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BIRD WALK

By P. Schuyler Miller

A very small bird can be a very deadly enemy—and very dangerous weapon for one who knows its ways!

Illustrated by M. Isip

COMMANDER JEFF NORCROSS was humped over his workbench with his long, sensitive nose deep in a tangle of tubes and wires when the door of the radio shack popped open, admitting a blast of steaming air and the reek of overripe Gorgonzola. With a yelp he flung himself forward over his apparatus, but a moment later the smell of cheese became overpowering and something landed heavily on his back and began to poke around between his ear and his elbow with a rubbery beak.

With a mighty heave of his shoulders, Norcross sent the creature spinning and came up with his chair in both hands.

"Hall!" he bellowed. "Get that triple-damned gulper out of here before I break its back! Get it out!"

The bird stood just out of his reach, contemplating him with a thoughtful expression on its bright, purple face. It was as big as a turkey, with the slightly sinister expression of a cockeyed goose. Its head and neck were bare and purple; its wingless body was a powder puff of magenta down; its legs were two feet long, with blue ruffles to the toes; and it had a long, curling red tail like a rooster and a bright yellow beak like a curlew. It smelled to high heaven of cheese.

Norcross poked at it gingerly with his chair. The birds were spry and

they had nasty tempers. A clatter behind him brought him around with a howl of anguish. A second gulper was standing up to its knees in the wreckage of the radio, twisting off bits of copper and gulping them down as fast as it could gobble. As he turned, the first bird bounced past him and into the feast. Norcross hit the roof.

They were going round and round the shack like a six-day bicycle race when Dave Hall finally heard the racket and came to investigate. One of the gulpers was ahead, squawling bloody murder in a canary soprano, its long neck stretched out, its cerise wattles flapping, its pantaletted legs pumping for dear life. A length of copper wire was trailing from the corner of its bill, and it was trying desperately to swallow as it ran.

Jeff Norcross was right behind, his splintered chair leg making vicious swipes, and behind him came the second gulper, its spine feathers on edge with indignation, murder in its popeyes, whooping like a hoarse Comanche and clacking its beak hopelessly.

Hall watched them through the door port while they made two rounds, then opened the door a crack and snagged the second gulper as the parade came by. He held it by the neck at arm's length, with its stubby claws swinging wickedly a



The tiny thing was a flash of color across the clearing, too swift for human eye to follow—

couple of inches from his vest, went over to the rain barrel, scooped off the scum of yellow algae, and

dunked it. The bird snapped at him disconsolately and stalked off, dripping color, just as Norcross and the

other gulper emerged from the shack and took themselves off down the path toward the park gate.

DAVE was methodically assembling the remains of the radio when Norcross returned. The older man had blood in his eye and a six-inch patch out of the back of his coat where the irate gulper had landed on him. He stood in the door for a moment, opening and shutting his mouth, then slammed the remains of the chair leg down and flung himself into a chair. It collapsed.

"Borers," Hall pointed out helpfully. "Birds'd clean 'em out if you'd let 'em. What happened to the radio?"

"What happened?" The commander's blood pressure was on the upgrade, but he was struggling dauntlessly to keep cool and calm. "You stand there and watch those birds of yours eat my copper and you ask *me* what's wrong? You stand there with that beautiful piece of apparatus busted to 'smash and you want to know what's *wrong*? Omi-gawd! When will they send me a man who can use the brains they stuffed him with?"

"How'd they get in?" Hall wanted to know.

"You let 'em in, you poisoned pup!" The patrolman's beetling black brows were bristling, and his little mustache was on end with rage. "Time after time I ask you to keep your birds out of this shack. I beg you. I *order* you. You can have 'em anywhere else. You can bring 'em into mess and feed 'em out of my plate. You can let 'em roost in my bunk and lay eggs in my dress jacket. But you *can't* have 'em in here! I mean it! I'm through! This one goes on the wire!"

The grin slid off Dave Hall's bland young face. The easy-going

Norcross had perhaps made his first assignment in the space patrol easier than most commanders would have done, and he had a certain taste in practical jokes himself outside the line of duty, but a black mark in the post report was a black mark for life. This was serious.

"Look, sir," he said earnestly. "You're wrong about that. I mean this time. I was in barracks when I heard you call. Maybe the door was ajar or something."

Norcross eyed him suspiciously. The rookie was no liar. "O. K.," he snapped. "Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. I heard the latch click when it opened. There's something ratty going on around here, anyway. That radio didn't just up and die. Some lug's been monkeying with it—sending personal calls to his floozies in Laxa, like as not. Break out the emergency kit—we've got to build us a new one."

