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A particularly virulent germ-life infested the third planet of Sol. It was obvious the world had to be decontaminated. But the aliens found —

Earthmen Die Hard!

By Richard O. Lewis

THEY climbed the hill together, arm in arm. At the crest, they stopped and looked back into the moon-brightened valley where the thin needle of metal pointed skyward.

The night wind blew her dress tightly about her slim legs, and she reached a hand to her head to keep the blonde curls from whipping about her face.

He put his arm about her waist, squeezed her gently. "Only a few more hours to wait," he said, reassuringly.

* * *

The great ship from beyond the Galaxy drew alongside the tiny planet, matched its orbit, cut its drive, and drifted slightly toward the lone moon. The ship was nearly as large as the planet itself, but there was no interchange of gravity between the two bodies, for the ship was of a substance made beyond the stars.

Inspector Ryt looked at his sky

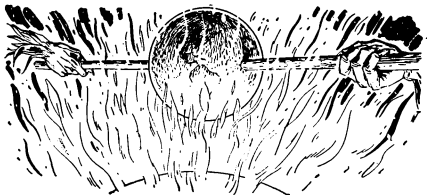
chart. Yes, it was Sol III. Then he looked through the port hole at his left and adjusted the lens. Then he swore by the Seven Sister Suns of Sagittarius.

The lens showed him the moonlit side of the planet. There were lights there, little rows of lights forming checkered patterns in various areas. And there were other lights, greater lights which flickered viciously among the patterns, leaving squat, circular clouds above them.

Ryt's cheeks puffed out in uncontrollable wrath. "Contaminated!" he bellowed. "And they are warring on each other!"

He turned from the lens, his gross body glowing in red anger. "Krembyl!" he screamed. "Krembyl!"

The door at the far side of the room swung open, and the entity called Krembyl fluttered in. "Yes?" he asked, his body trembling at the manner in which his name had rung



out.

"Your records show Sol III as sterile. Decontaminated!"

"Y-yes, sir," Krembyl stammered. "I—I took care of it myself. Just a—a few days ago . . ."

"Look!" shouted Inspector Ryt. "Look for yourself!"

Krembyl went hesitantly to the lens and adjusted himself before it. He saw the sparkling lights below, the flashes, the tiny clouds, and his body went pale pink with the shame of defeat.

"I—I am sorry, sir." He turned from the instrument, his pale pink fading to an ashen gray. "I just don't understand it. I have renovated the planet several times . . ."

"Several times?"

"Why, y-yes." Krembyl hurried to a shelf of documents along one wall, scanned the titles briefly

selected one, and returned to the desk. "Here it is, sir. You will find my reports quite in order, sir."

"Damn the reports!" snapped the inspector. "I want to know why this planet hasn't been cared for properly!" He darkened his body with a scowl.

KREMBYL fumbled the document open, flipped a few pages. "Here it is, sir. All written down, sir. All in correct order, sir.

"*Cosmos 66, 9238,*" he read. "*Malignant growth noted.*"

"*Cosmos 67, 9238 Decontamination process begun.*"

"*Method: Entire planet encircled with electrical impulses which caused hydrogen and oxygen to unite into a heavy liquid. Process continued for a full 40 of planet revolutions.*"

"*Result: Planet covered with the*

liquid to an average depth of 30 fathoms. Contaminating element, being oxygen-breathing, could not possibly exist under such conditions."

"Fool!" barked Ryt. "Some of them probably floated to the surface on some of the buoyant vegetation. They may even have made rafts of the vegetation. Or a boat!"

"They are exceedingly persistent and adaptable, sir," Krembyl admitted. "And there were other times . . ." He broke off to fumble through the documented account. "Yes, here it is, all written down in correct form . . ."

"Damn the reports!" snapped the inspector. "Tell me what happened!"

"Well, sir," said Krembyl, scanning the pages carefully, "it was back in 9237. I noticed the malignancy and took proper measures. I took the planet from its orbit and into an area remote from the Sol unit. There, in the intense cold, the polar caps grew larger and larger until they finally extended over the land portions. Even the middle belt became frigid. Then I swung the planet back near Sol and let it soak in tropical heat. I subjected the planet to this treatment three—or was it four?—times before placing it back permanently in its orbit."

"Dolt!" said Ryt. "They pro-

bably hid away in deep crevices. Probably remained alive through the treatment by eating each other!" He looked at the unhappy Krembyl for a devastating minute. "You should have used fire. *Burned them out!*"

"But I *did*, sir!" Krembyl said, hurriedly. "I *did*!" He fumbled rapidly through the pages. "Here it is, right here! All written out!"

"Nebula 42, 9235. Persistence of malignant contamination noted . . ."

