

# fantastic ADVENTURES

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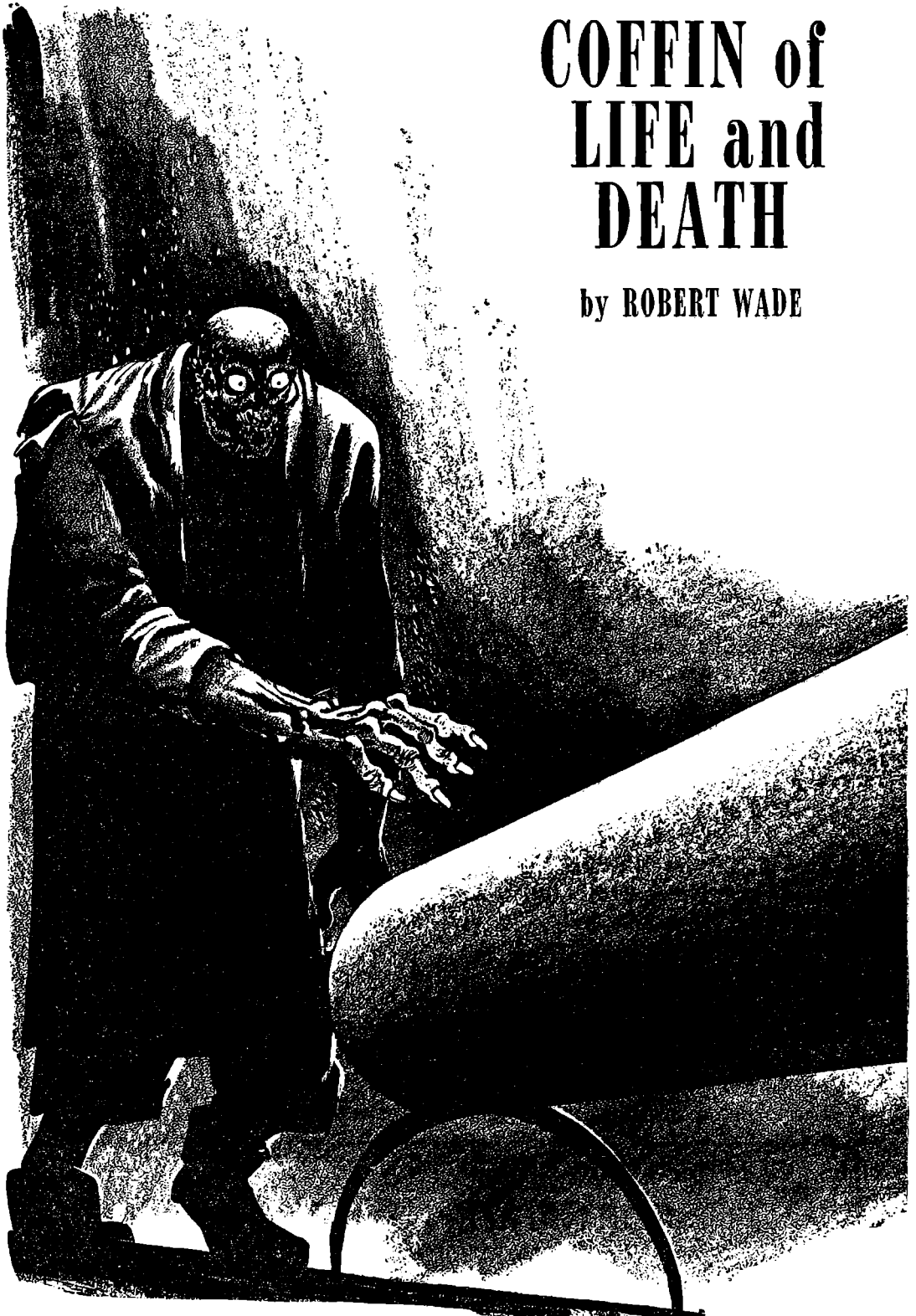


