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SPACESHIP IN A FLASK

By Clifford D. Simak

If a man's sharp enough in his observation, and quick enough with his wits—even a spaceship of sand in a bottle of glass can take him a long way—

Illustrated by Kramer

OLD Eli was plastered when I found him in the Sun Spot, one of the many disreputable dives situ-

ated against the walls of the domed city of New Chicago on the Twilight Belt of Mercury.

I had been afraid of that. As soon as I had heard the old Sunwarder was in town, I had set out to track him down by checking all the joints. The Sun Spot was the thirty-third.

Eli always was good for a story—the kind of a story the Solar Press ate up. No one in New Chicago believed a word he said, especially that yarn about being a couple of hundred years old. Some of the stuff he told about the Sunward side might be true, for few men ventured there, but the story about his age was just too much to swallow.

Most of his tales were alcoholic. He had to have a bit of glow to do much talking. But this time I saw he was pretty far gone.

He regarded me across the table with bleary eyes.

"I was a-comin' to see you, son," he cackled. "Kept thinkin' all the time, 'I gotta go see Sherm.'" He shoved the bottle at me. "Grab yourself a snort, son."

I shook my head. "Can't. Doctor's orders. Got a lousy stomach."

He guffawed in minor key and pounded the table in drunken mirth.

"I remember now. Doggone if I don't. Always taking pills or something, ain't you?"

"Capsules," I said, icily. I can't appreciate jokes about my stomach.

"Don't need water nor nothin' to wash them down," he went on. "Just pop them into your mouth and swallow. Funniest danged thing I ever see. Me, I never took a pill without a heap of gaggin'."

He hoisted the bottle and let it gurgle.

"What did you do this trip?" I asked.

"Not much of nothin'," said Eli. "Couldn't find a thing. This danged planet is gettin' too crowded. Too many prospectors runnin' around. Bumped into a feller out there, I

did. First time that has ever happened. Don't like it. Have to go out to Pluto where a man's got elbow room."

He wrestled the bottle again and wiped his whiskers.

"Wouldn't have come in at all 'cept I had to bring doc some of them salts of his."

"What salts are those?" I asked.

"What! Ain't I ever told you about them salts. Doc buys them off of me. Danged if I know why. Don't seem to be good for nothin'."

He reached into a bulging coat pocket, pulled forth a canvas bag and slung it on the table.

"Take a look," he urged. "Maybe you can tell me what it is. Doc pays me good for it. Takes good care of me, too. Caught the fever out on Venus, long time ago. He gives me injections to fight it off."

Eli stumbled a little over 'injections' but finally made it.

"Who is this doc?" I asked quietly, afraid I'd scare him into silence. "One of the doctors here in town?"

"Nope. The big doc. The feller out at the sanitarium."

"Dr. Vincent?"

"That's the one," said Eli. "Used to sell them to Dr. Anderson and Dr. Brown, too."

I let that pass. It was just another one of old Eli's tales. Both Anderson and Brown had been dead these many years, Anderson before Eli was born.

I OPENED the bag and poured part of its contents into one hand. Tiny, shining crystals winked, reflecting the lights above the bar.

"Took some to a chemist once," said Eli, "but he said it wasn't nothin'. Not valuable at least. Some peculiar combin . . . combi—"

"Combination."

"That's it. I didn't tell him about doc. Didn't tell him nothin'. Thought maybe I'd made a find and could cash in on it. Thought maybe doc was takin' me for a ride. But the chemist said it wasn't worth a thing. Offered to sell him some but he didn't want any. Out of his line, he said."

"Maybe you'd let me have some. Just a sample," I suggested, still afraid of scaring him off. For I sensed, even then, that he was telling me something he shouldn't tell.

He waved a generous hand.

"Take some. Take a lot. Take all you want."

I felt in my pockets.

"I haven't anything to put it in," I said.

He cackled at me, hoisting the bottle.

"Fill up a couple of them pills of yours. Dump out the stuff that's in them. Won't do you any good. Likker's the only thing for a touchy stomach."

"Good idea," I said, grinning at him.

I pulled three of the capsules apart, spilled out the powders, re-filled them with the salts and carefully placed them in my vest pocket. The bag I shoved back across the table.

"Where do you find this stuff?" I asked.

Eli wagged a shaky finger.

"Secret," he whispered, huskily.

His eyes, I saw, were blearier than ever. He wobbled even as he sat. But his hand snaked out with what amounted to instinct to cuddle the bottle.

