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# stamped CAUTION

# By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

## Illustrated by KOSSIN

*It's a funny thing, but most monsters seem to be of the opinion that it's men who are the monsters. You know, they have a point.*

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en minutes after the crackup, somebody phoned for the Army. That meant us. The black smoke of the fire, and the oily residues, which were later analyzed, proved the presence of a probable petroleum derivative. The oil was heavily tainted with radioactivity. Most likely it was fuel from the odd, conchlike reaction-motors, the exact principles of which died, as far as we were concerned, with the crash.

The craft was mainly of aluminum, magnesium and a kind of stainless steel, proving that, confronted with problems similar to ones we had encountered, aliens might solve them in similar ways. From the crumpled-up wreckage which we dug out of that Missouri hillside, Klein even noticed a familiar method of making girders and braces lighter. Circular holes were punched out of them at spaced intervals.

I kept hunting conviction by telling myself that, for the first time in all remembered history, we were peeking behind the veil of another planet. This should be the beginning of a new era, one of immensely widened horizons, and of high romance—but with a dark side, too. The sky was no longer a limit. There were things beyond it that would have to be reckoned with. And how does unknown meet unknown? Suppose one has no hand to shake?

The mass of that wreck reeked like a hot cinder-pile and a burning garbage dump

combined. It oozed blackened goo. There were crushed pieces of calcined material that looked like cuttlebone. The thin plates of charred stuff might almost have been pressed cardboard. Foot-long tubes of thin, tin-coated iron contained combined chemicals identifiable as proteins, carbohydrates and fats. Food, we decided.

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N

aturally, we figured that here was a wonderful clue to the plant and animal life of another world. Take a can of ordinary beef goulash; you can see the fibrous muscle and fat structure of the meat, and the cellular components of the vegetables. And here it was true, too, to a lesser degree. There were thin flakes and small, segmented cylinders which must have been parts of plants. But most was a homogeneous mush like gelatin.

Evidently there had been three occupants of the craft. But the crash and the fire had almost destroyed their forms. Craig, our biologist, made careful slides of the remains, tagging this as horny epidermis, this as nerve or brain tissue, this as skeletal substance, and this as muscle from a tactile member—the original had been as thin as spaghetti, and dark-blooded.

Under the microscope, muscle cells proved to be very long and thin. Nerve cells were large and extremely complex. Yet you could say that Nature, starting from scratch in another place, and working through other and perhaps more numerous millions of years, had arrived at somewhat the same results as it had achieved on Earth.

I wonder how an other-world entity, ignorant of humans, would explain a shaving-kit or a lipstick. Probably for like reasons, much of the stuff mashed into that wreck had to remain incomprehensible to us. Wrenches and screwdrivers, however, we could make sense of, even though the grips of those tools were not *hand*-grips. We saw screws and bolts, too. One device we found had been a simple crystal diaphragm with metal details—a radio. There were also queer rifles. Lord knows how many people have wondered what the extraterrestrial equivalents of common human devices would look like. Well, here were some answers.

A few of the instruments even had dials with pointers. And the numeral *1* used

on them was a vertical bar, almost like our own. But zero was a plus sign. And they counted by twelves, not tens.

But all these parallels with our own culture seemed canceled by the fact that, even when this ship was in its original undamaged state, no man could have gotten inside it. The difficulty was less a matter of human size than of shape and physical behavior. The craft seemed to have been circular, with compartmentation in spiral form, like a chambered nautilus.

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T

his complete divergence from things we knew sent frost imps racing up and down my spine.

And it prompted Blaine to say: "I suppose that emotions, drives, and purposes among off-Earth intelligences must be utterly inconceivable to us."

We were assembled in the big trailer that had been brought out for us to live in, while we made a preliminary survey of the wreck.

"Only about halfway, Blaine," Miller answered. "Granting that the life-chemistry of those intelligences is the same as ours—the need for food creates the drive of hunger. Awareness of death is balanced by the urge to avoid it. There you have fear and combativeness. And is it so hard to tack on the drives of curiosity, invention, and ambition, especially when you know that these beings made a spaceship? Cast an intelligence in any outward form, anywhere, it ought to come out much the same. Still, there are bound to be wide differences of detail—with wide variations of viewpoint. They could be horrible to us. And most likely it's mutual."

I felt that Miller was right. The duplication of a human race on other worlds by another chain of evolution was highly improbable. And to suppose that we might get along with other entities on a human basis seemed pitifully naive.

With all our scientific thoroughness, when it came to examining, photographing and recording everything in the wreck, there was no better evidence of the clumsy way we were investigating unknown things than the fact that at first we neglected our supreme find almost entirely.

It was a round lump of dried red mud, the size of a soft baseball. When Craig finally did get around to X-raying it, indications of a less dense interior and feathery markings suggesting a soft bone structure showed up on the plate. Not entirely sure that it was the right thing to do, he opened the shell carefully.

Think of an artichoke ... but not a vegetable. Dusky pink, with thin, translucent mouth-flaps moving feebly. The blood in the tiny arteries was very red—rich in hemoglobin, for a rare atmosphere.

As a youngster, I had once opened a chicken egg, when it was ten days short of hatching. The memory came back now.

"It looks like a growing embryo of some kind," Klein stated.

"Close the lump again, Craig," Miller ordered softly.

The biologist obeyed.

"A highly intelligent race of beings wouldn't encase their developing young in mud, would they?" Klein almost whispered.

"You're judging by a human esthetic standard," Craig offered. "Actually, mud can be as sterile as the cleanest surgical gauze."

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T

he discussion was developing unspoken and shadowy ramifications. The thing in the dusty red lump—whether the young of a dominant species, or merely a lower animal—had been born, hatched, started in life probably during the weeks or months of a vast space journey. Nobody would know anything about its true nature until, and if, it manifested itself. And we had no idea of what that manifestation might be. The creature might emerge an infant or an adult. Friendly or malevolent. Or even deadly.

Blaine shrugged. Something scared and half-savage showed in his face. "What'll we do with the thing?" he asked. "Keep it safe and see what happens. Yet it might be best to get rid of it fast—with chloroform, cyanide or the back of a shovel."

Miller's smile was very gentle. "Could be you're right, Blaine."

I'd never known Miller to pull rank on any of the bunch. Only deliberate thought would remind us that he was a colonel. But he wasn't really a military man; he was a scientist whom the Army had called in to keep a finger on a possibility that they had long known might be realized. Yes—space travel. And Miller was the right guy for the job. He had the dream even in the wrinkles around his deep-set gray eyes.

Blaine wasn't the right guy. He was a fine technician, good at machinery, radar—anything of the sort. And a nice fellow. Maybe he'd just blown off steam—uncertainty, tension. I knew that no paper relating to him would be marked, "Psychologically unsuited for task in hand." But I knew just as surely that he would be quietly transferred. In a big thing like this, Miller would surround himself only with men who saw things his way.

