

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the
forest
of
knives

by . . . A. Bertram Chandler

A blonde, a hunch, a madman's song spell danger on Mars—and uncover an alien cabal that may banish Man from the red planet.

EVEN MY BEING a stretcher case did not save me from the Customs and Immigration routine at Port Gregory. The Old Man was furious and tried to swing the weight of his rank to get me priority—but if anything it made things worse. With anybody obliging the name of Basset-Wills — with a hyphen — would have secured me a place among the B's. As it was I had to take my place at the tail end of the queue with the W's.

"And that's what you get for airing a double-barreled moniker!" growled Captain Brown. "If you had a sensible name like mine you'd be in the hospital by now."

I pointed out that as plain Peter Wills I should be just where I was now—and that with the preceding Basset I had stood a sporting chance of a quick release. I would have liked to add that if he hadn't rubbed the Immigration officials the wrong way it would have been better for everybody concerned—but one likes to leave a ship on friendly terms with all and sundry.

Jane, in those days, ranked as an M. Jane Meredith—and if the name isn't familiar you've never looked at a television screen. But she got permission to stick by me

What is Christmas without a goose—and what is Mars without canals? Though astronomers are still arguing, after three centuries, not only what the odd markings are but whether they actually exist, the public has accepted them as canals and would scarcely enjoy a Martian story without them. Well, Mr. Chandler has come up with a veritable humdinger of a Martian story and don't worry—the canals are in it too.

and hold my hand and smooth my fevered brow. She didn't do it by shouting that she was the great Jane Meredith, the Princess of the Press.

She got it by working on the assumption that gold hair piles on more G's than gold braid. As for her identity—she did her best to keep it quiet by wearing faintly tinted spectacles, a severe hair-do and a very plain costume. The ladies and gentlemen of the news dissemination services have never been over-popular on Mars.

I suppose she stuck by me because she felt a certain sense of responsibility for my condition. She says to this day that it was all her fault. I think that it was mine—after all, one expects passengers to do asinine things and one of the items we're paid for is to see that they don't.

It was when we had reached the Corner, that point in Space where the Navigator tells the Old Man it's time to turn around and start deceleration. My job while this was going on was to make the rounds of the decks and to see that nobody was taking advantage of the brief period of free fall to play pixies.

The routine is the same for all ships. You start right for'ard and work your way aft. When you begin you have about half a dozen cadets with you. In each space you press a button that indicates to Control that all hands are strapped into chairs or bunks, then you leave a cadet on guard to see that nobody

slips his safety belt and starts floating around.

By the time you get to the last compartment—which in *Martian Queen* was the main lounge—there's only yourself and you act as your own policeman after you've given the all clear.

Well, I finally finished up in the main lounge. Everything had gone remarkably smoothly on this occasion—usually there are at least a dozen people to whom you have to explain in words of one syllable why they should be strapped down. This, perhaps, had made me careless.

I took a hasty glance around, unlocked the cover of the signal button and gave the all clear, then pulled myself to the nearest vacant chair and started to strap myself in. The red warning light on the bulkhead had begun to flash and we could hear the noise of the gyroscopes starting up as Control began to swing the ship.

Then some old hen sitting next to me gave me a prod in the ribs with a knitting needle.

"Officer!" she cackled. "Why should *she* be allowed to run around loose?"

I dislike being called "officer," especially in that tone of voice, but my neighbor was now using her weapon as a pointer. I looked in the direction she indicated—and at once decided that if I didn't act quick this was where I got emptied out.

There, hanging against the deck-head, was Jane Meredith. I didn't

know her then—but I found time to think that she looked like a leggy blond angel, floating there above our heads. Perhaps a recording angel—assuming that such beings have gone all modern and use ciné-cameras.

"Come down!" I shouted, un-snapping the last buckle.

"Not until I've got this shot!" she replied.

By then the warning bell had started—and I had to make my choice between giving Control a Stop Signal and pulling Jane to a place of safety. To reach the push-button meant negotiating one or two corners. To pull Jane to a position of safety meant straight up and then straight down to my chair. I still think that it was the wiser choice.

My kick carried me up at such speed that I had to put out my hands to fend myself off from the deckhead. Then I grabbed the girl around the waist and tried to maneuver into a position suitable for shoving off back to the deck.

If she hadn't put up a struggle I might have done it in time. When the warning bell stopped I was still trying but with a scant split second to go it was hopeless. And when the main drive opened up I knew it was useless to try any more—although I did manage to get in one last kick at the deckhead that would bring us down on the dance floor instead of among the chairs around the perimeter of the lounge.

Fortunately I was underneath. Apart from a few bruises Jane was

unhurt. But when I tried to get up I found that I had a fractured femur. And that was the last thing I knew until I came around in the ship's hospital a few hours later.

So here I was in the main lounge once more—this compartment having been taken over by the port officials as their office. Many was the time that I had watched the formalities of landing being gone through on other worlds but this was my first trip to Mars. And I had never seen anything as thorough as these Martians.

