

# **SECOND MONSTER ISSUE**

# **SUPER-SCIENCE**

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# **FICTION**

## **CREATURES OF GREEN SLIME**

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

## **THE DAY THE MONSTERS BROKE LOOSE**

by ROBERT SILVERBERG



## **TERROR OF THE UNDEAD CORPSES**

by RUSSELL THOMPSON





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W. W. Scott — Editor

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# CREATURES OF GREEN SLIME

by JAMES ROSENQUEST

There were no living things on Mars; that seemed to be for sure. But dormant in the green slime of its canals was a hideous mockery of life that could wait and wait

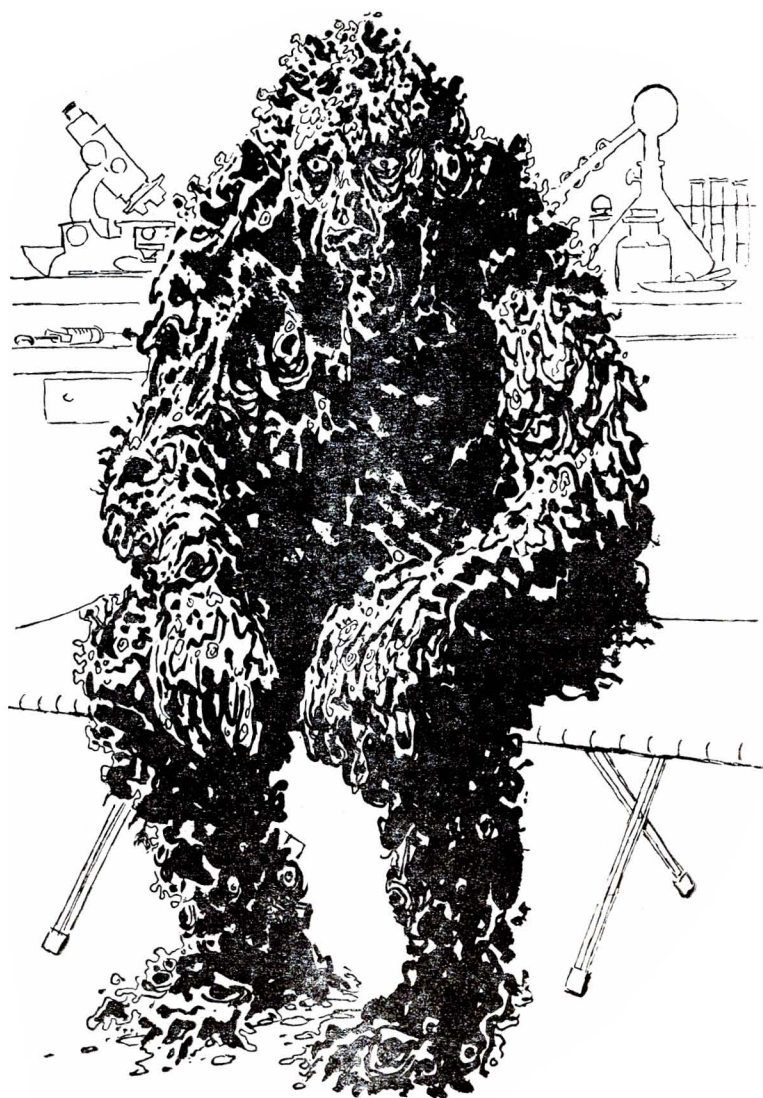
**F**EAR and Terror. Phobos and Deimos. Those are the names of Mars' two little moons in Greek. Fear and Terror. Whoever named them showed the same kind of uncanny intuition that inspired Dean Swift, in 1726, in *Gulliver's Travels*, to describe the two satellites of the Red Planet with fantastic accuracy almost 150 years before they were actually discovered.

My doctor has given me a renewable prescription for sleeping capsules. Not that I have trouble sleeping. They make me sleep deeply enough so that I can't have nightmares.

You know, alien planets are no place for kid stuff, and least of all Mars. But I am getting ahead of myself—. Anyhow, it almost wrecked the first Mars expedition...

"What on earth—or rather, what on Mars—possessed you to do such a fool thing?" snapped Doctor Fordham irritably. The ship's physician had Jack Hall's right foot in his lap, and had the first two toes spread apart to examine the skin between them closely.