"Good drinkin' likker," he mumbled. "Good for the stomach—"

His head drooped and rested on the table. The bottle tipped and the little remaining liquor splashed onto the floor.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said to the man behind the bar.

"Soon as he sobers up," the man told me, "he'll light out for Sunward. Been going there for years. Queer old duck. Figure there's anything to him claiming he's a couple hundred years old?"

"Not a chance," I told him.

He held a glass up to the light, blew on it, polished it with a cloth until it shone.

"A bunch of the boys had him yarning good just before you came in. Marty Berg was setting them up."

"About this time Marty always sets them up," I told him. "Election day is getting close."

I started to go and then turned back and laid a coin on the bar.

"When he wakes up give him a drink on me," I said. "He'll need one then. I'll try to catch him again before he hits for Sunward."

But I didn't catch him again.

Twenty-four hours later they found old Eli's body in the badlands just west of the city's port. He had been killed by three vicious knife thrusts. The police said he had been dead twelve or eighteen hours.

MARTY BERG was one of those men who can't go back to Earth. Just what the trouble was no one knew and no one cared to ask. It might have been any number of things, for Marty's talents are varied.

As a ward heeler in the North Wall precinct, he always delivered the vote. The methods he used were never questioned. What he got out of it no one really cared, for New Chicago had not as yet developed civic consciousness.

When he came into my office I gave him the glad hand, for he was a news source. More than once he'd

tipped me off on political shenanigans.

"What's the news on Eli?" he asked.

"None at all," I told him. "The police are baffled."

Marty wagged his head. "Too bad. I hope they catch the guy."

"What can I do for you, Marty?"

"Just a little favor," said Marty. "I hear you're going to Earth for a bit of vacation—"

"In a day or two," I said. "It'll be good to see Earth again. A man sort of misses—"

And there I stopped, remembering about Marty not being able to go back.

But he didn't seem to notice.

"You remember Chesty Lewis? The bird they hooked for forgery?"

"Sure, I met him a couple of times. The cops back in New York used to run him in every now and then."

"He's out again," said Marty, "and I'd like to send him a little gift. Just a remembrance from an old pal. I thought maybe you'd take it along and hand it to him. I'd mail it but the mail rates—"

I could understand that. The mail rates *were* high.

Marty hauled a package from his pocket and set it on the desk.

I picked it up and shook it. "Listen, Marty, you wouldn't be getting me into trouble, would you?"

He spread his hands. "Why should I be getting a friend of mine into any trouble? It's just to save the mailing costs I'm doing this. I'll tell you what it is. Just one of those sand flasks with different colored sands made into a pretty picture. A picture of a spaceship, this one is. A white ship out in space, with red sand like blasts shooting from the rockets—"

"Forget it, Marty," I said. "I just wondered. Sure, I'll take it."

"Chesty will be nuts about it," said Marty. "He always did like pretty things."

FLOYD DUNCAN, veteran chief of the New Chicago office of the Solar Bureau of Investigation, was the first to find the clue in old Eli's murder and when he found it he didn't believe it.

He growled at me when I came into his hangout, but I kidded him along and pretty soon he softened up.

"This case has got me down," he growled.

"No clues?" I asked.

"Hell, yes," he said. "I got a clue but it's worse than not having one because it can't be right."

"What's wrong with it?"

"About one hundred years," he said, rustling papers on his desk and trying to act ferocious.

"You're all haywire," I said. "Years haven't anything to do with clues."

"You ever heard of Dr. Jennings Anderson?" he asked me.

"The chap who built the sanitarium out on Sunward?"

"That's the fellow. Built it one hundred fifty years ago. Doc was all of fifty then, himself. Put every dime he had in it. Thought he could cure the space dopes. For that matter the sanitarium is still trying to cure them, but not getting very far."

I nodded, remembering Anderson's story. The sanitarium out on the Sunward side still stood as a monument to his hopes and humanitarianism. Recognizing the space disease, which regularly struck down the men who roamed the trails between the planets, as a challenge to his knowledge and his love of humankind, he had constructed the sanitarium, had tried to cure the

stricken spacemen by use of the radiations which slashed out from the Sun.

Duncan rattled some more papers and then went on. "Anderson died over one hundred years ago. He's buried out there at the sanitarium. Folks back on Earth subscribed a pile of money to put up the shaft over his grave. Had to use zero metal. Only thing that will stand up in the radiations."

