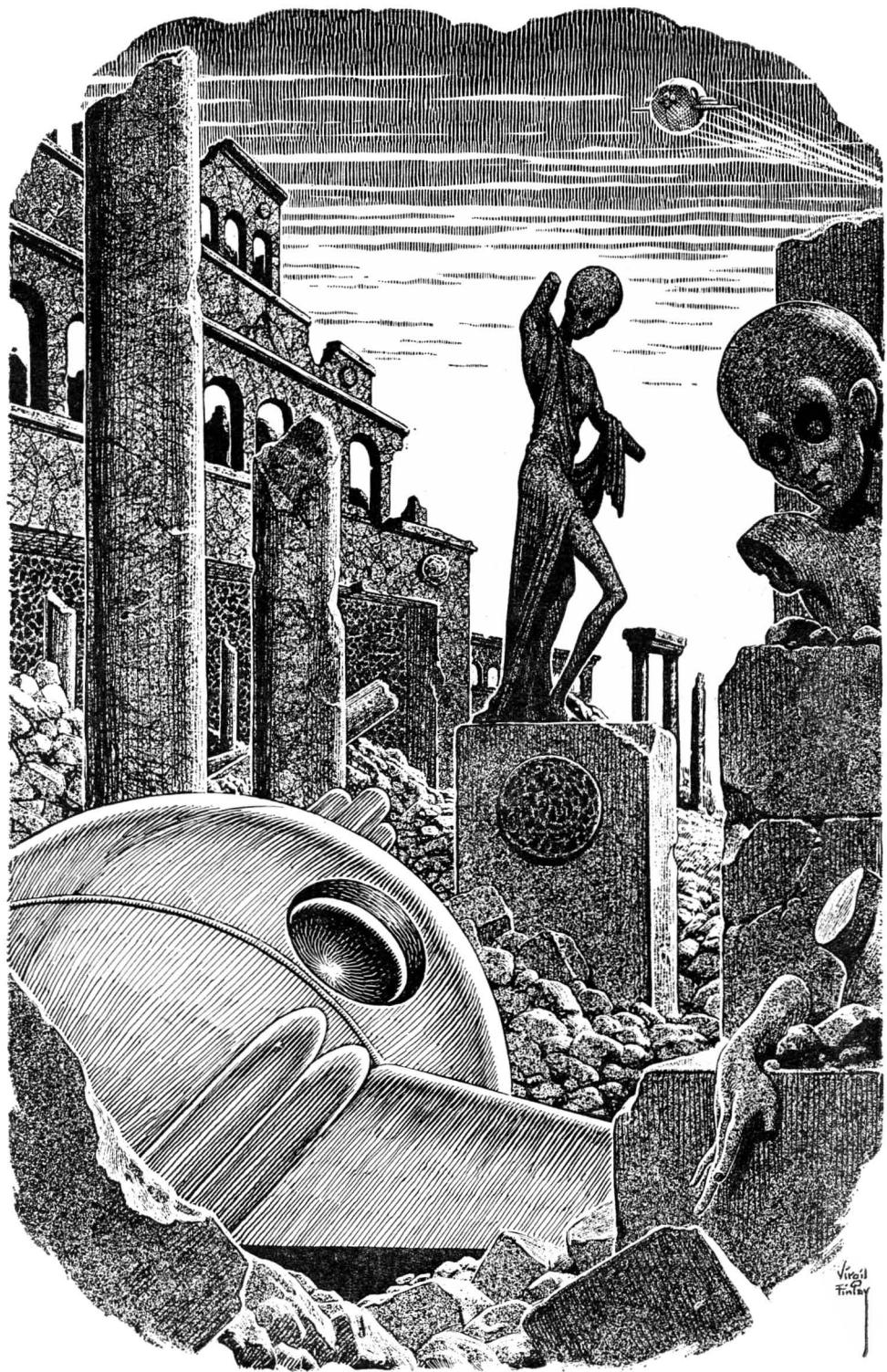


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MERCENARIES IS UNLIMITED MERCENARIES IES UNLIMITED ED MERCENARIES S UNLIMITED

by DAVID GORDON

LYING flat on my belly while a couple of groups of desperate men spray the surrounding territory with large, high-velocity slugs, and fill the local atmosphere with the flickering blue light of meson gun discharges is not my idea of either comfort or security. It is not even my idea of fun, except when talking about it afterwards over a quiet beer. If a man could be sure he would be able to talk about it afterwards, it might be more fun, but that sort of positive knowledge is rare in any business, and downright impossible in mine.

The trouble was that I was right in the big, fat middle of a No-Man's Land between two contending parties, each of which wanted me alive, but would rather see me dead than have the other bunch get me. The only thing I didn't have to worry about was getting hit by a meson gun beam; neither of the parties would deliberately hit me with something that would ruin what they were look-

ing for. No, if I was shot deliberately, it would be by a common, or garden variety, bullet. Still, in the excitement, someone might accidentally wing me with an energy beam. People do funny things when they're excited.

As long as they were holding each other off, I was relatively safe. That time, however, might only be a matter of minutes, so I thought it the better part of common sense to try to dope out a fast get away, if it was possible. I took a deep breath through my air mask and tried to calm my nerves. The crackle of rifle slugs through the thin Martian air didn't help my nerves any.

I was lying on the flat top of a high building, protected from the flying death around me by nothing more than a couple of two-foot stone walls that ran around the edge of the roof. Patterson's men were closest to me, on a roof adjoining mine, just to the west, but about five feet lower than

my own roof, and separated by a three-foot space from the building I was on. In order to hit me, a gunman would have to stand straight and then boost himself a little to fire over the two-foot roof-wall.

