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TURN LEFT AT THURSDAY

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FREDERIK POHL

BALLANTINE BOOKS
NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

MARS BY MOONLIGHT

I

HARDEE parked his jeep across the street from the Administration Building, opened the hatch and got out, gasping.

It was cold midnight, better than the heat of the day, but he shivered and his breath made a white mist in the thin air.

Mars—curse the place! Too hot by day, too cold by night, the air too thin all the time.

He looked up. The stars were densely drifted in the sky over head. Both moons were out of sight; the stars made a white light, not bright enough to be obtrusive but enough, after he had turned out the lights of the jeep, to pick out details of the street, the curbs, the sidewalks, the low buildings. The little town did not possess street lights and, on nights like this, few persons bothered to turn on the outer lights of their homes; it wasn't necessary.

Around the corner there was a glow of red. Hardee took his sack out of the back of the jeep, grunted as he threw it over his shoulder and headed for the welcome glow.

It came from a sign that read:

BUNNIE'S PLACE
Liveliest Night Spot on Mars

In the doorway, Hardee stood blinking.

It was only a matter of fifty yards or so from the jeep, but he was sweating like a hog because of the weight of the sack. There was no dampness from the sweat—sweat

was sucked greedily away into the thin dry air as soon as it was formed. But it was wearing on the muscles and the skin; it was like pounding a treadmill. He was panting, and noise and light beat out at him.

"Hardee!" yelled somebody. He nodded and waved, not troubling to identify whoever it was. Squinting, he moved inside and found a table.

Bunnie's Place. The Liveliest Night Spot on Mars. That was a flat lie—probably. There might be other places, but no one in Bunnie's Place had ever seen them; and if there were, they were bound to be livelier. What Bunnie's Place had to offer was:

A piano, dried from the desert air and in sad disrepair, on which, at the present moment, someone was trying to play a medley of familiar tunes, handicapped by the fact that all the B-flat keys in the middle octaves were broken.

A bar stocked with ceaselessly replenished cases of blended whiskey, gin and brandy, but with very little else.

A dozen tables surrounding a cleared space suitable for dancing, now in use.

A record player with several hundred LP records, mostly rock-and-roll, all well worn.

Two pool tables, the felts of which were held together with sticking plaster.

Two ping-pong tables.

A "library." It contained twenty-six books, all novels, dating from the years 1950-1955.

Nearly one hundred persons, about a dozen of them women, the youngest of them thirty years old.

That was Bunnie's Place. As a night club, it was a failure. As the recreation room for a penal colony, however, it was not so bad; and that was what it was.

Old Man Tavares came over to take Hardee's order.

"You're late," he wheezed. He claimed to have had lung trouble once, back on Earth in that former life that each of them talked of endlessly. "The Probation Officer was looking for you."

"I'll see him later," said Hardee. "Get me a highball first."

Tavares nodded and limped heavily way. The room was crowded. It was the dark of the moon, or nearly—moonrise would precede the morning sun by only an hour or so—so that practically all the trappers, like Hardee, tried to concentrate their monthly probation reports into this short period of three or four days.

If a trapper made his report on a full-moon night, it meant losing a night's work. A trapper couldn't afford that. He was on his own, despite being a prisoner. He needed every skitterbug he could catch to pay his bills and provide his stake for the next month.

The alternative was to make your report during daylight hours. But that was bad if you had more than ten or fifteen miles to travel—Hardee had fifty—because at this time of year the desert by day was just plain too hot. Besides, the Probation Officer didn't like having his day's sleep interrupted. And he was a prissy, querulous old man who had little real power—he was as much a felon as any of his charges (there was no one in the whole colony who hadn't been sentenced there)—and so he threw his weight around.

"Hello, Hardee."

Hardee looked up, and for the first time smiled.

"Hello, Joan."

Joan Bunnell, the "Bunnie" of Bunnie's Place, was short, warm-faced, honey-haired. Hardee was fond of her; they had slept together several times; they had even talked of getting married. But this was not a place for getting married. There was no rule against it—there were very few rules, everything considered, only the Big Rule against traveling more than a hundred miles from the little town, and a few lesser ones. But how could they talk seriously of getting married when either or both of them might still be married to someone back on Earth?

She had two drinks on a tray, his and one for herself. She sat down, fanning herself. It wasn't very hot—not compared to outside—but the room's bright colors and loud voices and the jukebox crashing against the sound of

the battered piano, gave the impression of a cauldron.

"Drink up," said Joan Bunnell, toasting him. "You've got to keep your liquids up."

"You gotta keep *something* up," bawled an ape's voice from behind Hardee. It laughed raucously.

Hardee turned, frowning. He recognized the voice. The man's name was Wakulla.

There, thought Hardee irritably, was the kind of man this place was made for. You knew just by looking at him that this was no bank embezzler or forger; this was knock-them-dead and loot-their-pockets. There was no finesse or cunning to those sloping shoulders and the curled black body hair that held his thin shirt cushioned an inch from his chest. The man was an ape.

He boomed with an ape's bellow: "Hardee, you dumb chump, how many skits did you bring in this time?"

His shout didn't exactly silence the room, but it did create a small oasis of quiet—an area roughly equal to the reach of his enormous fists. He was not liked. But he was feared; in a little world without law, he was feared very much.

Hardee said clearly: "A hundred and fourteen."

"In there?" Wakulla kicked the sack beside Hardee's chair.

"Only about a dozen. The rest are outside in the jeep."

Wakulla nodded, then grinned an ape's grin. "Good for you, Hardee! You won the pool this month. You know what you won?"

Hardee waited.

"You won the privilege of buying drinks for the house!" Wakulla yelled. "Come on, boys. Line up!"

Hardee glanced at Joan Bunnell and pressed his shoulders against the back of his chair.

There was a chance, he thought judiciously, that he could take Wakulla. The ape was inches shorter than himself, and that might make a difference. Everything else was going for Wakulla—reach, weight and the indestructible animal combat urge that made all other considerations unimportant. Still, there was that chance.

But it was better to avoid a fight.

Hardee took a deep breath and managed a grin. "Fair enough," he said.

Wakulla scowled, waiting.

"Why not?" said Hardee reasonably. "But if I win that for bringing in a few lousy skitterbugs, what do I win for this?"

He hefted the sack to the top of the table and opened the drawstrings.

There were a couple of skitterbugs on top. He pulled them out and laid them on the table, where their long jointed legs began to twine feebly under the room lights. Then, beneath them, was what he was looking for.

He took it out, stood up and shook it loose.

It hung from his hand limply. It was a gray canvas coverall, filthy, sweat-stained, spotted with what looked like blood.

Wakulla demanded: "What the hell is that?"

"What does it look like? It's a coverall. I took it off a man I found out in the desert three days ago. On foot."

It created a sensation.

Old man Tavares limped up, pushing his way through the men around Hardee's table, and clutched the filthy garment. "The man who was wearing it. He was dead?"

"What do you think?"

It went without saying. It was possible to walk around the desert for short distances, but not for anything like the distance from one prospector's prefab to another. For that you needed a jeep. "I buried him out in the desert. He was a stranger."

"A stranger!"

Tavares let go of the garment and stared at it.

Hardee dropped the skitterbugs back into the sack and closed it; as the light was cut off, the stirring stopped. He downed his drink.

"You know that old mine, Wakulla—out between your place and mine? I was out there at daybreak and I found this fellow. He wasn't dead then."

Wakulla growled: "But you just said—"

"He was close enough to it. He was face-down on the sand and not moving. I stopped and went over."

Nearly everybody in the room was clustered around, listening. The penal colony had been in existence for five years now—Hardee himself had been there for nearly three—and this was the first time a stranger had ever appeared. It was an event of the first magnitude, almost as though someone had finally completed his term, or as though, somehow, radio contact had been established with Earth.

Hardee's hand closed over the girl's.

"I tried to lift him up," he said. "He was still breathing, but not too well—you know, gasping. Panting. You know how it was when you first got here? Only it seemed even worse with him. He was on his way out. And then he opened his eyes and looked at me."

Hardee paused, remembering the dry, opaque eyes in the tortured face.

"It wasn't just thirst and exposure," he said, "because the man was pretty well scarred up. One of his arms was broken. I think. And—well, look at the coverall. You can see the blood. That's how he was. He raised his head and he said something. I could hardly understand him. And then he sat up and began to choke. And he died. He was pretty far gone, as I say."

Joan Bunnell demanded: "Hardee! What did he say?"

Hardee put down his glass and touched the coverall thoughtfully.

"He said: 'Thank God. A man!' "

II

Four hours later, Hardee was driving up to the shelter of his own prefab.

The moon was peeping over the eastern horizon in a wash of white light that picked out the mountains around them. Hardee opened the door and looked up, gasping—that was the way it always was when you had been sitting for a while. In this thin air, when you began to lift your-

self, the lungs strained for oxygen and found it only with difficulty.

Let's see, thought Hardee, staring at the broad white moon. That would be Deimos. Or Phobos. Some said the big one was Deimos, some the little. Nobody knew for sure, or nobody had yet convinced the rest of the colony. Old man Tavares was the only one who was really likely to know, and he only laughed when he was asked.

Hardee thought the big one was Deimos. That was the one that was bright and useful, and for weeks on end you didn't see it at all. The other one—what was the use of it? It was a rapid little comet, steel-blue and brighter than a star, yes, but not bright enough. It moved fast, fast; every night it soared across the sky two or three times. But it was no good for hunting.

He got out of the jeep, wheezing. He left it with its motor going—he would be right back—and twisted the combination that unlocked the door of his home, his and the boy's.

Not everyone bothered locking the doors when they went out, but it was habit with Hardee. That was the way he was and, besides, he had something more precious than most to protect.

Inside, he dumped his supplies on the floor and quickly looked into the boy's room. That was all quiet. He closed the door gently and returned to the larger room, stowed the perishables in the freezer, leaving everything else where it lay. He pulled out of his pocket the little sheaf of vouchers that represented the surplus skitterbugs—those whose profits had not been used up in paying for the supplies, for the installments on the jeep, the prefab itself and all of its furnishings.

He locked the door behind him and rode out into the desert.

There was still an hour of moonlight before the rising of the sun. It didn't do to waste hours; there were just so many hours in the month when the skitterbugs could be caught.

Old man Tavares said that the skitterbugs weren't animals—they were machines.

Tavares might know. He had been in the colony longer than most, and although his mind was wandering and he sometimes thought there was a war going on and all of them were in a concentration camp, he had once been an electronics engineer. Or so he claimed.

Tavares rambled about mussels filtering iodine out of sea water and plants splitting oxygen out of CO_2. Maybe it made sense and maybe not, but what he said was that the skitterbugs all came from one master skitterbug that had been made in a laboratory back on old Earth. There was iron in the sand, said old Tavares, and other elements, and so somebody had invented a sort of basic reproducible pattern for a simple machine operated by sunlight which could extract from sand and rock the ingredients necessary to produce other machines just like itself.

Maybe so. Maybe not. It was true that the skitterbugs *looked* like machines; they were metal. And yet they grew. The theory was simple. Maybe so. Even Hardee could see that, and *he* had been only a traffic policeman in the old days on Earth. Or thought he had.

It didn't matter much, one way or the other, to Hardee. What mattered to him was that during the hours of moonlight it was possible to capture the skits and that if you captured a hundred of them, you kept even with the necessary payments for supplies and installments to the Probation Officer; if you captured more than that you could even afford luxuries. And that mattered. Not so much for Hardee—he had too much self-punishment yet to inflict on himself for that—but for the boy.

The boy deserved a few luxuries. For he had nothing else.

A mile from the prefab, Hardee switched on the RDF unit.

The radio antenna that sprouted from the tail end of the jeep began to circle slowly, feeling for broadcast radio energy. That was the important thing about moonlit nights.

The skitterbugs, whatever they were, operated on light energy. When light hit their domed, absorbent carapaces,

the tiny circuits inside them busily converted the light into heat and kinetic energy. But not quite all of it. There was a certain amount of waste in the form of free radio impulses. This the RDF scanner was designed to locate.

Come to think of it, Hardee pondered, maybe that certain amount of waste was no waste at all. If it was true that the skitterbugs were artificial, it might perfectly well be that the waste was designed into them, for exactly the purpose for which it was used—to locate and harvest them.

But there had to be light to make them radiate and thus be found.

By day, the blinding sunlight made them radiate like mad, of course, but that was no good. In daylight, the skitterbugs could outrun a man and even a jeep; they produced strong signals, but what was the use of that when you couldn't catch them?

Starlight wasn't very satisfactory either. On a particularly bright night, you might, if you were very, very lucky, pick up a few stray wisps of signal, but only provided you happened to blunder within fifty yards or so of a skit and then the impulses were too weak to be much help for direction finding. No, it had to be moonlight—the big moon—energy enough to make them radiate, but not so much that they could get away.

Hardee checked the little blips of light on his cathode screen and marked a concentration of a dozen or more. Undoubtedly half of them would be under the legal limit. Half a kilogram was the minimum; you could be fined the vouchers for a dozen full-sized skits for bringing in one under the limit. But with any luck at all, he should be able to bag one or two of the full-grown ones before the others succeeded in tunneling into the sand and out of sight.

Hardee hunted until the broad red rising sun began to heat the desert and then raced back toward the prefab with four skitterbugs in the shielded locker. He circled the area where a long-abandoned shack marked the old mine, then took his foot off the gas, paused and looked back.

Under the faded board sign that said almost illegibly "Joe's Last Hope Shaft No. 1" was the shallow grave Hardee had dug out for the stranger. There had been no name, no papers, nothing in the pockets that told him anything, and accordingly, there was no inscription on the little wooden headboard Hardee had hacked out in the growing heat of the morning sun.

Hardee sat there for a moment, his mind vacant, vaguely wondering about the man he had found. But it was growing hot. He put the jeep in gear and headed again for home.

The boy was awake and waiting for him at the door.

"Daddy, Daddy!" he chanted, looking grave and sleepy. "Did you get it?"

"Hi," said Hardee inadequately. He bent over to pick the child up.

Chuck was small for his age, a serious-faced, brown-eyed, dark-haired little five-year-old. He said immediately, throwing his arms around Hardee's neck: "Daddy, did you get the tractor? I've been thinking about it! I woke up three times all night while you were gone."

"I'll bet you did," said Hardee. He tousled the boy's hair. "Well, I got it. It's in the sack."

"Oh, *Daddy!*" crowed the child. He wriggled frantically to be put down.

As soon as he was on his feet, he raced into the house, through the little foyer where the foot-scrapers waited to get sand off the feet of visitors, and the hooks lined the wall for their clothes. He made a beeline for the pile of supplies. By the time Hardee got rid of his sand boots and sweat-jacket, the boy was making a horrible scraping sound, tugging crates of canned goods out of his way; by the time Hardee reached the door of the room, Chuck had already opened the sack and was feeling inside.

"Oh, *Daddy!*" he cried again, taking the tractor out. It was an exact model of a jeep with a bulldozer blade mounted before it for sand moving; it was battery operated and controlled through a little hand-plate connected to the tractor with a long, thin wire.

"I've only got one battery," Hardee warned. "Make it last. I don't know when I can get another one."

"Oh, that's all right, Daddy. I don't mind *that*."

Experimentally, the boy turned on the power. The tractor lurched, whined, began pushing its blade across the linoleum floor.

The boy chortled: "Wait till I get outside! I'll stay near the house, Daddy, I promise. I'm going to make a fort and a castle! I'm going to dig a long canal all the way from the house to the trash burner! I'm going to get the soldiers and my red truck and I'm going to make an Army camp that—"

"Sure you are," said Hardee, patting the boy on the head. "But first you're going to have breakfast. Right?"

Hardee managed to keep himself awake while the child and he had breakfast. He even managed to stay awake for nearly an hour afterward, but that was the limit.

He stripped off his clothes, hung them neatly and fell into his bed. Outside, the boy was whooping at his new tractor.

It wasn't, Hardee admitted to himself, the best possible arrangement for him and the boy. But it was important that he be awake nights. And the boy was still too young to be trusted to roam around by himself while Hardee was out hunting.

This way, they didn't see as much of each other as Hardee would have liked—and, heaven knew, it was tough on Chuck to have to find his amusement for eight hours every day, to take his own meals at least twice a day and even to put himself in for a nap when the big hand and the little hand on the clock met at 12. Children are most marvelously adaptable organisms, but it was too bad, all the same.

But what else was there to do?

This way, the child was completely alone only at night —when Hardee was out hunting, and Chuck himself was asleep. True, that wasn't entirely safe. Something could happen—a fire, a sudden sickness, even a fall out of bed. It was better being close at hand, even if asleep, by day, when the child was up and about and thus more likely to

run into trouble. Chuck could be trusted to wake him up.

Hardee sighed and turned over. Overhead, he heard the engines of a transport plane and, outside, excited shouts from Chuck. Hardee could imagine him cavorting and waving at the plane.

No, thought Hardee, covering himself lightly and closing his eyes, it wasn't a perfect existence for either of them; but what else could you expect in a penal colony?

III

In the light of the morning, Joan Bunnell closed the door of her room and began to take off her clothes.

She put on light sleeping shorts and a short-sleeved top, patched and faded, but the best she had been able to buy, and stood at the window, looking out at the desert. She was facing west, away from the sunrise. She could see the black shadows streaming away from the sun-touched tops of the buttes and dunes. It was going to be a hot day.

This time of year, you could say that it was going to be a hot day every morning and never be wrong. Funny, she thought, she'd never had any idea that Mars was as hot as this. Back in the old days—before—she hadn't, in fact, thought about Mars much at all.

There was a lot of talk, she remembered cloudily, about rockets and satellites, and even some dreamers who ventured the hope that men would someday touch the surface of the Moon. But Mars? That was for the Sunday comics. She'd paid no attention to that sort of nonsense. She most especially never had dreamed that someday she herself would be a prisoner on Mars, stripped of her freedom and her memories.

Neither had any of the others—no freedom, no memories.

She cranked down the filter panels that would keep out nearly all of the heat, and went over to her little dressing table to complete her going-to-bed ritual. Cleansing cream. Skin cream. Fifty strokes of the brush on

each side of her part. Carefully rubbing in the cream below the eyes, behind the jaws, along the line of the throat —the places where wrinkles and sagging would start first.

No, she told herself brutally, *had* started. This hot, dry air was devastating on a girl's skin and hair; it was impossible to let things go for a single day.

She was sleepy, but she sat on the edge of the bed before lying down.

It was impossible for her to go to bed without performing, once again, another and different sort of daily ritual.

She looked across the room at her reflection in the mirror, wondering. Then, hopelessly, automatically, she pushed back the short sleeves of her jacket and examined the skin of her inner arm, pulled back the hem of her shorts and examined the flesh of the thigh.

There were no needle marks.

"Dear God," whispered Joan wretchedly. She had looked a thousand times before and there had been none. Well, maybe she ought to accept the evidence of her eyes as definite; whatever it was that she had been sentenced to this place for, narcotics addiction was not the answer.

It was the most severe portion of the punishment that not one of the prisoners knew what they were being punished for.

Framed on the wall, over the head of her brass bedstead, was an excerpt from *Martian Penal Colony Rules and General Information.* She had never seen the manual itself, though it was generally understood that the Probation Officer had a copy. But the excerpt she knew by heart. Everyone did. Nearly every room in the colony had it framed and hung:

•

> You are here because you have been tried, convicted and sentenced for a felony.
>
> In former times, felonies were punished by prison sentences. This ordinarily failed of its purpose, in that it did not act as a deterrent to repetitions of the same offense.

In recent years, a technique has been developed of erasing memories after a certain date—usually, for technical reasons, 16 October 1959. By virtue of the XXVth Amendment, provision for the use of this technique has been incorporated in the Uniform Penal Code of the United States, and under it you have been sentenced to rehabilitation and to transportation to the Martian Penal Colony for an indefinite period.

You will be observed from time to time, and the degree of your rehabilitation evaluated. When you are ready to return to normal life, you will be paroled.

It is not in the interests of your best efforts toward rehabilitation that you be advised of the crime of which you were convicted. However, the categories covered by the Uniform Penal Code include:

Murder, first degree.
Murder, second degree.
Manslaughter, in connection with a felony.
Grand larceny, grand fraud and embezzlement—but only after the third offense in each case.
Habitual use of drugs, without voluntary rehabilitation.
Habitual prostitution.

That was the list. Joan knew it well.

It was a choice selection, and she had to be guilty of one of them. But which one?

Joan Bunnell stared long at her own face, wondering if those eyes were the eyes of a murderess. Had she killed a husband, a lover? Perhaps her parents, seeking to inherit their wealth? Perhaps even a child—had she *had* a child? Could she have given birth to a baby, perhaps a boy small and grave-faced like Hardee's youngster —and could she, in madness or in hate, have killed the child?

It was not fair to carve out a piece of her mind and cast it away.

Joan lay back on the pillow, her closed eyes cushioned

on her own long hair against her forearm. It was the cruelest of all punishments, this mind-washing they called rehabilitation.

The Arabs chopped off a hand, the ancient English lopped off a finger or an ear, the Indians gouged out an eye . . . and those were kinder things, much kinder; for at least the victim knew exactly what he had lost.

But here was Joan Bunnell, thirty-one years old, according to the records in the Probation Office. She remembered her childhood in a monotonous brownstone two-family house on a monotonously uniform block in Philadelphia very well. She remembered going to school and she remembered her first job. She remembered a birthday party, and, closing her eyes, was able to count the candles—twenty-one.

She remembered years after that; loves and partings. She remembered yearning after the man she worked for and that he married someone else. (Had she killed him?) She remembered that life coursed full and complete through days compact with trivia and detail, up until a certain day—yes, the sixteenth day of October, in that year of 1959—when she got up in the morning, dressed herself, eaten breakfast at a corner drugstore, got into a subway train to go to work—

And woke up in a place where she had never been.

What had happened?

There was no clue, except the framed excerpt over her bed, and the gossip of the other prisoners.

Like her, they had awakened; like her, they had been questioned endlessly; like her, they had been confined. And, like her, they had been put, blindfold, into an airplane, flown for some hours—and released here.

They knew that they had committed a crime. Of course. That was why they were here.

But what crime?

How many years had been lopped off their minds?

Joan lay against the pillow too tired to weep; wept out.

After a while, and just as she might have slept, she heard a distant roar of engines growing closer.

She got up and looked out the window, pulling back the screens that cut down the light and heat.

A silvery plane was limping in low over the sand hills, from the west. It didn't circle or seek a traffic pattern; it came in and down, dumping its landing flaps, along the level sand that was kept bulldozed flat for it.

Joan, no longer sleepy, got up and began getting dressed again. The plane meant supplies—perhaps new clothes, and she could use them; perhaps some toys that she might be able to get for Hardee's son. Most of all, the plane might mean a few new inmates for the colony.

In slacks, blouse and a broad-brimmed sun hat, she hurried out after the growing crowd around the rickety old plane.

Wakulla had stayed over—not even the son of Polish miners wakes up and crosses the desert after drinking a bottle and a half of rye.

"I got to see these guys," he said thickly with a painful grin. "I got to see what a free man looks like in case they ever let me out of here."

"They never will," muttered someone, and Joan edged away as Wakulla lifted his squat head and looked around to see who it was. She wasn't looking for trouble.

The Probation Officer came up hastily, eagerly panting for the big moment of his being.

"Out of the way!" he quavered. "Here there, please! Out of the way, Saunders! Here, let me through, Tavares! Come on. Please!"

"Let the keeper through!" bawled Wakulla, forgetting about the man who had muttered. "Hurry up, Tavares, you old bag of bones!"

The three sputtering propellers of the aircraft coughed and choked and then stopped. Tavares and two other men hurried to push a metal ladder on wheels—with great difficulty—through the clinging sand up to the side of the plane, as the door jerked and then flew open.

Even Joan Bunnell, who was far from a mechanic, had not grown accustomed to the sight of a Ford tri-motor lumbering around in the thin air of Mars. That wash-

board fuselage, those ancient woodbladed props, they were period accessories from an old movie, not anything you ever expected to see in the air—anywhere. True, some of the men talked wisely about how the old Ford was a great plane for its time and a record-breaker; and they maintained that in all sorts of out-of-the-way places little out-of-the-way airlines had for decades kept up a sort of service using the Fords . . . but on *Mars?*

But there it was, as it had always been for all of them—it was the ship each of them had arrived in. And by and by the wonder had grown duller, submerged in the greater, special wonderment that each of them had, that went incessantly: *What was it that I did that got me sent here?*

The door of the plane swung rasping on its hinges, catching the bright hour-high sun and sending blinding rays into the faces of the colonists. Behind the glare, a man poked his head out—an old, haggard head.

"Hello, Mr. Griswold!" cried the Probation Officer in a thin high voice, greeting him. He waved violently. "Here I am, Mr. Griswold!"

This was the Probation Officer's *time.* Barring this time, he was nobody—not even in the penal colony of brain-blotted felons, not anywhere. All his days and nights at the penal colony were alike; they were partly bookkeeper's routine and partly file-clerk's duties, and partly they were without any shape at all. They deserved little respect from anyone and they got none—all those days. But on the few, the very occasional, days when the Ford transport waddled in—then he, the Probation Officer, he was the one that Mr. Griswold spoke to.

Mr. Griswold came with the plane, always. Mr. Griswold was the only man they ever saw who went back to freedom. And the Probation Officer was the link between the colony and Mr. Griswold—and, through him the rest of Mars and, more remotely, that unimaginably most distant of dreams, Earth and home.

"Hello," murmured Griswold in a faded, wispy sort of voice. He stood there, haggard and blinking in the sunlight, nodding to the Probation Officer. "I've got some new mouths to feed," said Griswold, and grinned a ruin

of a grin, as though he had meant it for a joke but could never laugh again.

Joan Bunnell pressed closer, though she disliked Griswold and usually, instinctively, stayed well clear of him. Each time Joan saw him, he appeared decades older, degrees more demon-haunted than the time before. She knew his age well enough, because she remembered him from her own trip to the colony, three years before. He had been about fifty then . . . could hardly be fifty-five now . . . but he looked seventy at the least, or perhaps some remote and meaningless age past a hundred.

His hands shook, his voice shook, his face was a working collision of jumpy muscles and fast-blinking eyes. Drugs? Drink? A terminal disease? It could hardly be any of those things, Joan thought; but if it was his job that made him so decrepit and so weak, then working conditions outside the penal colony must be even worse than within it.

And there was one other thing about Mr. Griswold. He never left the old plane.

In the three years of Joan's experience, he had yet to climb down that metal ladder to stand on the ground.

Since Griswold would not come down the ladder, the Probation Officer eagerly and importantly puffed up it.

There was a moment while he and Griswold talked to each other, low-voiced, at the door to the cabin of the old tri-motor plane.

Then the Probation Officer stepped aside. "Let 'em out, please," he ordered. "Let the new fish come down the ladder!"

Five men and women began to file out of the plane, squinting in dazed unbelief at the sunwashed scene around them.

Wakulla caught sight of one of the women and yelled an animal's cry of glee. "That's for me!" He meant it for a playful aside, but that voice was not meant for stage whispers. He grinned at the woman; then his expression changed to astonishment.

He wasn't alone. There was a gasp. "She's got a kid with her!" cried one of the women beside Joan Bunnell.

Joan caught her breath. That was very odd—and very rare and very precious. There were four babies in the colony, born there, three of them in wedlock and one in doubt. But this was a girl of five or six, not a newborn. That was almost without precedent—the only other child who had been *brought* to the colony was Hardee's boy.

A dozen hands helped the woman with the child down the ladder. They led her, with the others, across the hot sands toward the shelter.

Joan cast one glance at the plane. Already Tavares's crew was beginning to unload crates of supplies. Already the tied sacks of skitterbugs, feebly stirring in the light that filtered through the burlap, were being trundled out on wheelbarrows to be loaded into the plane for return to—where? No one had ever said. Back to Earth, perhaps. Perhaps not.

The glass windscreens of the tri-motor's battered old nose glittered opaquely.

Joan glanced at them and then away—there was nothing there; she never could see inside the cockpit; no one ever had. Behind those glittering windshields were, undoubtedly, the pilot and co-pilot—for surely Griswold was no aviator, not with that tic and those eyes. But she had never seen the pilots, not even when she herself was part of the plane's cargo, coming here. And she didn't expect to see them now.

But something was nagging at her.

She looked again, and her eye was caught by old Dom Tavares, who should have been helping to load the plane, and who instead was standing in a queerly tense attitude, staring at the open door.

Joan tried to peer past the door, but it was hard to see from the bright sun outside into the black shadows within. There was Griswold, and there was the Probation Officer, surely—at least there were two shadows. And the taller, fatter shadow was handing something to the lean, bent one—something that looked like a rag, or an old garment; they were talking about it.

Joan hesitated, wondered if it was worth thinking about.

But there were the newcomers—new faces, when all the old faces were worn so familiar.

And Tavares was, it was perfectly true, getting a little odd in his ways anyhow. Everyone knew that.

She turned, dismissing whatever it was that disturbed Tavares, and hurried after the newcomers as they were shepherded into the recreation room.

By day, the "Liveliest Night Spot on Mars" was even less attractive than by night.

The night before had been a big one; the signs of it were all over the room, overturned chairs, spilled drinks, the grime of a couple of dozen men in town. No one had taken the time to tidy up—that was done later, usually in the waning heat of the afternoon—and the new arrivals stared around them with revulsion in their eyes.

"They're very young," someone whispered to Joan. She nodded. One of the women was middleaged, but the one with the child was just into her twenties. And of the men, one was little more than a boy.

He was a blond-haired youngster, his eyes violet and innocent, his face far from the time of shaving. What, Joan wondered, had brought *him* here? For that matter, what was the crime of the dowdy-looking, plump little woman who was staring around in such panic?

