

# FORGOTTEN

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IN THE SHAFT IT WAS PITCH-BLACK but for the glow of uranium in the rock—low-grade stuff that they couldn't afford to take out—and the white beam of the torch. Here in the shaft there was enough dust to show the beam. Outside, the clear desert air was almost dustless and the beam of a torch was almost invisible, save on the darkest nights.

It was hot and stuffy in the heavy lead-lined suit. Now that the mine was gutted there probably wasn't enough uranium left to harm him, but it was wise to play safe. The first prospectors had paid for their carelessness—paid horribly with their lives. Cramer shuddered. That wasn't so long ago!

He turned and went back up the long, slanting tunnel toward the spot of daylight that marked the entrance. Gronfeld was wrong for once. The electroscope wasn't down here at all. As a matter of fact, he, Cramer, had taken it up to the hut when it showed that the lode was played out. If Graham had brought it back again as Gronfeld claimed, he probably knew where it was and was keeping quiet out of spite.

Cramer frowned. When they started out, three long Martian years ago, there had been a tie stronger than lust of profit binding them together. Then Gronfeld had found the lode and it turned out to be fabulously rich. There were millions for all of them. They had lost it once—one of Graham's blasts opened a lateral seam that had

them fooled for a while. But just as they were ready to give up and cash in on what they had, Cramer had found the main lode. There was no mistake about it now, though. The mine was gutted—empty. And they were rich for life!

That earlier camaraderie had died out after they struck the claim. Gronfeld and Graham had hung together longest. They were a lot older than he and had different tastes. But of late their gruff monosyllables had grown harsher and shorter and their tempers testier. They seemed suspicious of each other. Neither one could go out without having the other trailing along, watching him like a hawk.

They checked and rechecked each gram of the rich ore with what seemed to Cramer childish exactness. As if in that huge fortune a gram or half a gram made any difference! They were dealing in millions—not tens and hundreds! After all, though, they were getting along in years and they'd led a pretty tough life. You had to make allowances.

He stopped at the mouth of the shaft to squirm out of his suit. Instinctively he turned to where the locker should be, then laughed aloud. No more of that! This was just a hole in the rock now. The suit went into the ship and, in a few minutes, they'd be thundering across the desert to Lanak and the canals—and then home. Home! Ah! Earth would be good after six years in this barren hell!

He stood looking out over the fantastic, tumbled badlands that reached away in red confusion to the horizon. Horizons were near on Mars, even in the great sea plains, and the clear air made them seem nearer. Without some kind of rocket-ship, no man could go into those eroded red wastes and live. None but a giant.

There had been giants in the first days of men on Mars—men who had gone out into the desert and lived and, after years, had returned to die. They had made beasts of themselves—brutes living from hand to mouth, stalking the weird half-reptilian creatures that roamed the gorges, finding water in secret places and drinking blood when there was no water. It was a killing life, but they lived it.

Thanks to the rockets that was all over. Even the poorest desert-rat could afford a tiny ship with water tanks and storage for a pay-load. Down there at the foot of the slope was the hut. Beyond, around the spur, would be the ship, hot silver in the sun, waiting for him. Gronfeld must have found the 'scope by now—probably Graham had remembered and told him. They'd be impatient, waiting for him to get back. Then up and away into the black skies, and all the misery of those six long years would be gone and forgotten. Forgotten! As if a man could ever forget in the desert!

There was new life in his stride as he went up over the worn red rock of the hillside toward the place where the ship was. No need to go by way of the hut. Its rude walls of heaped talus were deserted and its smoke-hole gaped empty. He was done with that and all like it! Straight over the spur and down to the ship—that was the way. And then—home!

His wiry arms drew him up to the knife-edge of broken strata that edged the cliff. Anticipation was tingling like fire in his veins. It was great to stand here alone, high above everything, and then to look up into the black sky and let your eyes drop slowly down—down to the horizon—down to the red desert—down to the sculptured hills with their spidery gullies—down at last to the silvery ship nestling under the cliff! He closed his eyes. Up now, and open them to the hard sky, and now down—down—down—

The ship was gone!

Forgotten. Oh, but it was bitter! It was an old story in the desert—one partner too many when there was a rich pay lode—one who could be conveniently "forgotten" until it no longer mattered. No one could prove anything when the desert was done with him. There was no one to care.