But that would make the gunner a sitting duck for Ch'ien Tsung George's men, who were on the roof to the east—on my left. They were on a level with me, but there was a twenty-foot space between my building and theirs. As long as I stayed flat, neither side could get me without exposing a man, and that man would stand a better chance of dying than he would of getting me.

The battle had been going on the better part of three minutes before I made up my mind that I had better get out before someone decided to toss a sleep grenade over the parapet and end the whole thing. A sleep grenade would knock everyone out for a hundred yards around, but if either group had reinforcements coming, the reinforcements would be able to take over.

In that case you're wondering how a three-minute gun battle could take place on the roofs of a Martian city without the cops landing in swarms and putting the quietus on all and sundry, then I'd better explain. Granted, if we'd been fighting under one of the domed cities—New Boston, Dullesgrad, Nuova Venezia, or any of the others—then the fight wouldn't have lasted a minute. Aside from other considerations, the local citizens and their police officers frown on the idea of anyone shooting off weapons that might puncture the city dome. It would take a hell of a big hole to do any real harm, but even small ones are nuisances.

But we weren't fighting on human-built buildings. We were way the hell and gone out in the middle of the Xanthus Desert, on the rooftops of a city that was built before the native Martians died out, half a million Earth years ago. The corners have

been rounded off on those buildings during that time, but the thin, dry air of Mars doesn't weather granite very quickly; Mars has no rainfall, no earthquakes, and not much wind, so a good, solid granite building can sit around for a good many millenia without changing much. Those buildings are just about as strong as they ever were.

At that moment, though, I wished they weren't. I would have liked to be able to dig a hole in that stone roof. Unfortunately, that wasn't even remotely possible, and, to make things worse, there wasn't an opening of any kind in the flat surface of the roof. I could dig through half an inch of fine, drifted sand, but I didn't figure that would help much.

As far as I knew, there wasn't any way off the roof. I'd run myself into a dead end. I'd come up through the roof of the building that Patterson's men now occupied. That bunch had chased me into the next-door building and up the sloping ramps that the Martians used instead of stairways. And there had been no way I could go except up. I didn't fancy getting myself caught between floors, where I'd have to crouch down to move; the Martians were little fellows, and I thought that four-and-a-half-foot ceilings were adequate for anyone. So I had kept on going up the zig-zag ramp until I'd reached the roof. Then I'd taken a flying jump across the short space that separated that building from the next—the one I was on now.

For all of half a second, I thought I could get away by roof-jumping. But while I was still in the air a bullet snapped past my ear. Ch'ien Tsung George's boys had been following us, but they'd evidently made a mistake as to which building we'd gone in, so they found themselves on the roof of the next building over.

About that time, Patterson's lads had booted up out of the same trap door that I'd used to get to the roof

and tried to come after me, only to be caught by a blast of fire from the Chinaman's forces.

Which, of course, left me neatly trapped in the middle. I was on the roof of a building, nine floors above the ground, with a battle going on inches over my head.

I knew that somewhere on that roof there was a trapdoor leading back inside it; all Martian buildings have them. They're easy to find from beneath, but that roof was covered with half an inch of sand and dust which had drifted in over the ages, and I didn't feel like brushing off the whole roof to find the door.

There was a way out, but I didn't fancy to it too much. What decided me was one of Patterson's men. A couple of his friends must have boosted him up from the lower roof next door. He shot up fast and tried to get in a blast—whether it was at me or at Chien's men, I never knew. A couple of slugs from the Chinaman's side slammed into him before he could do anything, and his meson gun flared harmlessly into the Martian twilight. I knew then that I had to move—fast.

Night comes fast on Mars. The thin air doesn't refract light the way Earth's does, so twilight doesn't last long. In a minute or so, it would be dark, and all sorts of sorties and forays would be going on in that blackness. Both of the Martian moons were in the sky, but those two little bits of rock give off so little light that they're no brighter than stars.

Figuring that it was a case of "get going or get got", I started edging myself toward the north wall of the building. I could hear firing down below now; somebody had decided that the way to get me was to come up to this building from the inside, and the other side had thought of it, too. I moved faster, worming my way across that flat roof, through the fine sand.

When I reached the two-foot wall that bordered the roof, I took another deep breath. Then, moving faster

than I'd ever thought I could move, I pushed myself up and rolled over the parapet, to drop nine floors to the ground beneath.

If this were the scenario for 3D-TV merchandise opera, I would probably leave the story hanging right here while some oily-voiced chap belabored you with the wonders of owning a Fiat-Ford aircar, then told you to be sure and watch tomorrow to see if I'd come out all right. But anyone who stops to remember what he's been taught since primary school—that the gravitational pull of Mars at its surface is one-third that of Earth's—wouldn't even bother to worry about it.

It sounds simple. Nine Martian floors, at five feet to the floor, or thereabouts, gave me forty-five feet to fall. But at a gravitational acceleration only one-third that of Earth, it was no worse than dropping fifteen feet. At the rate I was dropping, my velocity at the end of a forty-five-foot fall was no greater than it would have been at the end of a fifteen-foot fall on Earth. I don't recommend it for casual exercise, mind you, but if you know how to land properly, all you'll end up with is minor bruises. Ask any good pole-vaulter.

But for Earth-born and Earth-raised human beings, the very distance itself causes a mental block. Try looking out of a fifth-story window sometime. You can tell yourself that under Martian gravity you wouldn't be hurt, but unless you're used to it, unless you've really *lived* with it, your argument to yourself isn't very convincing.

I lit with a thump in the soft sand and rolled across the narrow Martian street after taking up the shock by using my legs as shock-absorbers. I jumped to my feet and ran as though all the Fallen Angels of Hell were tailing me in a Marathon race. Behind me, I could still hear the crack and sizzle of gunfire, but whether that in-

dicated that my getaway hadn't been seen, or whether it meant that they were too busy with each other to bother just yet, I didn't know.

