

# fantastic

DECEMBER 1956

Volume 5 Number 6

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY  
William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder  
Editorial and Executive Offices  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

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Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY

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# The Fifth Stone

By ALFRED COPPEL

*What lay behind this family of accident prones? Was it something in the blood? Generation after generation falling into the same trap. John Marsh had to find out and there was only one way—join the family!*

THE man who had died once and would die again and still live, lay on the hospital cot. Blood and saline oozed from the racked jars and flowed through a tangle of plastic tubes into his veins. The electrocardiograph recorded a failing heart action. A sphygmograph needle traced the weakening pulse.

John Marsh had only minutes of life left to him and Calder, the therapist from BuPsych, watched the splintered wreckage on the cot with compassion. No matter what Marsh had done, he was dying a horrible death for it, his face and body bloated and torn from internal pressures, his tendons and muscles ripped from broken bones, his flesh burned and frozen and tinted blueblack by his own

ruptured blood vessels. An unprotected man in space goes through hell before he dies.

The Spaceforce line officer, a captain with silver lightnings on the peak of his cap and a delta-winged rocket on his breast, frowned at the medic who stood apart in the far corner of the room.

The medic shook his head. "I'm sorry. He's dying and there's nothing more we can do about it."

The captain held his clenched fists against the seam of his trousers. His knuckles were white. When he spoke there was hopeless fury in his voice. "I only wish I could kill him with my own hands."

The words hung in the humming stillness. In the corridor could be heard the



Madness, destruction, and the point of no return.

measured pacing of the double guard. Beyond the barred windows a meteor streaked across the starfields. Another.

"He won't last the night," Calder said. Because his training was emphatic, he could *feel* Marsh dying.

"We've been damned lucky to keep him alive this long," the medic said, "Staff has done a job on him." He was thinking that no one really appreciated just how good a job had been needed to keep John Marsh alive even for an hour, let alone two days. He looked at Calder and the captain from under lowered brows. The damned brasshat only wanted Marsh alive so he could be killed legally. Well, that was his business and in a way it was too bad he wasn't going to get his way. Certainly Marsh deserved the worst. But a higher authority was taking it out of the captain's hands and he was going to have to be satisfied with what Marsh had already suffered. Calder, now, was different. The BuPsych man looked as though he had his teeth into something. The way he handled those tapes and wires—like they were pure gold. It was chilling the way BuPsych people could *get inside* and actually *be* someone. That damned empathic

training. Perhaps that was why they all seemed so vague and blank when they weren't working. To be really empathic, you couldn't have any real personality of your own to get in the way.

The medic sighed and turned back to his death watch, awaiting the last minutes.

Calder began collecting his equipment. The recorder, the tapes, the subvocal micropick-ups.

"Will you be able to make anything out of all that?" the captain asked. "I couldn't hear a goddam thing."

"Those things are so sensitive they can almost seem to pick up thoughts," Calder said. "Not really, of course. But if there's enough life left in a subject for any sort of subvocalization, they'll tape it."

The captain's long face seemed carved from polished bone. Only his eyes were alive, and they were burning. "How soon will you have it all transcribed?"

"It'll take some time," Calder said. "It's like doing an analysis. Only I have to be both the therapist and the analyst. You can't rush it."

"The court of inquiry convenes at 0800 hours tomorrow. Be prepared to make

your presentation then," the captain said curtly.

Calder suppressed an un-military protest. There were documents to examine, and records. Then the tapes. He would have to actually *become* Marsh and live the crucial periods of his life. It could be done in a night, with the help of stay-awake pills. But his effectiveness would be impaired and so would his defenses against total transference.

"I could use more time, sir," Calder said.

"The court is at 0800 hours."

"Yes, sir."

The captain's bone-gray face showed his inner tension. "We have to know why. That's what's important. Why, and how to prevent it happening again."

"This isn't the first time, is it?" Calder asked, fishing.

"Has there been a breach of security, Mister Calder?" The captain spoke in a harsh, flat voice.

"Rumors, sir. And a class-mate of mine was on the Wheel two years ago."

The captain walked slowly across the room to look down into the shattered face. "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down.

Damn them all!" His face grew livid with hate and the medic tensed, watching.