He had the hut, and it was cold and empty, without fuel and without food. A few empty cans on the stone slab that had been their table, a shrinking stain of dirty water on the sanded floor—no more.

He had the mine, and it was empty, a rifled seam in the cliffside with its pale glow of wealth fading away. A cluttered heap of rock from the last blast, after the electroscope had showed that the lode had petered out, a dribble of black ore-dust on the floor of the tunnel where a can had leaked, thin echoes clattering along the walls—no more.

He had one feeble hope of life—no more.

There was no water at the mine. While they were scraping feverishly at the side of the hill, wondering what they had found, what the ship carried was enough. When black millions stared at them from the red rock they knew that it would be but a drop in the gallons they must have. They had to find water and they must have food.

They found water and food beyond the horizon—in the riddled, cavernous limestone that marks the buried streams and ice-caves of the Martian desert. They found the sprawling brown vines and fat pods of that nameless plant that has preserved the lives of more men than history can ever know. And for three long Martian years—years twice as long as those of Earth—they had lived on water and Martian peas.

In an hour the ship had gone and returned with its tanks heavy with water. Half an hour to fill them—it meant at least a hundred earthly miles, doubled and trebled by the tortuous gorges that lay between. It meant ten days at the least.

Most of those days would be waterless and all of them would be without food.

There was water in the mine-shaft—a single can. They had forgotten that.

Slinging it over his back in a twist of dried vine, Cramer went down past the squat red hut into the red desert. The sun was slanting down from the zenith and the long shadows were creeping out from beneath the rocks.

Cramer lay flat on his blistered face in the red sand close under the edge of an angular spur of sandstone. Ten suns had climbed ponderously to the zenith and wavered down.

Ten cruel nights had frozen the blood in his veins as ten burning days had boiled it. Ten days he remembered, five of them made horrible by the thirst that was drying up his skin, shriveling his flesh, clogging his mouth and throat with his blackened tongue and plugging his nostrils with caustic dust. Five days fusing together, merging into a red warped blur of pain and heat and thirst, riddled with crazy visions, wracked with cruel memories—five days of hell.

Only God knew how many more there had been.

It was day now. Cramer's mind was very clear—crystal-clear and keen. Everything stood out in his brain sharp and distinct and hard, as though he were feeling them with his fingers or with his swollen tongue. Every little nerve in all his body vibrated with pain and every muscle was withered by his thirst.

Thirst burned in him like a great never-ending fire licking up through his throat and mouth and nostrils into his brain. It was like a torrent of little ants, desert ants, sand-ants, swarming over his helpless body and tearing at it with venomous mandibles—a flood of many little units merging into one, yet all distinct. Every little pain in all his tortured body was a unit of the great red thirst-pain—every one distinct and clear in his brain. He could count them, if counting had not ceased to exist, if all meaning had not been swallowed up by the avid little pains that were part of the great pain that had become his body.

There was a picture in the back of his eyes against the retinas. He could feel it there. It had lain there motionless, for as long as he could remember since his brain had become clear. He could not change it, for the muscles of his eyes were dry and paralyzed by the little pains.

It was a picture of cliffs. Red cliffs rising up out of a tumble of broken rock into the black sky. Pink cliffs, cooler and whiter than the crimson sand that lapped hungrily at their base. Gray cliffs, dusted over with red dust and permeated with red. Limestone cliffs laid down in unremembered centuries in the depths of an unremembered sea. Bodies of sea-things, pulpy and white, showering down out of the cool green gloom and through the slow

ages being pressed and twisted and broken into cliffs, high cliffs red with the red dust of sleeping iron—red marble cliffs cut into fantasy, hollowed with caves.

He examined the part of the picture that had to do with caves. They were peppered all over the face of the rocks and crowded under its tilting time-eaten ledges. The cliff was rotten with them, big and little, black mottled against red, dark and cool and moist in the bright desert. They ran back and down into the rock and at the bottom there were slender rivers running in the dark, and long lakes arched over with shadows. In one of them stood dripping columns of sweet coolness—of ice—of life!

He knew the caves. He had come before, in the ship, with Gronfeld or with Graham. He knew the caves. There was life there—the flowing life that had been in his veins, that the sun and red desert had sucked out—in the blurred, waterless days before his brain had become clear, and he was lying here. There was water there. There was water!

In the desert there was death.