All I wanted to do was put plenty of distance between myself and twenty-odd killers.

Running on Mars is another thing that takes training and practice. A man who isn't used to the lighter gravity can get all tangled up in his own feet pretty easily. I was thankful at that point that *Mercenaries Unlimited* gives their field agents an exhaustive training course before they'll even let him handle the simplest assignment. Given any chance at all, I could get clean away before the triggermen got around to figuring out what had happened to the quarry they were fighting over.

Actually, things were working out better than I'd expected. Patterson's and Ch'ien's men had followed me here, neither group knowing that the other was on my tail, and both of them thinking that I was unaware that I was being followed. Except for the tight spot I'd got into on the roof, everything was going pretty much as planned. I only hoped things would keep working out the way they had been.

The assignment hadn't been an unusual one. There's no such thing as an unusual assignment for *Mercenaries Unlimited*.

Still, it had all started rather harmlessly; it had looked as though it were an ordinary, everyday, commonplace job. Sure. Real easy.

Mercenaries Unlimited, the ads always said. The sign on our central building always says the same thing. Underneath are the words: *we do anything—for a price*.

And we do. That's our business. If you can meet the tariff, you can get anything—but *anything*—done by *Mercenaries Unlimited*. You name the job, we name the price, and if we can come to terms, the job gets done

Ch'ien Tsung George had the job for us, and he had the wherewithal to back it up, so the contact man listened to him. I wasn't the contact man; a field agent doesn't often meet the client he's working for because that might cause strained client-agent relationships, and that, in turn, might be unprofitable.

But I had seen the full tapes of the meeting and the preliminary arrangements, so I had a pretty good idea of what I was getting into. When I was given the assignment, my immediate superior, Colonel Battersea, brought the tapes in to my office.

Colonel Battersea got his title in the Space Service, which is enough commendation for any man. He'd kept the title because he deserved it, even among *Merc Unltd* men, and that's more commendation than the average man deserves.

Colonel Battersea wasn't of course, an average man. He had, and still has, more intelligence in his *medulla oblongata* than the average man has in his cerebrum and cerebellum combined. He's a little man, a good four inches shorter than my six-two, but I still wouldn't want to tackle him in hand-to-hand combat. Not that I couldn't whip him, but I'd certainly hate myself afterwards if I did.

He dropped the tape magazine on my desk, and hunched his shoulders up—an odd little habit he has whenever he begins a conversation. "That's yours, son. Run it through, then erase it. The file copy is already on record." He pushed it toward me with one finger, as if he didn't care to touch it any more than necessary.

I picked it up and looked at him. "You don't like it, Colonel?" I asked.

The Colonel lifted an eyebrow. "I don't dislike it. It's a job, and I have nothing in particular against it."

I held the plastic box and wondered what was on the tape inside. "You don't particularly love it either, Colonel," I said. "What's the trouble?"

"I don't particularly love metallic plutonium or liquid flourine," he said, "and I don't dislike them, either. I'd just as soon not be bothered with playing with them, that's all. A man might get hurt." He waggled a finger at the tape magazine. "Run it. We can talk about it afterwards."

I dropped the magazine into the receptacle, made sure the toggle was engaged, and then flipped the projection switch on my desk control panel. It was unusual for Colonel Battersea to stay while one of his operatives ran off an assignment tape; usually these things are so cut and dried that there's no necessity of drawing a picture of them.

The 3D tank in the wall came to life, and I watched Ch'ien Tsung George come into the contact man's office.

I'm a devotee of the old film classics; it's a hobby with me. I've got taped replicas of some of the soundless films, dating back nearly a century, including a Fatty Arbuckle replica that cost more than I'd care to admit. But my favorites are some of the "horror" and "detective" flicks of the 1930's. So maybe you'll understand what I mean when I say that Ch'ien Tsung George reminded me of Sydney Greenstreet playing the part of Fu Manchu. As far as I know, Greenstreet never played the part, but if he had he'd have been Ch'ien Tsung George to the life.

Mr. Ch'ien liked to play the part of an old-fashioned Chinese. He even insisted on the old Chinese custom of putting his family name first and his given name last, though why he didn't go whole hog and adopt a Chinese given name along with the rest is something I'll never know. Actually, he had been born in the state of Hawaii, as had his parents and grandparents before him, and he was only half Chinese—a quarter from each parent—the rest being a mixture of Japanese, Filipino, and

Scot-Irish. He had been born George Matsuoka, forty-some years before, but he'd decided he didn't like the Japanese name and had adopted a Chinese one instead. He might equally as well have called himself O'Brien or MacTavish, but I guess he figured he looked far too Oriental for that.

He stood six feet tall and weighed well over three hundred. His belly preceded him into the room as though it were a herald with a trumpet, announcing that the great man was to follow in a few moments. His chins were multiple, and the top one, the only one backed by a jawbone, was covered with a dark, straight-haired beard that fell stringily to his collar. Above the beard, his full lips were framed by the mustache that complemented the chin beard. His round cheeks were clean-shaven, and his brows were heavy; below them, were black, expressionless eyes with a pronounced epicanthic fold. His hair was black, but it was thin and balding, and he kept it combed straight back, flat against his skull. His chin was a surprising pink, showing neither the faint tan of the Oriental nor the more pronounced tan that comes from spending time in the sun.

"I was told that I was to see a Mr. Corwin," he said, in a soft, rumbling voice. "I presume that you are he?"

Corwin, the preliminary contact man, smiled and extended his hand. "That's right, Mr. Ch'ien. May I offer you a chair?"