The colonists were all over the new women—particularly Wakulla, gallant with an ape's clumsy politeness. "A chair!" he bawled. "A chair for the lady!" And he wrenched one from Joan's hand. "I'll take the calf to get the heifer," he whispered hoarsely, with an exaggerated wink, and slid the chair clattering to the girl with the child. The girl only stared at him fearfully.

Joan tried to stay back and give the newcomers room.

She had a vivid sense of what they must be feeling; she remembered; she could read their eyes and know what they must be thinking:

The strangeness of their surroundings.

The sudden shock. (For it was always a shock, everyone agreed on it; one minute you were going about your business, a minute later you woke up somewhere else. A strange somewhere, and removed in time—in a white-

walled room, with a couple of tense and worried-looking doctors and nurses around you, with television scanner lenses in the walls . . . and, very quickly, a tense and worried-looking man in uniform coming in to talk to you, to tell you that you had become a criminal, in a life that was now wiped out of your mind, and that you were on Mars, headed for a penal colony. Shock? It was a wonder that it didn't prove fatal. And perhaps for some it had; they had no way of knowing.)

But more than these things—after that first shock wore off and you had become reconciled to the fact that your whole life had somehow been perverted into that of a criminal—after you had been bundled, blindfolded, into that rattling old three-motored plane and flown for windowless hours across the unseen Martian deserts—then you arrived.

And that was bad.

For there was always the uneasy, shamefaced question in the crowd: *Does this one know who I am? And that other one—why is he grinning like that? Does he know what I did? And what did he himself do, to be in this place?*

Nobody ever got over it.

But the early days were worst of all, before the pain became an accustomed one.

The heat was beating in on them. The woman with the child, half afraid, half contemptuous of Wakulla's gallantry, leaned white-faced against the back of her chair. The little girl, a thumb in her mouth and the other hand clutching her mother's skirt beside her, watched silently.

The boy was talking—his name was Tommy and he had told them he was seventeen years old. "That's what they *tell* me," he said, with a painful effort to be adult and sure of himself. His voice was a soft high mumble, hardly the voice of even a seventeen-year-old. "But—I don't remember that. Really, I don't. The last thing I remember, I was twelve!"

Twelve! Joan made a faint sound; almost she patted him on the head, though he was taller than she. Twelve! What sort of criminal could have hatched at twelve?

Even at seventeen, the thing was ridiculous! But somewhere, this child had lost five years.

She tried to explain it to him: "You must have done something, Tommy. Maybe you got involved with the wrong bunch at school—who knows? But somehow, you went wrong. That's why they send people here, you know. It's the new law. Instead of putting someone in jail and keeping them there—that would be a waste, you see, and cruel—they wipe out the part of the minds that has the criminal pattern in it. They go back erasing memory, until they come to a part that is clean and unaffected, not only before the crime was committed but before, even, the first seed of the crime was planted. That's why none of us know what it was we did. It's been taken away from us. We've been given a second chance. We should be grateful."

But should they? It was the old question; she cast it off.

"Then," she said, "after they've cleaned out our memories and taken us back to the right path, they send us up here. To Mars. This is a colony where we can try to get reoriented and—" She hesitated. And what? "And go back to normal life," she finished strongly, though there was still the relentless reminder of her memory that *no one* had ever gone back. "It isn't so bad, Tommy," she promised.

He didn't look convinced.

Someone was calling her name: "Joan! Joan, come here, please!"

It was old man Tavares. He was standing in the door, his face blenched a muddy mottled color in spite of the dark the sun had given it.

She turned and hurried to him. Heat-stroke, she thought at once. It was far from uncommon, especially when a man as old as Tavares had to work in the blinding sun helping to lift boxes and bales.

But he caught her feverishly by the hand and drew her outside into the sunwashed street.

"Joan," he whispered raggedly, terror peeping out of his eyes. "Joan, can you borrow a jeep?"

"Why—I suppose so. But—"

"Take me to Hardee," he begged. His lined old face was quivering with senile worry and fear; his dry, hot hand was crushing hers. "Quickly! It will take hours for us to drive there. And we may not have hours, because they can fly in the plane! Quickly, for his sake and your own!"

Joan said reasonably: "Now hold on, Dom. You're excited. Sit down for a minute." She tried to lead him back into the recreation room. She'd seen the signs coming on, she reproached herself, when he behaved so queerly at the plane; she should have done something about it at the time. Poor old man! "Come on, Dom," she coaxed. "I'll get you a nice cool drink of water and—"

"Quickly!" He planted his feet firmly, surprisingly strong, and halted her. His eyes were terrified; they flicked past her, out toward the plane. "You don't understand, Joan! The Probation Officer, he has told Griswold about the stranger Hardee found. It is a terrible thing, do you not realize?"

"Stranger?" she repeated.

"The dead man, Joan! I saw them with the coverall, and then I knew. So I came close and listened and, yes, he was telling Griswold. And Griswold was frantic! Of course. Hurry, Joan!"

Doubtfully, she said: "Well, let's see. You want to go out to Hardee's place? Wakulla's not far from there. I suppose I can persuade him to take us out, though he's got that new woman on his mind. It's a bad time of day, but—"

"Hurry!"

The panic in his voice finally reached her. All right, she thought, why not? She could handle Wakulla—even in the face of the constant threat of a boiled-out motor and trouble, the natural risk you took in driving across the sand by summer daylight. But Tavares gave her no choice.

Still she protested, half-resisting: "Can't it wait until night, Dom? Surely it can't be as serious as all that. After all, what's so dangerous about a stranger? I suppose he's merely a man who got lost in the desert—at

most, perhaps he escaped from another prison camp, somewhere else on Mars, but certainly that doesn't—"

"Mars!" Tavares hissed in a terrible whisper. Convulsively he squeezed her arm. "Joan, do you not understand? All these years—and you still think that this is *Mars?*"

IV

Hardee woke groggily to the sound of the boy's voice calling: "Daddy! Somebody's coming!"

It was only about noon.

Hardee swung himself out of bed, half asleep, his eyes aching. He stumbled over to the window and pushed back the shutters.

Fierce light beat in. He blinked, dazzled. The sun was directly overhead. The boy had been right; there was a jeep coming, still a long way off, but he could hear the faint whine and echo of its motor as the driver shifted gears, coaxing it around the worst of the bumps, trying to keep it from overheating. Someone driving at this time of day!

It must be an urgent errand, he thought, and began to clamber into his clothes. He couldn't make out who was in it, in the blinding light; but by the time he was into his shirt and pants and ready to come downstairs, he could hear voices. Tavares and Joan Bunnell—and his son, crying out to greet them.

"Aunt Joan!" Chuck was babbling excitedly—it was a great day for him when there were visitors. "Look at what Daddy got me, Aunt Joan! A *tractor*. And see, I can make a farm with Alice and Alfie—see? This is my tractor, and Alice and Alfie are the cows!" Alice and Alfie were his pet skitterbugs. Hardee had captured them with the regular bag; but they were undersized, not of legal limit to bring in, so he had given them to the boy to play with for lack of a kitten or a pup.

Hardee nodded without speaking and started down the stairs. The child was pushing the quiescent skitterbugs around on the floor with the tractor, whooping with

joy. In the filtered, screened-down light that came inside the prefab, they had just enough energy to try to creep out of its way.

Joan stared up at Hardee, began to speak, then caught herself. She took the boy's arm lightly. "Chuck," she said, "listen to me. We have to talk to your father. Go outside and play, please."

He stood up, his eyes wide and disturbed. "Oh, let me stay, Aunt Joan! My tractor's—"

"Please, Chuck."

He looked up at his father, hesitated, and started toward the door. Then he paused, looking at Wakulla and Tavares; even in his child's mind, he knew that it was not usual to see them there.

With a child's response, an incantation against evil, he summoned up politeness: "Hello, Mr. Tavares. Hello, Mr. Wakulla." He hesitated, then remembered one more cantrip. "Don't worry, Daddy," he piped. "I'll be carefully to stay in the shade."

Joan Bunnell, torn, said:

"There isn't any shade. I tell you what." She glanced at Wakulla. "You'd better play in Mr. Wakulla's jeep. Make believe you're driving it all by yourself."

"Whee!" The boy shouted gleefully. He dropped tractor and skitterbugs, flung the door open and leaped out into the sand.

Sunlight flared in.

One of the bugs—it was impossible to tell which; only the boy could tell them apart—lay squarely in the path of the sun's rays. There was a sudden crinkling *snap* of sparking energy as the light it fed on struck it; like a released spring, the little spidery metal thing spun around, leaped out the door and was gone.

It was like a meteorite flung up into space, so quick and glittering.

Hardee closed the door behind it and turned to face the others. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

Old man Tavares sank into a chair. "That stranger," he croaked. "The Probation Officer told Griswold about him, and now there will be trouble. For there is a lie here,

Hardee. This is not the sort of place we are told it is. It is not on Mars; we are not criminals. And there must be a reason for this lie. What reason? I do not know, but whoever is telling the lie will protect it."

He leaned forward. "It may cost your life to protect it, Hardee! Others have died, and I think for the same reason—you are in danger, and, with you, all of us because of the fact that you told us!"

Hardee shook his head. He was still more than half drowsy. The world had not yet come into focus; he was drugged from heat and sleep and none of this was making sense.

He said thickly: "What the hell are you talking about, Tavares?"

"I am talking about death!" said the old man. And then he stopped, and there was sudden fear on his face. "Listen!"

Outside, a noise. An engine. No—more than one.

"Someone coming?" guessed Hardee. "A jeep?"

"It is death that is coming," sobbed Tavares. "That's no jeep, Hardee. It is the plane, coming for you!"

They ran to the door and flung it open.

It came from the east, like a faint angry snarl of bees, the sound of the Ford tri-motor's three laboring engines.

"There it is!" cried the girl. "Look, over the dunes!"

Sunlight glinted off a wing. It was the plane, all right, hardly five hundred feet up. It was heading off to one side, more in the direction of Wakulla's hut than Hardee's; clearly, whoever was flying it was unfamiliar with the exact locations of the prefabs.

But clearly also, it would not take long to straighten them out.

"Come on!" said Hardee, and flung out the door. Whatever it was that Tavares was talking about, something of the old man's panic and desperation had reached him. "We'll have to hide! Wakulla, you know the old mining shack? Let's go!"

Hardee caught his son up and raced for his own jeep, leaving the others to follow in Wakulla's.

The heat was murderous. Before they had gone a hun-

dred yards, the radiator needle was climbing; in a hundred more, it was pressing perilously against the backstop. But Hardee couldn't wait to baby the motor now, not when the plane had begun to wheel around toward them. Already it might be too late; it was quite possible that the plane had spotted them. But it was at least a chance that the plane had not. A desert drenched in a vertical sun is not easy to scan, and there was a lot of it.

Next to him, on the seat, the little boy looked up wonderingly at his father, and was silent.

"It's all right, Chucky," Hardee said, the automatic lie coming to his lips. It *wasn't* all right. There was nothing all right. There was nothing all right about it.

But it satisfied the boy. He squirmed around and knelt backward on the seat, peering out the rear mirror. "They're catching up, Daddy!" he yelped cheerfully. "Step on it! We'll beat them!"

Even through heat and worry and overpowering weariness, Hardee had enough left to feel fondness and pride for his child.

At the abandoned old mine site, Hardee spun the jeep in toward the shed. He parked it under the overhang of the dangling board sign marked *Joe's Last Chance No. 1,* crowding over as far as he could to make room for the other. In a moment, Wakulla drove up beside him and squeezed in.

Climbing out, they stared at the hostile bright sky. "Stay under the shed!" Hardee said. "If they've seen us—"

But apparently the plane had not.

They could see it clearly, dropping down over the dunes. It picked out Hardee's prefab, banked and swung around it twice; then leveled off, headed out across the desert, banked again, came in and landed bruisingly on the uneven sand.

It was a rotten landing, but as good as could be expected for drifted sand. A tire might have blown or a wheel collapsed, but did not. The plane was lucky and the hidden fugitives were not; they would not be saved by a crash that would destroy their pursuers.

The plane stopped, perhaps a quarter of a mile from the prefab but well out of their sight. The motors died.

They waited.

"Now what?" demanded Wakulla angrily. He had been dragged away from a woman, and made to drive bouncingly across the hot sand with a hangover, and there was talk he hardly understood of danger that was never quite clear, and he was irritable.

Hardee climbed to the top of the old shed wordlessly. He stretched tall and peered toward his home.

"Can't see," he called down to the others. "I can't even see the house. I wonder what they're doing."

"Come down," said old man Tavares in a tired voice.

He sat on the sand with his back against the weathered boards, his eyes half closing, but not with drowsiness. The heat was very great, especially for a man near seventy, and especially for a man who had lived with outrageous fear for four years and now found his fears exploding in his face.

"Doing?" Tavares repeated wearily. "I shall tell you what they are doing. They are searching." His voice was hardly louder than a whisper, in the perfect quiet of the hot desert air. "They see that your jeep is not there, but they search your house. They observe that you are not in it. It takes very little time to do this; there is not much to search."

"Right," said Hardee roughly, dropping to the sand beside him. "Then what will they do next?"

Old man Tavares opened his eyes. He looked out across the sand. "Then I think they will take off again in the plane and look all through the desert for you. They will figure to find you easily from the air. But—" He paused, thinking. "Yes," he said. "It is not a good plane for the purpose and in any case they will want more, for they do not wish to miss you. So more will be summoned."

"More planes?" repeated Joan. "I never saw any other planes."

"You will," said Tavares sadly. "In an hour, perhaps, or two hours, there will be many planes flying overhead.

But in much less time than that, this one that is by Hardee's home will search for us."

Out behind the shed was the blank headboard and the shallow grave where Hardee had buried the stranger. Tavares looked at it longingly.

"If he were alive," he whispered, "then perhaps we could learn something."

"We could dig him up," Wakulla rumbled.

The girl made a faint sound. "In this heat? After nearly a week?"

Hardee shook his head. "No, we won't dig him up. Not because of the heat—it's dry, Joan; he'll be half a mummy by now. But I put him there and I know what I buried. There's nothing on him but ragged shorts and a pair of shoes. Nothing that would tell us anything." He gestured back toward the ringing hills. "That's where his trail came from. I didn't follow it, and now the wind has wiped it out, but that's where it was."

"No matter," said Tavares with the calm of resignation. "It is too late for any of those things." He nodded toward where the plane had landed.

"You think they mean trouble?" Wakulla demanded.

"Think?" Tavares glanced at him opaquely, then once again out across the hot, dry sand. "I do not think. I know. Look."

A flare of flame, almost invisible against the bright sky, fringed with bits of metal and sand and unidentifiable debris, leaped up over the dunes. Smoke followed.

"They are taking no chances," said Tavares slowly. "They looked for you, and when you were not to be found, they destroyed your home—perhaps you had hidden, you see. But now they will look some more."

In a moment, the sound of the explosion reached them.

The boy began to cry.

V

The sky was full of aircraft, high-winged light planes that chopped the desert into sector strips and patrolled

them, seeking, seeking; helicopters that darted from place to place.

"I never saw so many planes," breathed Joan Bunnell, one arm around the boy. He was thrilled, so excited that he forgot to be afraid; he had never seen so many planes either, had hardly believed that so many planes existed.

All through the afternoon, they lay there in the waning heat, while the searching planes crisscrossed the sky. Wakulla looked angry, then puzzled, then contemptuous. He said: "Stupid! Why don't they follow our tracks? If it was me up there, I'd find the jeeps in ten minutes!"

Tavares shrugged. He was very silent; he didn't want to talk, it seemed. Hardee and the others kept probing at him with questions, but he only shook his head. The heat was wearing. Even under the strain of the time, it lulled them, drugged them . . .

Hardee woke up, and it was a cold, bright night.

The sun had set.

Overhead, the stars washed across the sky. While he watched, one larger star—no, not a star; the second moon—soared in a great wide arc down toward the eastern horizon, steel-blue and familiar. Hardee squinted up wonderingly. If this was not Mars, then what was this lesser moon in the sky?

He woke the others.

The planes were gone and the desert was silent. They crept out and got into their jeeps and headed back toward the demolished prefab.

They stopped a couple of hundred yards away.

Still in the night, a faint red glow and ruddy smoke showed where part of the destroyed house still smoldered. Hardee caught his breath and touched Tavares on the shoulder.

"Look," he whispered.

In the starlight, metal glinted. It was a wing of the old Ford tri-motor.

The plane was still there!

For an instant, panic filled them all. But there was no

sound, only their own breathing and the metallic pinging from the smoldering ruin of the house.

The boy, silent and sleepy, stirred restlessly next to his father. "My tractor," he mumbled, and was silent. There was no toy tractor any more. There was no house. Only the smoldering metal and plastic were left.

Tavares said quaveringly: "I think perhaps they could not get the plane off the ground. There were helicopters, and it may be that they took the crew off with them. It is bad sand here for a plane."

"And maybe it's a trap!" rumbled Wakulla.

Tavares said softly: "Yes. Maybe it is."

Hardee said: "We don't have any choice. Let's take a look."

Cautiously they moved up with the jeeps. Hardee backed his near the open door in the washboard fuselage; Wakulla rolled to a stop a dozen yards away and turned his headlights on the plane. They climbed onto the hood of Hardee's jeep and peered inside.

Tinkling crystal bells whispered in their ears.

Under the lights from Wakulla's jeep, a metallic scurry of wavy jointed legs and of sliding, clicking bodies: the hold of the plane was full of skitterbugs.

Hardee took a deep breath.

"Come on," he said. "Let's look around."

They clambered into the plane.

The skitterbugs clicked and pinged protestingly underfoot. Chuck dove for a pair of them and came up with them proudly. "Daddy, can I keep them? I mean now that Alfie and Alice are gone?"

"Sure," said Hardee gently, and set the boy out of the way. To Wakulla, he said: "You come with me. If there's anybody left in the plane, they'll probably be up front, by the controls—"

Screech of metal, and a tinny crash.

The door slammed shut. Lights blazed on inside the plane. The elliptical door at the forward end of the ship opened and Griswold, his haunted eyes staring, peered out.

"There is," he said. "Welcome aboard, all of you."

Hardee tensed to jump him, and felt Wakulla gathering his muscles beside him—but it was too late, too late! There was a choking sputtering roar from outside—another, and a third; the three engines were spinning, warming up. Griswold stepped back a second before their leap and the door slammed in their faces.

As Hardee and Wakulla piled up against the elliptical door that led to the pilot's cabin, the engines shrilled louder and louder. The vibrations evened, smoothed, were synchronized.

Then—crash, crash! Two thundering blows smote them. The plane was a croquet ball, and a mallet huger than Thor's slammed it forward—bump and bump—across the uneven sands. Through the one small window left unblocked, they could see the trail of exhaust flame from the engines; and then, beside that flame and below it, a huger, brighter torch—a JATO unit, hurling the tired old transport up and out and into the thin air.

The JATO rockets flared twenty yards of heaving flame and then they were dark, but by then their work was completely done.

The plane sagged for a second. Waddling in the thin cold air, it began lumpishly to climb and gain altitude.

They were trapped.

A while later, the elliptical door opened again briefly—long enough for Griswold, carrying a gun, to come back to join them.

He said heavily: "I was afraid we would catch you."

He stood regarding them. Queerly, he seemed more afraid than they. "Don't try anything," he told them, shouting over the racket of the motors. "It's a waste of time. You see?"

And he held open the elliptical door for them to look. Through it they saw the bucket seats for pilot and co-pilot, and what was in those seats. And then the door was closed again, and Griswold was gone.

Hardee felt a sudden sharp convulsion in his stomach. He heard Wakulla swear and the girl cry out and knew

that they had seen what he had seen: In the seats, clinging to a metal grid, a pair of skitterbugs.

And riding on them, like a jockey on a horse: Bright bronze death's heads with beady black eyes.

Wakulla rumbled: "What—what the hell was *that?*"

"Martians?" whispered the girl. "But, Dom, you said we weren't on Mars!"

Tavares shrugged. His face was quiet and resigned now; he had given up. "I didn't say where we were," he pointed out. "Nor did I say what manner of creature might be with us."

Hardee shook his head to clear it.

His arm was tight around the shoulders of the boy. Having him there was a help; it made it necessary for Hardee to think. He couldn't merely give up, for the boy's life was dependent on what he did now.

He tried to reason it out.

"We are not on Mars," he said, testing the truth of the statement. "You're sure of that, Dom?"

"Sure?" Tavares laughed. "Can you lift three hundred pounds?" he asked queerly, his eyes watering. "Do you see two tiny moons in the sky? No, not the big moon. That is too big, too bright; that might be Earth's moon, but not one of those of Mars!"

"There *are* two moons," Joan said reasonably.

"No." Tavares shook his head. "A moon and a satellite. An orbiting spaceship, I believe. It is a hoax. We were never on Mars."

"But what's the *purpose* of it?" demanded Hardee.

Tavares shook his head. "Don't you think I've wondered, for five years? But I haven't been able to guess. All that I know is that they told us this was Mars, but it is not. Mars is a red star in the sky. I have seen it myself. This I know. I know nothing else."

"And all these years you haven't said anything?" asked Hardee roughly.

"I have not. Why? For the reason that I did not dare, Hardee. Yes, I, Tavares, who was once a fighter in France, in the war that happened before you were born —I did not dare. You recall when you woke up, eh?"

"Woke up? You mean the first time, before I came to the colony?" Hardee nodded. "I remember. I was in a room—"

"Yes," sid Tavares. "That room. And you were asked many questions, were you not, like the rest of us?"

"I was. Crazy ones."

"No, Hardee! Not crazy. They were for a purpose. Consider. You were asked what you knew about Mars—they said it was because you were being sent there, eh? And you told them, very truly, that you knew nothing. I do not know what would have happened if, by chance, you had been an astronomer, or perhaps a journalist, and had answered that question differently. But I know that you would never have come to the colony."

Hardee, frowning, ground out: "Go on!"

"And then they began to describe the planet Mars to you—to get you ready for your experience, they said. Right? They described it just as it turned out—in fine, *not like Mars itself!* And they watched you. And you showed no signs of doubting them.

"I know that this is so. For, at the time when I awoke, there was another with me, also awakened; and this one doubted, and let them see that he doubted. 'Mars has a light gravity,' he told them. 'And almost no air! And—' Oh, he went on and on.

"It was a mistake.

"They took him away."

Hardee said reasonably: "But that doesn't prove anything, Tavares. There could have been some perfectly simple reason."

"I heard him scream!" Tavares plunged his face into his hands, rocking slowly. "And so all these years, I have said nothing, I have questioned nothing, for I did not dare. But now it is too late to be afraid. For that stranger you found, Hardee, he proved that all of this is a lie.

"And now the liars must come out into the open—at least for us here, who know of the lie. And the liars—we have seen them."

He flung his arm out, pointing toward the elliptical

door to the pilot's chamber—where they had seen the skitterbugs poised calmly on their metallic webs, with the bronze death's-head riders perched on their shining carapaces.

The flying antique thumped and pounded in strong air currents. But it was not airsickness that made them feel sick and faint.

The elliptical door opened. Griswold came back, carrying the gun. Behind him they caught another glimpse of the skitterbugs and their bronze inhuman riders.

Griswold closed the door and called: "Sit down, all of you! We're coming down!"

"Thanks," said Hardee shortly. "I didn't expect this much consideration."

Griswold measured him with the eyes of a man who knew demons. "You blame me," he said. "Of course you do. What can I do about it?"

He motioned Hardee to the tiny window. "Look down there," he ordered. "See that city? It's full of skitterbugs—hundreds of thousands of them! There's hardly a human being alive in it, though it used to be full of them. The skitterbugs have taken over!"

"Taken over?" Hardee echoed, puzzled. "Then—are we—"

"On Earth, yes." Griswold nodded. "But it doesn't belong to the human race any more. You'll find out." He stared at Hardee with pity and fright. "You could have lived out your life in the colony," he said somberly, "but you had to find that man. Now God knows what the bugs will do to you. But you'll never see the colony again."

"And neither will you!" bawled an enormous voice behind them.

Griswold spun, trying to bring the gun up, but there was no time, and the shifting footing of crawling bugs beneath them tripped him, caught him off balance. Wakulla, grinning like a maddened gorilla, caught the old man with one square hand. The gun fell one way and Griswold fell the other—out cold.

"Come on!" shouted Wakulla, and dived for the gun.

He stumbled knee-deep through the crawling little monsters up toward the elliptical door. Hardee followed, almost without thought. They burst through the door—

Twin bronze creatures turned to regard them out of black and hollow eyes. They were small by human standards, built like huge metallic frogs, golden bronze, with tiny limbs and huge faces. They rode the skitterbugs, but they were not joined to them. One of them made a harsh metallic whistling sound and flopped off its mount, toward something that glittered on the floor—a weapon, perhaps.

Whatever it was, the bronze creature never reached it. Wakulla, bellowing madly, lunged into the cabin and brought his heavy foot down on the creature. There was a screech and a thin crackling sound; and that was the end of that one.

The other was getting into motion by now. But it never had a chance. Wakulla steadied himself, took aim and fired—again and again, pumping bullets at the thing, and though his aim was none too good, enough of them connected to splatter the creature against the control panels.

The ancient plane wobbled and began to fall off on one wing.

"Hold on!" bawled Wakulla, and grabbed for the control wheel.

Hardee, panting, fought his way into the seat beside him. "Can you fly one of these things?"

"I can try!" said Wakulla, grinning. Straight ahead of them, through the glass, Hardee could see a patchwork of trees and houses, roads and open land. "I'll land it there!" Wakulla yelled, horsing the stick back.

They hit the ground hard at more than a hundred miles an hour, bounced, came down on one wheel, blew a tire and slid crabwise across an open meadow. If there were brakes, Wakulla didn't know where to find them; if there was a way to stop the plane before it reached the fence at the edge of the field, he didn't know it. It hit the brush fence, still going fast.

Hardee felt the windshield fly up and smack him in the face. The last thought he had was: *Fire.*

VI

It was full morning; he had been unconscious for at least an hour.

Over against the trees, an enormous smoke plume showed where the tri-motor was giving up the ghost. Joan Bunnell was leaning over him, her cheek bloody, her clothing torn. "Hardee, you're all right?" she breathed.

He pushed himself up. "I guess so." He looked around. "Wakulla—?"

"His neck was broken." The girl rocked back on her heels. Tavares was sitting on the damp grass nearby, cradling the boy in his lap. Beside him, Griswold lay face-down, unmoving. "The rest of us are all right," Joan said. "Griswold has a bad arm. That's all."

Hardee shook his head and began to rub his ears. It felt like golf-tees driven into his eardrums; the old crate had come down fast and the change in pressure was bad. He could hardly hear what Joan was saying.

"Poor Wakulla," she murmured. "Maybe he saved our lives."

"And maybe he killed us all," said Griswold, painfully turning on one side to face them. His face was perspiring, and he clutched one arm with the other hand. "They'll never let this go by," he warned.

Hardee got up dizzily and strode over to the old man. "Talk!" he said. "What are the bugs? Where are they from?"

Griswold said wretchedly: "I don't know. The bugs don't matter—it's the skulls that are important. They're smart. And they aren't from Earth."

He sat up, holding his twisted arm. In the hot sunlight, the field they were in was alive with skitterbugs, flashing and leaping, loosed from the wrecked plane.

Griswold said: "The bugs are only brainless machines. They are seeded and they grow, and when they are large enough, the skulls harvest them. Sometimes they use human beings for the job of harvesting—like you."

Hardee walked over to the burning plane. The heat

kept him yards away. Wakulla was in there, probably hardly more than a cinder by now, but he couldn't be seen. Just as well, thought Hardee. A few skitterbugs, damaged in the crash, limped brokenly around on the grass, excited by the floods of radiant energy from the sun and the fire, but unable to move very fast.

And something else metallic lay in the grass.

Hardee bent for it; his head thundered, but he kept his balance and picked it up. It was the gun Wakulla had taken from Griswold. Hardee opened it, looked inside and swore.

Only one bullet left.

But it was better than nothing.

Back where the others were waiting, Tavares was relentlessly questioning Griswold. "These creatures, you say they came from space, in that great ship that now orbits around the Earth?"

"Five years ago," said Griswold, nodding. "They have a ray—I don't know how it works. But they sprayed the world with it, and every living thing went to sleep. Some are sleeping yet—those that haven't starved to death, though metabolism is slowed considerably.

Hardee looked at Joan Bunnell and put his arm protectingly around the boy. "Would that be October, 1959?" he asked.

"It would," said Griswold heavily. "You begin to understand, I see. That's what happened to all of you at the colony. You weren't criminals—except that, in the eyes of the skulls, it's a crime to be human at all."

Not criminals! No forgotten crime to expiate! Hardee could scarcely believe it. But Griswold was still talking:

"They want our planet," he explained. "One shipload came, to get things ready, an advance party. I don't know when the rest of them will be here—but they're on their way. Perhaps a year or two. And they need to have the human race under control by then."

He rubbed his arm and stared up at the sky. "So some of us are helping them," he said flatly. "Call us traitors —we are! But what else is there to do? The skulls gave us a very simple alternative. Either we help them study

us so that they can learn to rule the human race . . . or they go back out into their ship and spray the Earth with another ray. Not a sleep ray, but one that will wipe out all life entirely."

Griswold spread his hands. "It's a choice that isn't any choice," he said. "What else was there? So when they woke me—I was one of the first few hundred; now there must be tens of thousands—they learned, after we established communication, that I was a psychologist. It was exactly what they needed. They set me the problem of contriving an experimental colony—a test farm, if you like, where the human animal could be kept in conditions as close to natural as possible.

