me for reasons that have nothing to do with the circus. This time I think I can give your uncle a clean bill of health."

"But I don't understand. Why should any one want to kill you? What good would it do any one?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out." Betty stared at him, the new act which was now going on out in the circus arena forgotten. "This is the first time an attempt has been made against me on Mars, but it has happened before, on Earth."

"You ought to tell the police!"

"I don't know whether that will do any good, but I guess they've been called in by now. However, I don't want to talk about that. I just mentioned it because of Rover. Betty, I know that your uncle doesn't like me or anybody else connected with this circus. But how do you feel?"

"Well—I like you well enough to talk to you. And I like Rover, even though he hurt my feelings. I still don't see anything wrong in my uncle's not using his right name on the ship."

"Let's forget about that. Would you like to go to the movies with me? Tomorrow night, right after my act? There's a new three-plus D show, just in from Earth."

"I'd like to go. But—"

"But what?" demanded Mel. "Don't tell me you've got another date."

"It isn't that. I turned one down. The thing is—you were a stowaway on the ship. So you can't have much money. Suppose I pay our way in."

Mel shook his head. "I'm getting paid a salary for my act with Rover and the kabror. More than I deserve, I guess, but Bolam and Hakin are generous. Some of what I get goes to pay them back for my passage, a small amount each week, but there's enough left over for spending money. I can take you."

"I won't let you do that, but I'll compromise. We'll each pay our own way."

Mel frowned, but Betty insisted. Finally, he said, "All right, if that's the only way you'll go out with me. See you tomorrow night. Come to think of it, with Rover unable to move and my arm hurt, they may cut out the act altogether for a few days. So be ready early."

The act in front of them was coming to an end, and the applause of the audience cut off further speech for a moment. But Mel looked up, and at the end of the aisle he saw Gard Closker approaching. The man saw him too, and his gaze was cold and steely as it shifted from Mel to his niece.

Mel wasn't afraid of him, but he thought it advisable, for Betty's sake, to avoid an argument. No use having Closker get nasty with her just because he was angry with Mel. So, with a final, "See you tomorrow," Mel slipped away.

The Martian police, as he had expected, had been called in and were making an investigation in the dressing rooms. There was a Detective Lieutenant Blazer looking around, and half a dozen assistants with cameras and molecular records from the Homicide Division, as well as a medical examiner. Mel wondered what all these men could have found. Bolam rumbled, "Where have you been, Mel? The police have been wanting to talk to you."

"Hakim told me to look at the rest of the acts," said Mel. "And I've been speaking to a friend."

Bolam frowned. "Sometimes I think you make friends too easily," he said. "However—go ahead, Mel, tell the Lieutenant your story."

Mel repeated once more what had happened, and Lieutenant Blazer listened silently. "You say you didn't get a good look at the man who did the shooting?" he asked finally.

"Things happened too fast. All I could say for sure is that I never saw him before, that I know of."

"How about the man who was killed."

"I never saw him either."

The Lieutenant asked casually, "Ever been in Blister Seven?"

Mel stared. "Blister Seven? Why, no, Lieutenant, I've

never seen the place. This is the only place I've ever been on Mars. And we just got here today."

"So I've been told. I was just wondering whether I had been told right."

Mel flushed. "If Bolam or Hakin told you, you can believe them. They don't lie."

"Don't get excited, Mel. I'm not calling anybody a liar. It just happens that I have a reason for making sure. The man who was killed came from Blister Seven. He was reported involved in a hold-up there just two days ago. I wondered what he was doing here, more than a thousand miles away."

"Looks as if he'd been sent here," said Bolam.

"It does. Do you know anybody in Blister Seven, Mel?"

"Well, in a way—but the man I know couldn't have anything to do with trying to kill me! He's John Armstrong, and he was my father's partner."

"That's interesting. We'll have to do a little investigating of Mr. Armstrong. And then, Mel, maybe we'll have a little talk with him."

After the police had gone, Mel went over to see how Rover was doing. The vet had taken the trouble to reassure him about Rover, and he shouldn't have worried, but he couldn't help feeling uneasy. The dog was resting quietly, his eyes closed. As Mel came over, his eyes opened, and he tried to lift his head.

Mel gently pushed him down. "It's all right, Rover," he said. "You take it easy."

The dog obeyed and closed his eyes again. Except for the rise and fall of his bandaged chest, and the motion of his stomach as he breathed, he didn't move a muscle. Mel might have thought he was asleep. But he was sure that Rover knew his master was there.

It was queer, thought Mel as he watched the dog, how everything changed once you got off Earth and were out in space, or on a low gravity planet like Mars. You adjusted in all sorts of ways you had never thought of before. Like the way you walked or sat, even the way you slept. He stood there

staring at Rover for half an hour, and in all that time, the dog didn't move any muscles that weren't involved in the breathing process. On Earth, when you slept, you were always changing position, as one set of muscles after another became strained with supporting the body's weight, and you shifted over to a new set. Here the body weighed so little that you could sleep half a night through without moving. On Earth there were people who couldn't sleep on their backs, or their right sides. Here they learned to sleep comfortably in almost any position the body could assume. You could even sleep standing up without appreciable discomfort.

There seemed to be no end to the changes that an apparently minor factor like low gravity made in the details of everyday living. Even your eating habits were changed. The food you chewed didn't slide down into your stomach so fast, and it took a little longer to digest. But you didn't mind that, because there were compensations. You didn't have to support your body weight against a strong downward pull, which you got used to on Earth without remembering it was there. Here your muscles were under less strain, unless you were deliberately using them to move yourself or some object, and you felt less tense. Yes, the physical details of living on Mars could be very pleasant, once you were really used to them.

After a while, in the midst of these and similar thoughts, Mel looked up to see Hakin standing nearby him. "I despise myself for interrupting your profound meditations, O Pensive One," said Hakin. "But my Powerful Partner wishes to speak to you."

"I wasn't thinking anything profound," replied Mel as he moved away from Rover. "Just that so many little things are different on Mars. Like your foot falling asleep. I guess that doesn't happen here either."

"Your deductions are correct, O Penetrating Philosopher," said Hakin. "Feet do not slumber on Mars. But brains do."

"Don't worry," said Mel. "I'm wide awake."

He found Bolam pacing up and down restlessly, like one of his own caged tigers. The strong man said, "I think we're beginning to learn something about the people who are trying to kill you, Mel. And I'm beginning to suspect what the motive may be."

"You think that John Armstrong has something to do with it?"

"He has everything to do with it."

Mel looked doubtful. "Do you not think so, O Intended Victim?" asked Hakin.

"He didn't seem to me like the kind of man who'd kill anybody," replied Mel. "As I told you before, he's just a harmless, absent-minded old scientist."

"Perhaps not so absent-minded as you think," said Bolam. "The thing that baffled me in the beginning was the question of motive. It seemed pointless that anybody should want to kill a young man who had no enemies and didn't threaten to harm any one. But the more we learned about you, the clearer it became that the motive must be associated with your father. That business of his and John Armstrong's must have been valuable. It represented property and equipment, as well as the rights to several inventions on the control of robots. When your father and mother were killed, what happened to your father's half of the partnership?"

"I don't know," said Mel. "I was too young to think of such things at the time."

"Did you have any relatives that you knew of? Any uncles or aunts?"

"Nobody. That's one of the reasons, I guess, why I was put in an orphanage."

"Then it would appear, O Despoiled One, that this John Armstrong kept all for himself," said Hakin quietly.

"Yes," said Bolam. "That's what he did. But he knew all the time that the property was yours—if you ever grew up to claim it. Maybe he didn't worry about it at first, while you were still in the orphanage. Possibly it wasn't worth too much then, either. But as the value of what your father had left

increased, Armstrong became afraid that you would wake up to what he had done and demand your share. That's when he first arranged to have you killed."

"I can't believe that, Bolam. It just didn't fit in with the character of the John Armstrong I knew."

"Perhaps you do not know him as well as you think. Consider, O Skeptical One," said Hakin. "On Earth there are attempts on your life. Then, in space you disappear, and for a time Armstrong does not know where you are. The attempts cease. I do not count the incident of the man who cut through the wall on the ship, for that was planned by Closker, and was intended to harm not so much you as us. However, once you get to Mars, the attempts begin again. Ask yourself why."

"The reason is obvious," Bolam answered for Mel. "You sent that radiogram to Armstrong and told him where you were going. That gave him the chance to send a couple of hired killers after you."

"Maybe it sounds logical to you," said Mel slowly. "But I still find it hard to believe. I remember John Armstrong from the days when my father was alive. Uncle John, I called him then. I liked him a lot. And he liked me, as much as he could like any one or anything living. I can't think he's changed so much."

"It is possible, O Weak-Minded One," said Hakin, "to be some one's kind uncle and yet be a scoundrel. Let me recall to your attention your friend Betty's Uncle Gard. To her he is loving and considerate."

"But John Armstrong isn't in the least like Gard Closker. Take this question of motive, for instance, that Bolam brought up. You talk about his wanting to keep the whole partnership for himself. But John Armstrong never cared much about money. I remember hearing my father say that. His real interest was his inventions."

"People change, My Naive Young Friend," said Hakin. "A baby cares nothing for money either. But he grows up to care."

"I suppose so," admitted Mel. "But I still don't believe

that John Armstrong is the kind of man to commit murder."

"At present it doesn't matter much whether you believe it or not," observed Bolam. "If any further attempts are made, you can be sure that Armstrong won't make them in person. You'll just have to be on guard against everybody."

"I'll be careful."

Hakin frowned. "You say that too carelessly. You must not walk around on Mars unaccompanied, O Unhappy One," he said. "Now that Rover is unable to protect you, you must rely on us. When you leave the circus and go out into the city, either Bolam or I must be with you at all times."

"There are times when two's company and three's a crowd. I've got a date for tomorrow night with Betty. I don't think she'll like the idea of my bringing a friend to keep an eye on me. I don't like it myself."

"Why not?" asked Bolam. "Hakin will love to go along and help you to entertain her. He can tell her some wonderful stories. A few of them are true, too."

"We shall speak, O Chaperoned One, about her uncle, Gard Closker. She will learn about more villainy than she ever knew existed."

Hakin was half smiling as he spoke, but Mel could see that he meant what he said about going along on all Mel's trips. It simply wasn't safe for Mel to go out on Mars without protection. He groaned at the thought. A fine time he'd have on his date, with Hakin or Bolam along.

# CHAPTER 10

## *MEL IS FOLLOWED*

BY THIS time the performance had come to an end, and the audience was filing out. Mel went over to take another look at Rover. The dog seemed not to have moved since he had left, although as Mel came in he once more opened his eyes and raised his head slightly. In the way he slept, Rover was all dog. His nose remained on guard even when his eyes were closed.

For a time Mel stood by the dog and stroked his head. Then he quietly moved away.

As he was leaving the room, a man spoke to him. "How's your friend?"

"Getting along all right, thanks." For a moment Mel couldn't place the man. Then he realized who the latter was.

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Jan Ferencz, the oldest of the Bellinis. The change from acrobat's costume to street clothes had thrown him off. Even the man's face looked like a different person's without the greasepaint. Before he had seemed gay and lively. Now he appeared to be a quiet, ordinary individual, more like a high school teacher than a circus performer.

"Guess you're worried about him. But he'll get over it. Animals don't stay sick long, even on Earth. And on Mars, wounds heal in no time."

"That's what the vet said."

"You can take his word for it." Ferencz said slowly, "I hope there's no more trouble around here."

"You don't hope it any more than I do," said Mel.

"I hear you had a little run-in with some of Closker's men on the ship coming over. I've met Closker before. Could you pin anything on him?"

"Closker said he wasn't responsible. He said he wouldn't do anything illegal."

"Not unless he thought he could get away with it," said the acrobat dryly. "As I say, I know Closker. I worked for him long enough, and I can tell you I was glad when I had the chance to leave him. Bolam and Hakin are a lot better to work for. In the first place, they're performers themselves. They know how we feel about things. And then—well, I guess they're decent people, and Closker isn't. That's the real difference."

"I guess most people are decent," said Mel. He felt pleased at the other man's readiness to talk. Somehow, in Jan Ferencz's attitude there was an acceptance of him as a fellow performer.

"That, my boy, depends on how you get to know them. I'll say this much—most people have good intentions. They want to be decent, and they will be so long as it isn't too hard a job or doesn't cost them too much." He paused, and then went on, "I remember the old circus days, long before you were born. Circus and carnival people were kind and thoughtful, and if you needed it, they'd give you the shirt off their

back, even if it turned out to be a torn shirt. But at the same time, a lot of them were crooks who made their living by robbing the poor fools who came to see them."

He shook his head disapprovingly. "You can have no idea what some of those old-time concessions and side-shows were like. Full of frauds, from games of chance, in which the customer didn't have a chance, to marvels of nature that were purely man-made. Things like the spider-woman and the wild man from Venus. Done with mirrors, and fake features made of plastic, and a smooth line of talk. Of course all the fakes went out when large-scale travel started to Venus and Mars, and people got a sight of the real wonders those planets had to show."

"I thought that fake stuff went out more than fifty years ago," said Mel.

"Sure it did. How old did you think I was?" Ferencz chuckled. "I'm seventy-six, Mel."

"You can't be! No old man could do the tricks you do!"

"People tell me I don't look and act my age, and in fact, I don't feel it either. But that's because I stay on a low-gravity planet. On a place like Earth I'd age fast. And I'd be out of the Bellini act in half an hour with a broken leg or a pulled muscle. Yes, sir, for an acrobat, there's no place like Mars."

"The way you did those somersaults, I thought you were about twenty-five," said Mel.

"Oh, I'm good, I'll admit that. You don't have to twist my arm to get me to agree with you. But I'm not as good as I was, not by a long shot. And another thing, Mel. When you're my age, you know that although it's nice to win a fight against odds, it's even nicer when you're in a tough spot to get a little help. Why didn't you yell for help when you chased after that crook before?"

"I guess I just didn't think of it," said Mel.

