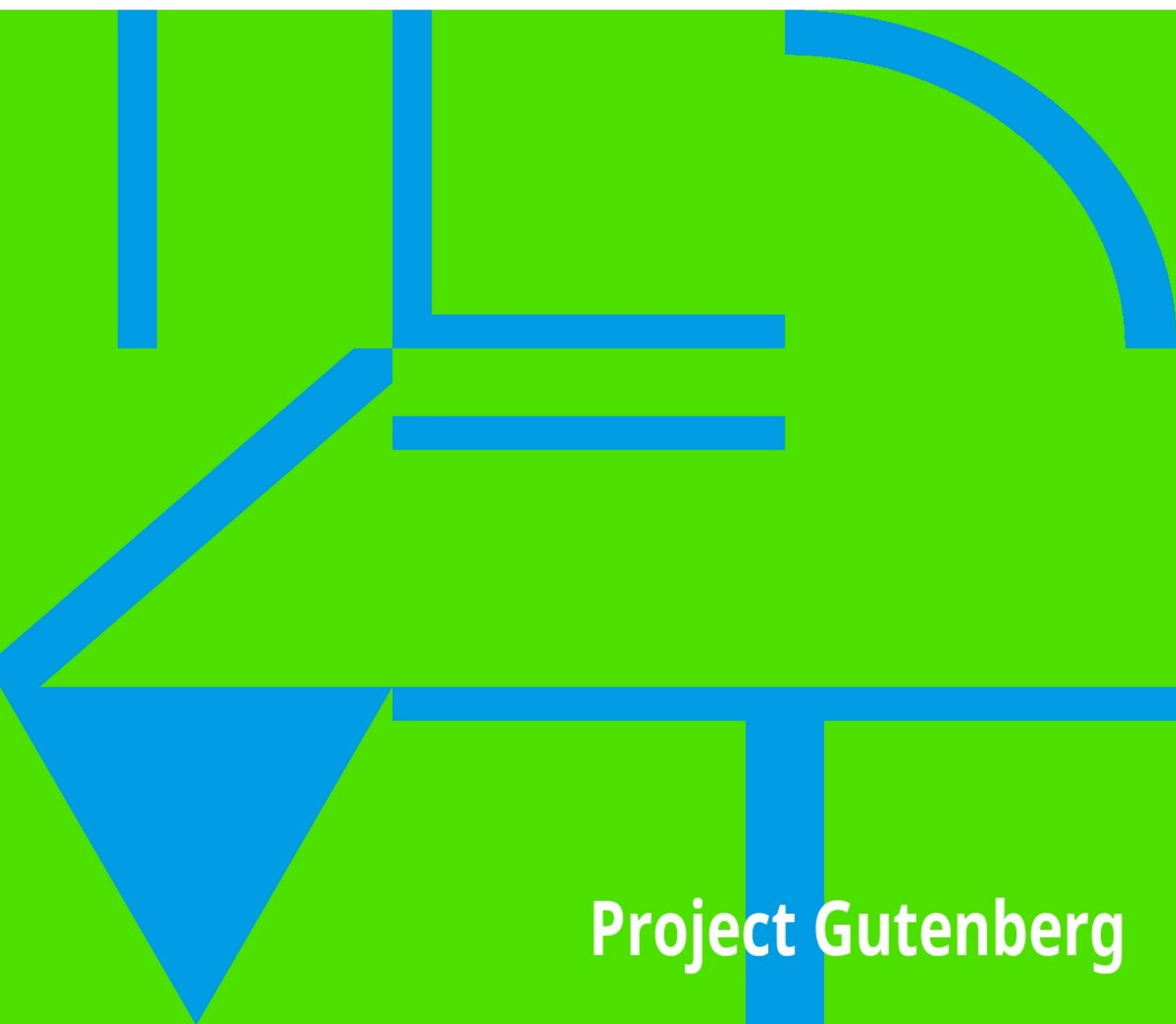


Blind Spot

Bascom Jones



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BLIND SPOT

**By BASCOM JONES,
JR.**

Illustrated by KOSSIN

*Everyone supported the Martian
program—until it struck home!*

JOHNNY STARK, director of the department of Interplanetary Relations for Mars' Settlement One, reread the final paragraph of the note which he had found on his desk, upon returning from lunch earlier in the day.

His eye flicked rapidly over the moistly smeared Martian scrawl, ignoring the bitterness directed at him in the first paragraphs. He was vaguely troubled by the last sentences. But he hadn't been able to pin the feeling down.

