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CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

- THE CHILDLESS ONES** by *Daniel F. Galouye* 18
The natives of the new planet had no interest in sex
- SONG OF THE AXE** by *Don Berry* 48
Was the dancing girl a key to the mystery on Procyon?
- DEATH'S PLANET** by *Robert Silverberg* 90
Nature in the raw is a hideous thing

SHORT STORIES

- A TIME FOR REVENGE** by *Calvin M. Knox* 2
The Vordillans were alien. They thought differently
- THE FEAR TRAP** by *Richard R. Smith* 80
How can fear be driven from the mind?
- THE BETTER LIFE** by *Charles V. De Vet* 120
Everything is subject to the force of will power

FEATURES

- SCIENCE SHORTS** by *Edgar P. Straus* 47
- LOOK TO THE STARS** by *Scott Nevets* 79
- SOUND AT SEA** by *J. Foster Blake* 89
- NUCLEAR NEWS** by *Steven Rory* 127

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THE FEAR TRAP

by RICHARD R. SMITH

illustrated by ORBAN

How can fear be driven from the mind? When it came to a showdown and we had to be completely fearless or die, I suddenly got a simple idea about it—and it worked!

WEEKS stepped down from the truck and tried to shake the red sand out of his clothes. "Phew. That was quite a trip. We must be two hundred miles from Marsport."

"It was worth it," Kane replied as he studied the low stone structure before us. "I'll bet nobody else has been here."

Grave robbing had become a popular hobby among the colonists. The Martians religiously avoided their ancestral graves, but their big mistake was that they didn't guard them. Earthmen didn't give a damn about the alien religion, especially when the tombs frequently contained valuables.

As we walked the rest of the way, I saw that the roof was covered with sand dunes. From the air it would be invisible in the red desert, which meant Kane was right; we were probably the first.

As I had expected, when we entered we found a ramp leading downward. Martian tombs were never constructed with doors but had steep ramps that led down from the forever open entrances. The sand blown through an entrance by the infrequent winds slid down a steep ramp and into huge caverns dug for the purpose of collecting sand. The system wasn't as absurd as it sounded:



a stone door would be impossibly heavy to move. Other materials such as wood would rot in years and the Martians had built their tombs to last eons.

As we followed the ramp, we passed several of the huge sand-collector pits until eventually there was no more sand beneath our boots. At the end of the ramp, we entered a level corridor and our footsteps rang hollowly on blocks of polished marble.

"Look."

Cut into a yard thick plastic wall before us was a triangular opening. It was a definite indication that the building was ancient since the Martians had discarded the style centuries ago.

Passing through the doorway, we immediately heard a sound of tinkling bells. visibly frightened.

"What's that?" Weeks was

The small room seemed empty, but we looked above us and saw that thousands of brightly colored strings covered with bells hung from the high ceiling.

Weeks sighed with relief. "A good indication of Martian intelligence," he complimented

the aliens. "They designed the tomb so air currents created by anyone moving through it strikes the bells. I wonder how long they've been up there?"

As I listened more closely, it sounded as if the tiny bells were ringing in a definite rhythm. But, I knew that was fantastic. It would mean that the air currents were directed at individual strings in a *pattern*. I doubted if even an engineering genius could create such a system.

PASSING through another doorway, we entered a huge room that looked like something from a technicolor movie. The walls were a kaleidoscopic maze and the floor was a brilliant blue and grey. In the middle of everything was an incongruous, colorless marble bench.

Another collection of bells hung from the ceiling and sounded twice as loud as the ones in the previous room. Whereas I had imagined the other bells playing a *gay* tune, this group sounded weird, ominous.

"Funny looking dump," I commented.

When we reached the bench we saw that there was an inscribed plaque set into the marble.

Weeks was a linguist so I asked him, "What's it say?"

He removed his rimless glasses from a pocket, quickly cleaned them and examined the inscriptions. "It's ancient Martian. It would take hours to decipher."

Fisher, a businessman who liked more action than suited his ulcers said, "We haven't got hours to sit around reading Martian fairy tales. Let's move on and see if we can find some diamonds."

He went a few yards and then paused to look up at the ceiling.

His forehead wrinkled and I knew from his expression that the dismal tune of the bells bothered him. I understood how he felt...the weird music gave me the creeps.

