

# PLANET STORIES



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FALL, 1950

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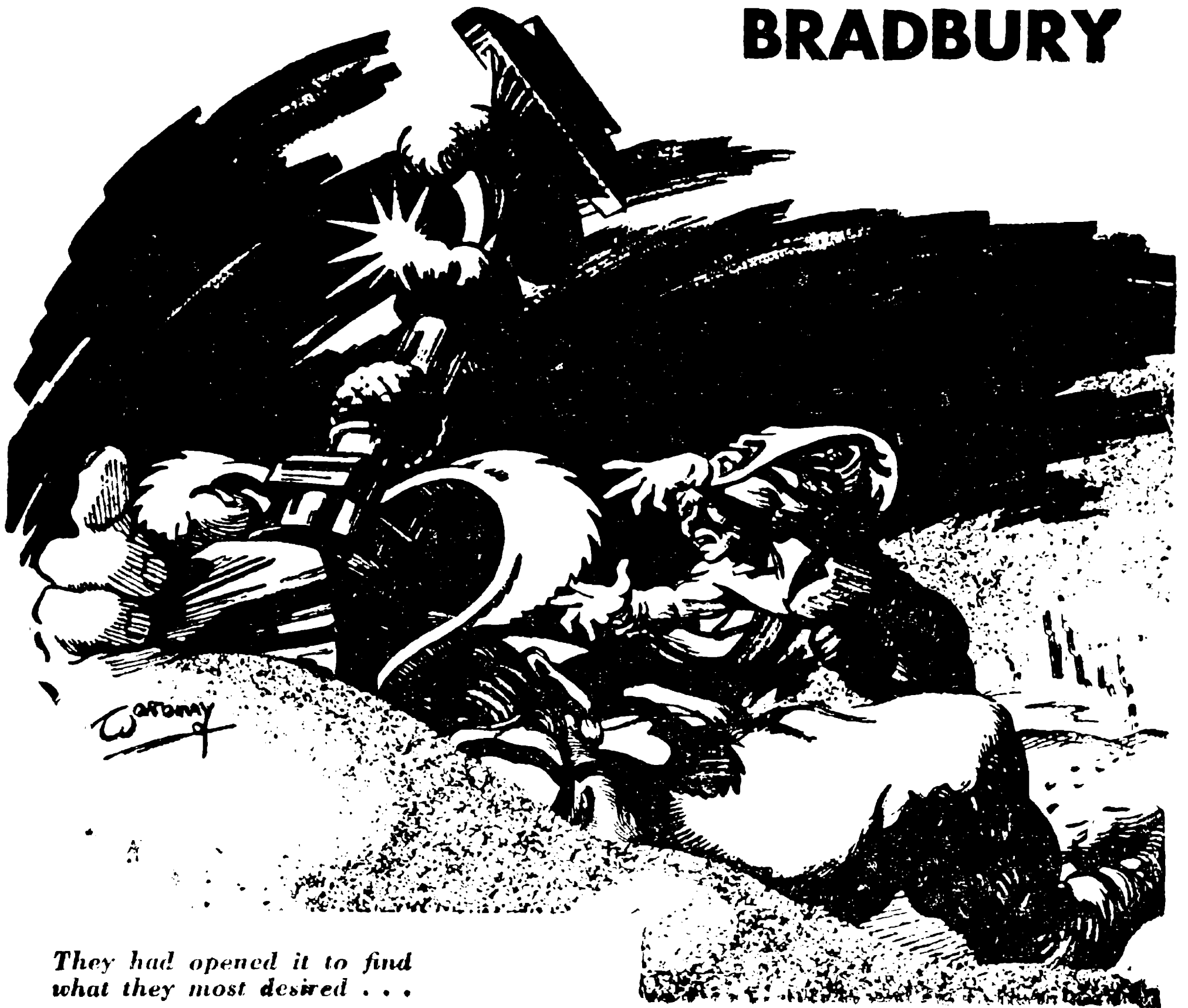
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**A Short Story by**

**RAY**

**BRADBURY**



*They had opened it to find  
what they most desired . . .*

# death-wish

**They wandered the dead and fragile cities, looking for the legendary Blue Bottle—not knowing what it was, nor caring, not really wanting to find it . . . ever . . .**

**T**HE SUNDIALS WERE TUM-  
bled into white pebbles. The birds  
of the air now flew in ancient skies  
of rock and sand, buried, their songs  
stopped. The rivers were currented with  
dust which flooded across the land when  
the wind bade it reenact an old tale of  
engulfment. The cities were deep laid with

granaries of silence, time stored and kept,  
golden kernels of forgetfulness, pools and  
fountains of quietude and memory.