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# COFFIN of LIFE and DEATH

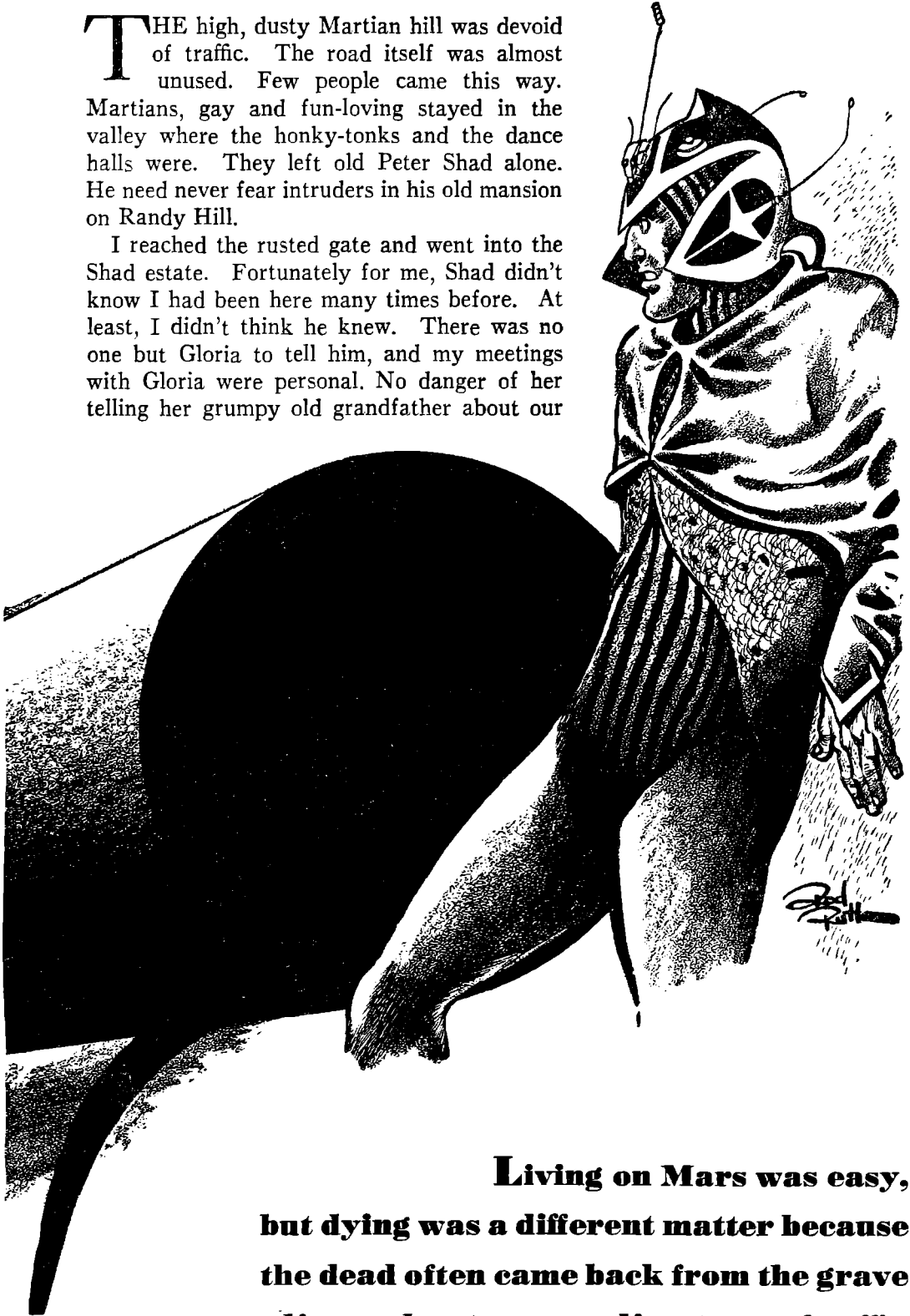
by ROBERT WADE



The creature came forward slowly, its claw-like hand stretched outward . . .

**T**HE high, dusty Martian hill was devoid of traffic. The road itself was almost unused. Few people came this way. Martians, gay and fun-loving stayed in the valley where the honky-tonks and the dance halls were. They left old Peter Shad alone. He need never fear intruders in his old mansion on Randy Hill.

I reached the rusted gate and went into the Shad estate. Fortunately for me, Shad didn't know I had been here many times before. At least, I didn't think he knew. There was no one but Gloria to tell him, and my meetings with Gloria were personal. No danger of her telling her grumpy old grandfather about our



**Living on Mars was easy,  
but dying was a different matter because  
the dead often came back from the grave  
alive — due to a peculiar type of coffin**

wandering among the twisted, aged trees that surrounded the house. No fear of her telling him that she and I hoped some day to elope to some small Venusian valley and escape Shad's domineering rule.

For the present, I preferred to remain unknown. Blake Wallace, member of the Martian to Earth Free Lance Space Pilot's Association. A rather windy title for a group of hardened pilots who flew everything and anything along the badly charted course.

For the present, as I said, I remained just Blake Wallace, answering an ad in the Martian *Space News*.

The ad was worded queerly, but being accustomed to Peter Shad and his ways, I took this opportunity to penetrate the old fort-like mansion in which Shad kept his granddaughter in virtual isolation.

I found my way around the house and to the small, windowless door at the rear. A huge sign on the front door had told me:

"Visitors please go to the rear entrance."

That was Shad's way of putting people, high and low, in their proper place.

I knocked and waited. A dog started howling within the house. As I waited, my eyes moved once more over the rough blocks of *sticka*, brought from the quarries of Mars and stacked in rough, rugged lines to make a home. It was a poor choice of building material. *Sticka* is black as night and not unlike soft coal in appearance. It doesn't make for a cheerful residence.

The door opened abruptly and I faced Peter Shad. He was a tall, stooped man, in his late sixties. His eyes, black as midnight, studied my space uniform. The uniform is good-looking and I wore it to make a good impression on the old coot.

"Yes?" he said.

"My name is Wallace," I said, "Blake Wallace. I'm answering your ad in the *Space News*."

I can't understand why the man put me on the defensive. Usually I'm not the timid type. He seemed to catch me before I was ready to speak. Later I was to learn why. Peter Shad's mind was a long way ahead, thinking and speaking through his lips before most men had time to prepare themselves for his verbal outburst.

"Come in."

His voice was colorless, without inflection. I might have been a dog, summoned to the kitchen for my dinner.

He turned and went into the dusty, un-used kitchen. The man had an odd, shuffling walk that reminded me of the Zombies of Venus. Like death, the walk was. Death on its feet, moving ahead slowly, stiffly.