"It was their ship, orbiting out there, that made me think of Mars—it does look like a second moon. Luna was no real problem. A simple post-hypnotic command and none of you could focus on it enough to recognize the features. But I couldn't erase knowledge of Mars, if it existed in any of you. There is no invention, of course, that causes partial—and selective—amnesia in criminals. That was a lie to make you accept this plateau as a penal colony on Mars."

"But what in hell *for?*" Hardee asked angrily.

"So nobody would try to escape. Thinking you were on Mars, you wouldn't hope to get to Earth. Knowing you were on Earth, you'd do anything to reach civilization —not realizing there wasn't any left. Skitterbugs wouldn't get harvested. Skulls would be killed. The colony would be trouble instead of useful—and it would then be wiped out.

"I wanted to keep as many people alive for as long as I could," said Griswold. "There was no other chance for humanity."

"What do we do now?" Hardee grimly demanded.

Griswold hesitated. "There are a few free humans," he said reluctantly. "Not many. They live in the woods, in hiding, some of them in the cities themselves. Mostly they are ignored by the skulls—because there are so few. If there weren't, the skulls would take the easy way out. The Earth is their new home, you see, and they regard it as

you would your house. You might tolerate a few vermin —but if there are too many, you'll call in the exterminators. But there are these few, and if we can somehow make our way to them, we might have a chance to—"

"Hush!" breathed Joan Bunnell.

She caught the boy to her, pointing. Out of the woods at the side of the field raced a posse of skitterbugs, each with its bronze death's-head rider.

Hardee tried to fight, though there were hundreds of the creatures. If Wakulla had not been so profligate with his bullets—

But he had been; and the single bullet in the gun was more frustrating than none at all.

"Too late," groaned Griswold, his tortured face sagging with fear. "Give up, Hardee! Otherwise they'll kill us right here!"

They were marched down a road and into the environs of a city, the skitterbugs with their bright bronze riders a disorderly rabble around them.

None of them recognized the city; it might have been anywhere. It was a silent city, a city of death. Even from the streets, they could see men and women who had been struck down in the middle of life. A mother with three children around her, sprawled in a Laocöon down porch steps; a postman with his two-wheeled cart beside him, his letters long since blown away.

And there were living, waking humans too. Chuck shivered and caught his father's arm as they rounded a corner and saw a work gang—ten or twelve men, in rags of clothing, clearing rubble from a tumbled house that lay across a side street; they looked up as Hardee and the rest passed, but there was no emotion in their eyes, only weariness.

"Those others," whispered Joan. "Are they dead?"

"No," said Tavares heavily, "not if what Griswold tells us is true. But they might as well be. Unless—"

"Don't even think it!" begged Griswold. "Some of the skulls can understand English!"

"Let them understand!" cried Hardee. He stopped and faced them. "We'll fight you!" he shouted. "You can't

have our planet—not now or ever! The human race isn't going to be taken over by a bunch of bugs from another planet!"

Incuriously, the blank-eyed bronze skulls stared at him; almost as incuriously, the ragged men looked on.

The skulls prodded Hardee on, and the ragged men went back to their work.

The prisoners were taken to a big building that bore on it a sign, *Hotel Winchester*. Once it had been a commercial hotel; now it seemed to be headquarters for the skitterbugs and the skulls that rode them.

Without a word, they were put in a room on a gallery that overlooked the lobby. The floor of the lobby was a seething mass of skitterbugs with their riders—and some skulls which had found a different sort of mount, for they perched on the shoulders of ragged men.

The door was closed, and they were left alone.

It was a partly glass door; Hardee peered out. "They must have come from a light-gravity planet," he guessed. "They move badly without the skitterbugs. They can't be very strong."

"They don't need to be," said Griswold somberly. "Not with their weapons."

"What about at night?" asked Hardee. "Surely the skitterbugs can't operate very well without light. Can't we—"

But Griswold was shaking his head. "They keep all the areas of the city where they move about well lighted. No, Hardee. The skulls are way ahead of you." He sat down and sighed. "I think they'll kill us," he said without emotion. "It's either that or the labor gangs."

Old man Tavares said something incandescent in Spanish. "You may die, Griswold, but I'll fight. Look, why can we not get away? Soon it will be dark, as Hardee says, and it is then only a matter of getting away from the lighted areas. Why not?"

"Wait," Hardee interrupted, staring out the glass of the door. "Someone's coming."

They crowded around.

Down the long gallery that surrounded the lobby, a tall man with angry eyes approached.

Hope surged—a human, and free!

But then they saw that on his shoulder rode one of the bronze skulls, motionless, the hollow eyes emptily staring.

"He is probably our executioner," said Griswold, as though announcing the time of day.

"Not without a fight," said Hardee tensely. "Tavares, you stand over here. I'll wait on the other side. Joan, you take Chuck to the far side of the room. See if you can make the skull look at you! And Griswold—"

"It won't work," said Griswold stubbornly, but he went with Joan and the boy.

The door opened.

As soon as the man and his rider were inside, Hardee lunged against the door, slammed it shut. "Now!" he shouted, and leaped toward the pair.

The angry eyes of the man opened wide in astonishment. Hastily he stepped back. "Wait!" he cried, stumbling—

And the bronze skull toppled from his shoulder.

It rolled across the room and lay motionless on the floor.

Hardee jumped for it as though it were a hand grenade, fallen back into his own rifle pit; but the new man with the angry eyes yelled: "Don't waste your time! That one's dead—I killed it myself!"

Hardee stopped short, gaping.

The man grinned tightly. "It keeps the others from bothering me," he explained. "Don't mess it up—we'll need it to get out of here. Come on!"

"Where?" asked Hardee, trying to take it in. It was hope, it was rescue—when they had expected it least.

"Down the end of the gallery," said the man, "there's a linen closet. In it is a laundry chute. It goes down to the cellar. The skulls don't go there much—the lights are bad; we keep them that way. And there are sewers and passages. If we reach the chute, we're safe."

He opened the door, peered out. "You go ahead, all

of you. I'll follow, as though I'm taking you somewhere." He closed the door and bent down to recover his skull. "Mustn't forget Oscar," he said. "He's our passport."

He opened a leather strap that passed around his neck and shoulder, bound it around the dead skull, buckled it again. Experimentally he bowed slightly from the waist. The skull wobbled but stayed on.

"Don't jar me," he said, and crossed his fingers. He opened the door a crack, looked down the corridor and nodded.

"Let's go!" he said, and flung it wide.

The procession moved down the gallery. Dust was thick on the leather settees that lined it; the skulls had no need for them, and no human without a skull possessing it had passed that way in five years. There were skitterbugs with skulls upon them at the end of the gallery, but they didn't seem to notice anything. Down in the lobby, a few of the men with skull riders glanced up, but no one challenged.

It was twenty yards to the door of the linen closet.

Fifteen yards were easy.

Then, out of a ballroom that was now a pen for the human slaves of the skulls, two skitterbugs with skulls upon them came out. They paused and then one of them opened its queerly articulated transverse mouth and made a sound, a chanting metallic whine—speaking to the skull on the shoulder of their rescuer.

Hardee caught Joan's arm, took a tighter grip on the hand of the boy by his side, lengthening his stride. So near! And then—

Quick as lightning, the skitterbug with the skull on it leaped forward and clutched at the legs of the man who was shepherding them.

He kicked it away. "Run!" he yelled.

The skull on his shoulder fell free and bumped lifelessly away. Three more skulls, riding skitterbugs, popped out of the ballroom. Down on the lobby floor there was a stirring and a whining commotion.

"Run!" he yelled again, and shoved them powerfully forward to the linen closet.

They made the door, just in time. It was the size of a small room, and they all crammed inside.

Hardee slammed the door and held it. "Jump! I'll stay here and keep them out."

The boy cried out once, then was silent. He glanced at his father as Tavares and the other man lifted him into the chute; but he didn't say a word when they let go and he slid out of sight.

"Go ahead, Joan!" barked Hardee.

Restless scratchings outside told him the skitterbugs were there. Then he could feel the door pressing against him. He cursed the clever, economical designers of the building, who had known better than to put a lock on the inside of a linen closet. If there had been one, they could all escape. But since there was not—

Griswold glanced at the chute, looked at Hardee, and nervously tongued his dry lips.

Tavares was in the chute now; he waved, and dropped out of sight.

Griswold turned his back on the chute.

He walked over to Hardee. "I've got a broken arm," he said, "and, you know, I'm not sure the free humans would welcome me. You go, Hardee."

"But—"

"Go ahead!" Griswold thrust him away. There was more strength than Hardee had expected in the worn, injured body. "I doubt I could make it anyway, with this arm—but I can hold *them* for a minute!"

Already the other man was gone; it was only Griswold and Hardee there, and the scratching and shoving were growing more insistent.

"All right," said Hardee at last. "Griswold—"

But he didn't know what it was, exactly, that he wanted to say; and besides, there was no time.

Griswold, sweat pouring into his eyes, chuckled faintly for the first time since Hardee had known him.

"Hurry!" he said, and looked embarrassed as he held up two fingers in a shaky V. But he looked embarrassed only for an instant. The fingers firmed into a spiky, humanly stubborn, defiant sign of victory. "Save the chil-

dren," Griswold said. "I couldn't get the skulls to let many into the colony—a waste, they told me, because kids can't work. Save the children!"

Hardee turned away—toward the laundry chute, and toward a new life.

THE RICHEST MAN IN LEVITTOWN

MARGERY tried putting the phone back on the hook, but it immediately rang again. She kicked the stand, picked up the phone and said: "Hang up, will you? We don't want any!" She slammed the phone down to break the connection and took it off the hook again.

The doorbell rang.

"My turn," I said, and put down the paper—it looked as though I never would find out what the National League standings were. It was Patrolman Gamelsfelder.

"Man to see you, Mr. Binns. Says it's important." He was sweating—you could see the black patches on his blue shirt. I knew what he was thinking: We had air conditioning and money, and he was risking his life day after day for a lousy policeman's pay, and what kind of a country was this anyhow? He'd said as much that afternoon.

"It might be important to him, but I don't want to see anybody. Sorry, officer." I closed the door.

Margery said: "Are you or are you not going to help me change the baby?"

I said cheerfully: "I'll be glad to, dear." And it was true—besides being good policy to say that, since she was pretty close to exploding. It was true because I wanted something to do myself. I wanted some nice, simple, demanding task like holding a one-year-old down with my knee in the middle of his chest, while one hand held his feet and the other one pinned the diaper. I mean, it

was nice of Uncle Otto to leave me the money, but did they have to put it in the paper?

The doorbell rang again as I was finishing. Margery was upstairs with Gwennie, who took a lot of calming down because she'd had an exciting day, and because she always did, so I stood the baby on his fat little feet and answered the door myself. It was the policeman again. "Some telegrams for you, Mr. Binns. I wooden let the boy deliver them."

"Thanks." I tossed them in the drawer of the telephone stand. What was the use of opening them? They were from people who had heard about Uncle Otto and the money, and who wanted to sell me something.

"That fellow's still here," Patrolman Gamelsfelder said sourly. "I think he's sick."

"Too bad." I tried to close the door.

"Anyway, he says to tell Cuddles that Tinker is here."

I grabbed the door. "Tell Cud . . ."

"That's what he said." Gamelsfelder saw that that hit me, and it pleased him. For the first time he smiled.

"What—what's his name?"

"Winston McNeely McGhee," said Officer Gamelsfelder happily, "or anyway that's what he told me, Mr. Binns."

I said, "Send the son of a—. Send the fellow in," I said, and jumped to get the baby away from the ashtray where Margery had left a cigarette burning. Winnie McGhee—it was all I needed to finish off my day.

He came in holding his head as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He was never what you'd call healthy-looking, even when Margery stood me up at the altar in order to elope with him. It was his frail, poetic charm, and maybe he still had that, and maybe he didn't, but the way he looked to me, he was sick, all right. He looked like he weighed a fast hundred pounds not counting the head; the head looked like a balloon. He moaned, "Hello, Harlan, age thirty-one, five-eleven, one seventy-three. You got an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

I said, "What?" But he didn't get a chance to answer

right away because there was a flutter and a scurry from the expansion attic and Margery appeared at the head of the stairs. "I thought—" she began wildly, and then she saw that her wildest thought was true. "You!" She betrayed pure panic—fussing with her hair with one hand and smoothing her Bermuda shorts with the other, simultaneously trying to wiggle, no-hands, out of the sloppy old kitchen apron that had been good enough for *me*.

McGhee said pallidly, "Hello. Please, don't you have an acetylsalicylic acid tablet?"

"I don't know what it is," I said simply.

Margery chuckled ruefully. "Ah, Harlan, Harlan," she said with fond tolerance, beaming lovingly at me as she came down the stairs. It was enough to turn the stomach of a cat.

"You forget, Winnie. Harlan doesn't know much chemistry. Won't you find him an aspirin, Harlan? That's all he wants."

"Thanks," said Winnie with a grateful sigh, massaging his temples.

I went and got him an aspirin. I thought of adding a little mixer to the glass of water that went with it, but there wasn't anything in the medicine chest that looked right, and besides it's against the law. I don't mind admitting it, I never liked Winnie McGhee, and it isn't just because he swiped my bride from me. Well, she smartened up after six months, and then, when she turned up with an annulment and sincere repentance—well, I've never regretted marrying her. Or anyway, not much. But you can't expect me to like McGhee. My heavens, if I'd never *seen* the man before I'd hate his little purple guts on first contact, because he looks like a poet and talks like a scientist and acts like a jerk.

I started back to the living room and yelled: "The baby!"

Margery turned away from simpering at her former husband and sprang for the puppy's dish. She got it away from the baby, but not quite full. There was a good baby-sized mouthful of mixed milk and dog-biscuit that she

had to excavate for, and naturally the baby had his way of counter-attacking for *that*.

"No bite!" she yelled, pulling her finger out of his mouth and putting it in hers. Then she smiled sweetly. "Isn't he a darling, Winnie? He's got his daddy's nose, of course. But don't you think he has my eyes?"

"He'll have your fingers too, if you don't keep them out of his mouth," I told her.

Winnie said: "That's normal. After all, with twenty-four paired chromosomes forming the gamete, it is perfectly obvious that the probability of inheriting none of his traits from one parent—that is, being exactly like the other—is one chance in 8,388,608. Ooh, my head."

Margery gave him a small frown. "What?"

He was like a wound-up phonograph. "That's without allowance for spontaneous mutation," he added. *"Or* induced. And considering the environmental factors *in utero*—that is, broad-spectrum antibiotics, tripling of the background radiation count due to nuclear weapons, dietary influences, *et cetera*—yes, I should put the probability of induced mutation rather high. Yes. Perhaps of the order of—"

I interrupted. "Here's your aspirin. Now, what do you want?"

"Harlan!" Margery said warningly.

"I mean—well, what *do* you want?"

He leaned his head on his hands. "I want you to help me conquer the world," he said.

Crash-splash. "Go get a mop!" Margery ordered; the baby had just spilled the puppy's water. She glared at me and smiled at Winnie. "Go ahead," she coaxed. "Take your nice aspirin, and we'll talk about your trip around the world later."

But that hadn't been what he had said.

Conquer the world. I heard it plain as day. I went to fetch the mop, because that was as good a way as any to think over what to do about Winston McNeely McGhee. I mean, what did I want with the world? Uncle Otto had

already *bequeathed* me the world, or anyway as much of it as I ever hoped to own.

When I came back Winnie was tottering around the room, followed at a respectful distance by my wife holding the baby. She was saying to the prospective conqueror of all the world:

"How did you hear about Harlan's good lu— About the tragic loss of his dear uncle, I mean?"

He groaned, "I read it in the paper." He fiddled aimlessly with the phone.

"It's all for the best, I say," said Margery in a philosophic tone, carving damp graham-cracker crumbs out of the baby's ear. "Dear Otto lived a rich and full life. Think of all those years in Yemen! And the enormous satisfaction it must have given him to be personally responsible for the installation of the largest petroleum-cracking still west of the Suez!"

"*East,* my dear. East. The Mutawakelite Kingdom lies just south of Saudi Arabia."

She looked at him thoughtfully, but all she said was, "Winnie, you've changed."

And so he had; but for that matter so had she. It was not like Margery to be a hypocrite. Simpering over her ex-husband I could understand—it wasn't so bad; she was merely showing the poor guy how very much better off she was than she ever would have been with him. But the tragic loss of my dear uncle had never occasioned a moment's regret in her—*or* in me; the plain fact of the matter is that until the man from the Associated Press called up she didn't even know I had an Uncle Otto. And I had pretty nearly forgotten it myself. Otto was the brother that my mother's family didn't talk about. How were they to know that he was laying up treasures of oil and gold on the Arabian Peninsula?

The phone rang; Winnie had thoughtlessly put it back on the hook. "No!" Margery cried into it, hardly listening, "We don't want any uranium stock! We've got *closets* full!"

I said, taking advantage of the fact that her attention

was diverted: "Winnie. I'm a busy man. How about you telling me what you want?"

He sat down with his head on his hands and made a great effort.

"It's—difficult," he said, speaking very slowly. Each word came out by itself, as though he had to choose and sort painfully among all the words that were rushing to his mouth. "I—invented something. You understand? And when I heard about you inheriting money—"

"You thought you could get some of it away from me," I sneered.

"No!" He sat up sharply—and winced and clutched his head. "I want to *make* money for you."

"We've got closets full," I said gently.

He said in a desperate tone, "But I can give you the world, Harlan. Trust me!"

"I never have—"

"Trust me now! You don't understand, Harlan. We can own the world, the two of us, if you'll just give me a little financial help. I've invented a drug that gives me total recall."

"How nice for you," I said, reaching for the knob of the door.

But then I began to think.

"Total recall?" I asked.

He said, sputtering with eagerness, "The upwelling of the unconscious! The ability to remember everything—the eidetic memory of an idiot savant and the indexing system of a quiz winner. You want to know the first six kings of England? Egbert, Ethelwulf, Ethelbald, Ethelbert, Ethelred and Alfred. You want to know the mating call of a ruff-necked grouse?" He demonstrated the call of the ruff-necked grouse.

"Oh," said Margery, coming back into the room with the freshly diapered baby. "Bird imitations."

"And more!" cried Winnie. "Do you know about the time the United States had two presidents?"

"No, but—"

"March the third," he said. "Eighteen seventy-seven.

Rutherford B. Hayes—I'd better say Rutherford *Birchard* Hayes—was about to succeed Grant, and he was sworn in a day early. I ought to explain that—"

"No," I said. "Don't explain."

"Well, how about this? Want me to name the A.B.C. bowling champions from 1931 to date? Clack, Nitschke, Hewitt, Vidro, Brokaw, Gagliardi, Anderson—oh, wait a minute. I forgot 1936. That's Warren. *Then* Gagliardi, Anderson, Danek—"

"Winnie," I said, "cut it out, will you? This has been a tough day."

"But this is the key to conquering the world!"

"Hah," I said. "You're going to bore everybody to death by naming bowling champions?"

"Knowledge is power, Harlan." He rested his head on his palms briefly. "But it does make my head ache."

I took my hand off the knob of the door.

I said grudgingly, "Sit down, Winnie. I admit you've got me interested. I can't wait to hear what the swindle is."

"Harlan!" warned Margery.

Winnie said: "There's no swindle, I promise you. But think what it can mean! Knowledge is power, Harlan, as I say. Why, with my super-brain we can outwit the rulers of any country anywhere. We can own the world! And—money, you say? Knowledge is money too. For instance—" he winked—"worried about taxes? I can tell you the minority opinion in U. S. Govt. *v.* Oosterhagen, 486 Alabama 3309. There's a loophole there you could drive an armored truck through!"

Margery sat down with a cigarette in the long, long holder I'd bought her to square a beef the year after we were married. She looked at me and then at the cigarette; and it penetrated, and I raced over with a match.

"Thank you, darling," she said throatily.

She had changed herself as well as the baby. She now wore something more suitable for a co-heiress of a big fat hunk of money entertaining an ex-husband. It was a gold lamé housecoat, and she had bought it, within an hour of the time the Associated Press man had called,

on a charge account we'd never owned until the early additions of the papers hit the stores around Levittown.

And that reminded me. Money. Who needed money? What was the use of inheriting all that loot from Uncle Otto if I couldn't throw Winnie out on his ear?

Politeness made me temporize: "All this is very interesting, Winnie, but—"

"Harlan, the baby!" Margery yelled. "Get him out of the pretzels!"

I did, while Winnie said faintly behind me: "The shape of a pretzel represents children's arms folded in prayer—or so it was thought in the Seventh Century. A good pretzel bender can bend more than thirty-five a minute. Of course, machines are faster."

I said, "Winnie—"

"Like to know the etymology of the word 'navvy'? Most people think it has something to do with sailors."

"Winnie, listen to me—"

"It doesn't, though. It comes from the laborers on the Inland Navigation Canals—eighteenth century England, you know. Well, the laborers—"

I said firmly, "Winnie, go away."

"Harlan!"

"You stay out of this, Margery," I told her. "Winnie's after my dough, that's all. Well, I haven't had it long enough to want to throw it away. Besides, who wants to rule the world?"

"Well . . ." Margery said thoughtfully.

"With all our money?" I cried. "Who needs it?"

Winnie clutched his head. "Oh," he moaned. "Wait, Harlan. All I need is a stake. I've got the long-term cycles of every stock on the Exchange down in my head—splits and dividends and earnings records since nineteen ought four! I know the private brokers' hand signals on the Curb—wave up for buy, wave down for sell; look, see how my fingers are bent? That means the spread between bid and asked is three-eights of a point. Give me a million dollars, Harlan!"

"No."

"Just a million, that's all. You can spare it! And I'll

double it in a week, quadruple it in a month—in a year we'll have a billion. A billion dollars!"

I shook my head. "The taxes—"

"Remember U. S. Govt. *v.* Oosterhagen!" he cried. "And that's a bare beginning. Ever think what a billion dollars could do in the hands of a super-genius?" He was talking faster and faster, a perfect diarrhoea of words, as though he couldn't control the spouting. "Here!" he yelled, clutching at his temple with one hand, pulling something out of his pocket with the other. "Look at this, Harlan! It's yours for a million dollars—no, for a hundred thousand. Yes, a hundred thousand dollars and you can have it! I'll sell it for that, and then I won't split with you—we'll *both* be super-geniuses. Eh? Fair enough?"

I was trapped by my own curiosity. "What is it?" I asked. He waved it at me—a squat little bottle, half-filled with pale capsules.

"Mine," he said proudly. "My hormone. It's a synapse-relaxer. One of these and the blocks between adjoining cells in your brain are weakened for an hour. Three of them, for every twenty pounds of body weight, and you're a super-genius for life. You'll never forget! You'll remember things you think have passed out of your recollection years ago! You'll recall the post-partum slap that started you breathing, you'll remember the name of the nurse who carried you to the door of your father's Maxwell. Oh, Harlan, there is simply no limit to—"

"Go away," I said, and pushed him.

Patrolman Gamelsfelder appeared like a genie from a lamp.

"Thought so," he said somberly, advancing on Winnie McGhee. "Extortion's your game, is it? Can't say I blame you, brother, but it's a trip to the station house and a talk with the sergeant for you."

"Just get rid of him," I said, and closed the door as Winnie was challenging the cop to name an opera by Krenek, other than *Johnny Spielt Auf*.

Margery put the baby down, breathing hard.

She said: *"Scuffling* and pushing people *around* and bad *manners.* You weren't like this when we were married, Harlan. There's something come over you since you inherited that money!"

I said, "Help me pick these things up, will you?" I hadn't pushed him hard, but all the same those pills had gone flying.

Margery stamped her foot and burst into tears. "I *know* how you feel about poor Winnie," she sobbed, "but it's just that I'm *sorry* for him. "Couldn't you at least be polite? Couldn't you at least have given him a couple of lousy hundred thousand dollars?"

"Watch the baby," I warned her. At the head of the stairs Gwennie appeared, attracted by the noise, rubbing her eyes with her fists and beginning to cry.

Margery glared at me, started to speak, was speechless, turned her back and hurried up to comfort Gwennie.

I began to feel the least little bit ashamed of myself.

I stood up, patting the baby absent-mindedly on the head, looking up the stairs at the female half of our household. I had been, when you stopped to think of it, something of a clunk.

Item: I had been rough on poor old Winnie. Suppose it had been I who discovered the hormone, and needed a few lousy hundred thousand, as Margery put it so well, as a stake in order to grasp undreamed-of wealth and power? Well, why not? Why shouldn't I have given it to him? The poor fellow was evidently suffering the effects of the hormone wearing off as much as from any hangover. I could have been more kind, yes.

And, item: Margery did have a tough time with the kids and all, and on this day of all days she was likely to be excited.

And, item: I had just inherited a bloody mint!

Why wasn't I—the thought came to me with sudden appalling clarity—using some of Uncle Otto's money to make life easier for all of us?

I galloped up the steps two at a time. "Margery," I cried. "Margery, I'm sorry!"

"I think you should—" she began and then looked up from Gwennie and saw my face.

I said: "Look, honey. Let's start over. I'm sorry about poor Winnie, but forget him, huh? We're rich. Let's start living as though we were rich! Let's go out, just the two of us—it's early yet! We'll grab a cab and go into New York—all the way by cab, why not? We'll eat at the Colony, and see *My Fair Lady* from the fifth row on the aisle—you can get quite good seats, they tell me, for a hundred bucks or so. Why not?"

Margery looked up at me, and suddenly smiled. "But—" she patted Gwennie's head. "The kids. What about them?"

"Get a baby-sitter," I cried. "Mrs. Schroop'll be glad of the work."

"But it's such short notice—"

"Margery," I said, "we don't inherit a fortune *every* night. Call her up."

Margery stood up, holding Gwennie, beginning to smile. "Why," she said, "that sounds like fun, Harlan! Why not, as you say? Only—do you remember Mrs. Schroop's number?"

"It's written down," I told her.

"No, that was on the old directory." She frowned. "You've told it to me a thousand times. It isn't listed in her own name—it's her son-in-law. Oh, what *is* that number . . ."

A thin voice from down the stairs said: "Ovington Eight Zero Zero Fourteen. It's listed under Sturgis, Arthur R., number Forty-one Universe Avenue."

Margery looked at me, and I looked at Margery.

I said sharply: "Who the devil said that?"

"I did, Daddy," said the owner of the voice, all of eighteen inches tall, appearing at the foot of the steps. He had to use one hand to steady himself, because he didn't walk so very well; in the other hand he held the squat glass bottle that Winnie McGhee had dropped.

The bottle was empty.

Well, we don't live in Levittown any more—of course.

Marjorie and Gwennie and I have tried everything—changing our name, dyeing our hair, even plastic surgery once. It didn't work, so we had the same surgeon change us back.

People keep recognizing us.

What we mostly do now is cruise up and down the coast of the U.S.J.I. in our yacht, inside the twelve-mile limit. When we need supplies we send some of the crew in with the motor launch. That's risky, yes. But it isn't as risky as landing in any other country would be; and we just don't want to go back to J.I.—as they've taken to calling it these days. You can't blame us. How would *you* like it?

I wish he'd leave us alone.

The way it goes, we just cruise up and down, and every once in a while he remembers us and calls up on the ship-to-shore. He called yesterday, matter of fact. He said: "You can't stay out there forever, Daddy. Your main engines are due for a refit after eleven months, seven days of running and you've been gone ten months, six. What are you using for dairy products? The load you shipped in Jacksonville must have run out last Thursday week. There isn't any point in your starving yourself. Besides, it's not fair to Gwennie and Mom. Come home. We'll make a place for you in the government."

"Thanks," I said. "But no thanks."

"You'll be sorry," he warned, pleasantly enough. And he hung up.

Well, we should have kept him out of those pills.

I guess it was my fault. I should have listened when old Winnie—heaven rest his soul, wherever he is—said that the lifetime dose was three tablets for every twenty pounds of body weight. The baby only weighed thirty-one pounds then—last time we'd taken him to the pediatrician; naturally, we couldn't take him again after he swallowed the pills. And he must've swallowed at least a dozen.

But I guess Winnie was right.

At the very least, the world is well on its way to being conquered now. The United States fell to Juvens Imperator, as he calls himself (and I blame Margery for that—*I*

never used Latin in front of the kid) in eighteen months, after his sensational coup on the $256,000 Question, and his later success in cornering soybean futures and the common stock of United States Steel. The rest of the world is just a matter of time. And not very much time, at that. And don't they just know it, though; that's why we daren't land abroad.

But who would have thought it?

I mean, I watched his inauguration last October, on the television. The country has had some pretty peculiar people running it, no doubt. But did you ever think you'd live to see the oath of office administered to my little boy, with one hand upraised and the thumb of the other in his mouth?

THE SEVEN DEADLY VIRTUES

I

NOBODY moaned: "Buddy, please listen to me! I'm hungry. Couldn't you at least give me something to eat?"

We paid no attention.

"Oliver," she said, "I love you."

I stopped and kissed her. Nobody sobbed and drifted away in the mist.

All of Grendoon was down by the Wallow. Torches inflamed the fog like living lips of fire, kissing each other as they blended. The noise of the big jungle machines boomed in the background, but it was almost drowned out by the crowd, a constant bull's bellow of noise. "Listen to them, Diane," I said. "They're happy."

"And so am I," she whispered.

"You don't miss the plantation?"

"No."

"Nor—"

"Nor Albert," she said, remembering. *"Especially* not Albert."

I felt her shiver in spite of the fact that the temperature was one hundred and ten.

Nobody clutched at my arm, looming out of the mist, but I shook him off and he stumbled, muttering, away.

I stopped, looking at Diane. Suddenly she was tense. "What's the matter?"

She said in a small voice: "Did you recognize that one?"

It was embarrassing. I shook my head. She said: "I did, Oliver. He used to work for Albert too. And he crossed him, and now—"

The joy froze in me. I said roughly: "Snub Albert! Let's get down to the Wallow. This is our night, Diane—don't let anything spoil it."