That night we moved everything to our labs on the outskirts of St. Louis. Every particle of that extraterrestrial wreck had been packed and crated with utmost care. Klein and Craig went to work to build a special refuge for that mud lump and what was in it. They were top men. But I had got tied up with Miller more or less by chance, and I figured I'd be replaced by an expert. I can say that I was a college man, but that's nothing.

I guess you can't give up participation in high romance without some regret. Yet I wasn't too sorry. I liked things the way they'd always been. My beer. My Saturday night dates with Alice. On the job, the atmosphere was getting a bit too rich and futuristic.

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L

ater that evening, Miller drew me aside. "You've handled carrier pigeons and you've trained dogs, Nolan," he said. "You were good at both."

"Here I go, back to the farm-yard."

"In a way. But you expand your operations, Nolan. You specialize as nurse for a piece of off-the-Earth animal life."

"Look, Miller," I pointed out. "Ten thousand professors are a million times better

qualified, and rarin' to go."

"They're liable to *think* they're well qualified, when no man could be—yet. That's bad, Nolan. The one who does it has to be humble enough to be wary—ready for whatever *might* happen. I think a knack with animals might help. That's the best I can do, Nolan."

"Thanks, Miller." I felt proud—and a little like a damn fool.

"I haven't finished talking yet," Miller said. "We know that real contact between our kind and the inhabitants of another world can't be far off. Either they'll send another ship or we'll build one on Earth. I like the idea, Nolan, but it also scares the hell out of me. Men have had plenty of trouble with other ethnic groups of their own species, through prejudice, misunderstanding, honest suspicion. How will it be at the first critical meeting of two kinds of things that will look like hallucinations to each other? I suspect an awful and inevitable feeling of separateness that nothing can bridge—except maybe an impulse to do murder.

"It could be a real menace. But it doesn't have to be. So we've got to find out what we're up against, if we can. We've got to prepare and scheme. Otherwise, even if intentions on that other world are okay, there's liable to be an incident at that first meeting that can spoil a contact across space for all time, and make interplanetary travel not the success it ought to be, but a constant danger. So do you see our main objective, Nolan?"

I told Miller that I understood.

That same night, Klein and Craig put the lump of mud in a small glass case from which two-thirds of the air had been exhausted. The remainder was kept dehydrated and chilled. It was guess work, backed up by evidence: The rusty red of that mud; the high hemoglobin content of the alien blood we had seen; the dead-air cells—resistant to cold—in the shreds of rough skin that we had examined. And then there was the fair proximity of Mars and Earth in their orbits at the time.

My job didn't really begin till the following evening, when Craig and Klein had completed a much larger glass cage, to which my outlandish—or, rather, outworldish—ward was transferred. Miller provided me with a wire-braced, airtight costume and oxygen helmet, the kind fliers use at extreme altitudes. Okay, call it a spacesuit. He also gave me a small tear-gas pistol, an automatic, and a knife.

All there was to pit such armament against was a seemingly helpless lump of protoplasm, two inches in diameter. Still, here was an illustration of how cautiously you are prompted to treat so unknown a quantity. You are unable to gauge its powers, or lack of them, for you have nothing on which to base a judgment.

I became like a monk—my pressure armor was my robe; the chilly semi-vacuum inside that glass cage, my cell. Nights out with Alice were going to be far between.

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O

n the third evening, that lump of mud, resting in dried-out soil similar to itself, split along the line where Craig had originally cut it. Out onto the cage floor crept what the records designated as *E.T.L.*—Extra-Terrestrial-Life. It was finished with the mud shell that had enabled it to survive a crash and fire.

Craig, Klein, Miller and a lot of news reporters stared into the glass cage from outside. There was nothing for me to do just then except watch that tiny monster, and try to read, in its every clumsy, dragging movement, some fragmentary unveiling of many riddles.

Although it might have shrunk a bit since I had last seen it, it looked more complete. The dusky pink of its wrinkled integument was darker. It had dozens of short tendrils, hardly thicker than horsehair, with which it pulled itself along. It had lost some leaflike pieces of skin. Laterally, two eyes gleamed, clear and slit-pupiled. Its jaws, hinged on a horizontal plane, opened and closed between fleshy flaps. Through the thin plastic of my oxygen helmet, I heard a querulous "chip-chip-chip," which reminded me of the squeaking of an infant bat.

The E.T.L. crept in a small looping course on the cage floor, back to one half of the mud shell that had encased it. It tried to mount this, perhaps to gain a vantage point for better observation. But it fell and turned over. Its ventral surface was ceiling-ward; its tendrils writhed furiously as it tried to right itself. I thought of a horseshoe crab, stranded on its back and kicking helplessly. But this thing's form and movement were even more alien.

After a moment, I followed an impulse which was part duty to my job and part

pity. I tipped the little horror back on its bottom, glad that there was a glove between me and it. Then I did the same thing I would do with a pet puppy or kitten. I set a dish of food—chemically prepared to duplicate the contents of the tubes we had found in the wreck—right down in front of the E.T.L.

It fumbled at the stuff and, possibly because of a gravity two-and-a-half times as great as it was made for, it almost got itself stuck in the mess. But it freed itself. Its mouth-flaps began to make lapping movements as it sucked the nourishment.

I felt prematurely relieved. This was no potentially dominant wizard in a strange body, I told myself. This was pure animal.

Over my helmet radiophone—there was a mike outside the cage, so they could communicate with me when I was inside—I heard Miller say to the reporters:

"The feeding instinct. They've got it, too. Now we know for sure...."

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## I

think that the E.T.L. had colic from that first meal, though, like any half-smart puppy trainer, I tried not to let it eat too much. It writhed for a while, as if in pain. And I was on pins. How was I supposed to know just what was best to feed the thing, so it would survive? Everything was guesswork, varying formulas cautiously, groping. And it wasn't only the food. There was the searching for the temperature, the air-pressure and the degree of dryness at which the E.T.L. seemed most comfortable. And there was also the fiddling around with light-composition and intensities, variable in the sun lamps, to find what seemed best.

We seemed to have figured things out right—or else the monster was just rugged. It shed several skins, thrived and grew active. Its size increased steadily. And other things began to grow in that cage. Odd, hard-shelled, bluish-green weeds; lichenous patches, dry as dust; invisible, un-Earthly bacteria—all were harmless, possibly even beneficial, to my charge.

How did all this stuff come into being? Miller and Craig had examined the dried clay of the E.T.L.'s discarded casing with microscopes. They scraped dust from every fragment of the wreck that hadn't been blasted too much with fire, and made cultures. They were looking for spores and seeds and microbes. And it

wasn't long before they had classified quite a list of other-world biological forms. The most common of these they transplanted into the cage.