I walked across the kitchen, noticing the filth and rubbish that had collected there. Gloria had told me what to expect.

"Grandfather has our meals brought up from Ardu," she said. "They are left on the porch and he brings them in himself. I eat in the library."

She had shuddered then, and continued:

"Grandfather lives alone—in the locked room."

The locked room was a place she had hated since she came to Peter Shad a dozen years ago. A place that she could never enter and where he lived alone. A place of queer sounds that came through the sturdy *pith* door.

SHAD went along a dark hall and ahead of me, I could see a fire burning in a fireplace in the library beyond. We entered the library. Gloria, reading in a chair by the fire, arose slowly. Her violet eyes, intense, fearful, warned me not to betray our friendship. Her

hair, black as the *sticka* stone, gleamed in the light of the small fire.

Shad motioned to her.

"My granddaughter, Gloria."

I took her hand, not daring to hold it.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Miss . . . ?"

"Williams," she said. "Gloria Williams."

She backed away from me toward the fire.

Shad said, "Come with me."

We went out of the library, up a rickety flight of stairs and Shad paused before a huge door. He produced an electric *key* from his pocket, rapped lightly at the panel and a silvery, musical note came from the panel. The door opened and he motioned me inside.

This was the locked room. The room that Gloria had never been allowed to enter. Then was I to learn Peter Shad's secret?

Frankly I was disappointed. The place was as dirty as the kitchen. A combination library and bedroom, I thought, as I surveyed the book lined walls and the unmade bed in one corner. There was a desk. The dim flame of the *trupa* juice lamp flickered over it.

Peter Shad seemed not to notice my curiosity. He shuffled to the desk and sat down. There was no place for me to sit. I stood there looking at him.

His cloak was dark and dropped to his knees. His eyes continued to burn into me. The remainder of his face was pale and sunken. He might have been dead, save for the intense life in those eyes.

"You said your name was . . . ?"

"Blake Wallace," I said. "You advertised for a Free Lance pilot to handle a charter trip to earth."

It was all business then. I had to sell myself first. Later, perhaps I could

gain his friendship and dare to tell him about Gloria and myself.

I produced a leather folder from my pocket and spread my credentials and recommendations before him. I was proud of those papers. I had letters from King Wanta of Venus, Carpus Wiley, the prominent earth pilot, and many others. I noticed that his eyes were approving when he passed them back to me.

"You seem to be a reliable young man," he said. "You are a fine flyer, if these credentials are in order."

He looked thoughtful.

"Of course I could check up on them."

Anger surged up within me, but I controlled myself.

"I assure you that they are."

He nodded.

"You seem to be a fairly honest man. You have the strength for the work. You look clean cut, intelligent."

Then came the blow.

"But I can't use you."

"Why not?" I snapped. "I know the ropes. I'm as good a man as you can find. You asked for . . ."

I was on my feet, knowing that my chances were slipping, hating to lose in the first round.

He held up his hand.

"I need more than a pilot," he said. There was the ghost of a smile touching his bloodless lips. "I need a man who has knowledge of science. A thinker."

"I studied under Newton at Harvard," I said. "I took his course in free thought and did some work with Doctor Pierce of Winston Hospital."

I had mentioned two of the best known students of the human mind. His eyes brightened.

"You studied under Pierce?"

I remembered one of old Pierce's favorite sayings.

"The human mind is an enigma. Open it and you have all the hate and love—the faith and fear of civilization, placed before you on a white sheet of paper. Study it at will and you will learn how foolish and yet how wise we animals are."

Peter Shad was interested.

"I taught Pierce," he said. "You'll do, Mr. Wallace. Bring up your flying gear tonight. You have a job."

I MIGHT have been prepared for a trap. At the time I didn't realize how deep a mind Peter Shad had. Later, it was much too late to remedy my mistake.

It happened in the hall below. Shad left me with Gloria while he answered the rear door. I had not heard the sound, but he said someone had knocked and he would see who had come.

When he disappeared into the kitchen, I hurried to Gloria's side. I'm afraid she was a little too happy, for our embrace lasted a second longer than it should have.

When I released her, Shad was standing in the library door. He seemed not to have noticed. I said goodbye to Gloria, and followed Shad to the door. He reminded me to report that night. Then he was gone and I went down the hill, cursing myself for taking that useless a risk. A kiss had created a trap—and the trap was ready to spring.

I reported to the house on the hill that night at seven. I had with me the precious case of navigation instruments that every pilot has to own, if he plans to fly the winding asteroid course. They are his right arm, his mechanical brain, to avoid death among the whirling asteroids. I brought also the space suit that I had had since joining the service and a small bag of personal belongings.

Shad met me at the door and took me directly to his room. Something had been brought here since I left that afternoon. It stood under the window, a shiny, closed *stamin-steel* coffin, used by most of the better class Martians. The thing gave me quite a start. It had the usual line of vents along the sides.\*

However, I noticed with sudden horror that the whistle valves that would warn of life in the casket, had been carefully removed. The coffin was sealed. I stared at it with sudden, intense forebodings.

Shad said:

"I will explain the coffin shortly. Meanwhile, we will talk."

This time he offered me a chair which he had evidently brought, with the coffin, from some other part of the house.

"I mentioned that for this venture, I would need a man who understood science and something of the human mind. Why I demand this will later become evident to you."