"Better learn to think of it. Anybody that tries to harm a circus is an enemy to all of us, and we'll all join in going after him. In the old days, we were always getting into trouble. Sometimes one of the people that got gypped at a

concession would try to get his money back. And once in a while, the crowd that tried to help him would get out of hand and attack all the circus people around. We had a way of handling situations like that. Guess most of the young ones around here don't know about it, because they don't need to know. But it could come in handy again, and the old timers haven't forgotten it. And it wouldn't hurt you to keep it in mind too."

"What was it?" asked Mel, thinking that although Ferencz looked young, the way he talked betrayed his age. He took an awfully long time to come to the point.

"We'd just yell, 'Hey, Rube!' That was a call for everybody in the circus to drop what he was doing in a hurry, pick up a tent peg or wrench, and come running."

" 'Hey, Rube!' " repeated Mel. "I'll have to remember that."

"But don't use it unless there's real trouble," cautioned Ferencz.

One of the girls who had been in the Bellini act came past them. Despite the fact that she too had changed into street clothes, Mel found that he recalled her without trouble. Strange, he thought, how much easier it was for him to recognize a girl than an elderly man.

She smiled and said to Ferencz, "Have a heart, Pop. Don't tell him the story of your life all at once. You'll wear out his ears."

"You go roll a hoop, Linda," said Ferencz. "I'm giving this young fellow advice that'll do him good. And that includes staying away from female acrobats. Especially when they're fifty years old."

The girl laughed as she turned a corner and disappeared. Mel wondered how old she really was. The way people stayed young on Mars, she might actually have been fifty—except, he suddenly realized, that she had laughed at the old man's words. That proved she was young. If she were really close to fifty, she wouldn't have seen anything funny in the remark.

Ferencz went on talking, but Mel's attention wandered.

And then Hakin came toward them, saw what was happening, and sent the talkative member of the Bellinis on his way.

Mel would have wanted to see some of the Martian colony where they had landed, but Bolam and Hakin had forbidden him to go alone at any time. And now it was late in the evening, and the danger would be greater than ever.

There was nothing to do but turn in. Mel checked once more to make sure that Rover was all right, and then went to sleep in the same room.

In the pale light of the Martian morning, Mel awoke to find Rover somewhat more lively. Mel brought the dog a dish full of water, which the animal lapped slowly, but Mel didn't offer him food. Rover usually ate but a single large meal a day, with occasional snacks. Today there would be no snacks.

Then Mel went out to find Bolam and Hakin. The two partners were busy with sheaves of papers which they were trying to put in order. Bolam growled, "This is the one thing I hate about running a circus. Some day all this paper work will kill me."

"We need a secretary, O Impatient One," said Hakin.

"Either that," suggested Mel, "or quit doing some of the acts yourselves. Training the animals and rehearsing takes up a lot of your time."

"We can't give that up," said Bolam. "That's the part that's most fun. This paper work is necessary, but it wears me out. I wasn't built to push a pencil. I'd rather lift a ton of bricks than go through an ounce of papers." He sighed. "Come on, Mel, let's take a look at the city. If Hakin doesn't mind, I'll finish this when I get back."

"Your departure, O Confounder of Confusion, will be no loss," said Hakin. "Go, and guide our young friend in his explorations."

Bolam had been in Marsopolis on many occasions, and he had watched the place grow from a small colony to the thriving city it now was. There were close to two hundred thousand people living inside the Blister, he told Mel, most of them in the urban part, and a few thousand in the large fac-

tory farms where they raised some of the food plants that required a high oxygen content in the atmosphere. Except for a few minor items, each Blister was self-supporting.

It seemed to Mel that the Blister was overcrowded—there were approximately seven thousand people for each of its twenty-eight square miles—and it struck him as odd that the streets should be so nearly empty.

Bolam said, "The people aren't out in the streets. You don't know how this place is organized, Mel. For every square mile, more than six thousand of them are at work, and a few hundred, who work at night, are now asleep."

"But I can see only a dozen people in this block," objected Mel.

"There are several reasons for that. This isn't a residential district, so you won't see many children here. And most of our delivery services take place at night, so that you don't have large numbers of delivery trucks. Besides, there are a great many blocks in a square mile," pointed out Bolam. "Seven thousand people per square mile is a heavy population density for a country as a whole, but it's nothing at all for a large city. No, there's plenty of room here."

Mel was looking all around him. Certainly the buildings had been widely spaced, and there were plenty of parks and open squares. The buildings themselves rose to a height of five stories, and to Mel they didn't seem strongly constructed at all. But he reminded himself that in the low Martian gravity, walls and foundations didn't have to be very solid. And five stories wasn't very high. Fire escapes ran down to the third floor, and there, for the sake of economy of construction, they stopped. From the third floor it was possible for any one but an invalid to jump with practically no danger.

The city seemed to be perfectly flat, but it was hard to be sure. Your body felt so light that you could climb a slight rise or descend a gentle slope without noticing it. You could see the single great wall of the Blister stretching to the right and left, as well as above you. It extended far into the distance,

where it seemed to curve down like a horizon to meet the Martian ground.

They had walked several blocks when Bolam said unexpectedly, "I think we'd better take a cab."

"A cab?" repeated Mel, as if he found it hard to believe his ears. "Why, it's a pleasure to walk here."

"I've got a hard day's work ahead of me," grunted Bolam. "And I have to put on a couple of tough acts tonight. I have to save my strength."

Mel stared at him, hoping to find that Bolam was joking. But the strong man was already hailing a small electrically driven cab, one of the few that was cruising the streets. Mel gazed at the cab with distaste. It was built low to the ground, and barely had room for two passengers in addition to the driver. It looked for all the world like an overgrown baby carriage.

Mel was still puzzled as they got in. The cab rode along rather slowly, and Bolam pointed out what passed for sights on Mars. There were no historic buildings naturally, no slums, no show palaces. The entire colony had been built for people who would live and work here, and although there were several open theaters where concerts and plays and movies were given, most of the buildings, outside of the apartment houses, consisted of offices, smokeless factories, and administration buildings.

They were still moving slowly, in fact Mel felt that they were crawling. "Can't we go any faster?" he asked in annoyance.

"If you want to," said Bolam, and leaned forward to give instructions to the driver.

They picked up speed at once, but they didn't move steadily. There were only a few low or high spots in the well-paved road, but every time they hit one of these they rose a foot into the air, the wheels of the cab spinning uselessly while they slowly came down again. "There are some advantages to high gravity," said Bolam. "It keeps the car on the ground."

"They could get the same effect as increasing the gravity by making the cabs heavier, couldn't they?" asked Mel.

"Not quite. Besides, it would be a waste of materials as well as of power. This way the cars get their power on a special broadcast beam from the central atomic station at a cost of only a few cents a day."

They slowed down again, this time almost to a stop before turning a corner, the driver applying his brakes with extreme caution. "More trouble from the low gravity," observed Bolam. "Apply your brakes hard, and you'll go head over heels, or skid and turn turtle. Accidents of that kind are fifty times as frequent here as on Earth, although it's true that they're less serious when they do happen."

"He wasn't going very fast in the first place," said Mel. "Why couldn't he have turned around the corner without slowing down at all?"

"You can't go around curves rapidly here. If you've ever driven on Earth, you'll note that the outside of a curve in the road is raised higher than the inside—it's banked, as they call it—to keep the wheels in contact with the ground as the car turns. Well, here the wheels would rise far higher than on Earth, and require very steep banking. And on city streets, that kind of banking is impracticable altogether. The only answer is to drive slowly."

"I guess we would have done better to walk," said Mel. "I just don't understand why you took this cab in the first place." He turned around and looked back. "Say, there's a car that went around the corner a little faster than we did. And you're right, Bolam, they almost climbed up on the sidewalk. Look at them wobble!"

"They were afraid they'd lose us," replied the strong man.

"Lose us?"

"They've been following us ever since we left the circus. With the streets almost empty, they stood out like so many sore thumbs. That, O My Imperceptive Friend, as Hakin would say, is why I decided to take a cab in the first place."

For a second Mel sat there with his mouth open. "I ought to have my head examined," he admitted finally. "Or my eyes. I couldn't figure it out." And then he shuddered. "If I'd been alone, I'd never have noticed. It's lucky you're with me."

"Yes, the people who want to kill you are in earnest. In dead earnest, I might say. But I don't think they'll dare to use a gun, blast or missile, out here in the center of town. They're hoping to get you in a more secluded spot."

Mel shivered. "I don't like the idea of being followed everywhere I go."

"Neither do I," said Bolam. "And I'm going to do something about it. You stay in the cab. I'm getting out for a minute."

He leaned forward again to whisper instructions to the driver, and the latter nodded. At the next corner they slowed down again, almost to a complete stop, and a second after the cab turned, Bolam opened the door and leaped out, while the cab continued a short distance down the street. Bolam almost went head over heels, but fortunately he was able to steady himself at the curb.

A few seconds later, the cab that was trailing them crawled around the corner in pursuit of their own. Bolam sprang into action as suddenly as if he were a robot set off by an electronic impulse. Catapulting toward the cab from the curb, the strong man knocked the vehicle over on its side. His action must have caught those inside the cab by complete surprise. Cries and curses of alarm came from them, and then a shot rang out, the bullet tearing through the top of the cab.

Bolam lifted the vehicle with the men in it high into the air, and spun it around, like a wrestler giving his opponent the airplane whirl. Then he smashed it to the ground again.

The cab with Mel in it had stopped about fifty feet away, and Mel was staring back in fascination. He saw Bolam tear open the somewhat crushed door and pull out of the cab two dazed and shaken men. Mel said to his own driver, "Wait

here," and got out. He ran back to see at closer hand what was going on.

"Recognize either one of them?" demanded Bolam.

Mel shook his head. "I don't think I've ever seen either of them before. Maybe—maybe you made a mistake."

"I don't think so. They were following us, all right."

One of the men, who was about Bolam's height, but only half his width, said shakenly, "You'll go to jail for this."

"More likely I'll get a medal," growled Bolam. "And a couple of rewards that I'm sure are posted for you."

"We weren't doing anything to you."

"You had intentions, Mister. I don't like being followed. Or shot at."

"That's because you attacked us first."

The streets had seemed almost deserted, but the sound of shooting was unusual enough to have brought a crowd around them. The second of the men from the cab, a tall slim man with a slight mustache, turned to the people around them. "Look at this fellow!" he shouted. "Look at the size of him! We weren't doing anything at all—just riding along in a cab minding our own business—and he knocked it over. He doesn't even live on Mars, either! He's just a foreigner from Earth. Are you going to let him get away with this?"

There was a low murmur of resentment from the crowd. But those in the front ranks took a good look at Bolam and had no trouble in controlling their feelings. Mel noted that even those who muttered loudest showed no desire to get too close to a man who was twice the width of any normal individual. Those in the rear, however, and the newcomers who kept coming, were pushing the others closer. Mel found that the ring around them was becoming uncomfortably small.

"Stand back!" roared Bolam, and the pushers froze in their tracks. "My friends," he said, "this is no business of yours. These men that you're so worried about are crooks. And they're carrying guns. You know that's illegal."

"We need guns for self-defense against thugs like you!" cried the first man. "This fellow's a menace. He's a strong

man in the circus, and he thinks that just because he's got bigger muscles than other people, he can push everybody around."

Murmurs were arising in the crowd again, and once more, although those in the front row tried hard to hold their places, the circle became smaller. The two men noticed a momentary opening in the crowd, and made a sudden dash to sneak through. Bolam leaped after them, and the excitement of the onlookers rose to the boiling point. The mass of men swept in, and Mel, separated from Bolam and the two criminals, found himself surrounded and almost unable to move. Somebody knocked him off balance, somebody else hit him in the face.

Mel had never before found himself in the middle of a hostile crowd, and for a few seconds he was terrified. He tried to fight back, but the press of people around him was too great to let him so much as swing his arms effectively. His feet were knocked from under him, and afraid of being trampled, he struggled desperately to stand up again. It would have been no consolation—even if he had time to think of it—that under Martian gravity trampling wasn't quite as unpleasant as it would have been on Earth. It would be bad enough.

Everything was happening so fast that he had no real time to think. He could never have said later why the words came to his lips and he called out desperately, "Hey, Rube!"

For a few seconds his call for help seemed to bring no results. The swirling mob knocked him off his feet again, and at the same time lifted him and carried him a dozen yards. He tried to struggle free, but the crush of human bodies held him more firmly than the Martian gravity.

And then something like a catapult seemed to strike the mass from outside. The pressure on Mel grew less. Men on the outside of the close-massed group were suddenly ejected, like neutrons from an atomic nucleus, and went flying at all angles in orbits of their own. Mel felt the ground under his feet

again, and had room to move his elbows, to hit in the face a man who had been poking his fist into Mel's jaw.

Suddenly it was over. The crowd around them was scattered, and half a dozen brawny members of the circus crew, led by Jan Ferencz, were facing them. Mel saw Bolam, still standing, and still holding on grimly to the two men who had caused the trouble. The faces of the pair were bruised, and their clothes were ripped to shreds. They hadn't gone unscathed at the hands of their would-be rescuers.

Neither had Bolam. There were bruises on his face, and the strong man's clothes too were torn. So, as Mel noted with surprise, were his own. He hadn't been aware of what was happening to them.

Jan Ferencz grinned happily at Mel and Bolam. "Haven't been in anything like this for fifty years. Never thought I'd see a riot on Mars."

"You wouldn't have, if these two rats hadn't deliberately started it." And Bolam shook the two men as if they were actually the rodents he had called them. "They thought they'd get away."

"They'd have done better to keep their mouths shut," said one of the circus crewmen.

"They took their chance and lost," said Bolam. "But what brought you to help us?"

"Why, we were just going for a stroll to see what changes had taken place since the last time we were here," said Jan. "Then we saw what looked like a riot. We figured it was an all-Martian affair, and the smart thing for us was to stay out. You could have knocked me over with a feather—an ostrich feather, I guess—when I heard somebody yelling, 'Hey, Rube!' "

Bolam's brow wrinkled. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You a circus owner and don't know what, 'Hey, Rube!' means!" exclaimed Jan. "How times have changed!"