Quite abruptly, the captain straightened and walked swiftly from the room. Calder heard the clash of metal as the guards saluted and then the sound of steel-shod footsteps echoing down the corridor.

The medic let his breath out with a sigh. "He wasn't kidding, was he?"

Calder shook his head slowly.

"What was that Denby business?"

"David Denby. That's his name. John Marsh is an alias."

The medic studied the figure on the cot. "*The* Timur Denby's son?"

"The youngest," Calder said, locking his instrument case.

"I'll be damned. A First Lander's brat. It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

"I thought the captain was really going to do what he said. With his bare hands."

"Most spacemen would feel the same way."

"They're giving out it was an accident, I suppose."

"That's probably what they'll say."

The medic shook his head disbelievingly. "A First Lander's kid—" He glanced at Calder. "Was he—you know—crazy?"

Calder frowned at the use of what his elementary psych instructors would have called a polarized word.

"I mean," the medic said, "five hundred people. And his own crew. Well—"

"And New Providence," Calder said. "It was more than mass murder. It was—" He shrugged. "Is there a word for it?"

The medic watched the flickering pulse of the sphygmograph needle. It flickered once. Twice. Again. And was still.

"If there is a word," he said, "he'll never hear it. He's finally gone."

Calder picked up his recorder. He had the curious feeling of being custodian of a man's soul. All that was left of David Denby, alias Captain John Marsh, was on Calder's tapes.

He watched the medic cover the dead face before he turned and quietly left the room.

The old-fashioned study lamp cast a pool of light on the desktop. The files and related documents had been ex-

amined, but only part of the mystery was dispelled.

His name was David Denby, and he was born in the industrial slums of the Mars Colony, New Providence. He grew up there, the youngest of five brothers: Isaiah, Mark, Charles, Dennison, and David. Father: Timur Denby, crewman of the *Hound of Heaven*, the first ship to arrive safely on Mars. Mother: unknown, presumed dead. So the files read.

Like all his brothers, David went into space as a racketman. For a Marschild there were only two choices. The space service or work in the huge industrial complexes of New Providence. He rose from jetman to section officer to astrogator, and finally to second pilot.

There the trail marked David Denby ended.

A year later, a second pilot of Martian colonial origin obtained command of the *Roc*, a fairish chemical rocket of 500 tons thrust. The man's name was John Marsh.

That much you knew from the trail of forms and records any man leaves behind him. Even a new identity can be uncovered and attached to a man's history. No problem for CIA and Spaceforce Intelligence. No problem at all,

Calder thought wryly, *after the fact.*

Item. Denby became Marsh—took two weeks and a day from the time that Charles Denby's ship, *Cygnus*, exploded a hundred miles from the Wheel on a routine flight from Mars.

There was a pattern too obvious to miss. Isaiah and Mark lost in the *Goddard*. Charles in *Cygnus*, Dennison in the *Stella Polaris*. And now David Denby in the *Roc*.

Spaceflight was hazardous, yes. But not that hazardous. Atomics were still in the future, perhaps a hundred years in the future for spaceships. Venus was an impenetrable formaldehyde desert, the Outer Planets methane glaciers. Only Mars could be exploited for needed ores. Uranium, iron, tungsten, platinum, palladium, everything the home world needed. So flight into space was a regulated, almost routine thing. Barring accidents.

But five accidents in the same family? What was it that line captain had said? "Another one of Timur Denby's sons. In spite of everything we did to keep them down."

Calder rubbed his chin with the back of his hand and cursed his job. This was like

trying to restore a portrait out of scattered flecks of paint. A ravaged near-corpse picked up in space. Personal effects. A book of old poems amidst the spinning, orbiting debris of the *Roc*. And old man's blindness. Timur Denby had lost his sight in a hydrazine explosion and had never returned to Earth with the *Hound*. Was that significant, Calder wondered? What had the old man done those two years alone on Mars while the *Hound* returned home to the Wheel to report Mars ready for the taking?

Calder had never been to Mars, but he had seen the antiquities a few of the spacemen brought home with them. The jade carvings, the fragmented mosaics, the delicately alien figurines. All created by the race vanished a million years before men left their caves.