My eyes crept to the coffin and re-

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*\*Editor's Note: Stamin-steel, an unusual combination of earth steel and a Martian super metal known as stamin—for stamina. The odd climatic conditions on Mars cause people to die at times when they are not truly dead. The air vents are open, to the air, through a series of metal pipes that lead to the surface. A small button is placed to the right of the corpse. If this button is pressed, a series of high-pitched whistles warn the grave-watchers that the grave should be opened at once. Ten years have been known to pass, and yet after all that time, the whistles had saved a recreated Martian from a horrible death below ground—an avoidable death.*

mained there. I tried to look away. I wanted to ask for Gloria. . . .

I FORCED my eyes away from the grim casket and looked back at Shad.

"You have heard many things about me, Wallace," he said. "Most of them unpleasant."

He grimaced.

"I'm not interested in the average man or his mind. We have nothing in common. I would never have let you come here if you hadn't been indispensable to me. I must have another man. A man who can keep his mouth shut."

He paused and drew a sheath of papers from his desk. He passed the top one to me.

"Read."

I read the sheet of printed matter with growing bewilderment. It was issued from the New York office of James Drake Trumble, foremost earth student of mechanics. Trumble, Inc., manufactured the entire working personnel of many huge earth factories. His robots were known as the nearest perfect mechanical models of the human race. Trumble was constantly giving millions to scientists who could improve his robots.

This was but one of dozens of his prize lists, distributed throughout the solar system, offering prize money for new robot inventions.

"Read it carefully," Peter Shad said. "Every word is important."

His voice was suddenly harsh—demanding.

I read the circular:

"Prize List for the year of 2500—issued from the offices of Trumble, Inc., New York, N. Y.

"It is known that Trumble, Inc., leads the field in the production of robot labor. Trumble, Inc., supplies earth

factories with complete groups of radio controlled labor. In its never ending search for improvements, Trumble, Inc., offer the following prize money this year for better, more dependable robots.

"Specifications are left to the discretion of the inventor. Our robots must respond quickly to the given command and at no time fail to respond by following the spoken word of their control masters. They must be devoid of feeling, efficient, insensitive.

"Trumble prize money will be paid as follows, by personal check on the Bank of United Planets, New York City."

There followed a list of cash prizes that made my hand tremble.

"We are interested only in the first prize," Peter Shad said. His eyes had been on me since I started to read. "We are visiting New York, and Mr. James Drake Trumble. *We are going to leave New York with fifteen million dollars.*"

To say that he startled me would be putting it mildly. I had never suspected that Shad was interested in things mechanical.

"I asked you to read that notice carefully. The offer is very important, and the exact terms of the offer are *most* important. You will guard that paper carefully. Keep it on your person."

He passed me an envelope, sealed with the Shad seal.

"Keep this with the paper. Do not open it until we are in the offices of James Trumble. Open it when he asks for a demonstration of our model. On these papers, you will find a series of Martian words. I will mention a few of them. They are the *control words* that will cause our robot model to respond."

He tapped his thin index finger on the desk, warningly.



"Do not mention these words, even in my presence, until that time comes. Here are a few examples."

He reeled off a dozen common Martian words.

"*Rela*," he said, "meaning *move forward*."

I nodded, remembering his warning not to repeat them.

"*Twan*, meaning *stop*," he sighed. "*Cwa*—you know its meaning. There are hundreds of others, all on your list. I am tired."

He arose.

"Now, the coffin," he said. He went to it and rubbed his hand along the smooth top.

"**H**ERE lies our most precious asset," he said. "Worth fifteen million dollars to James Drake Trumble in New York."

A great burden seemed lifted from my shoulders. Then Gloria wasn't in the coffin. The coffin was strong and heavy. I could understand now why Peter Shad made use of it. A fifteen million dollar robot was far too precious to risk breakage.

"But why did I have to have the list of control words? Why was I chosen to carry these precious papers to earth?"

"I am going with you," he said, and his voice suddenly sounded tired. "But I am an old man. I have checked up on your background. You are as honest as you are handsome. Your reputation is as good as those gray eyes of yours. I can trust you if anything happens to me."

He hesitated, then went on:

"We will spend a week here. You must not leave the house. It would be folly to allow you in town, where your tongue might slip. This is too valuable a property to risk losing."

He touched the coffin again, lightly.

"A robot—made exactly to the speci-

fications."

He went to the door and held it open. I had never seen such a change in a man. Now that I shared his responsibilities, he seemed to have deflated, grown older.

"We will not trouble Gloria tonight," he said. "You may take the room across the hall. Don't leave. The doors are wired with *spectra* (space electricity of high voltage). You see, I cannot trust even myself with this secret. Later, we can both relax. We will leave in seven days. You will call the spaceport once, the day we go. You will arrange for a freight-cab to come here. You, I and the robot will go in complete secrecy."

I went across the hall and entered the other bedroom. It was neat, for a wonder, and the linen was fresh. I wished I could see Gloria and tell her the secret of the room and why Peter Shad had insisted on complete isolation within his room. I was tired out however, and soon fell asleep. The folder of precious papers was under my pillow.

The next week was a hell of uncertainty for me. Never once did I see Gloria, and I was angered because Peter Shad gave me no explanation. So far as he was concerned, I deserved none. He wasn't supposed to know that I thought of Gloria every second of the day. That I searched the house from attic to cellar, looking for her—and hesitated in my search only when he was with me.