THE SPACE-PATROL post at the edge of the huge Venusian forest preserve never rated more than a two-man garrison unless there was trouble brewing. The patrol was there for window dressing, to represent the triplanet council and give an official air to what went on in the name of conservation and science. The rangers who patrolled the preserve itself and acted as guides for tourists were paid by the Venus government. They didn't like the patrol, and the patrol didn't like them. Chances were, Dave thought, that the chief was right. Some ranger had sneaked in to use the powerful transmitter for a private call and bollixed up the works. Then he'd let the gulpers in to cover up for him.

"Who's on the gate?" he inquired. Norcross glared at him. "Spin-

ney!" he snorted. "May his guts bloat! I've had enough of him, too. You're going to print this whole shack, inside and out, and if I find that he's been in here *he'll* go on the wire in six languages!"

Hall nodded. Of all the rangers—some of whom, he admitted off the record, were pretty nice guys—Spinney was the most obnoxious. To begin with, he was somebody's nephew and he used his pull to the limit. He was sleek and natty at all times, in a climate that would distill the lard out of soapstone, and he had the telltale pallor that proved he took bleach baths to remove the nasty sunburn he picked up on duty. He was patronizing and officious, and it was the dearest hope of every patrolman who was ever stationed at the park that Captain Hector Spinney would get lost in the woods and be eaten by mice. Only he never went near the woods. He did a little office work to keep his hand in, and when his appraiser's eye spotted a neat bit of gluteal arc in a party of tourists he would occasionally come down off his throne and give them the privilege of his personal attention on a tour of the tauer portions of the preserve.

Unfortunately, Spinney had been in the radio shack with full authority any number of times in the past, and his fingerprints were probably all over the place. The patrol radio was the official medium of communication for all governmental agencies in the park area, and there wasn't a member of the staff who hadn't been in the shack at some time. Hall pointed this out. He got no reply, but he didn't expect one. Norcross was not one to enforce unreasonable demands. He began quietly to assemble the missing parts which would be needed to restore the radio.

AST—8

PRESENTLY Norcross had cooled down enough to be human. "What you been doing?" he asked. "Chasing birds again? Whyn't you leave that kind of spap to the rangers?"

By grace of somewhat phony feathers, eggs, wings, and a few other similarities, Venus had birds just as it had fishes, lizards, and men. Evolution on Venus and Earth, directed by a limited number of usable combinations of certain vital chemicals, had taken parallel courses in parallel environments. Biologists were not even ready to swear that hybrids between the flora and fauna of the two planets might not be possible with a little test-tube diddling. Stranger things had happened.

Dave Hall's hobby back on Earth had been birds, and he had brought it with him to Venus. He reveled in the rather startling new varieties of feathered life that swarmed in the jungle sanctuary. The *kru*, the half-amphibian natives of Venus, had never seen any need for boats, and had consequently never discovered the island on which the preserve was located. The first zoologist to see it had howled loudly until it was proclaimed a national park, and now it was one of the show spots of the planet.

"Yep." Dave had only half heard his superior's question. Then it penetrated. "Say—yes! I was out all morning. And I found me a king-teller!"

"Yeah?" Norcross ignored such birds as he did not violently dislike. "What about it?"

"It's new here," Dave explained. "It isn't even in the official lists for the park. Fact is, they're rare anywhere. The *kru* had an idea that they were spies for their headmen—you know the old gag about 'a little bird told me.' Well, the *kru* had a story that these royal tits—that's

the book name for 'em—were informers, and the first Earth settlers picked it up. I guess there were plenty of uneasy consciences in the old days, because they just about wiped the species out. The natives and jungle rats still pot them on the sly. They're scared stiff of 'em."

"That so?" Norcross seemed interested. "A new one, huh—that Spinney and his pretty boys couldn't find? Keep it up, kid. Good thing to have a hobby. Keeps a man from going space-happy if he gets a single detail or goes on garrison with a guy whose guts he hates. That's how I got started on radio. I was alone for fifteen months on an asteroid the time I worked out the heptad circuit."

Hall beamed happily. Jeff Norcross had quite a reputation in the patrol, both as an inventor and as a man. "Ornithology isn't such a hot hobby for a patrolman, I guess," he admitted. "You don't find many birds in space. But I like to study 'em when I get the chance. I located a brush hen this morning, too. They're related to the gulpers, you know: when a hen's setting she'll swallow anything you offer her and hold it in her crop until the eggs are hatched. I'm going to feed her Spinney's badge some day."