I watched Duncan narrowly, wondering what he was getting at. He was right about Doc Anderson being dead, for I had seen the shaft myself, with his name inscribed on it.

"We found a brand-new dollar bill on old Eli," said Duncan. "We checked for fingerprints. Found a lot of them. Money picks prints up fast, you know. We checked all the prints and they all check out to nothing—all except one."

He ran blunt fingers through his iron-gray hair.

"The one print," he told me, "is that of old Doc Anderson!"

"But, look," I blurted, "that can't be right!"

"Of course it can't be right," he said. "That's what worries me."

BACK in my apartment I opened up the package Marty had given me and got the surprise of my life. For once, Marty had told the truth. The thing in the package really was a sand flask, one of those things the gift shops sell to tourists. Made of brilliant Mercurian sands, some of them are really bits of art.

The one I took out of the package wasn't any piece of art, but it was a fair enough piece of work. I put it on a table and looked at it, wondering why Marty would be sending something like that to an egg like Chesty.

And the more I looked at it, the

stronger grew the hunch that there was something wrong. Somewhere something didn't tie together. This business of sending a sand flask to Chesty Lewis somehow didn't click.

So I wrapped it up again and hid it in my dresser drawer. Then I went out and hunted through the shops until I found one just like it. I bought that one and wrapped it up and put it in the mails, addressing it to Chesty in care of a boardinghouse that I knew could get in touch with him.

Why I did a thing like that I can't explain, even to this day. It was just a hunch, one of those unaccountable sixth senses that newsmen sometimes acquire. The whole deal had a phony ring, had put me on my guard.

Back in the apartment once again, I closed the blinds, turned off the lights and tried to go to sleep.

I was dog-tired, but I had a lot of trouble dropping off. My mind kept buzzing round.

I thought about old Eli and the new dollar bill with the one-hundred-year-old fingerprints upon it. I thought about Marty Berg sending a sand flask to Chesty Lewis and wondered if what I had just done would make any difference. I wondered about Doc Anderson, dead these hundred years or more, resting under the stele of zero metal.

Finally I did go to sleep, only to be wakened a short time later with severe stomach pains. Groping blindly on the bedside table I found a couple of capsules, swallowed them and waited for the pain to ease.

It was hours later when I finally awoke.

All sign of stomach distress was gone. I felt a good ten years younger, I told myself, lying there, reluctant to get up. It's wonderful what a good long sleep will do.

Squaring off in front of the mirror after plugging in my razor, I noticed something funny about the face that stared back at me.

I leaned closer to the glass, trying to figure out what could be wrong. The image that stared back at me was me all right, but it had a different look. There weren't nearly so many wrinkles and the baggy cheeks had filled up a little bit, and there was a slight flush of color in them.

But that wasn't all.

The streak of gray on the left side of my head was gone! The hair was coal-black!

Alarmed, I rumbled my hair, searching for gray ones. There weren't any.

It wasn't until then I remembered the capsules.

A frantic search of the vest pocket where I had placed the ones filled with old Eli's salts failed to locate them.

There was just one explanation. Absent-mindedly I had fished them out of the pocket, put them with the others on the bedside table.

Could it be that I had taken one of them when I had awakened? And if I had, would that account for the filled out cheeks, the disappearance of the gray streak?

I sat down, flabbergasted.

I remembered old Eli had told me he sold those salts to Dr. Vincent out at the Sunward sanitarium.

Back at my shaving once again, I knew there was just one thing to do. I had to see Dr. Vincent right away.

And when I went to see him I would carry a short steel bar. One that would fit my coat pocket. There would be a use for it.

SEEING Dr. Vincent was easier said than done. Few people saw him. Both he and his predecessor, Dr.

Brown, were noted for their reluctance to appear in public. Too engrossed in their work, they had always said.

Anderson, Brown and Vincent, three strange men. Anderson under the steele that rose before the sanitarium entrance. Brown, undoubtedly dead, but with his later life, after he had left the sanitarium, shrouded in mystery. Vincent, present head of the institution, practically unknown to the medical profession except by reputation.

Three men who had dedicated their lives to finding a cure for the space sickness. Men who, so far, had failed. To them, from all the far corners of the Solar System came the space dopes, the men stricken by the dread disease which even now spelled the swift doom of all on whom it fastened. Not so swiftly now, perhaps, but nevertheless certain.