I couldn't leave now. Yet, if I mentioned the girl, I would betray myself.

*Stronger as the days passed, grew the conviction that Gloria Williams was in that coffin.*

I would sit in the study with Peter Shad, perspiration standing out on my forehead, trying not to look—trying to listen to him. He talked much, and

as the days passed, his voice changed, grew weaker and sounded as though it had been effected in some manner.

**H**IS face was as white as the Martian sands. The sands beyond the red desert, where the *vultee* birds waited endlessly for the unwary traveler.

"Remember," he said, "whatever happens, you are to open the envelope of key words only when you are admitted to Trumble's office. If anything strange happens, ignore its strangeness. If I cannot carry on, you must do my work for me."

He would lapse into a coma and I would leave the room, worried about his health, unsure of myself. Once more I would wander like a lost fool through the house, looking for the girl I loved.

Our meals were brought and left in covered *silver tainers* on the porch. I would take food to Shad and eat a little myself.

On the sixth day, Shad was alone in the study. I went to him.

"I've been worried," I said in a casual voice, "about your granddaughter. I haven't seen her since. . . ."

His eyes blazed momentarily, then faded and seemed to recede into his head.

"You are not to be concerned about my granddaughter," he said. "She has left the house until we return. She has gone to Sparna. The trip to earth is a strain for one so young and she could not stay here alone."

I dared not ask about her again, but I knew Sparna, the city of temples beyond the red desert. I knew that Gloria had no friends there. In my mind there was no doubt that the man was deliberately lying.

The seventh day came. I called the space-port and got a thrill out of Randy

Southers' breezy voice.

"For Jade's sake, Wallace, where have you been?" were his first words. "You missed a fat contract two days ago. A millionaire charter trip to California."

"I'm busy," I said. "Drag out the Z-15 and polish her tubes, will you? I'm going to earth on a special trip. It's worth more than your millionaire."

He whistled.

"Something *really* good, huh? Okay, sport, the Z-15 will be standing by; all tubes filled, in two hours. What time you exploding your rockets?"

I looked at my watch. It was six in the afternoon. I had made up my mind to go through with the deal. It would be better to load the coffin after dark. I was forced to make my own decisions now, for Peter Shad refused to talk for more than a few seconds at a time. He had withdrawn completely into himself, leaving the details of the trip entirely up to me.

"Send a freight-cab up at seven," I said, and gave him the address. "Stand by at eight-fifteen. Will you notify the officials?"

I had to have a pass to slip-out at the port. I didn't want any trouble. This trip was already overloaded with mystery—though just what the danger was, I couldn't put a finger on.

Randy said:

"I'll move the ship out to Dock Z-11. The pass will be arranged. What fuel you carrying? 10,000 Retain or 5,000 Super-Charge?"

I completed the arrangements and said good-bye.

"Don't get mixed up with the asteroid belt," he warned as I hung up. "Too damned many corpses out there already."

Cheerful note, I thought. Right in line with my thinking at the moment.

I told Shad to get ready.

"I am ready," he said. "There are no more arrangements to be made."

I had to accept his explanation of Gloria's absence. There was no alternative, if I was to go through with the trip.

The freight-cab came at seven sharp, thanks to Randy Southers' work. I loaded the coffin myself, with the help of the roller wheels beneath it. The freight-cab had no window at the rear of the pilot's seat, and I thanked my lucky stars that I could load the thing in secrecy. Martian freight cab-drivers are lazy people. They work under the assumption that as long as they can stay seated behind the wheel, they won't have to help load freight.

Peter Shad and I climbed into the huge driver's seat and we moved swiftly down the drive.

**D**OCK Z-11 looked damned good to me. The field was like home. The row upon row of landing docks, some of them occupied by the neat, slim army liners, others filled with squat, rusty freighters. A freighter took off just as we drove onto the field, squirting violet and red flame from its tubes, and drowning out all minor sound with its thundering tube exhaust.

Randy Southers was waiting for me at Dock Z-11 with the pass. It seemed good to feel the reality of his warm hand-shake and see that fat, freckled face again. It was as though I'd lived in a dark, musty tomb for a week, and was emerging into the sun once more. Randy seemed worried about me.

"Where in the name of Jade have you been?"

I put a finger to my lips and grinned at him.

He snorted in pretended indignation.

"Oh, hush-hush, Huh? Hope you ain't planning on carrying a load of stink-weed this trip."

Stink weed was our term for Martian *ariz-powder*, a dope peddled only at the risk of death, or at best the loss of our pilot's license.

"No danger," I said. "I love my work, *and* my neck."

He said: "S'long—Stop by the office when you come back. I'll dig out a bottle of sparkle water."

We shook on that. I had the freight cab backed up to the open lock of the Z-15 and loaded it carefully into the ship. The cab driver showed the same reluctance to help, and I blessed him secretly for it.

I helped Peter Shad into the lock and up the steps into the control chamber. He stumbled and almost fell several times. He muttered thanks into my ear when I helped him, but seemed too weak to speak at length. Finally the freight-cab was gone. I had secured both air locks and checked my fuel. I opened the bag of navigation instruments, strapped them into place on the control board and checked them also. These instruments cost more on Mars than an estate with a swimming pool. We pilots usually owed money on them until we died. It was worth it. Every pilot had that set of metallic guides to thank for saving his life many times over. Without them, the astroid belt would be sure murder.