Mars was dead.

And then out of the large stillness,  
from a great distance, on the stones of an  
old highway, there was a tiny sound.  
First, like an insect, and growing larger,

between the cinnamon hills, and finally broadening, flattening out, the sound buzzing and humming, while something moved, growing big.

The highway trembled. The rocks ground one upon another briefly. The sound grew into a thunder which shook down avalanches of dust in the old cities.

The sound ceased.

Mr. Albert Steinbeck and Mr. Leonard Craig sat in their rusted automobile, in the warm silence of midday, sighing. They looked at a city which did not move but stood with one stone upon another waiting for them to enter.

"Hello!" cried Mr. Steinbeck.

A tower dropped into soft dusting ruin.

"Hello!"

A second and a third tower crumbled into whispers of dust.

"Hello!"

Steinbeck waited.

No more towers fell.

"It's safe to go in now," he said.

"To find the Blue Bottle?" said Mr. Leonard Craig, not moving.

"Yes."

"Why does everyone want it? What's in the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck checked his equipment.

"Who does know?"

"Nobody knows. Those that found it never told."

"Then why bother?" said Craig, lying in his corner of the car, a cigarette unlit on his lower lip. His mouth barely moved. His eyes were half shut and faintly amused.

"Use a little sense," said Steinbeck. "It's because it might contain *anything* that everyone is looking for the Blue Bottle."

"*Everyone?*"

Steinbeck nodded. "It's old. Old as that desert there, or the canals."

"A Blue Bottle," said Craig, sitting up and looking around, as if trying to explain it to himself and the highway. "Blown by some ancient Martians, and it's in one of these damned cities. Mind you, I'm not criticising. I've got nothing to do. If I wasn't traveling with you, I'd be sitting under a tree somewhere or swimming in a canal. I'm just along for the ride. Continue."

STEINBECK LOOKED at the rusted car. They had found it in an old ruin somewhere, part of the flotsam of the first Industrial Invasion of Mars that had died when resources had petered out forty years ago. He and Craig had worked on the motor for six weeks and it ran, intermittently, from dead city to city, through the lands of the idlers and roustabouts, the dreamers and the lazars, like himself and Craig, men who had never wanted to do anything and had found Mars a good place to do it.

"Look at it this way, Craig," said Steinbeck; "all of my life, I've done nothing. Nothing big. Everyone else I went to school with, they did something big, on Earth, on Venus, somewhere in the System. Now it's my turn."

"You're a tramp," said Craig truthfully.

"Not when I get that Blue Bottle."

"Let me figure." Craig counted his fingers. "Nine, no, ten years you've hunted that damn thing. Long before I met you. And now the last two years since I landed on this place, I've been tagging along, watching you twitch nights. I see you by the fire, asleep. You whine and shake. You get nightmares. You sure must want it bad, and since you don't even know what's in that damn Bottle, that means you don't even know what you want from life."

"Look, Craig, we argue about this every day."

"And every day I keep telling you to relax. You don't need an excuse to be a bum. You got this Blue Bottle as an excuse maybe, a rationalization, for you never doing anything. All I ask is a drink, some hot soup, a sandwich, plenty of sleep. No work, if I can help it. And I don't need a blasted Bottle to excuse my lazy carcass. All right, I'll shut up. Come on, we'll get into the city."

They walked on the stones of the avenue, past fountains of littered bone.

"This building?" asked Craig.

"Just a moment," said Steinbeck. He cupped his mouth and shouted, "You there!"

They ran back.

From the towers, in a shattering flight, stone griffens fell down. They banged the street. They flew to pieces. His voice sum-

moned them like live animals, and the towers answered, groaned, cracked, the gargoyle's tilted over, twisting, plummeting. They fell one upon another, their faces splintered, their teeth stinging in small flints on Steinbeck's chest. That was the way of these cities. Sometimes towers as beautiful as a symphony would fall at a cough. It was like watching a Bach cantata disintegrate before your eyes. A moment later there was only a sweltering heap and silence.