For the sanitarium had made some progress. By its treatment with radiations it could ease the pain, could slow up the ravages, give each victim a few more months to live, an easier death. But that was all. The space sickness still was fatal. There was no cure.

I had visited the sanitarium only once before—when I first had come to New Chicago. The New York office had wanted a feature story about the place and I had gotten it, but not from Dr. Vincent. I had not, in fact, seen Dr. Vincent. The soft-voiced robot secretary, had told me he was very busy. An equally soft-voiced robot attendant had taken me in tow, had shown me the building, explained its workings, discussed learnedly the work of Dr. Vincent. It was a good story.

Practically all the attendants, I knew, were robots.

"We do not make mistakes," the

soft-voiced metal-man had told me. "Here, where mistakes are fatal, we are better than a human being."

Which sounded like a good explanation, but left one sort of hanging in the air.

This time, as the time before, I had no trouble getting to the secretary who guarded Vincent's office. And this time, as the time before, I got the same answer.

"Dr. Vincent is very busy. What is it you want?"

I leaned closer, across the desk, cutting off access to the row of call buttons.

"It's a matter of life and death," I said and even as I spoke I yanked the short steel bar out of my pocket and struck.

I put everything I had into that blow and I knew just where to hit, right between the robot's gleaming eyes.

The one blow was enough. It dented in the heavy metal, smashed the delicate mechanism. The robot slid off the chair, clanged onto the floor.

FOR LONG SECONDS I stood there, hoping against hope that the walls were soundproofed. They must have been, for there was no scurry of feet outside, no sound from Vincent's inner office.

Walking softly, thanking my stars the doors did not boast newfangled locks but the simple latches of the day when the sanitarium had been built, I locked the outer door, then strode across the room and twisted the knob to Vincent's office. It turned in my hand and I stepped inside.

A man sat at a desk directly opposite the door. A man well past middle age, with snow-white hair. He was busy and did not look up when I came in. If he had heard me at

all, he probably thought I was the secretary.

"Dr. Anderson?" I asked.

"Why, yes. What can I—"

And then he jerked his head up and stared at me.

I laughed at him softly.

"I thought so," I said.

Muscles jerked around his jaws, as if he were trying to keep his teeth from chattering.

"Who are you?" he asked hoarsely.

"A friend of old Eli's," I told him.

"He sent you?"

"No, he didn't send me. Eli is dead."

He started out of his chair at that. "What's that you say? Old Eli is dead? Are you certain?"

"The news," I told him, "has been in the papers. The radio carried it."

"I get no papers," he said. "I have no time to read them. The radio over there," he jerked his head toward an old set in the corner, "hasn't been turned on for months."

"It is the truth," I said. "Murdered. And the salts were stolen."

The man behind the desk went pale.

"The salts stolen!"

"Someone," I said, "who guessed what they were."

He sat down slowly, as if every ounce of strength had drained from his body. Huddled behind his desk he looked an old, old man.

"You've been afraid of this for years," I said.

He nodded dumbly.

Silence hung between us, a long and empty silence and looking at the man, I felt sorry for him.

"Afraid of it," he said, "for two reasons. But I guess it doesn't matter any more. I've failed. There is no cure. There was just one hope left and that has failed—"

I paced swiftly across the room.

"Look," I shot at him, "are you

actually admitting that you are Dr. Anderson?"

He looked at me. "Why not?"

I stammered a little. "I thought you would put up a fight."

"There's no use of fighting any more," he said. "Two hundred years is too long for any man to live. Especially when he fails year after year at the goal he has set himself."

"Dr. Anderson," I said, half speaking to myself, half to him. Dr. Brown and now Dr. Vincent."

He smiled faintly. "All three of them. It was easily arranged. I built the sanitarium, I owned it. I was accountable to no one. I named my successor and my successor named his successor. Why should the world wonder? The men who were named were men from the laboratory in this place. Obscure men, of course, but men familiar with the work."

He smiled wanly at me. "Clever?"

"But the staff?" I asked.

"Except at first, there has been none. Just myself and the patients and the robots. The robots don't talk, the patients die."

He drummed his fingers on the desk. "And who are you?"

I took a long breath. "Sherm Marshall of the Solar Press."

"And you want a story?"

I nodded, fearful of what would happen next.

And the thing that happened was the last thing I expected.

"Sit down," he said. "Since you are here, you may as well know what has been going on."

"That's swell of you, doctor," I said, waiting for the lightning to strike.