"Most of us didn't know either," admitted one of the crew. "But Jan said it was an old-time circus call for help."

"I had been telling Mel about it just last night. Smart boy, Mel. You kept your head when the going got rough."

Mel flushed. He thought of telling them that he hadn't really kept his head, but that the words had just seemed to come to him, and that he had yelled them out almost in panic. But he decided that he'd better keep quiet. Never refuse credit, he thought, when it's handed to you on a silver platter.

At this moment a policeman finally showed up. He came from around the corner, and when he saw the two battered men and Bolam, who was holding them, his eyes narrowed. At the same time, a couple of men who had been part of the crowd began talking to him excitedly.

He came over to Mel and Bolam and the circus crew. "You fellows come with me," he said. "You're under arrest."

# CHAPTER 11

## *MEL GETS A CHAPERONE*

FOR a moment Mel was paralyzed. But Bolam had been in tight spots before, and so had Jan. Both of them began, almost at the same moment, "Just a moment, Officer—"

"Quiet!" roared the policeman. "And one at a time!"

"Go ahead, Bolam," said Jan generously.

"I'll do the talking, all right. Officer, these two men are crooks, and I have reason to believe they're assassins too. One of them tried to shoot me. And—that reminds me—"

He slapped their clothes with heavy hands, and the man with the mustache winced as Bolam removed a blaster from him. "They had another gun too," he said.

"The other gun must still be in the cab," said Mel. He

poked his head in the small vehicle and looked around. Presently he found the gun and dragged it out.

"Here you are, Officer. You'd better take care of both weapons," said Bolam. "Now what do you think of these two prize packages?"

The policeman said doubtfully, "All the same, you did attack them first."

"I had to in order to save our own lives," said Bolam. "But don't take my word for it. Call Lieutenant Blazer. He's on the case."

"I think I'll do that. Just a minute." The policeman spoke briefly into his shield phone, and then said, "You're Bolam Turino?"

"That's right."

"The Lieutenant says to hold everything. He'll be right over."

During the five minute wait, the two men began to argue once more that they were respectable citizens who had been foully attacked and mistreated, and Mel had a brief feeling of discomfort. What if these men were perfectly innocent of any evil intentions against him, and Bolam had made a mistake after all? They might have had excellent reasons for carrying guns. His real enemies might be standing in the very crowd that was now gathering around again to watch, completely unsuspected, and laughing up their sleeves.

Then Lieutenant Blazer arrived in a small jetcopter plane which flew low over the buildings, and Mel's misgivings vanished. The Lieutenant took one look at the two men and said, "Hello, King. Nice to see you again, Duke."

Neither of the two men answered this pleasant greeting. Their chances were finished, and they lapsed into a surly silence.

"You know them pretty well, Lieutenant?" asked Mel.

"They're old friends. They used to be part of a gang that started young around here. They tried their hands at petty crimes, and graduated to burglary and murder. They were known as the Royal Martians in the old days—some name for

a gang of crooks, isn't it? These characters are going to join the rest of their pals, who are taking postgraduate courses in jail. And if you'll hand over those guns, Minneman," he said to the policeman, "we'll take a good look at them in the police laboratory. That missile gun may be the one that was used to shoot the dog in the circus." He nodded to the policeman. "Take the two characters away, Minneman. I'll talk to them later at the station."

The crowd, apparently disappointed that there would be no more fireworks, was dispersing. Bolam said, "We won't need the cab any more, Mel. Wait here a minute while I pay the driver."

The Lieutenant said, "You're a lucky youngster, Mel, to have friends like Bolam and Hakin. They're the kind that stick by you, and keep their wits about them."

"I know that by this time," said Mel.

"You've got nothing else to tell me about who might want to kill you?"

"I've told you all I know," replied Mel.

"Maybe all you *think* you know," said the Lieutenant thoughtfully. Bolam was returning, and he added, "So far it doesn't add up to much."

"You've checked up on John Armstrong?" asked Bolam.

"Lieutenant Garand, in Blister Seven, paid him a visit. According to him, the old man seems to live in a world of his own, and is harmless."

"That's what I told you," said Mel.

Bolam shook his head. "He's the only one who stands to gain from Mel's death."

"That's what we'd like to be sure about. We've started to investigate Armstrong's past history and financial affairs. So far we've come across nothing that could be considered incriminating. At the time of your father's death," the Lieutenant said to Mel, "the partnership between him and Armstrong wasn't doing too well. If Armstrong had tried to cash in the assets and pay all the debts they owed, he would probably have ended up in the red. It wasn't until some time

afterwards that the firm—now run by Armstrong alone—began to make money."

"Then you mean that I really don't have anything coming to me?" asked Mel.

"I didn't say that. Armstrong and your father worked on some of their robot inventions together, and whatever financial success Armstrong had later is based on these discoveries. But it is also based on the way he ran the business. He seems, for an absent-minded scientist, to be a surprisingly good business man. It would take a good accountant to figure out how much is coming to you in royalties. But it's undoubtedly a fairly large sum."

"And Armstrong has been holding on to it by himself all these years?" demanded Bolam. "Don't you call that a motive?"

Lieutenant Blazer shook his head. "You're forgetting the kind of man you're dealing with. So long as the firm was making enough money to get along, Armstrong didn't worry about finances. He set the policies, and hired the men to see that they were carried out. He seems to have set very good policies, but he didn't care about the money they brought in. He just let the profits accumulate without using them for any personal needs. Apparently he doesn't have personal needs. He doesn't smoke or drink, and he isn't married. He doesn't even seem to spend much on food. And he has no intimate friends, unless you can call his secretary a friend. His whole interest is in his work."

"He doesn't sound like a murderer to me," admitted Bolam.

"He used to be nice to me," said Mel. "I don't think he'd try to kill me. I remember that once when I was about five years old he brought me a puppy for a present. He was absent-minded even then, but kind. I remember that the puppy ran away or was stolen, and then he brought me a mechanical duck to make me happy again."

Bolam said, "Just how far have you carried your investigations, Lieutenant. Has Armstrong ever left Mars for Earth?

Does he have contacts with people on Earth? Could he possibly have any connections with these crooks we just caught?"

"We can't answer all that yet, not with certainty, anyway. So far, though, I can tell you this: The only contacts Armstrong has on Earth, or on Mars, for that matter, are with the engineering firms which install his robots. He hasn't made more than two long trips in the last ten years, one to the Asteroid Belt and the other to Ganymede, in both cases for the purpose of checking up on large installations of robot machinery. And as for crooks—I don't think he'd know how to talk to a crook if he saw one. Not unless the crook was an engineer too."

"I think that's carrying it too far, Lieutenant," said Bolam. "He's been around, and he can't be quite that ignorant. There must be a few things about John Armstrong that you don't know."

"There's plenty about him that we don't know and intend to find out. But so far there's no indication that he's the man who's instigating these attacks."

"He *will* profit from them if Mel is killed," insisted Bolam.

"He'll get more money. That's why we're keeping after him. The only trouble, as I say, is that money means nothing to him. Meanwhile, we've got these two men you caught. Maybe, under a little gentle persuasion, they'll tell us a few things. We're hoping to learn a lot from them."

After the Lieutenant had gone, Mel said, "It doesn't look as if John Armstrong is the man. But if he isn't, who is?"

Bolam shrugged his great shoulders. "Whoever it is, we've upset his plans for today. Come on, Mel, let's go on with seeing the town."

They could walk now without fear of being followed, but Mel had a feeling that they had already seen most of what the city had to show. He was more interested in what lay outside the transparent wall of the Blister, where the hills of the Martian plain stretched away into the distance. From time to time Mel could see an occasional space-suited

figure working among the long rows of cabbage-like plants that grew in the fields. The Martian air was thin and clear, and the details of the spacesuits, as well as of the plants, could be seen almost as sharply a mile away as close to the wall. Distance diminished the size of an image, but did not blur it.

The sun up above was small, but it looked startlingly bright against the almost black sky. The near absence of an atmosphere, Mel knew, was responsible for the almost complete lack of scattering of the sun's light, and therefore for the blackness of the sky. The brighter stars could be seen easily, even through the Blister walls. And the shadows cast by the sun were black and sharp.

At intervals of a quarter of a mile, air locks were built into the walls. "Just in case," explained Bolam. "Sometimes a man miscalculates his oxygen reserve, or his valve gets stuck, and he has to get back here in a hurry."

"I thought farming was mechanized," said Mel.

"It is, to a large extent. The men are present simply to check on the machinery. Actually, farming on the open fields of Mars is a simple business. The only plants that stand a chance are those of Martian origin, adapted through millions of years to very thin dry air and to a minimum of water. Biological stations test those plants capable of supplying food values that human beings need, and select the best strains. Most of the Martian plants grow from spores, you know, or by root propagation. Seed plants are rare. The Martian soil supplies the minerals, including carbonates and the tiny amount of nitrates required. The main thing we have to do is protect the plants from virus diseases and harvest the crop."

In the distance Mel thought that he saw a space-suited man crawling along the ground. When he got a better look, however, he realized that he was looking at a six-footed animal. Another beast like it grazed nearby.

"Native Martian 'sheep,'" said Bolam. "Actually they aren't sheep at all, and they're of not much use as food animals. On Earth you can live on meat alone, but you'd starve

in a hurry if you tried to live just on these sheep. Their bodies contain almost no protein of a kind we can use. They're useful because they eat weeds."

"I wonder what it's like out there," said Mel.

"You can hire a space outfit like any tourist and find out," remarked Bolam. "Wearing a helmet and jacket isn't quite as awkward and cumbersome as wearing a space suit, but it's bad enough, and once you get into the open, there isn't much more to see than you can see from here. The only reason an occasional tourist will go out there is to be able to boast to his friends back home about it. It gives him a sense of adventure to talk about how he went out on a Martian desert."

"The ground between the plants looks gray," commented Mel. "Is that because of the iron particles?"

"Right. They're secreted by the same plant-bacteria team that releases oxygen inside the Blister. But the iron isn't gathered up so rapidly out in the open, and much of it gradually oxidizes again after the growing season and turns into rust once more."

Bolam looked at his watch and said, "I guess you've seen enough by now, Mel. I'd better get back to that office work I left. Maybe after tangling with that pair of thugs I'll have enough ambition to tear into a pile of papers."

Mel nodded assent. They hadn't really been gone long, but a great many things had happened, and he felt as if he hadn't seen Rover in a week. And he was anxious to find out how the dog was getting along.

This time Rover not only lifted up his head in greeting but made an attempt to stand. Mel pushed him gently down. "Easy, boy. You're supposed to rest in bed, remember?"

Rover let himself be pushed down, but he didn't close his eyes again. Apparently he had enough of resting.

For a time Mel stayed with the dog. His visit seemed to do the animal good, and it made him feel better too. After a few minutes, satisfied that Rover was getting along as well as could be expected, he went into the circus office, where Hakin and Bolam were going over their papers. Bolam, who

had taken the two thugs in his stride, was once more groaning over his work.

"The trouble with you, O Powerful One," said Hakin, "is that you fear and dislike such labor as this. The difficulties you face here are child's play. A young inexperienced lad like Mel could solve them. But the moment you stare at a shipping schedule, your mind freezes with horror."

"Maybe I could lend a hand, Bolam," said Mel. "You do plenty around here, and you've done plenty for me too. It would be only fair for me to help you."

"I don't know how much help you'll be, but I'll appreciate every little bit, Mel. Here, sit down, and Hakin will give you instructions."

Everything wasn't quite as simple as Hakin had pretended. They were arranging the schedule of engagements for next year's circus tour, and there were a great many questions to settle, from the arrangements of leasing the grounds to the signing of contracts with shipping companies and suppliers of animal foods.

"The year after next, O Helpful Youth, if good fortune smiles upon us we shall have our own space ship, the way Closker has. Meanwhile we must wrack our harassed heads to find the lowest rates on regular passenger liners or fast freighters. If you only knew, O Ignorant and Happy One, how deep and intricate our calculations must be to save a few paltry credits!"

He might not have known at first, but he soon found out. By the end of the afternoon, he knew why Bolam dreaded the work. His head was a maze of figures, of costs and tonnages and taxes—interplanetary, municipal, income, excise, and several others—all of them whirling around and playing games with each other in his bewildered mind. He felt utterly confused.

Hakin was the only one who didn't mind the work. That was because even more than the others, he realized its importance. "You must remember, O Disgusted One, that a few hours of simple labor with paper and pencil may save

as much as the circus could earn by a month of hard work. Sometimes success or failure is determined in the signing of contracts, long before the first performance itself."

Mel nodded. That much he could understand. And gradually, through all the confusion, he began to get an idea of what Hakin was doing. All the same, he was glad when the rubber man said, "This will be enough for today. Soon we shall eat, and then begin to prepare for the evening's performance." He gazed thoughtfully at Mel. "How is your arm, O Injured One?"

"It's all right. To tell you the truth, Hakin, I forgot it had ever been hurt."

"As the doctor said, injuries heal quickly on Mars. But without Rover, your act would lack much. Tonight you may go free. You may accompany your friend, Betty, to the movies if you so desire."

"Thanks, Hakin." Mel grinned. "As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I was hoping to do after the performance."

"You need not stay for the performance at all. How well I know the minds of the young," said Hakin complacently. "You will give the girl my regrets. I do not hold it against her that her uncle is Gard Closker. Our relatives we do not choose for ourselves, and personally I hold no grudge against her. If it were possible, I should accompany you tonight as I had planned, and make her acquaintance again."

"That's right," said Mel. "You and Bolam are both going to be busy with the circus. You won't be able to come along with me. I'll have this date with Betty alone."

"Not alone, O Over-Hasty One," replied Hakin. "It is true that you will lack the pleasure of such company as only Bolam and I would give you. Your loss will be great indeed. But you will have a companion nevertheless."

He looked at Mel, and now it was his turn to grin.