... Our civilization predates that of Earth's by millions of years. We are an advanced, peaceful race. Yet, since Earth's first rocket landed here thirteen years ago, we have been looked upon as freaks and contemptuously called 'bug-men' behind our backs! This is our planet. We gave of our far-advanced knowledge and science freely, so that Earth would be a better place. We asked nothing in return, but we were rewarded by having forced upon us foreign ideas of government, religion, and behavior. Our protests have been silenced by an

armed-police and punitive system we've never before needed. Someday you will awaken to this injustice. On that day in your life, you have my sympathy and pity!

Stark knew that the Settlement's Investigations Lab could readily determine the identity of the Martian who had written the note. But he hesitated to send it over. Under the New System, such troublemakers were banished to the slave-labor details of the precious-earth mines to the North.

Crumpling the note in sudden decision, Stark dropped it into the office incendiary tube. The morning visi-report had shown that there were more than 17,000 workers at the mines. Only five had been Earthlings. Let the armed-police system find the Martian through their own channels. It wasn't his job.

A GLANCE at the solar clock on the far wall reminded him there was still time for one more interview before the last bell, so he impatiently signaled his secretary to send in the waiting couple.

Ordinarily, he liked his work and time meant little to him. He had jumped from interpreter to director in the ten years since the department had been created. But this day was different.

Stark was to announce his engagement at the Chief's monthly dinner party that evening and time had seemed to drag since his lunch with Carol.

When the door opened, he rose and nodded to the plump, freckle-faced girl who entered. The girl topped five feet by one or two inches, but she was no taller than the Martian man who followed her at the

prescribed four feet.

After the girl had seated herself, Stark and the Martian sat down. Stark opened the folder, which his secretary had placed on his desk earlier.

"Your names are Ruth and Ralph Gilraut? And you want permission to move into Housing Perimeter D?" It was merely a formality, since the information was in the folder.

When the girl nodded, Stark placed a small check mark in the space beside her name. Then he turned to the Martian.

The large, single red eye set deep in the Martian's smooth, green forehead above the two brown ones blinked twice before he answered.

He spoke deliberately. "As is required of all Martians under the New System, I have taken the name of one of the early Earthlings to write and pronounce." The large red eye blinked again. "My wife would like to move into Housing Perimeter D. By regulation, I respect her wish."

Stark placed a check mark by the Martian's name. He wiped the smudge of ink off his hand and said, "You both know, of course, that Perimeter D is reserved for couples who have intermarried and are about to have offspring?"

The girl and the Martian nodded, and the girl passed Stark a medical report. Stark looked over the report and then made a notation on a small pink slip.

He said, "This permit certifies that you are eligible to move from Perimeter E to Housing Perimeter D. It also certifies that your husband has no record as a troublemaker." Stark looked at the girl. "You understand that you may visit your friends in Perimeter E, but, by law, they will not be allowed to enter Perimeter D to visit you. And, of course, the new law clearly states that neither of you may visit Earthlings in Housing Perimeter A, B or C."

The girl looked down at her hands. Her voice was almost inaudible. "My husband and I are familiar with the advantages and disadvantages listed under the section pertaining to intermarriage in the new law, Mr. Stark. Thank you."

STARK rose as they left. For a brief moment, he thought he had detected a sense of rebellion in their attitude. But that was not possible.

The new law provided equality for all. And his department had been created to iron out relations between the two races—excepting complaints originated by troublemakers for the purpose of weakening the New System. In such cases, Investigations had stepped in and the Martian or Earthling troublemaker had been sent to the rare-earth mines.

The reddish light filtering in through the quartz and lead wall of his office showed that it was almost time for the last bell.

On the street below, shoppers were streaming out of the stores on their way to the various housing perimeters.

Earthlings were climbing into their speedy little jet cars for the short trip to the recently modernized inner perimeters. Martians were waiting for the slower auto buses. The traffic problem had been solved, under the New System, by restricting the use of the Martian-built jet cars to persons living in the inner perimeters.

As Stark watched, a black jet car impatiently hurtled out of the line of traffic, bowled through a crowd of Martians waiting for an auto bus, and skidded to a stop at the curb in front of the building.

A tall girl got out. The red evening glow reflecting from her golden hair, made her breathing globe almost amber. Male Martians and Earthlings alike turned to stare in appreciation as she pushed her way through the crowd to the building's compressor lock. Carol was that kind of girl.

ALMOST at the exact moment that Carol opened the door into Stark's office, the yellow visi-screen of the vocal box upon Stark's desk flashed on brilliantly and the Chief's booming voice filled the office. The light from the screen picked up the highlights on the furniture and gave a sallow, greenish cast to Stark's features. Carol stepped back into the doorway to stay out of range of the two-way unit.

"Stark!" The automatic tuner on the box corrected to bring the Chief's image in wire-sharp focus.