"You haven't anything in your baggage that you shouldn't?" whispered Jane, pitching her voice low so that it would not be overheard by the two shore stretcher-bearers.

"No," I began and then it was my turn.

They carried me up to the lie detector and while grasping its handles I had to state that I had neither livestock nor radioactives. But a mere statement wasn't good enough—even when backed up by the machine. One of the Customs officers went over every piece of baggage with an electroscope and when he had finished another one, armed with a stopwatch, put the articles into what looked like a domestic refrigerator.

"We give 'em all a cooking with HF," the senior man condescended to explain to Jane. "You might have something in your cases and not know about it—the eggs of some insect, for example."

"Had a case not so long ago—dame had half a dozen parrot's eggs,

suspended development jobs, tucked away in her undies. As far as the lie detector went she'd been able to kid herself that they weren't livestock—but she nearly threw a fit when she twigged what we were doing to 'em in the oven."

The Immigration wasn't such a tough hurdle. They sent for the surgeon to make him swear everything he had put on my certificate of discharge was correct, and that was all. They gave each of us a respirator—this they said was for use either outside the dome or inside if the power supply to the compressors should fail. We had to sign a receipt for these.

Jane came with me as far as the hospital. There was ample room in the monowheeled ambulance that bore us swiftly and silently through the gleaming corridors of Port Gregory and her charm worked on the driver and the two attendants as it had done on the port officials.

It was at the hospital door, however, that she met her first setback. She had a woman to deal with there. It was not visiting hours. And it was no use her coming outside visiting hours. No, not even if she had a dozen press cards to flash, not even if a Second Pilot with a broken leg was the world's hottest news. Which he wasn't. And he didn't feel like it, either.

I was not sorry when they put me in my bed and I was able to fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

II

While waiting for Jane the next

morning it occurred to me that I had never asked her what she was doing on Mars. I knew her reputation and it occurred to me that Port Gregory might not be too healthy a city in which to spend a convalescence.

Where Jane Meredith was things happened. The riot and bloodshed were due to begin at any moment. She had, and still has, a keen nose for news. Some even go so far as to say that she herself is a sort of catalyst, that things just naturally happen around her.

I mentioned this to Captain Brown, who was my first visitor.

"H'm!" he grunted. "Never thought of that. Suppose you'll be wanting to come home in the old wagon now, broken leg and all. Had enough red tape to cut through to get you ashore—but that old woman Parks swore that with the continual vibration of the drive the bone was not knitting properly. If you want to take the risk I'll contact whoever is in charge of this hospital and see if I can get you out by sailing day."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way, sir. Just mentioned it as a point of interest. I suppose that at bottom it's no more than a pressman's yarn. We all know that they can spin some tall ones."

"Perhaps you're right, Bassett. But if you do feel that you'd rather be homeward bound with us, just let me know. I don't like leaving one of my officers in this dump—never have had any time for Martians and never will. And . . ."

And then Jane came breezing in. I liked the way everybody in the ward followed her with his eyes as she swung down the aisle between the rows of beds. I liked the way that the Sister on duty and the few women who were there visiting their menfolk looked at her. There was envy, catish dislike and reluctant admiration. And she was coming to see *me*.

Gone was the intentional severe plainness of arrival day. I'm no hand at describing women's clothes and such—but this Jane Meredith was the Jane who had charmed the worlds over the television networks. Everything was just right from the top of her hatless head to the toes of her little shoes.

I was dimly aware that the Old Man had eased his bulky form out of the chair beside the bed. I have a vague memory of his saying, "Well, Basset, I must be running along now. Have to see the agent and the consul. And I think it might be as well if I did try to get you out and back aboard the ship."

I hoped that last sentence was in jest.

"Hiya, Peter," said Jane. "How's the corpse?"

"Could be worse. They tell me they're going to start some kind of ray therapy and they're feeding me some goo that they get from one of the local plants. Supposed to be an absolute cure-all."

"And when do they plan to throw you out?"

"In about two weeks."

"And *Martian Queen* is here for about six days more. H'm."

I didn't like that *h'm*. It seemed to bode ill for somebody—probably me. I vaguely remembered that this same Jane Meredith was *persona non grata* on more than one inhabited world of the system and didn't see that it would help my career as an astronaut any if I became involved in any of her escapades.

As it was she had already done my prospects of promotion a bit of no good. But it was unfair to blame her for that—I had slipped up badly and if it had been her leg that was broken and not mine it would have spelled O-U-T.

"Tell me," I said to switch my train of thought to more pleasant tracks, "what are you doing here? What's due to happen?"

"Wish I knew. But something's cooking, Peter, something big. The home office got a tip that the rabbits are mixed up in it, and the crabs. And I have a feeling that *Collinsia Utilensis* may be involved."

"What is this—*Alice in Wonderland*?"

"Damn nearly. How's your Martian history?"

"Lousy. If I'd been on this run before I might know something—but up to now I've been ferrying passengers and freight to and from Venus. Liked the run too—but the Big White Chiefs decided it was time I had a transfer."