The hard, clear, bright picture in the back of his brain was blurring over with a sort of red-black veil, like clotting hot blood pouring down over his open eyes. The shadows of the caves were melting into the shadows of the cliffs. The cliffs were swimming in redness, melting into it, swirling fantastically in a vortex of swift, undulant motion. The desert and the cliffs and the cool caves of the cliffs and the hard black sky were all eddying into one, into a great red stain against his retinas, into a vast red madness in his brain—all swallowed up by the thirst—pain that had become a huge red Thing eating—eating—eating—

The red swirl melted mercifully into darkness.

There were dreams in the darkness. Not sight-dreams not red visions—but sound-dreams. Little sibilant shufflings in the sands. Little clickings on the rock. Little excited whisperings and breath-hissings. And then there were touch-dreams. Little gentle fingers pushing through the pain. Little swinging motions, short and hurried and breathless. And then coolness. And then no dreams.

Cramer woke to the cool vision of myriads of eyes.

They were round eyes, big and phosphorescently green in the darkness. They had narrow pupils that pulsed and fluctuated as they stared at him, widening slits of black against milky yellow-green.

The agony of thirst was fading. Moisture was in the air and in the cool stone on which he lay. Moisture was dripping musically on crystal, its sound singing in his ears. Moisture was trickling through his broken lips, over his swollen tongue, into his thirst-seared throat. Moisture was soaking into his parched skin and into the muscles under it, and into his hungering vitals. The eyes were giving him life.

He moved, painfully. The eyes receded and their pupils became fine lines, fear-lines. The trickle of moisture through his lips slobbered and stopped. Eagerly he ran his tongue over the stain of water on his chin. Pain made him draw it back. A thin whimper whispered in his throat and from the darkness a whisper answered, like the mewling of kittens very far away. The eyes came closer.

Two of the eyes were just above him, very close. There was a grayness beyond the dark. Against it was the rounded silhouette behind the eyes—a small round head with great fan-like ears—a small, stout body—thin arms. There were hands and there was something in the hands. It approached him. The trickle of water began again and the other eyes came close to him, beside him. There were soft, deft touches of little fingers on his hot flesh. There was the caress of cool water. He raised his hand. His fingertips touched fur, soft and warm, fur that flinched and then steadied. Sleek muscles moved under the fur. Blood pounded.

Cramer drifted into sleep.

Many times Cramer woke to the gray dark and the slow trickle of water on his burning body. Once he ate something soft and rather tasteless that woke a gnawing hunger in his vitals, but after a little that subsided into the dull throb of the thirst-pain that was being washed out of his soul. He slept again.

When he woke the clearness had come back into his brain. It was a soft clearness, like deep water, not hard

and brilliant as it had been in the desert. He saw things gently and his body responded drowsily to what he saw. He moved his hand, and it stirred lazily, as through water, with a sort of voluptuous dull ache throbbing through it as the muscles contracted. He let it fall again and rolled his head toward the grayness.

The dark arched above him and the grayness was a soft blur against it. A thin column of water dropped down out of it to spatter on unseen ledges and spray his body with its delicious coolness. Far up where the gray began, as though at the end of a long shaft of pale mist, was a spot of bright white. There was a pink flush against it—a sort of glare reflected from some invisible source very far above. That white stain was digging into his memory. He closed his eyes and let his mind drift back in the blackness. Then suddenly he knew.

He was in the ice-caves.

He had been here before. The picture came to him—the great cave above, opening under the overhang of the cliff, its mouth always in shadow—the green-white ice welling out of the crannies of the rock, glistening with moisture, reflecting the flush of the desert—the little rivulet of clear water dropping into blackness. He had gone down, far down, on a rope of twisted vines. He had seen the ice as a pale white blink at the end of a shaft of gray and felt the mist wafting up from far below. But he had not found the bottom.

Now, as he opened his eyes again, it seemed to him that he could make out the shape of the cavern where he lay.

It was a great hollow dome, sheer-walled, cut away by eddying water. There were dark spots along the base of its walls—tunnels, leading down. One of them was gray. And the eyes had disappeared.

He rolled over on his face and drew his legs up under him, stiffening his arms. He rose on all fours, then tottered back on his knees, wavering dizzily. The nausea passed and he put out an exploring hand. There was a low rock quite close to him. With a heave he was on his feet.