He suppressed a shiver. What had two years alone with that incredibly ancient past done to Timur Denby and the woman crew member who presumably remained with him to bear his sons?

Somehow it must all be woven together into a pattern acceptable to eleven stone-faced officers of a court of inquiry. Because in some way it

led to David Denby's vicious, wantonly destructive, treasonable crime.

He opened the thin volume of poems. It was an old book, very old. But of terrestrial origin. He smiled at that thought. Had he expected it to be some sort of Rosetta Stone for the undeciphered ancient Martian glyphs? Who would be interested in this era of ruthless expansion anyway? Empathy again. Already he was beginning to feel like one of Timur Denby's sons.

Some of the pages were heavily underscored. The lines were drawn with a modern stylus, so it must have been David and not Timur who chose the lines to emphasize. He began to read slowly.

*Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—*

People didn't write like that any more; the line had a quality of exaltation that was missing from modern life.

He read on until he came to another underscored line.

*Sling your fifth stone, oh son of mine, and win—*

Calder closed the book, holding the place with his fingers. The fifth stone. He opened the book once more and reread the line.

He had the feeling of look-

ing without seeing, of knowing without understanding. The line was obviously opposite.

He stood up and lit a cigarette thoughtfully. He looked at the recorder. He was avoiding it because the key to the puzzle was so tantalizingly *there*.

He was almost afraid to be David Denby for the space of an hour.

He dropped his cigarette, half-smoked, into the disposal slot and forced himself to sit down again.

Time was getting short.

He sighed and reached for the switch. The plastic tape began to run from one spool to another.

He snapped off the desk lamp and the square of the window came alive with stars. The skyglow from the shops and working areas of Mojave couldn't dim the brilliance of the moonless desert night. He watched the meteor-fragments fall and burn, fall and burn. Someone had estimated it would be eight months before the last of the debris stopped falling.

He leaned back in his chair and began the pre-empathic relaxing exercises. The recorder hummed hypnotically in the darkened room.

Through the background



noises picked up by the super-sensitive instrument — the sighing of breath into lacerate lungs, the whisper of sluggish, cooling blood flowing through veins and arteries, the incipient cannibalistic feast-noises of self-degestion that accompany dying—he could hear David Denby communicating.

The sprawling complex of the great, useless spaceport beyond the walls of his room faded into unreality as the transference began.

A thousand years earlier men would have said he was being possessed. He would have crouched in a pentagram and the smoke of incense would have filled the air in his room.

Now it was only the hum of the recorder as the dead mind of David Denby crept into his.

And then he *was* David Denby, going home to Mars.

I was on the Wheel when they told me about Dennison. They didn't know I was his brother, of course, or they would never have said anything at all to me. They would have just taken the *Roc* away and given her to someone else.

There was even talk about some of the crews meeting in New Providence and lynching

the old man. They knew that somehow he was behind it all.

In a way, I felt the same as the rest of them did. Yes, Timur was my father and I was the missing fifth son everyone was ready to fear, but I have been a spaceman all my life and I felt as the rest did that what my brothers did was worse than murder. I didn't know then what it was they were *trying* to do. If I had, I might have been ready to kill Timur with my own hands.

On the outward flight to Mars, my crew talked of nothing else but Dennison and the *Stella Polaris*. It happened only two hundred miles from the Wheel and the ship had been locked on radar control so everyone saw the blowup. There were no survivors. No, no one could *prove* Dennison was responsible, but the word Denby was the same as Jonah by this time.

And so I found myself going home. Someone, I forget now who it was, had seen Timur on his last trip to New Providence, and the rumor was that he was dying.

Among spacemen, that was a happy rumor.

I had to see for myself. I thought then that it was only this that drew me back to the stinking hovel where I was

born, amid the slagheaps and the filthy industrial rubble of the Old City.

