

# SPACE SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER, 1952

Vol. 1, No. 3

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\$3.50 per year in U. S. A.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.



173 35¢ per copy



**A LACK OF**



# VERISIMILITUDE

BY WALT SHELDON

Dear Editor:

Listen, I ask you now—are you being fair?

I just got your note about those six Martian stories, and I can see I'm going to have to tell you exactly what happened.

It was just after one of those Taos parties that I met the—well, you name it. The thing that called itself Kit Carson. I'll admit I'd had a few. But cold sober—cold, light-of-the-morning sober—it would have seemed just as nightmarish, just as mad.

Now only in Taos, New Mexico—once the home of Kit Carson, by the way—would you find such parties, and would you meet Dr. August the way I did. Only there would Doc have been able to keep that *thing* of his. Without a collar and license, anyway. No one bats an eye in Taos—it's a special quality of the place, like the mountains, the sagebrush, the big turquoise sky, and the artists and writers and loafers and solid citizens who come here to breathe in harmony the clear air of seven thousand feet.

That air is like champagne. The champagne, however, hardly resembles air—potables at this altitude pack an extra kick. We were suffering ourselves to be thus kicked the evening it all started. Fredric Brown and Mack Reynolds and myself—we'd all gathered in the *cantina*

at the Taos Inn. Piñon crackled in the fireplace. We had taken the precaution of unplugging the juke box. We wanted only a few quiet drinks, some gentle camaraderie and a bit of *gemütlichkeit*. These were our good intentions. With them we proceeded to pave you-know-where.

"I just thought of a new quality," said Fred. "Taoscience." He talks like that. You'll be sitting there and out of a blue sky he'll say something like that.

"What the devil is Taoscience?" asked Mack Reynolds, shifting in his chair. He shifts in chairs as an elephant would gambol in a bird bath. He has a mustache and glasses and looks shaggy.

"Taoscience," said Fred solemnly, "is merely a Taos conscience."

"There is no such thing," said Mack.

"That's right. Therefore it becomes a new symbol of nothingness." Fred stared moodily into the oily slick of his tokay. How he can drink that stuff I don't know. But then how Fred Brown is Fred Brown I don't know, either: he's a small, quiet fellow with the face of a thin owl and a sandy mustache. He doesn't look at all like a man who has written some of the most original science fiction ever written, plus a flock of prize murder mys-

teries—hardboiled ones.

"Maybe you ought to talk to his new scientist in town," said Mack. "I personally don't understand you. You're obscure, Brown."

"What new scientist?" asked Fred.

"Doctor August." Mack leaned back, threatening the existence of his chair. Mack came to Taos to write science fiction, but he's a former newspaperman and has a way of finding out everything that goes on in town. "August quit or something down at Los Alamos and came here to work on a project of his own. Has an income. All very hushhush. You're not supposed to breathe a word of it to anybody. Neither am I. If there's an F.B.I. man under the table, we're sunk."

"Doctor August," I said thoughtfully. "Is he a physicist or what? Where does he live?"

"He's taken that old place out near the pueblo," Mack said, bulking around to look at me. "I think he specializes in cosmic rays or something. And I know why you ask me."

"Why do I ask you?" I tilted my beer.

"Because you're going to go out and pick up some gobbledygook from him. *N'est ce pas?* No? *Nicht wahr?*"

"Maybe," I said. "Hell, if you're going to write science

fiction you ought to learn all you can about science. Or am I being naive?"

Fred said, "You are being misguided. You can know too much about a thing. If I knew too much about science I would never have written *What Mad Universe*, or *The Star-Mouse*, to name a couple. I wouldn't have believed that the things I made happen could happen. The first man to reach the farthest star will be the man who doesn't know it can't be done."

"Say!" said Mack, leaning forward. "That's an idea for a story! There's this guy, see, who wants to reach a star—"

"You can have it for five bucks," said Fred.