But behind us in the fog, nobody was sniffling wretchedly.

It was sundown, you see.

Not that we ever see the sun on Venus. But it makes a difference. During "day" we stay indoors as much as we can, and when we go out we wear not only thermosuits and hoods, but portable air—at least at "noon." Toward twilight we can breathe the ambient air; at dusk we can leave off the hoods. At "night," sometimes, you can go out without even a thermosuit, but it was a long way from night.

It is also at night that the fog begins to condense. For about two months right around "midnight" the ceiling climbs, sometimes to a thousand feet, and all that water has to go somewhere; and it does.

It makes a nice celebration.

Grendoon has nearly eighteen hundred people living in it, and I don't think a hundred stayed to mind the store. Everybody else was laughing and joking and wandering around, carrying the torches, waiting for the water. The kids always get an enormous kick out of it; so do most of the grownups.

"It's coming," whispered Diane.

"I see."

Already the bottom of the Wallow was sticky with red mud, like the blood that runs out of a prime roast of beef. We were at the town end of the Wallow now, following the tapewalks to the deep part toward the hills. "Here you are, buddy!" shouted a grinning vendor and thrust a pair of torches at me. I paid him, handed one to Diane and walked on.

There's a reason for the torches too. The English knew about it; in the old wars, before aircraft bothered much with radar, the English were plagued by fog. They dug trenches around their landing strips and filled them with oil; when the planes came in and the fog was too thick they touched off the trenches of oil and the curtain of flame burned off the fog. That's what our torches were for.

First we could see only outlines, then bright beads of light from the torches themselves, and by the time a thousand torches were all aburn, we could see for more than fifty yards. We didn't need tapewalks then; we hurried down the bank toward the cheering, jostling throng.

There was a roar from the northern end of the Wallow, where the sludgy creek drained thick juices from the hills. "It's coming!"

Diane took her hand off my forearm. I released her hand. We both pressed forward, looking.

In the licking light of the torches the first thin trickle of water was coming down into the Wallow. Although it happened every few months, every time slow Venus completed a spin on its axis relative to the sun, it was like a miracle. It always was. Even inside my thermosuit I felt cooler, more comfortable. It was like Iowa in October, it was like the first freeze-up on the stream that went by everybody's home long ago. The water was coming down!

I whispered: "It's a wonderful time to be in love."

But Diane wasn't beside me.

I bawled: "Diane! Where are you?"

And then I saw her.

She had been separated in the crowd, but she was only a couple of yards away, stumbling back toward me. I couldn't see her face, only the hooded neck and line of the right mandible of her jaw, obscured by the transparent mantle of the thermosuit. But it was enough.

Diane was terrified.

A huge hulking cow of a man with a face like a footprint in mud and an expression like a stepped-on lizard was bellowing angrily at her: "Wassamatta thew? Whyntcha watchwatcha doing?"

Diane turned to me, white-faced. "Oliver," she sobbed, "this gentleman says I stepped on his foot."

"What?"

"I—I didn't, Oliver! You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course." But it was like a knell tolling.

"You've got to believe me!"

"I believe you." But it didn't matter; nothing mattered; we both knew the score then.

I said to the stepped-on lizard: "Sir, my fiancée is deeply apologetic. The crowd . . . the excitement . . . all the confusion. . . ."

He stared at me, glowering. He glanced around from under shaggy eyebrows, gauging the mood of the crowd around us. It didn't satisfy him. He shrugged and moved off.

"Come on, dear," I said, and urgently hurried her along.

She said: "Oliver. They won't give up. They'll try again."

"It won't do them any good!"

"But it will, Oliver," she said reasonably. "You know Albert. He *never* gives up. That was just one of his bullies. He'll have others."

I took her by the elbows and turned her to face me. In the red and shuddering light of the torches her eyes were dark, but luminous; her face was sad and calm. Her beauty wrung my heart.

"We can take care of ourselves, Diane," I promised. But it was a lie. I knew it was a lie. Albert Quayle

hadn't given up, not that easily. He wasn't going to let me have his wife without a fight.

He was out to get her—with hired assassins, no doubt.

And when she was gone, he would be coming after me. I remembered how nobody had whimpered in the fog.

"Will we whimper, do you think?" Diane asked suddenly. It was no more than I was asking myself. I caught her arm and turned her again toward the Wallow. Our torches were getting low. I threw them into the first few inches of silted water, and we watched without words as they choked and died.

II

The world had begun for me six months before.

I came down on the ship from Earth like a newborn baby, all pink and squally, tied into my deceleration-proof bassinet, crushed with the parturition pains of landing by rocket on an alien planet.

What did I know? The ads said: "Venus, the New Frontier!" "Venus, the planet where every man can start over!" "Own 1,000 Acres! Be Your Own Boss on Venus!"

Naturally I fell for it. So did thousands of others. It wasn't any lie. It was all there.

I got out of the ship at Grendoon and got on line at Customs. It wasn't a long line. "Immigrant?" they asked.

And I said: "Sure. I'm going to spend the rest of my life here."

It was true. But I didn't know why they laughed. I didn't know there wasn't any choice. I didn't know that, once you were conditioned for Venus, you couldn't ever live on Earth again.

They let you wear the brassard for two weeks—everybody knows what it means; everybody gives you plenty of leeway. That's so you can find your way around. You find a place to live. You get a job. You make your plans. You make up your mind.

Then—if you want to stay—you get conditioned.

If not, there's the return rocket waiting.

It was before I was conditioned, while I was still

under the brassard, that I met Albert Quayle. And his wife, Diane.

Grendoon was the steam chamber outside the gates of Hell. They sold me a thermosuit and pinned a brassard on it, with the sparkling word *Visitor* brightly picked out in diamonds. They gave me a card with Quayle's name and address on it, and turned me loose to hit him up for a job. I stepped out into the hot, penetrating fog.

Albert Quayle's address was on Breezy Point, overlooking the Wallow. I struggled along the tapewalks; even inside the thermosuit I was wringing wet. It was a hot day. The fog was whitely bright, a flour of soggy pearls that I stirred as I walked. I sucked a tube of suit air, but my face was exposed to the steam; I felt as if I were being gently boiled. Voices spoke to me out of the fog, begging; I couldn't help them so I ignored them, as might any citizen of Grendoon.

Then I came to Albert Quayle's house. Enormous blowers ripped the fog to tendrils around it. I could see it through a wavering haze. A big place of pink aluminum with picture windows to look out on fog. A big place for a big shot; and that was Albert Quayle.

I walked up the cinderblock path. It was like a Japanese garden back on Earth. Out of the condensation sumps in the walls a stream of hot water pulsed. It flowed through cement-walled troughs across a cactus garden; the path became a little arched bridge over one of the gently steaming brooks. With such an expensive layout you couldn't blame him for spending enough on blowers to give it a chance to be seen. The water, of course, came out of the sluice from the air-conditioning. It had to go somewhere. But the garden, the little stream, the bridge—that took money.

That was what Quayle had—and he had something more than money . . . he had Diane.

I rang. The door opened. There she was.

I glanced at the card in my gauntleted fingers. "Mrs. Quayle?"

"I'm Mrs. Quayle."

"I'm looking for a job," I mumbled. A figure like a night-club moaner. Eyes like the sad pits of Hell. Lips that tragically invited. I tore my eyes off her and dashed them against the card again. "Your husband—they said at the office he could help me."

"Help you?" His voice was like a bitter lullaby. "He'll help himself. But he'll give you a job, if that's what you want."

And then I knew I was in love. And I knew what it meant. Because even then, not twenty-four hours on Venus, I knew who Albert Quayle was. I knew he wasn't a man to tangle with, not in Grendoon, not if you wanted to stay alive.

But I tangled with him after all. Oh, yes. I took from him the one possession he did not care to lose.

Diane caught my hand. She was shaking. "Oliver, Oliver. It's him."

"I know."

"That fat man—he was working for Albert."

"I know."

"He's out to get us. Both of us! Oliver, I shouldn't have let you do this. It's the end."

"I know."

"Quit saying 'I know!' " she screamed.

I patted her hand through the gauntlet to show that I understood. Gently I led her along the banks of the Wallow, down to where the crowd was thickest.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," she whispered suddenly. "I'd like to kill him."

"You can't."

"I know I can't, but I'd like to. If only we weren't conditioned—"

I said: "Forget it. We're through with him. As soon as your divorce is final, we'll get married. That's that." I glanced at my watch, under the transparent gauntlet of the thermosuit. "Only another hour," I told her.

"Oh, Oliver!"

That was more like it. Her expression was like a candy bride's beaming from the top of a white frosted wedding

cake. Only another hour, and then the statutory waiting period would be over. It was hard to believe that already eleven hours had passed since we confronted Quayle with our love.

Almost gaily we moved among the rejoicing throng. It was a festival; the Grendoonians were laughing, singing, like happy children. It was like Iowa when I was a boy. There, when the creeks froze over, the whole town would come down to the lake—the grownups to watch, the teenagers to skate, the old ones and the babies to walk stiff-legged across the ice, everyone enjoying what the weather had done. Here it turned fog into water—water enough to fill the Wallow and make a pond of it for a few months of each year. There it had been water into ice, but the principle was the same; it was a carnival time.

Nobody came sniffling up to us. Abjectly he asked: "Mister, please. I'm hungry! Couldn't you help me out?" Diane shivered and clutched my arm. For an instant I was tempted to speak, but the instant passed. And then there was a confused clamor, and the nobody suddenly turned. "An Earthie!" he gasped, and darted away from us.

Diane stood on tiptoe, peering. "It is," she said. "Look, Oliver!"

And there he was, an Earthman, tall and darkfaced with the UV tan of a sunny planet but his face was crimson with anger now. He was backed against the margin of the Wallow surrounded by a dozen nobodies, imploring, clamoring, begging unashamed for food, for help—for everything. His gold brassard shone clearly, with the word *Visitor* glittering an invitation in diamond ink to every shunned nobody in Grendoon, for only an Earthie would fall so low as to talk to them. Short of grubbing for roots in the jungle and taking their chances with swamp, disease and the giant saposaurs, the only way a nobody could live was by finding a Terrestrial to help them.

But this Terrestrial was making hard work of it. He was offering them money, which was foolish—what good was money to them? And he was striking at them irritably,

which was even worse. It was bringing him down to the level of the nobodies, almost.

"I'll have to help him," I told Diane.

She nodded.

I walked sternly over to him. The nobodies scattered like mist before me.

They fled, whimpering as I began to talk to him.

He said angrily: "Thanks. What kind of a place *is* this?"

"I'm sorry you were bothered. Don't pay any attention to them. They'll go away."

"But *why?*"

"It's the way we do things here," I explained.

"Humph." He looked at me irritably. In a high, shrill voice, his face pouting like a fish out of water, he complained: "I don't think much of Venus. What a gyp! I spent twenty-five hundred bucks on this trip. I might as well have gone to the Moon."

"You're a tourist?"

"That's what they said when they sold me the ticket," he said disagreeably.

"I'm sorry."

"It isn't your fault," he admitted. Then he tried to be a little more friendly. "Look," he said confidentially, "is *this* all there is to it? I mean, the Coming of the Water, and the spirit of Mardi Gras that runs through the town and all, like they said in the travel agency?"

"This is all."

"Man!" He shook his head ruefully. "But isn't there, well, some place where I can find a little more excitement? I came millions of miles. I've been saving up for this vacation for years."

"Not the kind of excitement you want, mister," I told him, and turned to look for Diane.

But she wasn't there.

"Diane!" I shouted, and heard my voice drowned out in the multitudinous cries of the crowd around the Wallow. "Diane, where are you?"

No answer.

"Something wrong, buddy?" asked the Earthie. But I didn't have any answer for him. There was something

wrong—plenty was wrong, but there wasn't anything he could do about it.

She was gone. Search as I did, I couldn't find her. Quayle. It had to be Quayle. Somehow, in the minutes when I let her out of my sight, he had begun his revenge.

III

Frantic, I hurried back to the hotel. Where else was there to go?

The room clerk looked at me funny. I don't know how else to say it. It was the kind of look I got from everybody when I first came to Venus, but I hadn't seen it since I got conditioned to live here and took off the brassard.

I went up in the elevator, and the room clerk's look went out of of my mind like a nobody vanishing into the fog. There wasn't room for it. The only thing I had space for in my mind was Diane, Diane gone. I hurried down the corridor and unlocked the door, my fingers shaking. "Diane!" I cried.

But there was no answer.

She wasn't there. The room was empty—our room. We had checked into it that morning, then gone out to file for her divorce, eaten, wasted a little time, then decided to visit the Wallow since we were in a holiday mood.

But that mood was gone. It had been the slimmest of hopes, that she might have come back to the hotel, but now even that hope was gone. . . .

And then I took a longer look at the room. It was incredible, as if someone had struck me.

The cigarette butts were still in the ashtrays.

A soggy towel hung sloppily across a rack.

Across the back of a chair Diane's afternoon thermosuit lay slackly, its empty arms reaching out to the wastebasket.

The room had not been cleaned.

I turned slowly and looked at the back of the door, but I knew before I looked what I would see.

There was a pink slip taped on the door—pink, the

color of the complaint forms of the Maids, Butlers and Domestics. I read it with cold attention, though I knew what it would say.

GRIEVANCE REPORT

Re: Room 1635, Mr. and Mrs. Oliver Sawyer.
From: Joyce Trulove, 16th Floor Chambermaid.

As of this date, above persons spoke rudely to the undersigned on the phone, demanding service. Said: "This room is a disgusting mess." Also: "Get the hell up here and clean it up."

The undersigned intends to prefer charges before the Grievance Committee, pending which time undersigned refuses to deal with said persons again.

Signed:
J. Trulove, MB&D #886

I opened the door and went back down to the lobby, fast.

The desk clerk was all smiles, with a sneer folded into every one of them. "Yes, Mr. Sawyer. The room? Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Sawyer. That Grievance Report—some sort of mistake, I'm sure. But the chambermaid . . ."

I said tightly: "What about the chambermaid?"

"Oh, you know, Mr. Sawyer. They don't like to be ordered around. You can't blame them."

I got a grip on myself: "Look. We didn't even speak to the chambermaid. Don't you understand? We were getting married. We came in, dropped the suitcases; grabbed something to eat down here in the dining hall, and that's it. Outside of that we weren't even in the hotel."

"Oh. The dining hall, yes."

I stopped short. "What about the dining hall?"

He shrugged faintly. "You know, Mr. Sawyer. I'm sorry to have to tell you, but there's been a complaint in the dining room too."

"It isn't possible!"

The clerk whispered thoughtfully: "Mr. Sawyer, are you telling me that I lie?"

I said fast: "It's just a mistake, I mean. I remember everything that happened in the dining room. The waitress was perfectly wonderful. Why, we talked to her! And I left her a big tip! And—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Sawyer. I'm rather busy."

I took the warning.

There seemed to be only one thing to do.

I walked across the lobby of the hotel. It was like walking through a mushy daiquiri—ice floated on all sides of me. The atmosphere was congealed. The bellboys looked but saw me not; the elevator men glanced through me at the room clerk, but never realized I was alive. At the entrance to the dining room, the hostess sucked a tooth and stared at the wall and hummed quietly to herself.

I walked right past her. She didn't blink.

I found a table and sat down.

In about fifteen minutes a waitress came up to my table. "Miss," I said eagerly, "I—"

But she checked the setting with a practiced eye and walked away again.

I stared after her. More minutes passed.

I cleared my throat. "Miss," I said again to the waitress as she came to the table next to mine to take an order. "Miss!"

But she didn't respond and, after one quick, curious glance, neither did the customers at the table.

It was the deep-freeze, all right; they were cutting me dead.

I turned back to the table, and just caught a glimpse of the back of another waitress. For a moment I had the crazy notion that she had been about to serve me. But that notion was wrong. She had been to my table, all right; the proof was on the table before me, a sheet of bright green paper.

I read it.

It was bad.

The pink slip from the chambermaid had been bad enough. It meant that no member of the local would ever clean a room for me in a hotel while the Grievance Re-

port was outstanding. But all that meant was that I couldn't live in a hotel, and there were after all, other places to live if I worked at finding them. It wasn't fatal.

But the green one was more serious. It was on the stationery of the Cooks, Waiters and Restaurant Workers:

COMPLAINT

Re: Oliver Sawyer
Offense: Deliberate undertipping

Miss Gina Sortini of this restuarant served the above mentioned Customer luncheon. Customer seemed well satisfied with the serivce and made no complaint. Nor, according to affidavit of headwaiter, hostess and cashier, had Customer any just cause for complaint.

After Customer left, Waitress found two pennies under plate. It was not absentmindedness. Waitress distinctly remembers seeing Customer put money under plate, whereupon Customer's Guest, a young woman, commented upon said gratuity and both Customer and Guest laughed and made several joking remarks.

Matter referred to Grievance Adjuster this date.

And that meant that eat I could or starve I might, but I would do neither of them in any public restaurant in Grendoon.

I remembered Diane's comment and how we had laughed—it was true! But it had been because the tip was large; I was extravagant, she said.

There was no mistake here. It was deliberate. There was no longer any possible doubt.

I got up and walked slowly away from the table. I was the Invisible Man. I went out into the lobby, hesitated, crossed it to the door. I was still wearing my thermosuit; I hadn't stayed in my room long enough to take it off. I walked hoplessly out of the door and into the hot gray night.

There was a pile of luggage on the broad steps outside

the double-paned door. I tripped over it, hesitated, then looked more closely.

It was mine.

IV

I rented an armored car and raced out to the spaceport. Thank heaven it was only the hotels and restaurants so far!

But it would be more—Quayle would never stop—I would have to face it some day and find an answer or live through the total extinction of my personality that came with being shunned like any other nobody. But I wouldn't face it now, no, not until I had found Diane.

It was only desperation that drove me to the spaceport. Cryptic roarings from the side of the taped road told us that the giant machines were at work in the Ag fields. I turned at an intersection and eased cautiously into the right-hand transverse road, the sonic feeler sending out beeps into the fog to search for oncoming cars. Abruptly there was a sodden flare of white, and the giant blast of an industrial explosive behind it.

It was like that everywhere, outside of Grendoon and the other little cities. You don't remake a planet without using power.

And, of course, power can be dangerous . . . wherefore the conditioning.

I drove into the spaceport through a flaming fence of natural gas jets. A rocket was coming in. The buildings loomed queerly tall in the faint residual mist—it was strange to see the top of a two-story building. But though I could see much, I could not see Diane.

Nobody came weeping up to me in the walk outside the parking lot. I took a closer look, and it was Vince Borton.

I knew him—*had* known him—when he was alive, but the time was coming when I would no longer be able to make that distinction. He was typical of the kind that hangs around the docks, begging handouts from the tourist. He was a farmer before. In fact, he farmed with me.

In fact, he came in from Earth on the rocket with me. And went to work for Quayle with me; and it was because he had been caught stealing money from Quayle's pension fund that he was shunned. He sobbed: "Mister, please! If I don't get something to eat, I'll—"

"I can't help you, Vince," I said.

I left him staring after me, a shabby nobody with a flatfooted stance and an expresion of horror and surprise.

People didn't talk to nobodies.

But when somebody did, they didn't refuse help.

And the only explanation of behavior like mine was the true one—I was in process of becoming a nobody myself.

A high, confidential voice behind me said: "What's the matter, buddy? You don't look as happy as you did last time I saw you."

I turned. I saw a bright gold brassard, with the word *Visitor* picked out in diamond ink.

It was the Earthie I had seen down by the Wallow.

"Hello," I said shortly.

An enormous roaring seeped out of the overhead mist. Jets bellowing, the Earth rocket settled in on the landing pad, pointing a finger of flame at Venus to destroy it and then embracing it.

And then it started again.

There was a crowd, as there always is when a rocket's coming in. A tall, lean fellow in a thermosuit of Agricultural yellow almost bumped into me. He nodded politely and started to turn away.

"Her*shoo!*" I sneezed, and so did the Earthie—two mighty thundering sneezes. The Aggie whirled on us. His face was mottled and raging—oh, much more so than the offense justified!

He demanded: "What's the matter with you?"

I said quickly: "I'm sorry. Very sorry. Excuse me. . . . Us," I added, though the Earthie hadn't much to lose. I pulled the Earthie away after me.

He looked at me with eyes like question marks.

"Sneeze powder," I told him softly.

"What?"

"To make me sneeze on him."

"What?"

"I'm sorry I got you into it, but the brassard will keep you out of trouble. Now you'd better leave me alone."

He stared at me with doubting eyes and pouty lips. "Look. I'm just a stranger here, but I don't get it. Why the sneeze powder?"

"To make trouble."

"Trouble." He thought, and then admitted: "I heard about this kind of thing. You Venusians have your own systems. Not like Earth."

"No."

"No violence, eh?"

"We can't afford it."

He nodded. "I know. They explained it to me, back at the travel agency. Something about conditioning. Venus is a frontier planet and all frontiers are the same. Everybody is likely to kill everybody else. Especially because weapons are so powerful nowadays."

"They have to be here, because of the saposaurs. But not just weapons."

"No, I know about that. Explosives. Big machines that could shred a man into confetti. So they condition you against violence, eh? No matter what happens, once you're through with the conditioning you can't kill anybody. And if somebody is really out to get somebody else—"

"He cuts him dead." I nodded. "You have the picture. That's what's happening to me now. Now you better stay away from me—"

"Dunlap."

"Whatever your name is. I don't want to get you into trouble."

I turned and left him. The world was hot and empty without Diane; I didn't want to share it with him.

But I didn't have much of a world to share.

Even less than I'd thought.

I marched out toward the parking lot, and there was the Aggie again. He was on the taped path. The jets were

off and the fog beginning to settle in again. I thought of swinging around him, but the path was narrow.

I nodded politely. "Sorry," I said formally.

He looked at me with recognition, then with annoyance.

And then his eyes opened wide, and the expression became utter rage—contempt—*hatred.*

"What—what's the matter?" I faltered.

He turned away without a word, as icy as the waitress in the hotel, as completely as any person had ever cut a nobody.

It didn't figure.

Even if he was one of Quayle's men, there was no reason for this. I watched, incredulous.

In the haze of five yards of thickening fog I saw him stop to talk to one of the field police. Then the Aggie walked on and the policeman came slowly toward me. I nodded politely.

The policeman looked through me. He saw my face and memorized it, but he also didn't see it; not at all. He looked at my chest for a thoughtful second, then turned and moved back toward the parking lot.

I followed.

He went to my car, produced an official electroseal, locked it. On the entrance door he slapped a sticker with the glowing scarlet word: *Impounded.*

"Hey!" I yelled. "What's the matter?" There was no reason for that! That was the sort of treatment reserved for the gravest offenders—thieves like Vince, accidental murderers, those who used the shunning services without reason. . . .

And one other category.

I touched my chest.

A sharp metal star point scraped my finger. Pinned to my thermosuit was a badge—no, a brassard. *The* brassard,' In diamond ink the word *Visitor* flared.

I was wearing the brassard without right. It was the worst crime in the world.

I had been framed.

V

I rushed back along the tapewalks like a ghost put to flight with bell, book and candle, seeking help. The only help in all the world for me just then was the Earthie.

Vince Borton clutched at me out of the fog as I passed. "Oliver! You too?"

"Me too."

"But why?"

I said grimly, too full of hate and fear to answer: "Arthur Quayle, that's all. Good-by." But he followed.

I found Dunlap talking angrily to another new Earthie just pinning on his brassard. ". . . lousy place not worth the plutonium to blow it to hell! Take my advice ,Mac. Turn around. Get right back on that rocket, and—"

"Dunlap."

He turned and looked at me. "Oh. You."

"Can you help me?"

Suspiciously: "What do you mean? All I want is out, buddy. I don't want to get in any trouble here."

"You can't. You're wearing the brassard."

"Maybe."

"There's no risk involved! Remember? We Venusians can't use violence. That's the first thing we do, before we take off the brassard. We get conditioned against it. And you're immune to anything else. That's what the brassard's for."

"Well. You didn't tell me what you want."

"I want you to come see how the other half lives. The Terra Club."

"What's at the Terra Club?"

"Albert Quayle," I said.

Vince hit us up for a ride back to town—in Dunlap's car of course. I let him, provided he sat in the back seat.

He grinned at me wryly.

But I couldn't apologize, because the fission-blasts were going off again and the noise drowned everything out for a moment.

Dunlap demanded aggressively: "What *is* all that?"

"That's the reason, Dunlap."

"Blasting? The reason for what?"

"The reason for the conditioning. Every man a Titan. This is Venus. You've heard of the saposaurs?"

"Saposaurs?" He nodded. "Sort of intelligent lizards, eh? But they don't like people. They stay in the back lands."

"Most of the time. Not always. Look." I pointed to the built-in machineguns on the car. "They're needed, Dunlap. It isn't safe to travel on Venus without plenty of weapons. And the tools! Plutonium built the Wallow. All of Venus was marsh. Most of it still is. Without the atomic explosives to drain it off, we'd be living in jellied mud."

He said hoarsely: "There isn't any danger from the saposaurs in the car, is there?"

"Not unless one shows up."

He said, "Oh."

Vince Borton volunteered eagerly from the back seat—it must have been a joy for him to talk again—"There are plenty of them out in the fields. Not so much at night. They come in the daylight months, when there's plenty of fog."

"Why?"

"They like knives," Borton told him. "They're not really smart—sort of like gorillas plus twenty-five per cent. But they're smart enough to know that steel will outlast their teeth and claws. They never had fire and don't much want it. Steel is something else. They'll break up a car if they can just to take the jagged pieces of metal for weapons."

Dunlap said slowly: "But—all right, granted you have to have strong safeguards against violence with all that plutonium around, and guns for protection against the saposaurs. What about this business of ignoring people to death?"

"Shunning them," I corrected him. "Cutting them dead. There has to be *some* way, Dunlap. The community can't tolerate antisocial behavior! Why, if somebody insults my wife, I can't hit him—I don't know how. The community has to have protection against—against—"

"Against you and me, Oliver," said Vince mournfully from the back seat.

We dropped Vince at the edge of the city and followed the tapewalks to the Terra Club.

Dunlap complained: "It's hot. I don't like it so hot."

"You came here all by yourself."

"But I can't stand this heat!" He was fretful and irritable because he didn't like what he was getting into, I was sure.

"Watch the tape," I ordered. Lights were ahead, bobbing like pastel ghosts in the fog. A man loomed up. He glanced at me, then through me and he nodded to Dunlap.

"Already," I said.

"What?"

"Forget it." But it was a blow. The police weren't like the locals of the unions: they didn't content themselves with filing a protest and letting it get around to their own members. Now I was shunned by everyone; everyone in Grendoon would have seen my picture on the tri-V. "Turn in here, Dunlap," I told him, with my heart a solid load inside me.

The sign hanging from the tape wheeped faintly as we came close and its scanners picked us up, then blazed with the orange letters:

TERRA CLUB

We went in the door.

The maitre-de greeted us affably—glad-to-see-you-tonight and all that. I moved into the light where he could get a better look at me and I was a ghost. He couldn't see me at all.

I skinned off my thermosuit, and Dunlap out of his. The check girl took his, but there was nothing to do with mine but sling it over my shoulder. "Ask for a table for two, Dunlap," I said tightly.

"I'd like a table. . . . For two."

"The gentleman is expecting someone," the maitre-de inquired politely.

"Say yes, Dunlap."

"Yes."

"Very well, sir." The maitre-de led Dunlap down to a table right at the side of the dance floor. It was for me, that table, not for Dunlap, but Dunlap didn't know that. The maitre-de wanted it that way. He wanted me to be seen. I mean not *seen,* but not-seen by everybody. So that everybody who was not-seeing me could get a good look. Good enough so that they would know enough never to see me again.

The table was for two, all right, but it was only one chair that the maitre-de pulled out. I had to pull out my own. And when the waiter came, he only turned one glass right-side up, spread one napkin and offered one menu.

I said: "Thank God for your brassard. Order me some Scotch, Dunlap. And a sandwich."

"Two Scotches and a sandwich." Dunlap looked at me. "Ham?"

"Anything."

"Ham, or whatever you've got."

The waiter looked at him, then shrugged.

He brought the two Scotches, and lined them both up in front of Dunlap.

I didn't mind leaning across the table to get mine. I wolfed the sandwich; already I was hungry. Later it would be worse, but I wasn't looking that far ahead. I lifted my glass.

"Confusion to our enemies."

Dunlap was acting more and more nervous. He said sullenly: "But I don't know. I mean, it's more *your* enemy, isn't it? I wonder if I really should get involved in what is, essentially, a private disagreement."

"A private murder."

"All right, damn it! But this isn't much fun, Oliver. And it's costing me money."

"Money?" I reached in my pocket and dumped my wallet in front of him. He stared at me. "Keep it. It's no good to me. Literally. There isn't a man in Grendoon with something to sell who'll take money from me."

He looked thoughtful. He opened the wallet and whistled.

"There's a lot of dough here, Oliver."

"What? Well, why not." I swallowed the drink. "I worked for Quayle nearly six months. Out in the boondocks. Hard work, fighting off saposaurs, handling the plutonium. Ask Vince Borton, he was there with me. Then—"

"What then?"

"I got to talking to Quayle's wife. You saw her. . . . Down at the Wallow."

Dunlap looked at me with a certain expression on his face.

"All right," I said. "She was his wife. But you don't know him, Dunlap! A rat. Made life hell for her. Rough to work for—you wouldn't think he was conditioned, the language he used. In town, he'd be shunned himself, but out on the fields customs are a little different about giving offense. Especially when the man giving offense is the boss."

He grumbled nervously, "But I don't even know this Quayle!"

"Now you do," I told him, and pointed. "He's just coming in."