We lived close to the alien legends in the Old City. My father had lived there alone with my mother long before New Providence was built. He was blinded by an explosion and couldn't return on the first ship, the *Hound*. My mother—I never knew her, she died when I was born—stayed with him. She was a technician for the original expedition and Timur must have been a handsome man because she stayed with him in spite of his blindness—or maybe because of it. I don't know. As I say, I never knew her, but she would have had to be a remarkable woman to face two years alone on Mars with only a blind man for companion. By the time I was born, the Old City was a rubbish heap. But I remember that my brother Mark, who was my favorite, used to tell me that he remembered it differently. All I know is that my earliest memories are of filth, privation, and hostility from our neighbors.

I've said we lived close to the old legends. We all did. But even so, our family was set apart. I think it was those two years Timur and my mother spent alone on the

planet before the second expedition landed. People said Timur had learned things no man should learn and that he had become something *different*.

I used to lie awake on my narrow bed and listen to the music coming from the bars and honkytonks across the canal and I'd wish with all my heart that I were a real Earthman and that some day I could go home. At that time I thought of Earth, the Earth I had never seen, as my home.

Timur's old shipmates used to come across to the Old City—Dumptown, they called it—for a visit with my father whenever their ships landed at the spaceport on the other side of New Providence. I'd sit and listen to them talk about home, about the oceans I'd never seen, about skies that were pale blue and not dark at midday, about trees and green grass and great teeming cities full of aircraft. I was about ten then, and Earth was my fairyland.

But Timur would only scowl and nibble on the bitter lichens he liked so well and pretty soon the old shipmates would feel uncomfortable, as though they were in the presence of an alien of some kind, and they would leave.

The kindest of them would say to me, "Your old man's gone native, Davy. He's a regular Marski now." Which was supposed to be funny because the Martians had all died millions of years ago and left only the old ruins.

It was when Isaiah left home to sign as able space-man on the *Centaur* that I realized for the first time that Timur hated Earth.

Before Isaiah left, Timur took him away into the hills, toward the crumbled ruins on the edge of Solis Lacus. They spent what seemed to me a long time there, and when my brother returned, he was *different*. I mean that. His face was the same and he walked and talked the same way, but he was suddenly apart from Mark and Charles and Denny and me. He was *with* Timur. And deep down inside I could feel that both of them had shared something the rest of us knew nothing about.

I was only thirteen then, around eight by Martian count, and I could have been mistaken.

But when it came Mark's turn to go. I knew it was no mistake. Mark changed, too, after that visit to the hills. And after he had gone, I began to grow afraid.

All my brothers left in

their turn. Isaiah was lost on the *Goddard*, together with Mark. Mark signed on the *Goddard* because he wanted to be with his brother, and so both of them died.

Then Charles left, and finally Dennison, and I found myself alone with Timur.

By this time, his old ship-mates had all either died or stopped making the trek across the canal to Dump-town. The children of the mine and smelter workers who lived near us hated me because I was the son of a First Lander and therefore a kind of dirt poor aristocrat and at the same time I was Timur's son, and Timur was queer, crazy, blind, and he hated Earth.

I didn't hate Earth. The music room from across the canal, the neon lights burning

at night, the tinsel and excitement of New Providence, symbolized for me all that was wonderful and exciting.

What I did hate was our grinding poverty, and the sight of my father's milk-white eyes, and having to read to him from the old books he and mother had brought from Earth, and most of all I hated the prospect of my initiation trip into the hills that was surely coming.

I was afraid of the old ruins. I think now that I was afraid of old Timur, too. Not that he was cruel to me. Only that he was so different from everyone else. And at sixteen the last thing I wanted was to be different—like that.

Perhaps this is hindsight, but it seems to me now that I was always conscious of a *presence* around Timur. And when my brothers came back from the ruins, it was the same with them. I feared that more than anything else. It made me long for the hell-raising, wanton gaiety of New Providence and more important, the planet New Providence belonged to.

The Old City was part of Mars somehow, built on the remains of the ancient Martian town. New Providence,

with its factories and mines and theatres and ginmills and the rowdy men from the industries and the spaceport—that was Earth.

And so, two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, I ran away.

The Old City school wasn't so bad that I couldn't work my way into a technical job in New Providence. And from there, I followed my brothers into the space service.

It was an unkindness, leaving a blind old man. I knew it. But a combination of fear and desire for things terrestrial combined to give me the power to rationalize my actions.