"If the Blue Bottle was in there," said Craig, "we'll never know."

"Shut up."

They tested another building and entered.

"You take that room. I'll take this," said Steinbeck.

"In that bottle," said Craig, "is it a woman in there, a little accordian woman, all compressed up, like one of those tin cups you fold in on itself? or like one of those Japanese flowers you put in cold water and it opens out?"

"I don't give a damn for women."

"That's what you think. Maybe that's it. You never had a woman, so maybe, subliminally, that's what you hope is in it?" Craig pursed his mouth. "Or maybe, in that bottle, something about your childhood. That's a thought. All put up in a bundle, a lake, a telephone pole or a tree you climbed, a root-beer you drank, a sliver you got in your hand, green grass, a creek, some crayfish, how's *that* sound?"

Steinbeck's eyes focussed on a distant point. "Yes. Sometimes, that's almost it. I don't know."

"What's in the bottle would depend, maybe, on who's looking. Old men would want a Youth Elixir in it. A scientist might want a perpetual motion machine in it. Biologists would expect to find the perfect edible all-purpose food to sustain life in any climate. What about you?"

"Some nights," said Steinbeck, "I almost know. I dream about it. All I know is I've got to find it."

"Now, if there was a shot of bourbon in it—"

"Get on, and look!"

**T**HERE WERE seven rooms on the ground floor. They were filled with glitter and shine. From floor to tiered ceil-

ing there were casks, scuttles, cribs, crocks, magnums, pails, stoups, tubs, urns, vases and cruets. These were fashioned of red, pink, yellow, violet and black glass.

Steinbeck broke them, one by one, to eliminate them, to get them out of the way, so he would never have to go through them again, searching for the hidden treasure. The empty house sounded with continually breaking glass.

Steinbeck finished his room. He stood ready to invade the next. He was afraid to go on. Afraid that *this* time he would find it, the search would be over and meaning would go out of his life. It had been with him a long time, this fear that some day he *would* find the Bottle. And what would be left of his life *then*? Only after he had heard of the Bottle of Blue Glass from fire-travelers all the way from Venus to Jupiter, ten years ago, had life begun to take on a purpose. The fever had lit him and he had burned steadily ever since. If he worked it properly, the prospect of finding the Bottle might fill his entire life to the brim. Another thirty years, if he was careful, and not *too* diligent, of searching, never admitting aloud that it wasn't the Bottle that counted at all, but the search, the running and the hunting, the dust and the cities and the going-on. Then he could die, his life full of activity, as senseless as a clock set to sound out its twelve strokes at some future date, and then lie still.

What if he knew the Bottle to lie in the next room at this instant?

He would turn and walk out and not come back for many years. He knew that as certainly as he knew the forests of grey web and thickets of spiders waiting in the long hall.

He heard a sound. He turned and walked to a window looking out into the courtyard. A small grey, streamlined motorcycle had purred up almost noiselessly, at the end of the street. A fat man with blond hair eased himself off the spring seat and stood looking at the towers. Another searcher. A rich one, this time. Steinbeck sighed. Thousands of them, searching and searching. But there were thousands of brittle cities and towns and villages and it would take a millenium to search them all.

"How you doing?" Craig appeared in a

doorway.

"Get back to your own room and search."

"I searched. Nothing."

Steinbeck sniffed. "Do you smell anything?"

"What?" Craig looked about.

"Smells like—bourbon," said Steinbeck.

"Ho!" Craig laughed. "That's *me!*"

"You?"

"I just took a drink. Found some in the other room."

Steinbeck moved aside some red bottles and peered into a corner.

"Sure," said Craig. "I shoved some stuff around and I found a mess of bottles, like always, and one of them had some bourbon in it, so I drank it."

Steinbeck turned and stared.

"Say that again."

"So I drank it," said Craig.

"What would bourbon be doing in a Martian bottle?" asked Steinbeck. His hands were cold. He didn't move, but he knew that he was trembling. He took a slow step. "What color was the bottle?"

"I didn't notice, it was just a bottle—" Craig swallowed and turned pale. "Oh God!" he said. He put his hand to his throat and then to his mouth. "It was blue." And Craig was running.