He raised a foot to take another step, but a beam of light shot from the ceiling and bathed his body in its brilliant glow.

He crumbled into a pile of ashes.

Kane was paralyzed with awe but I happened to glance at Weeks and saw that he was far from motionless. His thin frame was trembling from head to toe.

"It's a trap! Those damned Martians set a trap for us!"

"Could it be some kind of accident?" I suggested.

Kane laughed without humor. "What kind of accident could cause a thing like *that*?"

Weeks groaned.

"What do you think, Weeks?"

"I-I-I" He cleared his throat and began again, "I-I don't think anything!"

"Why isn't somebody moving?" I asked. It had occurred to me that neither of us had moved for five minutes.

"I'm afraid to move," Weeks admitted.

"Why don't you move, Kane?"

He shrugged his husky shoulders. "Why don't you?"

Realizing that I couldn't just stand there the rest of my life, I gathered my courage and walked a short distance. When they saw that I didn't become a pile of ashes, they moved also.

"What do we do now?" Kane asked.

WE all looked at the expanse of blue floor that stretched between us and the doorway that led from the room. The blue circle completely surrounded the grey circle upon which we stood. Fisher had walked across the blue area and had died. . .

"Any volunteers?" I queried.

There were no volunteers. Each of us was afraid to follow in Fisher's footsteps.

"The inscriptions on the plaque might tell us something," Weeks suggested. "I'll try to decipher it." Taking a large note pad from a pocket, he sat down on the bench, leaned over the metal plate and began the task.

I expected it to be a ten minute job, but he worked for three hours while Kane and I smoked one cigarette after another and tried to act casual.

Weeks finally put the pad back in his pocket and stared at the grey floor beneath his feet as if it was quicksand. "I deciphered it."

"What's the matter?"

"When we stepped on this

grey circle, we activated a trap." He rose and pointed at the blue floor with a limp hand. "Centuries ago this place was a Martian. . . *proving ground* you might say. They used it to select their leaders and warriors; to weed out the weak from the strong."

He closed his eyes and I suspected it was to hold back tears: he had about as much nerve as a fly. "There's some kind of atomic disintegrator in the ceiling. . . and a machine sensitive to brain waves that activates it."

"*Brain waves?*"

"If a person in this circle walks across the blue area with any fear in his mind, the machine recognizes the neural pattern, triggers the disintegrator and the person is—"

"Blown to ashes like Fisher was," Kane supplied.

"Right."

"You tell me," I said, "how to get out of here. I got a date with a cute blonde tonight and I'd hate to miss it."

Weeks shrugged his bony shoulders. "I don't know. The trouble is that our minds are similar to Martians' and the

machines react to our thoughts!"

"We can't just sit here," Kane said. "We've got to try something."

After a half hour examination, we found there was no way to take the floor, bench or plaque apart. There was also no way to reach the ninety-foot ceiling and in short, there was no way we could do *anything*.

We sat down on the bench and tried to think.

AFTER several minutes of confused concentration, I said, "It doesn't seem possible that a machine could survive over a period of centuries."

"I translated a word as *machine*," Weeks informed me. "It might mean something else. And actually, the things in the ceiling might not be machines in a normal sense. For instance, the disintegrator might be a highly radioactive mass in a lead container. If it is, it wouldn't have any moving parts and could last until—"

"And how does the machine that's sensitive to brain-waves work?" I interrupted. "Don't tell me a machine like that

wouldn't have moving parts that could rust or fall apart?"

Weeks frowned with concentration and then snapped his fingers... or tried to at any rate. It seemed like he could never perform any physical act decently. "It wouldn't have to be a machine. Have you seen how a thermostat works? It has a piece of material inside that expands when heated. The Martians might have an alloy that reacts to electrical emanations from a brain. Thoughts travel instantaneously. When thoughts of a fear pattern reach this material, it might expand and upset a system of balances that holds a shield over the radioactive mass. The exposed mass might then—"

"Whoa," I said. "You lost me back at the last bend."

"Who cares how the Martians did it?" Kane said angrily as he rose to his feet. "They *did it* so who cares *how*? We're wasting time. Weeks, didn't you say the plaque states if a person isn't afraid when he walks out, he'll be safe?"

Weeks nodded affirmatively.