Often I even slept inside the cage, clad in my armor. That's devotion to a purpose for you. In a way, it was like living on a little piece of Mars. Often enough I was bored stiff.

But plenty did happen. From the start Etl—we began calling the thing that—showed an almost electrically intense curiosity for everything. Some of the habits of its kind were written in its instincts. It basked in strong light, but it liked dark corners, too. At night—when we turned the sun lamps off, that is—it would bury itself in the dusty soil. Protection against nocturnal cold might have been the reason for that.

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W

hen he was a month and two days out of his clay shell, Etl tried to rear up vertically on his tendrils. He kept toppling over. Maybe he was trying to "walk." But there were no bones in those tendrils and, of course, the strong Earth gravity defeated him.

Lots of times I tried to see what he could do. A real scientist would call this "making tests." I just called it fooling around. I made him climb a stool for his food. He seemed to make a careful survey first, eying each rung; then he drew himself up in one motion.

During one of my rare nights in town—to get a refresher from outlandish stuff in Alice's company—I bought some toys. When I came back to relieve Craig, who had taken care of Etl during my absence, I said: "Etl, here's a rubber ball. Let's play."

He caught it on the second try, in those swift, dextrous tendrils. There was a savagery in the way he did it. I thought of a dog snapping a bumblebee out of the air. Yet my idea that Etl was just an animal had almost vanished by then.

I got into the habit of talking to him the way you do to a pup. Sort of crooning. "Good fella, Etl. Smart. You learn fast, don't you?"

Stuff like that. And I'd coax him to climb up the front of my spacesuit. There

were fine, barb-like prongs along the length of his many tentacles; I could feel them pulling in the tough, rubberized fabric, like the claws of a climbing kitten. And he would make a kind of contented chirping that might have had affection in it.

But then there was the time when he bit me. I don't know the reason, unless it was that I had held onto his ball too long. He got my finger, through the glove, with his snaggy, chalk-hued mandibles, while he made a thin hissing noise.

Pretty soon my hand swelled up to twice its size, and I felt sick. Klein had to relieve me in the cage for a while. The bite turned out to be mildly venomous. Before that, I'd had a rash on my arms. An allergy, probably; maybe some substance from those Martian plants had gotten inside my spacesuit and rubbed onto my skin. Who knows? Perhaps Earthly flesh can sense alien life, and reddens to fight it off. And there you have one of the potential disadvantages of contact with unknown worlds.

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T

hat poisoned bite was one thing. But Etl's show of rage was another—a sign of the mixed nature of all his kind, emerging a bit from the shadows of enigma. Here revealed was the emotion on which things like murder are based. These creatures had it, just as we did. Maybe it's necessary for any kind of thing that can progress upward from nothing. Still, people did not find it reassuring when they heard about it on the newscast.

After that, popular opinion insisted that the cage be constantly surrounded by four manned machine-guns pointing inward. And tanks of cyanogen were so arranged that the poison gas could be sent gushing into the cage at any time.

Part of my mind felt these precautions were completely exaggerated. There is a certain, ever-present segment of any public, whose jittery imagination is a constant fuse-cap for panic. Such cowardice angered me.

But the rest of me went along with Miller when he said: "We're in the dark, Nolan. For all we know, we might be up against very swift maturity and inherited memory. And we've got to go on testing Etl ... with toys, psychological apparatus and tools and devices made by his own people. Suppose he

'remembers' skills from his ancestors, and can build dangerous new devices, or make old ones work again? If his kind are bent on being enemies, we'd better find it out as soon as possible, too, hadn't we? No, I don't truly expect any serious developments, Nolan. Still—just for insurance—eh?"

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A

year passed without great mishap—unless I should mention that Alice and I got married. But it didn't spoil anything, and it raised my morale. We got a bungalow right on the lab grounds.

A lot had been accomplished, otherwise. Once I let Etl play with my gun, minus cartridges. He was avidly interested; but he paid no attention to the Hopalong cap pistol that I left in its place when I took the gun back. He figured out how to grip simple Martian tools, threading his tactile members through the holes in their handles; but complicated devices of the same origin seemed more of a puzzle to him than to the rest of us. So our inherited-memory idea faded out.

Etl liked to work with those slender tendrils of his. The dexterity and speed with which he soon learned to build many things with a construction set seemed to prove a race background of perhaps ages of such activities. I made a tower or a bridge, while he watched. Then he was ready to try it on his own, using screwdrivers that Klein had made with special grips.

Of course we tried dozens of intelligence tests on Etl, mostly of the puzzle variety, like fitting odd-shaped pieces of plastic together to form a sphere or a cube. He was hard to rate on any common human I.Q. scale. Even for an Earthian, an I.Q. rating is pretty much of a makeshift proposition. There are too many scattered factors that can't be touched.

With Etl, it was even tougher. But at the end of that first year Miller had him pegged at about 120, judging him on the same basis as a five-year-old child. This score scared people a lot, because it seemed to hint at a race of super-beings.

But Miller wasn't jumping to conclusions. He pointed out to the reporters that Etl's kind seemed to grow up very rapidly; 120 was only twenty points above the norm—not uncommon among Earth youngsters, especially those from more gifted families. Etl seemed to have sprung from corresponding parentage, he

said, for it seemed clear that they had been of the kind that does big things. They'd made a pioneering voyage across space, hadn't they?

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E

tl could make chirps and squeaks and weird animal cries. Human speech, however, was beyond his vocal powers, though I knew that he could understand simple orders. He had a large tympanic membrane or "ear" on his ventral surface. Of course we wondered how his kind communicated with one another. The way he groped at my fingers with certain of his tentacles gave us a clue. There were tiny, nerve-like threads at their extremities. Seeing them prompted Miller to do something as brave as it was foolhardy.

He called in a surgeon and had a nerve in his arm bared. It must have hurt like the devil, but he let Etl clutch it with those thread-like members.

I was cockeyed enough to follow Miller's example and found out how much it really hurt. The idea was to establish a nerve channel, brain to brain, along which thoughts might pass. But nothing came through except a vague and restless questioning, mixed with the pain of our experiment.

"It doesn't work with us, Nolan," Miller said regretfully. "Our nervous systems aren't hooked up right for this sort of stunt, or Etl's nerve cells are too different from ours."

So we had to fall back on simpler methods of communication with Etl. We tried teaching him sign language, but it didn't work too well, because tentacles aren't hands. Klein's inventive ability, plus some pointers from me about how Etl used his tendrils, finally solved the problem.

Klein made a cylindrical apparatus with a tonal buzzer, operated by electricity, at one end. It had dozens of stops and controls, their grips in the shape of tiny metal rings, along the sides of the cylinder.