"Bad case of athlete's foot, huh Doc?" answered the navigator, with a feeble attempt at humor. Jack was twenty-five, and a damned good navigator



—made the first Mars run with the accuracy of a big electronic computer—but sometimes he acted like a kid in his 'teens. We all miss him, but we prefer not to think of him, and talking about him or what happened to him is absolutely taboo. I was his best friend, but even I would not care to say that I wish it had happened to me instead of him. God, no! Even the deepest friendship doesn't go that far.

The Doc had that funny mirror with the hole in the center of it over one eye and was examining the skin between Jack's toes with a magnifying glass.

He grunted. "Might be a little more serious than that," he retorted. He shook his head and reached for a swab and a bottle of silver-protein antiseptic, and rubbed the brownish medicine on the deep fissure between the toes.

"After all the warnings about alien bacteria and other life forms—to which humans might have no natural resistance—you have to go wading barefoot in one of those so-

called canals," he snorted.

At the time, we were all sympathetic toward Jack. Later, we began to fear him like the Black Plague.

You know of course that Mars has some extremes of temperature. During the night it sinks to fifty below zero. But during the daytime it may go up to fifty degrees above, which is not at all uncomfortable.

We had landed purposely at the planet's equator to take advantage of the 'mild' climate in that region. That meant that we could venture outside the protection of the spaceship with no more protection than a leather jacket. And, of course, a breathing mask.

The astronomers had been absolutely right in their long-range analysis of Mars' atmosphere with their spectroscopes and other instruments. The oxygen content was only about one sixth of earth's, so that we had to carry our own oxygen supply with us.

And, naturally, we wore heavy lead attachments on our boots. Since Mars' gravity is only about one third of earth's,

without them we would have bounced a couple of feet into the air with every step we took.

After a week of cautious exploration and sampling of the air and soil, the initial exhilaration at being the first men to land on the Red Planet began to wear off. On top of that, Mars is probably the least interesting planet in the Solar System. Nothing but red sand as far as the eye can see, with a few low hills only accentuating the dreary monotony of the plains.

Here and there were great, shallow patches of grey-green primitive plants, and an occasional 'canal,' which was really only a thin trickle of moisture running off the shallow polar ice-caps.

At night, of course, these canals froze over; but during the forty to fifty degree temperatures of the equatorial day they thawed out briefly. It was during these thaw periods that you could see the thin layer of green slime at the bottom of these puny Martian creeks.

Anyhow, at the beginning of

the second week, Jack got impatient and threw all caution to the winds. He had no assignment that day, so he found nothing better to do than to remove his weighted boots and heavy woolen socks and go wading barefoot in the shallow stream that ran by a hundred yards from the ship.

"Hey, Bob," he called out gleefully over the walky-talky, "come on in. The water's fine! Sure feels good for burning, tired feet." And he went wading up and down the shallow stream, sliding his feet along the slimy bottom rather than taking steps that would have sent him bounding into the air. That was his mistake. Who knows—if he had not dragged his bare feet over the bottom...

I hissed urgently into the microphone on the inside of my glass helmet. "Get out of there, you nut, and put on your boots before the Skipper catches you!"

"O.K., thou brother's keeper," he crackled laughingly over the short-wave intercom. He came out of the stream, dried his feet by walking

through the fine red sand for a few minutes, and replaced his stockings and boots, just in time to avoid the keen eyes of the Skipper as he rounded one of the hills with an exploration party and headed for the ship's gaping lock.

I wish to God that the Old Man *had* seen him, or that I had been G.I. enough to report him, at least to the medic. But you cover up things for a buddy, you see? So it wasn't really my fault, I keep trying to tell myself. So I paved the road to Jack's hell with my good intentions.

**S**O it wasn't until three days after the wading episode that Jack reported on sick call and showed the raw fissure between the first two toes of his right foot. Then it was that he had to confess to the irresponsible, foolish, kid thing he had done.

Doctor Fordham finished the swabbing and put some gauze over the crack and applied a small adhesive bandage, then warned him to stay off his feet for several days and to come back to the dis-

pensary for additional treatment every day.

"That won't be hard for you, Hall," rasped Captain Kramer. "As punishment, you're confined to quarters for five days. That's all." Jack hobbled off dejectedly to his private cubicle.

