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STEPSONS OF MARS

Guns are not enough, when the enemy is too strong. But if you can find out their weak point, and if you have one man who has the weapon to be used against it. . . .



By Ivar Towers

CHAPTER ONE

Forced Enlistment

WHEN you're unemployed on Mars, you're unemployed for sure. Because the Martians—which means the Earth colonists—have a

peculiar idea that every individual must occupy a definite niche in the scheme of things—or else become a derelict wanderer. Martin Sloane and his pal, Red Keating, were learning that very well. Too well in fact; so they tried to forget it by tossing away their last few dollars in the

various dives that lined the Street of Lights in Iopa. When their money was gone, they wouldn't be able to forget any more—but the time to worry about that was when it was gone.

They had strayed in and out of seven of the Street's saloons, and were now in the stage where they chuckled to themselves about the pleasing swaying motion of Iopa's streets. And they were singing, quite pleasantly singing at the top of their powerful voices.

That was when they ran into a broad-shouldered and stocky person who wore three chevrons on the sleeve of his grey tunic. The sergeant sprawled in the street for only a second, then bounced up again like one of those non-tiltable dolls and swore offensive oaths in three languages.

Red Keating brooked no insults from a simple soldier, and he swayed up to him with intent to assault. But Sloane wasn't quite so drunk. He shoved Keating back and intervened.

"Sarge," he said, patting the incensed non-com on the chest, "pay no heed wha'soever to my bull-headed friend, who is very, very drunk. We 'pologize mos' profoun'ly for knockin' you into th' gutter an' spoilin' your pretty uniform. Wouldn't have done it for worlds; was accident, pure and simple. Pure like me . . . simple like m'pal over there."

The sergeant was almost convinced. In fact, he wanted to forget the matter entirely, when Red, who had been patiently listening to his friend's words, decided to lend a hand. His homely Irish mug bent in a simian grin and he attempted to throw a friendly arm about the sergeant's shoulders, but succeeded only in rabbit-punching him and again sprawling him face down in the gutter. This was too much for the already overtaxed trooper, who fished a whistle from a pocket of his blouse and blew lustily on it, summoning several soldiers to his aid.

Not long after, Sloane and Keating

were being marched down the street, each held by three grim and determined guardsmen.

SLOANE yawned and rubbed his eyes. He had a vague idea that he was in jail again. On the other side of the narrow room Red was dumped across a cot, happily snoring like an amorous walrus, his battered face checked by an odd shadow. Tracing it to its source, Keating found it to be cast by a barred window set in the stone wall of a small cell. Looked familiar, he thought, taking in the two cots, sink, and rat-hole.

He shook his head and leaned over to rouse his companion-in-misery. Red sat up and stretched.

"Ouch!" he said brightly, squinting at their surroundings. "Who picked these sumptuous accommodations?"

"As I recall it," said Sloane, gingerly feeling his head, "it was decided for us by twenty hulking brutes, armed with lead pipe. What happened after they got through wiping their feet on us?"

"I'll swear they sat on us. They sat on us, and that is where everything goes blank. Positively blank." Red answered. "I presume we're in the calabozo?"

"Obvious. They should be coming in any minute now to take our orders for breakfast. Personally, I don't want any; I'd much rather crawl into a corner—any corner—and die. What's the antidote for kisju, Red? Or would there be any?"

Before Red could reply, the cell door clanked open and a soldier appeared in the opening, his large ears flapping in his distress.

"Captain wants you two guys," he announced, looking uneasily at the pair. They stared in fascination at his ears.

"C'mon," he insisted. "Down this way."

They proceeded down the corridor, the guard prudently keeping his hand on the butt of an enormous positron pistol bumping against his hip.

"Did you notice those ears?" Sloane whispered. "I'll bet when he's in a hurry—"

"In there," the guard interrupted, gesturing toward a door on which was lettered "Officer of the Day."

The O. D. was a mustached Frenchman attired in the colorful uniform worn by the officers of the Tellurian Army of Maintenance, known familiarly as the "Tellies". This was a force enlisted from the various armies of Earth to keep order on the Red Planet and to protect the interests of the transportation tycoons who sent monthly shipments of luano crystals to the hospitals at home where the valuable mineral, native only to Mars, was used in the treatment of cancer.

The O. D., Captain Redon, according to the plate on his desk, was striding up and down the room when they entered, puffing on a special cigarette made of oxygenized tobacco, which was the only kind that would burn steadily in the planet's rarified atmosphere.

Red nudged his friend. "Looks happy."

The captain stopped in mid-stride and glared at them. The guard whispered a frightened "Shhh!"

Redon savagely snuffed his cigarette and sat down at the desk. He motioned the guard away. There was silence for a moment, and the two unrepentant malefactors looked about them interestedly. The walls of the office were covered with illustrations from Parisian publications. Red looked from one particularly outspoken photograph to the captain:

"Tch-tch," he said.

The captain flushed. "Come here," he said softly—oh, so softly.

They came.

"I understand that you were arrested last night in the Street of Lights, in an advanced state of alcoholism . . ."

"He means we were drunk," the ir-repressible Red murmured.

". . . and while in that condition," con-

tinued Redon, heroically ignoring the interruption, "assaulted and threatened the life of Sergeant James MacBride. Is that correct?"

"We heard it different," ventured Red.

"That is substantially correct," Sloane contradicted, who was aware that diplomacy, not belligerence, was in order here. He stepped heavily on Red's number ten foot to acquaint him with that fact. Red smiled beatifically at the captain, and kicked Sloane in the shin—hard.

"I guess I was mistaken, at that," he amended. "But we didn't threaten the big lug's life. We just knocked him into the gutter."

"I see. Simply a boyish prank," the captain said acidly. "I am glad, however, that you have chosen to avoid unpleasantness by not lying about the affair. I have a peculiar distate for liars. There are now two courses open to you. You may accept sentence of nine months apiece at field labor on Hornhill 'Port—or you may choose the alternative of enlisting in the Tellurian Army for a period of three years at regular pay. Which is it?"

BOTH men knew what "field labor" meant. Absolute peonage, heart-breaking toil under the blistering sun at the Interplanetary Spaceport, filling in the deep, intolerably hot pits made by the incandescent exhausts of the great liners as they blasted their way through the thin atmosphere to some other planet. Then at night you dropped your shovel and trudged back to the military barracks, and in spite of the bitter, burning cold you flopped on your hard pallet like a corpse and slept until morning to do it all over again. There was no need for them to confer. They would join the Tellies. Why, lots of impecunious Earthmen had been known to enlist for the mere adventure of it. It was a lark . . . Soldier-of-fortune stuff. Besides, all their money had gone for *kisju*, and the dollar a day the Tel-

lies got was infinitely preferable to the questionable food and lodging handed out to the field laborers.