First I had to learn a little about how to work that instrument with my big fingers. The trick was to mold the sounds of the buzzer, as human lips and tongue mold and shape tones of the vocal cords, so that they became syllables and words.

"Hell-oh-g-g-Et-t-l-l.... Chee-s-s-ee-whad-d I-ee got-t?"

It was tougher for me than learning to play a saxophone is for a boy of ten. And the noises were almost as bad.

I turned the apparatus over to Etl as soon as I could. Let him figure out how to use it. I'd just give him the words, the ideas. Of course he had to get educated, learn his cat, dog and rat, and his arithmetic, the same as a human kid, even if he was from another world. In a way, it was the law. You can't let a youngster, capable of learning, stay home from school.

And I was Etl's tutor. I thought what a crazy situation we had here; an entity from one planet being brought up on another, without any real knowledge of his own folks, and unable to be very close to those entities by whom he was being reared. It was strange and sad and a little comic.

For a while I thought I had a stammering parrot on my hands: "Hel-l-l-l-o ... Hell-oh-g-o ... N-n-ol-l-an-n-n ... Hell-lo-oh."

Etl never lost that habit of repetition. But he made progress in his studies.

"One, two, t'ree, fo', fibe, siss ... One time one ee one, toot time one ee two...."

Picture it the way it was—I, clad in a spacesuit, crouching beside Etl in the cold, thin air inside that cage, tracing numbers and words in the dusty soil on the floor, while he read aloud with his voice tube or copied my words and figures with a sharp stick. Outside the transparent cage, the television cameras would be watching. And I would think that maybe in a way Etl was like Tarzan, being raised by apes.

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F

our more years went by. I had offspring of my own. Patty and Ron. Good-looking, lovable brats. But Etl was my job—and maybe a little more than that.

At the end of two years, he stopped growing. He weighed fifty-two pounds and he was the ugliest-looking, elongated, gray-pink, leathery ovoid that you could imagine. But with his voice tube clutched in his tendrils, he could talk like a man.

He could take the finest watch, apart, repair and clean it in jig-time—and this was just one skill among scores. Toward the end of the four years, a Professor Jonas was coming in regularly and getting into a spacesuit to give him lessons in physics, chemistry, college math, astronomy and biology. Etl was having his troubles with calculus.

And Etl could at least ape the outward aspects of the thoughts and feelings of men. There were things he said to me that were characteristic, though they came out of apparent sullenness that, for all I knew, had seeds of murder in it: "You're my pal, Nolan. Sort of my uncle. I won't say my father; you wouldn't like that."

Nice, embarrassing sentiment, on the surface. Maybe it was just cool mimicry—a keen mind adding up human ways from observation of me and my kids, and making up something that sounded the same, without being the same at all. Yet somehow I hoped that Etl was sincere.

Almost from the building of the cage, of course, we'd kept photographs and drawings of Mars inside for Etl to see.

Hundreds of times I had said to him things like: "It's a ninety-nine and ninety-nine hundredths per cent probability that your race lives on that world, Etl. Before the ship that brought you crashed on Earth, we weren't at all sure that it was inhabited, and it's still an awful mystery. I guess maybe you'll want to go there. Maybe you'll help us make contact and establish amicable relations with the inhabitants—if there's any way we can do that."

During those five years, no more ships came to Earth from space, as far as we knew. I guessed that the Martians understood how supremely hard it would be to make friendly contact between the peoples of two worlds that had always been separate. There was difference of form, and certainly difference of esthetic concepts. Of custom, nothing could be the same. We didn't have even an inkling of what the Martian civilization would be like.

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O

ne thing happened during the third year of Etl's existence. And his presence on Earth was responsible. Enough serious interest in space travel was built up to overcome the human inertia that had counteracted the long-standing knowledge

that such things were possible. A hydrogen-fusion reaction motor was built into a rocket, which was then hurled to the moon.

Miller went along, ostensibly to help establish the first Army experimental station there, but mostly to acquire the practical experience for a far longer leap.

In a way, I wished I could have gone, too; but, after all, the shadows in Etl's background were far more intriguing than the dead and airless craters and plains of the lunar surface.

Before Miller and the other moon-voyagers even returned, Detroit was busy forging, casting and machining the parts for a better, larger and much longer-range rocket, to be assembled in White Sands, New Mexico.

When Miller got back, he was too eager and busy to say much about the moon. For the next two and a half years, he was mostly out in White Sands.

But during the first of our now infrequent meetings, he said to Craig and Klein and me: "When I go out to Mars, I'd like to keep my old bunch as crew. I need men I'm used to working with, those who understand the problems we're up against. I have a plan that makes sense. The trouble is, to join this expedition, a man has to be part damn-fool."

Klein chuckled. "I'll sell you some of mine."

I just nodded my way in. I'd never thought of backing out.

Craig grabbed Miller's hand and shook it.

Miller gave Etl a chance to say no. "You can stay on Earth if you want to, Etl."

But the creature said: "I have lived all my life with the idea of going, Miller. Thank you."

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M

iller briefed us about his plan. Then he, Klein, Craig and I all took a lot of psych tests—trick questioning and so forth to reveal defects of conviction and control. But we were all pretty well indoctrinated and steady. Etl had taken so many tests already that, if there were any flaws still hidden in him, they would probably

never be found.

Mars and Earth were approaching closer to each other again in their orbital positions. A month before takeoff time, Craig, Klein and I took Etl, in a small air-conditioned cage, to White Sands. The ship towered there, silvery, already completed. We knew its structure and the function of its machinery intimately from study of its blueprints. But our acquaintance with it had to be actual, too. So we went over it again and again, under Miller's tutelage.

Miller wrote a last message, to be handed to the newscast boys after our departure:

"*If by Martian action, we fail to return, don't blame the Martians too quickly, because there is a difference and a doubt. Contact between worlds is worth more than the poison of a grudge....*"

I said good-by to Alice and the kids, who had come out to see me off. I felt pretty punk. Maybe I was a stinker, going off like that. But, on the other hand, that wasn't entirely the right way to look at things, because Patty's and Ron's faces fairly glowed with pride for their pa. The tough part, then, was for Alice, who knew what it was all about. Yet she looked proud, too. And she didn't go damp.

"If it weren't for the kids, I'd be trying to go along, Louie," she told me. "Take care of yourself."

She knew that a guy has to do what's in his heart. I think that the basic and initial motive of exploration is that richest of human commodities—high romance. The metallic ores and other commercial stuff that get involved later are only cheap by-products. To make the dream of space travel a reality was one of our purposes. But to try to forestall the danger behind it was at least as important.

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W

e blasted off in a rush of fire that must have knocked down some self-operating television cameras. We endured the strangling thrust of acceleration, and then the weightlessness of just coasting on our built-up velocity. We saw the stars and the black sky of space. We saw the Earth dwindle away behind us.