The cavern was suddenly much smaller than he remembered it. The roof swooped at him and the walls rushed



in. Only the shaft of grayness stretched endlessly up, unchanged. It was as though he had been a little flat thing of two eyes and a brain, whereas now he was a six-foot mass of flesh and bone, a man.

The idea started a little feathery tickling at the bottom of his brain. It was funny! He laughed a great roaring, echoing laugh that rocked thunderously about him.

Abruptly there was a sudden wave of motion. The gray tunnel went flickeringly black. There was the click of tiny claws hurrying on stone. There were the kittenish mewings, alarmed and plaintive. There were the eyes again.

They swirled about him in the dark. There were shapes that he could not make out, moving swiftly. The narrow pupils were dilated—questioning. The hurrying forms pressed close. Little hard hands pushed at his calves and knees. Clusters of paired eyes hovered about his thighs. Tottering precariously above them, he shuffled forward.

There was a large tunnel that twisted steeply upward, too tortuous for any light to filter through to the inner cavern. When they saw that he went willingly, the little creatures ceased their pushing and pattered ahead through the dark, leading the way. At a fork in the passage they crowded into the false path, staring silently up at him. Then light came suddenly around a hairpin bend in the tunnel and he saw them.

They were like rabbits. That was his first thought. They had small, blunt heads with huge round ears, and red-brown, furry bodies. Their hind legs were much like those of an earthly rabbit or squirrel, shaped for agility and speed, but their feet were like monkeys' feet and their fore-limbs were to all intents and purposes arms—human arms—with tiny furry hands and blunt nails. They had no tails.

If their hands were human, their faces were elfin. There were the great glowing eyes, slightly protruding, and there were stubby noses, soft and flat like rabbits' noses. Their mouths were round and pursed with square white teeth. They seemed to wear a perpetual grimace of whimsical amazement. A "whimace," Cramer called it, thinking

smilingly of his *Alice in Wonderland* with its aptly coined words. The light-colored tufts of fur above the big round eyes helped to make their faces elfishly ridiculous. Cramer never forgot that first impression of scores of tiny furry fairies scuttling about on squatting legs, waving their furry hands in excited gesture.

He looked down. At the base of the cliff, crowded into the narrow band of shadow that lay between the sheer rock and the desert, were hundreds of the little creatures, staring expectantly up. They were waiting for something—for someone. He wondered if it were he.

Then he saw something that made him gape. The little beasts stood erect on their bent hind legs, like a rabbit or a squirrel on its haunches. That was a natural enough posture in animals of the type that they seemed to represent. But they were not animals!

Slung over their shoulders were little fiber bags, woven out of the tough bark of the vines that swarmed over the bottom of the cliff!

He stared down at those that surrounded him. They too had bags—were shouldering them from a pile in a nearby cave-mouth. Five of them came struggling out of the depths of a crevice, dragging something huge and unwieldy. Then and there Cramer lost his last doubts as to the intelligence of these creatures of the desert.

They had woven a bag for him!

He examined it closely before he followed them down the sheer face of the rock to where the main group waited. It was like burlap, though coarser, woven crudely out of twisted strands of bark. It was crammed with fat pods of the big brown Martian desert-pea that grew so profusely under the cliffs, and in a sort of insulating blanket of heavy leaves was a spongy fungus-growth, its fine pores saturated with water. Cramer realized that his long trek through the red desert had not ended.

The sun was low and they traveled in the shadows of the cliff until it merged with the red sands. Then strung out in a straggling caravan they headed out into the desert. From his place at the rear of the long line, Cramer watched their tiny rounded forms bobbing far ahead against

the dunes. They moved with an elastic loping hop, very much like the rabbits they resembled, but with their sacks they seemed to him more like a caravan of gnomes, packing a fabulous treasure across a coral sea.

With night they came together into a compact group with Cramer at the center. They could see in the dark as well or better than in the glare of day, but they realized that he must be guided and chose their pace accordingly. When day came and the sun glared at them over the edge of the desert, they turned aside into a labyrinth of gorges where there were crannies and burrows and a shadowed shelter large enough for him.

They ate little and drank less. Cramer realized the necessity of that. Because of his stumbling presence the distance covered by their night-marches had been cut by more than half. They were on half-rations, yet they did not desert him or try to hurry him. These little beast-creatures showed more consideration than most men.

Six days of travel brought them out of the desert into rock country again. Their water was almost gone, but more than half of the food remained. What did it mean? Why had they started on this tedious trek across the desert face of Mars? Why did they carry a burden so much greater than they needed? It puzzled him.