No lightning struck.

"Have you ever kept a thing bottled up inside yourself so long you wanted to shriek?" he asked. "Have you ever ached to tell something

that you knew and still you couldn't tell it?"

I nodded.

"That's me," said Dr. Anderson.

He sat silent so long I thought he had forgotten me, but finally he went on.

"I CAME HERE with a theory that the radiations thrown out by the Sun, properly screened for selectivity, would have a curative effect upon the victims of space sickness. It worked, to an extent. It alleviated the malady, but it was not a cure. It didn't go far enough. It gave a few added months, in some cases a few added years, of life, but that was all. I knew that I had failed.

It was about the time I came to this realization that old Eli stumbled in. His car had broken down, his spacesuit was down to the last half-hour of oxygen. With him he had some peculiar salts—a queer earth such as he had never seen before. He had only a sample. I offered to analyze it for him and he left it. Quite by accident I discovered its properties.

"At about the time a very close friend of mine was brought here with the sickness. It was then that the full force of my failure was brought home to me. I knew my friend would die despite all that I could do. But he had hopes that I could save him—and that only made it worse."

He stopped and stared at something on the opposite wall, but there was nothing there.

So I reminded him: "These salts of Eli's. They prolonged life?"

It was as if something had struck him with a whip. He started and then settled back.

"Yes, they do," he said. "The extent of their possibilities I cannot

say. I can tell you roughly what they do, but I don't understand just how—

"Perhaps we had better start at the beginning.

"If one is too accept the hypothesis that death is the result of the final hydrolysis of the proteins in the protoplasm, then it would seem reasonable that anything which would arrest hydrolysis or would catalyze resynthesis of the proteins would hold death at bay.

"The salts apparently do this, but whether they merely arrest the process of hydrolysis, preventing one from growing older, or whether they completely resynthesize a portion of the original proteins contained in the protoplasm I cannot even guess.

"If resynthesis actually does occur, then one might speculate upon the possibility that a larger dosage, by resynthesizing all or nearly all of the proteins would cause a man to grow younger instead of merely stopping him from growing older."

He smiled. "I never experimented. I was satisfied with arresting old age."

I didn't say a thing. I almost held my breath. It seemed incredible the man could be sitting there, telling me that story. There was something wrong. Either he was wacky or I was batty—or maybe both.

I wanted to pinch myself to make sure it wasn't all a dream, because, if it wasn't, here was the biggest story the world had ever read.

Here was the sort of thing Ponce de Leon, the old Earth explorer, had dreamed about. Here, in hard truth, was an age-old myth that had echoed down the world for ages.

He was quiet so long that I finally spoke. "So you took some of the salts. Possibly so you could continue your work?"

"That's it," he said. "I talked it over with my friend, the one who expected me to help him—the one I knew I couldn't help.

"He understood and agreed to do his part. I was to prolong my life so I could continue with my work. He was to continue his so I could use him as a subject for experiments. It wasn't an easy decision for him to make, for it meant years of torturing illness. The salts seemed to help him to some extent, perhaps repairing some of the ravages of the disease and for a while we thought they might be the cure. But they failed us, too. He lived—it's true—but he wasn't cured."

"But why was it necessary to continue his life?" I asked. "Necessary for the experiments, I mean. Certainly you had plenty of other patients to experiment upon."

"They died too fast," said Anderson. "A few months, a few years at the most. I needed long range observation."

He matched fingertips, speaking slowly, as if choosing his words with care.

"PERHAPS you wonder why I did not pass my work along, why I did not select someone else and train them so they could pick up where I left off. Maybe that would have been the best. I've often blamed myself for not doing it instead of this. But my research had become an obsession. It wasn't all pride or scientific ardor. There was the human angle to it, too. No man could have seen those poor devils, doomed, without a single chance, and not wanted to do something for them. They weren't just patients. They were human beings, crying for someone to do something—and no one had. I tried to—God knows how I tried.

"I was afraid, you see, that someone else, no matter how carefully selected, might not be able to carry on with the singleness of purpose that seemed necessary—that somewhere along the way they might falter, might get sick of the job. That couldn't be, that was the one thing that simply could not happen. Someone at least had to keep on trying to help those men for whom there was no help."

"So you killed yourself off," I said. "You let yourself be buried. You saw the stele erected in your honor. You became Dr. Brown and later Dr. Vincent. And yet, when I called you Dr. Anderson you answered."