Ch'ien Tsung George took the hand, shook it quickly, and then took the chair. It was obviously a relief for him to get all that poundage off his feet and let it rest on his buttocks, where it belonged.

"I am grateful for your hospitality, Mr. Corwin," he said. He patted the arms of the chair. "It is not often that a man of my—ah—bulk finds that adequate preparations have been made to accommodate him."

The chair was a special one—

broader, stronger, and more thickly padded than the average. Just one of the little services that *Mercenaries Unlimited* extends to its customers.

"We feel," said Corwin blandly, "that a comfortable customer is a more satisfied customer." He was already mixing a drink for each of them, and when he set one in front of Ch'ien, the fat man looked up appreciatively.

"You even know that my favorite afternoon drink is a Planter's Punch. I feel very humble and honored." But his black eyes were shrewdly calculating. "Am I to presume that your excellent organization has already deduced why I have come to you?"

Corwin shook his head. "Not at all, Mr. Ch'ien. We make it our business to know certain things about our customers and potential customers—little things that will enable us to serve them better. We do not make it a policy to pry into their private lives."

That last, of course, was an out-and-out lie. We definitely *do* make it a policy to know everything, private and public, about everyone. But it wouldn't be good politics to admit that to our customers.

"I see," George said coolly, looking as though he didn't believe a word of what Corwin had said. Ch'ien Tsung George was no moron. "Then I shall be pleased to tell you what I want—after we have finished our drink together."

"At your pleasure, Mr. Ch'ien," said Corwin, sipping at his Planter's Punch. Corwin is one of our best contact men—suave, smooth, and polite. He was in his late thirties at the time, but he was as good then as he is now. Physically, he hasn't changed much—handsome without being "pretty", with a brush of gray at his temples, smoothly waved brown hair, a mustache that covered just the right amount of upper lip, and a face that could express any emotion from total apathy, through anxiety, anger, and

boredom, clear up to triumphant joy, without betraying in the least what was actually going on in his mind. Right now, he looked as though he was enjoying Ch'ien's company and wanted nothing more than to sit and drink with him the rest of the afternoon.

Ch'ien Tsung George smiled a smile that crinkled his Oriental eyes. "You are very kind, Mr. Corwin. Very kind. I trust—" He chuckled heavily. "I trust I am not taking up too much of your time."

Corwin, judging his customer accurately, gave him the full charge.

"Mr. Ch'ien, you are paying for my time at the rate of one hundred International Credits per hour. Frankly, I enjoy your presence. The fact that I get paid for it is of little matter to me. I will discuss any matter you wish from now until Doomsday, if that is your pleasure. I will endeavor to be entertaining, but if, at any time, you find me dull, we can terminate the conversation at that moment. Until then, I am your servant."

Ch'ien repeated his heavy chuckle. "I understand. Very well. To business, then. You know, I presume, that I am a lover of fine *objets d'art*?"

Corwin nodded. "I know that you are a well-known and enthusiastic collector of beauty—of many kinds. So?"

"*Touche*," said Ch'ien. "Then you know of my gem collection?"

"I've heard of it, naturally. I don't know all the details," Corwin lied carefully.

Ch'ien Tsung George folded his hands across his great paunch. "I'm sure you do," he said cryptically, "therefore, I will not go into detail. I will only say that one of my many ambitions is to have the most completely representative collection of gems in the Solar System." He gestured idly with his tapering hands. "One day, when I die, I shall will my collection to the Solar Institute. It will be a small gesture, but it will, I

think, insure that my name will be remembered."

"I'm certain it will," Corwin murmured.

Ch'ien leaned forward in the big chair. "I have not attempted to get every famous stone that has ever existed. Only the best. The Star of India is mine, as is the Parlotta Ruby, but I do not covet the rest of the British Crown Jewels. But there is one stone missing from my collection." And then he leaned back, waiting for Corwin to ask the obvious question.

Corwin took his cue. "Which stone is that, Mr. Ch'ien?"

"The Heart of Xanthus," Ch'ien said flatly.

Corwin looked at his drink, swirling it gently, while he thought. He showed no sign of surprise, which proved him to be a good contact man. "The Heart of Xanthus," he said after a moment, "is in the Museum of Martian Artifacts and Culture, at New Boston, Mars. Have you approached them directly for purchase of the stone?"

Ch'ien's chuckle bordered on a sneer. "Come, now, Mr. Corwin. You know better than that."

"I'm not sure I do," Corwin said. His voice was gentle, but the meaning was all there.

"Your pardon," said Ch'ien. He sounded almost apologetic. "Permit me to elucidate. In the first place, I am fully aware that the so-called Heart of Xanthus now on display at the New Boston Martian Museum could not be purchased by a private individual—not even myself. In the second place, I am fully aware that, even if I commissioned you to steal it—pardon my frank language—it would do me no good to have possession of the gem in New Boston." He unclasped his hands and formed a finger-to-finger steeple of them over his huge paunch. "In the third place, that gem is not the one I want at all."

"Oh?" said Corwin. "Perhaps you'd better explain."

"I shall." Again he heaved his ponderous build forward in the chair, his black eyes intent upon Corwin's face. "You know as well as I do that the gem in New Boston is not the true Heart of Xanthus. According to archeological studies, it is merely a replica, a replica built by the ancient Martians themselves. Evidently, according to what Earthmen have been able to decode of the language of the dead Martian race, the stone now in the New Boston Museum was built for display purposes, just as we might build a model of some expensive object in order to display in public something that could not be displayed in the original. Am I right?"

Corwin spread his hands noncommittally. "As far as my knowledge of the subject goes, you are perfectly correct." Then he waited for Ch'ien to go on.