I seldom went back. And when I did, I hated it, and Timur was constrained with me. I gave him money, as Charles and Dennison did, but he lived in the same way as he always had. As though physical discomforts affected him not at all. He refused to move out of Dumptown.

Then Charles was lost in the *Cygnus*, and the name Denby was becoming famous again. For all the wrong reasons.

I was in line for a command of my own and the owners of the ship told me that no crew would fly with a Captain named Denby.

So I became John Marsh.

But I was still Timur's son, and when Dennison died and I was the only one left, I resolved to go and see my father.

That's how I returned home to Mars. I had to discover Timur's influence.

The years had taught me something. I no longer loved the bustle of New Providence or, for that matter, of London, or Mojave, or New York.

The child's illusions are the man's disappointments and I had had my full share.

There had been a marriage in Los Angeles. It lasted two trips. I wasn't an Earthman. I was a colonial Martian and the differences were too much to adjust. We parted bitter friends.

The cities of Earth were crowded, noisy, frenetic. The blue sky was there, but it had to be seen from a rising Wheel taxi or a high mountain because of the pall of smog and grime. The people were confused, rapacious, and ambitious. For what, I could never understand. For *more*, perhaps. But as I say, I was a colonial. There are things I do not value.

It may be that in the back of my mind was the hope that returning to the place of my

birth would give me something to believe in.

The Old City had not changed. It was still a wretched rash of hovels, a festering hole on the dry face of Mars. The shanties were built right down to the highwater mark on the canal bank, and the whole area stank of industrial refuse.

I walked through the narrow streets followed by a band of ragged urchins who stared at my uniform and occasionally darted up to beg for a few coins. This was a thing unique to colonial Mars. The poor of Earth didn't beg. No one would have listened to them.

The house, if you can call it that, where I was born, was on the far outskirts of Dump-town. I saw it again with mixed emotions.

I had hated this place as a child, but now, as a man, I hated it more because I had been abroad and I knew there was no place really very different. The hopelessness of that made my feelings venomous.

There was a boy with Timur in the shanty when I stepped through the half-open door. The boy looked at my uniform with hungry eyes and then ran, scuttling through the door without

touching me and vanishing amid the slagheaps. Some unwanted brat dropped by one of the women from across the canal and brought to Dump-town to be sold. Timur must have taken him as a substitute pair of eyes. It could have been worse. In many cases it was. Vice was a principal industry in the Old City.

There was an animal smell in the cold room. My father sat in his ancient chair near the open window, listening to the distant roar of Bessemer steel converters across the canal.

I thought of my four brothers, and of our name being synonymous everywhere in space with murder and sabotage. And this made me speak without compassion, even though I could see that Timur was very old and obviously failing.

"Timur—" For some reason I could not call him "father." "Timur," I said. "Dennison is dead."

The blind eyes turned toward me and I shuddered. The ravaged face was terrible to see. He sighed and the sound was like the long-remembered whispering of the marswind. I was, for an instant, a child again and lying on my pallet in this very room and listening to the voice of

Mars drifting on the cold wind from the north.

"Did you hear me? I said Dennison is dead."

"I heard," he said.

I could sense it already, that differentness, that feeling of alien presence.

"They say he wrecked his own ship," I said bitterly.

"I know," Timur said. "Is that why you have come back? You ran away before I could teach you. I had four sons and they are all gone now."

I hated him suddenly, the stink of him, and the calm way he disowned me, and above all I hated the gray memories that bound me to him and to my four dead brothers, memories that would not let me turn away now and accept his disownment.

"Answer me," he said slowly. "Have you come back because Dennison is dead and now there's only you?"

It seemed that senility had claimed him at last as he answered his own question in a rasping voice.

"Yes, you've come back."

He rustled drily, searching for me with his hands. "Welcome home, son," he said.

His touch revolted me. It was the touch of something

out of my childhood. The fear of the ancient past, of the ruined temples, of the masks and carvings.

God, I thought, how I despise this place. The oily smell of it, the gritty taste of mines and smelters and the red-black soot of collieries and the darkness of burrows shored with timbers looted from ruins as old as time. I despise the heavy smoke in air that's too thin to support it, and the crummy shacks of mineworkers and steelworkers, the trapped poverty of it. I hate the marred, scarred face of the whole miserable dead and should be buried planet—

Earth was bad enough. But *this*. It was as though I were seeing Mars for the first time and it was hideous.