That evening after chow, when our time was our own, I went to see Jack in his room. He was seated on the bunk with his right foot resting on his left knee, and I was dismayed to see that he had removed the bandage and was examining the fissure with such concentration that he did not hear me enter. I tapped him on the shoulder.

"Trying to doctor yourself now?" I asked cynically. "Why couldn't you leave the dressing on?"

He looked startled and sheepish at first, then a worried frown creased his forehead.

"Take a look, Bob."

I bent over and peered gingerly. The surrounding skin was brown, of course, where the medic had applied the antiseptic, and I suppose the



crack should have been brown, too. But it wasn't. It was a decided green.

"Better tell Doctor Fordham about it," I said worriedly.

"Heck, no," he grunted, replacing the bandage and then pulling on his stocking. "He probably saw it when he put the guck on it. And anyhow, he'll see it tomorrow soon enough."

I shrugged despairingly at his customary stubbornness and indifference to consequences. "Suit yourself. It's your funeral."

The following day he reported to the dispensary again as instructed, and I tagged along out of worry and curiosity. The Captain was there, too. He never overlooked or forgot anything. He was, naturally enough, worried by the possibility of contagion. An outbreak of athlete's foot on board would seriously cramp further exploration sorties, and our rations limited us to just one more week on Mars. Then it would have to be homeward bound to Earth again.

The ship's physician removed the dressing gently and exposed the infected region. His sharp intake of air was audible. The Skipper swore a soft oath, unusually for him. I felt a little sick to my stomach, myself.

The green patch had spread, and was now visible to me, even at a distance of several feet, as a fine, fuzzy growth, like short, very fine green hairs. The medic let out his breath very slowly and looked up at the Captain.

"This man will have to go into quarantine," he said flatly.

Jack grinned pathetically. "Guess I put my foot into it, huh? Hey, that's a pun, son! Get it? Put my foot in it!"

No one was amused, and the Captain muttered something under his breath about the fool back at Earth GHQ who had assigned a juvenile delinquent to the first serious probe into outer space.

The doctor fetched a glass slide and a small surgical knife and scraped some of the green fuzz from between Jack's toes.

"I'll want to examine this under the microscope," he said heavily. "Perhaps make a culture, too." He looked over at Jack with half-angry, half-worried eyes. "With the Captain's permission, I'm restricting you to your room for an indefinite period. You will keep your door closed. Your meals will be brought to you. You are not to leave under any circumstances.

"Instead of coming here to the dispensary, *stay in your room*—and keep the door locked. No visitors except myself. I'll come to you when I think it is time for another examination or treatment. Understood?"

The Captain confirmed the doctor's order curtly, and Jack acknowledge the command with a hang-dog expression. He limped off down the gangway to his room, his shoulders drooping dejectedly. I wanted to follow him to buck up his morale a little, but a warning glance from the Skipper stopped me short.

"He is to be left in strict isolation," Captain Kramer warned ominously. "And that

includes you as well. We don't want any more casualties, no matter how minor."

That night, after chow, I managed to pass by his cubicle. The door was closed and locked, but through the round, glass window near the top I could see that Jack was sitting on the edge of his bunk, holding the bandaged foot in one hand and rocking back and forth gently, like a man in pain.

I rapped lightly, surreptitiously, and he looked up quickly, the grimace of pain giving way to the boyish smile I had come to know so well. I made the universally recognized V signal with my first two fingers, and moved my lips silently: "Chin up." He waved back nonchalantly and stabbed toward the ceiling with one thumb.

I found it hard getting to sleep that night. Through the thick porthole of special reinforced glass over my bunk, I could see the velvet-black sky of Mars' thin atmosphere, through which an incredible number of brilliant, unwinking stars looked down, cold and

pitiless, at the handful of soft little bipeds that were threatening to invade their eternal realm.

The thought came to me that they were not hostile, but regarded our first tentative probing into their infinite gulfs with a vast, cosmic indifference to our fate, and I shuddered.

I finally fell asleep, but my slumber was upset by dreams of a familiar figure covered with fine, greenish fuzz from head to foot, with *only* the eyes recognizable in a featureless mass of waving green cilia, despairing and pleading at the same time.