He could see that they were growing uneasy. They were behind schedule, and it seemed to make a difference—a big difference. He sensed impatience and a shade of regret growing in the big round eyes that stared up at him in the dark. And he resolved to do something about it.

At evening of the sixth day they were assembling in the lee of a crumbling bluff, waiting to take up the night's march. Cramer hauled himself out of the nook in which he had been sleeping and beckoned to his neighbor, a large male with a broad black line down his back.

With the little creature at his heels, he strode over to where the leader of the caravan was assembling his followers. Squatting in the sand before them, he pointed off in the direction in which they were going, then to the waiting throng. He moved aside, out of the line of march,

taking his black-backed friend with him, and made an imperious gesture of dismissal. Then he waited.

He had to do it again before they realized what he meant. Then he saw understanding dawn on the little leader. A flurry of excited mewling ran over the crowd of watching creatures. The leader seemed to be conferring with those nearest him. Next two of the older males separated from the group and came over to where Cramer sat with the black-striped one. There was a piping whistle from the leader and the line got under way, loping over the loose sand at a speed at least twice as great as he could make. With his three guides, Cramer followed as fast as he could manage.

Three nights later they reached their goal. They had cut through a wilderness of rotted sandstone, its tortuous gorges heaped with sand and strewn with talus from the tottering crags that lined them. Cramer's sense of direction long since had been lost, but the three who guided him seemed to be certain of the way. About midnight they reached a sheer wall of red-ribbed white rock—the only white rock Cramer had seen on Mars. A dark line split it from top to bottom, a great fault in the planet's crust. A foot or less of space separated the sheer walls. Into it his little guides vanished. With a moment's hesitation he followed.

He had to sidle along like a crab, dragging his pack after him. He had to twist his feet around and fit them into crevices that threatened to seize them and hold them forever. He had to inch his way up fifty feet and more to where the crevice widened enough to let him through, or squirm along on his side through a mere rabbit-hole with three pairs of eyes peering anxiously out of the dark. Finally, lame and sore in every muscle, he reached the end, and tumbled headlong out on the ledge that ended the fault.

Ages ago a meteor had crashed into the center of a limestone butte, throwing up a shattered, weirdly broken wall or rock-wreckage and filling the bowl of the resultant crater with rock-dust finer than fine sand. The force of the impact had split the plateau along an old fault-line, open-

ing the crevice which was its single exit to the outer world. Here in the hidden crater was the secret sanctuary of the little red-brown rabbit-men.

They were busy now—furiously busy. The floor of the crater swarmed with them, crouching close over the arid soil, scratching and prodding, shuffling queerly. Cramer could not see what they were doing, but they reminded him of a flock of hens pecking and scratching for grain.

His simile was poor. They were sowing, not reaping. A sort of insane frenzy seemed to have possessed every individual of the tribe. Piled in confusion against the walls of the crater were the dry stalks of a previous harvest. They looked queer—blighted. They had lost the sere red-brownness of the normal vines. A black dry-rot stained them, a powdery dust was eating them away. Many were contorted by huge knots and boles. Something had gone very wrong with that last harvest. It was that something that had sent the males of the tribe hundreds of miles across the arid face of Mars to find new seed. It was that something that had brought them to him and saved him from the terrible hunger of the red sands.

From the vantage-point of a cave-mouth, high on the wall of the crater, Cramer watched the planting. With their strong, nailed feet the males threw out the powdery rock-dust in long straight furrows. Behind them came their mates, strewing the seed with skillful hands. A sudden thrust of their stubby thumbs shot the peas from their pods—a double shuffle of agile feet covered them. At intervals of a few inches were buried large chunks of the porous water-holding fungus. Water was the greatest problem of the little half-human people—was, in fact, the greatest problem of any thinking race that would try to conquer the dying planet—but they seemed to have solved it in a way all their own.

Cramer learned more of that fantastic, frenzied ceremony of planting in the years that followed—ten long Martian years in which he came more and more to be one of the desert folk—the Maeë, as his rude tongue translated their mewling call. They had a language of a few simple words, supplemented by signs and shrill expletive cries

and whistles—emotion-sounds. They had a rude social order with a chief-leader and a nobility of the older and wiser males. In a sense they were monogamists, although with each recurring spring there was a mating ceremony in which many of the younger creatures took new mates and discarded old ones. Few of the older members of the tribe participated, squatting in their dark cave-mouths beside the mates they had chosen for life and staring owl-ishly down at the weaving, darting shadows on the crater floor.