They exchanged glances. Sloane nodded and turned to Redon.

"Okay, we'll join your army, Captain," he said. "Where do we draw our pretty uniforms?"

"Good." Redon rose and touched a bell. "I congratulate you on your choice. The Army will make men of you." He looked at their lean, flat, muscular bodies. "Even better men; trained and disciplined. I'm sure you'll get more than enough excitement in the ordinary life of the—ah—Tellies. Guard, take these men to Lieutenant Mueller. They are to be fully outfitted and assigned to Training Depot Number Seven. That will be all."

Lieutenant Mueller was a short, stout, roly-poly of a German who might have been a butcher before his army life. He watched in a fatherly sort of a way, sucking placidly on a gurgling soupy pipe, while Keating and Sloane wrote brief autobiographies on their enlistment forms.

"Martin Sloane, American, twenty-six, single. Education: Monticello government school, graduate of Darwich College. Previous military experience: United States Army, five years."

"Raymond Keating, American, twenty-eight, single. Education: Dayton government school. Previous military experience: United States Army, five years; Legion Etrangere, two years."

Mueller inspected the papers with a critical eye, corrected one or two small mistakes, and mumbled an inaudible and perfunctory oath of enlistment at them. The next stop was a supply room, to which Mueller personally conducted them. Then, for the first time, he actually spoke to them.

"Slip the supply sergeant a pack of butts," he said, amazingly, "and you may

get a decent fit. So long, boys."

None of the uniforms on the long stacks of shelves were precisely the right size for the two recruits, which somehow didn't seem quite relevant at the moment. The shoes were a bit large at one end but paper stuffed in the toes, or the wearing of three extra pairs of socks, would fix that. The peaked, snappy caps were, on the other hand, entirely too small; although this wouldn't matter long, as the gloomy horse-faced sergeant informed them, since they'd be on desert duty all too soon, where skull-caps and transparent, shoulder-length *flexol* capes would be the uniform of the day. Their cast-off civilian clothing was stuffed into zippered bags, to be returned, when and if. The sergeant pessimistically indicated a pile of bags that would never be claimed. Redon looked at them, and sighed. His mind was dwelling on the contrast between the G. I. cotton underpants he was now wearing, and the blue silk he'd previously prided himself on.

"Y'know, Mart," he murmured, as they slopped out of the supply room, leaving the sergeant to his melancholy meditations, "this is just like the army back home. Only two sizes: too damned big and too damned small."

CHAPTER TWO

The Mysterious Martians

THE barrack room was an uncozy place. Rows of olive-green metal cots stretched from two walls to an aisle in the center. Beneath each cot was a wheeled coffin in which the soldier was expected to keep his equipment, oiled and in such *klim-bim* order as would bring no tongue-lashing after Saturday inspections. The rookies' spare time was spent in cleaning and oiling their positron rifles, fresh from the arsenals at Osteo and packed with a gummy cosmoline that defied removal, short of picking the particles of grease

from each individual pore of the metal. It was said that this condition was purposely ordered by the powers that be, expressly to keep the poor recruit fruitfully occupied and keep him out of trouble. They were also expected to keep their uniforms laundered and in repair. Equipment- and garrison belts hanging on the hook on the left side of the locker. Dress blouse, followed by G. I. field blouse, both to be buttoned when hung up. Slacks, dress breeches, G. I. field breeches—also buttoned. Cotton or Bombay dress shirts, G. I. field shirt—buttoned. Ties to be hung from the hook on the right-hand side of the locker.

There were a couple of hooks in the back of the locker, too, but nobody ever knew what they were for. Hadn't been used in years.

On the shelf of the locker were ranged, in equally strict and religious order as prescribed by T. R. Seventeen, the close-fitting helmet and earphones by which orders were transmitted in the thin broth of the Martian atmosphere, and a garrison cap. Dress gloves were hidden beneath the cap, and were never worn. There was still a bit of room, on the floor of the by now overcrowded locker, which was reserved for a shoe-box containing polish, cleaning rags, a brush, a can of oil, and a face towel. Then there were a pair of garrison shoes and a pair of boots, both never, *never* to be found unlaced.

All this had to be removed once a day, generally before breakfast, and the lockers dusted and the bunks made up. Then ho! for the parade ground and fifteen minutes of close-order drill, and then breakfast. After the meal, which was really quite good, consisting of cereal, fruit, bacon and eggs, and coffee—all you wanted, if you were smart—the men marched back to barracks and smoked or slept an extra five minutes, or cleaned up the room, until assembly and drill.

Theirs was a rigorous, sternly disci-

plined life, but, withal, easy enough, once they learned their way around. Keating and Sloane, ex-soldiers and experienced in the devious ways of dodging work and trouble, adjusted themselves almost immediately.

One afternoon Red ran out of the first sergeant's office waving a yellow slip around his head.

"Hey, Mart!" he yelled. "Passes to town! C'mon, unwind yourself!"

Sloane looked up from his task, which happened to be watering one of the mules that had been imported from Earth in an abortive experiment with draft animals.

"Sam here seems to have a touch of the mis'ry. Doesn't appear to be at all well. Must be the atmosphere and general unfamiliarity of the joint." He surveyed the bleak surroundings. "Nope, not a bit like Missouri."

"Poor Sam," Red commented. "I remember when he first got here. He got sore at young Allen, for some reason or other. He waited his chance, and when the time came, he meandered over to where the kid was tying his bootlace. He reared up and was all set and cocked to let Allen have it. Sam kicked out all right, but not having read any books on the subject, he forgot about the blasted Martian recoil and landed flat on his face. He picked himself up and wandered away, unhappy-like; I never saw such a puzzled look on an animal's face before. And Allen went peacefully about his business, never knowing what missed him."

Sloane laughed. "Poor Sammy; he's just pining away. I don't suppose he'll last much longer . . . I never did like playing nurse to a Missouri mule anyway."

"Yeah. But how about these passes? We going to paint the town red?"

"The whole damned planet's red already. We'll just see that it doesn't get blue tonight."

Red grinned sourly. "Pun my word," he said, and ran.

Martin and Keating turned off the Street of Lights into Thoris Place in search of a new saloon. Halfway down the block stood a decrepit, dark-fronted place, sandwiched between a dance-hall and a cheap hotel.

An age-rotted sign over the entrance proclaimed to all who cared to see that this was Slimy Mary's.

"Prob'ly a very beautiful lady," hic-coughed Red, "festerin' in this sink of iniq—inki—aw, in this sink. Whadda say, let's rescue her."