"Yes, sir?"

"About the dinner tonight. Just checking to make sure you're planning to be there. We want a full turnout. An inspection team has come up from Earth and we have two visiting dignitaries from Venus."

Stark nodded and waited for the Chief to say something else, but the visi-screen blanked out.

Carol said, "That was Dad, wasn't it?"

Stark felt very depressed suddenly. "Haven't you told him yet?"

"No. He's been tied up with those inspectors all afternoon. And you know how Dad is, Johnny. There's a right and a wrong time to tell him

things. Right now, he's only interested in hearing about Earth."

"But we're supposed to announce our engagement tonight at the dinner." He shook his head. "We can't go on forever with just a few stolen moments here and there, eating an occasional lunch or third meal together in little out-of-the-way places."

Carol laughed, the youthful swell of her breasts against the soft, spun-glass material of her blouse. "Don't worry so, Johnny! I'm a big girl now. This is my eighteenth birthday. Dad's bark is much worse than his bite. I'll tell him about us on the way home."

She moved closer to him, until he could feel the warmth of her body. He could see the warm, damp indentation where her breathing globe had rested against her shoulders and chest.

She asked teasingly, "What did you get me for my birthday, Johnny? Something real nice?"

"What did you want?" Johnny asked her gently.

AND suddenly she wasn't teasing any more. She put her arms around him. "Dad and my brother would say I'm crazy. But all I want, Johnny, is you. Just you! You know that."

Stark had picked out her birthday present, but he wanted it to be a surprise for that night. He said, "I already saw one of your presents. A black jet car!"

"How did you know that?"

"I saw you drive up in it a few minutes ago."

Carol giggled. "Dad gave it to me. Did you see me plow through that crowd waiting for the auto bus?"

"Did your brother send you anything?"

She nodded. "Three new outfits from Earth. They were on the same liner that brought the inspection team to the Settlement this morning. Oh, yes, and the captain of the liner brought me this."

She showed him the tiny pin she wore attached to her collar. The pin itself was a carefully wrought but cruel caricature of an awkward buglike creature. A small ruby set in the center of its face served as its eye.

Stark frowned. "Carol, you shouldn't be wearing that." He reached up and unpinned it. "That's the sort of thing our department is fighting."

"But the captain said it was the latest rage back on Earth. They're even making toys like it. I'm sure they're not designed to ... to poke fun at anyone."

Stark started to say something, but the last bell interrupted him. He said, "If you're going to take your father home and tell him about us before the dinner, you'd better hurry. I'll come early."

Carol kissed him and said good-by. She left the pin on Stark's desk and was smiling at him as she closed the door.

AFTER waiting until the first rush of workers had gone and the building was quiet, Stark caught the elevator down. The overhead lights in the compressor lock were reflected in the twin rows of breathing globes. The green-tinted ones had to be used by Martians in

the building, and the clear ones were used by Earthmen when they were outside in the Martian atmosphere. Stark stopped in at a little open shop down one of the many side streets. The sign said "Closed," but he rang the bell until a little, dried-up Martian appeared.

The storekeeper handed him a small box. Stark opened it to examine the ring—Carol's birthday present. The single, large diamond set in the thin precious-metal band dated back to an all-but-forgotten custom practiced on Earth. Stark thought the engagement ring would please Carol, though.

Standing in the compressor lock at the Chief's home later, Stark rubbed the diamond against the sleeve of his tunic. He fumbled with his breathing globe and then pushed the button that activated the door. The tele-guard beyond the opening door scanned him rapidly. As he stepped forward, a red light above the tele-guard flashed on and the door began to close again.

Stark threw all his strength against the door and squeezed through into the house.

Throughout the house, Stark could hear the alarm bell. A taped voice, activated by the tele-guard, said, "Do not enter! Do not enter!"

He found Carol and the Chief in the library alone. Nearly purple with rage, the Chief drew himself up to his full six feet.

The Chief bellowed, "Stark! Are you crazy?"

The growing feeling of sickness spread through Stark.

"Who do you think you are?" the Chief yelled. "Get back to your office and consider yourself under arrest as a troublemaker. Give you people an inch and you try to walk away with everything. Why, I wouldn't let you touch my daughter if you were the last living being in the Universe!"

Carol didn't look up. She stood through it all, silently, without moving. Stark knew now where his blind spot had been. He turned and left them.

BACK at his office, he waited for the police. Stark stared down at his reflection in the polished top of the desk. A yellow, moist film of sweat covered his face. The red eye set in his forehead blinked. But the pain visible just behind the surface of that eye was not over Carol or himself.

The pain was for what he was seeing for the first time ... now.

—**BASCOM JONES, JR.**

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