They had no fire—no tools—and so far as Cramer could discover, no religion or superstition. They were animal, and yet they were not animals. They twisted bark into cord and wove it into bags, but they knew nothing of cloth and wore no clothes or adornments. They planted the desert peas and, in the long dry fall, reaped their harvest, but there was no use of plow or spade. Their sole implements were their feet and their clever hands.

The peas were the only food they had. Each harvest was heaped high in the dry, cool cave they had allotted to Cramer. Here they came when they were hungry and took what they needed. Cramer could never discover their system of rationing, yet system there must have been. As if by instinct each creature took what was proper and no more. In the beginning Cramer had thought to make their life easier by applying his human intelligence to the apportionment of the food under his care. There was never any need for that intelligence.

They lived to eat and they ate to live. So it seemed to Cramer. Whatever pleasures they might have, besides the annual ceremony of mating, meant nothing to him. Their psychology was not his. Superficially he became one of them, sharing in their simple work and feeding from the common store, but never in all the years he was with them did he really see into their minds. He was never really sure that there were minds for him to see.

Always he returned to the puzzle of the planting. He learned other facts, saw other things that helped a little to interpret the meanings that he could not see, but the real problem never changed. It was not a question of

water. He had soon realized that. In some of the deeper caverns there were springs with water enough to keep them alive but none to spare. Once a year, over a range of about ten days, the underground sources were replenished by the melting polar ice, thousands of miles away. In those ten days they must plant—must sow their seed with its accompanying sponges of water. What moisture it gave was enough to sprout the peas.

With uncanny speed the young plants thrust their rootlets deep into the powdery soil, far down to the buried watercourses. By the time the fungi had rotted away and given up the last of their absorbed moisture, the desert-bred peas had reached a supply of their own. By that time, too, a second planting had become impossible. There was no longer water to spare for it.

That explained much—the impatience of the little creatures as time passed, when their straggling caravan was still far from home, the extra seed that they had carried, the importance of the planting ceremony to their simple lives. It did not explain why they had trekked hundreds of miles across a waterless desert for that seed. It did not explain how they had come to find him.

As the barren seasons rolled past, Cramer lost all count of time. He was a machine—an automaton—feeding, watching, dully wondering. He saw that that first harvest was incredibly rich. The stout brown vines were covered with swollen, heavy pods. The thick leaves grew huge and had a metallic sheen. The ordinarily minute blossoms grew into gigantic purple blooms that flooded the crater and the caves with a cloying, suffocating perfume. At harvesting Cramer had to find another cave. The granary in which he had been living was filled to overflowing.

The second year the purple flowers were smaller and their perfume less powerful. Some of the vines died and on others the leaflets were stunted and withered. Most of the peas were still enormously larger than any Cramer had ever seen, but there were a few, commonest near the center of the crater where the land was lowest, in which the pods were small and many of the peas shriveled and were dwarfed.

Year by year he watched the blight spread and the harvest dwindle. There was still food enough for the little colony, for those rich, early harvests supplied food for more than two years as well as seed for the planting. But there would not be enough for long. All the peas were dwarfed now, and most of them were black and glossy as the leaves had been. Then in the fifth year a black stain appeared on the vines nearest the center of the crater and spread swiftly.

A powdery black dust consumed leaves and stalks and withered the roots. The peas were small and hard and black, with a bitter metallic taste. They would not sprout. That year, when the floods came and the water rose in the deepest caverns, half the tribe gathered for the trek across the desert in search of new seed. Cramer went with them.

When there was water enough to saturate their sponges, they went. Cramer's eyes had long since adapted themselves to the life of darkness that he led and there was no delay because of him. In three days they covered the distance to the water-caves where they had found him ten earthly years before. For a single day they rested, filling their sacks with seed and replenishing their water. In three more days they were back at the crater. The water had subsided, but the females and young had stored away great quantities of the spongy fungus, saturated with water in readiness for the planting. It was cool in the lower caves, but the water evaporated rapidly into the thin air. The year when he had come the caravan had returned barely in time. Another day or two and there would not have been enough water. That year many would have died.