"Go to hell," said Mack.

"All right, take the idea free, then. But tell me if you don't use it—maybe I'll want to do it myself some time."

I said, "Why don't you compromise and give the idea to me? I can use more. I haven't turned out my quota yet this month."

"You won't do it sitting here in Taos Inn drinking beer," said Fred. "How can you drink that stuff, anyway?" He twirled his own tokay glass.

"Oh, nuts," I said. Writers are given to original expressions like that. "Let's have another round."

So we had another round and I sat back and a little apart from the table and brooded. My quota was way down this month. It had been down last month, and the month before. I'd put the time in at the typewriter, but just hadn't been able to turn out fiction in any quantity. And there was the house we were buying and the stove to be paid for and a few old doctor bills and shoes for four tiny feet and a bar bill here at the Inn, and one thing and another. I'd been corresponding with some other writers about this matter of output and production. In particular I'd been asking one new discovery how he did it—his stuff was in almost any magazine you'd pick up on the stands. He'd written to me in great detail about his theories on writing and life in general—but I still didn't know how he did it.

I recalled one of the letters I'd written to him. "How do you do it?" I had asked him. "Do you have four arms and two typewriters?" That, I thought dreamily, would really be an asset for a writer. Like unlimited credit and an understanding wife.

We had another round and yet another. Some people started to drift in. I don't remember who, exactly: the usual mixture of artists and bookkeepers and gi-

golos and millionaires, I suppose. I was still thinking about my output, and also about this Doc August. Maybe I *would* get some dope from him. Real, deep science stuff, maybe—flesh for the story skeletons in my file. Stimulus, to get me going . . .

Another round of drinks.

A thin old gal with Indian bracelets up to her elbows and a face like a gnu going around to everybody and saying, "Come on up to my place. We'll finish the party there. Come on. Let's go." Somebody calling her Una, so that must have been her name. "Let's go!"

On the ride out, five of us piled in the front seat of a station wagon. You'd get landsick if you rode in back, said Una cryptically.

Her house—a huge, rambling adobe hacienda with a fireplace as big as a witch's cave. People milling about . . . artists, bookkeepers, gigolos and millionaires. Mack Reynolds getting into a political argument, Fred Brown finding a chess set and an opponent in a far corner. Una steering me to the refreshment table; standing there was a bowl of scotch — pure scotch — crackers beside it. You had to dip it out in a consomme cup and eat it with a spoon, Una explained. Rule of the house. I, Taos citizen, did not bat an eye. I took

my cup of scotch and my crackers to another far corner.

I bumped into a gent with a purple beard and a patch over his eye. Well, the beard looked purple in that unsteady light, anyway. Through that scotch mist. I bumped into this party by edging into the corner and trying to watch the crowd at the same time. His cup of scotch spilled all over him, all over his purple beard and tweed suit and camel's hair sweater.

"Gosh, I'm sorry," I said. "Let me have your suit dry-cleaned for you." It's the thing to say. You don't *really* have any intention of spending a buck or so to send the guy's duds to the cleaners.

"Okay," said the man with the purple beard. "I'll send the suit to you tomorrow. What's your name and address?"

I stared at him a little more closely, then. Any man whose logic was better than his manners deserved a closer stare. He was short—about five-seven and level with me — and stocky through the chest, and he had a thick, square, planted way of standing. His hands were strong and stubby. He was fifty or so, and I saw that his beard was really gray, but a very light gray and very soft in texture, so that it had a purple sheen. His eyes

were bright, icy blue—his one eye, anyway. It was one of these don't-miss-a-trick eyes.

"Just give the suit to the cleaners and tell 'em to charge it to Walt Sheldon," I said. "They know who I am." I spoke coldly. Honor to uphold, after all. "And now, sir, if I may inquire your name?"

"You don't have to be so damn formal," said Purple-beard. "Relax, kid. My name's August. I get called Doc. If you didn't really want to send the suit to the cleaners what the hell did you ask me for?"