Quayle was a toad, with a toad's face and features.

Three men were with him—overseers from the farms, big men, rough and mean men, the kind that seemed to seek him out. And there was a woman, a woman in a scarlet dress.

That would be Diane's successor. Trust Quayle! He wouldn't go long without a woman, and always a beauty. Diane had been far from the first—he'd been married to only three of them. She was one; the other two had died out on the boondocks. Not in-quotation-marks "died"; one got in the way of a saposaur and one disappeared in the swamps. That was how Quayle had got where he was in fact—they had been rich, and he inherited from both.

His filmed toad's eyes went mildly around the room.

He didn't see me. It was very clear that he didn't see me. After he was through not seeing me he whispered something to one of the men; and the man snapped a

finger for a waiter, and whispered to the waiter, and the waiter whispered back.

Albert Quayle smiled a toadish smile. "Oh, go on, live a minute," that smile said. "Live a minute longer, let yourself be sheltered by an Earthman's brassard. But he won't stay forever. And then you're dead."

And he was right, unless I found a way to handle it.

The first thing was to get Dunlap on my side. I had to show him what I was up against.

"Order two more Scotches," I told him.

While the waiter was gone I whispered: "Listen close. You don't believe that this business can kill me, do you? You don't think that simply ignoring a man can be fatal? Watch what happens."

He scowled, making almost as toadish a face as Quayle's. "Hold on, Oliver! What are you up to? If you kill this guy Quayle or something—"

"If I only could!" At that moment came the waiter back. I took one of the glasses out of the waiter's hand. He blinked only once at the remaining glass and calmly set it in front of Dunlap. "Sorry, sir," he apologized. "You wanted two scotches, didn't you? I'll get another."

"Now watch what happens." I took the full glass and walked straight across the dance floor.

Nobody bumped into me, though the band was playing and the floor was full. Nobody noticed that I was there. They danced neatly around a moving vacum, named me.

I got to Quayle's table and I stood staring at him for a second. The woman moved nervously, but no one else gave any sign that a man was standing within a yard of them all. I shouted loudly: "Quayle!"

There was no response, none at all. Only the woman blinked.

"Quayle," I cried, "you're a rotten, stinking murderer! You're shunning me to death because I took your wife away from you!"

And I threw the liquor in his face.

He blinked—raw alcohol was in his eyes—but that was all I could see. I fell writhing to the floor.

That's the conditioning, you see. The muscles are there, and the brain can think murder; but once the thought becomes act, even if it is less than murder, if it is violence in any form—then the conditioned reflex begins. Think of a white-hot, iron maiden from Nuremberg, with her spikes closing in on you. Think of an epileptic fit. Think of being boiled alive. Combine them.

Unfortunately I did not lose consciousness, though the room spun madly around me and I couldn't see anything but a tortured giant's face, mottled and furious, with the liquor sloshing down the bridge of his nose.

After a few minutes I painfully got up.

The dancers had been all around me, but no foot had touched me; every person in the room must have seen and heard, but there was no sign. The music was playing. The Terra Club was gay and laughing. I walked shakily back to our table.

Vince Borton was standing there, pleading with Dunlap for something; but his eyes were on me. "You damned fool! What do you think you were trying to prove?"

"More Scotch," I said hoarsely.

Dunlap pushed one of his glasses over. He looked shaken. "That was the conditioning?"

I nodded.

Vince said, "You're crazy, Oliver! Come out of here. I came to tell you something, but—"

I cut in: "Imagine what it would have been if I'd tried to kill him."

"I can't," Dunlap admitted.

"It would have killed me."

"It *should* have killed you!" Borton blazed. (And while we were shouting, all around us the Terra Club was having a party.)

I said: "Vince. Please. . . . Leave me alone."

Suddenly he calmed. "All right." Then he said thoughtfully, "Listen. Funny thing. You know when you threw the liquor in Quayle's face?"

"Yes. I know."

"But do you know what he did?" He nodded, satisfied at my expression. "He started to *go* for you."

"But surely that's not strange," Dunlap protested.

"It isn't? After you just saw what happened to Oliver?"

"Mmm. I see," Dunlap said after a moment, but then he shrugged. "All right," he said. "You've convinced me. You deliberately let yourself in for that to prove a point, so I guess I have to say you've proved it. Now what?"

"Help me, Dunlap."

"How?"

"First I want to find Diane. I've *got* to. But I can't talk to anyone, so you'll have to—"

"No he won't," Borton interrupted. "That's what I came to tell you."

"Tell me *what*?"

"Where Diane is." Borton fingered his ragged cap. "I heard from one of the other nobodies. You know how it is—misery loves company. When somebody new gets shunned, we all know it right away."

"And Diane?"

He nodded. "Shunned. She's over at the Wallow, on an island; and the water's coming in, and she can't get anybody to help her."

VI

Outside the Terra Club I said: "Now I've got him! Quayle's in the palm of my hand!"

The hot fog closed in on all of us like a barber's steamy towel. It seemed to make it difficult for Dunlap to breathe. He wheezed nervously: "What are you talking about?"

The doorman glanced at him with curiosity, then looked away. Borton was almost treading on the man's shoes, but the doorman didn't know he was alive.

"I'm talking about Quayle! This is the end of the road for him, I promise you. I didn't want to do this. But he doesn't leave me any choice. Now that I know where Diane is, I'm going to blow the lid off. We'll go get her, and then—it's the end for Quayle."

Dunlap clutched at his chest, knocking the brassard off

his thermosuit. He bent and fumbled for it. When he stood up he seemed a little steadier.

"How?" he asked.

"With a little help from the police, that's how! Do you know what he's been doing? He's been smuggling steel knives to the saposaurs. Yes! I can prove it with Diane's help. It's our ace in the hole."

"But, look. What does that have to do with you?"

"Everything! Why do you think we were shunned, Dunlap? He's behind it. He's afraid. Diane knew all about it. She had to. But she wouldn't have talked. And neither would I, because that was the way she wanted it. But now—"

"I know. Now you're going to blow the lid off," he sneered.

"You bet we are. Once we let the truth out, he's discredited—done. He'll be a nobody then, not us. And then we can appeal our cases. The courts will listen. We'll get the verdict reversed; they'll believe me when I say I didn't put the brassard on. The locals will let us off." I grinned as confidently as I could, although I was sweating even more than the hot fog could justify.

"And the pity of it," I said, "is that Quayle didn't have to have it this way. We were willing to buy him off if necessary."

They both stood looking at me like saposaur chicks fresh out of the egg—puzzled, surprised, and ready for a fight.

"Oliver, what the hell are you talking about," Vince Borton demanded. "You don't have anything Quayle wants, except Diane."

"That's where you're wrong, Vince. I told you. He bribes the saposaurs with steel knives so they'll go after the other plantations, but leave his alone. But it takes a lot of knives. There are lots of saposaurs. And it's against the law, of course."

"So?"

"So he can't get all the knives he wants," I explained patiently. "But I can get them for him. Plenty! We talked

about it, Diane and I; that was what we were going to offer him. But now—no. Now it's war."

Dunlap said tenaciously: "Explain that a little, will you? Where were you going to get them?"

"I know where there's a shipload! Did you ever hear of the *Formidable*? Old rocket ship—oh, twenty-five years back. It crashed. They did that, in those days. It missed Glendoon by twenty miles, smashed itself up and sank in forty feet of mud. But I know where it is." I let that sink in like the old rocket had sunk into the greasy mud. "I found it while I was working for Quayle, digging his own drainage ditches, blasting with his own plutonium. I thought of telling him about it. But I told Diane first, and then the two of us. . . . Well—anyway, we didn't tell him. And it's loaded with knives. That was twenty-five years ago, you see. They used to try to trade with the saopsaurs then."

Dunlap cleared his throat. "I, uh, I think I left my wallet at the table. Wait a minute, will you? I'll be right back."

Vince Borton stared after him. Then, lowering his voice so that the unhearing doorman would really not hear, he blazed: "Oliver, you idiot! What's the use of telling him all those lies?"

"No, Vince. Don't get me wrong. They're only part lies. I do know where the *Formidable* crashed—but it isn't forty feet of mud, it's four hundred and Quayle's own thousand-acre drainage lake is right on top of it now. He'll never recover it. But he'll want those knives, as long as he thinks they can be had."

"So? Then why did you tell the Earthie about it? Why not tell Quayle?"

I stepped back to the entrance of the Terra Club. The noise of revelry was loud inside it, loud enough to drown out most of the distant dull roll of blasting. But I could see clearly through the double glass door.

Even through the door, across the crowded dance floor, I could see someone bending to talk to Albert Quayle; I could see his look of worry, then the change of expression. Avarice gleamed out of his eyes, like golden glints from a pawnbroker's sign.

"Don't worry, Vince," I said softly. "Quayle knows."

It wasn't far to the Wallow. Borton led us by the taped path to the water's edge. We were quiet, especially Dunlap.

The torches were gone. Most of the people were gone. Only scattered couples and groups were left, many drunk, all invisible in the clotted fog. The thick water in the Wallow had risen to the very edge of the tapewalk.

"Under here." Vince held the tape for us. We stepped off into sucking mud. The distant rumble of explosions was still drumming at the horizons. Venus is an enormous planet, bigger in land area than four Earths. There is much blasting to be done and the sound of plutonium carries.

But above the distant boom, suddenly I heard something else. A thin, distant voice cut like piano wire at my heart. Out in the middle of the Wallow, Diane, invisible, was moaning. "Help me! Please, the water's getting higher."

And there were people within the sound of her voice—a good many, though most had left—and they had boats if they chose to use them. But she wasn't there for them. She was nobody. A ghost. If anyone knew she was alive, there was no sign shown.

"Dunlap. Get a boat."

He looked at me.

"Go ahead, man. Ask someone—anybody. They'll lend it to you because you're wearing the brassard. But they won't talk to Borton or me."

He trudged off, muttering.

As soon as he had disappeared into the fog, I said: "All right, Vince. You remember what I told you in front of the Club. Now do it!"

"Aw, Oliver! You're crazy! Do you know what you're getting into?"

"Do you want to be shunned all the short rest of your life?"

He grunted once and walked away. But I knew he didn't approve. That didn't matter. What mattered was Diane and life.

So now I was all alone in the hot slimy fog with Diane's distant sobs tearing at me. I wanted to call to her, but there was a reason for not doing it.

But time was passing.

The Wallow was filling rapidly now with the run-off from the hills. The air was twenty degrees colder. Still hot—terribly hot by Earth standards, but as our portion of Venus rolled into shadow, water was wrung out of the sodden air and it had to go somewhere. Now the Wallow was a hundred acres of steaming muddy water. All that was left of the red mud of six hours before was a few islands poking up. Diane was on one of them. But in a while, maybe a very short while, all of the islands, would disappear. By full flood time the shallowest point in the Wallow would be sixty feet deep.

And it was not merely drowning that endangered her. That water was hot.

Time was passing. . .

Then I heard Dunlap's wheezing breath, and a moment later the thunk of his oars moving blindly toward me in the fog.

"Here!" I cried.

He found me a moment later.

I scrambled aboard, and we rowed clumsily out on the soupy lake, following the sound of Diane's sobbing voice.

She cried out unbelievingly: "Oh god!"

I clutched at her in the mist. It was like Leander embracing Hero, still wet from the raging Hellespont; it was the meaning and purpose of all my life.

Then I felt her go suddenly tense.

She strained to see through the hot fog. In a voice that cracked a little she said: "It's—it's the Earthie."

I looked around politely.

Dunlap was standing there in an awkward, embarrassed stance. His face was half turned away.

He cleared his throat. "I can explain," he apoligized.

"Explain what, Mr. Dunlap?"

He felt his throat. "I mean, I thought she'd take this

attitude. I knew she wouldn't understand about what happened. Here I am trying to help you, and—"

"What did happen, Dunlap?"

Diane rasped furiously: "He's the one! He got you away on purpose, I swear it! And then the fog closed in, remember? And somebody grabbed me. *Grabbed* me!"

"I know, dear."

"But it was *physical!* Like an Earthie. It must have been him. He grabbed me, and brought me out here on a boat. And left me. And then some people came by and I called to them, and—they shunned me. He did it!"

"But it wasn't me, I swear. Ask your friend here! I was with him, wasn't I?"

"You were with me for about three minutes." I patted his arm with my free hand. "But you didn't do it," I reassured him. "I know that. It wasn't him, Diane."

"Then who?"

I stopped her. "Be patient, Diane. Just for a few moments."

We stood there. Then there were voices in the fog . . . a canoe's paddling . . . and then a familiar whining voice, droning the nobody's familiar whimpering cry. "Mister? Please, mister. I haven't eaten in three days—"

"Vince!" I shouted. "Here we are."

In a moment he came up out of the fog, looked us over and nodded. Behind him there were other figures in the fog.

"Who the devil are they?" Dunlap demanded, fingering his brassard.

"Nobody," I told him. "Nobody at all."

There were four of them, ghostly in the mist. In the fog they had no faces, only vague mottled shapes, and faint voices that agreed: "Nobody, mister. Nobody."

"But maybe," I said steadily, "they won't be nobodies forever. Maybe some day they'll be somebodies again."

Dunlap shouted hoarsely: "I don't know what you're trying to pull, Oliver, but I don't like it. I'm getting out of here!"

I stood in front of him. "How did you know my name was Oliver?"

He rocked back, staring. "What?"

"I never told you my name."

"But—"

"Never mind." I raised my voice. "Quayle! Come on out here. I know you're on the island. You wouldn't miss a chance to get knives—and besides, I heard your canoe."

A moment, while Dunlap's face turned to flabby butter. Then there was a soft sludgy sound of footsteps in the mud. Albert Quayle walked steadily up to us, his fat toad's face a mask. He glanced at Dunlap, and even in the drenching heat of that little island in the Wallow, Dunlap shivered.

Then Quayle turned to me. He waited.

I said cheerfully: "We're ready, I think. Quayle here. Dunlap here. Diane and myself, here. Borton and the witnesses—"

"Witnesses?" Quayle's lips didn't move, only the word popped out of the fog and hung there between us.

"To a murder, Albert. Yours. You're going to die."

"Ha!" He was contemptuous. "You can't kill me. I'm an important man here, Oliver. Who's going to shun me on your say-so?"

I paused. "There are other ways of killing," I said softly.

He didn't move a muscle. I let him think for a second. Then I said, "Vince, have you got what I asked for?"

He passed me something cold and sharp. It was hard to make it out in the fog, but I knew what it was; and then I held it up and they all knew.

"A knife, Quayle!" I cried. "It's what you want, isn't it? A knife to bribe a saposaur to wreck somebody else's plantation. That's what brought you here, and now you can have this one, at least!"

He stood frozen. I took a second to turn to Diane. "Good-by," I whispered. She didn't know what I meant by it, but that was all right. If it turned out that she had to know, she would know.

And then I said loudly to Quayle: "I'm going to give you the knife—where it belongs. You put too much trust in conditioning, thinking I can't use this. But maybe you're wrong."

He licked his lips.

"Did you ever hear of a bribe?" I demanded. "Ever hear of a man who was supposed to be conditioned—but wasn't? Well, you're looking at one—and now, Quayle, *here's your knife.*"

And I tensed, and fought my own body to do it; and I jumped for him, the knife raised to plunge into his breast.

And that was the last I saw; I fell senseless to the ground; because, you see, what I had just told him had been a complete and utter lie.

I came to, very slowly, with much pain. A long time had passed. I hurt in places where I'd never known there was a nerve. I was weaker than any living man has a right to be.

But I was alive.

That was all I needed to know. If I was alive, everything was all right; that was the gamble I had taken. The conditioning doesn't prevent, quite. It only punishes. I had sought out that punishment as a bluff, but it was a bluff that could easily have killed me.

Diane was leaning over me. Blearily I focused on her face. Her scent was musky, her expression calm and passionate. "Oliver," she murmured. "You're all right. Don't worry."

"I know," I whispered. "At least I lived through it. That was the hard part."

I rubbed my face. There was heavy beard on it; I had been unconscious at least a full day. I was in a hospital room.

"You didn't kill Quayle with the knife."

"No. The attempt was bad enough. If I'd succeeded, there would have been no chance at all; the conditioning would have killed me."

She looked at me with a glance of wonder and loving admiration. "You knew exactly what was going to happen,

didn't you? When you said all that about a man bribing the immigration people to get in without being conditioned, it was Quayle you were talking about, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"You were right. He wasn't conditioned. He—" She shuddered. "He killed his first two wives, Oliver. Did you know that? But I guess you did—for their inheritance. And he killed others to get them out of the way. He admitted it all, you see, once it was too late and they'd begun to shun him. And he was the one who grabbed me in the fog—from behind, so I couldn't see his face. And then, when you went at him with the knife—"

"I know." I nodded again, beginning to feel better. "He hit me, proving that he wasn't conditioned."

"That's right. And with Vince Borton and the others to see it, there was no doubt. The police listened to them. Vince was framed. Albert admitted it."

"I know."

"And Dunlap? Did you know about him? He wasn't an Earthie; he was from one of the South Pole cities, working for Quayle, running in knives for trade with the saposaurs."

"I know. When he called me Oliver I got suspicious, but I wasn't really sure until I was in the Club. You see, he didn't tell me what Quayle had done when I threw the drink in his face—tried to hit me then too—and he didn't faint. It was suspicious. Vince Borton had to tell me about it. Then I began to think back. The brassard—Dunlap could have done it, and nobody else that I could think of."

Diane leaned forward. "It's all right now," she murmured huskily. "We can forget. Oliver, you're wonderful!"

I said, reaching out to her: "I know."

THE MARTIAN IN THE ATTIC

DUNLOP was short and pudgy; his eyelashes were blond and his hair was gone. He looked like the sort of man you see sitting way off at the end of the stadium at the Big Game, clutching a hot dog and a pennant and sitting with his wife, who would be making him explain every play. Also he stuttered.

The girl at the reception desk of LaFitte Enterprises was a blue-eyed former model. She had Dunlop catalogued. She looked up slowly. She said bleakly: "Yes?"

"I want to see Mr. LaF-F-F—" said Dunlop, and paused to clear his throat. "I want to see Mr. La*Fitte.*"

The ex-model was startled enough to blink. *Nobody* saw Mr. LaFitte! Oh, John D. the Sixth might. Or President Brockenheimer might drop by, after phoning first. Nobody else. Mr. LaFitte was a very great man who had invented most of America's finest gadgets and sold them for some of America's finest money, and he was not available to casual callers. Particularly nobodies with suits that had come right off a rack.

The ex-model was, however, a girl with a sympathetic heart—as was known only to her mother, her employer and the fourteen men who, one after another, had broken it. She was sorry for Dunlop. She decided to let the poor jerk down easy and said: "Who shall I say is calling, sir? Mr. Dunlop? Is that with an 'O,' sir? One moment." And she picked up the phone, trying to smile.

The reception room was carpeted in real Oriental wool —none of your flimsy nylon or even LaFitton!—and all about it were the symbols of LaFitte's power and genius. In a floodlighted nook, stood an acrylic model of the LaFitte Solar Transformer, transparently gleaming. On a scarlet pedestal in the center of the room was the LaFitte

Ion-Exchange Self-Powered Water Still, in the small or forty-gallon-a-second model. (Two of the larger size provided all of London with sparkling clear water from the muddy, silty, smelly Thames.)

Dunlop said hoarsely: "Hold it a second. Tell him that he won't know my name, but we have a mutual friend."

The ex-model hesitated, struggling with the new fact. That changed things. Even Mr. LaFitte might have a friend who might by chance be acquainted with a little blond nobody whose shoes needed shining. It wasn't likely, but it was a possibility. Especially when you consider that Mr. LaFitte himself sprang from quite humble orgins: at one time he had taught at a university.

"Yes, sir," she said, much more warmly. "May I have the friend's name?"

"I d-don't know his name."

"Oh!"

"But Mr. LaFitte will know who I m-mean. Just say the friend is a M— is a M— is a M-Martian."

The soft blue eyes turned bleak. The smooth, pure face shriveled into the hard *Vogue* lines that it had possessed before an unbearable interest in chocolate nougats had taken her from before the fashion cameras and put her behind this desk.

"Get out!" she said. "That isn't a bit funny!"

The chubby little man said cheerfully: "Don't forget the name, Dunlop. And I'm at 449 West 19th Street. It's a rooming house." And he left. She wouldn't give anyone the message, he knew, but he knew, comfortably, that it didn't matter. He'd seen the little goldplated microphone at the corner of her desk. The LaFitte Auto-Sec it was hooked up to would unfailingly remember, analyze and pass along every word.

"Ho-hum," said Dunlop to the elevator operator, "they make you fellows work too hard in this kind of weather. I'll see that they put in air-conditioning."

The operator looked at Dunlop as though he was some kind of a creep, but Dunlop didn't mind. Why should he? He *was* a creep. But he would soon be a very rich one.

Hector Dunlop trotted out into the heat of Fifth Avenue, wheezing because of his asthma. But he was quite pleased with himself.

He paused at the corner to turn and look up at the LaFitte Building, all copper and glass bands in the quaint period architecture that LaFitte liked. Let him enjoy it, thought Dunlop generously. It looks awful, but let LaFitte have his pleasures; it was only fair that LaFitte have the kind of building he wanted. Dunlop's own taste went to more modern lines, but there would be nothing to stop him from putting up a hundred-and-fifty-*two*-story building across the street if he liked. LaFitte was entitled to everything he wanted—as long as he was willing to share with Hector Dunlop. As he certainly would be, and probably that very day.

Musing cheerfully about the inevitable generosity of LaFitte, Dunlop dawdled down Fifth Avenue in the fierce, but unfelt, heat. He had plenty of time. It would take a little while for anything to happen.

Of course, he thought patiently, it was possible that nothing would happen at all today. Whatever human the Auto-Sec reported to might forget. Anything might go wrong. But still he had time. All he had to do was try again, and try still more after that if necessary. Sooner or later the magic words would reach LaFitte. After eight years of getting ready for this moment it didn't much matter if it took an extra day or two.

Dunlop caught his breath.

A girl in needle-pointed heels came clicking by, the hot breeze plastering her skirt against her legs. She glanced casually at the volume of space which Hector Dunlop thought he was occupying and found it empty. Dunlop snarled out of habit; she was not the only hormone-pumping girl who had seen nothing where he stood. But he regained his calm. To hell with you, my dear, he said good-humoredly to himself. I will have you later if I like. I will have twenty like you, or twenty a day if I wish—starting very soon.

He sprinted across Forty-second Street, and there was the gray familiar old-fashioned bulk of the Library.

On a sentimental impulse he climbed the steps and went inside.

The elevator operator nodded. "Good afternoon, Mr. Dunlop. Three?"

"That's right, Charley. As usual." They all liked him here. It was the only place in the world where that was true, he realized, but then he had spent more time here than anywhere else in the world.

Dunlop got out of the slow elevator as it creaked to an approximate halt on the third floor. He walked reminiscently down the wide, warm hall between the rows of exhibits. Just beyond the drinking fountain there—that was the door to the Fortescue Collection. Flanking it were the glass cabinets that housed some of Fortescue's own Martian photographs, along with the unexplained relics of a previous race that had built the canals.

Dunlop looked at the prints and could hardly keep from giggling. The Martians were seedy, slime-skinned creatures with snaky arms and no heads at all. Worse, according to Updyke's *The Martian Adventure,* Fortescue's own *First to Land* and Wilbert, Shevelsen and Buchbinder's *Survey of Indigenous Martian Semi-Fauna* (in the *Proceedings of the Astro-Biological Institute* for Winter, 2011), they smelled like rotting fish. Their mean intelligence was given by Fortescue, Burlutski and Stanko as roughly equivalent to the *Felidae* (though Gaffney placed it higher, say about that of the lower primates). They possessed no language. They did not have the use of fire. Their most advanced tool was a hand-axe. In short, the Martians were the dopes of the Solar System, and it was not surprising that LaFitte's receptionist had viewed describing a Martian as her employer's friend as a gross insult.

"Why, it's Mr. Dunlop," called the librarian, peering out through the wire grating on the door. She got up and came toward him to unlock the door to the Fortescue Collection.

"No, thanks," he said hastily. "I'm not coming in today, Miss Reidy. Warm weather, isn't it? Well, I must be getting along."

When hell freezes over I'll come in, he added to him-

self as he turned away, although Miss Reidy had been extremely helpful to him for eight years; she had turned the Library's archives over to him, not only in the extraterrestrial collections but wherever his researching nose led him. Without her, he would have found it much more difficult to establish what he now knew about LaFitte. On the other hand, she wore glasses. Her skin was sallow. One of her front teeth was chipped. Dunlop would see only TV stars and the society debutantes, he vowed solemnly, and decided that even those he would treat like dirt.

The Library was pressing down on him; it was too much a reminder of the eight grub-like years that were now past. He left it and took a bus home.

Less than two hours had elapsed since leaving LaFitte's office.

That wasn't enough. Not even the great LaFitte's organization would have been quite sure to deliver and act on the message yet, and Dunlop was suddenly wildly anxious to spend no time waiting in his rooming house. He stopped in front of a cheap restaurant, paused, smiled broadly and walked across the street to a small, cozy, expensive place with potted palms in the window. It would just about clean out what cash he had left, but what of it?

Dunlop ate the best lunch he had had in ten years, taking his time. When some fumbling chemical message told him that enough minutes had elapsed, he walked down the block to his rooming house, and the men were already there.

The landlady peered out of her window from behind a curtain, looking frightened.

Dunlop laughed out loud and waved to her as they closed in. They were two tall men with featureless faces. The heavier one smelled of chlorophyll chewing gum. The leaner one smelled of death.

Dunlop linked arms with them, grinning broadly, and turned his back on his landlady. "What did you tell her you w-were, boys? Internal Revenue? The F.B.I.?"

They didn't answer, but it didn't matter. Let her think what she liked; he would never, never, never see her again. She was welcome to the few pitiful possessions in

his cheap suitcase. Very soon now Hector Dunlop would have only the best.

"You don't know your boss's secret, eh?" Dunlop prodded the men during the car ride. "But I do. It took me eight years to find it out. Treat me with a little respect or I m-might have you fired."

"Shut up," said chlorophyll-breath pleasantly, and Dunlop politely obeyed. It didn't matter, like everything else that happened now. In a short time he would see LaFitte and then—

"Don't p-p-push!" he said irritably, staggering before them out of the car.

They caught him, one at each elbow, Chlorophyll opening the iron gate at the end of the walk and Death pushing him through. Dunlop's glasses came off one ear and he grabbed for them.

They were well out of the city, having crossed the Hudson. Dunlop had only the haziest sense of geography, having devoted all his last eight years to more profitable pursuits, but he guessed they were somewhere in the hills back of Kingston. They went into a great stone house and saw no one. It was a Frankenstein house, but it cheered Dunlop greatly, for it was just the sort of house he had imagined LaFitte would need to keep his secret.

They shoved Dunlop through a door into a room with a fireplace. In a leather chair before a fire (though the day was hot) was a man who had to be Quincy LaFitte.

"Hello," said Dunlop with poise, strutting toward him. "I suppose y-you know why I— Hey! What are you d-doing?"

Chlorophyll was putting one gray glove on one hand. He walked to a desk, opened it, took out something—a gun! In his gloved hand he raised it and fired at the wall. *Splat*. It was a small flat sound, but a great chip of plaster flew.

"Hey!" said Dunlop again.

Mr. LaFitte watched him with polite interest. Chlorophyll walked briskly toward him, and abruptly Death reached for—for—

Chlorophyll handed Dunlop the gun he had fired. Dun-

lop instinctively grasped it, while Death took out another, larger, more dangerous-looking one.

Dunlop abruptly jumped, dropped the gun, beginning to understand. "Wait!" he cried in sudden panic. "I've g-g—" He swallowed and dropped to his knees. "Don't shoot! I've g-got everything written d-down in my luh—in my luh—"

LaFitte said softly: "Just a moment, boys."

Chlorophyll just stopped where he was and waited. Death held his gun competently on Dunlop and waited.

Dunlop managed to stammer: "In my *lawyer's* office. I've got the whole th-thing written down. If anything happens to me he ruh—he ruh—he *reads* it."

LaFitte sighed. "Well," he said mildly, "that was the chance we took. All right, boys. Leave us alone." Chlorophyll and Death took their scent and their menace out the door.

Dunlop was breathing very hard. He had just come very close to dying, he realized; one man handed him the gun, and the other was about to shoot him dead. Then they would call the police to deliver the body of an unsuccessful assassin. Too bad, officer, but he certainly fooled us! Look, there's where the bullet went. I only tried to wing the poor nut, but. . . . A shrug.

Dunlop swallowed. "Too bad," he said in a cracked voice. "But naturally I had to take p-precautions. Say. Can I have a drink?"

Mr. LaFitte pointed to a tray. He had all the time there was. He merely waited, with patience and very little concern. He was a tall old man with a very bald head, but he moved quickly when he wanted to, Dunlop noticed. Funny, he hadn't expected LaFitte to be bald.

But everything else was going strictly according to plan!

He poured himself a stiff shot of twelve-year-old bourbon and downed it from a glass that was Steuben's best hand-etched crystal.

He said: "I've got you, LaFitte! You know it, don't you?"

LaFitte gave him a warm, forgiving look.

"Oh, that's the boy," Dunlop enthused. "B-Be a good loser. But you know I've found out what your fortune is based on." He swallowed another quick one and felt the burning tingle spread. "Well. To b-begin with, eight years ago I was an undergrad at the university you taught at. I came across a reference to a thesis called *Certain observations on the Ontogenesis of the Martian P-Paraprimates.* By somebody named Quincy A. W. L-LaFitte, B.S."