Mel said in alarm, "What is it, Hakin? What have you got up your sleeve? Don't hold out on me!"

"You forget that there is still danger. But the cautious Lieutenant Blazer has not forgotten. Those two men who

followed you today may not be the only ones on your trail. The Lieutenant has therefore arranged to have you discreetly accompanied by a plainclothesman wherever you go."

"Oh, no!" groaned Mel. "You mean that I can't even have a date without having a cop along?"

"It is for your own good, O Rash One," said Hakin.

That was as far as Mel could get with him. He said bitterly, "I hope it's a cops-and-robbers movie, and all the cops get killed."

Actually he knew that as Hakin said, he would be followed for his own good. That, however, didn't make him feel any better about it.

In the evening, shortly before the performance, there was a video call from Lieutenant Blazer himself. First Bolam talked to him, and then Mel.

The Lieutenant said, "Mel, we've been questioning those two men who followed you. We already have enough on them to send them up for a good part of their lives, and it wasn't hard to make them talk. Did you ever hear of Little Jupe?"

"Little Jupe? Never that I know of, Lieutenant. Is it a new planet? Or an asteroid?"

"No, it isn't a new planet or an asteroid. My informants say that they were hired to get you by an underworld character known by that name."

"Never heard of him. You have a better chance of knowing people like that than I do," said Mel. "The only underworld characters I know are the ones who come after me."

"We realize that. But the fact is that we've never before heard of Little Jupe at all. It would seem that he's an intermediary himself, hired by whoever really wants to kill you. Well, it shouldn't be too hard to find him, if he's still in Blister Seven."

"I hope you get him soon, Lieutenant. And by the way, Lieutenant, about my being followed—"

"You want to thank me? You're welcome."

"No, Lieutenant," said Mel. "I didn't want to thank you. I was just wondering if it was necessary for tonight. It's kind

of a nuisance when you're—well, when you're with a friend—to look around and see a man trailing you all the time. A guy wants some privacy once in a while."

"A guy wants to keep alive once in a while too," replied Lieutenant Blazer. "But don't worry, Mel, about looking around and seeing a man trailing you. You won't. And this friend of yours won't know anything about it."

"But I'll know I'm being watched! No matter if this man of yours keeps out of sight, I'll know he's there."

"You won't know anything of the kind. Afraid we'll cramp your style? You just go ahead about your business and stop worrying."

"But just for tonight, Lieutenant, couldn't I go without being trailed?"

"Nothing doing," said the Lieutenant firmly. "If we leave you out of our sight for a moment or two, that's just the time you can expect trouble."

"There'll be plenty of trouble with a man following me," said Mel gloomily.

He was supposed to meet Betty near the movie itself, and on the way there, he kept turning around from time to time to see whether he could spot the man who was following him. But now that the day's work was over, the streets were full of hundreds of people streaming to places of amusement, and he couldn't pick out the one man who might be on his trail.

He was early, and he had to wait ten minutes for Betty. When she finally did arrive, a little breathless, she said, "I'm sorry we arranged to meet here. You could have come to our hotel."

"I thought you didn't want your uncle to know that we were going out together."

"I didn't, at first, but when I thought about it a little more, I realized it wasn't right to do things secretly. When he asked me tonight where I was going, I wasn't going to lie to him. I told him about you. And you know, Mel, he wasn't angry at all. He said to go out and have a good time. And to bring you back later. He said he wanted to talk to you."

"I don't know what we can talk about. We don't have much in common."

"You'll find something. I have an idea, Mel, that you're all wrong about Uncle Gard. He isn't the conniving creature you think he is."

"Look, Betty, after what happened on the ship, I have my opinion of him and you have yours. He brought you up, and I guess you have a right to like him. I suppose I'd like a Venusian snake if he brought me up and was good to me. Let's not argue about it."

"Are you comparing Uncle Gard to a Venusian snake?"

Mel groaned. "Betty, what I'm saying is that I don't want to get into an argument. Not with you, anyway. I didn't say he was a snake, I just gave a snake as an example. I could as well have said a hyena-bird—oh, skip it. How about going in and seeing the movie?"

"All right. But from now on, please be careful of the way you talk about Uncle Gard."

Before they went in, Mel looked around again, but he couldn't see any one he thought might be a plainclothesman trailing him. He looked around again once they were inside, and Betty noticed it.

"What's wrong, Mel?" she asked. "You seem nervous. Is it my glamorous personality?"

Mel didn't want to tell her that some one was probably following them and going to stay with them all evening. "We had a little trouble today," he said. And he described to her what had happened.

"Too bad you couldn't have had Rover with you," said Betty. "That dog certainly protected you from *me* all right."

"Bolam did pretty well too. You should have seen him knock that car over."

"I know he's strong. All the same, I guess it is dangerous for you to go out on Mars, where there are people who hate you. You should have some one with you all the time."

"I've got you with me now," said Mel. He didn't add that he also had one of Lieutenant Blazer's plainclothes police.

The first picture they saw was a three-D-plus cartoon about Martian Mouse. Martian Mouse had a series of adventures with ferocious mouse-eating cat-plants, and barely escaped with his life—just in time to wake up and discover he had dreamed all his adventures. This was followed by an old newsreel showing things that had happened on Earth the week before. The pictures were flashed through space and caught on a spool of tape at one of the InterPlanet offices. There were new items every day, but the management didn't bother to change the film any oftener than once a week. One of the troubles, thought Mel, with living out in the Martian sticks.

The feature picture was called *The Monster from Mars.* It was a low-budget movie made on Earth, obviously, because a writer and director who really knew Mars would never have made the boners that somehow crept in. Besides, all the characters had their feet practically stuck to the ground. When they walked, they showed no tendency to bounce, as they would have done on the smaller planet, and they used typical Earth gestures.

The idea, thought Mel, was silly. According to the writer, there had once been a race of Martian monsters called hypersaurs who had become almost extinct fifty million years ago as the planet lost its heat and moisture. The last monster had taken refuge in an old cavern ten thousand feet below the surface of the planet, and there he had fallen into a kind of hibernation, remaining dormant and yet capable of coming to life again through all the ages that passed.

Came the first Earth explorers to Mars. They set up colonies, built the Blisters. And way down beneath the surface of the desert, faint tremors disturbed the sleeping monster. The people, supplies, and buildings in each Blister upset the delicate balance of the Martian surface, put too much weight on it. This set off underground quakes that became worse and worse. Finally, one of the quakes shook the monster so thoroughly that it awakened him, and he came to the surface again, huffing and puffing and breathing atomic flame. It

seemed that he had an atomic pile in his stomach from the uranium he ate.

His coming to the surface was the whole purpose of the picture. Graphic camera shots showed the monster attacking a Blister, tearing huge holes through which the air rushed out. Buildings toppled and fell grandly to the ground. People screamed and ran in panic in every direction. Inside the Blister, only the hero, who was beyond fear, didn't give way to despair. He realized the danger, gave orders to conserve the oxygen supply, and tackled the monster himself with a pair of huge blasters. There was a terrific atomic battle, that came across beautifully in Marticolor, and was the best thing about the entire picture. The hero was on the point of death, when by a final clever ruse he exploded the atomic pile in the monster's stomach, and the last surviving hypersaur of Mars came toppling down in a tremendous crash.

After that, the hero and heroine clinched.

Mel said, "I could write a better story than that with my brains tied behind my back."

"I liked it," said Betty. "The hero was cute."

"Cute? I never saw a dumber face in my life. I was hoping the monster would beat him."

They got up to leave, and as they walked down the aisle, Mel couldn't help turning around to see if any one was following them.

Betty noticed it. "You're still nervous, aren't you, Mel?"

"Not really. It's just habit. How about some Martian cream soda in a Refreshment Dome, Betty?"

"I like Martian cream soda, but they don't make it very well in these places. They use all kinds of substitutes. Mel, why don't you come over to the hotel and meet Uncle Gard? He really wants to see you."

Mel wasn't anxious, but after a time he allowed himself to be persuaded. He had a plainclothesman along with him anyway, he thought. It wouldn't matter too much if Uncle Gard also joined the party.

The hotel was an impressive ten-story structure, designed

as much to awe tourists as to supply comfortable rooms for them. Mel walked in feeling somewhat ill at ease at being a guest in the home of Gard Closker.

To his surprise, the man seemed to be making an unusual effort to be pleasant. "Well, my boy, how are you?" He shook Mel's reluctant hand with great heartiness. "I had a very good impression of you on the ship, and I wanted to see you again. I see that you're a performer in the circus now. Nice act you have. Clever dog, and well-trained kabror."

"Thank you, sir," said Mel suspiciously. He wondered what was behind these effusive and obviously insincere compliments.

"If I wanted to play Hakin and Bolam a dirty trick, the way they think I'm always doing, I'd hire you away from them. But I don't do such things."

"I wouldn't leave them, Mr. Closker. They've been too nice to me."

"Yes, yes, they're a hard-working pair. Have a tendency to run their acts down, though. Afraid their performers might ask for too much money."

"Oh, no, sir—"

"Come, come, Mel, I've been around a little more than you have. I'll bet they told you that you weren't good enough to go on in the second half. That's why they put you on early, before the people quite got settled in their seats. They did give you that line, didn't they?"

"Well, I *am* new, sir. And to be honest about it, the other acts are a lot better than mine."

"He's modest," said Betty.

"Hmm, they managed to persuade you that you weren't much good, did they? As an old showowner, I want to warn you. Don't be so modest. It's dangerous. A performer has to believe in himself, or he can't go over with an audience. Watch your step, lad, or they'll be giving you an inferiority complex. However, Betty didn't bring you here to waste your time talking to an old fogy like me. Here, let me help you off with your jacket. It's a lot warmer in here than it is

outside, and you might as well be comfortable. How would you like a genuine Martian cream soda, with no substitutes?"

"Oh, don't bother, Mr. Closker," said Mel half-heartedly.

"No bother at all, Mel. All I have to do is press a button." He had Mel's jacket now, and as Mel turned away, a card fluttered slowly to the floor. Mel stooped down to pick it up, and saw with surprise that it was a schedule card, giving the list of places the circus would play during the next season, along with dates. He must have taken it by mistake, he thought, absently putting it into his pocket instead of returning it to Hakin when they were working together. He'd have to give it back after he got home tonight.

He returned it to his jacket pocket, and Closker himself hung the jacket up in a closet. "No mechanical servants for me," said the man jovially. "I can tend to my own wants. That's a joke, Son. All it means is that I can press my own buttons for food and drink."

He pressed the button for the soda, and soon Mel and Betty were enjoying the icy, bubbly drink. It *was* good, Mel admitted. Better than anything he could have got at a Refreshment Dome.

"Betty," said her uncle, "how about turning on some music?"

"I was just going to, Uncle Gard." She pressed a button, and the strains of an orchestra came to them.

"And now I suppose you young folks would like to be alone for a while, instead of listening to a talkative old fellow like me. If you'll both excuse me, I'll go back to work in my study."

He made a smiling withdrawal, and Betty said, "He can be awfully sweet when he wants to be. And he did try to be helpful. I think you're all wrong about him, Mel."

"He's taking a lot of trouble to be nice," admitted Mel. "I wonder why."

"You're always looking for some hidden reason," said Betty indignantly.

Mel remembered the attacks on the circus in the space

ship coming to Mars, and opened his mouth to reply, then changed his mind. Betty wasn't going to convince him that Gard Closker was an angel, but neither was he going to persuade her that her uncle was a demon. They had both better save their breath for other things and avoid argument.

The music was still going on, and Betty asked, "Do you dance? I suppose if you've always lived on Earth, you don't. Earth people have heavy feet."

"I never had a chance to learn," admitted Mel.

"Do you want me to teach you? Come on. Dancing's a lot of fun on Mars."

Mel stepped close to her and put his right arm around her. Betty showed him a simple step, and he tried to follow. He felt awkward at first, but Betty wasn't self-conscious at all, and after a while he began really to enjoy himself. He learned the simple steps she first showed him readily enough, and Betty was so light and graceful that he had no difficulty in leading her. In fact, the chief trouble was that he himself was almost as light as she was.

"How do you keep close to the floor?" he demanded. "I'm always bouncing off."

"That's the low gravity again. You just have to learn to glide, except when you do the Martian Stomp. That calls for a lot of jumping. Let me show you how it goes."

The Martian Stomp, Mel found, was more of an athletic contest than a dance. You not only leaped and hopped around, you bounced off the walls, and if you were really ambitious, you turned your partner upside down and did somersaults yourself. It was fun, and to Mel, who had been practicing somersaults for weeks now, easy enough. But most adults found it undignified. They also found the bouncing off the walls rather noisy and nerve-wracking, not to say bad for the walls. Gard Closker came in and began, "What on Mars is going on here?"

"I'm just teaching Mel the Martian Stomp, Uncle Gard," said Betty.

"Isn't that a rather noisy dance for this time of night?"

He looked at his watch. "Hmm, I don't want to hurry you, my boy, but it is after midnight, local time. And we have to get up in the morning even on Mars, you know."

Mel could take a hint, especially when it was as strong as this one. He said, "I guess I'd better be going."

"Yes, I think we all of us need plenty of rest. An acrobat should get plenty of sleep."

"I guess you're right, Mr. Closker. Well, good night, Betty. Good night, Mr. Closker."

Mel started to move toward the door, but Betty said, "Don't forget your jacket."

"That's right, it's chilly outside."

He put it on, and said, "Good-bye," all over again. Mr. Closker watched him go, and this time Mel could find no reason to turn back.

In the corridor outside he practiced the quieter of the steps Betty had taught him. Dancing was something you could enjoy, he thought. If you were a trained athlete—as he was now—it was nothing at all to pick it up.

A man came around a bend in the corridor and stared at him curiously, as if he thought Mel might be crazy. Mel stopped dancing, and hurried on.

Outside the hotel, he looked around for his shadow. Once more the streets were deserted, and there was no one in sight but a middle-aged woman plodding slowly down the opposite side of the street.