I plugged in the genie-screen and checked with the control office.

"Z-15—Pilot Blake Wallace, seeking clearance to earth," I said.

It was routine stuff. I had mouthed those words a thousand times.

Headquarters office and Speen Johnson's tanned face came into view on my receptive-screen.

"Hello Blake," Spleen said, "Long time no see. Got your pass?"

I took it from my pocket and held it so he could see the pass through the

lense of the genie-screen.

"Okay," he said, "Say, there's a blonde in Brooklyn named Gretta Willow. Haven't seen her for six months. Look her up and . . ."

"Go to blazes," I said, and grinned. "You take care of your own women. I got problems of my own."

He chuckled.

"Explode your rockets, Pilot," he said. "Anyhow, call up Gretta and give her my best. Tell her I'm coming in one of these nights, and I better find her alone."

I blanked the screen and checked the rocket charges. The power was up, the fuel, 5,000 Super-Charge.

I looked up the slanted sight toward the blazing Asteroid belt and repeated words what every pilot said as he pulled down the release jet control.

"*Here comes murder.*"

I pulled the control lever down—hard.

THE asteroid belt isn't bad—not after you get through it. After that it was a matter of contacting the Long Island Port, making arrangements for a landing, and time did the rest.

The handling of the coffin would be rather tough. I decided on telling the truth, so far as Peter Shad's explanation of the coffin was concerned. I told the Long Island manager that I was bringing in a special robot, packed in a Martian coffin. He was a thin-faced, sallow complected man. I had never seen him personally. We had talked many times on the genie-screen.

"Of course," he said dryly, "there'll be the matter of inspection. Can't take chances on *ariz-powder* smuggling, even with a man of your caliber."

I did a little fast thinking.

"Contact James Trumble," I said. "Tell him that Peter Shad, Martian scientist, is delivering a robot of a revo-

lutionary new type. Tell him that the machinery is delicate and cannot be risked by a careless inspection. You can send an inspector to Trumble's office. He will be present when the coffin is opened. Will that do the trick?"

He was doubtful, but I knew that the name Trumble was not to be lightly reckoned with. After a time he promised to call Trumble. In ten minutes he was back on the screen.

"Trumble says it's satisfactory with him," he said. "He seems quite curious about the whole thing."

"Good," I said. "It's a relief for me to know that."

It sure was. I was afraid that when the coffin was opened, I would find something vastly more delicate and lovely than a robot. That thought persisted all the way in on the last stretch.

When we landed at Long Island, one of Trumble's trucks was waiting, and a frigid faced customs inspector kept an eagle eye on the coffin. Peter Shad was worse. He seemed paralyzed when I helped him from the ship. He couldn't walk, and I had to call a special car.

"I suggest that you enter a hospital," I said. "You're not in condition to see Trumble today."

He interrupted me with an angry grunt.

"I'll see Trumble at once," he said. "There isn't much time."

I knew there wasn't, not if Peter Shad ever expected to see his robot in action and collect the fifteen million that his heart was set on. Peter Shad was dying. I had seen men go to pieces before. He was paralyzed from the waist down.

Trumble, Inc., occupies an entire block in down-town New York. The building, seventy stories of it, is made completely of synthetic marble. Trum-

ble wasn't putting on a front. He was *big business* in the United States and he advertised it with immense, wealthy demonstrations. This building was a demonstration of his wealth. Trumble robots gave the old "working-class" freedom from the factories. Carefully controlled, production never went over the limits. People lived quietly and on a good scale.

I admired Trumble, but I had never dreamed of entering a venture that would end in acquiring fifteen million of his good money. If I hadn't been so deadened by the pain of worrying about Gloria, I might have appreciated all this more. In addition, Peter Shad was really in bad shape now. I knew that he must be rushed from Trumble's office directly to a hospital. Only his own iron-clad determination allowed me to help him out of the car and into the elevator that bore us upward toward the sun, to Trumble's vast suite of rooms. The coffin went up with us, and with the coffin, the customs agent.

Trumble, as a man, showed nothing of his wealth. The massive desk, the perfectly trained robot secretaries, the rich furnishings of the office reflected wealth. Trumble was a small man, almost lost behind the desk, eager eyes covered by glasses, his clean fingers tapping the plastic top of the desk. After meeting Trumble and explaining that I was only Peter Shad's assistant, I obtained permission to wheel in the coffin and to carry Peter Shad to a comfortable chair.

Then we sat down. It was a great moment in a way, and yet a horrible one. Success for Peter Shad, when success was too late. Shad had been afflicted, it seemed to me, with a terrible form of paralysis. In addition to that, I had to worry over what the coffin contained.

I hoped against hope that Gloria

Williams really was in that far off Martian city, safe and waiting for our return.

"I am to understand," Trumble said in a friendly voice, "that you have brought a perfected robot, created to meet my specifications, that it is housed at present in this coffin, and it will be far more clever and adaptable than anything we now produce?"

Peter Shad's head nodded.

His hands, resting on the chair arms, were motionless. Was paralysis affecting even those hands?

"You are correct in all but one respect," Peter Shad's voice was low, measured. "The robot is here. It is *not* in the box."

Trumble looked surprised. I started to say something, then remained silent. It was Shad's show. If he didn't finish in a hurry, he might not be able to go on.