I woke up about an hour before the pale Martian dawn broke over the silent red sands, and through the port-hole could see the moon Phobos— Fear —racing across the sky in its seven-hour revolution about the parent planet, as though being pursued. My pillow was soaked with perspiration.

**A**FTER breakfast in the mess hall, the Captain, who had sat hunched and

brooding over his coffee and hot roll, seized me grimly by the arm and led me along the echoing gangway in the direction of the dispensary and laboratory.

"How well do you know Jack Hall's family?" he asked softly, and a chill rose slowly up my spine like cold fingers counting each vertebra. I could not miss the implication of the question.

"V-very well," I stammered. "My folks died in an auto crash when I was eighteen, and his mother and father have been like foster-parents to me." I looked up into his stern face anxiously. "But why do you ask, sir? Isn't he— isn't he going to be all right?"

The Skipper muttered heavily, "I don't know, Bob. It doesn't look too good. Last night he was in such pain when the doctor dropped in for a final night examination that he had to have a codeine injection. And that damned fungus has spread out to cover his entire right foot.

My head reeled and I thought I would lose my breakfast when I thought of

the prophetic dream I had the night before. Jack—my best friend, almost like a brother—turned into a quivering mass of green fungus... I trembled violently. The Captain noticed it and looked at me with a sudden softening of his granite features.

"Well," he said with a deep sigh, "that's what I wanted to know. If we can't beat this thing—if, mind you—I'd like you to be the one to break the news to his family when we get back to Earth. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded dumbly, stunned by the sudden turn of affairs. I still could not completely grasp the possibility that Jack might not be coming home with us, back to the green hills and the great swelling oceans and the soft clouds and skies of Mother Earth. It just doesn't happen to your best friend, you see?

I was so lost in my dazed thoughts that I only came out of my trance when I realized that the Skipper had led me into the laboratory.

"You might as well know

all the details," he said heavily.

The physician was standing at one side of the porcelain lab table. Pierce, the ship's biologist, was seated at the table, bent over a high-power microscope with a fierce intensity of concentration that made him oblivious to our entry.

We stood silently until he finally tore his eyes away from the instrument and looked up at us, squinting to bring his strained eyes into focus. I noticed a bead of perspiration running down his brow, and a small muscle jumped persistently in his right cheek. His jaws were clenched tightly. Then he stood up suddenly and pushed the chair back and rubbed his eyes wearily.

The doctor broke the silence first. "What did you find, Pierce."

The biologist shook his head. "This is no ordinary fungus growth," he said slowly. "It's actually a sort of lichen—that is, a combination of a fungus living in symbiosis with an alga, a combination of

a simple plant with a primitive animalcule, each helping the other in some way to survive. In this respect it is very much like lichens on Earth. But in addition the green slime seems to carry some kind of giant protein molecule or spore in a state of suspended animation." He looked at the physician. "You're familiar with the theoretical structure of genes, viruses, and protein molecules?"

The ship's medic nodded hesitantly. "To some degree."

"Good enough," continued the biologist slowly, as if searching for words. "This green slime is a triple symbiosis, if you will. The giant spores seem to have no function, but are merely carried by the lichen as a sort of privileged guest, doing nothing itself, but being nourished and protected.

"It is the largest and most complicated protein structure I have ever seen. It looks like a gene—a pattern or template for a much more complicated organism that we have found so far on Mars. I can't shake off the impression that it is

the seed of something lying dormant."

The Skipper frowned. "I don't quite follow you."

The biologist pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Consider," he said at last, "that we have found no higher life forms on the planet. Just the areas of lichens struggling desperately for life in the moist areas near the 'canals' and the green scum itself lining the bottom of the same canals.

"As you know, the life history of Mars has been a short and brief one, compared with Earth's. Perhaps not in absolute time, but by revolutionary standards, Mars is a very old planet. A dying planet. It went through the cooling process while our Earth was still a hell of erupting volcanoes and inconceivably violent earthquakes, when the air rained fire and the century long storms poured down millions of tons of water that turned into live steam and boiled upward again the instant it touched the incandescent surface.

"Later on, life appeared in its first primitive forms, and



took billions of years to culminate in man. On Mars, this process must have been greatly condensed and foreshortened, and life had to adapt itself to changing conditions at a much faster rate than it did on earth.