"Dennison," the old man said in a whisper. "Oh, I had hopes for Dennison— He must have tried very hard."

I stared at him unbelieving.

"But now you've come back."

My mind recoiled from what I had been thinking. It was too grotesque and too senseless.

I looked around me at the books piled everywhere and covered with reddish dust. At the carvings and figurines salvaged from the sand-drifted temples. It suddenly occurred

to me that the room's arrangement was, how can I put it, subtly unearthly. Arranged in a way no terrestrial would arrange it.

"I won't be here for long," I said violently. "Nothing could keep me in this God-forsaken place."

"You were born here," the old man said. "This is your home."

I laughed at that. "Home is where the heart is."

Outside the shanty it lay, this home of mine, under the blanket of a deepening night. The smoke obscured the stars, and from the ground beneath us came the rumblings of drilling and blasting. Across the silted canal the lights of New Providence—those lights that had beckoned to me when I was a child, the city we terrestrials had built on the rubble of temples and unearthly castles. The ginmills were running full blast for the crew of my ship and the thin wind carried the shouts and rowdy laughter, the frontier-bordertown medley of cursing, brawling, catting noises. From the spaceport came the whine of turbines and the roar of jets being tested.

And I saw it all for what it was: the wanton rape of a world.

Presently, Timur spoke. "Is it ugly, son?"

"It's filthy," I said with feeling.

"It wasn't ugly when I first came here. I still see it the way it was."

This was the pioneer speaking, I thought sadly. The First Lander. I turned away from the door and sat down wearily on the bed. "I need a drink," I said.

Timur's blind eyes seemed to be looking inward. "I'm old, son. Too old now to take you to the temple in the hills. It's been years since I've been there. But if I could, if I could call them to me here— Oh, I could show you Mars as it was. As it should be."

I wondered at his turn of phrase. If I could call them here to me—

It started a strange train of thought in my mind. In a sense *they*, the Martians still did exist. They were memory, and fragments buried under tons of ferric sand, and the marswind mourning.

They existed for Timur as surely as I did. No, more surely than I did. He could see them with that inward-turning sight of the blind.

And I wondered what he had experienced during those two years alone with my

mother, alone on this silent, ancient world.

A terrestrial had once said: I think, therefore I am. Couldn't *they* say: We are remembered, therefore we are? The ultimate application of the Berkleyan philosophy. The very endpoint of evolution. A kind of incorporeal immortality.

The idea opened up a frightening vista of a world populated by slumbering memories rudely awakened by the advent of invaders from space. What would these memorial beings desire? Peace. For eternity.

I shivered and rubbed my cold hands together.

The old man nodded. "It's in the blood," he said. "It's happening to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said roughly. "I'm going. Write to me if there is anything you want. I'll try and get it to you." I stood up.

"A favor, David, before you go." It was the first time he had called me by name.

"What is it?"

"You used to read to me. Before Mark died, and the others."

"I remember."

"Find the book and do it now."

And childhood memories



possessed me again and I could not refuse him. It was all there in my mind, waiting to be recalled.

I went to the cluttered shelves and searched the dusty volumes there. I found it. A thin book, very old, by a woman named Stella. The golden letters of the last name had long ago flaked away. The place was even marked by a ribbon that crumbled at my touch. It had seen much use.

Timur followed my movements with that arcane sensitivity of the blind.

"*Oh bless your blindness,*" he quoted before I could begin, "*Oh bless your blindness, glory in your groping—*"

I glanced at him and saw his raddled old face transfigured.

I read the verse aloud and finished with the lines I best remembered.

"*Go forth, go forth, nor ask me what comes after; The fifth stone shall not fail you, son of mine—*"

I stood for a long moment, holding the book and trying to read the expression on my father's face. He seemed to be listening to voices I could not hear. Tears streaked his cheeks. "They've come," he said softly. "Thank God."

I thought, he's gone mad.

He hears the ghosts of a race a million years vanished.