"I've always been Anderson," he said. "The robots, of course, call me by the name I go by at the moment, but my friend who has stood by me all these years always calls me Anderson."

He grimaced. "He never could get used to my other names."

"And Eli?"

"Eli was easy to manage. I made him believe he had a malignant ailment, cautioned him he must come here at regular intervals for injections. The injections, of course, were his own salts. They have to be taken at intervals. After a time the hydrolysis would reach a point

where it was necessary to set the catalytic action back to work again.

He rose from the desk and paced up and down the room.

"But now Eli is dead. And I have failed. And someone else knows about the salts."

He stopped in front of me.

"Do you realize what the knowledge of the salts will do the Solar System?" he demanded. "Can you see what I have feared all these years?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "The salts would be the greatest blessing the world has ever known—"

He stared at me.

"Greatest blessing, did you say?" he whispered.

His fists clenched and unclenched by his side.

"They would be the greatest curse that could fall on mankind. Can you see what men would do to get them? No crime too foul, no treachery too great. Can you imagine what those in power would charge for them? Charge in money and service and power? The man who had them would rule the Solar System, for he could hold forth or withdraw the hope of eternal youth, of eternal life.

"Can you even remotely imagine



the economic consequences? Men begging themselves for a few more years of life. Life insurance companies crashing as the people grabbed at the hope of living forever. For if a man is to live forever why bother with insurance? And when the insurance companies crashed they would drag others with them—companies that hold their paper—and other companies that— But why go on. Surely you must see.

"Envision the wars that might result. The mad hunt for the magic salts—"

"Wait a minute," I shouted at him. "You're forgetting that the man who killed Eli probably didn't find out where Eli got the salts. He stole the salts that Eli had, but he probably doesn't know—"

"That makes no difference," said Anderson. "No difference at all. Once the System knows such salts exist all hell will break wide open. Mercury will be swamped with men looking for them—"

He stopped his tirade, walked around the desk and sat down.

"I hope you've enjoyed my story, Mr. Marshall."

I gulped at that one. "Enjoyed it! Why, it's the greatest story the System's ever known. They'll give it headlines two feet high. They'll spread it—"

I stopped because I didn't like the look that had crept into his eyes.

"You realize, of course, Mr. Marshall, that you shall never print it."

"Never print it," I yelped. "What did you tell it to me for?"

"I took advantage of you," said Anderson. "I had to tell it to someone. I've had it corked up in me too long. And I needed time."

I gulped again. "Time—"

He nodded. "Time for the robots

to take certain measures. By this time they have discovered something is wrong. They are quick at things like that."

He seemed to be laughing at me.

"You'll never leave this place alive," he said.

WE SAT THERE looking at one another. He was smiling. I don't know how I looked. I was mad and plenty scared.

"Don't misunderstand me," he said. "We mustn't be dramatic. I don't mean I am going to kill you. I mean that you will never leave this place. If you try you'll most assuredly be killed. You see, I can't let you go. Not knowing what you know."

"You dirty—" but he stopped me.

"You asked for it," he said.

A door back of the desk opened softly and a ray of light slashed into the room. Through the door I caught the glimpse of a laboratory.

A tall, gaunt man stood in the doorway. His face was pallid above the black lounging robe he wore.

"Anderson—" he began excitedly.

"Why, Ernie," said Anderson. "I didn't expect to see you. We have a guest. Mr. Sherman Marshall. He's staying for a while"—he cast me a sidelong look—"for quite a while," he finished.

"I am glad to know you," Ernie said to me. "Do you, by chance, play whist? Anderson is no good at it. Claims it is old-fashioned—absolutely primitive."

"I don't know a thing about it," I said, "but I'm handy with cards."

"Of course," said Anderson to me, "you must have guessed that Ernie is my partner in crime. Not quite as old as I am but almost. Ernie Hitchcock. Once one of the best captains that ever flew in space."

"I came to tell you," said Hitchcock, speaking to Anderson with the old urgency in his voice, "that there has been a reaction. The kind we were hoping for. I made sure before—"

Anderson's hands grasped at the table.

"A reaction—" he choked. "You mean it . . . really . . . what we were looking for?"

Hitchcock nodded.

Anderson turned to me. "You will excuse us?"

I nodded, not knowing what to say. I was trying to make head and tail of what had happened. What did the tall, gaunt man mean by reaction? Could it mean that a cure had been found, after all these years, for the space sickness? Did it mean that Dr. Anderson, at the moment all seemed lost, had triumphed in this search that had stretched over three lifetimes?