LaFitte nodded faintly, still smiling. His eyes were tricky, Dunlop decided; they were the eyes of a man who had grown quite accustomed to success. You couldn't read much into eyes like those. You had to watch yourself.

Still, he reassured himself, he had all the cards. "So I l-looked for the paper and I couldn't f-find it. But I guess you know that!" Couldn't find it? No, not in the stacks, not in the Dean's file, not even in the archives. It was very fortunate that Dunlop was a persistent man. He had found the printer who had done the thesis in the first place, and there it was, still attached to the old dusty bill.

"I remember the w-words," Dunlop said, and quoted from the conclusion. He didn't stutter at all:

" 'It is therefore to be inferred that the Martian paraprimates at one time possessed a mature culture comparable to the most sophisticated *milieux* of our own planet. The artifacts and structural remains were not created by another race. Perhaps there is a correlation with the so-called Shternweiser Anomaly, when conjecturally an explosion of planetary proportions depleted the Martian water supply.' "

LaFitte interrupted: "Shternweiser! You know, I had forgotten his name. It's been a long time. But Shternweiser's paper suggested that Mars might have lost its water in our own historical times—and then the rest was easy!"

Dunlop finished his quotation:

" 'In conjunction, these factors inescapably suggest a pattern. The Martian paraprimates require an aqueous phase for development from grub to imago, as in many terrestrial invertebrates. Yet there has not been sufficient

free water on the surface of Mars since the time of the Shternweiser explosion theory. It seems likely, therefore, that the present examples surviving are mere sexed grubs and that the adult Martian paraprimate does not exist *in vivo*, though its historical existence is attested by the remarkable examples left of their work.' "

"And then," finished Dunlop, "you b-began to realize what you had here. And you d-destroyed all the copies. All, th-that is, b-but one."

It was working! It was all working the way it should!

LaFitte would have thrown him out long ago, of course, if he had dared. He didn't dare. He knew that Dunlop had followed the long, crooked trail of evidence to its end.

Every invention that bore the name LaFitte had come from a Martian mind.

The fact that the paper was suppressed was the first clue. Why suppress it? The name attached to the paper was the second—though it had taken an effort of the imagination to connect a puny B.S. with the head of LaFitte Enterprises.

And all the other clues had come painfully and laboriously along the trail that led past Miss Reidy's room at the Library, the Space Exploration wing of the Smithsonian, the Hall of Extraterrestrial Zooforms at the Museum of Natural History, and a thousand dusty chambers of learning all over the country.

LaFitte sighed. "And so you know it all, Mr. Dunlop. You've come a long way."

He poured himself a gentlemanly film of brandy in a large inhaler and warmed it with his breath. He said meditatively: "You did a lot of work, but, of course, I did more. I had to go to Mars, for one thing."

"The *S-Solar Argosy,*" Dunlop supplied promptly.

LaFitte raised his eyebrows. "*That* thorough? I suppose you realize, then, that the crash of the *Solar Argosy* was not an accident. I had to cover up the fact that I was bringing a young Martian back to Earth. It wasn't easy. And even so, once I had him here, that was only half the

battle. It is quite difficult to raise an exogenous life-form on Earth."

He sipped a drop of the brandy and leaned forward earnestly. "I had to let a Martian develop. It meant giving him an aqueous environment, as close as I could manage to what must have been the conditions on Mars before the Shternweiser event. All guesswork, Mr. Dunlop! I can only say that luck was with me. And even then—why, think of yourself as a baby. Suppose your mother had abandoned you, kicking and wetting your diaper, on Jupiter. And suppose that some curious-shaped creature that resembled Mommy about as much as your mother resembled a tree then took over your raising."

He shook his head solemnly. "Spock was no help at all. The problem of discipline! The toilet training! And then I had nothing but a naked mind, so to speak. The Martian adult mind is great, but it needs to be filled with knowledge before it can create, and that, Mr. Dunlop, in itself took me six difficult years."

He stood up. "Well," he said, "suppose you tell me what you want."

Dunlop, caught off base, stammered terribly: "I w-w-want half of the tuh—of the tuh—"

"You want half of the take?"

"That's ruh—that's—"

"I understand. In order to keep my secret, you want me to give you half of everything I earn from my Martian's inventions. And if I don't agree?"

Dunlop said, suddenly panicked: "But you *must!* If I t-t-tell your secret, anyone can do the same!"

LaFitte said reasonably: "But I already have my money, Mr. Dunlop. No, that's not enough of an inducement . . . But," he said after a moment, "I doubt that such a consideration will persuade you to keep still. And, in fact, I do want this matter kept confidential. After all, six men died in the crash of the *Solar Argosy*, and on that sort of thing there is no statute of limitations."

He politely touched Dunlop's arm. "Come along. You deduced there was a Martian in this house? Let me show you how right you were."

All the way down a long carpeted corridor, Dunlop kept hearing little clicks and rustles that seemed to come from the wall. "Are those your b-bodyguards, LaFitte? Don't try any tricks!"

LaFitte shrugged. "Come on out, boys," he said without raising his voice; and a few feet ahead of them a panel opened and Death and Chlorophyll stepped through.

"Sorry about that other business, Mr. Dunlop," said Chlorophyll.

"No hard f-feelings," said Dunlop.

LaFitte stopped before a door with double locks. He spun the tumblers and the door opened into a dark, dank room.

"V-r-r-roooom, v-r-r-room." It sounded like a huge deep rumble from inside the room.

Dunlop's pupils slowly expanded to admit more light, and he began to recognize shapes.

In the room was a sort of palisade of steel bars. Behind them, chained to a stake, was—

A Martian!

Chained?

Yes, it was chained and cuffed. What could only be the key hung where the Martian would be able to see it always but reach it never. Dunlop swallowed, staring. The Martians in Fortescue's photographs were slimy, ropy, ugly creatures like thinned-out sea anemones, mantall and headless. The chained creature that thundered at him now was like those Martians only as a frog is like a tadpole. It possessed a head, round-domed, with staring eyes. It possessed a mouth that clacked open and shut on great square teeth.

"V-r-r-room," it roared, and then Dunlop listened more closely. It was not a wordless lion's bellow. It was English! The creature was talking to them; it was only the Earth's thick atmosphere that made it boom. "Who are you?" it croaked in a slobbery-drunk Chaliapin's boom.

Dunlop said faintly: "God b-bless." Inside that hideous skull was the brain that had created for LaFitte the Solar Transformer, the Ion-Exchange Self-Powered Water Still, the LaFitte Negative-Impedance Transducer, and a thou-

sand other great inventions. It was not a Martian Dunlop was looking at; it was a magic lamp that would bring him endless fortune. But it was an ugly nightmare.

"So," said LaFitte. "And what do you think now, Mr. Dunlop? Don't you think I did something great? Perhaps the Still and the Transducer were his invention, not mine. But I invented *him*."

Dunlop pulled himself together. "Y-yes," he said, bobbing his head. He had a concept of LaFitte as a sort of storybook blackmail victim, who needed only a leer, a whisper and the Papers to start disgorging billions. It had not occurred to him that LaFitte would take honest pride in what he had done. Now, knowing it, Dunlop saw, or thought he saw, a better tactic.

He said instantly: "Great? N-No, LaFitte, it's more than that. I am simply amazed that you brought him up without, say, r-rickets. Or juvenile delinquency. Or whatever Martians might get, lacking proper care."

LaFitte looked pleased. "Well, let's get down to business. You want to become an equal partner in LaFitte Enterprises, is that what you're asking for?"

Dunlop shrugged. He didn't have to answer. That was fortunate; in a situation as tense as this one, he couldn't have spoken at all.

LaFitte said cheerfully: "Why not? Who needs all this? Besides, some new blood in the firm might perk things up." He gazed benevolently at the Martian, who quailed. "Our friend here has been lethargic lately. All right, I'll make you work for it, but you can have half."

"Th— Th— Thank—"

"You're welcome, Dunlop. How shall we do it? I don't suppose you'd care to take my word—"

Dunlop smiled.

LaFitte was not offended. "Very well, we'll put it in writing. I'll have my attorneys draw something up. I suppose you have a lawyer for them to get in touch with?" He snapped his fingers. Death stepped brightly forward with a silver pencil and Chlorophyll with a pad.

"G-G-Good," said Dunlop, terribly eager. "My l-lawyer

is P. George Metzger, and he's in the Empire State Building, forty-first fl—"

"Fool!" roared the Martian with terrible glee. LaFitte wrote quickly and folded the paper into a neat square. He handed it to the man who smelled of chlorophyll chewing gum.

Dunlop said desperately: "That's not the s-same lawyer."

LaFitte waited politely. "Not what lawyer?"

"My *other* lawyer is the one that has the p-p-papers."

LaFitte shook his head and smiled.

Dunlop sobbed. He couldn't help it. Before his eyes a billion dollars had vanished, and the premium on his life-insurance policy had run out. They had Metzger's name. They knew where to find the fat manila envelope that contained the sum of eight years' work.

Chlorophyll, or Death, or any of LaFitte's hundreds of confidential helpers, would go to Metzger's office, and perhaps present phony court orders or bull a way through, a handkerchief over the face and a gun in the hand. One way or another they would find the papers. The sort of organization that LaFitte owned would surely not be baffled by the office safe of a recent ex-law clerk, now in his first practice.

Dunlop sobbed again, wishing he had not economized on lawyers; but it really made no difference. LaFitte knew where the papers were kept and he would get them. It remained only for him to erase the last copy of the information—that is, the copy in the head of Hector Dunlop.

Chlorophyll tucked the note in his pocket and left. Death patted the bulge under his arm and looked at LaFitte.

"Not here," said LaFitte.

Dunlop took a deep breath.

"G-Good-bye, Martian," he said sadly, and turned toward the door. Behind him the thick, hateful voice laughed.

"You're taking this very well," LaFitte said in surprise.

Dunlop shrugged and stepped aside to let LaFitte precede him through the doorway.

"What else can I d-do?" he said. "You have me cold.

Only—" The Death man was through the door, and so was LaFitte, half-turned politely to listen to Dunlop. Dunlop caught the edge of the door, hesitated, smiled and leaped back, slamming it. He found a lock and turned it. "Only you have to c-catch me first!" he yelled through the door.

Behind him the Martian laughed like a wounded whale.

"You were very good," complimented the thick, tolling voice.

"It was a matter of s-simple s-self-defense," said Dunlop.

He could hear noises in the corridor, but there was time. "N-Now! Come, Martian! We're going to get away from LaFitte. You're coming w-with me, because he won't dare shoot you and—And certainly you, with your great mind, can find a way for us both to escape."

The Martian said in a thick sulky voice: "I've tried."

"But I can help! Isn't that the k-k-key?"

He clawed the bright bit of metal off the wall. There was a lock on the door of steel bars, but the key opened it. The Martian was just inside, ropy arms waving.

"V-r-r-room," it rumbled, eyes like snake's eyes staring at Dunlop.

"Speak more c-clearly," Dunlop requested impatiently, twisting the key out of the lock.

"I said," repeated the thick drawl, "I've been waiting for you."

"Of course. What a t-terrible life you've led!"

Crash went the door behind him; Dunlop didn't dare look. And this key insisted on sticking in its lock! But he freed it and leaped to the Martian's side—at least there they would not dare fire, for fear of destroying their meal-ticket!

"You c-can get us out of here," Dunlop panted, fumbling for the lock on the Martian's ankle cuff and gagging. (It was true. They did smell like rotting fish.) "B-but you must be strong! LaFitte has been a father to you, but what a f-false f-father! Feel no loyalty to him, Martian. He made you his slave, even if he d-did keep you healthy and s-sane."

And behind him LaFitte cleared his throat. "But I didn't," he observed. "I didn't keep him sane."

"No," rumbled the thick, slow Martian voice. "No, he didn't."

The ropes that smelled like rotting fish closed lovingly and lethally around Dunlop.

THIRD OFFENSE

ROYKIN is I. One minute Roykin was in the Web and it was beginning to vibrate and get hot. And then red lightnings flashed and crashed, and then he was naked, on dusty ground, under a pale winter sun. The wind was knifely cold.

Roykin stood up and looked angrily around.

A hoarse voice shouted at him, a voice like Grillard's voice, in a language he didn't understand. Grillard has all of stuffy male wrath in his voice when he talks to Roykin and so had this voice.

But it was not Grillard. It was sobering. Roykin's anger chilled as quickly as his body, for this was no place for anger. He looked around him and what he saw made him momentarily afraid.

Bare dirt was underfoot.

A frozen sky was overhead.

Low wooden barracks surrounded him.

Nearby was a clot of naked men with doomed, opaque faces. They were looking at him. An irregular crescent of men in brown uniforms, splashed jagged black-and-white at the shoulders, surrounded them all. The uniformed men were looking at him too.

Roykin thought angrily: Curse Grillard—what sort of place is this?

It was a cold place that stank with the thick pungency of sweat and sickness. It was a lot worse than the galleys,

Roykin admitted, although at that time he had thought that there could never be anything worse. But that had been his first offense. Naturally this would be worse. Roykin could trust Grillard to see to that.

A man in a brown uniform stepped forward and struck him on the head with an eighteen-inch club.

The blow drove Roykin to the ground.

He climbed to his feet with the unfamiliar sensation of physical pain filling his skull like a breath swelling a balloon.

The man was standing over him still. There was no passion in his face, Roykin noticed. He looked at Roykin as a carpenter might look at a nailhead. Perhaps the nailhead would need another blow and perhaps not, but he wasn't angry at the nail.

Hurriedly Roykin scrambled over to the knot of naked men. They marched off in the shivering cold. The man with the club looked emptily after.

The line of bareskinned men passed a sign lettered in hooked curlicues and straggling lines. Roykin couldn't read it very well, partly because it wasn't in his own language and partly because, although the letters were Roykin's familiar ABCs, they were more ornate than he was used to.

But underneath the more complicated words was one more simple one. He read it:

BELSEN

Roykin slept that night on a board floor with cold air coming up between the cracks.

The smell was appalling. It was a fetid slaughterhouse aroma, like the hot steamy gusts from a rendering plant, but it wasn't hot, it was cold as old ice. It was very difficult for Roykin to get to sleep, particularly because a baby was crying annoyingly near his ear. The baby wept and wept.

"Curse Grillard," Roykin thought in fatigue. His head still hurt badly and that was an inconvenience.

Still . . . it wasn't so bad. Roykin can always adjust

himself to whatever comes along; it's the thing he prides himself on. At least he wasn't pushing an eighteen-foot oar, as in the galleys; *that* was bad, but he adjusted to that well enough, though it was work. Roykin doesn't like work. And they didn't seem to care if the prisoners worked or not in this place, whatever place this was, and that in itself was an improvement. Roykin curled up and set his mind to trying to go to sleep, but the crying baby bothered him.

Roykin propped himself up and looked around.

There was no baby. The baby was a man, ancient as Methuselah's father, with arms like pipestems and a face hacked out of dirty bone—no flesh, no softness—the skin stretched rock tight. His eyes were closed and he was crying, crying.

Roykin could think of nothing that he could do or wanted to do about it, and accordingly returned to the effort to go to sleep. But he remembered things drowsily, things from another place and time. Grillard, furiously angry, hissing into the microphone, "You don't *deserve* another chance, Roykin. You've had chance after chance, and what do you make of them?"

"I don't like your chances," said Roykin.

"The world doesn't like you, Roykin! You're antisocial. You've stolen. You've hurt people. What are we to do? Corrective school, or—"

"I don't like school."

"All right. That leaves only one thing."

Bang, came the gavel, and the microphone enlarged the sound flatly. "Second offense, thirty days, take him away."

And the greasy-feelered police, sparking blue from the ends of their sensors, wrapped themselves around Roykin and rolled him away to the Web.

Roykin, remembering, fell asleep to dream of Grillard and, with fond contempt, of Zenomia, who had watched at the Web as he went and would be waiting at the Web as he returned. Joke on her. Joke on Grillard. Great joke!

For this to Grillard was punishment, designed to cor-

rect, this Web-borne transference to a place of punishment and pain. But Roykin has never been afraid of pain and to Roykin pain has never been punishment.

There was no more parading around naked, though the filth that was in the clothing Roykin received was worse than bare skin. Roykin needed someone to talk to and in time found someone—no, not one of his own people but what was called a Spaniard. The language he spoke was not the inflected loan-worded Spanish Roykin was used to, but an earlier version, still, Roykin could make himself understood and could understand, though some of the words of the jailers were more familiar than the Spanish. And he had found out where he was. Belsen? A concentration camp, explained his informant. For criminals, Jews, homosexuals, aliens and the politically suspect. For *what*? Haltingly the Spaniard tried to explain each of the terms but Roykin lacked patience for instruction in the mores of this time. Where? he asked. Germany.

Where was Germany?

His informant began to look worried, particularly as one of the men in brown uniforms was wandering near. Silently the man crept away.

But Roykin at last remembered; yes, Germany; he had heard of it. Things fell into place. He discovered that the gauntlet he had run naked, was called "medical inspection"; for a while Roykin wondered about the spectrum-readers of his own time who diagnosed physical state by electronic measurement. But Roykin understands these things. This is a place where things are not called by proper names: it is a place where things are concealed in part for purposes of security and in part so that those who were here would lack even the assurance of knowing what was in store for them and should therefore suspect and fear everything. Roykin was determined to remember that principle; it would be helpful when the thirty days were up.

The men in brown uniforms put Roykin to work.

He was taken to an open ditch where blank-faced men

in filthy rags like his own were up-ending wheelbarrows of ash into the trough and others were striking the ash with great hammers. Roykin looked closer and saw what the hammers were for: mixed in the ash were pieces of calcined bone; it was the task of the hammers to shatter them out of shape, perhaps so that the ash itself could be added anonymously to some farmers' soil, perhaps out of an instinct for neatness. Roykin rebelled. No, not at the cremated remains, for that was to be expected in a punishment time, but— "Work," he cried, in the halting German he had begun to pick up. "I not work, I not here for work!"

"Halt's mahl," said one of the men in brown uniform standing by, and moved passionlessly to hit him in the face.

Roykin felt his teeth crumble. He reeled to where he was ordered to go and stood for a moment, tasting the pain. It was an inconvenience again, he thought, appraising it; but not too bad, not too bad at all. Pain has never been punishment for Roykin, as he has said. Pain is only a tingle in the nerve endings, not different from warmth or taste or orgasm; it is only the connotations of pain that make it feared. The pain of a knife rending through the flesh is only in part the message that the cut nerves send. The greater part is fear—fear of death, fear of long slow-healing aches, fear that the wound will never heal, or that an arm or a leg may be lost, an eye go blind. Pain itself is not always feared—even by others than Roykin—the grueling pain of childbirth is more sought than evaded. To the degree to which, for some reason, he was immune to these fears which make pain insupportable, Roykin was immune to pain. This is what Grillard has not been able to learn.

All the same, Roykin picked up his hammer and began to punish the calcined bone.

Roykin understands that there is danger here.

Thirty days is not long, but it was up to him to survive the thirty days; it would be no court's fault if he were killed first. And perhaps, he mused, it had even

been Grillard's wish that he should die here in this place, thus solving the problem of Roykin once and for all. The thought amusing him, he laughed, and he determined then to avoid the worst of the punishments these men offered.

Of such punishments there were many. Around him was more than pain; it was pain multiplied to a pitch that raised it to another magnitude entirely. Roykin discovered that every person in this place was here because it was desired that he die. Some were killed outright by blow or knife or gun. Some were starved. Some were placed in enormous gas chambers, stripped and extinguished; and their corpses ransacked for dental fillings and for rings.

Roykin thought, by the twentieth day, almost wistfully of the galleys. This was not the galleys, this was something different. Here the imprisoned were not commanded to work until they died. Here they were commanded to die.

Roykin had to admit that it made a pattern and even that it had a certain elegance. This was early machine age. There was no need for human slaves, which inevitably made a difference in attitude toward the preservation of human life; the impulse to preserve life rested only on ethical considerations, not on the solid basis of conservation of usable property. There were, however, no ethical considerations in Belsen.

It was a long stride from the tenth century galleys to which his first offense had brought him, but it was not a stride upward.

Still, he survives, though he grows quite thin. Twenty days. Thirty days.

And he felt the invisible Web wrapped, tight and burning, around him. The dying prisoner whom he had been robbing of a moulded piece of bread looked apathetically up at him, then wonderingly, then disappeared.

Roykin dropped a few inches onto a padded couch. Bright lights blazed around him; he was home.

Zenomia was waiting to greet him—of course.

"Pfiu," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Darling Roykin, I am here but—pfiu."

Roykin felt strong as a tiger. He fought his way free of the Web and kicked against the protecting bars. "I stink!" he exulted. "Ah, we all did, Zenomia, but I lived and the others didn't. You, there! Let me out of here."

Behind his glass panel the Web operator, silently disapproving, moved a hand and the bars that kept visitors from tangling with the Web dropped away. Roykin bounded out and clutched the girl.

"We'll get married again," he planned. "I need a woman tonight. Now! You'll do."

"Roykin," she said, straining away, "please bathe. I'll wait."

Roykin laughed and, walking lightly, stripped off his clothes and threw them at the Web operator; they struck the glass and left a mark. Roykin laughed again. He went surely to the dressing rooms on the other side of the door, for he remembered the way. Naked and laughing to himself he passed unremembered faces—men and women who perhaps worked there, perhaps had business elsewhere in the building, perhaps had come to see what it was like. Everyone knew about the Web, though only a few, like Roykin, would ever experience it themselves. Or perhaps they had come to see Roykin! Some of the faces seemed to know him, for they whispered to each other. He laughed louder. Roykin! Roykin knew Roykin too. It was a name that everyone should know!

He was still laughing as the bath sprayed him, soaped him, rinsed him and dried him. "Love?" whispered the bath recording, its perfume sprays and power jets cocked. "Sport? Sleep? What is your pleasure?"

Roykin frowned. The mood for Zenomia had passed him. "Nothing," he decided. "Just get me out of here." Warm gusts of air wrapped themselves obediently around him and the curtain slipped away.

He stepped out and clothed himself, while Zenomia waited lovingly. But he said grandly, "Not now, I will see you later perhaps. Now I intend to visit with Grillard."

Grillard's house stood alone on stilts in six feet of water.

"Hoy!" cried Roykin, waving at the house. "Come get me!"

Obediently the house unrolled a floating streamer from the door to the grassy bank where Roykin stood. He stepped on it and stood grandly as it retracted to deposit him on the doorstep. A silvery voice recognized him and chimed, "Roykin, Roykin," though he had never been there before; trust Grillard, he thought, he hasn't neglected to tell the house that I might appear. Roykin waited, tapping his foot.

Grillard himself appeared.

The handsome face, white-haloed, was dignified but uneasy. "What do you want, Roykin?"

"I'm back, Grillard."

"I know you're back. I signed the order for the Web."

Roykin pushed by him. "You signed the order that sent me there, too."

"I had no choice. What do you want?"

Roykin walked on in and sat down, fingering little knickknacks on a table before him. "Chinese, Grillard?" he guessed, picking up a little figurine. It was quite heavy and dangerous. "It looks Chinese."

"Get out of here, Roykin."

Roykin considered. "No," he decided, "I don't want to do that. I thought I wanted Zenomia, but I didn't want her either. I am not sure what I do want. Is that amusing, Grillard?"

Grillard peered fretfully out from the white whiskers that framed his face. He said uneasily, "I'm warning you, Roykin. The next time will be your third offense, and that isn't a matter of thirty days."

"What is?" asked Roykin dreamily. "No, it wasn't Zenomia I wanted, though she has taut breasts. It wasn't a woman at all. I wanted to frighten someone."

"Get out of here!"

"I may steal your Chinese figurine," said Roykin, "or I may hit you with it. Perhaps I will pull out your whiskers. Have you a wife, Grillard? I don't know, but I could

violate her. I have learned these things, in thirty days with your help as well as elsewhere. I am grateful, I think."

"Roykin," Grillard cried shrilly, "the third offense is—"

"Shut up, old man, and come here," said Roykin, moving toward him, and he couldn't afterward remember what had come next.

But he remembered what happened the next morning, oh, yes.

Grillard, with a bit of surgeon's plaster across his forehead, stood over him on the dais, scowling, and said into the microphone: "The diagnosis is total dissociation, schizoid. Third offense. One day." And then it was the Web again.

Roykin leaped to his feet where the Web dropped him, very angry, for not even Zenomia had been there to see him go. (He thought, though he couldn't remember for sure, that he had been to see her after striking Grillard. Also there had been something about a fire. Perhaps he had made her dislike him.)

But he looked about him, and he was not so angry. This time they had let him keep his clothes and besides, it wasn't very cold.

"Oh, fools," he cried silently, very pleased. Only *one* day?

Roykin was in a city, with trains rumbling overhead on steel stilts. He looked around him and was far from displeased with what he saw. Grillard still had learned nothing; this is exactly the sort of place Roykin likes. Some people were afraid of the Web and consequently walked in the ways that such as Grillard set out before them, but Roykin enjoys being sent to the past. He learns from it, and what he learns he can them employ in his own time. One day? Roykin was almost angry; it should have been more!

He stopped a passerby. "Where am I?"

But the man had no Spanish; he shook his head and

moved irritably along. Another man, this one swarthy this time. "Where am I?" asked Roykin again.

This man, at least, spoke Spanish. Not well, but Roykin could understand it.

"It is the city of Philadelphia, sir," he said, smiling and bowing.

"Philadelphia?" Roykin thought, and then remembered. Oh. Philadelphia. The city was easy to remember. Why not? It was like Pearl Harbor or Waterloo or Thermopylae; you might not remember who fought in a battle, but cannon thundered in the names of the battlefields. "Remember the Fifth of July," Roykin said easily, attempting to make himself liked by the man. It was as one might have said *Remember the Alamo* or *Remember December Seventh.* But it was strange, he thought looking around, that there was no sign of damage. The rebuilding must have been quick and thorough.

"The fifth of July?" repeated the swarthy man, beginning to edge away.

"At sundown," said Roykin, nodding. "Everyone knows. Tragic, but it was one city for a world, was it not? Once the bombs dropped and everyone was so frightened—ah, they backed away then. And bombs on Philadelphia were a small price to pay for ruling out bombs on the rest of the world. Or perhaps, as a Philadelphian, you do not agree." He laughed pleasantly.

The man nodded, but his look was worried. "Yes, sir," he agreed, but he began to walk down the street. "It is the Fifth of July," he said, pausing ten yards away. Feeling himself safe, he permitted himself to smile. "It is not yet sundown," he called, and disappeared around a corner.

Strange.

Roykin doesn't like things to be strange. He hurried after the man, suddenly thinking of something that had not occurred to him before. It was necessary to find the date—not only the day, but the year. For if there were no signs that the bombs had dropped, perhaps it was because . . .

There were newspapers on a stand.

He took one; the date leaped up at him.

Third Offense. One day. It was not too little—not at all, especially with the western sky already turning red in this city, on this day.

There were trains, there were cars, there were many ways of getting out of the city—but not in a matter of minutes, and minutes were all that was left. Roykin stood with the paper dangling from his hand, the man who owned the newsstand clamoring unheard for payment, staring up at the sky. He fancied he saw something there, silvery and tiny. He looked, unable to move. It was really there; he saw it; and then he saw nothing, nor ever again. Third offense—one day—but it came to an end much earlier than that.

THE HATED

THE bar didn't have a name, all it said on the outside was:

Cafe
EAT
Cocktails

which doesn't make a lot of sense. But it was a bar. It had a big TV set going ya-ta-ta ya-ta-ta in three glorious colors, and a jukebox that tried to drown out the TV with that lousy music they play. Anyway, it wasn't a kid hangout. I kind of like it. But I wasn't supposed to be there at all—it's in the contract. I was supposed to stay in New York and the New England states.

Cafe-EAT-*Cocktails* was right across the river. I think the name of the place was Hoboken, I'm not sure. It all had a kind of dreamy feeling to it. I was. . . . Well, I couldn't even remember going there. I remembered one minute I was downtown New York, looking across the

river. I did that a lot. And then I was there. I don't remember crossing the river at all.

I was drunk, you know.

You know how it is? Double bourbons and keep them coming. And after a while the bartender stops bringing me the ginger ale because gradually I forget to mix them. I got pretty loaded long before I left New York, I realize that. I guess I had to get pretty loaded to risk the pension and all.

Used to be I didn't drink much, but now, I don't know, when I have one drink I get to thinking about Sam and Wally and Chowderhead and Gilvey and the captain. If I don't drink I think about them too, and then I take a drink. And that leads to another drink; and it all comes out to the same thing. Well, I guess I said it already, I drink a pretty good amount, but you can't blame me.

There was a girl.

I always get a girl someplace. Usually they aren't much, and this one wasn't either. I mean, she was probably somebody's mother. She was around thirty-five and not so bad, though she had a long scar from under her ear down along her throat to the little round spot where her larynx was. It wasn't ugly. She smelled nice —while I could still smell, you know—and she didn't talk much. I liked that. Only——

Well, did you ever meet somebody with a nervous cough? Like when you say something funny, a little funny, not a big yock, they don't laugh and they don't stop with just smiling, but they sort of cough? She did that. I began to itch, I couldn't help it. I asked her to stop it.

She spilled her drink and looked at me almost as though she was scared—and I'd tried to say it quietly, too. "Sorry," she said, a little angry, a little scared. "*Sorry*. But you don't have to—"

"Forget it."

"Sure. But you asked me to sit down here with you, remember? If you're going to—"

"*Forget it!*" I nodded at the bartender and held up

two fingers. "You need another drink," I said. "The thing is," I said, "Gilvey used to do that."

"What?"

"That cough."

She looked puzzled. "You mean like—"

"God damn it, stop it!" Even the bartender looked over at me that time. Now she was really mad, but I didn't want her to go away. I said, "Gilvey was a fellow who went to Mars with me. Pat Gilvey."