Mel turned toward the direction of the circus, and began to walk rapidly. He kept away from the buildings themselves, hugging the edges of the sidewalks as much as possible, just in case any one tried to jump at him from around a corner. Now that he didn't have a shadow, it struck him that Lieutenant Blazer was being awfully careless, letting him travel around alone. Why, some one might try to murder him!

He looked back. Still nobody around. Unless you counted that middle-aged woman, who was still a short distance behind him.

That, when you came to think of it, was odd. She didn't

seem to be moving fast, and he had been keeping up a rapid pace, and yet he hadn't lost her. Could it be—?

And then it struck him. It not only could be, it was! This was the shadow that Lieutenant Blazer had put on him. Not a plainclothes man, but a plainclothes woman. That was why the Lieutenant had been so positive that Mel wouldn't notice a man following him. Mel had spent the evening with Betty accompanied by a chaperone.

"I'm blind," he groaned to himself. "I can't even see what's going on under my eyes."

Blind, and absent-minded too. Take that business of the schedule he had put in his pocket. Why, he hadn't realized he was taking it at all. He must have put it away mechanically—

Wait a minute, now, he caught himself. That's impossible. I remember now that I had my jacket off when I was helping Hakin. And I'm sure that I didn't deliberately take the schedule along when I left the desk, and stick it away in a pocket.

He frowned. Come to think of it, he thought, I didn't get a good look at that schedule when it dropped to the floor. Maybe I made a mistake. Maybe it wasn't what I thought it was.

He put his hand in his right-hand pocket and groped for the schedule card. There was no card. Then he began to search through the other pockets. Still no card.

I *couldn't* have dropped it out again, he thought. I put it right in here, and it still ought to be here. Unless—

Unless, of course, some one had taken it out. And who could have taken it but Gard Closker? So *that*, thought Mel bitterly, is why he invited me in the first place and was so friendly. That's what he had in mind all the time. That's why he talked to me and tried to get information from me, that's why he was so worried about my comfort, and got me to take my jacket off. Come to think of it, he didn't take his own off.

No question about it, Closker had the schedule now. And it wouldn't do any good to go back and ask him about it. I'd look like a fool, Mel told himself, ringing his bell so late after

midnight to say I lost something and wanted it back. I can imagine what he'd say to that. He'd tell me blandly that he didn't know anything about it, he'd wonder why I came back in the middle of the night to ask about it. And even if he arranged to have me find it on the floor, he'd have copied it over by this time, he'd know what Hakin and Bolam planned to do.

# CHAPTER 12

# *UNDER THE MARTIAN SKY*

HE FINISHED the rest of his walk in gloom. He had certainly made a fine mess of things. The first thing he did when he reached the circus was to seek Rover. The animal was up now, and walking about. Mel said, "Easy, boy," and scratched the dog behind the ears. Rover stood up, and put his paws on Mel's chest. The dog's eyes were bright and inquisitive, and if not for the bandage across his chest, you wouldn't have thought he was wounded at all.

"I'll be back in a minute, Rover," said Mel, giving him a final pat. "Got to see Hakin and Bolam now."

The two men were still up, and they greeted Mel with inquiring eyes. "Have a good time?" asked Bolam.

"Fine, until I stopped to think. Closker made a fool of me."

"Indeed? I did not think that was possible, O Brilliant One," said Hakin.

"It's possible, all right," said Mel dejectedly. "No trouble at all. I had a schedule card on me, listing the places you planned to play during next season's tour, and the dates. Somehow I seem to have lost it in Closker's place."

"Most unfortunate," said Hakin, looking not at all disturbed.

"He invited you to his hotel rooms?" asked Bolam.

"Yes, I think he wanted information. And he got more than he had a right to expect. I guess he must be laughing up his sleeve at what an idiot I am, right now."

"Do not distress yourself, O Doleful One," said Hakin. He still looked much calmer than Mel had expected him to be. "The Crooked One's sleeve will not know laughter for long. And the fault is not yours."

"We can always change our schedule," observed Bolam. "If necessary."

"After the trouble you've gone to in working this one out?" Mel shook his head. "No, don't try to make me feel good. I let Closker make a monkey out of me. The only thing I can't understand is how that schedule card got into my pocket in the first place. I don't remember putting it there. I just can't figure out—I can't understand—"

"It is not polite to interrupt any one, O Puzzled One," said Hakin. "Even one's self."

"Wait a minute," said Mel slowly. "Maybe I *can* understand. Could you possibly have put that schedule in my pocket, Hakin?"

"All things are possible, O Ponderer of the Mysteries of Nature."

"Around this circus they seem to be. You put it in my pocket *hoping* that he'd steal it. Isn't that so?"

"You wrong us, Mel," said Bolam. "We don't hope anybody will ever do any stealing."

"Let's say you expected him to steal it. So you wrote out a fake schedule—" Mel stared at the two partners. "Say, it's

beginning to look as if Closker isn't the only one around here who has funny ideas about ethics."

"Our ethics are beyond dispute, O Pure-Thinking One," Hakin told him. "If Closker is an honest man who has no idea of purloining what belongs to others, he will lose nothing. He will make out his own schedule as best he can without paying any attention to ours. If, however, he is a thief who seeks to use the property that belongs to us, we have arranged to make him suffer for his knavishness."

Bolam said, "That's simple justice, Mel."

"It may be justice," admitted Mel. "But it isn't so simple. Not to me it isn't. You expect him to make out his own schedule in such a way that he falls into a trap you've set. I suppose you've juggled the dates a bit."

"You suppose correctly, O Shrewd One," smiled Hakin. "On the schedule that Closker has in his possession we have set back all the dates approximately one month. And we have hired the circus grounds in each locality not in our own name, but in that of some dummy company which Closker will not recognize as ours. Thus, if he investigates, he will think that we have not hired the grounds at all. He will ascribe this to our carelessness, to the looseness of our organization, which he supposes is much inferior to his. Perhaps he will try to arrange his circus to play each engagement two weeks before he thinks ours will arrive. In that way, he will hope to attract audiences until every one is tired of circus-going, so that when we give our own performances they will play to empty houses.

"Think how chagrined he will be to discover that we play each engagement not two weeks later, but two weeks before him! Think how mortified he will be, O Ethical One, to find that it is we who have skimmed the cream of the audiences, instead of he! Think how enraged he will be to learn that it is he who will show great losses for the season, and not we!"

Mel thought, and he didn't altogether like his thoughts. He said, "I still don't like the idea of the way you used me and Betty to arrange this."

"We used Closker's own greed and trickiness," said Bolam.

"If not through you, we'd have managed to do it some other way. We owed him something for the dirty work his men tried on board the ship."

"I'll agree to that," admitted Mel.

"And do not forget, O Dubious One, that the outcome depends on his own honesty and on that alone. If he does not try to make use of our property, then our plan fails."

Slowly, and somewhat reluctantly, Mel admitted to himself that the rubber man was right. He didn't like being in the middle of a deal like this. But if Closker got caught, it would be that gentleman's own fault.

As for Betty—well, Mel hoped that Closker would be too mortified when he eventually found himself victimized to tell her about it. The story would reflect no credit on himself. Whatever happened, however, Mel knew that when next season rolled around and Closker found himself trailing the rival circus, instead of just preceding it, the man would have no more use for him.

He went back to his room to find Rover waiting for him. The dog didn't seem at all sleepy, and began to pace restlessly back and forth.

"I know how you feel, Rover," said Mel. "But you'd still better take it easy. Lie down. Tomorrow maybe you can go for a walk."

The promise seemed to satisfy Rover, and he lay down. Mel's own thoughts were in a whirl, but he was tired, and presently he too lay down. He fell asleep at once.

The next day, as he had promised, he took the dog for a walk. There was no sign of the middle-aged woman who had followed him the night before, and for a moment Mel wondered if perhaps Lieutenant Blazer had called off his shadow. It wasn't likely, he decided. The Lieutenant hadn't known that Rover would be sufficiently recovered to go with him.

Then the answer struck him, and once more he felt ashamed of his own stupidity. The police didn't use the same shadow all the time. That would put his enemies on guard.

Now, in all probability, they had a man trailing him, later there would be another man, and so on.

The way Rover walked reminded Mel that bright as the animal was, he was all dog. Mel had been interested in strange sights, and after he had seen the few that the colony seemed to have, he had rather lost interest. Rover, however, was even more interested in smells than in sights. Two buildings might look alike, but one sniff, and he knew how really different they were inside. Everything he saw fascinated him.

A couple of the six-legged "sheep" that foraged on the outside came close to the walls, and Rover was interested in them too. Mel said, "Your ancestors were sheep-dogs, Rover, but these beasts don't need to be herded. As far as they're concerned, you're out of a job. Besides, you couldn't breathe out there where they are. You'd need a space suit."

That set him to wondering. Did they have space suits for dogs?

At the next airlock, set into the Blister walls, he stopped to ask. He found that there was a small concession next to each airlock, and to his surprise, the man who ran it, a small alert individual in his thirties, said, "We don't have space suits for animals because there isn't enough demand for them. But the dog doesn't really need a whole suit, not if you don't intend to stay out with him for more than a short time. He can get by with just a helmet to supply oxygen, and a sort of jacket to apply pressure over the upper part of his body. You want an outfit for him?"

"Not right now," said Mel. The dog was still recovering from his wound, and it would be subjecting him to needless risk to take him outdoors where the low pressure would cause expansion of the surface blood vessels. "Maybe in a day or two, though."

"You come back right here, and I'll fix both of you up. Space suits for human beings, jackets and helmets for man and beast. Oxygen tanks, special appliances for cooking in the open, picnic food, everything. You name it, and we got it. And nobody can beat my prices."

"Thanks a lot," said Mel evasively. "I'll remember about you. Which airlock is this?"

"York airlock. Named after a place on Earth."

"I've heard of it," said Mel, and made his escape. The Martians might have low-pressure air, but they didn't, he thought, lack high-pressure salesmanship.

During the next couple of days, he helped around the circus, doing whatever Hakin and Bolam couldn't find time to do, and making himself generally useful. He tried to call Betty a couple of times, but she wasn't home, and he left no message with the hotel clerk. He didn't want Gard Closker to know that he was calling.

Rover was improving from day to day, and although he still wore a bandage on his chest, it was a much smaller and less impressive looking one than the vet had first put on him. Mel wasn't ready, however, to have the dog go on in their act again, not until Rover was entirely healed.

He was sure that some one assigned by Lieutenant Blazer was still trailing him, but he generally stayed close to the circus grounds, and he found it impossible to tell who the man or woman was. There was no direct word from the Lieutenant, and he wondered how the investigation of the character called "Little Jupe" was coming along. He had an idea that if there had been anything positive to report, the Lieutenant would have called him by now.

He had just made his third phone call to Betty, to find that she was not home, and in desperation, much as he disliked to do so, he had left his name with the hotel clerk. Just as he returned to the circus, an envelope fell through the mail slit into his room.

"Who'd be writing to me?" he asked himself. And then a look at the address gave the answer. It was in a girl's handwriting, and he knew it was from Betty, although, somehow, he hadn't associated her with quite such a florid script.

*"Dear Mel,"* she wrote, *"Uncle Gard is busy with his circus, and I've got nothing to do tomorrow afternoon. I mean*

this *afternoon, because by the time you get this little note it'll be a day later. How about putting on space suits and seeing what Mars is like outside? I've never been out and I'd love to go. Meet me at York Air-lock at four. If I'm a little late, you can put on your suit and go outside, and wait for me there. I'll join you in a few minutes.*

*Ever yours,*

*Betty."*

Mel read the letter quickly, then read it again, more slowly this time. What did she mean by, "Ever yours"? Nothing much, he decided. It was just a way of ending a letter, like "Yours truly," or "Yours sincerely." It didn't mean that she was *his*.

As for paying a visit to the fields outside, that wasn't a bad idea, he thought. This time he'd take Rover with him and Betty, and if there was anybody following, they'd make a nice little party of four.

The next day, at four, he and Rover were at the York Air-lock. Mel was wearing a suit of warm clothes and carrying a pair of warm gloves, in readiness for the cold outside. Betty, as she had warned him might happen, wasn't there. Well, he might as well wait outside, as she had suggested.

The man he had spoken with the other day wasn't there. Instead, a thin sallow-looking individual said, "Anything I can do for you, Mister?"

"Where's the fellow who was here the other day?"

"Taking the afternoon off. I can take care of you."

"I don't suppose it makes any difference. I want space helmets and jackets for myself and the dog."

"I've got just the right thing for you." The man dragged out a pair of helmets, one for him and one for Rover. The one for Rover looked hardly more weird than his own. "Try these on for size."

He began to put on his own awkwardly, and the man helped him and showed him how to adjust the elastic flaps that made an air-tight seal. There was a built-in two-way

radio, easily controlled by a pair of buttons on a switch attached to his belt. The radio had direction and wave-length selectors, so that if he were in the midst of a group, he could tune in on the single person he wanted to hear.

Over his chest Mel put on a fibrous plastic jacket that would maintain a fair amount of pressure. Through the jacket he could barely feel the weight of a pair of small oxygen tanks, which were light and easy to carry under Martian conditions. "Enough oxygen for five hours," the man assured him, speaking into a radio of his own. "And you oughtn't to stay out any longer than three hours in a space helmet. Especially if it's the first time you've used one. When the oxygen in one tank is almost used up, and you have trouble breathing, you switch to the other with this valve. Here, let me show you."

Mel switched back and forth from one tank to the other. As the man said, it was no trouble at all. Mel asked, "Are they full?"

"Both of them are full. They have to be, by Martian regulations. Wait a minute, I'll give you a gauge reading. See that? New tanks, just filled. You'll have time to find a lot of jewels."

"Jewels?"

"Crystallized parts of rocks. Tourists are always picking them up. Most of them aren't worth much, but once in a while you come across one that's worth a fortune. I know one fellow who found a crystal that paid the entire cost of his trip to Mars."

"Hope I'm as lucky as that."

"You might be. Got the hang of using the tanks?"

"It doesn't seem to be hard," said Mel.