"Why did you bring the coffin?" Trumble asked in a puzzled voice. "I don't think I understand."

Peter Shad's hand dipped forward, then straightened. The muscles of his neck were working—perhaps hardening.

"You will understand everything in a short time," Shad said. Then with every word measured and spoken mechanically and with great pain, he went on. "You made an offer, James Drake Trumble, and I have filled every obligation of that offer. You are a man of great honesty. A man who will fulfill his every promise. I know that, for I was careful to check your personal reputation before I started this madness."

**H**E TURNED to me, and I saw fear—ugly fear in his eyes. He gasped for breath.

"Blake—open the letter. *Open the letter before it is too late.*"

His head slumped forward and he

was silent.

The customs agent jumped to his side. He felt Shad's pulse.

"*This man is dead,*" he said quickly. "You shouldn't have brought him here."

*Shad dead?*

Then it was too late. The venture had failed. I had depended on Shad. He himself had said that the coffin was empty—or rather, that the robot was not in it.

The agent and James Trumble were over Shad's body now, seeking some sign of life, and finding only death.

I remembered Shad's last words.

*"Open the letter."*

Neither man seemed to know what to do next. Trumble turned to me.

"This man was obviously in a bad condition. You had no right to bring him here."

I hardly heard him. I had torn the envelope from my pocket and opened it. There were half a dozen pages of Martian words. *Key words* to control the robot. They were useless now, I thought. I found a page of closely written script. I started to read it, and then, something in my brain turned over and I started to see things clearly.

"Listen," I said, and Trumble stood there, looking at me as though I was a mad man. "Listen. This is contained in an envelope of sealed instructions. You've got to understand that I've known Peter Shad for only a short time. He gave me this envelope when I met him. It's addressed to you."

Trumble took it from me and started to read. I could see the wrinkles appear on his forehead. He rounded the desk slowly and sat down.

"I guess," he said, without looking up, "that in fairness to all of you, this should be read aloud."

He read in a hushed voice:

"James Drake Trumble

Trumble, Inc.

New York City, N. Y.

Dear Sir:

At the beginning, I wish it clear that I have nothing but honest admiration for you and for the way you run your business. However, I also had a business. It was the task of probing into man's body and mind, and finding there certain qualities that affect life and death.

"On Mars, there is a death that is *not* death. It causes people to die in a manner that resembles *true* death, and to be buried in that condition. Methods have been perfected to save such people, if they revive after burial. They are not perfect, and many suffer the hell of a second death within their coffin."

Trumble hesitated and stared across the room at the gleaming coffin. I was reminded sharply of Gloria, yet I was fascinated by the letter. Here, I thought, lies the true mind of Peter Shad. What is he seeking? What will he gain?

Trumble went on:

"Once I, Peter Shad, was a rich man. I sought a drug or a chemical cure for false death. I found it. However, to serve the people of Mars, the drug would have to be produced in immense quantities. There would have to be special instruments, huge clinics to handle and sort the true dead from the false.

"My money was spent on research. I tried to borrow, but people thought me mad. I couldn't tell them why I needed money. I was classed as a recluse, a fool.

"**T**HIS year your folder offering prizes for perfect robots came to my attention. Do not misunderstand me, Mr. Trumble. I haven't produced a robot that will be of value to you. It

will not be. However, I claim to have perfected the robot to a point that it will respond perfectly to every command.

"Your rules were as follows:

"Our robots must respond quickly to the given command and at no time fail to respond to the command given by control masters. . . . Specifications are left to the discretion of the inventor."

Trumble stopped reading then, and stared at the corpse half sitting in the chair. I suspect he was beginning to wonder even then. I gripped the list of control words in my hand, and listened as he went on.

"I planned to trick you into giving me that first prize of fifteen million dollars. I have succeeded. Only the test remains. You will have to give that money to my agent, Blake Wallace, to fill the terms of your promise.

"He is to use the money to build clinics of proper size on Mars and fitted to inject my drug into *all* who die. It will not affect a *true* corpse, but it will restore to life at once any unfortunate person who is afflicted by *false* death.

"I feel that in tricking you, by matching wits with you, I have done humanity a great service.

"In conclusion, let me assure you that the drugs that I have injected into my body were necessary for the success of the rather macabre experiment. There will be no need for you to use the revival drug on my body. I will be, as I sit before you, a *true* corpse. Let there be no doubt of it. Let my body be tested by all methods to determine this fact.

"The remainder of this venture rests in the hands of Blake Wallace. He has the tools that will control your robot."

James Trumble put the letter down. There was something in his eyes. Horror, perhaps, but also a vast tribute for

a man who would kill himself so that others might live. I guess Trumble knew then. I know I did, and I had a horrible task ahead. I'd go through with it for Shad's sake. Wherever Gloria was, whatever she was doing, I knew that she could have only a deep love for the old man.

I looked at the sheets of paper I held in my hand. The first word was familiar. I had heard it from Peter Shad's lips that night in his room. I took a deep breath. I didn't wait for Trumble to approve of what was to take place.

I said: "*Rela.*"

It was the Martian word meaning *move forward*.

Peter Shad's lifeless corpse jerked suddenly to attention. I felt a shudder go up my spine. I couldn't do it. I couldn't force a corpse to move, yet the body moved forward in the chair.

I was only the instrument to control Shad's great brain.