"And as the favorable conditions for higher forms of life quickly passed away, life may have been compelled to turn in on itself, to become simpler and more compact, in a desperate attempt at survival.

"It may have followed a dwindling spiral, finally winding up as the dormant spores now clinging to existence in the cold, slimy womb of the green lichens at the bottoms of the canals."

The biologist paused for thought, polishing his pincenez. "Last night," he continued, "I took a sample of the growth scraped off Hall's foot yesterday by Doctor Fordham here"—he gestured absently toward the medic with one hand—"and incubated it in a warm, nutrient broth. The spores—broke—and developed into clusters of shapeless pro-

toplasm, like giant amoebas, but died quickly when they exhausted the amino acids in the solution."

His lips tightened and I thought he turned somewhat pale. "Then," he went on, his voice sinking to a whisper, "I tried an experiment. I put some more of the scrapings into another beaker of nutrient, waited until the spores began to grow and burst, and poured some into a bowl containing one of the fish we brought along for test and experimental purposes. Now, if you will please step over here to this stand."

We followed him silently to where a small stand stood in one corner of the lab, covered with a black cloth. He lifted the cloth with a hand that trembled noticeably, and we all leaned forward to gaze into the fish bowl.

Startled by the sudden light, the goldfish dashed about erratically in the clouded water, bumping blindly into the glass wall that shut it in.

My stomach churned violently when I saw that green

fur sprouted from each finny occupant—thick masses of waving, poisonously green cilia where there should have been reddish-golden scales. And worse yet, the fish was almost completely distorted out of its normal stream-lined shape by nodules and bumps that seemed to swell up at random under the furry growth.

I thought of Jack, and of my dream, and stared with bulging eyes at the fish-thing in the bowl, and suddenly I was at the other side of the room, leaning over a basin and retching violently between sobs of anguish.

I felt a light hand on my shoulder, got myself under control and turned around. The Captain was looking at me with luminous, pitying eyes.

"You see," he said gently, "if we can't save Hall, some one is going to have to break the news to his family, sparing them the details. All they need know is that he died of an unknown infection indigestion to Mars."

"But isn't there anything

we can do for him?" I wailed despairingly.

The physician broke in. "We are trying everything, from penicillin through the whole gamut of antibiotics, and even the crude, primitive arsenicals used in the early twentieth century against venereal diseases. But as Pierce indicated, the thing is of a semi-virus, semi-gene nature. It insinuates itself into the very cell-structure of the host and converts it to its own purposes.

"Anything strong enough to completely destroy the green invader would also be fatal to the host organism." He spread his hands helplessly. "There is nothing more we can do for him, except to keep him under sedation and ease his pain. The horror of it is that, as in rabies, his mind is crystal clear, and will probably remain that way until—termination."

They let me go then, and I staggered rather than walked back to my room. On the way, I passed Jack's cubicle furtively, noticing the red quarantine sign hung on the door,

and was shocked to see that an opaque shield of some kind had been pasted over the glass window from the inside, so that it was no longer possible to peer into the little room or look in on its occupant.

What in God's name was happening in there? Then I thought I heard a muffled groan from within, and I clapped my hands over my ears and ran to my own room and threw myself face down on the cot, and cried unashamedly.

THAT day, although Martian days are of about the same length as Earth's, seemed of endless duration. I donned my helmet and oxygen mask once and stepped outside the ship, and stumbled about aimlessly through the silent red sands, and once I stood on the bank of the stream where Jack had gone wading in sheer boyish exuberance, and I shook my fist and cursed futilely at the green slime lining the bottom.

I came back into the ship in time for lunch, but had no appetite to eat. During the

course of the meal, the biologist hurried into the mess hall and whispered something into his Captain's ear. The Skipper turned gray, threw down his napkin and followed the biologist. I raised myself slowly from the table and followed a few yards behind them. They did not go directly to the lab as I had thought they would, but stopped first outside Jack's room.

The Captain extracted a key from his pocket, and the two men slipped inside. During the brief moment the door was opened, I could hear the agonized gasp inside, and then the door was slammed shut and the sound was cut off.

I dashed wildly for the dispensary, and almost knocked the ship's physician off his feet as he came out, carrying a hypodermic in one hand. I seized him violently by the arms.