"It isn't. But you'd better take the outfit off and put it on again all by yourself. Just to make sure you know how to use it."

Mel took the helmet off. But he didn't put it right back on again. First he examined it, and looked over the oxygen tanks. These were easily removable, and the entire tops, including the valve connections, could be screwed off.

Despite that, when he tested them for leaks, he found that they were oxygen-tight.

He put on the helmet again. It was easy enough to do. Then he adjusted Rover's helmet and jacket. The dog seemed a little wary of the strange things on his head and chest, but when Mel told him it was all right, he submitted. He seemed to have no trouble breathing inside the helmet.

After he had paid the rental fee for helmets and jackets, Mel looked around, but there was still no sign of Betty. "Might as well go outside," he thought. "Now that Rover and I have our helmets on, there's no need for us to stay in an oxygen-rich atmosphere."

The guard let him and Rover into the airlock. Five minutes in the medium-pressure chamber, five in the low-pressure, and then, for the first time, Mel found himself on the open ground of Mars. He had a sense of freedom and adventure—and yet it didn't really feel any different. He was breathing through the helmet, as he had been breathing for the last quarter hour. His skin, where the special jacket didn't cover it, felt dry and stretched, and his fingers seemed a bit stiff, as if they were swollen inside the gloves. Through the warm clothes he could feel the coldness of the thin air, and was glad he had come so well prepared. Rover, of course, had his fur. He hoped that this was enough to keep the dog warm.

The sun was bright, the sky dark, the shadows sharp, all as he had seen them before. He looked in every direction, to get his bearings. There were no space-suited men in sight, no six-legged animals. He and Rover were the only living creatures in the neighborhood outside the Blister.

He walked away from the wall of the Blister, and Rover followed at his heels. Poor Rover, he thought. He hoped again that the dog's thick fur would be protection enough from the cold. What worried him more than that, however, was the thought that Rover, like all dogs, lived more by his sense of smell than by sight. And next in importance to smell, was the world of sound. Here the helmet shut him off from all the odors and sounds of this strange world. Although, come to

think of it, as far as sound was concerned, the thin air didn't carry it too well. Yes, Rover was pretty much isolated. He couldn't smell the six-legged "sheep," if any were to come around, or the Martian plants, or the soil itself. He must feel much as Mel would feel if he were blind.

Mel reached down and turned the dog's radio on. "Can you hear me, Rover?" he asked. The dog looked at him. "I think you can. But just to be sure—if you hear me, sit down."

The dog sat down, and Mel had a feeling of relief. They weren't quite as isolated from each other as he had feared.

They were still close to the wall of the Blister, and the ground here was flat and uninteresting. No harm in going farther out, thought Mel. If Betty showed up, she'd know he was out here, and he would still be in easy view of her.

They reached a row of cabbage-like plants, and Mel bent down for a closer look. The leaves were large and blue-green, and they seemed mottled with brown. To Mel they looked as unappetizing as wilted spinach. Between the plants, there was a slight sprinkling of gray iron dust on the red-brown soil.

A botanist might have spent a profitable hour or two examining the plants. But Mel was no botanist, and anything that looked like spinach bored him. He moved on.

A little further out they saw one of the six-legged beasts. The thing gazed at them calmly, and then got out of their way. Rover, who under different conditions would have given expression to his canine instincts and chased after the animal, made no move toward it. A dog couldn't be very much interested in any creature he couldn't smell. And with that helmet on, he certainly couldn't do any biting.

Mel looked back to see if Betty had arrived and come out after him. She hadn't, and he shook his head. Girls, he thought, were always late. But he hadn't expected her to be that late.

Up ahead there was some sort of sharply rising hill that looked interesting. It had better be interesting, he thought. Maybe it would have been different if Betty had been along

to talk to, but he was finding his little voyage of exploration something of a disappointment. The Martian landscape was a monotonous one. Almost nothing moved in it. No trees, no rivers, no small animals like rabbits or squirrels, no birds, no insects. Just the imitation cabbages motionless in the windless air, and the placid imitation sheep. The only things that did move slowly appeared to be the endless shadows cast by the sun, staring down at them like a bright eye out of the darkness.

That hill, though, seemed as if it might be worth investigating. The peak glittered in the Martian sunlight, and at least a thin layer of the surface must be transparent and glasslike, for it seemed to change color as he approached it, and his eyes caught the light reflected from it at a slightly different angle.

It was steep, but the low gravity made it easy to climb for both him and the dog. And the peak, which rose several hundred feet into the air, was as he had suspected, covered with a vitreous layer. As if, he imagined, it had been struck by lightning and the surface molten by the heat. Only, there was no lightning on Mars. No clouds, no rain, no thunder, no lightning. Not at any rate for the last million years or so.

In a couple of places, the glassy layer seemed to have crystallized. He broke off one gleaming fragment that was shaped like a hexagonal prism. Could this be one of those jewels the fellow had talked about? Chances were that anything this close to the Blister had been thoroughly investigated. Still, you never could tell, and there was just a faint possibility that this was one of the crystals that were considered jewels and brought high prices. He put the gleaming prism in his pocket.

Still no sign of Betty. Something must have happened to her, he thought. Maybe an accident. Maybe her uncle had found out what she meant to do, and had stopped her. There were a dozen things that might have delayed her.

There was another hill farther on, a small one, with a

very sharp peak. There might be more crystals. He said, "Come on, Rover," and advanced toward it.

It took him longer to reach it than he had thought it would. The hill wasn't quite as small as it had seemed, and it was much farther away. This clear Martian air was extremely deceptive. He looked back, and was startled to see how small the Blister had become. He could see all of it from one end to the other, except the side which lay in deep shadow, and he realized how much it deserved its unflattering name. It was no more than a shiny swelling, a gleaming irritation, of the great red and green plain. It seemed out of place on the rough skin of Mars. And he would be unable to reach it in less than a half hour.

Now that he was here, he thought, he might as well look at the hill before turning back. It was much like the first hill, despite the difference in size, and the peak was also vitrified. But there were no crystals to be picked up. Other tourists, he realized, must have been here before him, and collected all the souvenirs worth taking.

For the first time, as he bent over, looking for the crystals which weren't there, he became aware of the fact that wearing the helmet was a nuisance. It was beginning to be hard to breathe. He had to fight a little to draw the air into his lungs. It struck him that he had been a bit reckless to go so far away from the Blister.

He felt the perspiration starting on his forehead. That was another source of discomfort, and he knew that in a minute or two his lenses would start fogging. Something was wrong, and he couldn't think what. For a moment he entertained the idea of holding his breath and removing the helmet. The perspiration would evaporate in a few seconds and leave his face just as cold and dry as the rest of his body exposed to the thin atmosphere.

He shook his head. I must be crazy, he told himself. That would just be a way of committing suicide. Whatever else I do, I leave that helmet on out here. Never mind how I feel.

So long as I continue to breathe out of that oxygen tank, I'm safe.

All the same, it isn't doing me much good. I'm still having trouble catching my breath. Maybe—maybe the oxygen in one tank is getting used up.

It shouldn't be. According to what the man said, I should have a large supply left. Still, accidents happen, although they shouldn't, and it won't hurt to switch tanks.

He reached in front with a gloved hand, and turned the valve that shifted from one tank to the other.

Then he choked. Black spots danced before his eyes, and inside the helmet he was almost sick before he could switch back to the first tank. The second tank was completely empty.

# CHAPTER 13

## *THE POLICE INVESTIGATE*

FOR a few seconds he gasped for breath. Then he caught himself. Easy, Mel, he said to himself. Take it easy. You won't last more than another minute or two if you start using your oxygen up so fast. Take it easy, relax, breathe slowly. Make it stretch. How much of a supply do you have left? Enough for five minutes? Ten? You don't know, but one thing's sure, there isn't enough to let you reach the Blister, not by a long shot. But if you walk slowly, and take shallow breaths, and don't let yourself get panicky—

And call for help. That's what you ought to do. You've got a radio, you can let them know what happened. Call for help, and they'll come out and get you.

How do you call for help? What's the proper way? You

just don't yell, "Help, I'm choking! I need oxygen!" You talk in a calm voice: "Calling York Airlock. Mel Oliver calling York Airlock. Oxygen low. Cannot reach Blister in time. Oxygen low, please send tank. Oxygen low—"

And you just don't talk. You walk toward the Blister. You keep walking even though every movement, every step sends a knife stabbing through your tortured lungs. You walk slowly, so as not to use up too much of the little oxygen left in the air you've breathed over and over, and you keep talking in a steady voice, and you try to take shallow breaths. Your view lenses *are* fogging up now, and you can't see through them as you stumble forward, but you get the reflection of the sun from the Blister walls, so that you know you're going in the right direction. You may not reach safety, but at least you can keep heading for the patch of brightness where it lies.

Odd, though, there's no answer to your call for help. Somewhere, some one should be listening in. The guards at the Airlock, for instance, know that I went out here with Rover. Wouldn't they tune in once in a while, just to find out what's happening to me? Just to find out if there's any kind of message? Aren't there other people out here who'd like to tune in and hear a human voice?

Well, maybe it is odd. Maybe my radio just doesn't carry very far. But that isn't any odder than the fact that I'm short of oxygen in the first place. I ought to have a big supply in reserve. With two tanks—

Something touched his leg. Rover, of course. I've been forgetting about him. Rover has two tanks also. Maybe I could use one of his. The tanks are easy enough to switch around.

He couldn't see through the fogged lenses, so he felt for the dog. Another strange thing, he thought. Rover wasn't walking, Rover was crouching on the ground. Rover had difficulty walking too. Rover—

Now he knew what he should have known before, at once. This was no accident. The dog's oxygen supply was

short too. The man at the Airlock concession had deliberately planned this, had deliberately switched oxygen tanks on them, while Mel was practicing putting on the helmet. He had deliberately sent them out to die.

Mel sat down suddenly on the cold dry ground. Martian gravity might be low, but his body suddenly felt like lead. This was the end, he thought. It was his fault, he should never have left the Blister, he should never have taken the dog with him out here. Betty hadn't shown up because that letter was not from Betty at all. It was a trap, intended to lure him out here where he'd be helpless. Whoever was trying to get rid of him had given up direct attempts at killing with a gun and used a slightly more subtle method. He should have known it, when the handwriting seemed so oddly unlike Betty. But he had been too stupid to suspect.

He took his right glove off, and ran his hand over Rover's fur, the smooth soft fur that felt so pleasantly warm after the coldness of the ground. He could feel the dog's body shaking, as if the dog were panting inside his helmet. Neither of them could possibly last much longer.

His hand dropped off the dog's body, trailed on the ice-cold ground again. The Martian ground, red-brown with a powdery layer of gray iron particles as the silently working bacteria and plants slowly released its oxygen into the thin air—

He caught himself. Oxygen. Where did the supply in the tanks come from in the first place? From the soil, of course, released in exactly the same way. The oxygen in the soil was inexhaustible. If he could release that—

He began to work feverishly. The gloves were in his way, and he discarded both of them. He started on the spare oxygen tank, the empty one. It wasn't easy, especially as his hands soon began to feel frozen, but he managed to unscrew the top section. Then he began to fill the tank itself, with soil, mixing in the top layer, to distribute the bacteria through the mass, and piling in handfuls of the cold red-brown dirt that lay just beneath the surface. He worked fast, his numb

hands trembling, the dirt spilling out of them. When he had the tank almost completely full, he screwed the top on again. But he didn't switch the tank into the feed line. It was too soon for that. He had to give the bacteria in the soil a chance to get to work, to build up a pressure of oxygen that he might breathe.

When he was finished with his own tank, he filled one of Rover's the same way. He and the dog would both continue, for as long as possible, to use the tanks they had been using. As long as possible. That wouldn't be long. By this time the dog was lying on the ground unable to move, and Mel sat alongside him, knowing what he was doing, but almost forgetting why he was doing it. He remembered only that he mustn't switch over until he felt himself on the verge of blacking out.

With the dog's tank loaded and back in place, Mel lay down. Lying prone, he rested as much as he could, keeping his oxygen needs to a minimum, stretching the limited supply in his present tank to the utmost. And at the same time, the warmth of his body would, he hoped, raise the temperature of the soil in the tank, at least where it was in contact with the wall, by a degree or so, speed up the evolution of oxygen by the trifle that might spell the difference between life and death.

He was just sinking into a pleasant painless sleep when he realized that this was the moment he had been waiting for. He switched tanks, and for a second was afraid to try to breathe. Then he began to fill his lungs.

There was something to fill them with. Not as much oxygen as would have made him forget his need of it, but enough to keep him alive. Painfully alive. It had been much pleasanter a few seconds before. But if pain was the penalty for living, he was willing to pay it. He reached over and switched to the dirt-filled tank on Rover's back. In a few minutes they'd start to walk again.

Five minutes later they were moving forward. Slowly the perspiration inside the helmet evaporated, slowly the fogged

lenses cleared. But Mel knew that he had better not move too fast. It was another hour before he and Rover reached the Blister airlock.

As he had expected, the man at the concession, the one who had rented them their helmets, was no longer there. He had probably gone to whoever had hired him, to report a mission of murder successfully accomplished.

A little while later, Mel was talking to Lieutenant Blazer. The Lieutenant's face was red, and he spoke with obvious anger. "They made a fool of my man that time. Yes, Mel, you weren't the only one who failed to use his head. I had a man following you. But he didn't think of going out after you in a helmet of his own. His job, he said, was to see if any thugs were on your trail, and obviously, when you left the Blister, there weren't any. He too was thinking of guns and obvious violence. He didn't suspect the man at the concession."

"You ought to be able to pick that fellow up," said Mel.

"I'll do my best, but it won't be easy. The man who really works there—the one you talked to the other day—was found knocked out and tied up. He had been hidden away in the basement of a nearby building. He isn't in a condition to give us much information. The other man, the one who sent you out, isn't around. Once you went outside, he disappeared in a hurry."

"I don't understand it," said Mel. "He took so much trouble to make sure that I knew how to operate the helmets. He even had me practice taking mine off and putting it back on again."