But the journey itself, though it lasted ninety days, was no real adventure—comparatively speaking. There was nothing unpredictable in it. Space conditions were known. We even knew about the tension of nostalgia. But we understood, too, the mental attitudes that could lessen the strain. Crossing space to another world under the tremendous power of atomic fusion, and under the precise guidance of mathematics and piloting devices, reduces the process almost to a formula. If things go right, you get where you're going; if not, there isn't much you can do. Anyway, we had the feeling that the technical side of interplanetary travel was the simplest part.

There is a marking near the Martian equator shaped like the funnel of a gigantic tornado. It is the red planet's most conspicuous feature and it includes probably the least arid territory of a cold, arid world. Syrtis Major, it is called. Astronomers had always supposed it to be an ancient sea-bottom. That was where our piloting devices were set to take us.

Over it, our retarding fore-jets blazed for the last time. Our retractable wings slid from their sockets and took hold of the thin atmosphere with a thump and a soft rustle. On great rubber-tired wheels, our ship—horizontal now, like a plane—landed in a broad valley that must have been cleared of boulders by Martian engineers countless ages before.

Our craft stopped rumbling. We peered from the windows of our cabin, saw the deep blue of the sky and the smaller but brilliant Sun. We saw little dusty whirlwinds, carven monoliths that were weathering away, strange blue-green vegetation, some of which we could recognize. To the east, a metal tower glinted. And a mile beyond it there was a tremendous flat structure. An expanse of glassy roof shone. What might have been a highway curved like a white ribbon into the distance.

The scene was quiet, beautiful and sad. You could feel that here maybe a hundred civilizations had risen, and had sunk back into the dust. Mars was no older than the Earth; but it was smaller, had cooled faster and must have borne life sooner. Perhaps some of those earlier cultures had achieved space travel. But, if so, it had been forgotten until recent years. Very soon now its result would be tested. The meeting of alien entity with alien entity was at hand.

I looked at Etl, still in his air-conditioned cage. His stalked eyes had a glow and they swayed nervously. Here was the home-planet that he had never seen. Was he eager or frightened, or both?

His education and experience were Earthly. He knew no more of Mars than we did. Yet, now that he was here and probably at home, did difference of physical structure and emotion make him feel that the rest of us were enemies, forever too different for friendly contact? My hide began to pucker.

---

H

igh in the sky, some kind of aircraft glistened. On the distant turnpike there were the shining specks of vehicles that vanished from sight behind a ridge shaggy with vegetation.

Miller had a tight, nervous smile. "Remember, men," he said. "Passivity. Three men can't afford to get into a fight with a whole planet."

We put on spacesuits, which we'd need if someone damaged our rocket. It had been known for years that Martian air was too thin and far too poor in oxygen for human lungs. Even Etl, in his cage, had an oxygen mask that Klein had made for him. We had provided him with this because the Martian atmosphere, drifting away through the ages, might be even leaner than the mixture we'd given Etl on Earth. That had been based on spectroscopic analyses at 40 to 60 million miles' distance, which isn't close enough for any certainty.

Now all we could do was wait and see what would happen. I know that some jerks, trying to make contact with the inhabitants of an unknown world, would just barge in and take over. Maybe they'd wave a few times and grin. If instead of being met like brothers, they were shot at, they'd be inclined to start shooting. If they got out alive, their hatred would be everlasting. We had more sense.

Yet *passivity* was a word that I didn't entirely like. It sounded spineless. The art of balancing naive trust exactly against hard cynicism, to try to produce something that makes a little sense, isn't always easy. Though we knew something of Martians, we didn't know nearly enough. Our plan might be wrong; we might turn out to be dead idiots in a short time. Still, it was the best thing that we could think of.

The afternoon wore on. With the dropping temperature, a cold pearly haze began to form around the horizon. The landscape around us was too quiet. And there was plenty of vegetation at hand to provide cover. Maybe it had been a mistake

to land here. But we couldn't see that an arid place would be any good either. We had needed to come to a region that was probably inhabited.

We saw a Martian only once—scampering across an open glade, holding himself high on his stiffened tentacles. Here, where the gravity was only thirty-eight percent of the terrestrial, that was possible. It lessened the eeriness a lot to know beforehand what a Martian looked like. He looked like Etl.

---

L

ater, something pinged savagely against the flank of our rocket. So there were trigger-happy individuals here, too. But I remembered how, on Earth, Etl's cage had been surrounded by machine-guns and cyanogen tanks, rigged to kill him quickly if it became necessary. That hadn't been malice, only sensible precaution against the unpredictable. And wasn't our being surrounded by weapons here only the same thing, from another viewpoint? Yet it didn't feel pleasant, sensible or not.

There were no more shots for half an hour. But our tension mounted with the waiting.

Finally Klein said through his helmet phone: "Maybe Etl ought to go out and scout around now."

Etl was naturally the only one of us who had much chance for success.

"Go only if you really want to, Etl," Miller said. "It could be dangerous even for you."

But Etl had already put on his oxygen mask. Air hissed into his cage from the greater pressure outside as he turned a valve. Then he unlatched the cage-door. He wouldn't be harmed by the brief exposure to atmosphere of Earth-density while he moved to our rocket's airlock. Now he was getting around high on his tendrils. Like a true Martian.

He left his specially built pistol behind, according to plan. We had weapons, but we didn't mean to use them unless everything went dead wrong.

Etl's tendrils touched the dusty surface of Mars. A minute later, he disappeared

behind some scrub growths. Then, for ten minutes, the pendant silence was heavy. It was broken by the sound of a shot, coming back to us thinly through the rarefied air.

"Maybe they got him," Craig said anxiously.

Nobody answered. I thought of an old story I'd read about a boy being brought up by wolves. His ways were so like an animal's that hunters had shot him. He had come back to civilization dead. Perhaps there was no other way.

By sundown, Etl had not returned. So three things seemed possible: He had been murdered. He had been captured. Or else he had deserted to his own kind. I began to wonder. What if we were complete fools? What if there were more than differences of body and background, plus the dread of newness, between Earthmen and Martians, preventing their friendship?

What if Martians were basically malevolent?

But speculation was useless now. We were committed to a line of action. We had to follow it through.

We ate a meager supper. The brief dusk changed to a night blazing with frigid stars. But the darkness on the ground remained until the jagged lump of light that was Phobos, the nearer moon, arose out of the west. Then we saw two shapes rushing toward our ship to find cover closer to it. As they hid themselves behind a clump of cactiform shrubs, I had only the memory of how I had seen them for a moment, their odd masks and accoutrements glinting, their supporting tendrils looking like tattered rags come alive in the dim moonlight.

W

e'd turned the light out in our cabin, so we couldn't be seen through the windows. But now we heard soft, scraping sounds against the outer skin of our rocket. Probably they meant that the Martians were trying to get in. I began to sweat all over, because I knew what Miller meant to do. Here was a situation that we had visualized beforehand.