"Very well, then," the fat man said. "What I want is the *original* stone—the real Heart of Xanthus."

Corwin knew his business. He looked at his hands and then rubbed the palms gently together. Then he looked up at Ch'ien and smiled apologetically. "Mr. Ch'ien, archeologists have been looking for the original of that stone for twenty years. The duplicate itself is a seven thousand carat diamond, more or less; its volume is on the order of four hundred cubic centimeters, as I recall." Corwin allowed his voice to drone, as though he were quoting from a textbook he'd read years before. "The gem is a perfect octohedral diamond crystal, measuring a little more than seven inches along—"

Ch'ien cleared his throat rumblingly and held up a plump, pink hand. "Please, Mr. Corwin! I assure you that, as a gem collector, I am fully aware of the physical properties and dimensions of the New Boston replica. As you have pointed out, your time is costing me a hundred credits

an hour. Not that I begrudge so small a sum, but—please come to the point."

Corwin had bated his man to exactly where he wanted him. He looked properly conciliatory and said: "There is another duplicate of the Heart of Xanthus in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington City, U.S.A.; there is a third in the British Museum in London, England, and a fourth in the Kremlin Museum of Moscow, Greater Russia. These last three replicas are, of course, human-made synthetics—artificially produced genuine diamonds, made at a cost of some eight hundred thousand credits each. None of them has the star-like optical flaws that give the New Boston replica its individuality. We have still not achieved the technological level that the Martians achieved fifty thousand years ago—at least, not as far as being able to duplicate the art-form that is epitomized by the Heart of Xanthus."

Ch'ien started to speak, but Corwin said: "Bear with me a moment. I am merely pointing out that the Heart of Xanthus, third-hand—the replicas of a replica—costs eight hundred thousand credits. And you want, not the Martian replica, but the original itself.

"In addition, let me point out that there is no real evidence that the mythical original ever existed, and no evidence at all that it exists now."

Corwin held up a finger. "In other words, your project, as you've stated it, would cost money—a great deal of money. And there is almost no chance at all that you would be able to attain your goal—to gain possession of the real, original Heart of Xanthus.

"We are in business to give service to our customers, Mr. Ch'ien, but we discourage their spending money on wild-goose-chases. It isn't good for our own business."

Again Ch'ien tried to interrupt, and again Corwin silenced him with a wave of his hand. "I'm fully aware," Corwin said, "that you wouldn't come

here without knowing what you were about. Which means, of course, that you have information unknown to us. Do you wish to go on?"

Ch'ien Tsung George relaxed in his chair and smiled complacently. "You must pardon me, Mr. Corwin; I underestimated your sagacity. I do, indeed, have secret information. I shall be happy to explain—and, as you would not permit me to interrupt you, I beg that you shall observe the same convention towards my own exposition. Eh?"

Corwin nodded. "Go on."

Ch'ien Tsung George folded his hands together and held them under his bearded chin. "To begin with, let us take the Martian language. I have made a great study of it, and, at the moment, it pleases me to expound on my knowledge.

"The Martian race has been extinct for five hundred thousand years. But they left behind them certain markings on stone, metallic plates, ceramic artifacts, and so forth. When these were first discovered, archeologists despaired of ever decoding them or translating them. There could be no equivalent of the Rosetta Stone, since there was no possibility that parallel, coeval transcriptions of any Martian writing and any Terrestrial writing could exist. Even if they had had space travel—which is unlikely—the last Martian died before Terrestrial Man had invented writing. There could be no common basis for deciphering the Martian texts on that ground. Do you follow me?"

Corwin merely nodded.

"Very well," Ch'ien continued, "then how were the Martian texts finally deciphered?" He extended his left hand and tapped forcefully on its palm with the forefinger of his right. "Because—and *only* because—the Martians had a highly scientific civilization. As soon as our scientists realized that, they were able to decipher those things which were, are, and *must be* common in any two lan-

guages of scientifically advanced peoples."

He began ticking them off on his fingers. "The ratio of a circle's diameter to its radius is the same all over the Universe. So are the relative weights of the atoms. So is Planck's Constant. These, and others, were the common Rosetta Stone that enabled us to translate ancient Martian."

Corwin nodded again. He knew all this, but it wasn't his business to look bored.

"In addition," Ch'ien went on, "we have the few hints that we get from the present, half-intelligent denizens of Mars. We don't know whether the present Martians are degenerate mutations of the ancient Martian race, or simply mutated specimens of an inferior species. It is as if some interstellar explorer were to land on Earth at some future date and find that the only near-intelligent race happened to be a group of ape-like sub-men, living on a planet that had been decimated by an atomic war half a million years before. Would that hypothetical explorer know whether the sub-men were degenerate human mutants or the changed descendants of chimpanzees, who had climbed up the evolutionary scale instead of being pushed down? How could he know?

"The present-day Martians speak a language that is not, so far as we can tell, related at all to Old Martian. Their vocabulary and usage is sparse, reflecting the fact that their intelligence, by human standards, is submoronic. They have, for instance, no notion of time; they express the past by saying the equivalent of: 'before me came'. Psychologists have tried to bring up Martians away from their present culture, and have shown that their ability to think abstractly is almost non-existent. They are hardly a step above the animal.

"Nonetheless, they *do* have folk tales. And these folk tales, combined with the scientific deciphering of Old Martian writings, have enabled us to

read the Old Martian inscriptions fairly accurately—as far as we can tell."

Ch'ien Tsung George settled himself in his chair and stroked his beard with one hand. "I have delivered myself of my lecture, Mr. Corwin. I have no doubt that you are aware of all these facts, but they form a necessary background to what I have to say next." He paused, ran his fingers through his beard, and went on.