I said: "*Twan—stop.*"

The corpse stopped short and froze in rigidity. I heard the custom's officer gasp and saw the look of horror on Trumble's face.

"Look," I said, "this isn't fair to you. It isn't fair to him."

Trumble looked at me steadily.

"Young man," he said, "you have a job to perform. I have a duty. Proceed."

With shaking hands, I held the list of control words. I mumbled the word: "*Steepa*"—or stand up.

The body of Peter Shad arose stiffly, every joint forcing itself to work, every limb rigid.

"*Rela.*"

The corpse shuffled forward and hit the desk before I could cry out the command: "*Twan.*"

I looked down the long list. There were many words there, with their

meanings all written after them.

I said to Trumble:

"Paper and pencil."

He produced them.

"*Twists-fara-squn-atter-port.*"

"Figure the distance from the door to the desk."

THE slim fingers grasped the pencil and started to write. There was no hesitation, no study of the problem. I arose and went to the desk. There were words and figures on the paper.

"I figure  $8\frac{1}{2}$  feet, with  $1/100$  inch allowed for expansion due to weather."

I pushed the paper toward Trumble. I moved mechanically myself now. I was so full of mixed terror and horror for what I was forced to do that I couldn't speak myself. I was glad that Gloria wasn't present.

"Tell him," Trumble said, "to estimate the number of robots in my employ. Tell him he will use these production figures from my plants. They give the number of robot parts made in the past month. The month should be multiplied by one million to get the figure for the years in question."

I searched for a long time and jotted down the right command words. During that time, the custom's inspector stared out of the window. Trumble averted his eyes from the rigid humble looking thing that stood waiting. At last I was ready, I asked for the estimate.

It came quickly, spoken from dead lips. Trumble gasped.

"I think," he said, "that Peter Shad has outwitted me. I am ready to admit that he has earned his money, and God bless his memory, for the fine thing he has done."

He stared straight at Peter Shad's corpse. He did a strange thing. I think by then he was too numb to feel fear or horror. He grasped the dead,

stiffened hand and squeezed it.

"*I shake hands,*" he said in a hushed voice, "*with a most perfect creation, a Human Robot.*"

I think I, as well as the readers of this account, knew from the first that we would find Gloria Williams in that casket. There was an explanation there also, written by Peter Shad's hand, and it was read in the privacy of James Drake Trumble's office, after Peter Shad's body had been taken away to a more fitting place. I destroyed the key words in Trumble's presence, so that never again would Peter Shad, Human Robot, be forced to rise from death at a spoken command.

Peter Shad wrote these words, and I read them to Trumble and to a prominent earth doctor on Trumble's staff:

"I, Peter Shad, realize that I can revive Gloria Williams tonight before my trip to earth begins. Should I do so, she will be frightened and may betray my secret in a moment of fear.

"I love my granddaughter dearly. She is the one person I live for. I keenly regret that I have never been able to make her happy. She is in love with my agent, Blake Wallace. It was through her that I learned how valuable Wallace would be to me. I watched them alone, and knew him as an honorable, upright man.

"I would not leave her body untouched, for I examined her on the night she died. Her death was caused by shock, when she learned that I intended to die to help others. An examination proved that hers was not true death, but of the type mentioned in my earlier communication.

"I had no choice but to bring her to earth, carefully cared for, so that she could come to no harm.

"The capsule of my drug, contained in this coffin, will revive her and estab-



lish to everyone my sincerity and faith in it to revive the false dead. It should be handled by a competent doctor, according to my instructions."

The instructions followed, and I skipped them for the present, later giving them to the man in charge. The letter closed:

"I have removed from this coffin, the alarm whistles used in present day burial methods. They will not be needed, for I hope to spend the ages in this resting place, after my granddaughter has been removed from it.

"May God bless my children and forgive me for tricking an honest man, to obtain part of his fortune.

Peter Shad"

The brilliantly lighted perfection of the modern operating room was a far cry from Trumble's office. I watched them give Gloria the drug and I sat by her side after she revived, telling her as honestly as I could what had happened. She cried some, but I think she knew how Peter Shad would feel about that. She soon dried her tears.

**JAMES DRAKE TRUMBLE** was in his office when we were ushered in. He shook hands with Gloria. He had regained some of his composure since he last saw me, and so did I. Peter Shad was buried on Long Island, and there was a tall shaft of marble marking his grave.

"You've changed some since I saw

you last, young lady," he said.

Gloria nodded and held my hand tightly. She had a right to hold it in front of the whole world. We were married now. Had been married a total of two hours. I felt quite possessive about the whole thing.

"You know," I told Trumble, "you've cared for Peter Shad's body and given him a fine burial. We have talked everything over. It isn't fair to force you to live up to that promise."

Trumble looked hurt.

"Are you returning to Mars?"

Gloria said:

"We're going directly to Venus. My husband has purchased a small place there. It's to be our home."

She said it proudly.

Trumble nodded. His eyes twinkled.

"Then I'll send my check direct to the Martian branch of the Bank of United Planets. The medical staff of my Martian hospital has been notified of what has happened. They are ready to start work on a hundred clinics. I will take pride in carrying on Peter Shad's work."

I wanted to thank him, but words choked me.

"Then," Gloria said gratefully, "my grandfather's work will be carried on?"

Trumble nodded.

He started writing a check. It was for a vastly larger sum than Peter Shad had demanded.

THE END