STEINBECK WANTED to yell, "No, don't! I'm leaving." He tried to walk out, to get away. But Craig was back now, and there was a bottle, as blue as the sky, the size of a small fruit, light and airy in his hands as he set it down upon a table.

"Here it is, it doesn't look very interesting to me," said Craig. "It can't be the right one. After all, it's just a bottle, a bottle with some bourbon in it, and very refreshing." He smiled.

Steinbeck stood looking at it.

"I don't see anything inside," he said.

"You're insane," said Craig. "Go on, shake it."

Steinbeck picked it up, gingerly. He shook it.

"Hear the liquor gurgle inside?" said Craig.

"No."

"I can hear it. Just as plain."

"There's nothing in it, I tell you."

"You don't see *anything?*"

"No."

They set it on the table again and said nothing. Sunlight falling through a side window struck blue flashes off the tall, slender container. It was the blue of a star held in the hand. It was the blue of a shallow ocean bay at noon. It was the blue of a diamond at morning.

"This is *it*," said Steinbeck. "I know it is. We don't have to look any more. We've found it."

"I guess you're right," said Craig, slowly. "If I see bourbon and you see nothing, it *must* be the Bottle. Are you *sure* you don't see anything?"

Steinbeck bent close and peered deeply into the blue universe of glass. "There's something *faint* there. I can almost see it, but not quite. Maybe if I open it up and let it out, what ever it is, I'll know."

"I put the stopper in tight. Here." Craig reached out.

"If you will excuse me," said a voice in the door behind them. Steinbeck and Craig did not move.

The plump gentleman with blond hair walked around into their line of vision with a gun. He did not look at their faces, he looked only at the blue glass bottle they held in their hands. He began to smile. "I hate very much to handle guns," he said, "but it is a matter of necessity now. I simply must have that work of art, and this need of mine overcomes any squeamishness I might have toward firearms. Now, the longer you refrain from giving me the Bottle, the more nervous I am inclined to become. My finger might easily cause an accident. To avoid any such unfortunate thing, I suggest that you let me take it and go."

Steinbeck was almost pleased. It had a certain beauty of timing, this incident, it was the sort of thing he might have wished for, to have the treasure stolen before it was opened. It was only Craig's presence that had forced him to go ahead with opening the Bottle anyway, and now—there was the good prospect of a chase, a fight, a series of gains and losses, and, before they were done, perhaps another four or five years spent upon a new search.

"Come along now," said the stranger. "Give it up. There's nothing in it for you, a lot for me." He shook the gun warningly.

Steinbeck handed it over.

"Thank you and goodbye," said the plump man, then hesitated. "But first, your guns. I'm afraid I'll have to take them along with me, in case you should think of following." The guns were relinquished. "This is really amazing," said the plump man. "I can't believe it was as simple as this, to walk in, to hear two men talking, and to have the Bottle simply *handed* to me."

He wandered off down the hall, out into the daylight, talking to himself.

**I**T WAS MIDNIGHT. The cities of Mars were bone and idle dust. Along the scattered highway the rusted car bumped and rattled, past cities where the tapestries, the meters, the gyrostats, the furniture, the paintings lay powdered over with mortar and insect wings. Past cities that were cities no longer, but only things rubbed to a fine silt that flowed senselessly back and forth on the winds between one land and another, like the sand in a gigantic hour-glass, endless pyramiding and re-pyramiding. Silence opened up to let the car pass, and closed swiftly in behind.

Craig said, "We'll never find him. These damned roads. So old. Pot-holes, lumps, everything wrong. He's got the advantage on a motorcycle, you can dodge and weave. Damn it!"

They swerved to avoid a crevasse.

"You watch the sides of the road," said Steinbeck. "He could hide until we passed and then go the opposite direction."

"Maybe he had a rocket parked somewhere and went up in it."

"Wait a minute!" Steinbeck throttled the car down. He slowed and turned about.

"I saw something back there."

"Where?"

They drove back a hundred yards.

"There, you see?"

In the ditch, by the side of the road, they saw a large mass.

The plump man lay folded over his motorcycle. He did not move. His eyes were wide and when Steinbeck flashed his torch down, the eyes burned dully.

Steinbeck jumped down into the ditch and retrieved a gun from under the plump man's heaviness.

"Where's the Bottle?"

"I don't know." Steinbeck cursed.

"What killed him?"

"I don't know that either."