"Oh, hell," Sloane groaned, "you startin' that again? What the heck, though . . . you're quite probably right. But first permit me to straighten thy visor, sir knight—there. Very 'andsome. Now . . ."

THEY pushed through the swinging doors and walked to the bar, past tables circled by the bleary-eyed dregs of Iopa and the "girls" who consorted with them.

Mary was a washed-out blonde who could easily have passed for forty, in the dusk with the lights behind her. She wore a rubber apron over her magnificent girth, and leaned on the bar, watching her customers with a fishy, dispirited eye.

"Hullo, Princess," was Sloane's greeting. "Get your cloak. We've come to rescue you. Or don't you want to be rescued?"

"Yeah?" said Mary. "Who ya kiddin'?"

"Bright-eyes," said Red, "we are happy. We are very happy. We've been happy all night. We would like everybody to be happy. So you can give me a tremendous slug of kisju. Give everybody a tremendous slug of kisju . . . even this frog-faced gentleman next to me, name of Sloane. Mart, meet Mary. Mary, Mart."

He liked the sound of that. He repeated it several times.

"Mary," said Sloane, "may we serve you, my pretty? Can we slay some evil knight for you?"

Mary decided that the best way to get rid of these nasty people was to fall in with their ideas. He pointed out a man at the other end of the bar, with his back to them. "See that guy?" she asked. "I don't like his face. I can't see it from here, but I still don't like it. Sorta slug him for me, will ya?"

"Sure. Sure," Red agreed happily. "Anything you say, Mary."

He picked up a handy bottle and advanced on the unsuspecting victim, licking his lips and walking on tiptoe. He raised the bottle.

It had come to Sloane, meanwhile, that there was something oddly familiar about the man with his back toward them. Now he knew. The fact that the stranger wore civilian clothes had thrown him off for a moment, but he recognized him now.

"Red!" he yelled. "Don't hit that guy! It's—"

Too late! The bottle smashed down.

Sergeant MacBride rose unsteadily to his feet and combed glass out of his hair. He looked uncertainly about him with glazed eyes until he spotted the astonished faces of Mart and Keating. The sergeant turned apoplectic; his collar seemed to be choking him.

.. "You!" he said. With great and obvious self-control he pulled himself together. "Come on," he said, calmly taking each of the soldiers by an arm. "Come quietly. Come very quietly. I want to have a long, long talk with you."

Sloane paused at the doors. He looked back.

"Mary," he said, "that was a helluva dirty trick."

THE drills on the parade ground of the Iopa Reservation were long, tedious, tiring, and much-cursed, but necessary. Without this preliminary training the Tel-lies' troops would not have lasted a day in the desert. Drill—drill—drill—and drill some more. Marking time full pack,

marching up and down . . . squads right and squads left, right front into line . . . and then the dirty son-of-a-gun—he gives us double time . . .

Exercises under the noonday sun under the supervision of barking non-coms. And the fifteen-mile marches out into the desert, where the men set up camp, cook and eat their noontime meal, rest for an hour, and return to Iopa. "Picnics," these little trips were called.

Toward evening, one day, Sloane and Keating sat with Barry Fawnes on the latter's cot, polishing their equipment and talking of people they had known back on Earth.

"Speaking of people," said Keating suddenly, "where're all the natives? Mart and I have been here for eight months now, and not a lousy Martian have we seen. You'd think they'd pop up once in a while, running a shop, or as guides, or something."

"That's been puzzling me, too," put in Sloane. "Not only the fact that you never see them, but that no one ever mentions them or refers to them in any way. Yet there must be some about some place. Too many things point to it. Their buildings, for instance; old, but not terribly so. Not more than one or two hundred years, at any rate. And the roads . . . magnificent! Paved smoother than anything on Earth. And yet no Martians. Surely they can't all have died off before we arrived!"

Fawnes looked at his reflection in the bit of metal he was industriously rubbing, and glanced up at them. "Oh, there are Martians, certainly. Not the ones that built the roads and buildings, however. Those structures are at least a thousand years old; the roads are older yet. Out in the desert you will find ruins that will make those buildings you saw look like a new housing project.

"The first Martians seen at close range were those that greeted the first space-

ship to land. They waited until the ship had grounded and the crew emerged, then killed them all and lugged the ship off into the desert and buried it there. They did the same thing to the second ship three years later, and they plagued merry hell out of the first colonists. Kept 'em in a perpetual state of siege, you know. When more Earthmen, and more, arrived, though, the Martians grew quite cautious and withdrew into their abandoned cities in the Outlands. They've always been rather a mystery to everyone. I've been in the service for five years, and in all that time I've seen but three and those were at least a mile from me at the time. They never seem to come near the cities any more."

"What do they look like?" Sloane questioned.

Fawnes shrugged. "From what little I've seen, and from what I've heard, which might very well be fable, they're eight-foot horrors, oval-shaped and greenish. They get around pretty swiftly, though no one knows how—they may or may not have legs. You see, nobody at all knows anything about them."

Red shuddered. "Nice pets," he said, and spat, accurately inundating a tiny lizard investigating the mysteries of a crack in the cement floor. The lizard scurried away.

Martin looked at him sorrowfully, a shocked, hurt expression twisting his lean face. "Oh, you low, vulgar person!" he exclaimed, mournfully, shaking his head.

DISCIPLINE was even more strict at Camp Shroyer, whither the two were transferred, but orders couldn't stop the men from thinking. The colonel's orderly heard something at the keyhole of a conference, and told the mess-sergeant. The mess-sergeant told the sutler-sergeant, who told just one corporal, who told a friend who happened to be a private, and in an hour it was all over the post.

Sloane sat on the edge of his bunk, his feet in a pan of warm water, after the inevitable march into the middle of nowhere and back, when Red shattered his languorous calm. "I hear," said Red, "about those things—"

Mart looked at him with murder in his eye. "That's just fine," he said acidly. "Look, Red, I was happy until you came in. Won't you please go very far away? What things?"

The big man goggled.

"Don't you know? Where've you been? I got it from a personal friend of the commandant—we march tomorrow!"

Sloane sank back with a groan. His face turned scarlet and his eyes bulged dangerously. "Oh, God! Oh, you—you—! Of course we march tomorrow . . ."

"No, no! I mean, against the Greenies, Mart! Aren't you excited? Aren't you scared?"