I said, "I don't know. Seemed the thing to do. Here—I'll make peace. I'll give you my scotch and crackers."

"Just the scotch, thanks," said August. He took it and drained it neatly, not getting a drop on his beard. Must have taken years of practice. He smacked his lips when he finished. "Matter of fact," he said, "I *do* know who you are. Know your work, anyway."

I brightened. Naturally. "My—work? You mean my—literary efforts?"

"Literary efforts, hell," he said, "I mean those bagatelles of yours that pop up in science fiction magazines once in a while. More fiction than science. Your junk, anyway."

"Is that so?" I was miffed.

I had little spikes sticking out all over me now. "Well, the editors bought 'em. They seemed to think they were worth buying. Anyway, science fiction isn't my main field. I'm an aviation specialist."

"Rats," said Doc August. He looked me over. "You haven't got another drink on you, have you?"

I said, "Listen, if I had a drink, and you were Ray Miland, and I was sorry for you, I wouldn't give it to you."

"Let's not be emotional," August said. "Now I can see you aren't scientifically trained. Now it's clear."

"What do you mean, I'm not scientifically trained? I'll have you know I'm a qualified weather man, navigator, radio engineer, and—"

"Kid stuff."

"Okay, Grandpa. What are you?"

"Well, I've three degrees in math and physics and I've done a book on cybernetics which utterly refutes its founder's theories, but this, too, is all kid stuff. Actually I'm a parapsychotopologist."

"You sound," I muttered gloomily, "like just another Taos phony to me."

August said, "Good, I like you."

"What?"

"I like all people who have the guts to insult other people. Let's go have a drink together."

I shrugged. "All right. The refreshment table's over there. You run interference and I'll carry the drinks."

"Not over there," said August. "Let's go out to my joint. Too crowded here. Too darned polite. Everybody's being careful of everybody else's feelings. Makes my skin crawl."

"Okay," I said. "What have I got to lose?"

I wish right then and there someone had answered that question. Accurately. Then never, never would I have gone to Doc August's that night. Never.

We took his jeep. He lived up toward the pueblo at the skirts of the mountains in one of those old, made-over adobe houses. We had to leave the main road and bounce over ruts for about five minutes to get to it. There was a part-moon. August's beard, as he drove, looked more pale and purple than ever. When we pulled up to the house a huge, razor-lean dog came out and barked at us.

"Shut up, Ganymede," said August, getting out. The dog slunk away. "Bred him myself," said August. "Wolf and greyhound, with just a tempering of Doberman Pinscher."



"Let's go someplace and pinsch Dobermans," I said.

August said, "Get hold of yourself."

We went inside. There was one big, main room in the center of the house. It was decorated in the usual Southwest way: Indian pottery and Navajo and Chimayo blankets. A picture window in the back looked out over the mountains, the rolling, lonely foothills of the Sangre de Cristos. I stared at them and had a recurring notion of mine—that you could walk a hundred yards or so and probably stand where no human had ever stood before.

August came back after a moment with drinks. The drinks were green. I stared at mine and said, "What the hell?"

"Never have absinthe before? You haven't lived, kid. This is real stuff, too. I think it even comes under the Harrison Narcotic Act."

"I knew I'd get some dope from you," I said. I gulped.

He looked at me disgustedly. "I'll get you another, but this time, sip it."

"Okay, okay, who cares?" I said. The room was rocking gently.

After he brought the second drink he made me sit down facing the big picture window. He pulled up a Mexican pigskin

chair. "Now," he said.

"Now what?"

"The only reason I'm telling you what I'm going to tell you is that you won't understand it, anyway. But I've got to talk to *somebody* about it. Partly a human failing, a desire to brag a bit, partly to help clear some of it in my own mind by talking about it."

"About what? What's it all about? Look, I better get home. My wife'll be furious. I just started out to have a couple of quick ones with Brown and Reynolds at the Inn."