"As you are no doubt aware, the Museum in New Boston has been looking for the true, the original Heart of Xanthus for a long time. Now, I do not intend to tell you how I came about this information, but I do know for a fact that the New Boston scientists have translated certain Old Martian writings, and they have kept these translations secret because the writings themselves give hints as to where the original Heart of Xanthus is hidden—buried beneath the drifting sands of Mars."

And now, again, the fat man leaned forward earnestly. "The ultimate point is this: I, too, have certain information regarding the location of the original Heart of Xanthus—information which is unknown to the archeologists at New Boston, Mars, or to any other person except myself. The two areas of data may overlap at tiny points, but, in general, they are mutually supplementary. It is as though I held one half of a treasure map and they held the other; neither of us could find the treasure without the other half of the map. Do you follow?"

"I think so," said Corwin. "Neither you nor the New Boston research group has enough information to find the Heart of Xanthus, but—according to you—if your information were combined, the mythical—*pardon me, legendary*—jewel could be found."

"Exactly," said Ch'ien Tsung George, settling back firmly. "Exactly."

Corwin took a cigarette from his pocket case, tapped it alight, put it between his lips, took a drag, and exhaled a plume of smoke before he answered. He wanted to think, and he was stalling for time. He took another drag before he said: "As a preliminary, we will hypothetically concede that all this is true. Assuming that it is, Mr. Ch'ien, what is your proposition?"

The fat man looked highly self-satisfied. "I propose an agreement which will be satisfactory to both of us, *whether or not my hypothesis is correct.*"

Corwin waited.

"It is very simple," Ch'ien said. "I know, as does all the civilized Solar System, that *Mercenaries Unlimited* never violates a contract, even though many of your contracts are not only un-enforceable in a court of law, but actually, in some cases, downright illegal. In spite of this, as I say, you have always lived up to your contracts."

"Provided," Corwin interjected, "that our client lives up to his end of the bargain."

Corwin wasn't being diplomatic there; he was simply expounding on Ch'ien's statement, which was perfectly true: *MercUn* has never welshed on a contract. It's perfectly true that some of our work is illegal—or, as the courts put it, "contrary to the public welfare", but, considering the weakness of the central government of the Solar System, and the state of affairs that exists between the loosely confederated Commonwealths on the three planets, there is no reason to pay any attention to the courts if their decisions can be avoided.

There are four Commonwealths on Earth, two on Mars, and three on Venus; these make up the Big Nine. In addition, there are the Minor Commonwealth of Luna, the Planetoids, and the Jovian Satellites. Each commonwealth claims "state's rights",

and, according to the milk-sop constitution of the Solar Government, each Commonwealth has the right to go to hell in its own way. The resulting mess of inter-Commonwealth legislation is more than any court can deal with.

On Earth, for instance, the so-called Commonwealth of the West consists of the United States of America, the Dominion of Canada, the Estado Unidos Mexicanos, the Caribbean Confederacy, and the United Nations of Europe. Each one of these is split up into various "sovereign states", which are split up again into districts, counties, duchies, sub-states, provinces, townships, and what-have-you, each maintaining its own claim to some kind of more-or-less autonomy.

With that kind of confusion, any company with the tight organization that *MercUn* has can get away with murder. And we do.

But the only way we can operate is by having an unbroken record of keeping our word, a reputation of giving every client a fair deal and sticking by our guns.

Ch'ien knew we were trustworthy, and Corwin's remark about the client living up to his end of the deal was simply conversation, nothing more.

"Of course," said Ch'ien Tsung George complacently. "Any compact must be mutually agreeable and mutually enforceable. I hope my own feeble efforts will be to your liking."

"So do I," said Corwin. "What are your terms?"

The fat man folded his hands over his paunch and looked up at the ceiling. "I want to know what information New Boston has about the location of the—shall we call it the 'True Heart'? I think that's rather romantic, eh?"

"I will give you—that is to say, I will give *Mercenaries Unlimited*,—all the information I have as to the location of the True Heart. You, on the other hand, will find out what in-

formation New Boston has. Naturally, since you are working for me, you will not disclose any information which I may have to New Boston.

"After finding what the New Boston information is, you will report to me. I will correlate the information, if you have not already done so. I imagine my own efforts will be superfluous, but I want the satisfaction, nonetheless.

"Then one of your agents will obtain the gem and bring it to me.

"As for my part of it." He paused. "I will pay one million credits for the investigation, regardless of the results. If the search is successful, and the stone is actually found, then it will become my property until my death, after which time it will become the property of *Mercenaries Unlimited*."

He smiled at Corwin. "I would, of course, insist on a contract which would provide that your firm would not only refrain from taking steps to hasten my demise, but would do everything in its power to protect me. I think the actual value of the True Heart would make such a contract worth your while."

Corwin was still thinking it over when the 3D tank blanked out. Colonel Battersea had reached over to the control panel on my desk and cut the switch.

"That's the essence of it," the Colonel said. "What do you think of it?"

"We agreed to the contract?" I asked. "As he stated it?"

"With only minor changes, yes," he said.

"Then I don't see anything wrong with it," I told him. "A cool million, whether we succeed or not, plus ultimate possession of the stone if we do find it. The thing must be worth—hell, four or five million."

"All of that," Colonel Battersea agreed. "Corwin agreed with you. That's why we signed the contract. Now we're committed."

I sighed. "All right, then; what's the catch?"

"The catch," said Colonel Battersea, "is that our fat friend is no more interested in that Martian jewel—as a jewel—than he is interested in a set of matched kidney-stones. He's pretty well convinced that it's a machine of some kind—and operational device."

I frowned. "I dig you the least. Sketch me a diagram."