"We could shut them out till dawn, Miller," I whispered hoarsely. "We'd all feel better if the meeting took place in day-light. And there'd be less chance of things going wrong."

But Miller said, "We can't tell what they'd be doing in the dark meanwhile, Nolan. Maybe fixing to blow us up. So we'd better get this thing over with now."

I knew he was right. Active resistance to the Martians could never save us, if they intended to destroy us. We might have taken the rocket off the ground like a plane, seeking safety in the upper air for a while, if we could get it launched that way from the rough terrain. But using our jets might kill some of the Martians just outside. They could interpret it as a hostile act.

We didn't matter much, except to ourselves. And our primary objective was to make friendly contact with the beings of this planet, without friction, if it could be done. If we failed, space travel might become a genuine menace to Earth.

At Miller's order, Craig turned on our cabin lights. Miller pressed the controls of our ship's airlock. While its outer valve remained wide, the inner valve unsealed itself and swung slowly toward us. Our air whooshed out.

The opening of that inner valve meant we were letting horror in. We kept out of line of possible fire through the open door.

Our idea was to control our instinctive reactions to strangeness, to remain passive, giving the Martians a chance to get over their own probable terror of us by finding out that we meant no harm. Otherwise we might be murdering each other.

The long wait was agony. In spite of the dehumidifying unit of my spacesuit, I could feel the sweat from my body collecting in puddles in the bottoms of my boots. A dozen times there were soft rustles and scrapes at the airlock; then sounds of hurried retreat.

But at last a mass of gray-pink tendrils intruded over the threshold. And we saw the stalked eyes, faintly luminous in the shadowy interior of the lock. Grotesquely up-ended on its tentacles, the monster seemed to flow into the cabin. Over its mouth-palps was the cup of what must have been its oxygen mask.

What was clearly the muzzle of some kind of pistol, smoothly machined, was held ready by a mass of tendrils that suggested Gorgon hair. Behind the first monster was a second, similarly armed. Behind him was a third. After that I lost count, as the horde, impelled by fear to grab control in one savage rush, spilled into the cabin with a dry-leaf rustle.

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A

ll my instincts urged me to yank my automatic out of my belt and let go at that flood of horror. Yes, that was in me, although I'd been in intimate association with Etl for four years. Psychologists say that no will power could keep a man's reflexes from withdrawing his hand from a hot stove for very long. And going for my gun seemed almost a reflex action.

There was plenty of sound logic to back up the urge to shoot. In the presence of the unfathomable, how could you replace the tried defenses of instinct with intellectual ideas of good will?

On the other hand, to shoot now would be suicide and ruin our hopes, besides. So maybe there'd have to be human sacrifices to faith between the planets. If we succeeded in following the plan, our faith would be proven either right or wrong. If we didn't act passively, the failure would be partly our fault. In any case, if we didn't get back to Earth, hatred and fear of the Martians would inevitably arise there, whether it had been the Martians' fault or ours. The message that Miller had left for newscast might only give people the self-righteous attitude that Earthly intentions had been good. If another expedition ever came to Mars, it might shoot any inhabitants on sight, and maybe get wiped out itself.

Still, how could we know that the Martians weren't preparing the kind of invasion of Earth that has been imagined so often? It was a corny notion, but the basis for it remained sound. Mars was a dying world. Couldn't the Martians still want a new planet to move to?

All these old thoughts popped back into my head during that very bad moment. And if I was almost going for my pistol, how much worse was it for Craig, Klein and Miller, who hadn't been as friendly with Etl as I had been? Maybe we should have put our weapons out of our own reach, in preparation for this incident. Then there would have been no danger of our using them.

But any freedom of action was swiftly wrested from us. The Martians rolled over us in a wave. Thousands of dark tendrils with fine, sawlike spines latched onto our bodies. I was glad that I wore a spacesuit, as much from the revulsion I felt at a direct contact as for the small protection it gave against injury.

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## I

I am sure that there was panic behind that wild Martian rush. To get us pinned down and helpless quickly, they drove themselves in spite of their own fear of the horrid human forms. For did I feel a tremor in those tendrils, a tendency to recoil from me? I was trembling and sweating. Still, my impressions were vivid. Those monsters held us down as if they were Malay beaters holding down trapped pythons. Maybe they had known beforehand what men looked like—from previous, secret expeditions to Earth. Just as we had known about Martians from Etl. But it wouldn't have made any difference.

Or perhaps they weren't even aware that we were from the neighboring planet. But it would be obvious that we were from another world; nothing from their own planet could be so strange.

Our own reactions to the situation differed a little. Craig gasped curses through his helmet phones. Miller said, "Easy, men! Easy!" It was as if he were trying to build up his own morale, too. I couldn't utter a sound.

It wasn't hard for our captors to recognize our weapons. We were disarmed. They carried us out into the night and around a hill. We were piled onto a flat metallic surface. A vehicle under us began to throb and move; you could have called it a truck. The nature of its mechanism was hinted at only by a small, frosty wisp of steam or vapor up front. Perhaps it came from a leak. The Martians continued to hold us down as savagely as ever. Now and then a pair of them would join the nerve-ends of tendrils, perhaps to converse. Others would chirp or hoot for no reason that I could understand.

The highway rolled away behind us, under the light of Phobos. Buildings passed, vague as buildings along a road usually are at night. It was the same with the clumps of vegetation. Lights, which might have been electrical, flashed into my eyes and passed by. In a deep valley through which we moved in part of our short trip, a dense, stratified fog arose between the lights and me. I noticed with an odd detachment that the fog was composed of minute ice crystals, which glinted in the glow of the strange lamps. I tried to remember our course. I knew that it was generally east. Off in the night there were clangings and hisses that might have been factory noises.

Once Miller asked, "Is everybody okay?"

Klein's and Craig's responses were gruff and unsteady in the phones.

"Sure...."

"More or less—if heart-failure doesn't get me."

"I guess our skins are still intact," I said.

We didn't talk after that.

---

A

t last we entered a long, downward-slanting tunnel, full of soft luminescence that seemed to come out of the white-tiled walls themselves. My attention grew a little vague. It could be that my mind turned in on itself, like a turtle drawing in its head for protection. In that state of semiconsciousness, I experienced a phantasm. I imagined I was a helpless grub being dragged down into the depths of an ant-hill.

But such a grub belongs in an ant-hill a lot more than a man belonged where I was going. This became plainer when the large tunnel ended, and we were dragged and carried along winding burrows, never more than three feet in diameter. Mostly they were tiled, but often their walls were of bare rock or soil. Twice we passed through air-locks.