"Stay where you are!" said August.

There was something in his voice.

I stayed.

"Now. Look out of the window. Not so far—look at that little shack right next to the house. That little 'dobe shack."

"Your garage?"

"It's not a garage. It's the adobe of an e.t. Know what an e.t. is?"

"Certainly. An electrical transcription. I feel transcribed right now. The following young man is transcribed." I started to whirl my head around in a flat circle.

"Be still." August was leaning forward, waggling his purple beard. His one eye had cold fire

in it, under the ice somewhere. "An e.t.," he said, "is an extra-terrestrial. A being from a world other than our own."

"You mean a Bem? Old stuff. Stef fans have known all about Bems for years. Fans know ET's, both A.D. and B.C. Even BMOC's and VIP's tire of same PDQ."

"Shut up," said August. "As a matter of fact I got my idea for my original research from a science fiction magazine. I forget the story. It wasn't one of yours, anyway. It was a good one."

"Thanks."

"It was a kind of detective science-fiction story. Laid in the west, so that made it a kind of western-detective-science fiction. Hero was a ski instructor—sort of a sports-western-detective-science-fiction, I guess you could say. And there was this girl. I guess actually it was a love sports western detective science-fiction."

"On with the story," I said, "I yawn."

"Well, there were these e. t.'s invading our planet and nobody knew quite how to capture them. They were elusive—not subject to the laws of solid matter. Anyway, the writer was closer to the truth than he knew. I'd already been making some research on molecular separation

and psychokinesis. You know that the nature of the atom is magnetic - electro-kinetic - whatever you want to call it. The big puzzle has always been the binding force: just why should protons and neutrons be packed so tightly in the nucleus? Just what was the relation of this to gravity? Partially Einstein's four new equations answer it. You know, zero equals i-k plus or minus el times G, and so on."

"I don't know," I said. "Or as a Greek friend of mine once declared—it's all mathematics to me."

He kept right on. Never heard me. "But the Generalized Theory of Gravitation only approaches this basic force from the physical side. Actually, its definition of 'basic force' gives the clue. It's both physical *and* metaphysical. The monistic trend of all science demands that a new universal theory answer everything—but how few have insisted on that basic qualification!"

"How few, how few," I said sleepily. "How about another drink?"

"Certainly," he said, taking my glass.

"Got any beer instead?"

"If you insist." He shrugged.

While he was gone I stared at the box-like adobe shack. The

adobe of the e.t. "Good old adobe abode," I murmured. There was a little square window in it. As I watched it seemed a tendril-like curling thing came out of it, swaying a bit, testing the night air. I stared. "Hallucination," I told myself. "Pure hallucination. It's that absinthe."

August was back presently; the pigskin chair creaked as he sat again. He handed me my beer. "I can see," he said, "That it's no use even trying to explain to you the basic universal force whose nature I have determined. You're hep to less than I thought. Let's make it simple. Let's just put it this way. There's been all kinds of evidence that e.t.'s exist, even that they've visited our planet. Took me years to analyze all of it and decide just what kind of beings some of them might be. I got on the track of a particular species. From a particular planet. Mars, if you really must know. There'd been a strong movement of these creatures just south of Fort Benning during the war."

"That's how it started, then, huh?"

"That's how what started?"

"Martian through Georgia."

"Shut up," said August. And kept talking. "These creatures, if that they can be called, were neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral. What were they? Ab-

stractions? Well, perhaps. Most accurately, they were concentrated globs of basic force, in the way an electron is simply a charge of energy set in one relatively continuous time-place."

"That's interesting," I said mildly.

Doc August stared at me and shook his head sadly. "How to get to your mind? How to speak to someone when he doesn't have enough language?" He stood up suddenly. "Only one thing to do. Come on out to the shack and I'll show the e.t. to you."

"Show him to me?" I blinked. "I thought you said he was an abstraction. Pure force. How can you see something like that?"