Norcross had repaired the damage to the radio and was intent on the settings. Reception had been bad enough in the past ten days, thanks to sunspots and the general atmospheric cussedness of the planet, before the set blanked out. He sent out the station's call signal and filed his routine report, then as headquarters came in he stiffened in his chair. He waved his hand wildly for the pencil that Hall slipped into his fingers and began to scribble like mad. All the recruit heard of the conversation were his "Yes, sir," "Yes, sir,"

"We'll do that, sir." Then he snapped the shut-off switch and sat back.

"The Gem's gone," he said flatly.

DAVE HALL gaped. The Gem was the peculiarly colored star ruby, the size of a hen's egg, that one of the first explorers had found in the possession of the *kru*. At the time of the first revolt, when the settlers pulled away from Earth and set up their own empire under a crafty ex-congressman from Kansas, it had become the symbol of royal authority over the entire planet. Since the return of democratic government under the council, it had been in the Laxa Museum under heavy guard. Twice in the past generation it had been stolen and used as the symbol of revolution, and twice the patrol had brought it back and squashed the spark of revolt.

"When?" he demanded. "How'd it happen?"

Norcross frowned. "This was a slick job," he said thoughtfully. "No violence—nobody killed—but some very smart individual with ideas of his own got it—and he's on his way here."

Dave came up on his toes with a click. "Here?"

The commander nodded. "They are sure of that. They've been trying to raise us since about the time the set broke down. Somebody needled the guards with some fancy dope that stopped time for them for about ten minutes. In that ten minutes someone in a museum guide's uniform cut out the alarm, opened the case with a key, took the Gem, substituted a fake, and got out. They didn't spot it until the check-up when the guard changed. But the only people in the place who had left when the alarm was given were a party of tourists—and

they're on their way here."

"Gee!" Hall's boyish face wrinkled in thought. "What'll we do? Search 'em?"

Norcross shook his head. "We're not in this yet," he said glumly. "The Venus Council wants to keep it hushed up for fear that the news will start a lot of crackpots rioting. They won't call on the patrol till they find they're stuck, like last time. No—it's Spinney's baby. It was in the orders he got this morning before the set went bad. Funny he didn't say anything about it. Hell—it isn't that big a secret!"

Dave had been thinking. "Look, chief," he said, "even if it isn't our job now, we can't afford to miss anything. If they've narrowed it down to one party—and I'll bet a button it was the patrol that spotted them this quick—they must be pretty sure that the thief still has the Gem on him. If he has, there's a reason why he's with this particular tour. There are dozens of tourist parties in the museum every day, but they don't all come here afterward. Unless he's hiding the Gem on the boat coming over, that means he's going to leave it here. It'd be easy to cache it somewhere on the nature tour and come back for it later, or pass word to an accomplice. I'm going around with 'em and keep my eyes open."

Norcross stared at him. He had been thinking just that himself. "Go to it," he agreed. "You haven't got long. There's the boat—and here comes Spinney."

The head ranger was as tall as Dave Hall, and nearly as broad. His gray-green uniform was flawless, and his spiky mustache waxed to a needle point. He thrust open the door and stood on the threshold, one knee cocked forward jauntily.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Radio going again? Then you've heard the

news. This is *my* job, Mr. Norcross. When I want the patrol I'll send for it. Suppose you both stay right here where I can find you. I am guiding this party myself, and no one will be allowed on the preserve without my permission. Understood?"

The two patrolmen glared at the closing door. Dave Hall let out his temper in a long hiss. "Chief," he declared tautly, "that stinker is in this. He knew about the radio. He's warned us off the preserve. He's in it!"

He strode to the window and looked after the retreating ranger. Spinney was standing on the terrace in front of the barracks, watching the tourist launch swing in to the landing. Dave's eyes narrowed. He turned to his superior. "If it please the captain," he snapped, "I have urgent personal business which requires my immediate attention. I am not on watch until six o'clock. Have I the captain's leave?"

Norcross bristled. "What do you mean? Any of your nonsense and we'll be on the grids. Use your head!"

"Yes, sir. This is personal business. I will not wear the uniform of the patrol. Have I leave, sir? I . . . I expect to study birds."

A little spark gleamed in the older man's eyes. The boy had stuff in him, and they'd taken Spinney's leavings for a long time. "You have my leave," he said gruffly.