"The motorcycle looks okay. Not an accident. Looks as if he just let himself down here on his motorcycle and died."

Steinbeck rolled the body over. "No wounds. He stopped of his own accord."

"Heart attack. He had to stop. He got down off the highway to hide in case we came by. Thought he'd be all right. But the heart attack didn't go away. Killed him." He touched the body. "Cold. He's been dead at least five hours."

"That doesn't account for the Blue Bottle."

"Someone happened along. Lord, you know how many prospectors there are, on horseback, on foot, any old way."

They both scanned the desert around them. Far off in the starred blackness, on the cinnamon hills, they saw a dim movement.

"There!" Craig pointed.

"Looks like three men, on horseback."

"You going after them?"

"I haven't decided."

Craig opened his mouth to say something, but it was never said.

**B**ELOW THEM, in the ditch, as they watched, the figure of the plump man glowed and began to melt. The eyes took on the aspect of moonstones under a sudden rush of water. The face began to dissolve away into fire. The hair resembled small firecracker strings, lit and sputtering. At any moment, he might explode, shatter apart, so many fragments of crystal and glass and molten lava. The body fumed. The fingers jerked with flame. Then, as if a gigantic hammer had struck a glass statue, the body cracked upward and was gone into a million shards, becoming mist as the breeze carried it across the highway.

"Good Lord," said Craig. "They must have done something to him, those three men, with a new kind of gun."

"It wasn't a gun," said Steinbeck.

"What was it, then?"

"I don't know. But I'll find out."

"Are you going to follow them?"

"Yes, I've decided. This decided me."

He pointed to where the body had been.

"It's happened before, this way. Men I knew who had the Blue Bottle. They vanished. And the Bottle passed on to others, who vanished. This is the first time I was present when it happened. It looked like a million fireflies, when he broke apart, did you notice?"

"I noticed."

"We'd better start."

"In the car?"

"Yes."

"But three against two, and we have only one gun—"

"Stay here then." Steinbeck went back to the car. He judged the desert mounds, the hills of bone-silt and cinnamon. "It'll be a hard job, but I think I can poke the car through after them. I *have* to, now. I think I know what's in the Blue Bottle, and for the first time in my life I want to have it. Always before, it was the running after it that counted. I never really wanted to find it, because I knew that what ever was in it couldn't possibly be as big as my dreams of what it should be. And now, suddenly, I realize that what I want most of all *is* in the Bottle. Now. Waiting for me."

"Maybe you'll think I'm a coward," said Craig, coming up to the car where Steinbeck sat in the dark, his hands on his knees. "But I'm not going with you . . . because the Bottle means nothing to me in any way. I won't die for it. You're asking to be shot by those goons out there who're running off with it. That's your business. I'll follow you up, on foot. Then, if they should capture you, maybe I can figure a way of helping you. I just want to live, Steinie. Maybe I'm different than you. You seem to want something awful bad, something even you don't know what. Me? I don't want anything but to kick around and drink and smell the air and sit down and think once in awhile. So you go on ahead and I'll walk. I just don't want to die right now. I like to walk at night, anyway, just looking around. Good luck."

"Thanks," said Steinbeck, and drove away into the dunes.

**T**HE NIGHT was as clear as the water in a long river. It was as cool as water coming over the glass hood of the car. He drove the car over dead river washes and stones and spills of pebble,

his hands fastened to the wheel as if all of destiny were in it.

He bent forward and gave the car full throttle. In the rushing roar, for a moment, there was time to cast his mind back, to all the nights in the last ten years, nights when he had built red fires on the sea bottoms, and cooked slow, thoughtful meals to spoon into his hungry mouth. And lying down and dreaming of his wants and desires. Always those dreams of *wanting* something. Not knowing what. Ever since he was a young man, the hard life on Earth, the great Panic of 2130, the slow starvation, and then the bucking through the planets, the womanless, loveless years, the alone years. You came out of the dark into the light, out of the womb into the world, and what did you find that you *really* wanted? Nothing. Nothing could touch you or change you. Out of the dark and comfortable womb into chaos, riot, want, torture. And wasn't it the same for all men? Were the rich men any better? What about that plump man back there on the highway, dead? Wasn't *he* always looking for something *extra*? Something that he didn't have? Peace? Or what?

So what was there for men like himself? Or for anyone? Was there anything at all to look forward to?