"For God's sake," I cried out. "What's going on in that room? What's happening to Jack? Isn't there *something*—anything—that you can do for him?"

The medic was ashen. He

shook his head silently, detached himself gently but firmly from my grasp and went down the gangway to the sealed room. He knocked on the door twice, and some one on the inside let him in quickly and slammed the door behind him.

I stood there helplessly, with clenched fists, not daring to come closer to that locked room with its terrible secret, and yet frozen to the spot, unable to move. The door opened again a little later and the three men came out. It was quiet now inside.

The Captain, the doctor and the biologist passed me on the way to the lab, and the Skipper stopped long enough to suggest that I go to my room and stay there. Then the medic said that he thought I ought to be given a tranquilizer of some sort, and I followed him to the dispensary, where he shot a hypodermic into my gluteal muscle, and soon thereafter I felt the soothing waves of synthetic peace wash over my feverish brain.

The doctor dismissed me, suggesting that now perhaps I

would be able to finish my lunch, and then to go to my room and try to get some rest.

He joined the Captain and the biologist then in the adjoining laboratory, and before I shambled away, I could see through the open doorway that the biologist had raised the cloth covering the goldfish bowl so that the others could look at its occupant.

"My God!" the Captain burst out involuntarily, and the physician staggered back was up against one wall and from the bowl until his back his eyes closed as if to shut out what he had just seen. The cloth dropped into place again and I staggered back to my cubicle before they could turn around and observe me spying on them from the doorway.

Back in my room, the tranquilizer began to take effect, and the afternoon passed by in a sort of stupefied euphoria. I was too drugged to feel anything but a sort of not-unpleasant numbness in my limbs, and a curious detachment, as if my brain had been cut off from whatever nerve

tracts bring it the messages of emotion and feeling.

I seem to remember long hours of staring stupidly out the porthole at the endless expanses of red sands, and watching with naive, childish pleasure as the small, distant, watery disc of the sun sank below the sharply curved rim of Mars' foreshortened horizon, turning the sands first into blood red and finally into featureless black.

Sometime in the evening, a kindly crew member brought me my dinner to my room, and I spooned something down mechanically, not knowing or caring what it was I ate. Still later on, when it came time to retire for the night, the doctor appeared again briefly and gave me another shot of tranquilizer.

He shook his head and firmly refused to answer any of my thick-tongued questions about Jack's condition, and I was almost too numb to resent his refusal. But I could clearly see how haggard and drawn his face was as he bent over me to administer the shot.

Then he pressed me down

gently on the cot, switched off the light and left me. I plummeted down into infinite, black gulfs, down into a shaft, and before I reached bottom, I was asleep.

THE hypo wore off, alas, too soon. They must have expected me to sleep on into the next day, but my nervous system was so keyed up under the covering blanket of drug that I woke up again before the bleak Martian dawn was due to break. Pale light filtered down from the jet sky and poked ghostly fingers through the porthole into the silence and pitch-blackness of my room. The darkness and quiet were oppressive, pressing down on me with an almost angible weight.

I rolled to the edge of my cot and sat up and looked out through the porthole. Deimos — Terror—floated through the night sky like the ghost of a dead planet. Then Phobos appeared on the scene, moving three times as fast as its satellite sister, moving in the opposite direction, soon passing it by and dwindling rapidly



toward the invisible horizon like a frightened wraith.

I turned on the light and went over to the wash basin and splashed my face and head with cold water. The shock hastened the fading out of the narcotic daze, and I felt my faculties and senses return with sudden keenness. I returned to the edge of my cot and sat with my head in my hands, trying to recall the events of the day before, which seemed to have a dream-like quality of its own. Then I remembered the lifting of the cloth over the fish bowl, and the exaggerated reactions of the medic and the ship's Captain to what they had seen inside it, and I sat up suddenly.

I knew I would have to see it for myself, whatever it might be, no matter how terrible. The secrecy was unbearable. At least I would get a line on what was happening to Jack and how he was progressing—if he was. Like the naive fool I was, I thought that the truth, however terrible, was preferable to uncertainty and ignorance and all the formless

fantasies that my lack of knowledge led me to substitute for the truth.