Ten Martian years! On Earth that time would be almost doubled. Cramer's name had long since been forgotten in the home-world that he had loved. Among the Maeë he was taken for granted—was almost one of their own kind. Then for a second time he went with the seed-seekers.

They came up out of the desert to the long, low line of red cliffs, pale rose in the starlight. A great wave of heartsickness rose in Cramer's throat as he stood there



under the towering wall of rock, staring out across the sands to that horizon which hid the hillside where he had been "forgotten." Above him a great star glowed softly white among the steel points of the constellations—Earth—his home.

Crouched there at the mouth of his cave, the horizon lightening with the sunrise, he remembered Earth and men.

The Maeë were weirdly manlike, but they were not men. Every day he discovered new humanity with them, but he could not forget the animal beneath. He longed for the heave of sullen seas against granite cliffs with the wind swirling in his ears and the scent of the pines in his nostrils. He longed for the lingering, fading tints of evening and the slow flush of dawn. He longed for the beauty of the moon, cheese-white against a bowl of cobalt, diamond-studded. He longed for blue days when the skylanes were strewn with cloud-castles and for the softness of a night in which the stars were not hard, bright, watching eyes. But most of all, he longed for men.

The Maeë had a language, but he could not speak it or understand. They had a life of their own, a society, but he was alien to it. In the long red days when the Maeë slept and the sun shimmered over the brown vines, he would sit and stare into emptiness, dreaming of the sound of a human voice, longing for human friendship, hungering for all the complex trivialities that go to make up human life. Men were somewhere there beyond the sands and the contorted crags. He was a man! But men never came.

He turned away from the sudden glare of the sunrise and went into the cave. Ice glimmered in the gloom. He went toward it, touched it. It was cool and soothing to his feverish skin. He could close his eyes and remember the coolness of Earth—cool moss under the green arch of the forest—cool shadows across the hillsides—cool streams among majestic peaks—cool flight in the spangled darkness above the clouds. He could still remember. It was all he had now.

He let his fingers trail along the smooth surface of the

ice. A little thrill ran up through his arms, knotting the muscles. He stiffened. He felt the sharp edge of a fresh cut in the ice.

Men had been here!

By daylight it was plain. Men had come often, had come recently. They would come again. Or—would they?

All through the day he sat thinking. It was hard to think now, after all the years. He was old now. And there was no answer. The Maeë could not help him—could not understand. He could stay, hoping against hope that men would come, living each endless day twice over, lying sleepless through the interminable night, wasting slowly away. He could go with them, and never know. In the end he decided to go.

But he must be sure! He must not let them come and go without him! There must be a way! Laboriously, wakening the long-buried memories of a discarded life, he scratched his message in the thin sand that formed the floor of the cave. Then he went with the Maeë.

They came! Day after day he clambered to the top of the cliff to watch, and one day they came! They were a steel-bright speck over the desert, glittering against the sky. They were an oval gem, tailed with fire. They were a smooth-flanked craft of steel, hurtling through the skies. They checked the vessel, settled slowly to the plateau. The side of the little ship swung open.

Men came!

There were two, young prospectors as he had been. He was lean and dry and old, a withered skeleton with a grizzled beard. His voice was strange, even in his own ears. He had not heard it for very long. He saw them smiling, nudging each other as he babbled out his crazy, jumbled mass of words—all that had happened—all that he had seen—all that he had learned of the Maeë—everything—anything—anything so long as it was speech, so long as they would listen. The old man was cracked—he knew—but they were men. They were men! Tears were in his old eyes after twenty earthly years.

They gave him men's food and men's drink—canned meat and cold coffee out of cans—but it was better than

the tasteless peas and the metallic, glowing water of the Maeë. They put clothes on him and listened when he told them about the crater and the caves and the planting. They asked questions—polite, kind questions. They were being kind—kind to a cracked old man—kind because they were men—his breed—men! After twenty years, there were other men!

He listened to what they told him, eagerly, hungrily. They told him about Earth—about wars—Europe all one nation—the yellow peoples growing strong and bold—they told him about Mars of the canals—Lanak—civilization—new laws and new governments, and new ways they had of mining, getting every last milligram out of the rock. "Soaking up the glow" they called it.

He showed them the crater and the caves and the Maeë. The Maeë were strange—timid. They squatted in the cave-mouths, watching. Their eyes shone out of the deep darkness. They moved away when he approached even the old black-backed one—even his old friend. They were strange. But it didn't matter! He didn't care!