The Blue Bottle.

He braked the car to a halt. He leaped out, the gun ready. He ran in the dunes. Ahead of him, three horses reared up in terror. He fired a shot. He aimed but there was nothing to aim at. Empty-saddled, the horses screamed and pelted off, throwing up great showers of sand. Their hooves pounded past a dead city and the bony towers fell, stone upon stone, at the echoes.

Steinbeck ran hunched over. He cocked his gun. Then he returned it to his holster.

The three men lay on the cold sand, neatly. They were Earthmen, with tan faces and rough clothes and gnarled hands. Starlight shone on the Blue Bottle which lay among them.

Far away, the horses screamed faintly and plunged on.

Steinbeck watched the bodies.

And as he watched, the bodies began to melt. They vanished away into rises of steam, into dewdrops and crystals. In a

moment they were gone.

Steinbeck felt the coldness in his body as the flakes rained across his eyes, flicking his lips and his cheeks.

He did not move.

The plump man. Dead and vanishing. Craig's voice, "Some new gun . . ."

No. Not a new gun at all.

The Blue Bottle.

They had opened it to find what they most desired. All of the desiring men down the long and lonely years had opened it to find what they most wanted in all of the planets of the universe. And all had found it, even as had these three. Now it could be understood, why the Bottle passed on so swiftly, from one to another, and the men vanishing behind it. Harvest chaff fluttering on the sand, among the dry river beds. Turning to flame and fireflies. To mist.

STEINBECK PICKED UP the bottle and held it away from himself for a long moment. His eyes shone clearly. His hands trembled.

So this is what I've been looking for? he thought. He turned the Bottle so it flashed blue starlight.

So this is what all men *really* want? the secret desire, deep inside, hid all away where we never guess? The subliminal urge. So this is what each man seeks, through some private guilt, to find?

Death.

An end to doubt, to torture, to monotony, to want, to loneliness, to fear, an end to everything.

All men?

No. Not Craig. Craig was, perhaps, far luckier. A few men were like animals in the universe, not questioning, drinking at pools and breeding and raising their young and not doubting for a moment that life was anything but good. That was Craig. There were a handful like him. Happy animals on a great reservation, in the hand of God, Craig and the men like him. With a religion and a faith that grew like a set of special nerves in them. The un-neurotic men in the midst of the billionfold neurotics. They would only want death, later, in a natural manner. Not now. Later.

Steinbeck raised the Bottle to his face. How simple, he thought, and how right. This is what I've always wanted. Nothing

else. It was always in my mind but I never took it out into the light. I couldn't admit it.

The Bottle was empty and blue in the starlight. He took an immense draught of the air coming from the Bottle, deep into his lungs.

"I have it at last," he thought.

He relaxed. He felt his body become wonderfully cool and then wonderfully warm. He knew that he was dropping down a long slide of stars into a darkness as delightful as wine. He was swimming in blue wine and lavender wine and red wine. There were candles in his chest, and firewheels spinning. He felt his hands leave him. He felt his legs fly away, amusingly. He laughed. He shut his eyes and laughed.

He was very happy for the first time in his life.

The Blue Bottle dropped onto the white sand.

AT DAWN, Craig walked along, whistling. He saw the Blue Bottle lying in the first pink light of the sun on the empty white sands. As he picked it up, there was a fiery whisper of air. A number of orange and red and purple fireflies blinked on the air, and passed on away. This place was very still.

"Here's the Bottle," said Craig. "I'll be damned." He glanced toward the dead windows of the city. "Hey, Steinbeck!" A tower collapsed into powder. "Steinbeck, here's your damn bottle! I don't want it. Come and get it!"

"Come and get it," said an echo, and the last tower fell.

Craig waited.

"That's rich," he said. "The Bottle right here and Steinbeck not even around to take advantage of it." He opened the Bottle and peered inside. "Yes, sir, just the way it was before. Full of bourbon, by hell! That's more *like* it." He drank and wiped his wet mouth. "Ah! Have another? Don't mind if I do."

He held the Bottle carelessly.

"All that trouble for a little bourbon. I'll just wait right here for Steinbeck and give him his old bottle. Meanwhile . . ."

The only sound in the dead land was the sound of liquid running into a parched throat. The Blue Bottle flashed in the sun. Craig smiled happily and drank again.