"So, if we exercise self-control when we walk across that

floor, we *won't* be afraid. I'm willing to try it first."

WE both looked at Kane's muscular face and cold grey eyes. He had been one of the first to take ships between Earth and the Moon and one of the first to travel to Mars. I knew his nerves were made of steel. If they weren't, he couldn't have gotten a job as a space pilot. And if anyone could walk across that floor without being afraid, he could.

He hesitated a moment to gather his courage, then began walking.

After going several yards, he laughed. "This is silly. There's nothing to be afraid of!"

Nothing except fear of fear itself, I thought.

The Martian bells tinkled softly as they played their ominous tune.

Kane continued walking...

...and almost imperceptibly quickened his stride.

I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, Kane was gone.

Where he had been, a pile of ashes drifted lazily across the floor. The space pilot with nerves of steel hadn't been an

outright coward but there must have been *some* fear in his mind...enough to set off the Martian trap.

Weeks was whimpering like a puppy in a snow storm and I fought an impulse to knock his face in. It was too early to give up; too early to cry about dying!

The two of us sat down and tried to think.

I tried to concentrate on the problem of escaping but my mind had slipped in a groove and couldn't get out: Weeks' wife. She was a gorgeous blonde with light blue eyes that made you breathe faster whenever she looked at you. She had been a secretary, but was cute enough to have been a model or movie star. How, I asked myself, did Weeks latch onto her? He was such a pale little guy, the combination seemed ridiculous.

"Maybe we'll be lucky," Weeks interrupted my chain of thought. "Maybe a Martian will come and tell us how to get out."

"Don't be stupid. Why would a Martian come to a joint like this in the middle of a desert when after he got here he

might get fried alive if he was afraid!"

After my reply he was quiet for half an hour until he looked up at the strings of bells high above us and said, "In ancient times on Earth, a knight proved their bravery by fighting with a lance and mace. Here Martians proved their bravery by fighting with their minds."

After that deep but useless thought, he was silent for another half hour.

MY stomach began to grumble because it wasn't being treated properly and I realized there was only one thing for me to do.

Clearing my throat, I began, "Weeks, you've probably heard of men like us sitting around waiting to die and making all sorts of confessions?"

He grunted his reply, and I kept my eyes focused on the floor, unable to look at him.

"Well, I used to think it was damned silly." I paused. "But now, I can see why guys do it and I have something to tell you. I'm not doing it because I'm a religious man—I haven't been to church since I was a

kid. But, I think I'll feel better when I get it off my chest."

I had gotten through to him and he was watching me now, interested. "Your wife and I. I suppose everyone in Marsport knows it except you. That's the way it always is...no one has the nerve to tell the husband."

"What?" He thought he misunderstood.

"Your wife and I," I said angrily. "We've been seeing each other for months. It's your own damned fault in a way. You shouldn't have married such a good-looking woman."

He shook his head from side to side. "I don't believe you."

I laughed. "Ain't that something? I tell you so I can get it off my chest before I die and you don't believe me!" I shouted at him, "*Want to hear the details? Want to hear what happened last night while you were uptown?*" I continued with lurid details that made my face redden.

"*You dirty—*"

I never saw anyone so mad before in all my life. So help me, the little jerk grabbed his knife and tried to stab me!

He was a push-over even when he was mad. I could have taken the knife away from him but I would have probably broken his arm in the process.

I ran.

Waving the knife and screaming like a maniac all the while, he ran after me.

He finally caught up with me, but he was so exhausted it was easy to knock the knife from his hand. I had to yell to be heard above his screaming, "*Whoa, boy. Look!*"

He stared at the familiar corridor and his jaw sagged. "We got out! How'd we do it?"

I tapped my chest. "Me, buddy. I did it. I realized there was only *one* way to get out."

"How...?"

"Simple. If you fill your

mind with something else, it crowds out the fear." I patted him on the back. "All that stuff about your wife wasn't true. I made it up so you'd hate me so much you wouldn't be afraid of anything...and it worked."

"It worked!" he exclaimed. "I wasn't afraid!"

He laughed...laughed until tears rolled down his cheeks... laughed so hard he had to sit down.

"You sonofagun." He took a handkerchief from a pocket and wiped the tears from his face. "And what were you thinking about?"

It was my turn to laugh. "I hope you don't mind. I was thinking about your wife."

THE END