THE RANGER was halfway down the leafy tunnel that led to the park gate when he heard Hall's racing footsteps behind him. He turned with a frown just as a man-sized fist came up and caught him neatly on the jaw. His knees V'd out and he dove into the bushes.

Still wriggling the ranger's uni-

form into position on his somewhat oversize shoulders, Dave Hall stood at the gate watching the tourists come up the steps from the boat. The whole thing now depended on the two rangers with them, Chase and Williams. If his hunch was good, Spinney had not told them about the ruby. They liked the head ranger no more than he did, and they might—they just might—string along.

There were six visitors, and any one of them might be the man he wanted—or the woman. One couple looked like second honeymooners: a white-haired 'old gentleman with a military goatee and an army backbone, and a little old lady clinging to his arm. It might be a gag—the whole party might be in this together—but Hall had a hunch it was a lone-wolf affair. Probably the thief was a Venusian—or in the pay of someone with royalist aspirations.

The man next to the old couple looked like a politician or a grocery magnate. He had on a spotty white suit, an elaborately tapestried tie, and a huge diamond ring. It was a good front if it wasn't genuine. Then he saw the girl and his eyes narrowed.

In two centuries, climate and diet had done certain things to the men and women of Earth who had come to live on Venus. Although there had been no mixture with the *kru*, white Venusians had become more and more like the little natives. There was a yellowish cast to their skin, and their hair had a bluish tinge in the right light. Their complexions were smoother and creamier than other people's, particularly the women's. Their lips were fuller and darker red, and their eyes had queer coppery flecks in the iris.

This girl was tall, and she had long legs—longer than most native

Venusians'. She was burned a deep brown—a most peculiar brown, Dave thought, almost golden underneath. She wore dark glasses, although at this season of the year the sun rarely broke through, and her hair had been dyed. Of that he was sure. It was a silky ash-blond, but her eyebrows were dark—and as the light struck them they were blue! She had Venusian blood!

He stalked to meet them with an exaggerated imitation of Spinney's strut. The other rangers must be certain that this was a practical joke or the whole thing would be off. He studied the other tourists: a short, stout woman with gray hair and heavy shoes, who by no stretch of the imagination could ever have posed as a museum guide, and a soft-looking, heavy-set man in a trick hat who seemed to be sticking close to the girl. Dave decided that his lips were too full and red, his face too white, and his clothes too perfectly up to the minute.

He saw Chase's mouth beginning to open and a puzzled look growing on Williams' freckled face. He stiffened, clicked his heels and gave a flourishing salute.

"Chief Ranger Hall, ladies and gentlemen," he proclaimed. "At your service! Captain Spinney's compliments, and he is regrettably detained by official business. He has delegated me to conduct you on a specially arranged tour of the preserve, which will include some parts not generally opened to the public. May I have the honor?"

TOM CHASE'S wide mouth had shut, but there was a suspicion of a grin of it. He introduced them: Colonel and Mrs. Porter, the old couple, on a diamond-wedding tour; Professor Vedder, of Yale, the "politician"; James, the heavy-set man

who was wearing purple glasses and skin-tight gloves; Miss Anderson, the stout schoolteacherish female. He kept the girl for the last, and Dave knew he did it deliberately. She was a Miss Wandreau of New York, and Dave cursed under his breath as he tried to place the name. New York was his home town, and he knew every pedigree in the social register, but he couldn't place a Wandreau. And yet the girl was familiar—he'd seen her before, somewhere. The trouble was that somewhere was a pretty big place.

She had a fragrance that made his head swim. Her voice did things to the little hairs along his spine. "Shall we see Captain Spinney before we leave?" she inquired. "I hoped to meet him. I've heard so much about him from mutual friends."

"Yes!" It was the spotty-looking professor. "I've written him. There are things we must discuss. Can't we see him before we begin the tour?"

Dave was ticking over half-submerged recollections in his head at a furious rate. "Professor Vedder," he said, "don't you teach ornithology at Yale? I'm sure I was in one of your classes."

The little man clawed out a pair of pince-nez and balanced them on his nose. He tipped his head back and looked Dave up and down. "Hall? Hall? I don't remember you. I don't remember any Hall in the service? Who are you? How long have you been here?"

Williams—good old Goose-boy Williams, who always had a couple of guppers tagging him, snapping at the brass eyelets of his boots—came to the rescue. "Ranger Hall was recently promoted and transferred here, sir," he volunteered. "He has

a way with birds. He's like a father to them."