I took off my shoes—I had slept fully dressed—and slipped out silently into the semi-dark corridor. I crept on tip-toe, feeling my way along the cool, alloy walls of the passage, listening to the reassuring sounds of heavy breathing and snoring that betokened that the rest of the crew slept soundly.

I wondered how many of them knew what had happened to Jack. In the mess hall the day before, I had been the focus of many eyes, being Jack's buddy, and practically everybody had spoken in irritating whispers and undertones. But no one had ventured to question me openly, and it would have done little good in any case, for I knew scarcely more than they did.

I reached the doorway into the dispensary and the lab that lay just beyond. The lights were on, and I saw with dismay that Pierce, the biologist, sat in a chair with his back toward the door. I stood irresolutely, wondering wheth-

er to return to my room, when I noted the steady, rhythmic rise and fall of his shoulders and heard his heavy breathing. I tiptoed forward with infinite care, holding my breath, until I came around in front of him and saw that his eyes were closed and his chin rested on his chest. He was sound asleep.

I glided silently past the sleeping sentinel and into the lighted lab beyond the next doorway. I walked up to the fish bowl. I stood a long moment, the fear of an unbearable revelation fighting with the desperate desire to know.

I finally reached out with a trembling hand and raised the cloth that covered the little glass tank.

The poor, mishapen monstrosity that swam feebly in the dirty water was only a nightmare caricature of its former self. It was a longish spheroid of green fur, some of the waving strands now several inches in length. But through the loathesome tangle of matted hair the nodules and protuberances of the day before had lengthened and ex-

tended outward from the shapeless mass, as if the goldfish were trying to grow limbs. I bent forward in horrified fascination.

One of the excrescences was almost as long as my little finger, and as I peered closer, I could see that it was pinched off, near the body of the fish, to a narrow connecting band that barely joined it to the parent mass. Then, as I watched, stunned and sickened, the *process of maturation* completed itself suddenly, and the hair-thin connecting link snapped off and the detached segment floated free in the water.

It floated free—and then it began to move. *It began to move.* A mere, shapeless blob at first, it wriggled and contorted and finally settled down into a crude but recognizable reproduction of the goldfish to which it had been attached only a minute before. Its eyes were still shut, like a newborn kitten's, and the fins and tail were only rudimentary, but it moved on its own, and I could even see the primitive gills open and close.

I couldn't help it. I dropped the cloth back into place and let out a strangled cry. I clapped my hands over my mouth, but it was too late. I heard the rush of footsteps, and then the biologist was behind me. He seized me by the arm and whirled me around.

"You fool," he hissed angrily, and yet there was a sickly kind of pity in his red-rimmed eyes. "You fool, you ineffable fool! We tried to spare you this. Isn't it enough that three of us have to carry the burden? But no! Fools always rush in where the angels themselves fear to tread." He rubbed a weary hand over his lined face. "Well, now you know."

I seized him by the shoulders and shook him. "*Know what?*" I almost shrieked. He tried to press a restraining hand over my mouth, but I ignored him.

"Tell me!" I shouted. "*What am I supposed to know now?*"

He looked at me incredulously, then stepped to the fish bowl and raised the cloth briefly. He nodded to himself,

as if he had expected what he saw, then dropped the cloth back in place. He faced me again.

"You've just seen *that*," he murmured unbelievably, "and you still can't deduce what's happening to your friend? But no," he continued pityingly, "your mind won't let you face the truth."

"For the love of God," I cried despairingly, "tell me, tell me! I can't stand your damned mysteries any longer!" I seized his arm with a grip that made him wince.

"Listen," he said with weary patience. "You remember what I said to the Captain and Doctor Fordham the other day, in your presence."

I ran my fingers through my hair wildly. "Yes, yes, I remember! But I didn't—didn't understand all of it."

HE regarded me out of dark, somber eyes—eyes in which barely suppressed horror lurked. "You recall that I advanced the hypothesis that the spores that seemed to serve no function in the economy of the green slime were

like the huge, highly complex molecules that comprise the genes of living things, at least as we know them on Earth.

"I suggested that they might be the highly condensed survival form of any and all higher life that might have once lived on this dying, forsaken planet. I also thought that they might be like viruses, invading the cells of the host organism and converting them to its own form in order to reproduce.