"Oh." She sat down again and leaned across the table, low. *"Mars."*

The bartender brought our drinks and looked at me suspiciously.

I said, "Say, Mac. Would you mind turning down the air-conditioning?"

"My name isn't Mac. No."

"Oh, have a heart. It's too cold in here."

"Sorry." He didn't sound sorry. But I was cold. I mean, that kind of weather, it's always cold in those places. You know around New York in August? It hits eighty, eighty-five, ninety. All the places have air-conditioning and what they really want is for you to wear a shirt and tie. But I like to walk a lot. You would too, you know. And you can't walk around much in long pants and a suit coat and all that stuff. Not around there. Not in August. And so then when I went into a bar it'd have one of those built-in freezers for the used-car salesmen with their dates, or maybe their wives, all dressed up. For what? But I froze.

"Mars," the girl breathed. *"Mars."*

I began to itch again. "Want to dance?"

"They don't have a license," she said. "Byron, *I* didn't know you'd been to *Mars!* Please *tell* me about it."

"It was all right," I said. That was a lie.

She was interested. She forgot to smile. It made her look nicer. She said, "I knew a man—my brother-in-law—he was my husband's brother—I mean my ex-husband—"

"I know."

"He worked for General Atomic. In Rockford, Illinois. You know where that is?"

"Sure." I couldn't go there, but I knew where Illinois was.

"He worked on the first Mars ship. Oh, fifteen years ago, wasn't it? He always wanted to go himself, but he couldn't pass the tests." She stopped and looked at me. I knew what she was thinking. But I didn't always look this way, you know. Not that there's anything wrong with me now, I mean, but I couldn't pass the tests any more. Nobody can. That's why we're all one-trippers.

I said, "The only reason I'm shaking like this is because I'm cold."

It wasn't true, of course. It was that cough of Gilvey's. I didn't like to think about Gilvey, or Sam or Chowderhead or Wally or the captain. I didn't like to think about any of them. It made me shake. You see, we couldn't kill each other. They wouldn't let us do that. Before we took off they did something to our minds to make sure. What they did, it doesn't last forever. It lasts for two years, and then it wears off. That's long enough, you see, because that gets you to Mars and back; and it's plenty long enough, in another way, because it's like a straitjacket. You know how to make a baby cry? Hold his hands. It's the most basic thing there is. What they did to us so we couldn't kill each other, it was like being tied up, like being in a straitjacket, like having our hands held so we couldn't get free. Well. But two years was long enough. Too long.

The bartender came over and said, "Pal, I'm sorry. Look, I turned the air-conditioning down. You all right? You look so—"

I said, "Sure, I'm all right." He sounded worried. I hadn't even heard him come back. The girl was looking worried too, I guess because I was shaking so hard I was spilling my drink. I put some money on the table without even counting it. "It's all right," I said. "We were just going."

"We were?" She looked confused. But she came along

with me, they always do. Once they find out you've been to Mars.

In the next place she said, between trips to the powder room:

"It must take a lot of courage to sign up for something like that. Were you scientifically inclined in school? Don't you have to know an awful lot to be a spaceflyer? Did you ever see any of those little monkey characters they say live on Mars? I read an article about how they lived in little cities of puptents or something like that—only they didn't make them, they grew them. Funny! Ever see those? That trip must have been a real drag, I bet. What is it, nine months? You couldn't have a baby! Excuse me. . . . say. Tell me. All that time, how'd you, well, manage things? I mean, didn't you ever have to go to the you-know, or anything?"

"We managed," I said. She giggled, and that reminded her, so she went to the powder room again. I thought about getting up and leaving while she was gone, but what was the use of that? I'd only pick up somebody else.

It was nearly midnight. A couple of minutes wouldn't hurt. I reached in my pocket for the little box of pills they give us—it isn't refillable, but we get a new prescription in the mail every month, along with the pension check. The label on the box said:

> Caution
> Use only as directed by physician. Not to be taken by persons suffering heart condition, digestive upset or circulatory disease. Not to be used in conjunction with alcoholic beverages.

I took three of them. I don't like to start them before midnight, but anyway I stopped shaking.

I closed my eyes, and then I was on the ship again. The noise in the bar became the noise of the rockets and the air washers and the sludge sluicers. I began to

sweat, although this place was air-conditioned too. I could hear Wally whistling to himself the way he did, the sound muffled by his oxygen mask and drowned in the rocket noise, only still perfectly audible. The tune was *Sophisticated Lady*. Sometimes it was *Easy to Love* and sometimes *Chasing Shadows,* but mostly *Sophisticated Lady*. He was from Juillard. Somebody sneezed, and it sounded just like Chowderhead sneezing. You know how everybody sneezes according to his own individual style? Chowderhead had a ladylike little sneeze—it went *hutta,* real quick, all through the mouth, no nose involved. The captain went *Hrasssh!* Wally was Ashoo, ashoo, *ashoo.* Gilvey was *Hutch*-uh. Sam didn't sneeze much, but he sort of coughed and sprayed, and that was worse. Sometimes I used to think about killing Sam by tying him down and having Wally and the captain sneeze him to death. But that was a kind of a joke, naturally, when I was feeling good. Or pretty good. Usually I thought about a knife for Sam. For Chowderhead it was a gun, right in the belly, one shot. For Wally it was a tommy gun—just stitching him up and down, you know, back and forth. The captain was putting him in a cage with hungry lions, and Gilvey was strangling with my bare hands. That was probably because of the cough, I guess.

She was back. "Please tell me about it," she begged. "I'm *so* curious."

I opened my eyes.

"You want me to tell you about it?"

"Oh, please!"

"About what it's like to fly to Mars on a rocket?"

"Yes!"

"All right," I said. It's wonderful what three little white pills will do. I wasn't even shaking. "There's six men, see? In a space the size of a Buick, and that's all the room there is. Two of us in the bunks all the time, four of us on watch. Maybe you want to stay in the sack an extra ten minutes—because it's the only place on the ship where you can stretch out, you know, the only place where you can rest without somebody's elbow in your side. But you can't. Because by then it's the next

man's turn. And maybe you don't have elbows in your side while it's your turn off watch, but in the starboard bunk there's the air regenerator master valve—I bet I could still show you the business, right around my kidneys—and in the port bunk there's the emergency escape hatch handle. That gets you right in the temple, if you turn your head too fast. And you can't really sleep—I mean not soundly—because of the noise. That is, when the rockets are going. When they aren't going, then you're in free-fall, and that's bad too, because you dream about falling. But when they're going, I don't know, I think it's worse. It's pretty loud. And even if it weren't for the noise, if you sleep too soundly you might roll over on your oxygen line. Then you dream about drowning. Ever do that? You're struggling and choking and you can't get any air? It isn't dangerous, I guess. Anyway, it always woke me up in time. Though I heard about a fellow in a flight six years ago—

"Well. So you've always got this oxygen mask on, all the time, except if you take it off for a second to talk to somebody. You don't do that very often, because what is there to say? Oh, maybe the first couple of weeks, sure—everybody's friends then. You don't even need the mask, for that matter. Or not very much. Everybody's still pretty clean. The place smells—oh, let's see—about like the locker room in a gym. You know? You can stand it. That's if nobody's got space sickness, of course. We were lucky that way. I heard about a flight where two of the crew got space sickness on the first course correction, and chucked up all over the place the second day out. Man! But that's about the way it's going to get anyway, you know. Outside the masks it's soup. It isn't that you smell it so much. You kind of *taste* it, in the back of your mouth, and your eyes sting. That's after the first two or three months. Later on it gets worse. And with the mask on, of course, the oxygen mixture is coming in under pressure. That's funny if you're not used to it. Your lungs have to work a little bit harder to get rid of it, especially after you're asleep, so after a while

the muscles get sore. And then they get sorer. And then—

"Well.

"Before we take off, the psych people give us a long doo-da that keeps us from killing each other. But they can't stop you from thinking about it. And afterwards, after we're back on Earth—this is what you won't read about in the articles—they keep us apart. You know how they work it? We get a pension, naturally. I mean, there's got to be a pension, otherwise there isn't enough money in the world to make anybody go. But in the contract it says to get the pension we have to stay in our own area. The whole country's marked off. Six sections. Each has one big city in it, at least. I was lucky, I got a lot of them. They try to keep it so every man's home town is in his own section, but—well, like with us. Chowderhead and the captain both happened to come from Santa Monica. I think it was Chowderhead that got California, Nevada, all that southwest stuff. It was the luck of the draw. God knows what the captain got."

"Maybe New Jersey," I said, and took another white pill.

We went on to another place.

She said suddenly: "I figured something out. The way you keep looking around."

"What did you figure out?"

"Well, part of it was what you said about the other fellow getting New Jersey. This is New Jersey. You don't belong in this section, right?"

"Right," I said after a minute.

"So why are you here? I know why. You're here because you're looking for somebody."

I said, "That's right."

She said triumphantly, "You want to find that other fellow from your crew! You want to fight him!"

I couldn't help shaking, white pills or no white pills. But I had to correct her.

"No. I want to kill him."

"How do you know he's here? He's got a lot of states to roam around in too, hasn't he?"

"Six. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland —the way down to Washington."

"Then how do you know—"

"He'll be here." I didn't have to tell her how I knew. But I knew.

I wasn't the only one who spent his time at the border of his assigned area, looking across the river or staring across a state line, knowing that somebody was on the other side. I knew. You fight a war and you don't have to guess that the enemy might have his troops a thousand miles away from the battle line. You know where his troops will be. You know he wants to fight too.

Hutta. Hutta.

I spilled my drink.

I looked at her. "You—you didn't—"

She looked definitely frightened. "What's the matter?"

"Did you just sneeze?"

"Sneeze? Me? Did I—"

I said something quick and nasty, I don't know what. No! It hadn't been her. I knew it.

It was Chowderhead's sneeze.

Chowderhead.

Marvin T. Roebuck, his name was. Five-feet eight inches tall. Dark complected, with a cast in one eye. Spoke with a midwest kind of accent, even though he came from California—"shrick" for "shriek," "hawror" for "horror," like that. It drove me crazy after a while. Maybe that gives you an idea what he talked about mostly. A skunk. A thorough-going, deep-rooted, mother-murdering skunk.

I kicked over my chair and roared: "Roebuck! Where are you, damn you?"

The bar was suddenly silent. Only the jukebox kept going.

"I know you're here," I screamed. "Come out and get it, curse you! You louse, I told you I'd get you for calling me a liar the day Wally ripped his mask!"

Silence, everybody looking at me.

Then the door of the men's room opened.

He came out.

He looked *lousy*. Eyes all red-rimmed and his hair falling out—the poor bastard couldn't have been over twenty-nine. He shrieked: "You!" He called me a million names. He said: "Thieving rat, I'll teach you to try to cheat me out of my candy ration!"

He had a knife.

I didn't care. I didn't have anything and that was stupid, but it didn't matter. I got a bottle of beer from the next table and smashed it against the back of a chair. It made a good weapon, you know; I'd take that against a knife any time. I did. I ran toward him, and he came all staggering and lurching toward me, looking crazy and desperate, mumbling and raving—I could hardly hear him, because I was talking too. Nobody tried to stop us. Somebody went out the door and I figured it was to call the cops, but that was all right. Once I took care of him I didn't care what the cops did.

I went for the face.

He cut me first. I felt the knife slide up along my left arm but, you know, it didn't even hurt—only kind of stung a little. I didn't care about that. I got him in the face, and the bottle came away, and it was all like gray and white jelly, and then blood began to spring out. He screamed. Oh, that scream! I never heard anything like that scream; it was what I had been waiting for all my life. I kicked him as he staggered back, and he fell. And I was on top of him, with the bottle, and I was careful to stay away from the heart or the throat, because that was too quick—but I worked over the face, and I felt his knife get me a couple times more, and——

And——

And I woke up, you know. And there was Dr. Santly over me with a hypodermic needle that he'd just taken out of my arm, and four male nurses in fatigues holding me down. And I was drenched with sweat.

For a minute I didn't know where I was. It was a hor-

rible queasy falling sensation, as though the bar and the fight and the world were all dissolving into smoke around me.

Then I knew where I was.

It was almost worse.

I stopped yelling and just lay there, looking up at them.

Dr. Santly said, trying to keep his face friendly and noncommittal, he said: "You're doing much better, Byron, boy. *Much* better."

I didn't say anything.

He said: "You worked through the whole thing in two hours and eight minutes. Remember the first time? You were sixteen hours killing him. Captain Van Wyck it was that time, remember? Who was it this time?"

"Chowderhead." I looked at the male nurses. Doubtfully they let go of my arms and legs.

"Chowderhead," said Dr. Santly. "Oh—Roebuck. That boy," he said mournfully, his expression saddened, "he's not coming along nearly as well as you. *Nearly*. He can't run through a cycle in less than five hours. And, that's funny, it's usually you he. . . . Well, I better not say that, shall I? No sense setting up a counterimpression when your pores are all open, so to speak?" He smiled at me, but he was a little worried in back of the smile.

I sat up. "Anybody got a cigarette?"

"Give him a cigarette, Johnson," the doctor ordered the male nurse by my right foot. Johnson did. I fired up. "You're coming along *splendidly*," Dr. Santly said. He was one of these psych guys that thinks if you say it's so it makes it so. You know the kind? "We'll have you down under an hour before the end of the week. That's *marvelous* progress. Then we can work on the conscious level! Boy, you're doing extremely well, whether you know it or not. Why, in six months—say in eight months, because I like to be conservative—" he twinkled at me—"we'll have you out of here! You'll be the first of your crew to be discharged, you know that?"

"That's nice," I said. "The others aren't doing so well?"

"No. Not at all well, most of them. Particularly Dr.

Gilvey, the run-throughs leave him in terrible shape. I don't mind admitting I'm worried about him."

"That's nice," I said, and this time I meant it.

He looked at me thoughtfully, but all he did was say to the male nurses: "He's all right, now. Help him off the table."

It was hard standing up, I had to hold onto the rail around the table for a minute. I said my set little speech: "Dr. Santly, I want to tell you again how grateful I am for this. I was reconciled to living the rest of my life confined to one part of the country, the way the other crews always did. But this is much better. I appreciate it. I'm sure the others do, too."

"Of course, boy. Of course." He took out a fountain pen and made a note on my chart; I couldn't see what it was, but he looked gratified. "It's only what you have coming, Byron," he said. "I'm grateful that I could be the one to make it come to pass."

He glanced conspiratorially at the male nurses. "You know how important this is to me. It's the triumph of a whole new approach to psychic rehabilitation. I mean to say, our heroes of space travel are entitled to freedom when they come back to Earth, aren't they?"

"Definitely," I said, scrubbing some of the sweat off my face onto my sleeve.

"So we've got to end this system of designated areas. We can't avoid the tensions incident to space travel, no. But if we can help you work off the tensions through a few run-throughs, why, it's not too high a price to pay, is it?"

"Not a bit."

"I mean to say," he said, warming up, "you can look forward to the time when you'll be able to mingle with your old friends from the rocket, free and easy, without any need for restraint. That's a lot to look forward to, isn't it?"

"It is," I said. "I look forward to it very much," I said. "And I know exactly what I'm going to do the first time I meet one—I mean, without any restraints, as

you say," I said. And it was true; I did. Only it wouldn't be a busted beer bottle that I would do it with.

I had much more elaborate ideas than that.

I PLINGLOT, WHO YOU?

I

"LET me see," I said, "this is a time for the urbane. Say little. Suggest much." So I smiled and nodded wisely, without words, to the fierce flash bulbs.

The committee room was not big enough, they had had to move the hearings. Oh, it was hot. Senator Schnell came leaping down the aisle, sweating, his forehead glistening, his gold tooth shining and took my arm like a trap. "Capital, Mr. Smith," he cried, nodding and grinning, "I am so glad you got here on time! One moment."

He planted his feet and stopped me, turned me about to face the photographers and threw an arm around my shoulder as they flashed many bulbs. "Capital," said the senator with a happy voice. "Thanks, fellows! Come along, Mr. Smith!"

They found me a first-class seat, near a window, where the air-conditioning made such a clatter that I could scarcely hear, but what was there to hear before I myself spoke? Outside the Washington Monument cast aluminum rays from the sun.

"We'll get started in a minute," whispered Mr. Hagsworth in my ear—he was young and working for the committee— "as soon as the networks give us the go-ahead."

He patted my shoulder in a friendly way, with pride; they were always doing something with shoulders. He had brought me to the committee and thus I was, he thought, a sort of possession of his, a gift for Senator

Schnell, though we know how wrong he was in that, of course. But he was proud. It was very hot and I had in me many headlines.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Will you state your name, sir?
A. Robert Smith.
Q. Is that your real name?
A. No.

Oh, that excited them all! They rustled and coughed and whispered, those in the many seats. Senator Schnell flashed his gold tooth. Senator Loveless, who as his enemy and his adjutant, as it were, a second commander of the committee but of opposite party, frowned under stiff silvery hair. But he knew I would say that, he had heard it all in executive session the night before.

Mr. Hagsworth did not waste the moment, he went right ahead over the coughs and the rustles.

Q. Sir, have you adopted the identity of "Robert P. Smith" in order to further your investigations on behalf of this committee.

A. I have.

Q. And can you—

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Excuse me.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Certainly, Senator.

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Thank you, Mr. Hagsworth. Sir—that is, Mr. Smith—do I understand that it would not be proper, or advisable, for you to reveal —that is, to make public—your true or correct identity at this time? Or in these circumstances?

A. Yes.

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Thank you very much, Mr. Smith. I just wanted to get that point cleared up.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Then tell us, Mr. Smith—

Q. (Senator Loveless.) It's clear now.

Q. (The Chairman.) Thank you for helping us clarify the matter, Senator. Mr. Hagsworth, you may proceed.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Thank you, Senator Schnell.

Thank you, Senator Loveless. Then, Mr. Smith, will you tell us the nature of the investigations you have just concluded for this committee?

A. Certainly. I was investigating the question of interstellar space travel.

Q. That is, travel between the planets of different stars?

A. That's right.

Q. And have you reached any conclusions as to the possibility of such a thing?

A. Oh, yes. Not just conclusions. I have definite evidence that one foreign power is in direct contact with creatures living on the planet of another star, and expects to receive a visit from them shortly.

Q. Will you tell us the name of that foreign power?

A. Russia.

Oh, it went very well. Pandemonium became widespread: much noise, much hammering by Senator Schnell and at the recess all the networks said big Neilsen. And Mr. Hagsworth was so pleased that he hardly asked me about the file again, which I enjoyed as it was a hard answer to give. "Good theater, ah, Mr. Smith," he winked. I only smiled.

The afternoon also was splendidly hot, especially as Senator Schnell kept coming beside me and the bulbs flashed. It was excellent, excellent.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Mr. Smith, this morning you told us that a foreign power was in contact with a race of beings living on a planet of the star Aldebaran, is that right?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you describe that race for us? I mean the ones you have referred to as "Aldebaranians?"

A. Certainly, although their own name for themselves is—is a word in their language which you might here render as "Triops." They average about eleven inches tall. They have two legs, like you. They have

three eyes and they live in crystal cities under the water, although they are air-breathers.

Q. Why is that, Mr. Smith?

A. The surface of their planet is ravaged by enormous beasts against which they are defenseless.

Q. But they have powerful weapons?

A. Oh, very powerful, Mr. Hagsworth.

And then it was time for me to take it out and show it to them, the Aldebaranian hand-weapon. It was small and soft and I must fire it with a bent pin, but it made a hole through three floors and the cement of the basement, and they were very interested. Oh, yes!

So I talked all that afternoon about the Aldebaranians, though what did they matter? Mr. Hagsworth did not ask me about other races, on which I could have said something of greater interest. Afterwards we went to my suite at the Mayflower Hotel and Mr. Hagsworth said with admiration: "You handled yourself beautifully, Mr. Smith. When this is over I wonder if you would consider some sort of post here in Washington."

"When this is over?"

"Oh," he said, "I've been around for some years, Mr. Smith. I've seen them come and I've seen them go. Every newspaper in the country is full of Aldebaranians tonight, but next year? They'll be shouting about something new."

"They will not," I said surely.

He shrugged. "As you say," he said agreeably, "at any rate it's a great sensation now. Senator Schnell is tasting the headlines. He's up for re-election next year you know and just between the two of us, he was afraid he might be defeated."

"Impossible, Mr. Hagsworth," I said out of certain knowledge, but could not convey this to him. He thought I was only being polite. It did not matter.

"He'll be gratified to hear that," said Mr. Hagsworth and he stood up and winked: he was a great human for winking. "But think about what I said about a job, Mr.

Smith. . . . Or would you care to tell me your real name?"

Why not? Sporting! "Plinglot," I said.

He said with a puzzled face, "Plinglot? Plinglot? That's an odd name." I didn't say anything, why should I? "But you're an odd man," he sighed. "I don't mind telling you that there are a lot of questions I'd like to ask. For instance, the file folder of correspondence between you and Senator Heffernan. I don't suppose you'd care to tell me how come no employee of the committee remembers anything about it, although the folder turned up in our files just as you said?"

Senator Heffernan was dead, that was why the correspondence had been with him. But I know tricks for awkward questions, you give only another question instead of answer. "Don't you trust me, Mr. Hagsworth?"

He looked at me queerly and left without speaking. No matter. It was time, I had very much to do. "No calls," I told the switchboard person, "and no visitors, I must rest." Also there would be a guard Hagsworth had promised. I wondered if he would have made the same arrangement if I had not requested it, but that also did not matter.

I sat quickly in what looked, for usual purposes, like a large armchair, purple embroidery on the headrest. It was my spaceship, with cosmetic upholstery. *Zz-z-z-zit,* quick like that, that's all there was to it and I was there.

II

Old days I could not have timed it so well, for the old one slept all the day, and worked, drinking, all the night. But now they kept capitalist hours.

"Good morning, *gospodin,*" cried the man in the black tunic, leaping up alertly as I opened the tall double doors. "I trust you slept well."

I had changed quickly into pajamas and a bathrobe. Stretching, yawning, I grumbled in flawless Russian in a sleepy way: "All right, all right. What time is it?"

"Eight in the morning, Gospodin Arakelian. I shall order your breakfast."

"Have we time?"

"There is time, *gospodin,* especially as you have already shaved."

I looked at him with more care, but he had a broad open Russian face, there was no trickery on it or suspicion. I drank some tea and changed into street clothing again, a smaller size as I was now smaller. The Hotel Metropole doorman was holding open the door of the black Zis, and we bumped over cobblestones to the white marble building with no name. Here in Moscow it was also hot, though only early morning.

This morning their expressions were all different in the dim, cool room. Worried. There were three of them:

Blue eyes; Kvetchnikov, the tall one, with eyes so very blue; he looked at the wall and the ceiling, but not at me and, though sometimes he smiled, there was nothing behind it.

Red beard—Muzhnets. He tapped with a pencil softly, on thin sheets of paper.

And the old one. He sat like a squat, fat Buddha. His name was Tadjensevitch.

Yesterday they were reserved and suspicious, but they could not help themselves, they would have to do whatever I asked. There was no choice for them; they reported to the chief himself and how could they let such a thing as I had told them go untaken? No, they must swallow bait. But today there was worry on their faces.

The worry was not about me; they knew me. Or so they thought. "Hello, hello, Arakelian," said Blue Eyes to me, though his gaze examined the rug in front of my chair. "Have you more to tell us today?"

I asked without alarm: "What more could I have?"

"Oh," said Blue-Eyed Kvetchnikov, looking at the old man, "perhaps you can explain what happened in Washington last night."

"In Washington?"

"In Washington, yes. A man appeared before one of

the committees of their Senate. He spoke of the *Aldebaratniki*, and he spoke also of the Soviet Union. Arakelian, then, tell us how this is possible."

The old man whispered softly: "Show him the dispatch."

Red Beard jumped. He stopped tapping on the thin paper and handed it to me. "Read!" he ordered in a voice of danger, though I was not afraid. I read. It was a diplomatic telegram, from their embassy in Washington, and what it said was what every newspaper said—it was no diplomatic secret, it was headlines. One Robert P. Smith, a fictitious name, real identity unknown, had appeared before the Schnell Committee. He had told them of Soviet penetration of the stars. Considering limitations, excellent, it was an admirably accurate account.

I creased the paper and handed back to Muzhnets. "I have read it."

Old One: "You have nothing to say?"

"Only this." I leaped up on two legs and pointed at him. "I did not think you would bungle this! How dared you allow this information to become public?"

"How—"

"How did that weapon get out of your country?"

"Weap—"

"Is this Soviet efficiency?" I cried loudly, "is it proletarian discipline?"

Red-Beard Muzhnets intervened. "Softly, comrade," he cried. "Please! We must not lose tempers!"

I made a sound of disgust. I did it very well. "I warned you," I said, low, and made my face sad and stern. "I told you that there was a danger that the bourgeois-capitalists would interfere. Why did you not listen? Why did you permit their spies to steal the weapon I gave you?"

Tadjensevitch whispered agedly: "That weapon is still here."

I cried: "But this report—"

"There must be another weapon, Arakelian. And do you see? That means the Americans are also in contact with the *Aldebaratniki*."

It was time for chagrin. I admitted: "You are right."

He sighed: "Comrades, the Marshal will be here in a moment. Let us settle this." I composed my face and looked at him. "Arakelian, answer this question straight out. Do you know how this American could have got in touch with the *Aldebaratniki* now?"

"How could I, *gospodin?*"

"That," he said thoughtfully, "is not a straight answer but it is answer enough. How could you? You have not left the Metropole. And in any case the Marshal is now coming, I hear his guard."

We all stood up, very formal, it was a question of socialist discipline.

In came this man, the Marshal, who ruled two hundred million humans, smoking a cigarette in a paper holder, his small pig's eyes looking here and there and at me. Five very large men were with him, but they never said anything at all. He sat down grunting; it was not necessary for him to speak loud or to speak clearly, but it was necessary that those around him should hear anyhow. It was not deafness that caused Tadjensevitch to wear a hearing aid.

The old man jumped up. "Comrade Party Secretary," he said, not now whispering, no, "this man is P.P. Arakelian."

Grunt from the Marshal.

"Yes, Comrade Party Secretary, he has come to us with the suggestion that we sign a treaty with a race of creatures inhabiting a planet of the star Aldebaran. Our astronomers say they cannot dispute any part of his story. And the M.V.D. has assuredly verified his reliability in certain documents signed by the late— (cough) —Comrade Beria." That too had not been easy and would have been less so if Beria had not been dead.

Grunt from the Marshal. Old Tadjensevitch looked expectantly at me.

"I beg your pardon?" I said.

Old Tadjensevitch said without patience: "The Marshal asked about terms."

"Oh," I bowed, "there are no terms. These are unwordly creatures, excellent comrade." I thought to mention it as a joke, but none laughed. "Unworldly, you see. They wish only to be friends—with you, with the Americans . . . they do not know the difference; it is all in whom they first see."

Grunt. "Will they sign a treaty?" Tadjensevitch translated.

"Of course."

Grunt. Translation. "Have they enemies? There is talk in the American document of creatures that destroy them. We must know what enemies our new friends may have."

"Only animals, excellent comrade. Like your wolves of Siberia, but huge, as the great blue whale."

Grunt. Tadjensevitch said: "The Marshal asks if you can guarantee that the creatures will come first to us."

"No. I can only suggest. I cannot guarantee there will be no error."

"But if—"

"If," I cried loudly, "If there is error, you have Red Army to correct it!"

They looked at me, strange. They did not expect that. But they did not understand.

I gave them no time. I said quickly: "Now, excellency, one thing more. I have a present for you."

Grunt. I hastily said: "I saved it, comrade. Excuse me. In my pocket." I reached, most gently, those five men all looked at me now with much care. For the first demonstration I had produced an Aldebaranian hand weapon, three inches long, capable of destroying a bull at five hundred yards, but now for this Russian I had more. "See," I said, and took it out to hand him, a small glittering thing, carved of a single solid diamond, an esthetic statue four inches long. Oh, I did not like to think of it wasted! But it was important that this man should be off guard, so I handed it to one of the tall silent men, who thumbed it over and then passed it on with a scowl to the Marshal. I was sorry, yes. It was a favorite thing, a clever carving that they had made in the

water under Aldebaran's rays; it was almost greater than I could have made myself. No, I will not begrudge it them, it was greater; I could not have done so well!

Unfortunate that so great a race should have needed attention; unfortunate that I must now give this memento away; but I needed to make an effect and, yes, I did!

Oh, diamond is great to humans; the Marshal looked surprised, and grunted, and one of the silent, tall five reached in *his* pocket, and took out something that glittered on silken ribbon. He looped it around my neck. "Hero of Soviet Labor," he said, "First Class—With emeralds. For you."

"Thank you, Marshal," I said.

Grunt. "The Marshal," said Tadjensevitch in a thin, thin voice, "thanks you. Certain investigations must be made. He will see you again tomorrow morning."

This was wrong, but I did not wish to make him right. I said again: "Thank you."

A grunt from the Marshal; he stopped and looked at me, and then he spoke loud so that, though he grunted, I understood. "Tell," he said, "the *Aldebaratniki,* tell them they must come to us—if their ship should land in the wrong country . . ."

He stopped at the door and looked at me powerfully.

"I hope," he said, "that it will not," and he left, and they escorted me back in the Zis sedan to the room at the Hotel Metropole.

III

So that was that and *z-z-z-z-zit,* I was gone again, leaving an empty and heavily guarded room in the old hotel.

In Paris it was midday, I had spent a long time in Moscow. In Paris it was also hot and, as the gray-haired small man with the rosette of the Legion in his buttonhole escorted me along the Champs Élysées, slim-legged girls in bright short skirts smiled at us. No matter. I did not care one pin for all those bright slim girls.