That was a dirty crack, having to do with a clutch of gulper eggs which Dave had smuggled out of the park for omelette and smuggled back again as chicks, with Williams' help, when they hatched in his duffel bag. He let it pass.

"I made a discovery only this morning which I am sure will interest you all," he announced. "I recorded the Venusian royal tit for the first time within the limits of the park."

He was looking straight at the girl as he spoke. For a moment her eyes flashed behind her dark glasses, but her only reply was a smile. The professor rose to the bait. "Indeed! Miss Anderson—Colonel Porter—this will be a rare treat! You remember the legend I was telling you on the boat—the story of the king-teller. Shall we see it?"

They should. Dave was most anxious to oblige. He watched their backs as they preceded him through the gate. The teacher and the little professor were out, except as accomplices. They were too short and stout to have worn a guide's uniform. Porter—evidently a retired military man—was tall enough and had a deep spaceburn that would hide the telltale Venusian yellow in his skin. His hair was white, and Venusians rarely changed with age, but it might be bleached. James was plenty big enough, and so, to his satisfaction, was the girl.

DAVE HALL was in his element. He knew the park better than many of the rangers, to begin with. He shepherded his little flock through all the usual trails, keeping an eagle eye on their every move and pattering away at the usual guide-book marvels. He was nearly caught out

on botany, but the teacher, Miss Anderson, turned out to be a vociferous and opinionated amateur in the field, who was willing and anxious to argue fine points with the professor. The others dutifully looked and listened and were led on their way.

He gave them a good time, by his standards. After all, they might all be innocent, and some of them certainly were. None of them had tried to pull anything as yet, and he doubted that anyone would until he called the signals.

He led them down-wind on a colony of gulpers and let them throw pennies to the ravenous birds, whose insatiable craving for copper in any form was a standing mystery in scientific circles. He showed them the tiny tufted dipper, no longer than a man's thumb, whose single membranous egg is laid in the cup of a certain huge fungus, where it soaks up dew and rain water and swells to three or four times the size of the parent bird before the heat of the sun begins to incubate it. He showed them a female jug bird, neatly walled up in a kind of clay jar by her mate, her head sticking out of the narrow neck, while her eggs hatched. He showed them the little golden bee birds, with transparent membranous wings like great feathered insects, that nest in great colonies in waxen cells, and the gaudy green-and-white stone-picker that builds itself a nest of colored pebbles cemented together with its gluey saliva. He showed them all the park's usual wonders, with variations, and then he lined them up and made his spiel.

"Folks," he told them expansively, "we've come to know each other pretty well on this little tour of ours. Ordinarily we would be turning back at this point, but Captain Spinney

arranged a little something extra for the special benefit of those of you whom he has—met—before. He was to have conducted you himself, but Commander Norcross of the space-patrol post here received certain news which made an immediate conference necessary. I have the captain's full confidence, and while our further tour may to some extent transcend the regulations, I am sure you will understand and appreciate the captain's interest in your entertainment. Miss Wandreau—this section of the sanctuary may be rather hard on white shoes. May I apologize in advance?"

She smiled. "You've been very entertaining so far, Mr. Hall. I'm sure we are all looking forward to your further revelations."

"We'd hardly want to miss what Spinney planned for us." That was James. The man was nervous, and he hadn't enjoyed a brief brush with a harmless flying reptile which Dave had captured and fed to a banded bell bird. The others were equally voluble, so with a grin of appreciation Dave led the way into the underbrush.

IT WAS late spring, and the trail, even shaded as it was by some of the densest jungle on the preserve, was dry enough to walk on. Otherwise he would never have persuaded them to try it. He let Miss Anderson and the professor discover new plants and beautifully repulsive fungi for themselves, and concentrated his attentions on the others.

The brush hen was the first move in his game, and he was somehow pleased to see that the girl spotted it first. It was James, however, who pointed it out. They had been studying a tiny mouselike creature which Dave had found for Mrs. Porter, clinging to the underside of a

leaf, when James spotted a glint in the bird's eye. "What's that?" he whispered.

Dave chuckled. "Recognize it, professor?" He bent over what looked like a splotch of dried blood on the forest floor. The brush hen cocked a bright yellow eye up at him, opened a ducklike beak lined with bright scarlet, pointed it skyward, and howled.

He gathered the bird up under one arm and let the women pet it while it nibbled at his buttons and made hopeful stabs at the girl's jet earrings. "It's a brush hen," he told them. "Professor Vedder will tell you that it belongs to the same genus as the gulpers you saw earlier. When the female is brooding, as this one is, she will swallow anything you cram down her gullet." He fingered the bird's distended crop. "Feel here—she must have gobbled down half a dozen small stones."