I couldn't describe too much of what I saw or the noises I heard in those warrens. In one place, incandescence glowed and wheels turned. In a great low-ceilinged

chamber full of artificial sun-rays there was a garden with strange blooms. The architecture of the city was not altogether utilitarian and it was not unpleasing. I saw a lot more. But my mind was somewhat fuzzy, probably from shock and fatigue.

I know we traversed another chamber, where trays full of round lumps of soil were set in frames. A Martian nursery, no doubt.

Some minutes later, my companions and I were left in a small room, high enough so that we could stand erect in it. Here the Martians let go of us. We sprawled on the floor, faces down. We'd had a busy day. Our nerve-energy was burned out.

Hopelessness warped all of my thoughts. I must have slipped into the coma of exhaustion. I had jangled dreams about Alice and the kids and home, and almost imagined I was there.

Half awake again, I had a cursing spree, calling myself fifty kinds of a numbskull. Be passive before the people of other worlds! Reassure them! How did we ever think up that one? We'd been crazy. Why didn't we at least use our guns when we'd had the chance? It wouldn't have made any difference to be killed right away.

Now we were sacrificial lambs on the altar of a featherbrained idea that the inhabitants of worlds that had always been separate from the beginning should become friends, learn to swap and to benefit from the diverse phases of each other's cultures. How could Martians who hatched out of lumps of mud be like humans at all?

Klein, Craig, Miller and I were alone in that room. There were crystal-glazed spy-windows in the walls. Perhaps we were still being observed.

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W

hile I was sleeping, the exit had been sealed with a circular piece of glassy stuff. Near the floor there were vents through which air was being forced into the room. Hidden pumps, which must have been hastily rigged for our reception, throbbed steadily.

Miller, beside me, had removed his oxygen helmet. His grin was slightly warped as he said to me: "Well, Nolan, here's another parallel with what we've known before. We had to keep Etl alive in a cage. Now the same thing is being done to us."

This could be regarded as a service, a favor. Yet I was more inclined to feel that I was like something locked up in a zoo. Maybe Etl's case was a little different. For the first thing he had known in life was his cage.

I removed my oxygen helmet, too, mainly to conserve its air-purifier unit, which I hoped I might need sometime soon—in an escape.

"Don't look so glum, Nolan," Miller told me. "Here we have just what we need, a chance to observe and learn and know the Martians better. And it's the same for them in relation to us. It's the best situation possible for both worlds."

I was thinking mostly—belatedly—of my wife and kids. Right then, Miller was a crackpot to me, a monomaniac, a guy whose philosophical viewpoint went way beyond the healthy norm. And I soon found that Craig and Klein agreed with me now. Something in our attitude had shifted.

I don't know how long we were in that sealed room. A week, perhaps. We couldn't see the day-light. Our watches had vanished along with our weapons. Sometimes there were sounds of much movement in the tunnels around us; sometimes little. But the variation was too irregular to indicate a change based on night and day.

Lots of things happened to us. The air we breathed had a chemical smell. And the Martians kept changing its composition and density constantly—experimenting, no doubt. Now it would be oppressively heavy and humid; now it would be so dry and thin that we began to feel faint. They also varied the temperature, from below freezing to Earthly desert heat. And I suspected that at times there was a drug in the air.

Food was lowered to us in metal containers from a circular airlock in the ceiling. It was the same kind of gelatinous stuff that we had found in the wreck of the ship that had brought the infant Etl to Earth. We knew that it was nourishing. Its bland sweetishness was not to our taste, but we had to eat.

Various apparatus was also lowered to us. There were odd mechanical puzzles that made me think how grotesquely Earthly Martian scientific attitudes were.

And there was s little globe on a wire, the purpose of which we never figured out, though Miller got an electric shock from it.

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## I

kept looking for Etl among the Martians at the spy-windows, hoping that he'd turn up again. I had noticed that Martians showed variations of appearance, like humans—longer or shorter eye-stalks, lighter or darker tendrils.... I figured I'd recognize Etl. But I didn't see him.

We were none of us quite ourselves. Not even Miller, whose scientific interest in the things around him sustained him even in captivity. Mine had worn out. And Klein and Craig were no better off. I was desperately homesick, and I felt a little ill, besides.

I managed to loosen the metal heel-plate from one of my boots, and with this, when I thought that no Martian was watching, I started to dig the gummy cement from around the circular glassy disc with which the main exit of our quarters had been sealed. Craig, Klein and I worked at it in brief and sporadic shifts. We didn't really hope that we could escape. It was just something to do.

"We're going to try to get to the ship, Miller, if it's still there," I whispered once. "Probably it won't work. Want to join up with the rest of us?"

I just didn't think of him as being in command now. And he seemed to agree, because he didn't protest against my high-handed way of talking. Also, he didn't argue against a projected rashness that could easily get us killed. Apparently he understood that our lives weren't worth much to us as things were.

He smiled a little. "I'll stick around, Nolan. If you do manage to get back to Earth, don't make the Martians sound too bad."

"I won't," I answered, troubled by an odd sense of regret.

Loosening that exit disc proved in the end to be no special trick. Then we just waited for a lull in the activity in the tunnels around us. We all put on our oxygen helmets, Miller included, for the air-pressure here in our "cage" would drop as soon as the loosened disc was dislodged. We put our shoulders against it and pushed. It popped outward. Then the three of us, with Miller staying behind,

scrambled on hands and knees through the tunnel that lay before us.

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A

crazy kind of luck seemed to be with us. For one thing, we didn't have to retrace our way along the complicated route by which we had been brought down to our prison. In a minute we reached a wide tunnel that slanted upward. A glassy rotary airlock worked by a simple lever—for, of course, most of the city's air would be pressurized to some extent for the Martians—led into it.

The main passage wasn't exactly deserted, but we traversed it in leaps and bounds, taking advantage of the weak Martian gravity. Shapes scattered before us, chirping and squeaking.

We reached the surface quickly. It was frigid night. We stumbled away into it, taking cover under some lichenous bushes, while we looked for the highway. It was there, plain to see, in the light of Phobos. We dashed on toward it, across what seemed to be a planted field. A white layer of ice-crystal mist flowed between and over those tough cold-endured growths. For a minute, just as two shots rang out behind us, we were concealed by it completely.

I thought to myself that, to the Martians, we were like escaped tigers or leopards —only worse. For a moment I felt that we had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. But, as we reached the highway, my spirits began to soar. Perhaps—only perhaps—I'd see my family again before too long. There was traffic on the road, trains of great soft-tired wagons, pulled by powered vehicles ahead. I wondered if, like on Earth, much freight was moved at night to avoid congestion.

"When I was a college kid, I used to hitchhike sometimes," Craig remarked.

"I don't guess we had better try that here," Klein said. "What we can do is more of a hobo stunt."