The miraculously recovered man smiled quietly. "Not yet, kid. But I will be. It's only the lad without any gray matter that isn't afraid of anything. You've got to conquer fear to be brave, and here's how you can do it. You know how to handle a posi-rifle; sometimes the gun backfires, and you get your face burned, but it isn't often. And when a good marksman aims and fires, he can call his shots. Well—you're the shot. Somebody . . . something aimed you in one direction and whatever you think you're doing you're going ahead the way you were aimed, and nowhere else. That's predestination, my son—and if you can't overcome your fear of the Greenies, or if you're all set to go in and rip them open and take their hides home on your belt, you won't do what you aren't meant to do by the man behind the gun."

Red scratched his head. He had been listening and trying to understand, when all he knew was that he wasn't afraid any more, and that he felt closer than ever before to his companion of drunken

days and nights. He said, "Damned if I see what you mean, but I'll take your word for it, Martin. But we gotta get ready for inspection in a couple of hours. Let me have your rifle; I'll polish it up a little."

"Nuts to you, y'big lug!" said Sloane. "I've got arms, haven't I?"

CHAPTER THREE

On the March

THE guns glistened dully in the hot spears of the Martian sun as a snaky column of one hundred or so men, in neutral-colored uniforms, marched with the long, swinging stride that produced maximum efficiency for the air and gravity of the red planet. In the fifth rank, side by side, strode Red and Sloane. They had been ten long days on the road, and soon there would be no more road—just sand. Sloane knew what that meant: sun from above and sun from below, made more terrible by its reflection from the blistering floor of the desert. The flexol capes were sweaty and uncomfortable, but a man who neglected to don the garment that enveloped his head and shoulders in crinkling folds would first be blistered, then driven mad by the harsh, pitiless radiations. And when the sun shot below the flat horizon and the icy winds swept around the little, two-man shelters, there was no relief.

Why were they fighting for possession of a dead planet? Why were they marching into hells undreamed of back on happy little Earth? Not one-quarter of the men knew, but it was for their home world that they threw their lives away.

Mars is a pauper among the worlds, for air and water, but its treasures of minerals are almost limitless. Dreaded cancer's claws had been at the throat of the Third Planet ever since the dawn of man; with the Age of Machines they spread wider and gripped all the tighter.

It was as though the spirit of disease had loosened its clutch for a space, but to jeer at man, and then to haul him back to the slime.

Then the priceless *luano* crystals were discovered on Mars; tiny gleaming things that meant life to Earth and its peoples. The ships that drove through space were loaded with the stuff; it was for that that the Tellies were stationed on the bleak, red world. For there had drifted rumors back to Tellus—ugly rumors of great, horrible green things. The miners who lived there and had established true homes; the “wanted” men and women who had found brief haven far from the scene of their crimes; the giddy creatures of wealth who scurried to Mars for the thrills and the novelty; the seekers of easy wealth who probed the low, tough hills for gems and metals; and the men of science who had come to the strange planet for the sake of the new knowledge—something was wrong, they all said. No, not all, for not all were there. It was conceivable that men had died of the myriad vices to be found in the jerry-built sin-centers, but the terrified whispers persisted and grew. Caravans had vanished. Colonies had been utterly extinguished; not a trace of them ever found to prove their previous existence. And when the supply of *luano* was checked, the Tellies came into being.

This was to be no mere punitive patrol, thought Sloane, easing his rifle on his shoulder. This was a strong force of one hundred and fifty picked men. The time was near when—

There was a faint musical chiming in his ears; by his side Heimroth, the German, was sinking so slowly and quietly to his knees; then he sprawled flatly and limply. The column dispersed to the sides of the road as one hundred men assumed one hundred defensive positions, but no enemy was in sight, nor did any further casualties ensue.

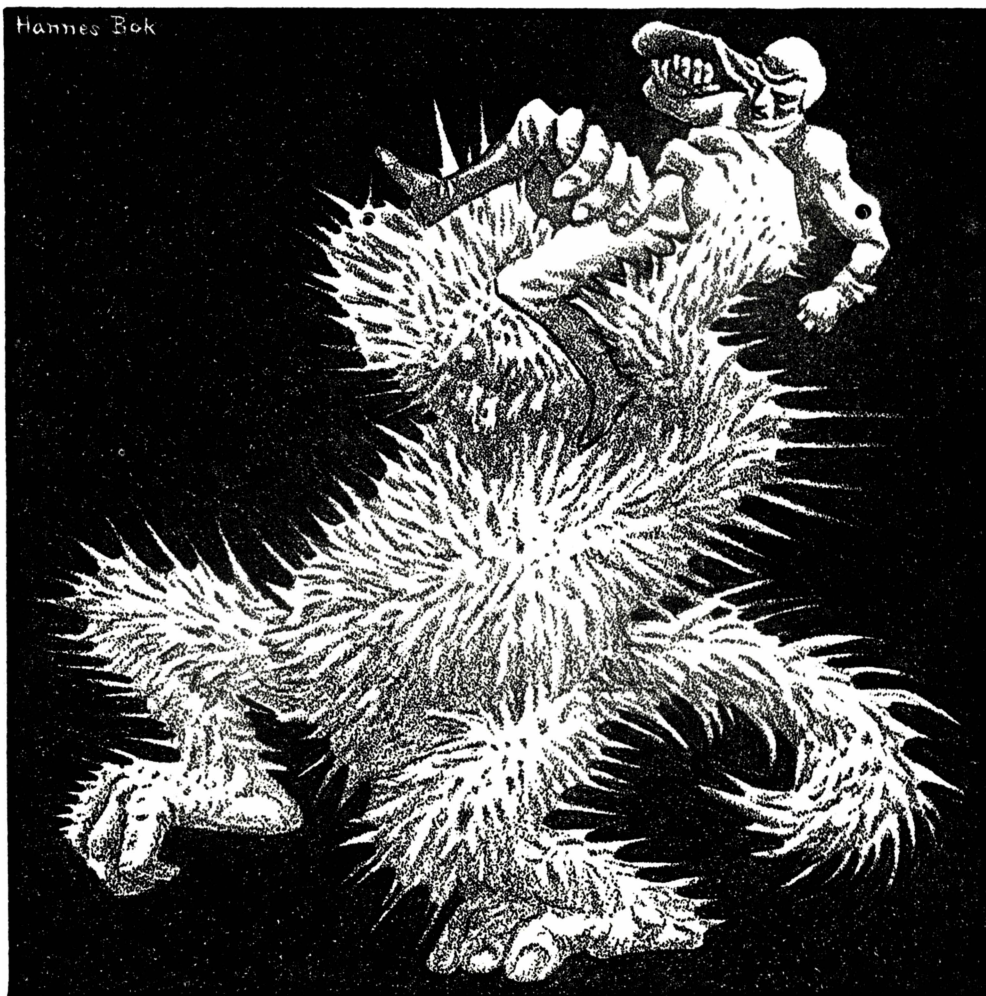
A sliver of copper ten inches long protruded from the body's throat. Tersely the M. O. gave his statement. the peculiarly deadly nature of the missile lay in the fact that it spun so swiftly and violently in its flight that it twisted and tore veins, muscles, and tendons as far as eighteen inches from the actual wound. A nasty weapon.