"Just winning your confidence," grunted the Lieutenant. "He knew you'd be a little nervous, and he wanted to be sure you wouldn't change your mind about going out. As you later suspected, he probably switched oxygen tanks on you when he got you to practice. You wouldn't be able to give a description of him, would you."

Mel said regretfully, "I didn't get a good look at him. All that I can tell you is that he was thin and sallow. I was more interested in getting the helmet on right than in seeing what

he was like. Besides, I think I was excited about going out, and maybe finding some jewels. He told me some of them were worth a fortune."

"Just another way of making sure you spent plenty of time outside. Those so-called jewels are a dime a dozen on Mars."

"I didn't know. Between thinking about the jewels, and practicing with the helmet, and wondering when Betty would get there, I didn't pay too much attention to him. But I don't think he looked like a crook."

"If you could tell crooks by looking at them, this would be a lot simpler world. Anyway, the fact is that you're not much help."

. "I'm sorry, I didn't suspect anything wrong." Mel still felt that he had been inexcusably careless, and he was anxious to change the subject. "By the way, Lieutenant, did you investigate to see whether you could find that fellow called, 'Little Jupe'?"

"The police investigated in Blister Seven," said Lieutenant Blazer. "They were lucky enough to get on his trail. Even located the house where he lived."

"But did they get *him*?"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "They sent a couple of men to pick him up. Just as the men got to the room where he lived, there was an explosion, and the next thing they knew, the house was on fire. The fire department had unexpected trouble in putting the flames out, and when things had cooled down a little, it turned out that Little Jupe was gone. At least they found no trace of his body."

"It looks as if he had been expecting the police, Lieutenant."

"Sure. The trouble with modern science is that everybody can take advantage of it. Even a crook. He had fixed up some sort of radio arrangement to warn him, and a remote control device to touch off the explosion. He was way ahead of us."

Not so much ahead, thought Mel, as he walked slowly back to the circus. The man himself, whoever he was, had

escaped. But his plans had failed. And their failure had alerted the police and taught Mel himself a few things. By no means as much as he should have learned, he admitted ruefully to himself. But he had lost some of the ignorance which had previously made him such an inviting victim.

When they reached the circus, he had the vet examine Rover again to make sure that the dog, barely recovered from his injuries, had not been harmed by his experience outside. The man went over Rover's body slowly, using an electronic stethoscope to check the dog's heart-beat, and a photometric chromogram to give a quick picture of his blood chemistry. At the end he gave the dog a pat and said, "Nothing wrong. You have a pretty healthy animal here, Mel."

"Think he can get back into the act we've been doing, Doc?"

"I don't see why not. It isn't much of an act, as most of our acts go."

"Thanks, Doc," said Mel dryly. "I'm beginning to realize that."

Bolam and Hakin listened with some concern to the story of this latest escape. When Mel had finished, Hakin said, "You have been fortunate indeed to remain among the living, O Quick-Thinking One. And you will continue to need good fortune. I am certain that there will be yet other attempts."

"Perhaps we can nip them in the bud," said Bolam thoughtfully. "One fact is clear. Now that Rover's able to guard you again, and the police have a man protecting you, your enemy isn't going to send ordinary criminals against you. He'll obviously have to rely on men who can size up a situation and adapt themselves. For one thing, your enemy has learned about your friendship with Betty. He's taken advantage of that once, and he may try to do so again. You'll have to be on guard against any messages that seem to come from her."

Mel nodded. "I won't be fooled that way again."

"For another thing," went on Bolam, "most of your time

from now on is going to be spent around the circus, and it's safe to assume that your mysterious ill-wisher has taken the trouble to learn all he can about the circus routine. He probably knows a great deal about us, from the deliveries of supplies to the arrangements we make for selling tickets. We'll have to set up a guard system. I think that Lieutenant Blazer will cooperate with us there."

"An excellent thought, O Mighty Partner," said Hakin. "It has been all too easy for strangers to slip into our midst in the guise of members of our crew. From now on, if that Despicable One, Gard Closker, attempts to send in spies, his men will be caught."

"I don't think Closker will try anything," said Bolam. "He thinks he already knows enough about us to hit us hard next season. He'll probably lie low and try to give us the impression that he's resigned to our being successful. It's Mel's safety that I'm worried about. And that brings up something else. Your act is out, Mel."

"Oh, no!" protested Mel. "I'm perfectly all right, and Rover is fine too. The vet said we could go on any time."

"Your health is in danger from another source than muscular strain. Think of it this way, Mel. We've been drawing full houses, a little more than four thousand people at each performance. What's to prevent a would-be murderer from slipping in here and trying to kill you during your act? We can stop anybody who tries to get to the dressing rooms, but we can't investigate every one who buys a ticket. And during the performance, the eyes of the spectators are on the arena, not on an individual sitting in their midst. It would be possible to shoot you, get rid of the gun, and escape during the panic that followed. Maybe it would be a little daring, but it could work. I say again that your act is out."

Mel said sadly, "If you feel that way, Bolam, I guess it is. But I was counting on getting back and really earning my salary. This way I feel useless."

Hakin grinned. "It is not the desire to be of help, but the itch to be applauded which has seized him," he said. "But

be of good cheer, O Hammy One. Once this danger is past, you will display your talents to many a Martian audience."

"Once it's past," repeated Mel. "The trouble is, we don't have any idea how to put an end to it."

"John Armstrong is connected with it," said Bolam. "And soon we move our show to Blister Seven, to give performances there. You'll visit Armstrong and find out what's wrong."

"The police visited him," said Mel, "and they didn't learn anything against him. No, Bolam, I think you're wrong. John Armstrong is my friend, even though he's an absent-minded one and doesn't really show his friendship. I told you that I remember him being nice to me when I was a kid, and—"

His voice trailed off. Hakin said, "What is wrong, O Reminiscent One?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought of something he said to me. Maybe it would be a good idea to pay him a visit after all."

Hakin and Bolam exchanged glances. "What did he say to you, Mel?" asked Bolam.

"Something about not liking dogs. I'll have to bring Rover to see him."

The big dog perked up his ears. There was an important job ahead of him, although neither he nor Mel knew yet exactly what it would be.

# CHAPTER 14

## *ROVER UNMASKS AN ENEMY*

THE next two weeks passed, so far as Mel knew, without any further attempt on his life. The police guarded the circus carefully, and Rover never left Mel's side.

Once Mel spoke to Betty on the visor screen. Her uncle was getting ready to leave Marsopolis, and Betty would have to go with him. Mel was sorry that he wouldn't have another chance to see her, but in a way he was glad too. The thought had occurred to him that next time his mysterious enemy might not only try to get at him through Betty, but might actually harm her. It would be better for her to be out of the way until this business was settled.

So he thought it best not to alarm her. He didn't even tell her that her name had been used to lure him into a trap.

Mel hoped that they would meet again soon, but the time and place were vague and uncertain.

Meanwhile, it was annoying not to be allowed to act for an audience. Hakin was right, thought Mel ruefully, once you had tasted applause you were like all the other hams, incurably infected with the desire to enjoy more of it. But behind the scenes Mel practiced and rehearsed faithfully, preparing a new act, and keeping in trim.

They ended their run in Marsopolis, and right after the performance one evening, packed up and took a jet ship for Blister Seven. There were many things to be done, and they spent the entire day of arrival in getting ready for the evening's opening performance on the new site.

Once more the circus acts went on without Mel and Rover. But it wouldn't be long now before he was acting again, thought Mel. Just a little while, and everything would be straightened out.

The following morning, Mel looked up John Armstrong's address. When Bolam learned what he was doing, the strong man stared at Hakin, and the latter nodded. "We have an hour's free time, O Powerful One. Let us accompany our friend."

"All right with me," said Bolam. And the three of them, along with Rover, got into an electrically driven cab and went off to pay John Armstrong a visit.

Armstrong's home was near the end of the Blister Seven suburb farthest away from the circus. It was a small two-story house, with a larger separate annex, the latter including the laboratory in which Armstrong was supposed to do his research. Hakin ordered the driver to take the cab some distance past the house before letting them out.

"If Armstrong is indeed the Criminal One, then we must use caution. We must not let him see that we expect trouble and are prepared for it."

"Do you think he knows we're coming?" asked Mel.

"It is unlikely, unless he has had you followed here too. And I have seen no signs of that, O Victimized One. Most

probably he does not expect us to come to him, and we shall have the advantage of surprise."

"I don't know what you expect to find," said Mel. "The police didn't find anything."

"We shall not follow the methods of the police. And we shall have help from Rover."

"I'll walk over to the house first with Mel," said Bolam. "You follow, Hakin. You shouldn't have any trouble getting to the roof."

"There will be no trouble," agreed Hakin. Mel knew that all the rubber man had to do was stretch his arms to a window ledge high up, draw himself back, and snap his body upward.

"You'll use your own judgment about when to interfere in the conversation we're having with Armstrong."

"In case there is no trouble, I shall not interfere at all. But I do not think it will be possible to avoid trouble."

"How about Rover?" asked Mel. "When does he come in?"

"We'd best keep him as a surprise for Armstrong," decided Bolam. "If he comes up to the front of the house with you, Armstrong may not even let him in."

"If a window is open," suggested Mel, "he can leap in through that."

"I shall see to it, O Youth of Many Expedients, that a window is opened."

"On the first floor, Hakin."

"It matters not. Rover can leap well, and even if he cannot make the entire distance in one bound, he can climb the rest. Here on Mars other dogs have learned to climb against the low gravity, and what they can do Rover can do even better."

Mel turned to the dog. "Understand, Rover? When I call you, you jump into the house through the window."

"You will not call him, O Simple-Minded One," said Hakin. "Not in the ordinary way. You will signal, with this." He handed Mel a small red sphere a half inch in diameter. It resembled a piece of Martian confectionary. "Actually it is an

ultra-sonic whistle, whose sound is inaudible to human ears, but very audible to the hearing organs of a canine. We have used it with some of our beasts. When you are ready to signal, you will pop this into your mouth. Meanwhile, you will munch on other confections, of which I have a small box here, so that your preparations for signaling will go unnoticed. You will even offer a piece of confection to John Armstrong."

Mel grinned. "You and Bolam have thought of everything, haven't you, Hakin?"

"If we were capable of thinking of everything, there would be no danger at all, O Rash One," said Hakin very seriously. "But I am afraid that although we have a surprise for him, John Armstrong may also have a surprise for us."

"I suppose you're right." Mel faced the dog again. "When I signal to you with this, Rover, you jump into the house through the window. Listen, Rover." He popped the red sphere into his mouth and blew. He heard nothing, but Rover looked up at him and made complaining sounds.

"To a dog the noise is shrill and unpleasant," said Hakin. "He will not fail to hear. Now, is there anything else?"

There was nothing else anybody could think of, and Mel and Bolam started off down the street, toward Armstrong's house. It was Mel who looked around for a doorbell to press, but found nothing.

He was making up his mind to knock, when a voice came from in front of him, "What do you want?"

There was probably an electronic warning device, he thought. That was why there was no bell. And most likely a visor cell was scanning them and transmitting their image to a screen inside.

"I'm Mel Oliver. Mr. Armstrong asked me to drop in and see him."

"Who is the other man?"

"A friend of mine. A—a business adviser."

"Mr. Armstrong cannot see you now. He is in the middle of an important experiment."

"This is important too. I spoke to him about it on a long distance visor call."

"Just a moment."

There was a pause of a few seconds. Then the voice said, "You will have to wait a while. But come in."

The door opened, and Mel entered. He was followed by Bolam, who was trying to seem small and harmless, and not succeeding very well.

Mel stared at the squat figure that faced them. It was a robot butler. "I should have expected this," he thought. "Mr. Armstrong is an expert on robots. He liked to have them around, and make as much use of them as possible."

They followed the robot into a sparsely furnished, undecorated room. The robot said, in an obviously mechanical voice, "Please sit down and wait," and then left.

"This isn't very homelike," said Bolam.

"Mr. Armstrong wouldn't agree with you. If a place looks like a laboratory, it's home to him."

The door through which the robot had gone now opened, and a man of about forty came in. He was of medium height, and quietly dressed. His hair was just beginning to thin out on top of his head, and he had a preoccupied look.

"I'm Coleman Gardner," he said pleasantly. "Mr. Armstrong's secretary. Could you state your business to me?"

Mel remembered the man who had been just out of range of the screen when he had talked to John Armstrong. He said, "I think you know what this is about, Mr. Gardner. I told Mr. Armstrong that somebody had been trying to kill me. I wanted to know if he could help me find out who it was."

"I remember your conversation with him, Mr. Oliver. But I'm afraid that Mr. Armstrong is unable to help you."

"Suppose we talk to him about that," put in Bolam mildly.

"Mr. Armstrong is a very busy man," began the secretary. "And he doesn't like to leave his experiments."

"He should be able to spare a few minutes to help save the life of his partner's son," said Bolam, staring grimly at Gardner.

Somewhat uneasily, the secretary avoided his glance. "Well, if you put it that way, I shall see what I can do. Just stay here, please."

He left, and Mel turned to face the strong man. "Mr. Armstrong is certainly giving us a good looking over before talking to us."

"Almost as if he had something to hide."

"I wonder if Hakin—"

Bolam frowned and shook his head, and Mel stopped. He was being a fool again. They were undoubtedly being watched through spy lenses every moment, and microphones were probably picking up their conversation. Bolam said, "Don't worry about Hakin. He can handle the circus perfectly well without our help."

"I hope Rover's all right," said Mel, playing along. "I didn't like the idea of leaving him alone. He still hasn't got over that wound of his." He thought of the signaling arrangement that they had made, and put one of the round pieces of candy in his mouth.

Two minutes later the robot came for them again. "Follow me, please," it said.

It led them into another bare room. Here, sitting at a desk in the only chair the room contained, Mel recognized John Armstrong. The face looked old and worn, the figure was bent. Armstrong had his eyes fixed on a page full of mathematical symbols, and he did not look up as they approached.