A thrill ran up his spine as the girl's fingers touched his. He felt her eyes on him, behind the impenetrable disks of her glasses, and his own eyes hardened as he spotted the telltale wash of blue at the roots of her hair.

The brush hen made a grab at Colonel Porter's fob and nearly had it. Laughing, Dave set the bird back on its nest, where it promptly began to howl again.

"It'll shut up when we leave," he told the others. "The male is probably somewhere out there in the brush, waiting for us to go. If you miss anything when we get back to the post, you'll probably find it in this bird's crop. Captain Spinney or I will get it for you. We're the only ones who know where the nest is."

He let them stroke the bird and feed it pebbles and coins while he talked with the professor. A small

warblerlike bird flitted across the trail, lit on a vine and burst into a deep bass solo before vanishing into a knothole. He used it as an excuse to move away from the brush hen, and he noticed with satisfaction that Miss Wandreau, James, and the Porters lagged behind and had to hurry to catch up. Everything was happening right on schedule and according to specifications.

They had seen the furred mouse bird that nests under stones, and heard the distant halloo of a saffron guide bird—the first, incidentally, on his own list. He explained how the bird's human-seeming call had led many a lost hunter or explorer into difficulties, and gave them a look at the morass in which it nested.

The guide bird gave him another out for a problem which had been worrying him. Spinney couldn't stay tied up forever, and when he was found the pursuit would be on. He might be able to pass off the shouts of the posse as bird calls—given a lot of luck. None of these people were fools.

THE FOREST was quite open here, and the party had spread out. James and the girl were a little way ahead, and the Porters were lagging behind, while Dave compared notes with Miss Anderson and the professor. Then the girl screamed.

In a flash Dave was beside her. It was as though the forest had opened at her feet. A huge flat creature squatted there in a shallow pit, its warty back tufted with lichens and evil-colored fungi, its flat skull plastered with shreds of decayed wood. Its narrow, yellow eyes glared up at them, and a slender scarlet tongue had licked out and wound about her ankle.

Dave felt the girl trembling under his fingers. He bent close to her ear.

"Steady!" he murmured. "Let's give them a show."

Ever so slowly he crouched down beside her; then, with a lightning snatch, had the monster by the tongue. Instantly it unwound from the girl's ankle and coiled around his wrist. James, who had been standing petrified a few feet away, leaped back to safety, but the girl stood still, looking down at him.

"Every Venusian baby is scared good with one of these things," he told her. "It's quite harmless, unless you happen to be a small animal or a ground-nesting bird, but you can't convince a native-born Venusian of that. They think its touch means death. They'll swear its breath is deadly, and that it can paralyze you with one glance of its eyes and swallow you alive. It's the bunk! Look!"

He reached out, caught the creature by one foreleg, and heaved it over on its back. It lay there, hissing and kicking, until he tickled its sulphur-yellow belly, and then it began to bubble like a great teakettle. The girl smiled, took an uncertain step forward and went down in a heap.

Several minutes passed before she was herself again. Dave Hall's brain was in a whirl. The weight of her slim body in his arms as he picked her up—the perfume of her hair—everything about her told him that it couldn't be so, but it was. It must be! Skin—hair—complexion—they all checked. Unless he was wrong from the start, the thief had Venusian blood, and there was no one else who fitted. He had to be right!

"I'm sorry this happened," he told them apologetically. "The jungle is always unpredictable. If that creature had been dangerous, Miss Wandreau might have been dead before

Mr. James or I could reach her. Luckily it wasn't—except to someone who believes the native stories."

Their backs were up; he could see that. The women had taken charge of the girl, and James had picked up her purse and gloves. "I've had quite enough of this exhibitionism, and I'm sure the others have, too," he snapped. "If you're through with your little surprises, perhaps you will take us to Captain Spinney."

"He'll hear of this!" It was Porter. "If you had been attending to your duties as a guide, this would never have happened. Take us back at once!"

Hall was a bit pale. He'd muffed things. "Professor—Miss Anderson! I can show you the king-teller in a very few minutes, and the opportunity may never come again. There's really no danger."

"Certainly not!" Colonel Porter was ramrod stiff with indignation. "There is something very peculiar in all this. I am thoroughly acquainted with the service which you claim to represent, and it would never tolerate the familiarity and impudence which you have shown. That uniform was never made for you. Take us to Captain Spinney at once!"