"Well, he had to take *some* form. I call him 'he' for convenience—actually he has no sex. He's dubbed himself Kit Carson. He had to have a name, too, you see. And since Kit Carson's grave is here in Taos, and since he's interested in that period of history—"

"You mean he looks like a man? How can he?"

"Simple enough. Once we understood the nature of Q force it wasn't hard to translate him into physical form. I—er—must admit we missed slightly. We didn't exactly get the humanoid form we were after."

Doc August was helping me from the chair now, and leading

me to the door.

Now let's get this all straight before we go any further. Remember, I'm explaining how this happened through my senses, because after all it's your reaction to those manuscripts I think is unfair. I think you should know that the events of this night were like a dream in one way, in that illogicalities seemed perfectly logical, and everything seemed to float—but on the other hand event followed event in the logical order. In the *waking* order. That's why I'm sure it all happened. That and the manuscripts. But we'll get to them later.

The night air was cool and I stood there quietly, feeling it on my cheek, as Doc August unlocked the door of the shack.

I edged back a little.

"Nothing to be afraid of," August said. "He's harmless, Capricious, that's all. If I didn't keep him locked up he'd be all over town. He'd start a flock of legends about devils appearing, footprints in the snow of the roof, and so on."

Doc threw the door open, reached in and snapped on the overhead light.

There *it* was—I'll never forget it; I'll never forget exactly how *it* looked in that moment. I stared. It was unquestionably a

living thing, it had identifiable features. They could be zoologically labeled, I mean. First, he stood upright on two appendages that might reasonably be called legs. He had a body. He had four arms and two heads.

"The heads are fraternal rather than identical," said Doc August chattily.

The Martian stood there. One head regarded us, grinning. The other was looking away. Deep thought. The little adobe room had no heating, but looked otherwise comfortable and well-equipped. There were gadgets for the thing's amusement. There was an easel and on the easel was a dry, vast, red and ochre landscape. You could almost feel yourself standing in it, small and alone, while the wind shuffled the dust about your feet. Immediately I thought of one of Ray Bradbury's Martian landscapes. I looked around the room some more and saw a cot and an easy chair and several shelves of books and a typewriter. Piles of yellow paper, typed-upon, lay in a basket.

"Wagh," said the head that was grinning. "Did you hosses bring this child a splash o' awardenty to tuck in his meat-bag?"

"What?" I asked.

August chuckled. "Kit Carson, remember?"

"Oh, he talks like him, too."

"Sure. Expert on the period. More than that, in just a few months with me he's educated himself completely. Equivalent of a B.A. in English. He's working on science, now. How about it, Kit?"

Kit was looking at me. When I refer to Kit from here on, I mean of course his right-hand head, the one that did all the talking. The other just seemed to stare and think. Kit looked me right in the eye, then, and said, "I wrote m'self off a sonnet-poem, I did."

"Oh?" I said politely. "Let's hear it."

"Why, shore," he said. He switched abruptly then to exquisite stage diction. Reminded me of Barrymore in his day. His eyes became dreamy as he recited:

"Come breed of ghostly mountain men—now breathe,  
The wilderness of mountain mist again,  
Now hear the angry mountain silence seethe,  
About you with the steelhead mountain rain.  
Take horn of Dupont, rifle, clay dudeen,  
And hump rib crackled on a fire of dung,  
Spice marrow-gut with gall and

running spleen—"

He stopped there. He shrugged his upper set of shoulders. "Ain't put m' paws on the next line, yet."

I said, "How about: 'Add curses from a mule skinner's tongue?'"

Kit thought it over. "Mebbs. Close, anyways. I'll think it over in m'haid. M'other one."

"Kit's really very talented," August said. "Does excellent poems and sketches. By the hundreds."

I leaned heavily against the door jamb. "I—I need another drink."

"Okay," said Doc August. "I'll fetch a couple. You stay and get acquainted with Kit."