"Mr. Armstrong," began Mel.

"Yes?" The blue eyes stared blankly at them. "Who—?"

"I'm Melvin Oliver. You remember me, don't you, Mr. Armstrong? You asked me to come and talk to you. And this man is Bolam Turino, a friend of mine."

"Indeed. What is it you wanted, Melvin?"

"I told you the last time I spoke to you. Some one has been trying to kill me. And I'm anxious to find out if you can suggest who it is."

"Some one has been trying to kill you? You are mistaken, Melvin. The idea is absurd. Completely absurd."

"That's what you said last time, Mr. Armstrong. But there's no mistake about it."

"Do not be too certain of that, my boy. Mistakes creep into the most unexpected places. In this pageful of calculations, for instance—" His voice trailed away.

Mel looked at Bolam in exasperation. The latter smiled grimly, and said, "Let me handle this, Mel. I'll see to it that we don't get side-tracked."

"All yours, Bolam." Mel popped another candy into his mouth, and thought of his instructions. "Will you have one, Mr. Armstrong?"

Armstrong said impatiently, "I am not a child to be concerned with candy. Have you finished your business with me, Melvin? I must return to my experiment."

"We're just starting, Mr. Armstrong," said Bolam. "Mel's father was your partner, wasn't he?"

"Of course. A more amiable man I never met. But is there need to discuss this now? My experiment is waiting."

"Maybe you aren't aware of it, Mr. Armstrong, but when his father died, Mel had no relatives to go to."

"My experiment—"

"Let it wait," said Bolam sharply. "As I started to say, Mel had to stay for a time in an orphanage, and then had to earn his own living."

"Excellent, excellent. His experiences, I imagine, have taught him to be self-reliant."

"Self-reliant and suspicious. It has recently occurred to him, Mr. Armstrong, that he inherited his father's share of the business. But in all the years since his father's death, he hasn't received a single credit."

"Really? I have been negligent about financial details, and I am shocked to hear this. That is very unfortunate. I shall see, Melvin, that you are provided for."

"That isn't the point," said Bolam. "Mel isn't asking for a

handout. The point is that by rights he owns half this business. And he's entitled to an accounting right now."

Armstrong looked at Mel—or rather, right through him. He had a vague expression on his face, as if he were still thinking of something else.

Finally he said, "Dear me, I think there is a great mistake. Are you really under the impression, Melvin, that half this business is yours?"

"Isn't it, Mr. Armstrong? Isn't half yours and half mine?"

"Well, no. You see, after your father's death, I ran into financial difficulties. As the sole surviving member of the partnership, being responsible for saving as much of it as I could, I sold the assets to a group of investors. They took the business dealings out of my hands, which pleased me greatly, and hired me to supervise the necessary research for them. So you see, Melvin, the business now belongs to neither of us."

"That isn't what the police found."

"The police do not know everything. The financial arrangements have been kept very quiet. But that will make no difference to you, Melvin. I deposited half the proceeds of the sale in a bank in your name, and the money is yours, any time you wish to have it."

"You don't happen to know how much it amounts to, do you, Mr. Armstrong?"

"A thousand credits, or thereabout, I imagine. Not a bad sum at all for a young man with no responsibilities to a family."

A thousand credits, thought Mel. A tiny fraction of what Bolam had led him to expect. Still, if Mr. Armstrong was telling the truth—and perhaps he had documents to back his word—there was nothing Mel could do about it. He might have chosen a bad time to sell the business, but he had a right to do so.

"You seem disappointed, Melvin. I thought I had behaved quite shrewdly. Had you expected more?"

"A little more," said Mel. He popped the red sphere into

his mouth and blew it. "There's just one other thing, Mr. Armstrong." If all was going as it should, Rover would now be leaping into the house through a window. "One little thing you might clear up for me."

"If I can do so briefly, Melvin. But I must really return to my experiment."

"You remember that a few weeks ago when you spoke to me you said that you didn't like dogs?"

"Of course. They're disagreeable animals. And I happen to be allergic to them."

"I guess you can get that way. But when did it happen, Mr. Armstrong? Because I remember that years ago you gave me a puppy for a present. You didn't dislike dogs then."

"I gave you a puppy? You are mistaken, Melvin. I can recall no such incident. Your memory has played you false."

Mel shook his head. "I don't think so, Mr. Armstrong. What's the real reason you don't like dogs? What's wrong with Rover, for instance?"

At the sound of his name, Rover came into the room. Armstrong turned to stare at him, and Rover growled. He took a step toward the man and sniffed, and the hair stood up along his spine. The next moment he had snarled and leaped at the man's throat.

Armstrong's action was startlingly swift and unexpected. His arm jerked up and without the appearance of effort knocked the dog back against the wall.

Bolam plunged at the stooped figure, and this time Mel was even more astounded by what happened. Armstrong seized the strong man in both hands and lifted him into the air. Bolam squirmed and kicked in vain in an effort to get loose. Decrepit as he seemed, Armstrong had a grip of steel.

Held high in the air, Bolam threw his feet over his head and kicked hard against the ceiling. The sudden downward thrust was successful in tearing him free from Armstrong's grip, although it ripped his own clothes at the same time and left bruises on his body.

As Bolam landed on the floor, Armstrong moved grimly

toward him again. Mel picked up the chair on which the old man had been sitting and threw it against him. The chair shattered to pieces and the pieces bounced away. But the expression on the old man's face was unaltered.

What happened between Bolam and the old man after that, Mel didn't see. He was too busy watching the robot butler enter the room. Despite the fact that robots were not supposed to harm human beings, this robot made straight for him, and only the distraction of another attack by Rover enabled Mel to escape.

But his good luck, Mel realized, was only momentary. This time, when Rover was thrown back, he lay where he had fallen.

The robot advanced again, and Mel backed away. There was the sudden flash of something bulky being hurled past his face. Armstrong's body whirled in the air and crashed into the advancing metal figure. The next moment the robot sprawled on the floor, the smaller body of John Armstrong alongside him.

"Robots can't pick themselves up in a hurry," panted Bolam. "Let's get out of here. Quick!"

"But I can't leave Rover. He's hurt!"

Bolam bent over and picked up the dog. Armstrong and the robot butler were trying to stand up again, both of them having the same clumsy trouble in getting to their feet. Bolam paused and said, "Wait a minute, Mel. Maybe we'll stay after all." He picked up a piece of the broken chair and smashed first Armstrong and then the robot butler with it. Precariously balanced at the moment the weapon hit them, they collapsed to the floor again.

Gardner appeared in the doorway. He had a gun in each hand, and he was no longer the politely amiable hard-working secretary. There was a look of hate on his face as he pointed the weapon in his right hand at Mel.

The blast swept over the walls just as a sweep of Bolam's arm knocked Mel to the side. Then two hands, each at the

end of a long thin arm, had grasped the guns, and were fighting to twist them out of Gardner's grip.

Bolam stepped forward and hit the secretary on the jaw. He collapsed, and Hakin, holding the two guns, said softly, "My thanks, O Powerful One."

"I didn't feel so powerful a minute ago," said Bolam. He looked down at the floor, where Armstrong and the robot butler lay motionless. "He handled me as if I were a baby."

"Your strength, though great, is only human. His is a robot's."

"J-John Armstrong a robot?" stammered Mel.

"Didn't you know it?" said Bolam. "I suspected the minute Rover attacked him. And when I felt those hands of his on me, I didn't have any more doubts. They don't just feel like steel. They *are* steel."

"But John Armstrong was my father's partner—"

"Not this John Armstrong. The real John Armstrong, O Still Innocent One so slow to suspect, the genuine John Armstrong died or was killed after your own father's death."

"We'll explain later," said Bolam. "Hakin, where are the controls for these two?"

"In the next room. I turned them off when Gardner left to take a hand in the fight himself."

"And there are no more robots around?"

"It matters not. So long as the Unconscious One remains in his present condition, they cannot be sent against us."

"Don't be too sure of that, Hakin. He may have some human assistants. And these robots are unusually dangerous. They don't seem to have any built-in orders not to attack human beings. We had better take no chances."

"You are right, O Partner with Powerful Mind. I shall call the police."

It was later, after the police had come and questioned the revived secretary, that Mel got a more complete picture of what had happened. Rover had revived, and Mel's hands ran anxiously over the dog's body to feel for broken bones. There seemed to be none, however, and although Rover

walked stiffly for a time, he showed no lasting ill effects from his struggles with a robot.

Lieutenant Pietro Cellini, of the local police, said to Mel, "I've been in touch with Lieutenant Blazer, over in Marsopolis. He's picked up the man who sent you out into the open air to die. And from this man's description of the character known as 'Little Jupe,' it's clear that Jupe was nothing but another robot, a simpler one than the fake Armstrong, manipulated by Gardner. Gardner himself made sure that none of the underworld characters he used would be able to give him away."

"But Gardner wasn't a technician!" exclaimed Mel. "How did he make a robot that looked and acted exactly like John Armstrong?"

"He didn't," said Bolam.

"Armstrong did that himself," said Lieutenant Cellini. "It happened some time after your father died. Armstrong was sorry about his death, but not for exactly ordinary reasons. The average man would have grieved at the loss of a friend, would have felt emotional ties to an old companion. Armstrong was too cold and unemotional for that. He was annoyed because now he would have to do everything himself. Your father had attended to many business details, had interviewed many people in the course of running the business. Now Armstrong had to do that himself, and he hated it because it interrupted his research, which was the only thing that interested him.

"That's what gave him the idea of making a robot like himself. Gardner was his secretary at that time, and Gardner struck him as being quite capable of handling the business details. Only, most people didn't want to talk to a secretary, they wanted to talk to the head of the business himself. So Armstrong had the robot take his place. He built it with a voice modulator that would reproduce the sound of his own voice, and patterned its gestures and facial expressions after his own. He had a rather easy job there, because he himself was so unemotional that the robot didn't need a wide range

of facial expression. All the same, he did an excellent job, producing a much better facsimile of himself than he did of any of his clients in the animal training or similar professions. And he showed Gardner what changes to make as time went on, and the robot had to 'age.'

"It isn't easy to make a robot act and sound exactly like a human being, and on his own, Gardner would have found the job impossible. The ironic thing is that Armstrong helped him do it. He trained him in the manipulation of the robot controls, and when there was any doubt in his secretary's mind, Armstrong himself would act as a model to be imitated."

"And all the time," said Mel, "he was just preparing for his own death."

"An illustration of the stupidity of the wise, O Wide-Eyed One," said Hakin.

"Maybe," said Cellini. "Gardner denies he killed Armstrong. Not that it makes much difference, but he claims that Armstrong died a natural death. Naturally, we intend to check on that. At any rate, we can fix the approximate time of death, after the last patent was issued to him. Once he was dead, of course, his research had to stop. That was one job that Gardner couldn't take over or hand to an assistant. But Gardner hid that from the world by pretending that Armstrong was on the track of a great invention that was taking many years to perfect.

"You can see now what the situation was. Gardner had complete control of what had once been a business belonging to your father and John Armstrong—and he had no legal right to it whatsoever. When he learned of your existence, he was afraid that you would claim your share, and worse still, that you might possibly get on the trail of what had happened. Hence his attempts to kill you."

Mel said thoughtfully, "I don't think I'd ever have guessed. The fake John Armstrong fooled the police, didn't he—or it?"

Lieutenant Cellini nodded. "A subordinate of mine, who

went to see Armstrong allowed himself to be overawed by the man's reputation. Perhaps I shouldn't blame him. Maybe I'd have been fooled just as easily."

"Gardner had me fooled," admitted Mel.

"Me too," said Bolam. "At first, anyway."

"The only one he couldn't possibly fool was Rover, who'd know that although the figure looked and acted like a man, it didn't smell like one. Gardner knew he had to keep the dog away from him, and thought of the excuse about being allergic to dogs. It was a good thing that you remembered about that puppy the real Armstrong gave you, Mel, and decided to bring Rover along anyway."

"You owe much to your beast, O Dog's Best Friend," said Hakin.

"And not for the first time," said Mel.

Rover looked at him as if he understood his words.

Bolam said, "I think that Lieutenant Cellini has cleared everything up, Mel. Now we'd better get back to the circus. We're glad we could help you."

"We shall think of you often, O Sudden Possessor of Great Wealth," said Hakin.

"What do you mean you'll think of me? I'm going with you," insisted Mel.

"You don't have to," said Bolam. "It's clear that the story we heard about selling the business for a small sum is untrue. You own it now."

"I don't know anything about running it, and I'll have to hire somebody else to take care of my end of it. I'm staying with the circus—that is, if you think I'm good enough."

He waited anxiously, while Bolam ran his huge hand over his square chin and pretended to think it over.

"Well, you're not so good, but you'll learn," growled the strong man finally. "Think we can use him, Hakin?"

"We need the dog, O Angry-Voiced One. And how can we have the dog without his master?"

"You hear that, Mel? Come along."

Mel came along, with Rover beside him. In his mind

he pictured the audiences waiting eagerly on Mars and Earth and Venus and on Jupiter's moons, he saw them holding their breaths as they watched. He envisioned the clowns and the aerialists and the riders of strange steeds who held their attention. He pictured himself too, tumbling and turning, and herding ferocious beasts with his electrical whip. And he caught a glimpse of Betty smiling at him from the seats and applauding enthusiastically, while her Uncle Gard frowned beside her and chewed angrily on his unlighted cigar.

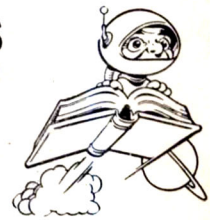
So long as he was with the circus there would always be new and exciting adventures, there would always be something to make his life worth living. Did they expect him to give up all this just to sit home and spend the money some one else had earned for him?

"Never," he said, unexpectedly voicing his thought aloud. "Never. You and I, Rover, are sticking to the circus. We're going to have a lot of good times together."

The strong man and the rubber man looked at him blankly, but Rover seemed to understand. He raised his right forepaw, and Mel gravely shook hands with him.

It was a deal.

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