The two went out the door, into the laboratory and I watched them go. Minutes dragged by. I got up and paced around the room. I stared at the book in the shelves, but there was nothing to interest me, mostly medical works.

Knowing it wouldn't do me any good, I went to the door leading into the room where I'd bashed the robot on the head. I opened it and there squarely in front of it, stood a robot with his arms folded across his chest. He looked as if he were just waiting for me to make a break. He said nothing and I said nothing. I simply shut the door.

The radio caught my attention and I wondered if it would work. Anderson had said it hadn't been tuned in for months. Radio reception usually is almost impossible here, but with the new broadcast units put in at New Chicago in the

last few months it should be half-way decent, I thought.

I turned it on and the set lighted up and hummed. Swiftly I spun the dial to the New Chicago wave length and the voice of Jimmy Doyle, newscaster, blared out, somewhat disrupted by static, but still intelligible.

Jimmy was just starting his broadcast and what he had to say held me rooted to the spot—

"—still searching for Sherman Marshall, wanted for the murder of Eli Lawrence. A warrant was issued for Marshall's arrest ten hours ago when a canvas bag belonging to the murdered man was found in an alley near the North Wall. Marshall's fingerprints, the police say, were found upon it. A bartender at the Sun Spot, a night club—"

There was a lot more to it, and I listened, but it didn't mean much. The things that mattered were my fingerprints upon the canvas bag in which old Eli had carried his salts and the story the bartender at the Sun Spot had told the police.

Back at New Chicago the cops were in full cry. Intent to hang the murder on someone. Anxious to make a showing because election was near.

And with those fingerprints and the bartender's story it wouldn't be so hard to hang it on me.

Numbly I reached out and snapped off the radio. Covering trials, both in New Chicago and back on Earth, I often had tried to put myself in the defendant's place, had tried to imagine what he was thinking, how he felt.

And now I knew!

I was safe, I knew, for a while, for no one would think of looking for me here. Perhaps even if they did come looking they wouldn't find

me, for Anderson would want to keep me hidden. It would be to his interest to keep me where I couldn't talk.

I thought back over the events immediately preceding and following Eli's death—and I suddenly remembered the sand flask hidden in my dresser drawer. The sand flask with the white spaceship!

THE DOOR to the laboratory opened and Anderson entered the room. He was all smiles and he almost beamed at me.

"I have been thinking," he said. "Perhaps I can let you go."

"What's that?" I yelped.

"I said I was thinking I needn't keep you here."

"But, doc," I protested, "I really want to stay. I think—"

And then I saw it wasn't any good. If he was ready to let me leave, he would be no protection if I stayed.

"But why this sudden switch?" I demanded. "If you let me go, I'll publish the story. Sure as hell, I will."

"I don't think you will," he said. "Because I am trading you another story for it. A bigger story—"

"The cure? You've found the cure?"

He nodded. "There had seemed just one thing left to do. A very dangerous thing and with slight chance of success. If that failed, we feared that we were done. We had then explored every possibility. We had come to the end.

"We tried and failed—or so it seemed. But what had seemed failure was really success. The reaction was slower than we thought, took longer to manifest itself. We know now that we can cure the space sickness."

He was staring at the wall again and there still was nothing there—

"It will take some time," he finally said. "A little time to perfect the method. But I still have a little time . . . a little time . . . enough —"

"But, doctor," I yelled at him, "you must have some salts. You certainly didn't use all that Eli brought you. There is no need to talk of time."

He turned tired eyes to me.

"Yes, I have some salts," he said. "Let me show you—"

He rose and went through the laboratory. I followed him.

From a cabinet above a sink he lifted down a box and opened it.

Inside I saw the crystals.

"Look," said Anderson.

He upended the box, dumped the salts into the sink, reached out and turned the tap. In silence we watched the water wash them down the drain.

"Try and tell that story now," he said. "You'll be laughed out of your profession. There is no evidence. I am the only evidence and I will soon be dead.

"I've waited for this day—for the day when I could pour them down the drain. I've done what I set out to do. I've taken the terror out of space. I've answered the prayers I have seen in the eyes of dying men. No one, even if they knew, and believed, my story, could say now that I had been wrong in doing what I did."

"You forget just one thing, doctor."

"What is that?"

"There still is evidence. Someone stole some salts from Eli."