"Alone?"

Kit snorted.

Doc said, "Don't be such a coward. Are the heroes in those two bit yarns of yours such cowards?"

"That's different," I said. But he was already on his way.

"Say, there!" Kit was slithering toward me. "You one o' them writin' fellers?"

I jabbed a finger. "Keep away from me you—you Martian oddity!"

Kit looked amused. "Shucks, simmer down you ol' bull buffler, 'fore I lift yore hair. Come on—make beaver over here t' the

desk and read some o' this here stuff I done wrote out in words."

Somehow, then, I was in the easy chair and he was shoving typed pages at me. I wished August would hurry back with that drink. I started to read perfunctorily—in the way a man would finish tying his shoes if they were untied and the end of the world was coming.

I read:

### *WIND OF SILENCE*

*By Kit Carson*

*There is a wind on the Great Plain of Mars that has no voice. It comes with the speed of death from the Great Yellow Mountains, trailing poison dust as a running harridan trails her ragged hem . . .*

I looked up. "Not bad."

"Shore," agreed Kit. "Only trouble is I cain't make stories out of it. Don't reckon I know enough 'bout yore kind o' folks." His four arms worked nervously as he talked. Four arms. Something clicked. Two heads. Four arms, two heads. Way in the bottom of my brain something clicked. That letter Bradbury had written to MacDonald. *How do you do it—four arms and two typewriters?* Was it fate that Bradbury had said that? That MacDonald had forwarded

the letter to me? Was it?

"Kit!" I stared at the monster. "I have a terrific idea!"

And then I started to tell him about it. Doc August came back with the drinks about then. He listened, too, cocking his purple beard and frowning.

"Well, maybe you can try it sometime," said Doc—

"I want to start right away! Tonight!" I said.

Doc took another sip of absinthe. "Well, I don't know—" I grabbed his lapels. "Listen, Doc, you've got to let me! I've got to know! It won't take long—it won't be any trouble. Got another typewriter in the house?"

"Well, I have a portable somewhere—"

"Get it. Get it right now. I've listened to your guff all evening—you owe me this much. I even drank your lousy absinthe. And I have a house to buy and old doctor's bills to pay, and I need shoes for four tiny feet, and there's a bar chit at the Inn—"

"Okay," grunted Doc August. "Against my better judgment, okay."

It took us some minutes to get the portable and then arrange it on the desk beside Kit's own typewriter. Kit needed only one chair, of course. He crossed his sets of arms so he could operate both typewriters at once. He

tried it out first.

Now is the time for all good Bems to come to the aid—

It worked.

"Now," I said. "Put in a white sheet, a carbon and a yellow. One in each machine. We'll do two yarns at once. I'll rough in the general idea as you go along. First titles—let's see—OUT ON A LIMBO—okay? And the second—EAT, DRINK AND BE WARY—"

The two typewriters clickety-clack-clackclicked and it was done.

"They'll both be about Mars, naturally," I said, getting dreamy-eyed. "The first one—a space pilot is lost on the Martian desert. His ship crashed and he life-rocketed down alone, but now he has to find the wreck to see if anybody survived. He jumped in a moment of panic. No, wait—he thought the others were out, but didn't realize they hadn't jumped until he left the lock. Okay, that's a start. Now, the second story. An expedition's landing on Mars and there's a fat man—the rocket ship's steward—who is a terrific gourmet. Can't resist any new taste thrill. Cooks and eats anything he comes across. As the story opens the larder is low—only enough for three more days. Let's knock those opening scenes off. You fill in what you know

about Mars. Plenty of good description now."

Clickety-clack-clack again. Solidly went the two typewriters. The first half page was done. Kit whipped the paper out skillfully and got the second page in. Clickety-clack-clack-click. At terrific speed.