The column moved on, some men sweating and white-faced with fear, hardly able to pack their rifles. Others were glad of the few moments' rest that tragedy had afforded them.

They reached the road's end, and without a pause marched on, their eyes hardened for the glare of sun and sand, readjusting their *flexol* capes on the move and cursing as the recalcitrant material scratched chins and foreheads. The air gradually grew chilly, and a cold, thin wind soughed around them, twisting the sand into fantastic shapes. At the company commander's orders the column halted and bivouaced on the spot. What point to fussiness, when each patch of sand is precisely like its neighbor? Tents were pitched in a neat, circular formation, outposts established. Within twenty minutes the mobile battle-unit had become a quiescent field of furry hillocks, and the sudden Martian night fell.

SILENTLY sentries changed during the night; the first hint of dawn saw a sketchy breakfast distributed to the men, and the striking of the tents. The Tellies were on the march.

A soldier without a watch couldn't have told what time it was when it happened, so embracing was the monotony, but all at once two men staggered, clutched at their bodies, and fell, and some heard faint tinklings. The line held and went on, but there were heard mutterings against the officers who were driving them into slaughter; insensibly the tension increased until, about noon, the first file screamed



and pointed ahead. Rapidly the word spread along the column, "Towers . . . it's one of their cities . . . towers—" There was an unconscious tightening of grips on rifle butts, an involuntary hitching up of equipment.

Red turned a puzzled face to Sloane: "Are we stopping here? What's up—do we storm the city?"

Sloane smiled. "If there's one thing I learned in the army, my boy, it's that officers are the lowest form of animal in the System. But don't forget that they have things in their little black bags of tricks that you don't know about. If they

didn't, they wouldn't be officers. If *they* don't know what they're doing, nobody does."

"Yeah," Red worried, unconvinced, "but *does* anybody?"

They could see the city then, if city it was. Towers of red rock, squared and brutal, rising around a central walled plain, it seemed to be. In response to orders the men deployed to a spear-headed formation, Captain Suchminski at the point. They wormed up to the squat towers—there was no sign of life, inimical or otherwise. Even the usual tiny lizards were lacking. Suchminski, taking a rather

long chance for the effect on the morale of his company, stood up and gave the order to take the city. Up to great, massive doors in the central enclosure's wall they marched, and through them. Without instructions several of the soldiers swung the great gates shut and dropped the precisely-hung bar that locked them.

Two-man patrols, dispatched to investigate the city, soon returned, and the entire detachment was drawn up into line; Suchminski was to address them.

"Stand at ease, men," he opened. "You may smoke, if you like, but please pay attention to what I have to say. I like speechmaking as little as you do, but this is quite necessary.

"You men are well-trained—the top-rankers of the Army. You have been hand-picked for a very important job, one that will be found in all the histories of the future . . . the job of cleaning up the vermin that infest this planet. These monsters have been called by various names; 'greenies' is one; a fanciful classicist who spent his sabbatical on Mars gave the rumored natives the name of 'lamiae'—loathsome beasts from the dregs of mythology. Enough to say that we are here to stamp them out. To give our Earth her chance for life! These beasts have tampered with, and shall eventually bring about a stoppage of the production of our Martian *luana* crystals, if unchecked. Our difficulty is that we are totally in ignorance of the nature of these creatures, save that they are bent on the destruction of human life on Mars, and so, eventually, on the extinction of man on his own Tellus.

"This city we are now in is typical of the mystery that surrounds the greenies. Why is it here? Why is it—in perfect condition—abandoned? Why have we not been attacked in force? We do not know! And there's the whole story. We know only that their psychology is one of logic: to stop our crystal supply they slaughter our miners; to deter further colonists they

horribly mutilate those they snare. Yet no one has ever seen them. That is all—absolutely all—we know. We are here to find facts, to draw conclusions from those facts. That is all."

A long silence followed; then, "Company, attention! First Sergeant. Dismiss the company."

THE wind was not as fierce that night; the walls that surrounded them broke its back. Sloane and his friend found it perfectly comfortable to remain awake and talk.

"What Such' really said was that, whether we know it or not, this is a scientific expedition."

"Yeah?"

"The lamiae have a weak spot, presumably . . . a weak point or one which may, by some strange freak of fortune, be vulnerable to Tellurians though useless to any race constituted slightly otherwise. And our job is to find that potential Achilles heel—though we don't know if they have feet or not. This is the first time, I know, that an outpost has actually been flung into the teeth of the things. It's a dare, a chip on the shoulder. The Central Tactical Committee hopes that one or two of us will survive the expected 'molestation', as they say in the reports. But nobody has gotten out alive, up to now. You get stories from hopheads and bats, but that's about all . . ."

"Yeah."

"Why doesn't Such' examine the problem analytically? Their fundamental characteristic is a *strangeness*, as far as we know, to Earthly attitudes and concepts. You have to fling yourself out of your body as far as you can—If you were a greeny, Red, how would you go about killing you? We won't find that the proper weapon to use is the positron bolt or a bomb, when we get a clue. Those things are different, I'm convinced—as incredibly alien to us as anything could ever be.

STEPSONS OF MARS

That must be why we hate them; probably why they hate us as they do . . . And yet I can understand their position. They're fighting for their planet, just as we're fighting for ours . . ."

He paused. Red said:

"I once heard an old rumdum in a Frisco dive say that he'd seen them. Yeah, seen the greenies! He was high as a kite on ethyl—he said that after he met them he swore he'd stay drunk till the day he died."

"And I'll wager it wasn't long after. Red, have you got any hard liquor about you? Because if you have, I want you to chuck it away. That stuff is okay in the cities until something better comes along, but in active service you need a clear head and body ready for action. I can cut it out clean when I want to, and I did. You ought to—hell! The big oaf's asleep."

The wind cried over the walls, and the night was bitter. Sleepers turned restlessly in their tents, and the sentries paced up and down, drawing their hoods and heavy coats close about themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

Madness and Death

THE next morning there were eye-opening calisthenics in lieu of marching. Suchminski believed in racing his men through a joint-cracking series of gymnastics. Breakfast was then rationed out; they ate, and talked of many things. Fawnes began to sing one of the lilting songs of the Tellies:

"We're the scum of every spacehole
from Antares to the Sun,
We're the toughest eggs that ever
cracked a crown;
When they say we're through the
jobs we do are only just begun
While we're fighting for the Tellus
green and brown!"