We found the westerly direction we needed easily enough from the stars. The constellations naturally looked the same as they did at home. We hid behind some rustling leaves, dry as paper, and waited for the next truck train to pass. When one came, we used the agility which Martian gravity gave us and rushed for the tail-end wagon and scrambled aboard. There we hid ourselves under a

kind of coarse-fibered tarpaulin.

Peering past boxes and bales, we kept cautious watch of the road. We saw strange placques, which might have served as highway signs. Again we saw buildings and passing lights.

We were dopes, of course, ever to think that we were going to get away with this. Our overwrought nerves had urged us to unreasoning rebellion, and we had yielded to them.

Our last hope was punctured when at last we saw the flood-lights that bathed our ship. The taste on my tongue was suddenly bitter. There were roughly three things we could do now, and none of the choices was especially attractive.

We could go back where we had come from. We could try to keep concealed in the countryside, until we were finally hunted down, or until our helmet air-purifiers wore out and we smothered. Or we could proceed to our rocket, which was now surrounded by a horde of Martians. Whichever one we chose, it looked as if the end would be the same—death.

"I'm for going on to the ship," Klein said in a harsh whisper.

"The same with me," Craig agreed. "It's where we want to go. If they're going to kill or capture us, it might as well be there."

Suddenly, for no good reason, I thought of something. No special safeguards had been set up around that sealed room in the city.

Escape had been easy. What did that mean?

"Okay," I said. "Maybe you've both got the same hunch I just got. We walk very slowly toward our rocket. We get into the light as soon as possible. Does that sound right to you? We'd be going back to the plan. And, it could be, to common sense."

"All right," Klein answered.

"We'll give it a whirl," Craig agreed.

We jumped off that freight wagon at the proper moment and moved toward the rocket. Nothing that we'd done on Mars—not even making our first acquaintance

with the inhabitants—was as ticklish an act.

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S

tep after slow step, we approached the floodlighted area, keeping close together before that horde which still looked horrible to us. One thing in our favor was that the Martians here had probably been warned of our escape by whatever means of communication they used. And they could certainly guess that our first objective would be our ship. Hence they would not be startled into violence by our sudden appearance.

One of them fired a shot which passed over our heads. But we kept on going, making our movements as unfrightening as we could to counteract the dread of us that they must have still felt.

Panic and the instinctive fear of the strange were balanced in our minds against reason. We got to the nose of our ship, then to the open doors of its airlock. The horde kept moving back before us and we clambered inside. Martian eyes remained wary, but no more action was taken against us.

Our cabin had been ransacked. Most of the loose stuff had been removed ... even my picture of Alice, and our two kids.

"Who cares about trifles?" I muttered. "Rap on wood, guys—I think we've won. So have the local people."

"You're right," Klein breathed. "What other reason can there be for their not jumping us? Miller's passive strategy must've worked the first time. The story that we meant no harm must have gotten around. They don't want to make trouble, either. And who, with any sense does?"

I felt good—maybe too good. I wondered if the Martians felt the same eager fascination for the enigmas of space that we felt, in spite of the same fear of the nameless that we too could feel. My guess was that they did. Undoubtedly they also wanted interplanetary relations to be smooth. They could control their instinctive doubts to help attain this objective. If they coveted Earth's resources, it was still far away, and could defend itself. Besides, they were not built to live in comfort under the raw conditions of its strange environment. Commerce was

the only answer.

Suddenly Mars was no longer a hostile region to me, out in the reaches of space. Again it was full of endless, intriguing mysteries. It was beautiful. And knowledge of that beauty and mystery had been won, in spite of some blundering. The scheme that we had practiced, and that Miller had stuck to, had paid off. It had broken down that first inevitable barrier of alienness between Earthmen and Martians enough so that they now had a chance to start looking for the countless similarities between us.

A fraction of our food stores aboard the rocket had been taken, probably for analysis. But there was plenty more. We closed the airlock, repressurized the cabin from air-tanks, and cooked ourselves a meal. Then we slept in shifts, one of us always awake as guard.

At dawn, Miller hammered at a window. He'd been brought out from the city. We weren't too surprised by then.

---

E

tl turned up at noon. He came in a kind of plane, which landed right beside our rocket, making quite a noise. I recognized him easily enough; I'd know those eye-stalks anywhere. Besides, as he came out of the plane, he was carrying the speech-tube that Klein had made for him.

We let him into the cabin. "Hello, gang," he said, manipulating the tube with his tendrils. "I see you passed your tests almost as well as I did on those weird things you were always making me take on Earth."

"So they were tests," I said.

"Sure. Otherwise, why do you think I didn't come to you before? They said you had to solve your own problems."

"How did they treat you?" Miller wanted to know.

"Mostly my people were nice to me. They took me to a great desert city, far away. Sort of the capital of Mars. It's in an 'oasis' where a network of 'canals' join. The canals fit an old theory of your astronomers. They're ribbons of

irrigated vegetation. But the water is piped underground. I spoke to my people in the way that you once thought I would, trying to convince them that you were okay. But I guess that you did most of the job yourselves."

"In spite of a lot of blunders, maybe we did, Etl," I replied dryly. "What are your plans? Going to stay here now? Or will you come back with us?"

I sensed that he would stay. It was natural. Maybe I even sensed a remoteness in him, a kind of withdrawal. Not unfriendly, but ... we both knew it was the parting of the ways.

"It's best for what we're trying to accomplish, Nolan," he said. "I can tell my people about Earth; you can tell yours about Mars. Besides, I like it here. But I'll be back on Earth some time. Just so you'll come here again. Thanks to you guys for everything."

"I'd like to stay too, Nolan," Miller said, smiling. "If they'll have me. Under Etl's instructions, they might improve my quarters."

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S

o that much was settled. I felt a certain longing myself now. But I'm a family man, with home still in my blood. Klein and Craig weren't tied as I was, but they had a lot to hold them to Earth. Besides, somebody had to report back.

We were on Mars two days longer, though we didn't go any farther than back to the neighboring city. We took thousands of photographs. We were given samples of common Martian apparatus, pieces of jade that were covered with queer, beautiful carvings made millions of years before, bars of radioactive metal.

Earth was still near enough in its orbit to be reached without too much trouble. We jacked our rocket into a vertical position, from which an interplanetary takeoff could best be made. The cabin, swinging on its universal joints, stayed level. Martians watched, interested, but still obviously not quite ready to cast aside their deeper suspicions. Yet, when we blasted clear, we knew that a ship of theirs, halfway around the planet, was doing the same and would follow us back to Earth. Ambassadors, of course, and commercial attachés.

I'd lost my picture of Alice, Patty and Ron to some local souvenir hunter. But I

knew that I was going to see them....

The friendly contact between Earth and Mars can still be queered by somebody's silly blunder, of course. Human or Martian. You have to be careful. But a beginning has been made.

**—RAYMOND Z. GALLUN**

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