He showed them the things that he knew—the granary—the water-caves. He gave them food, peas from the granary—all they wanted. They filled their ship with food and took water, plenty of water from the caves.

They were interested in caves, especially in those that ran back under the crater. He was glad. He showed them all he knew—the place where the fungus grew and the tunnels beyond where there was light—caves too small for any but the Maeë to enter. He had wanted to go in and explore, many years ago when he was still young. The tunnels widened beyond. But he was too big. These were men—clever, intelligent men! Eagerly he watched them drill and set their explosives. The Maeë watched too, from the dark—myriads of round eyes watching from the dark. He ran with the other men when it was time, but the Maeë did not run. They sat and watched from the dark till the glare came, and the noise.

The black-striped one was killed. Others died too—others he had known for a very long time. The gases got some of them, and then there was the concussion and the

falling rock. The fungus-beds were buried by the rock that fell. But the men took the dead Maeë away to their little ship and came back with torches and instruments to explore the caves beneath the crater.

He did not go. Somehow, he did not want to go where the Maeë had died. The years had made him different from other men, more like the beasts, like the Maeë. He saw different things and thought differently. But they went, trampling over the fallen rock, and when they returned there was a queer hard luster in their eyes.

They were men. They took him with them—away from the crater and the caves—home! The Maeë watched them go, silently, from the cave-mouths. Myriads of green eyes glowing in the dark. He lay far back in the tail of the little ship, near the rockets, among the great piles of pods. The men were talking, whispering together, up forward in the control-cubby. He lay and listened to their voices. A half glow of contentment enveloped him. He was a man again!

The big man was talking now. The big man was Barron and the young one was Galt. Barron had a harsh voice, slurred and coarse. It was like Graham's voice, years ago. Cramer didn't like it.

"It's lousy with the stuff!" Barron grated.

"Yeah." Galt agreed to everything Barron said.

"The's metals too—platinum and that. I made tests. It was the big meteor brought 'em in."

"Think you can get it?" Galt sounded a little skeptical.

"Sure!" Barron didn't like being doubted. "You seen the 'scope. Kicked clean off the scale, didn't it? You seen the little chunk from the blast—big as a house and just a little piece at that. The real big stuff is back of that rock wall, under the crater. It's what blights their vines, like the old guy told us. It's gotta be lousy with radioactives to act like it does."

Galt's young voice was awed—sort of reverent.

"Geez!" he murmured. "It's like heaven, findin' it like that! Like a dream. Millions for the both of us, and then Lanak and the canals and home. Earth!"

Barron was talking on—details—practicality. He was no milksop, dreamin' about home! "We can blast down

through from the top, right in the middle where it's lowest. We'll save time that way, and there's no chance of shiftin' the water. We got water there, and food, just for the takin', and we don't want to lose it. By God, kid, we got it soft! Millions for the both of us!"

Galt's voice sounded a little dubious. "What food do you mean? Won't blasting like that kill the peas?"

The big man roared with laughter. "Peas! Who wants the lousy dried-up swill? We got meat, kid—just for th' takin'! Rabbits. Thousands of 'em. Fill up that big crack with a couple good blasts and they're there till we're done with th' place. We'll eat meat, kid."

Galt peered back over his shoulder. The old man was lying still—sleeping maybe. Crazy old duffer! Living half his life over millions and never knowing it. Gibbering about rabbits like they were men, and about peas.

"What about the old guy?" he asked.

Barron leered knowingly. "Him? The's nobody knows about him but us and nobody that cares a cuss. We can forget him."

*Forget!*

Both men turned at a sudden sound. The old man was trying to stand up. The acceleration pushed him back. He hunched forward on his knees. He was by the fuel-chambers, where the outlets bulged into the ship. He was laughing—crazy, screaming laughter.

Good God! He was spilling the hydrogen tanks!

Over the red desert a bright speck blossomed into a great white puff of flame. After a while a sound came, thin and very far away, like the bursting of a rock.

A plume of fire streaked slowly down across the sky and vanished into the up-flung chaos of the badlands. A fountain of light shot up where it fell, bright with specks of burning metal. Another sound came, deeper, the thin echo of a mighty roar.

The Mae were watching from the crack in the plateau that was the only entrance to their secret haven. In the dark their eyes were great and round—myriads of green eyes, watching from the dark.