It was Mrs. Porter who turned the tide. "Come, George," she said, taking her husband's arm. "Don't be an old ninny. We've come all this way and we've had a very good time, and we certainly don't want to go home without seeing the rarest bird of all. I'm sure Miss Wandreau agrees."

The girl's smile looked a bit wan, Dave thought, but she nodded. When he led the way he was by himself. James and the colonel had constituted themselves her bodyguard, and he saw that the fancy boy still had her gloves.

HALL RUBBED IN the story of the king-teller as they walked. He told one version of the story and encouraged the professor to amplify it. He egged Miss Anderson on to ask questions and answered them in detail. And all the time it seemed that he could feel three pairs of eyes boring into his back, searching his mind. The thief was on his guard now, and anything could happen.

"Mr. Hall," the teacher demanded, "is there anything in this legend? Can a bird really detect treason?"

He shrugged. "Venusians believe it," he replied, "and they should know. It's not only the *kru*, though they had the story first; every native-born Venusian I ever met had been brought up on the same yarn. It's not impossible, you know."

"Rubbish!" Colonel Porter bristled with hostility. "I've been on every habitable planet in the System—did it before you were born—and these native superstitions are poppycock. Nonsense! Damned ignorant natives start 'em and a lot of ignorant nobodies keep 'em going. Eh, professor?"

The professor looked uncomfortable. "You are both right," he said lamely. "It is possible that a certain race, or people with certain habits of life, may have an imperceptible but characteristic odor which is attractive to these birds. It is also quite possible that under the influence of superstitious or guilty fear this odor will change and infuriate the bird so that it will attack the terror-stricken person. It is well known that dogs and some insects will smell and attack fear in a human being. Why not a bird? And yet—I cannot bring myself to believe it."

"I can." The girl's voice was very

low. Her hand was on James' arm, and the man's full lips were twisted in a sneer as he watched the others. "I had a Venusian nurse—a woman whose ancestors came from Earth with the first explorers, and who had been a child among the *kru*. She was homesick for Venus, and she told me many of its legends. She was an intelligent woman, and an educated one, and she believed."

They had come to the clearing where Dave had found the bird that morning. The place was ablaze with flowers, and he suspected that the king-teller's nest was somewhere nearby. Suddenly he saw it, a scarlet dot darting among the gaudy blossoms of a pepper cup. He felt the professor's fingers on his arm, and heard Miss Anderson gasp. The tiny bird seemed to be working in their direction. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that the others had stopped at the edge of the clearing.

"There was another story your nurse may have told you," he said softly. "Certain men in the king's service could call the king-teller and summon it to smell out treason. These men understood the bird's language and could talk to it. They were the ones to whom it reported. This is how it was done!"

PUNTING his lips, Hall whistled—a high, trembling shriek, more like the squeak of a mouse than a bird's call. Instantly the tiny bird paused in its flight. It hung in midair, a scarlet mote, and as he squeaked again it darted toward him and hovered a foot from his face, seeming to stare into his eyes. He gave a new note, a shrilling twitter, and it twittered in reply. He turned.

"A certain thing was stolen from the museum in Laxa," he said. "A royal thing, whose theft was treason. The thief was a Venusian, and he is

here. He is one of you. O bird—*which is he?*"

He whistled again, that same low, tremulous, shrilling twitter. He stepped back slowly, his fingers sliding down to the gun at his belt. The bird was facing the little semi-circle of people, and their eyes were fixed on it. Dave tried to read those eyes—the professor's, little and wary; Colonel Porter's, hard and bright; Mrs. Porter's, dark with trouble; the teacher's, round with amazement; and James' and the girl's, hidden behind their dark glasses.

Like a dart of fire the king-teller moved. It hovered before Miss Anderson; it hung for a moment over the professor; then, like a glowing spark, it drifted toward the Porters. Dave's hand closed on his gun, but it had passed them. A shot crashed, and another. The bird wavered; then, with a whistle of fury, it hurled itself at James, who stood with a gun in his hand and his teeth showing between his full red lips. He turned to run; then the bird's long needle beak struck him full in the temple. He went down, with the body of the bird pinned like a bright-feathered dart to his skull.

Close by came an answering shot. A moment later Norcross crashed through the bushes, followed by Chase and Williams.

"What's happening here?" the commander demanded.

"Where's Spinney?" Dave asked.