I read over his shoulder:

*. . . and was this loneliness, when there were whispering things in the air—things he could not see?*

And on the other typewriter:

*. . . tiny as the plants were, Bruleau knew they were food. In spite of their sharp edges, like sheared tin, in spite of their mottled green moray color, they were food.*

I kept talking, outlining the narrative. Kit's second head was fully awake, now, staring down at the second typewriter and frowning.

Clickety - clack - clack - click-click-clack. No let up. On and on—pause only at the end of a page—and the mountain night deepening outside, making the stars only brighter. Shortly, the first grayness of dawn. Then the real dawn—a ballerina's arms spreading upward in the east, trailing pink—day itself suddenly crackling like a pomegranate over the Sangre de Cristos—

Kit Carson typed "The End" upon the sixth story we had done

that morning.

"That's all, Kit, I said.

"Wagh! This here's fun! Cain't we go on? I ain't tired yet!" said Kit.

"But I am." I turned and looked at the other corner and Doc August was tilted in a chair, fast asleep. I gathered up the manuscripts. "I'll split with you, of course," I told Kit.

"Fergit it, hoss," he said. "Don't have no use fer dinero in m' sack o' possibles, nohow. Take it on the prairie. Come back anytime—we'll play this here game again!"

"So long, hoss," I said, falling into the spirit of it.

"So long, beaver," said Kit.

I walked home. I tried to read the manuscripts as I trudged along, but my eyes were too heavy. I decided I'd sleep first, then go over them and mail them. All six of them. That practically filled my month's quota then and there!

Sleep . . . daze . . . machine steps . . . I don't even remember getting home and mumbling some sort of excuse to my wife as she tucked me in bed. The excuse trailed off into nothingness. . . .

Well, you already know I sent those manuscripts. You got them. What you don't know is that I waited a few days before I tried

to get in touch with Doc August or Kit Carson again. I had a million things to do, and besides I wanted to let my plans simmer. Success seemed in the bag. At the rate Kit Carson turned the stuff out I could flood the market with it—beat John MacDonald, even.

I started to dream about paying off the house . . . a station wagon . . . that Beechcraft Bonanza to fly in . . .

When I finally called Doc August on the phone the operator said, "That number's been disconnected."

"What?" I said. Although I'd heard her perfectly well. I went out to Doc's place. Nobody there. The windows were boarded and the little shack where Kit Carson had lived was empty. A dry and silent wind came from the canyon and flapped the open doors dismally—

"Yup, Doc's cleared town," the bank cashier told me. "Not a soul knows where he went."

Then your letter had to come. That was the last straw. I met Fred Brown and Mack Reynolds at our usual table in the Taos Inn the day it came. I showed them the letter, and then I told them everything that had happened that mad night.

Fred said, "You've got to stop drinking—bang—like that. This



tapering-off business never really works."

"You don't believe me?"

He shrugged. Mack shifted in his chair and looked the other way.

I slammed the table. "But it must have happened! I have the manuscripts! I sent them off!"

Fred twirled the stem of his tokay glass and picked the letter up—your letter—then shrugged again and bobbed his head from side to side the way he does.

"Go ahead, read it," said Mack.

So Fred read it aloud. Just to keep the record straight I'll remind you of what you wrote:

*Dear Walt:*

*These six stories about Mars aren't bad, but I'm afraid they just miss. They lack verisimilitude. I'm speaking in relative terms, of course; none of our readers have actually been to*

*Mars, but in science fiction there must always be a feeling that the setting and action is real. That it happens as you read it.*

*In particular I was disappointed in your Martian landscapes. I suggest, if you want to write about Mars, you read some of Ray Bradbury's stuff and see how he does it—*

Fred looked up then and blinked owlishly. "You see what too much research does for you?"

"At that," said Mack, "your crazy dream might be the basis for a story. There's this guy, see—"

"You can have it for five bucks," I told him.

He told me where to go. And it wasn't Mars.

Listen, I ask you now—is all this fair?

Sincerely,

Walt.