But it was necessary to look, the man expected it of me, and he was the man I had chosen. In America I

worked through a committee of their Senate, in Russia the Comrade Party Secretary; here my man was a M. Duplessin, a small straw but the one to wreck a dromedary. He was a member of the Chamber of Deputies, elected as a Christian Socialist Radical Democrat, a party which stood between the Non-Clerical Catholic Workers' Movement on one side and the F.C.M., or Movement for Christian Brotherhood, on the other. His party had three deputies in the Chamber, and the other two hated each other. Thus M. Duplessin held the balance of power in his party, which held the balance of power in the Right Centrist Coalition, which held the balance through the entire Anti-Communist Democratic Front, which supported the Premier. Yes. M. Duplessin was the man I needed.

I had slipped a folder into the locked files of a Senate committee and forged credentials into the records of Russian's M.V.D., but both together were easier than the finding of this right man. But I had him now, and he was taking me to see certain persons who also knew his importance, persons who would do as he told them. "Monsieur," he said gravely, "it lacks a small half-hour of the appointed time. Might one not enjoy an aperitif?"

"One might," I said fluently, and permitted him to find us a table under the trees, for I knew that he was unsure of me; it was necessary to cause him to become sure.

"Ah," said Duplessin, sighing and placed hat, cane and gloves on a filigree metal chair. He ordered drinks and when they came slipped slightly, looking away. "My friend," he said at last, "tell me of *les aldebaragnards.* We French have traditions—liberty, equality, fraternity —we made Arabs into citizens of the Republic—always has France been mankind's spiritual home. But, monsieur. Nevertheless. *Three* eyes?"

"They are really very nice," I told him with great sincerity, though it was probably no longer true.

"Hum."

"And," I said, "they know of love."

"Ah," he said mistily, sighing again. "Love. Tell me, monsieur. Tell me of love on Aldebaran."

"They live on a planet," I misstated somewhat. "Aldebaran is the star itself. But I will tell you what you ask, M. Duplessin. It is thus: When a young Triop, for so they call themselves, comes of age, he swims far out into the wide sea, far from his crystal city out into the pellucid water where giant fan-tailed fish of rainbow colors swim endlessly above, tinting the pale sunlight that filters through the water and their scales. Tiny bright fish give off star-like flashes from patterned luminescent spots on their scales."

"It sounds most beautiful, monsieur," Duplessin said with politeness.

"It is most beautiful. And the young Triop swims until he sees—*Her*."

"Ah, monsieur." He was more than polite, I considered, he was interested.

"They speak not a word," I added, "for the water is all around and they wear masks, otherwise they could not breathe. They cannot speak, no, and one cannot see the other's eyes. They approach in silence and in mystery."

He sighed and sipped his cassis.

"They," I said, "they know, although there is no way that they can know. But they do. They swim about each other searchingly, tenderly, sadly. Yes. Sadly—is beauty not always in some way sad? A moment. And then they are one."

"They do not speak?"

I shook my head.

"Ever?"

"Never until all is over, and they meet elsewhere again."

"Ah, monsieur!" He stared into his small glass of tincture. "Monsieur," he said, "may one hope—that is, is it possible—oh, monsieur! Might one go there, soon?"

I said with all my cunning: "All the things are possible, M. Duplessin, if the Triops can be saved from destruction. Consider for yourself, if you please, that to turn such a people over to the brutes with the Red Star—or

these with the forty-nine white stars—what difference?—is to destroy them."

"Never, my friend, never!" he cried strongly. "Let them come! Let them entrust themselves to France! France will protect them, my friend, or France will die!"

It was all very simple after that, I was free within an hour after lunch and, certainly, *z-z-z-z-zit.*

My spaceship deposited me in this desert, Mojave, I think. Or almost Mojave, in its essential Americanness. Yes. It was in America, for what other place would do? I had accomplished much, but there was yet a cosmetic touch or two before I could say I had accomplished all.

I scanned the scene, everything was well, there was no one. Distantly planes howled, but of no importance: stratosphere jets, what would they know of one man on the sand four miles below? I worked.

Five round trips, carrying what was needed between this desert place and my bigger ship. And where was that? Ah. Safe. It hurled swinging around Mars: yes, quite safe. Astronomers might one day map it, but on that day it would not matter, no. Oh, it would not matter at all.

Since there was time, on my first trip I reassumed my shape and ate, it was greatly restful. Seven useful arms and ample feet, it became easy; quickly I carried one ton of materials, two thousand pounds, from my armchair ferry to the small shelter in which I constructed my cosmetic appliance. Shelter? Why a shelter, you may ask? Oh, I say, for artistic reasons, and in the remote chance that some low-flying plane might blundersomely pass, though it would not. But it might. Let's see, I said, let me think, uranium and steel, strontium and cobalt, a touch of sodium for yellow, have I everything? Yes. I have everything, I said, everything, and I assembled the cosmetic bomb and set the fuse. Good-by, bomb, I said with affection and, *z-z-z-z-zit,* armchair and Plinglot were back aboard my ship circling Mars. Nearly done, nearly done!

There, quickly I assembled the necessary data for the Aldebaranian rocket, my penultimate—or Next to Closing—task.

Now. This penultimate task, it was not a difficult one, no, but it demanded some concentration. I had a ship. No fake, no crude imitation! It was an authentic rocket ship of the Aldeberanians, designed to travel to their six moons, with vent baffles for underwater takeoff due to certain exigencies (e.g., inimical animals ashore) of their culture. Yes. It was real. I had brought it on purpose all the way.

Now—I say once more—now, I did what I had necessarily to do, which was to make a course for this small ship. There was no crew. (Not anywhere.) The course was easy to compute, I did it rather well; but there was setting of instruments, automation of controls—oh, it took time, took time—but I did it. It was my way, I am workmanlike and reliable, ask Mother. The human race would not know an authentic Aldebaranian rocket from a lenticular Cetan shrimp, but they *might*, hey? The Aldebaranians had kindly developed rockets and it was no great trouble to bring, as well as more authentic. I brought. And having completed all this, and somewhat pleased, I stood to look around.

But I was not alone.

This was not a fortunate thing, it meant trouble.

I at once realized what my companion, however unseen, must be, since it could not be human, nor was it another child. Aldebaranian. It could be nothing else.

I stood absolutely motionless and looked, looked. As you have in almost certain probability never observed the interior of an Aldebaranian rocket, I shall describe: Green metal in cruciform shapes ("chairs"), sparkling mosaics of colored light ("maps"), ferrous alloys in tortured cuprous-glassy conjunction ("instruments"). All motionless. But something moved. I saw! An Aldebaranian! One of the Triops, a foothigh manikin, looking up at me out of three terrified blue eyes; yes, I had brought the ship but I had not brought it empty, one of the creatures had stowed away aboard. And there it was.

I lunged toward it savagely. It looked up at me and

squeaked like a bell: "Why? Why, Plinglot, why did you kill my people?"

It is *so* annoying to be held to account for every little thing. But I dissembled.

I said in moderate cunning: "Stand quiet, small creature, and let me get hold of you. Why are you not dead?"

It squeaked pathetically—not in English, to be sure! but I make allowances—it squeaked: "Plinglot, you came to our planet as a friend from outer space, one who wished to help our people join forces to destroy the great killing land beasts."

"That seemed appropriate," I conceded.

"We believed you, Plinglot! All our nations believed you. But you caused dissension. You pitted us one against the other, so that one nation no longer trusted another. We had abandoned war, Plinglot, for more than a hundred years, for we dared not wage war."

"That is true," I agreed.

"But you tricked us! War came, Plinglot! And at your hands. As this ship was plucked from its berth with only myself aboard I received radio messages that a great war was breaking out and that the seas were to be boiled. It is the ultimate weapon, Plinglot! By now my planet is dry and dead. Why did you do it?"

"Small Triop," I lectured, "listen to this. You are male, one supposes, and you must know that no female Aldebaranian survives. Very well. You are the last of your race. There is no future. You might as well be dead."

"I know," he wept.

"And therefore you should kill yourself. Check," I invited, "my logic with the aid of your computing machine, if you wish. But please do not disturb the course computations I have set up on it."

"It is not necessary, Plinglot," he said with sadness. "You are right."

"So kill yourself!" I bellowed.

The small creature, how foolish, would not do this, no. He said: "I do not want to, Plinglot," apologetically. "But I will not disturb your course."

Well, it was damned decent of him, in a figure of speech,

I believed, for that course was most important to me; on it depended the success of my present mission, which was to demolish Earth as I had his own planet. I attempted to explain, in way of thanks, but he would not understand, no.

"Earth?" he squeaked feebly and I attempted to make him see. Yes, Earth, that planet so far away, it too had a population which was growing large and fierce and smart; it too was hovering on the fringe of space travel. Oh, it was dangerous, but he would not see, though I explained and I am Plinglot. I can allow no rivals in space, it is my assigned task, given in hand by the great Mother. Well. I terrified him, it was all I could do.

Having locked him, helpless, in a compartment of his own ship I consulted my time.

It was fleeing. I flopped onto my armchair; *z-z-z-z-zit*; once again in the room in the Hotel Mayflower, Washington, U.S.A.

Things progressed, all was ready. I opened the door, affecting having just awaked. A chambermaid turned from dusting pictures on the wall, said, "Good morning, sir," looked at me and—oh!—screamed. Screamed in a terrible tone.

Careless Plinglot! I had forgot to return to human form.

Most fortunately, she fainted. I quickly turned human and found a rope. It took very much time, and time was passing, while the rocket hastened to cover forty million miles; it would arrive soon where I had sent it. I hurried. Hardly, hardly, I made myself do it, though as anyone on Tau Ceti knows it was difficult for me; I tied her; I forced a pillowcase, or one corner of it, into her mouth so that she might not cry out; and even I locked her in a closet. Oh, it was hard. Questions? Difficulty? Danger? Yes. They were all there to be considered, too, but I had no time to consider them. Time was passing, I have said, and time passed for me.

It was only a temporary expedient. In time she would be found. Of course. This did not matter. In time there would *be* no time, you see, for time would come to an

end for chambermaid, Duplessin, senators and the M.V.D., and then what?

Then Plinglot would have completed this, his mission, and two-eyes would join three-eyes, good-by.

IV

Senator Schnell this time was waiting for me at the curb in a hollow square of newsmen. "Mr. Smith," he cried, "how good to see you. Now, please, fellows! Mr. Smith is a busy man. Oh, all right, just one picture, or two." And he made to shoo the photographers off while wrapping himself securely to my side. "Terrible men," he whispered out of the golden corner of his mouth, smiling, smiling, "how they pester me!"

"I am sorry, Senator," I said politely and permitted him to lead me through the flash barrage to the large room for the hearings.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Mr. Smith, in yesterday's testimony you gave us to understand that Russia was making overtures to the alien creatures from Aldebaran. Now, I'd like to call your attention to something. Have you seen this morning's papers?

A. No.

Q. Then let me read you an extract from Pierce Truman's column which has just come to my attention. It starts, "After yesterday's sensational rev—"

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Excuse me, Mr. Hagsworth.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) "—elations." Yes, Senator?

Q. (Senator Loveless.) I only want to know, or to ask, if that document—that is, the newspaper which you hold in your hand—is a matter of evidence. By this I mean an exhibit. If so, I raise the question, or rather suggestion, that it should be properly marked and entered.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Well, Senator, I—

Q. (Senator Loveless.) As an exhibit, I mean.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Yes, as an exhibit. I—

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Excuse me for interrupting.

It seemed an important matter—important procedural matter, that is.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Certainly, Senator. Well, Senator, I intended to read it only in order to have Mr. Smith give us his views.

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Thank you for that exaplanation, Mr. Hagsworth. Still it seems to me, or at the moment it appears to me, that it ought to be marked and entered.

Q. (The Chairman.) Senator, in my view—

Q. (Senator Loveless.) As an exhibit, that is.

Q. (The Chairman.) Thank you for that clarification, Senator. In my view, however, since as Mr. Hagsworth has said it is only Mr. Smith's views that he is seeking to get out, then the article itself is not evidence but merely an adjunct to questioning. Anyway, frankly, Senator, that's the way I see it. But I don't want to impose my will on the Committee. I hope you understand that, all of you.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Certainly, sir.

Q. (Senator Loveless.) Oh, none of us has any idea, or suspicion, Senator Schnell, that you have any such design, or purpose.

Q. (Senator Duffy.) Of course not.

Q. (Senator Fly.) No, not here . . .

Oh, time, time! I looked at the clock on the wall and time was going, I did not wish to be here when it started. Of course. Ten o'clock. Ten thirty. Five minutes approaching eleven. Then this Mr. Pierce Truman's column at last was marked and entered and recorded after civil objection and polite concession from Senator Schnell and in thus wise made an immutable, permanent, indestructible part of the files of this mutable, transient, soon to be destroyed committee. Oh, comedy! But it would not be for laughing if I dawdled here too late.

Somehow, somehow, Mr. Hagsworth was entitled at last to read his column and it said as follows. Viz.

After yesterday's sensational revelations before the

Schnell Committee, backstage Washington was offering bets that nothing could top the mysterious Mr. Smith's weird story of creatures from outer space. But the toppers may already be on hand. Here are two questions for you, Senator Schnell. What were three Soviet U.N. military attaches doing at a special showing at the Hayden Planetarium last night? And what's the truth beyond the reports that are filtering into C.I.A. from sources in Bulgaria, concerning a special parade scheduled for Moscow's Red Square tomorrow to welcome "unusual and very special" V.I.P.'s, names unknown?

Exhausted from this effort, the committee declared a twenty-minute recess. I glowered at the clock, time, time!

Mr. Hagsworth had plenty of time, he thought, he was not worried. He cornered me in the cloakroom. "Smoke?" he said graciously, offering a package of cigarettes.

I said thank you, I do not smoke.

"Care for a drink?"

I do not drink, I told him.

"Or—?" he nodded toward the tiled room with the chromium pipes; I do not do that either, but I could not tell him so, only, I shook my head.

"Well, Mr. Smith," he said again, "you make a good witness. I'm sorry," he added, "to spring that column on you like that. But I couldn't help it."

"No matter," I said.

"You're a good sport, Smith. You see, one of the reporters handed it to me as we walked into the hearing room."

"All right," I said, wishing to be thought generous.

"Well, I had to get it into the record. What's it about, eh?"

I said painfully (time, time!), "Mr. Hagsworth, I have testified the Russians also wish the ship from Aldebaran. And it is coming close. Soon it will land."

"Good," he said, smiling and rubbing his hands, "very good! And you will bring them to us?"

"I will do," I said, "the best I can," ambiguously, but that was enough to satisfy him, and recess was over.

Q. (Mr. Hagsworth.) Mr. Smith, do I understand that you have some knowledge of the proposed movements of the voyagers from Aldebaran?

A. Yes.

Q. Can you tell us what you know?

A. I can. Certainly. Even now an Aldebaranian rocket ship is approaching the Earth. Through certain media of communication which I cannot discuss in open hearing, as you understand, certain proposals have been made to them on behalf of this country.

Q. And their reaction to these proposals, Mr. Smith?

A. They have agreed to land in the United States for discussions.

Oh, happy commotion, the idiots. The flash bulbs went like mad. Only the clock was going, going, and I commenced to worry, where was the ship? Was forty lousy million miles so much? But no, it was not so much; and when the messenger came racing in the door I knew it was time. One messenger, first. He ran wildly down among the seats, searching, then stopping at the seat on the aisle where Pierce Truman sat regarding me with an ophidian eye, stopped and whispered. Then a couple more, strangers, hatless and hair flying, also messengers, came hurrying in—and more—to the committee, to the newsmen—the word had got out.

"Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman!" It was Senator Loveless, he was shouting; some one person had whispered in his ear and he could not wait to tell his news. But everyone had that news, you see, it was no news to the chairman, he already had a slip of paper in his hand.

He stood up and stared blindly into the television cameras, without smile now, the gold tooth not flashing. He said: "Gentlemen, I—" And stopped for a moment to catch his breath and to shake his head. "Gentlemen," he said, "Gentlemen, I have here a report," staring incredu-

lously at the scrawled slip of paper. In the room was quickly silence; even Senator Loveless, and Pierce Truman stopped at the door on his way out to listen. "This report," he said, "comes from the Arlington Naval Observatory—in, gentlemen, my own home state, the Old Dominion, Virginia—" He paused and shook himself, yes, and made himself look again at the paper. "From the Arlington Naval Observatory, where the radio telescope experts inform us that an object of unidentified origin and remarkable speed has entered the atmosphere of the Earth from outer space!"

Cries. Sighs. Shouts. But he stopped them, yes, with a hand. "But gentlemen, that is not all! Arlington has tracked this object and it has landed. Not in our country, gentlemen! Not even in Russia! But—" he shook the paper before him—"in Africa, gentlemen! In the desert of Algeria!"

Oh, much commotion then, but not joyous. "Double-cross!" shouted someone, and I made an expression of astonishment. Adjourned, banged the gavel of the chairman, and only just in time; the clock said nearly twelve and my cosmetic bomb was set for one-fifteen. Oh, I had timed it close. But now was danger and I had to leave, which I did hardly. But I could not evade Mr. Hagsworth, who rode with me in taxi to hotel, chattering, chattering. I did not listen.

V

Now, this is how it was, an allegory or parable. Make a chemical preparation, you see? Take hydrogen and take oxygen—very pure in both cases—blend them and strike a spark. Nothing happens. They do not burn! It is true, though you may not believe me.

But with something added, yes, they burn. For instance let the spark be a common match, with, so tiny you can hardly detect it, a quarter-droplet of water bonded into its substance—Yes, with the water they will burn—more than burn—*kerblam,* the hydrogen and

oxygen fiercely unite. Water, it is the catalyst which makes it go.

Similarly, I reflected (unhearing the chatter of Mr. Hagsworth), it is a catalyst which is needed on Earth, and this catalyst I have made, my cosmetic appliance, my bomb. The chemicals were stewing together nicely. There was a ferment of suspicion in Russia, of fear in America, of jealousy in France where I had made the ship land. Oh, they were jumpy now! I could feel forces building around me; even the driver of the cab, half-watching the crowded streets, half listening to the hysterical cries of his little radio. To the Mayflower, hurrying. All the while the city was getting excited around us. That was the ferment, and by my watch the catalyst was quite near.

"Wait," said Mr. Hagsworth pleading, in the lobby, "come have a drink, Smith."

"I don't drink."

"I forgot," he apologized. "Well, would you like to sit for a moment in the bar with me? I'd like to talk to you. This is all happening too fast."

"Come along to my room," I said, not wanting him, no, but what harm could he do? And I did not want to be away from my purple armchair, not at all.

So up we go and there is still time, I am glad. Enough time. The elevator could have stuck, my door could have somehow been locked against me, by error I could have gone to the wrong floor—no, everything was right. We were there and there was time.

I excused myself a moment (though it could have been forever) and walked into the inner room of this suite. Yes, it was there, ready. It squatted purple, and no human would think to look at it that it was anything but an armchair, but it was much more and if I wished I could go to it,—*z-z-z-z-zit,* I would be gone.

A man spoke.

I turned, looking. Out of the door to the tiled room spoke to me a man, smiling, red-faced, in blue coveralls. Well. For a moment I felt alarm. (I remembered,

e.g., what I had left bound in the closet.) But on this man's face was only smile and he said with apology: "Oh, hello, sir. Sorry. But we had a complaint from the floor below, plumbing leak. I've got it nearly fixed."

Oh, all right. I shrugged for him and went back to Mr. Hagsworth. In my mind had been—well, I do not know what had been in my mind. Maybe *z-z-z-z-zit* to the George V and telephone Duplessin to make sure they would not allow Russians or Americans near the ship, no, not if the ambassadors made of his life a living hell. Maybe to Metropole to phone Tadjensevtich (not the Marshal, he would not speak on telephone to me) to urge him also on. Maybe farther, yes.

But I went back to Mr. Hagsworth. It was not needed, really it was not. It was only insurance, in the event that somehow my careful plans went wrong, I wished to be there until the very end. Or nearly. But I need not have done it.

But I did. *Z-z-z-z-zit* and I could have been away, but I stayed, very foolish, but I did.

Mr. Hagsworth was on telephone, his eyes bright and angry, I thought I knew what he was hearing. I listened to hear if there were, perhaps, muffled kickings, maybe groans, from a closet, but there were none; hard as it was, I had tied well, surely. And then Mr. Hagsworth looked up.

He said, bleak: "I have news, Smith. It's started."

"Started?"

"Oh," he said without patience, "you know what I'm talking about, Smith. The trouble's started. These Aldebaranians of yours, they've stirred up a hornet's nest, and now the stinging has begun. I just talked to the White House. There's a definite report of a nuclear explosion in the Mojave desert."

"No!"

"Yes," he said, nodding, "there is no doubt. It can't be anything but a Russian missile, though their aim is amazingly bad. Can it?"

"What else possibly?" I asked with logic. "How terri-

ble! And I suppose you have retaliated, hey? Sent a flight of missiles to Moscow?"

"Of course. What else could we do?"

He had put his finger on it, yes, he was right, I had computed it myself. "Nothing," I said and wrung his hand, "and may the best country win."

"Or planet," he said, nodding.

"Planet?" I let go his hand. I looked. I waited. It was a time for astonishment, I did not speak.

Mr. Hagsworth said, speaking very slow, "Smith, or maybe I ought to say 'Plinglot,' that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"Talk," I invited.

Outside there was sudden shouting. "They've heard about the bomb," conjectured Mr. Hagsworth, but he paid no more attention. He said: "In school, Plinglot, I knew a Fat Boy." He said: "He always got his way. Everybody was afraid of him. But he never fought, he only divided others, do you see, and got them to fight each other."

I stood tall—yes, and brave! I dare use that word 'brave,' it applies. One would think that it would be like a human to say he is brave before a blinded fluttering moth, 'brave' where there is no danger to be brave against; but though this was a human only, in that room I felt danger. Incredible, but it was so and I did not wish it.

I said, "What a. you talking about, Mr. Hagsworth?"

"An idea I had," he said softly with a face like death. "About a murderer. Maybe he comes from another planet and, for reasons of his own, wants to destroy our planet. Maybe this isn't the first one—he might have stopped, for example, at Aldebaran."

"I do not want to hear this," I said, with true.

But he did not stop, he said: "We human beings have faults, Plinglot, and an outsider with brains and a lot of special knowledge—say, the kind of knowledge that could get a file folder into our records, in spite of all our security precautions—such an outsider might use our faults to destroy us. Senate Committee hearings—why,

some of them have been a joke for years, and not a very funny one. Characters have been destroyed, policies have been wrecked—why shouldn't a war be started? Because politicians can be relied on to act in a certain way. And maybe this outsider, having watched and studied us, knew something about Russian weaknesses too, and played on them in the same way. Do you see how easy it would be?"

"Easy?" I cried, offended.

"For someone with very special talents and ability," he assured me. "For a Fat Boy. Especially for a Fat Boy who can go faster than any human can follow from here to Moscow, Moscow to Paris, Paris to the Mojave, Mojave to—where? Somewhere near Mars, let's say at a guess. For such a person, wouldn't it, Plinglot, be easy?"

I reeled, I reeled; but these monkey tricks, they could not matter. I had planned too carefully for that, only how did they know?

"Excuse me," I said softly, "one moment," and turned again to the room with the armchair, I felt I had made a mistake. But what mistake could matter, I thought, when there was the armchair and, of course, *z-z-z-z-zit.*

But that was a mistake also.

The man in blue coveralls, he stood in the door but not smiling, he held in his hand what I knew instantly was a gun.

The armchair was there, yes, but in it was of all strange unaccountable people this chambermaid, who should have been bounded in closet, and she too had a gun.

"Miss Gonzalez," introduced Hagsworth politely, "and Mr. Hechtmeyer. They are—well, G-men, though, as you can see, Miss Gonzalez is not a man. But she had something remarkable to tell us about you, Plinglot, when Mr. Hechtmeyer released her. She said that you seemed to have another shape when she saw you last. The shape of a sort of green-skinned octapus with bright red eyes; ridiculous, isn't it? Or is it, Plinglot?"

Ruses were past, it was a time for candid. I said—I said, *"Like this?"* terribly, and I went to natural form.

Oh, what white faces! Oh, what horror! It was remarkable, really, that they did not turn and run. For that is Secret Weapon No. 1, for us of Tau Ceti on sanitation work; for our working clothes we assume the shape of those about us, certainly, but in case of danger we have merely to resume our own. In all Galaxy (I do not know about Andromeda) there is no shape so fierce. Nine terrible arms. Fourteen piercing scarlet eyes. Teeth like Hessian bayonets; I ask you, would *you* not run?

But they did not. Outside a siren began to scream.

VI

I cried: "Air attack!" It was fearful, the siren warned of atomic warheads on their way and this human woman, this Gonzalez, sat in my chair with pointing gun. "Go away," I cried, "get out," and rushed upon her, but she did not move. *"Please!"* I said thickly among my long teeth, but what was the use, she would not do it!

They paled, they trembled, but they stayed; well, I would have paled and trembled myself if it had been a Tau Cetan trait, instead I merely went limp. Terror was not only on one side in that room, I confess it. "Please," I begged, "I must go, it is the end of life on this planet and I do not wish to be here!"

"You don't have a choice," said Mr. Hagsworth, his face like steel. "Gentlemen!" he called, "come in!" And through the door came several persons, some soldiers and some who were not. I looked with all my eyes; I could not have been more astonished. For there was—yes, Senator Schnell, gold tooth covered, face without smile; Senator Loveless, white hair waving; and—oh, there was more.

I could scarcely believe.

Feeble, slow humans! They had mere atmosphere craft mostly but here, eight thousand miles from where he had been eighteen hours before, yes, Comrade Tadjensevitch, the old man; and M. Duplessin, sadly meeting my eyes. It could not be, almost I forgot the screaming siren and the fear.

"These gentlemen," said Hagsworth with polite, "also would like to talk to you, Mr. Smith."

"Arakelian," grunted the old man.

"Monsieur Laplant," corrected Duplessin.

"Or," said Hagsworth, "should we all call you by your right name, Plinglot?"

Outside the siren screamed, I could not move.

Senator Schnell came to speak: "Mr. Smith," he said, "or, I should say, Plinglot, we would like an explanation. Or account."

"Please let me go!" I cried.

"Where?" demanded old Tadjensevitch. "To Mars, Hero of Soviet Labor? Or farther this time?"

"The bombs," I cried. "Let me go! What about Hero of Soviet Labor?"

The old man sighed: "The decoration Comrade Party Secretary gave you, it contains a microwave transmitter, very good. One of our *sputniki* now needs new parts."

"You *suspected* me?" I cried out of fear and astonishment.

"Of course the Russians suspected you, Plinglot," Hagsworth scolded mildly. "We all did, even we Americans—and we are not, you know, a suspicious race. "No," he added thoughtfully, as though there were no bombs to fall, "our national characteristics are . . . what? The conventional caricatures—the publicity hound, the pork-barrel senator, the cut-throat businessman? Would you say that was a fair picture, Mr. Smith?"

"I Plinglot!"

"Yes, of course. Sorry. But that must be what you thought, because those are the stereotypes you acted on, and maybe they're true enough—most of the time. Too much of the time. But not *all* the time, Plinglot!"

I fell to the floor, perspiring a terrible smell, it is how we faint, so to speak. It was death, it was the end, and this man was bullying me without fear.

"The Fat Boy," said Mr. Hagsworth softly, "was strong. He could have whipped most of us. But in my last term he got licked. Guile and bluff—when at last the bluff was called he gave up. He was a coward."

"I give up, Mr. Hagsworth," I wailed, "only let me go away from the bombs!"

"I know you do," he nodded, "what else? And—what, the bombs? There are no bombs. Look out the window."

In seconds I pulled myself together, no one spoke. I went to window. Cruising up and down outside a white truck, red cross, painted with word *Ambulance,* siren going. Only that. No air raid warning. Only ambulance.

"Did you think?" scolded Hagsworth with voice angry now, "that we would let *you* bluff *us?* There's an old maxim—'Give him enough rope'—we gave it to you; and we added a little. You see, we didn't *know* you came from a race of cowards."

. "I Plinglot!" I sobbed through all my teeth. "I am not a coward. I even tied this human woman here, ask her! It was brave, even Mother could not have done more! Why, I sector warden of this whole quadrant of the very Galaxy, indeed, to keep the peace!"

"That much we know—and we know why," nodded Mr. Hagsworth, "because you're afraid; but we needed to know more. Well, now we do; and once M. Duplessin's associates get a better means of communication with the little Aldebaranians, I expect we'll know still more. It will be very helpful knowledge," he added in thought.

It was all, it was the end. I said sadly: "If only Great Mother could know Plinglot did his best! If only she could learn what strange people live here, who, I cannot understand."

"Oh," said Mr. Hagsworth, gentle, "we'll tell her for you, Plinglot," he said, "very soon, I think."

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FREDERIK POHL is a very fine fellow

. . . Fred Pohl is fondly known in science fiction circles for the social commentary in the satires he has written in collaboration with C. M. Kornbluth, and under his own authorship. Aficionados know also that Pohl's science fiction is strictly non-fantastic — in fact even old-fashioned in its adherence to the rules of the game.

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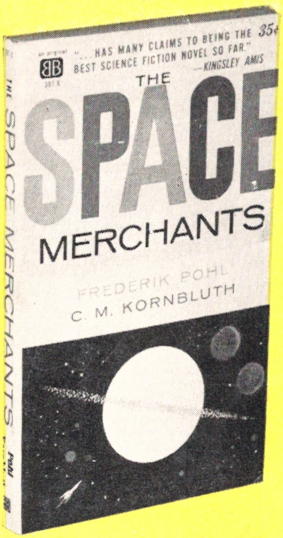

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