Norcross snorted. "Where he'll keep! When Williams found him he was raging, out to get your pelt and nail it on his door. Then I mentioned that you'd found a king-teller, and Chase said that you were going to show it to this gang. First thing we knew he poked a gun in our guts and I had to slug him. Then we came looking for you."

"There's your thief," Dave told him. "James. He had me fooled with that skin bleach and dyed hair. His lips and eyes would have given him away, but he wore glasses. Even so I should have tumbled, but I had my own candidate. I was too sure. Well—the king-teller knew the truth."

THE GIRL laughed softly. "Was I your candidate, Chief Ranger Hall?" She had taken off her glasses, and there were no specks of any kind in her eyes. They were blue—just the clear, cool, transparent blue of the open sea that Dave Hall hadn't seen for ten long years. "The Dave Hall I knew, years and years ago on the rocks at Ogunquit, is in the space patrol—not the rangers."

"Toni! Toni Bevis! Oh, *was* I an ape! But what's that fancy name—and what happened to your hair? It was black when you were twelve." A terrible suspicion overcame him. "It is *Miss* Wandreau?"

She laughed. How could he ever have forgotten that laugh? "It is. Mother married again. But how could one of the supermen of the space patrol possibly fail to recognize the product of a New York beauty expert?" She touched her golden cheek. "Venusian bronze—done under special lamps. I'm all like that." She puckered up her lips. "Venusian Kiss—the very latest shade. It's said to be irresistible." She ran her fingers through her hair. "This is *really* new—Venusian blue. Ladies of fashion in New York look more like Venusians than the real thing now, *Patrolman* Hall."

Norcross had been kneeling by the dead man. "O. K.!" he barked. "So you're bosom pals. Now where's the Gem. It's not on him."

Dave blushed. "Maybe I did go

all haywire, but that part of it's all right," he said. "I figured that I was either to take the thing from whoever had it, or signal him where to hide it. Nobody made any move to slip me anything, so I told them how very palsy I was with Spinney, and how he'd planned the next act specially for them, and then took 'em over to see a brush hen. You'll find the Gem in the bird's crop any time you want to look for it. Tom Chase knows where the nest is—he showed it to me this morning."

He looked sheepishly down at his feet, stuffed into Spinney's too-small boots and punishing him violently for the sacrilege. "I have a confession to make," he said. "That moss-back was a put-up job, too. I sort of held the rest of you back so Toni—Miss Wandreau—would be the one to blunder into it, and when I galloped to the rescue like the rangers are always supposed to do, I doused her hair with a little moonflower juice. I knew that would attract the king-teller, and I figured if she was really a Venusian she'd break. It was a pure fluke that James went off his boiler and tried to kill it. That's bad stuff. Those birds won't take it. You saw yourself what happened."

He knelt down and gently pulled the tiny bird's bill out of the wound it had made in James' temple. The sharp beak had been driven clean through the thin bone. The king-teller lay in his palm, a little fluff of rumpled red and black feathers. "Maybe the prof would like this for his collection, if it isn't needed as evidence," he said.

Miss Anderson was yanking violently at his elbow. "Look!" she cried. "Look! I saw it breathe! It's only stunned."

As she spoke, the bird stirred. It tucked its tiny feet under it and wobbled along until it could grasp his finger. Suddenly it was in the air, a buzzing, squeaking mite of fury, swinging round and round their heads in ever-narrowing circles. Dave went white. The moonflower in Toni's hair!

It hung before her like a scarlet bubble, and she stared back into its beady eyes. It swam closer on blurring wings, until it was touching her hair with its beak. Then it was gone, so swiftly that none of them saw it go. They glimpsed it for a moment among the flowers, then it rose in a mounting spiral and vanished over the treetops.

Hall shivered. "I guess maybe you've had enough of birds for a while, folks," he said. "I've put you all to a lot of trouble, and I'd like to make up for it. Won't you be our guests—the chief's and mine—for dinner before you go?"

Norcross looked sourly from him to the girl. "Sure," he said. "We'd like to have you. It's sort of monotonous out here by ourselves all the time. It just happens that Patrolman Hall is cook tonight, so you can be sure of a good meal." He grinned evilly at Dave. "I'm sure Chase and Williams will be glad to amuse Miss Wandreau while you're washing the dishes. And another thing. Those pet gulpers of yours found your uniform where you left it after you slugged Spinney. They ate all the brass buttons. Maybe if you can make 'em cough 'em up and scrub the cheese off 'em, one of the ladies will sew 'em on again for you while you're peeling the potatoes."

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Get going—kitchen cop!"