He blanched at that. I knew he would. In the triumph of the moment he had forgotten it. His hand shook as he put back the box, turned off the water.

And in that instant, I think, I realized what he stood for. I could envision those long lonely years. Facing failure every year, despairing of ever doing what need be done. Keeping within his brain a knowledge that would have brought him greater glory than any man had ever had and yet keeping silent because he knew what his secret would do to the people of the System.

"Look, doctor," I said.

"Yes?"

"About those salts that Eli had. You needn't worry. I know where they are."

"You know where they are?"

"Yes, but I didn't until a minute ago."

He didn't ask the question, but I answered it.

"I'll do what's necessary," I said.

Silently he held out his hand to me.

I KNEW where those salts were, all right. But the problem was to reach them.

I knew, too, who had murdered Eli. But there was no way to prove it. The salts would have furnished the proof, but it was doubtful if any court, any jury would have believed my story. And using them as evidence would have told the world, would have broken faith with Dr. Jennings Anderson.

My first job was to get them.

How I did it I still don't clearly remember. I remember that I came into the west port of the city with a jam of other cars, gambling on the belief the police would be watching outgoing cars, would pay little attention to incoming ones.

Once inside I ran the car into a side street, ducked it into an alley and abandoned it. I remember dodging up alleys, hiding in recessed doorways to avoid passers-by, working nearer and nearer to my apartment house.

Getting into the house was simpler than I thought.

Plain-clothes men were watching the place, but their watch had eased up a bit. After all, what murderer would be crazy enough to come back to a place he knew was being watched?

I waited my chance and took it. I met one man in the hall, but turned to one of the doors, fumbling in my pocket as if for a key, shielding my face from him until he was past.

My own room was unguarded. Probably they figured that it was

impossible for me to slip into the building, so why guard the room?

The place had been ransacked, but nothing, apparently, had been taken.

Swiftly I went to the dresser in the bedroom, pulled out the drawer, lifted out the sand flask. With trembling fingers I pried out the cork, shook out the contents.

There was no mistaking the appearance of the white sand. It wasn't white sand—it was the crystals Eli had shown me at the Sun Spot.

What was it Anderson had said—*“if resynthesis actually does occur a man would grow younger—”*

I hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment. Then I scooped up some of the crystals, put them in my mouth and swallowed. They went down hard—like sand. But they went down. I took some more, just to make sure. I had no way of knowing how many I should take. Then I washed the rest down the bathroom drain.

After that I sat down to wait. I knew it was a dangerous thing to do, but probably it was as safe there in my room as any other place.

Four hours later I walked out of the apartment house, through the lobby, right past Floyd Duncan, SBI chief. He didn't know me. For that matter I hardly knew myself. To all appearances, I was a youth of no more than twenty years.

THE NEWSBOYS began screaming an extra as I neared the Martian Times building in Sandebar. I stopped to listen to their shouts.

“Extra!” they bellowed. “Marty Berg Guilty. Marty Berg Guilty of Eli Lawrence Murder.”

I shrugged my shoulders. It had taken Duncan plenty of time to crack that one. I grinned as I re-

membered him sitting in the apartment lobby, never blinking an eyelash as I sauntered past.

In the newsroom I walked up to the city editor's desk.

“What do you want?” a hard-boiled guy barked at me.

“I thought you might need a man.”

“Can you write?”

I nodded.

“Experience?”

I rattled off the story I had all fixed up.

“What the hell are you doing on Mars?” he demanded. “This isn't any fit place for a man to live.”

“Bumming around,” I told him. “Seeing the System.”

He made doodles on a sheet of paper.

“I'll try you out,” he said. “I like your looks. Remind me of someone. Someone I met.” He shook his head. “Can't place him.”

But I had placed him. He was Herb North. I'd met him once, years before, at a press convention. We'd gone on a bat together.

“Ever hear of a guy named Chesty Lewis?” he asked.

“Read about him. New York gangster, isn't he?”

“He used to be in New York,” said North, “but he lammed out here a few months ago. He's coming up for trial this morning. That will be your first job. Funny case. Seems he took an old bird for about a billion bucks. Told the old sucker he had some stuff that would make him young again. But it didn't and so—we have a trial.”

I nodded. I knew all about it.

Chesty Lewis had sold Andrew J. Rasmussen, Mars utility magnate, a small bottle of white sand—the kind that comes in those picture flasks they sell to tourists out on Mercury.