The knot of men around him joined in the chorus,

“All comrades together, we are fighting for the victory of man!

United, march onward—we’re the boys who build the roads and clear the land!”

Suchminski walked by. “May I request,” he said biting, “that you refrain from this needless noise?”

He stalked away, and as the men sank back to their comfortable seats around the fire, Red looked wonderingly after him. “What’s biting him? What’s wrong with a little singing?”

Sloane laughed. “Maybe if it *was* singing he wouldn’t mind, but that fruity basso of yours is enough to make a mule sick. In fact I wouldn’t be surprised at all if poor Sam had died of that, what with you crooning love-songs every night.”

“Aw, cut it out, Mart!” begged Red. “I ain’t got a bad voice. Besides, Suchminski wouldn’t care if I had the best voice in the Three Planets—it’s just that the big bum is down on us as heavy as lead on Jupiter. He’s a scut, that guy is.”

Sloane considered. “Red,” he said, “you have the wrong idea. Such’ is an officer, and he didn’t get those pips on his shoulder straps by good luck. He knows how to handle the run-of-the-mill, and I hear he’s a pretty able tactician. It’s no joke to have a bad man down on you; but it’s worse to have a good man on the other side of the fence. Maybe, Red, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to watch out for that officer-laddy. It’s not childish spite that made him shut us up—look through that loophole. See the sentries? It’s hard on them, I suppose, when we sing. You wouldn’t like to be out there under that sun, and hear the Happy Home Quintet singing from peace and security; neither would I. The skipper’s a shrewd guy; he knows that our chief weapon right now is morale, when we have nothing else to

work with. How do the greenies attack—we don't know. Well, a sentry keeps thinking about that, and finally works up to a point where he'll break and run from his own shadow. That means one man lost in the desert, and twenty men whose strength and psychological resistance have been cut in half."

"Game o' cards, fellas?" a man interposed. It was Bristol, a pimply-chinned young private with a thin, whining voice. His deck was always at his side; he was suspected of card-stacking, but the others gladly asked to be dealt in, to break the nerve-wracking monotony.

THE dealer was winning heavily, by the standards of the Tellies, though Sloane had won and lost a thousand times the pot on the turn of a single card. Then, to Bristol's obvious discomfiture, the pasteboards began to run against him, and the stakes gradually flowed back to the pockets of the bettors. The game broke up from sheer inertia, without winners or losers.

Red and Sloane drew apart. Sloane grasped his friend by the front of his blouse, and poising a hard fist, demanded, "Where's your deck, my little one?"

Red flushed, and produced from some hiding place a pack of cards identical with the unfortunate Bristol's. "I can't stand that little worm, Mart," he said. "There he was sitting, raking in the other boys' pennies—I hadda do something."

Sloane staggered him with a mighty buffet on his broad back.

"Stout fella, Red. You sure did, and maybe it was the right thing. You know, you've changed since you yanked me out of that dive in Tunis . . . for the better, I guess. You were pretty near to getting your back ventilated for the way the cards sat up and said uncle every time you whistled. You've got a heck of a funny way of doing things, though—your sense

of justice wouldn't stand for a cheat, so you go right ahead and cheat hell out of him and right one wrong with another . . . oh, boy!"

Red scratched his head. "It wasn't that," he said uneasily. "It was the way he handled those cards. Crude, Mart—crude, I call it! I just wanted to show him what a real manipulator could do with a pack. I'm not saved from sin yet, fellow—not by a devil of a long way!"

Sloane smiled, and said, "Let's go find out how Bristol's taking it."

They strolled over and hailed the sharper. He slouched up to them with a snarl on his ratty face. "Keating," he intoned, "I think I'm going to teach you gambling manners." Red knew what that meant; he'd often said it himself. The two of them charged, head down, like a pair of bulls.

It didn't last long, though; there was that faint bell-sound which some had come to know, and a furiously spinning shard of metal whanged into the hard-packed ground of the enclosure, seemingly from nowhere, tearing a great gash in the surface. All scattered to cover, huddling against the meagre protection of the walls. Suchminski shouted, "Five men to go outside!" Sloane and Red leaped to him, and with them Corporal Medonia and two French Tellies. Tersely the captain ordered a sally-port opened, as a pair of the terrible darts threw a shower of dirt over him. The door swung open, and the little band ran through and spread out.

"God!" screamed one of the men, and he began to fire wildly into the mass of monsters some distance away. They were huge, green things, grotesquely reminiscent of the Terrestrial prickly-pear cactus, studded with cold spines upon which the sun was reflected, lending them a hazy, indefinite outline. They did have legs—two short, stumpy legs upon which they hopped with an agility surprising for creatures of their size. A third mem-

ber, rooted at the base of the spine, might have been a third foot or a tail, and gave them leverage and mobility. And their faces—their faces were hidden in the haze that surrounded them, but the ghost that was seen was enough to set the Terrestrials' teeth on edge. There was something alien about them that set up a definite reaction of horror in Earthly nervous systems.

THEIR weapons were not entirely strange, resembling somewhat the ancient Roman ballista. Several of the machines were set up on tripods and directed, on the principle of the mortar, that their bolts might fall in the fort of the Tellies.

Some of the things fell under the juicebolts of the frenzied man's rifle; with disconcerting speed they slid away from the spot under fire and retreated a little. The five volunteers advanced one at a time, the other four lying back and maintaining a covering fire while one man wiggled forward. The lamiae continued to fall back in their bewildering, kangaroo-like fashion, firing bolts from their crossbows as they went. The men ducked into a fortuitous depression in the hot sand, and fired over the crest, ignoring the deadly bolts that whizzed above them. One hurtling shaft tore off the flexol cape of one of the Frenchmen, and carried it on. The fellow, a Parisian named Antoine and said to be an ex-Apache, shot a hurried glance at the coppery sky, and scrambled frantically after the cape, some hundred yards away. He had covered perhaps half the distance, crouching and zig-zagging like a frightened rabbit, when he suddenly straightened up with a piercing scream, and clawed at his chin and eyes.

Medonia, who knew what was happening, looked away. Under Antoine's blue chin were appearing the terrible burns caused by the malignant radiations of the sands. The sun's direct rays were ripping into his eyes; pain would soon send him

mad. Insanely he staggered back to them, staring sightlessly, his hands piteously outstretched before him. Deaf to their cries he passed by and reeled on toward the Martians, unprotected, his rifle discarded.