"Well, I had half of the truth, and the other half was exactly the opposite of what I thought. The invading spores do not reproduce themselves in their own image from the living protoplasm of the infected organism. *They adapt* themselves. The ultimate form of adaptation. And in this way they perpetuate themselves as an imitation of the parent mass, budding off and then breaking free to live a life of their own.

"I don't know yet how much they are really like the organism they duplicate, or what new features of their own they introduce. But at least, in this

way, they can survive and reproduce themselves in any environment that the host organism can live in.

"Perhaps, in the course of time, they mutate and return to the form of life that was dominant on Mars countless ages ago." He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows? It's too soon to tell yet."

I went berserk then. I waved my arms and screamed. "*Too soon to tell yet? You cold-blooded, inhuman monster! You know what Jack is going through, and yet you let him live on! He's just an experiment to you—an interesting subject! Why haven't you put him out of his misery?*"

The biologist stared at me, shocked. "Good God, no!" he gasped in horror. "You're all wrong. We have to try to save him, right up to the very end. We don't have the right to end his life, least of all Doctor Fordham, who took an oath to struggle against disease and death until the matter is taken out of his hands. Don't you see that?"

"Let me go," I said hoarsely. "I've got to go to Jack.

I've got to help him. Somebody's got to help him!"

I tried to brush past the biologist, and he seized me by the arm to restrain me. In blind panic and horror I lashed out at his jaw and connected violently. He sank to the laboratory floor silently.

I realized suddenly that the door to Jack's room would be locked, and searched rapidly through his pockets until I found a key with the number of Jack's cubicle stamped on it. I dashed out of the lab and through the dispensary, and ran head on into the Captain, who must have been awakened by my shouting.

"What the devil—?" he began. I pulled myself together quickly and put on a show of calmness with an immense effort of will. By good fortune, the inert body of the biologist was not visible from the angle of the doorway to the dispensary.

"Just been having an argument with Pierce," I said sheepishly. "I'm afraid I got a little hot-headed."

He looked at me out of narrowed eyes. "Very well," he

said slowly, "but don't let it happen again. You can go back to your room now."

I reached the sealed door to my friend's room, inserted the key fumblingly, and stumbled into the room. The weak, cold, watery light of the rising sun poured through the porthole and illuminated the thing that writhed and moaned in delirium on the cot, and I could see what my friend had turned into.

I screamed until my throat was raw. My screams must have awakened the poor thing from its final delirium, because the eyes opened in the furry blur of the face and looked at me with recognition. And then when I ceased my screaming and trembling long enough to reach for the heat-ray pistol hanging on the wall and turn the flared muzzle toward the remnants of humanity on the cot, I thought I saw a gleam of gratitude in the feverish, sunken eyes.

When they finally rushed into the room and seized me, it was too late. I had done the ultimate favor a man can do



for his friend, other than laying down his life for him.

They snatched the gun from my limp hand, but the sickening monstrosity had been reduced, along with its bed of pain, to a mound of blackened cinders.

**T**HEY say I was hysterical for days, raving and crying alternately. All they could do was shoot me full of tranquilizers, while the rest of the crew almost perished from hunger and thirst waiting until an incubation period had passed, and no one else showed any signs of being infected.

The samples of fungus and the goldfish were disposed of, and the entire interior of the ship was thoroughly scorched with heat rays and then washed down with the strongest antiseptics we could find.

Eventually we returned to Earth. However, the Captain had to inform Jack's family after all, veiling the truth in vague generalities. How could I have faced his parents? I was twice over his murderer, once by omission and once by

commission. I had failed to report his childish action that first day out of mistaken loyalty, and then later I reduced him to ashes. But I'd do it again.

Sometimes the sleeping capsules don't work too well, and I wake screaming from nightmares in which I see him again in his last moments.

Ugh! That naked, shapeless, furry thing huddled on its cot . . . The excrescences all over the vague, greenish outline of a man, like huge blisters or carbuncles. The anaesthetic drugs must have gradually lost their potency from continuous use, for he had opened his fuzz-covered mouth and screamed, faintly, for the last time.

And as he screamed, two of the huge carbuncles burst open, just before I rayed him into cinders, and two tiny heads poked up out of the festering wounds—caricatures of the face I had come to know and love—and two tiny voices shrilled in unison.

THE END