"You know something about solid-state physics, surely," he said. "You know how the lattice arrangement of a crystal can be made to function as a machine. Hell, we've been using germanium and silicon crystals as electronic components since before I was born. Transistors are old hat."

I agreed. "So?"

"So, according to our information, the True Heart of Xanthus, as our Hawaiian client called it, has a special crystal lattice that enables it to function as a detector and amplifier. It may be pretty to look at, but it's a hell of a lot more useful than it is pretty, if you follow me."

I did. "But why lay out a million credits to get a better broadcasting crystal? Or is this something that will give us interstellar communication?"

I meant it as a gag, but the colonel took me seriously. "It might be," he said. "According to the legends handed down to the present-day sub-human Martians, that rock is supposed to enable a man to read minds."

I must have showed what I thought on my face. Colonel Battersea looked at me and gave me a wry grin.

"That's right," he said. "Our little True Heart is supposed to be able to make any human being a telepath. And we have an iron-bound contract to get it for Ch'ien Tsung George. And I'm dumping the whole bloody mess in your lap, son. The Legal Department is inclined to think that the stone doesn't even exist; they seem inclined to put it in the same class with King Arthur's Excalibur, the

Philosopher's Stone, and the Holy Grail. They figure us to make a clean million and that's the end of it."

"But you don't agree."

He gave his little shrug. "I wouldn't give big odds against it. Nothing definite, you understand; just a hunch. But let's tackle the job as if the rock really does exist."

"In that case," I said, "our primary investigation will concern Mister Ch'ien Tsung George."

The colonel grinned happily. "I knew you were the man for this job, son. Obviously we dig into Fat Boy first. He knows something that he's not telling us."

So we, as the colonel put it, dug into Fat Boy first.

We had plenty on him to begin with, of course. A man doesn't become a multimillionaire in these days unless he has his fingers in more than one mud pie, and if Ch'ien Tsung George had tried to make the metaphor literally true, he would have had to have more fingers than he had hairs on his head and chin combined, with each one of them stuck into a very dirty pie, indeed. Interplanetary crime covers, if you will pardon the remark, a multitude of sins, and Mr. Ch'ien was involved in most of them.

But we already knew all that. What we wanted to know was how, where, and through whom Ch'ien had gotten his information about the Heart of Xanthus.

While one group of operatives were trying to get the information that Ch'ien wanted from the scientists at New Boston, another group was finding out about Ch'ien's own personal contacts.

The investigation of Ch'ien finally narrowed our sights down to bear on a man named Patterson—Leslie Patterson. We went to our data files to see what we had on him and came up with large fistfuls of very interesting information.

Patterson wasn't the big operator that Ch'ien was, but he was no small-

timer, either. Up until a year or so before, he had been working with the Chinaman hand in glove. During that time, he had personally made three trips to Mars, centering his interest in and around New Boston.

Our agents in New Boston found that Patterson hadn't shown up there under his own name, but that a small, wiry man named Dr. Theodore Reiner had been hobnobbing with certain members of the New Boston Academy of Sciences, concentrating mainly on friendships with archeologists, xenologists, and linguists. The description of "Dr. Reiner" tallied almost perfectly with that of Patterson.

Patterson himself was no slouch when it came to those fields. He had two Ph.D.'s from good Earth universities, and had been a member of the British Royal Society until he was relieved of his fellowship for "conduct unbefitting a Gentleman and Fellow of the Society"—i.e., pocketing funds that rightfully belonged to the Royal Society itself.

Whatever information he'd come up with in New Boston had evidently been shared with Ch'ien Tsung George. But, since then, Patterson and Ch'ien had had a falling out, although not exactly a parting of the ways. They were still crossing each other's trail now and then. It looked as though they were both trying to get the True Heart before the other got it, which made for complications.

That, of course, explained why Ch'ien had come to *Mercenaries Unlimited*. He was so desperately anxious to get that stone before Patterson did that he had stooped to hiring us instead of using his own boys.

In the long run, it didn't matter which of them got the True Heart. If either of them ever got full telepathic powers, as the stone was supposed to give them, then the rest of the human race could kiss their freedom goodbye. Either one of them would rule the Solar System within a year after he got that stone.

And yet, *Mercenaries Unlimited* was honor-bound to find the True Heart and deliver it to Ch'ien. And *MercUn* doesn't renege on a contract.

Another thing we found out was that Ch'ien had most certainly been holding out on us. Not only did he know that the True Heart of Xanthus was more than a simple jewel, but he knew how to use it, once he got hold of it. So, presumably, did Leslie Patterson. Which was a hell of a note all the way around.

Meanwhile, we were earning our million credits from the honorable Mr. Ch'ien Tsung George. He had, true to his word, given us all the information he had about the location of the True Heart. By the time six weeks had passed, our men in New Boston had probed far enough to get the complementary information from the Academy men there. And I, as head of that particular detail got all the reports, so, one fine day, there it all was, staring me smack dab in the face.

I knew where the True Heart of Xanthus was located—if it existed.

Right in the great, sand center of the Xanthus Desert itself.

Where else?

From then on, it was simply a matter of timing. *MercUn* would not, could not, and did not betray a client. I sent Ch'ien a report, as agreed, in a pre-arranged code, giving him, as he had put it, the other half of the treasure map. I also told him that we were sending an agent to Mars to get the stone. By the time the message reached him, I was aboard a high-gee plasma-squirter, hightailing it for Mars at five gravities of acceleration, in one of the best spaceships *MercUn* owned.

It was miserable all the way. I was loaded to the earlobes with antigrav shots, and I was strapped down in a pressure tank to equalize the gravity load, but, even so, I felt the pull. When a man's effective weight is half a ton, he doesn't exactly feel like do-

ing a toe dance.