Red vaulted over the little parapet and dashed after the Frenchman.

"Come back, you fool!" shouted Medonia. "He's past help!"

But Red did not listen. Antoine, unseeing, would have blundered into a lamia, had it not hopped aside. But another of the monsters grabbed him about the waist, tearing his belly open with the sharp points of one spiny arm, and dashed him to the ground with a murderous impact, where he lay still.

Keating miraculously escaped the whizzing javelins that flew thick about him and was right in the thick of the Martians, firing wildly into the green of them and doing terrible damage at that short range. The monster that had killed Antoine crept up behind the Earthman, who was unable to hear his companions' warning shouts. As the remaining three skirmishers raced toward him, Red was hoisted high into the air, kicking and struggling, and flung through space like a stone from a boy's slingshot. He landed in soft sand, shaken but unhurt, as the others reached him. The lamia hopped grotesquely over a rise in the sand.

Sloane helped Red to his feet, brushed the sand from him, and adjusted his flexol shield. "You okay?" he asked anxiously.

"Sure," said Red, gazing uncomprehendingly at the rifle he had kept unreasoningly clutched in his fist all through his lightning-like flight. "What happened to the dingbats?"

Sloane cuffed him on the side of the head. "Y'big bum," he said. "The dingbats? Oh, they skedaddled. Couldn't stomach your furious assault. You'll be mentioned in dispatches now; isn't that nice?"

"Oh, go to hell!" Red growled.

The Frenchman touched Sloane's sleeve. "Please," he said softly, "would you help me bring Antoine back to the city? He can—have a decent burial—at least."

"Of course," soothed Corporal Medonia, who had overheard. "Land a hand, Sloane, will you?"

ANTOINE and six other Tellies from the city who had been killed by the shafts of the Martians were given simple burials that afternoon as the first dark winds of evening whispered among the dunes. There was nothing to mark the graves, nor would there be any. No services in honor of the fallen, no fanfare of glory. Some clerk, rummaging in Headquarters files, would some day find brief reports, colorless, thankless precis of the deaths of men who died to save their world.

That would be all. . . .

A rough hospital was set up in one of the deserted buildings to accommodate future wounded. The wounds inflicted by the Greenies' weapons were terrible indeed. A hit at any place in the body was fatal, and unless immediate attention was given those men stricken in the arms or legs, these wounds also led to death.

Morale was low. Those who had actually seen the monsters, through the eyes of fear, spoke to those who had seen nothing but mysterious, spinning lances that ripped and tore and brought agonizing death. There were mutterings against Suchminski, talk of mutiny. The men were laboring under terrific tension, and something was sure to break soon.

There was a gathering by one of the towers, three days after the attack of the lamiae. The men talked for a while—the usual conversation of the trooper, dealing with women, drinking bouts, Tellus and home, bits of small gossip about their

officers—and then some bright lad produced a pair of dice. The close-clustered group was instantly transformed to an irregular circle; ennui and fear were temporarily forgotten or relegated to the background as the men focussed their attention on the game. There were little cries of eagerness, shouted invocations to “Baby”, soft curses when luck ran against the player of the moment. Coins jingled or shushed into soft sand, the ivory cubes clicked against each other, and the shuffle of many feet and bodies wrapped all these lesser sounds into one bulging parcel of sonancy.

The clown of the company, a quick little ex-jockey riding under the name of Kenmore, had the dice. “Come on, luck,” he was saying. “Stand aside, you mugs, and watch a guy that knows how. . . Ha! Match that, Panicola, and I’ll buy you a drink when we get back to Iopa—if you don’t get a spear through that fat belly of yours!”

Panicola growled a profane reply, expressing a desire for certain indignities upon Kenmore’s carcass. Kenmore grinned.

“My, my!” he said. “Wash your mouth out with soap, Pan. You know what soap is—or do you?”

There was a stir in the crowd, and Caarsen, a newly-made non-com with a distorted sense of his own importance, pushed his way through.

“Okay, break it up!” he growled, although there had been no orders prohibiting gambling. “On your feet, goddam it!”

Cries of distressed protest rose in answer. Caarsen was this, he was that; surely he’d let them have a little fun . . . he wasn’t the kind of dirty son of a gun that would break up an innocent little crap game.

“Hey, look, Corporal,” Kenmore begged, serio-conic. “Just one more

throw, huh? I'm hot now—you wouldn't wanna spoil a run of good luck, would you? I'll make faces at you, nice nasty faces . . . waggle my fingers at you and say 'boo!' in dark corners. . . ."

For answer the corporal strode to the center of the ring and swung one booted foot, scattering the dice and the little heap of coins beyond all possibility of recovery.

The soldiers drew together in a compact bunch, muttering ominously. They had changed in a minute from a happy, good-natured crowd back to a collection of murderous, mutiny-minded malcontents with swift and sudden mayhem in their hearts. Caarlson stood before them, hands hooked lightly in his belt; whatever his other faults he was, at least, no coward—or was it simple stupidity? In any case, he was in grave danger of a severe mauling, at best, and the gates of the military prison at Osteo were swinging wide for the infuriated soldiers when—

THE rapid notes of a resonator sounding "Alarm!" clicked loudly in the tiny headsets worn by each man. The men forgot their grievances, and discontent shoved aside by the prospect of a tangible enemy, grabbed their stacked rifles and ran to their posts. Suchminski stepped from the house he'd made his headquarters and rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"What's up?" he cried to the sentry in the lookout tower.

"The Greenies, sir! They're comin' back—hundreds of 'em!"

"Where from, you fool? The south? Okay, Bradbury—Jones: take your sections to the south towers and walls. Larsen—Richer—Cadoux: distribute your men around the east and west walls. Wylie, take three men; place yourselves under Lieutenant Lowndes' orders in the hospital. Speir, your section to the north wall. Okay, let's go!"

The small force was quickly redistributed. For a minute or so they waited, tense and expectant. Keating peered over the crudely crenellated wall to watch the bounding approach of the lamiae, a much larger band than the one of the previous attack. The hot morning sun glinted harshly on the weapons they carried, ready for immediate action. Red, at his side as usual, spat, and grimaced at the thought of what these same cross-bows might very shortly be doing to him.

When the Martians were five hundred yards distant they raised their bows and loosed a rain of spinning spears that sped surely toward the walls behind which the Earthlings crouched. The deadly hail fell inside the fort with a series of loud thuds. The man next to Keating was impaled where he stood, a lance going entirely through his body and smashing against the pavement. A scream died in his throat as he fell to the stone sidewalk below, his blood spattering those about him.

"Fire!" screamed Suchminski into his phone.