And then he began to speak, with a voice that was not his own. A voice so gently timbred, so delicately modulated, that I had the feeling my ears were not fine enough instruments to accept one-tenth of its immense expressiveness.

"Mars was not always as you see it now," the voice said. My father took my arm like one possessed. And I knew that I was listening to the voice of a race gone but not destroyed. "Let me show you Mars—"

And I saw it. I saw the world before the coming of men. I saw the red hills, slumbrous and old under a daylight sky full of stars. I walked under the two moons and watched the shifting shadows on the sand. I saw flying towers too delicate to stand on any planet's breast but this, towers and needle spires soaring like birds in flight. There were ice clouds glare white with sun against a sky the color of cobalt. There was music, intricate and stately rhythms and tones like crystals drifting on the marswind. The canals rippled in sunlight, the deep still water bluegreen at midday. And I

was there and not dreaming, because I saw my own face in the mirror depths, and behind me fleeting glimpses of lacey figures dancing in woven robes of silver so thin it floated on the air, and the laughing faces hidden behind masks of beaten bronze. I touched the icy water. I stood on the ochre moss and the white rime lay on the ground and it crunched beneath my feet.

I thought wonderingly, this, then was the world Timur found during those two years, the world beyond the curtain of his blindness and the ravaging of time and progress. I could not think how it was done, nor did I care.

I watched the seasons turn and when summer came and the lichens turned to rusty crimson, the tides, deep and full, swelled the canals, and the moss turned green on the ancient ground, nourished by the clean, clear blood of the silent planet—

My inward vision faltered. I had not dreamed that Mars was like that once. It was as though the dreamer had touched the face of the dream and must weep. It was all there, everything I had ever longed for. The stars in a cupped hand.

"You saw," my father said. The voice was his own.

"Yes," I said. "Oh, God, yes."

"They still live, you see. In the hills, in the snowfields. Everywhere."

I sat down abruptly, because my legs were tired and trembling.

"What can we know of the evolution of an alien race?" he asked quietly. "What can we know about them at all?"

"That was what you showed my brothers," I said.

"Yes."

"That was what I ran away from."

"I'm sorry, David."

I sat silently, containing the ache of longing in my chest.

"Now look at your Mars," Timur said harshly.

And I saw the smoke again, and the ginmills, the filthy refuse. I felt myself crumbling inside. "I don't know. I don't know at all. It's our way—"

I broke off suddenly because I realized that it wasn't *our* way. It was *their* way. And once I knew that, I knew what it was I must do. What Dennison, and Mark, and the others had tried to do.

I slipped the book I still held in my hand into my

pocket. I was the fifth stone.

"We will not meet again," Timur said sadly.

"No," I said.

"You've listened to them," my father said. "They will be with you always."

I walked out into the night. Across the water and the city I could see the wide winged shape of my ship being hoisted into take-off position.

Calder sat quite still in the darkness of his room. The recorder shut itself off.

Bits of the here-and-now impinged on his consciousness. The old man had flung five stones. No, not just the old man. *They* had done it. To get their world back.

Even that wasn't quite right. *They* and Timur and his five dead sons were one.

He felt himself stiffen with fright. He heard Timur telling David: They will be with you always."

Then they were here.

Here, he thought. With me. Now.

No, not *with* me. I am Timur Denby. I am David and all his brothers.

I am one of them.

Total transference. They had bridged the gulf.

But everything has a function, Calder thought. David

completed his. What is mine?

In the sky he saw the rain of meteors that had been falling for two days, ever since Captain David Denby had rammed his ship into the space-station.

Not only had the men on the Wheel died, but New Providence would have to be abandoned, because although ships could fly from Mars to Earth, they could not fly from Earth to Mars without the Wheel.

What was Calder's function?

Guardian.

But of what, and how?

His eyes left the sky and caught the brilliantly lighted machine shops and construction sheds where already the long, long task of building another Wheel was underway.

He understood.

He would teach others.

The Mars colony was finished. Another Wheel would never be launched.

Calder looked back at the sky with longing. The red eye of Mars gleamed low on the horizon. He thought of the silent lichen-covered rocks and the deep cool waters of the canals with sadness.

For nothing is accomplished without sacrifice.

He would never go home.

**THE END**