The only relief I got was a minute or so at turnover, but then it was back to the same old load. By the time my pilot settled the ship down at the New Boston spaceport, I felt about nine hundred years old.

The light Martian gravity made me feel as if I'd crossed a thousand miles of desert on foot and then suddenly fallen into a well of cool water.

At New Boston, I went to a Drive-Yourself place and rented an aircar. I didn't have to pick it out for myself; the manager was one of our men, and he had already been instructed to give me a special job.

Half an hour later, I was cruising over the Xanthus Desert, toward one of the ancient Martian cities. I just moseyed along at two hundred miles an hour, as though I had all the time in the world. Theoretically, I was just out to pick up a hunk of diamond crystal weighing a little more than a pound—Earth weight. I wasn't supposed to have any reason to suspect anything. Around me, there was nothing but the purple Martian sky. All was sweetness and innocence.

The little, ultra-powerful detector in the dashboard told me differently. There was an aircar behind me. I hoped that there was one waiting for me, too.

The one behind me would be Patterson's boys and Patterson himself. Patterson had found out that Ch'ien had come to *MercUn* for help, and had been waiting at New Boston for weeks for me to show up. Now he was tailing me to the hiding place of the True Heart.

Ch'ien should already be at the ruined city. He was supposed to be on Earth, but he'd left three weeks before and was simply waiting for me to tell him where the jewel was. He didn't trust *MercUn*, in spite of what he'd said. He wanted to be there to pick up the jewel when I did.

As I neared the city, Patterson's aircar started closing in on me. I

checked the detector and saw that Ch'ien's aircar was in the city below, well hidden somewhere.

I landed at the outskirts of the city and climbed out as though I had all the time in the world. Then Patterson's aircar screamed down out of the sky and I looked up as though I were surprised. Then I started running for the city's streets. Patterson's car landed and his boys piled out of it, running after me. But I had two hundred yards head start, and I managed to get lost for nearly ten minutes before they spotted me again. They were all carrying person-to-person communicators, so as soon as they saw me again, they gathered together like flies at a watermelon feast. The thing was, they didn't know what I had been up to during that ten minutes.

We weren't alone. Ch'ien and his men were trying to get to me, too, and, what with all the chasing, things were quite jolly for a while. That was when I nearly got myself trapped on the roof.

I kept running after I jumped off the roof, covering as much distance as I could, using the long, leaping strides that Martian gravity makes possible. When I finally reached the edge of the city, I stopped and turned to look back at the scene of the battle. There were a couple of flares of bluish light from meson gun discharges, so I knew that there were still a couple of the boys in the battle.

But I didn't take more than a couple of seconds to check. I had work to do. Beyond the city, on all sides, stretched the flat, arid wastes of the Xanthus Desert. I was now almost directly across the city from where I had landed my aircar. I took the little control unit out of my jacket. The thin, cold night air seemed to cut in like a knife during the time I had my jacket open.

I activated the control unit and began turning the dials.

I imagine that those of Patterson's boys who were watching my car and

guarding their own must have been pretty surprised when it suddenly shot up from the ground and did a fast spin before it gained altitude and looped over the city to where I was waiting for it.

When it landed, I opened the door with a quick jerk, ready for anything. Sure enough, there had been a man in it, but the takeoff and spin had slammed him against the inside walls, and he was out colder than the poles of Pluto. I dumped him out and left him on the sand. I hadn't any time to waste.

I got into the air again and started using some of the hidden resources of the special aircar. First, I gunned it back to Patterson's aircar and gave his machine a blast with the high-amplitude Meson gun concealed in the nose of my own craft. Then I flew into the city, keeping low, and keeping my eyes on the detector plate. Ch'ien's aircar was hidden underneath an overhanging roof near one of the ruined buildings, but I got in close and let it have a blast, too. Then I got up high and zoomed back towards New Boston at a full twelve hundred miles an hour.

Before dawn, I was back aboard the spaceship, ready for the bone-crushing flight back.

Colonel Battersea stepped into my office and let the door close gently behind him. He wore a pleased smile on his face, which pleased me, too.

"I hear all went well," he said. "Want to see the loot?" He didn't wait for an answer; he simply pulled the thing out of his jacket pocket.

It was beautiful. A big diamond, as large as my two fists and weighing over a pound. A perfect octohedron, with edges as sharp as broken glass and as straight as a razor's. But, unlike any diamond I had ever seen before, this one glittered inside with a myriad of little blue-white sparks that seemed to be always on the move.

"So that's the True Heart of Xan-

thus," I said. I could hardly take my eyes off it.

"That's it," said the colonel. "If it really works as a telepathic amplifier, the Company will have a new tool to work with—and a very useful one. How did your end of it come out?"

I told him what had happened out on the Martian desert, and he grinned.

"No trouble at all, eh?" he said.

"Not much. Hell, I could have gotten the stone myself and got away with it."

He shook his head. "It was much better to send in one of our agents from Dullesgrad, on Mars, as soon as you found out where the thing was. That eliminated any chance of losing it to Ch'ien or Patterson. It was gone before they got there."

"Have we lived up to the letter of

our contract?" I asked.

"Absolutely," said Colonel Battersea. "We promised to deliver the stone to Ch'ien, here on Earth, as soon as we got it. Despite attacks from—er—unknown assailants, we have brought the stone back. Unfortunately, our client has failed us. He hasn't shown up to pay us the million he owes us, and, for some reason, he can't be found anywhere on Earth. But when he does show up to get his property, we'll give it to him—if he pays the million."

I nodded, grinning. With no means of transportation; with no food, and no water; with only the air in the air tanks on their backs, Ch'ien, Patterson, and Company would be a long, long time covering the five thousand miles across the Xanthus Desert to the nearest human city. Hell, they might never make it.