The shots from one hundred-odd positron rifles hissed out, wreaking fearful damage in the close-packed ranks of the attackers.

"Fire!" cried Suchminski again, and again.

The Greenies, closer this time, suffered even greater damage. Scores went down with each volley.

"Fire at will, section chiefs take charge!" Suchminski shouted, aiming his own weapon at a green haze that had raised its bow, and blowing it to fragments.

The firing increased in volume as the Martians rushed the outpost. At this close range the carnage was terrific; the advantage was all with the Tellies, as any half-baked strategist could see. Only a few Greenies reached the walls and began to scale them, but the defenders, undesirous of coming too close to these

spiny beasts, made short work of them. Only a handful were left, running as fast as their stumpy legs could hop over the sand dunes, when "Cease Firing!" sounded.

The hot, tired men recharged their hand-searing rifles and cleared away the dead for the struggle to come. Sentries were posted again and, for half the afternoon, paced the ramparts, eyes sharp on the horizon. One swore suddenly. He called:

"Captain! They're back—and with something big!"

CHAPTER FIVE

The Problem Solved

WHAT the "something big" was, they soon found out. Sloane glued his eyes to a loophole, Red inevitably beside him.

"It's a . . . it *seems* to be a . . . Lord knows what!" Then, suddenly, he cursed. "We might have known! The things that built these towers have what we don't want. It's a gynne—a siege engine." He yielded to Red, who looked curiously.

"What do you make of it?" Mart asked.

"Just another one of those tin slingshots they've got, only—gosh—it's big! What'll they do with it?"

"Knock down our walls and carve us up for dinner," said Sloane quietly. "They can do it with that thing; I'm not kidding. They were used in the Middle Ages, back on Earth, and I don't see why they shouldn't work here. Seems to be the same design as their smaller projectors. That means that the bolts they toss would be the same as the ones that caused all our casualties, only scaled up perhaps fifteen times . . . what one of those twisters does to a man, the big ones will do to the fort. Somehow, Red, I aint happy no more. . . . Look, I think they're aiming it—yep, right at us. They must have our range, too, for the job. Pity, after the

swell showing we were making—we haven't got a chance against a thing like that. Why the hell don't they fire?"

Red lit a cigarette and let the smoke trickle from his nostrils. "Maybe," he said, "they haven't brought up their ammunition yet. I remember once, when I was in the Legion, we'd brought up a battery of .75's . . . ah, I'll tell you later; I'm not in the mood right now. Lot of those things out there, aren't there? I guess they plan to chew up the walls and then rush in and get the ones that aren't killed by their bolts or falling debris. Funny people, those Greenies. I haven't found the weak spot you were talking about, Mart."

RED was on guard duty that night, the coldest of the campaign.

They carried him in in the morning. He was almost frozen, and when he'd thawed out a bit, he explained to an openly skeptical Sloane that he had been slugged.

"Were you drinking?" Sloane asked. "Did you have a flask?"

Red looked scared. "Yeah," he admitted hesitantly, "and now it's gone! A litre of mellow ethyl I'd picked up in Iopa and was saving for sentry-go on cold nights. But I didn't touch a drop—this was my first turn on guard; I was slugged from behind, I tell you, and when I woke up it was gone—the whole flask. I can't think of a guy in the outfit who'd be low enough for a trick like that."

"Neither can I, Red. . . . I can't think of a man. . . . I can't think of a man—a man! Red! I've got it! I think I have! . . . Wait—"

"Wait, hell, Mart! Don't go wacky on me now—I'm nearly that way myself."

Sloane capered madly about the puzzled, apprehensive man.

"Don't quote me, kid, but I kind o' think I've got that Achilles heel of our little playmates outside! Do you remem-

ber that I once said foolish, foolish things about our lamiae? Things like 'their predominant characteristic is a strangeness to man'? I was wrong, Red! Utterly, insanely, imbecilically, gloriously wrong! For the greenies are so *very* much like people—especially certain people I can point out, not forty kilometres from where I stand. Let's go find your flask; I bet I know just where it is."

THE office of the Central Tactical Committee of the Tellies is as sacrosanct as any spot on Mars, yet two ragged madmen had managed to force their ways into its depths. With strange, wild laughs they brushed aside immaculate secretaries and attaches, to at last hammer on the door of General Warner Allen Grabb, C. I. C. Himself, he opened it, and the two lunatics rushed in like brother simoons.

General Grabb was a hard, but just man; before summoning a squad of husky M. P.'s he would hear these men through. He bade them be seated; one did so without a word, collapsing into a fortunately situated chair and laughing hysterically; the other leaned across the general's desk and spoke.

"I introduce myself, sir, as Private First Class Sloane, Fifth Company of the Tellurian Army. I have a suggestion to make in regard to the campaign against the greenies, sir.

"It is this—the creatures, like so many human beings, are so constituted that to them vaporized alcohol is a lure; liquid alcohol a narcotic. In other words, even as you and I, pal, first they sniff, then they drink.

"My moronically happy friend in the chair was so considerate as to bring with him a portable still designed to synthesize ethyl-alcohol out of food-tablets and carbon-monoxide. With this happy device remaining, the outpost is supplied with an

uninterrupted source of pure and potent alcohol. I believe their technique is to place a pan of the stuff near a loophole, and when the bibbing lamiae come to taste, they knock hell out of them. . . ."

The two left with the blessings of the Committee, and the promise that immediate action would be taken along the lines so recommended. They were also given a week's leave, this to be spent as they saw fit. And there was little doubt as to what they would see fit.

Sweetly scented, bathed, and tailored, the two friends strolled down one of the wretched little lanes of the Iopan back-alleys, inhaling the dear fragrance of stale beer, spiked wines, macerated cigars and discarded cigaretts. Red slushed his foot through a puddle of mush, and sighed happily.

"Just like the old days, hey, Mart?"

"Yeah, it's great. Where do we begin drinking? We've got a week to stiffen up in. How about a three-day drunk, next day in a Russian bath, and another three-day bat?"

They turned up a street, and broke through a swinging door arm in arm. Mary was leaning on the bar, her face a mask of sorrow.

"Hiya, kid!" whooped Sloane. "Cheer up, big spenders are in town!"

She looked up. "Yeah?" she said listlessly.

"Give me a triple kisju twice," he said. "and the same for Red. You remember Red?"

Mary didn't move her tremendous feet. The mustache on her upper lip quivered a little. "You ain't heard, have you?"

"Ain't heard what? And where's our liquor?"

"That's what you ain't heard!" she almost screamed. "Every drop o' hooch in town's confiscated three hours ago. General Grabb, he says the Greenies need it more than we do."

THE END