He broke off abruptly as the inspector's body turned to brittle obsidian.

"H-m-mm . . . A-hh . . . Well, sir, finding them confined in an area of particularly lush vegetation, I burned them out, chased them with fire into arid regions, and swept the garden of plant growth completely away where they could not find it again."

"But it is obvious that you failed! Even if two of them succeeded in escaping . . ."

"And before that, sir," Krembyl hurried on. "Before that, I shook the land masses violently, rent great fissures that permitted the gasses and flames to leap out from the central core and spread destruction. I submerged huge infected areas into the depths of the seas, and brought up new land masses, fresh and clean, into the light of

Sol. I even . . . ”

“Enough! Enough!” Ryt hit the desk before him a ponderous blow. “Silence, fool, while I think!”

KREMBYL turned a sickly shade of green and let the document close in weary hands.

Sol III had been a particularly painful lancet in his side, even more so than had yet been guessed. He hoped the inspector would probe no deeper. But even as his hopes kindled, they became but ashes.

“There are a few more things I do not understand about this,” Inspector Ryt was saying. “When this planet was formed from the elements of space, there was no contamination. It was virgin. And, yet, it is now contaminated. Why?”

Krembyl felt his inners churning fearfully. His whole body was so filled with trembling that he could not bring himself to fashion words.

Ryt’s body grew blacker in the silence. “Why?” The word was lightning from the Stygian depths. “WHY?”

Krembyl’s body rent asunder, and the effort of reknitting himself so weakened him that his voice was scarcely a whisper. “They—they came from Sol V, sir.”

The thunderous blow upon the desk top mingled with Ryt’s bel-low of fury. Together, the sounds shook the room and nearly disin-

tegrated Krembyl’s hastily reassembled body.

“Dolt! Ass!” screamed Ryt, his body assuming the blackness of the dust cloud of Orion. “You failed to stop them on Sol V! You not only let them blow the planet into tiny bits, but you also let them escape to Sol III! And here all your efforts of extermination have failed again and again!”

He wheeled to look through the lens again. Three brilliant flashes, greater than the others, sparkled almost simultaneously upon the planet’s troubled surface, sent up mushrooms of dust and shattered atoms. “And is this what happened on Sol V?”

“Y-yes,” stammered Krembyl. “The same thing. Just before . . . just before . . . ”

He could not bring himself to complete the statement.

Ryt leaped from the seat at the desk, his body black and bloated. “Then there is not a moment to lose! Exterminate before this planet is destroyed! And let none escape!”

“But, sir,” pleaded Krembyl, “I have tried everything— fire, floods, ice . . . ”

“Then try something else!” Ryt roared.

Krembyl drifted slowly towards the door.

“Wait!”

Krembyl stopped obediently.

"What about Sol IV?"

"Oh, Sol IV is all right, sir."

Krembyl brightened a shade as he turned. "There is not the slightest trace of contamination. That planet must have been on the far side of Sol when—they escaped Sol V. I am certain, sir, you will find the rest of the system quite in order . . ."

"Enough! Begin the extermination! And this time employ drastic measures. Take the planet to the rim of Sol itself and bake it to a crisp before they infest the entire galaxy."

"Yes, sir. Immediately, sir."

Krembyl turned again to the door, thankful his fate had not been worse.

"And don't fail this time!" warned Ryt. "If you lose Sol III as you lost Sol V, I'll see to it that you put them both back together again, piece by piece, if it takes you six eons beyond your retirement age!"

* * *

THE moon, with its strange accompanying cloud, had nearly set. The blue of the eastern sky was fading into apple-green. There was a roaring swish of sound, a shattering blast of energy, a whistling sigh, then a remote whisper. The needle-like structure from the valley became a flickering pin point in the sky.

The girl leaned her blonde head against the shoulder of the man beside her. "We—we are free?" Her voice was but a whisper.

He adjusted the ra-vis to get a clearer view of Earth and its surrounding space. The view was but slightly distorted by the hot gases of the stern tubes. "Yes," he said, struggling to keep his nervousness from playing havoc with his vocal cords. "Free. Free from a mad world!" He squeezed her hand reassuringly, his eyes intent upon the screen.

Something had gone wrong. The earth had slid to one edge of the screen. He readjusted the ra-vis. The space-cloud of black that had hovered near the moon that night had also shifted its position. It was now between the earth and the sun, and the earth seemed to be following it . . . The furrow between his dark brows deepened, but he said nothing.

"Just think of it!" she said, her voice a song. "Mars! And a brave new world!"

He put an arm about her shoulders and took his eyes from the screen. It was absurd to think the earth was moving sunward. It was probably merely due to some space aberration . . .

"Yes," he said, picking up her enthusiasm. "And after that—the stars!"