"Oh, well. I'll give you a brief run-through—it'll help me to get

my own theories straightened out.

"Mars, of course, has run through the same pattern of social evolution as the other colonized planets. First of all a collection of settlements—American, British, Russian, Dutch and so on—each little colony owing allegiance to the mother country on Earth.

"Then at last the day when they all began to regard themselves as Martians rather than American, British or what have you. And the inevitable inferiority complex that seems unavoidable with young nations—taking its usual form, the conviction that the Terran Central Government was out to do them dirt, was just waiting for an excuse to send a fleet and invade.

"Now—exports and imports.

"Collins was the biologist with Gregory on the first expedition to Mars. He found the plant that bears his name, the plant that is the only native living thing on Mars. There *were* animals once—but judging by their remains they weren't intelligent.

"It must have taken considerable skill and knowledge on somebody's part to cut the canals—but whoever it was didn't leave so much as a mud hut with four walls and a roof. Not a trace has ever been found of either architecture or artifact of any kind.

"But—to get back to old Collins' super-vegetable—it was early recognized that, in its various forms, it would supply every need of man. Food, clothing, medicines—all growing from the one root. They

get industrial alcohol from it—and the muck that they sell in bottles with an Imported Scotch label. And there are certain scents and drugs which, until they could be synthesized, fetched high prices in the Terran market.

"But man doesn't thrive on a vegetarian diet. Some fool repeated the early Australian experiment and had a few pairs of rabbits shipped out. In spite of the climate and the impossibly thin atmosphere, one or two survived of those that were turned loose in the open. And they bred—and bred—and began to make serious inroads into the supplies of *Collinsia Utilensis*.

"But there were mental giants in those days as always. It finally dawned on the other colonies that a nice little war with those responsible for the introduction of the innocent bunnies wasn't getting anybody anywhere. So hostilities were concluded and everybody went into a huddle about ways and means of controlling the pest. Biological control was all the rage in those days—but people were chary about introducing any very small life form to prey on our furry friends lest it get completely out of hand.

"It was a laddie called Carruthers—who now has the best-hated memory on this cock-eyed world—upon whom the great light finally dawned. He remembered reading somewhere that, way back in Pre-Atomic days rabbits had been introduced to certain islands of Earth's Pacific Ocean.

"These islands carried visual bea-

cons of some kind that were used by the surface ships of that time and people had to live on the islands and look after these lights. The idea was the rabbits would provide both a welcome dietary change and sport. They did—for the land crabs. The same little beasts that had overrun Australia couldn't stand up to an armor-plated enemy that followed them down into their burrows.

"Surprisingly enough the crabs did well on Mars and Carruthers was the hero of the hour. It is only a year ago that they demolished his statue."

"Yes, I remember seeing a recording of it. Carmichael of Extra-Terran News covered it."

"He would. He's a Martian citizen, you know, and has considerable pull with the censor. Very little leaks out before he's scooped it. But if he'd had any sense he wouldn't have made that newscast of the crabs surrounding a mob of rabbits. Do you know what it reminded me of? Sheepdogs and a herd of sheep."

"There were at least three hundred bunnies—and all the time Carmichael had the scene in the lens of his camera only two were pulled down and eaten. It looked for all the world as though somebody—or *something*—was having the rest herded North along Casarilli's Canal.

"But the crabs—and the rabbits. It finally dawned on somebody that the rabbits were doing *Collinsia* more good than harm. They went

mainly for the fruit—and they dropped the seeds all along the canals. Dropped them and fertilized them. And remember that these same seeds had resisted all attempts made by the colonists to plant them.

"The rabbits too had changed. Man, when he colonizes an alien world, brings his own conditions with him. The rabbits outside the domes had to adapt themselves to alien conditions. They did. They're big now and have a lung capacity large enough to handle the thin atmosphere. There may quite probably be not a few mutants in their Martian genealogy—but that I wouldn't know. I do know that every woman on Earth would sell her soul for a coat of Martian Bunny."

"Snob appeal!" I said.

"It's not! It's the loveliest fur you ever saw, ever felt. It makes mink look like alley cat. But where was I?

"Oh, yes. The rabbits are valuable now. And the land crabs, which have developed into something like boilers on stilts, are playing hell with the Martian economy. Of course when they kill a rabbit they don't eat the fur—but the pelt looks as though it had been put through a mincing machine. And they seem to herd the rabbits away from the traps as though they were doing it on purpose. They have even been known to attack hunters. They—"

"Miss Meredith! Miss Meredith! Your time was up ten minutes ago."

"Sorry, Sister. I had no idea how the time was flying."

"Will you be in this evening, Jane?" I asked.

"No, Peter. I'd better not. There's bound to be a crowd from the ship. I really must start making some contacts. After all, it's what I.P.N.S. pays me for."

III

The crowd from the ship was along that night and every night until she shoved off. They looked after me well, smuggling ashore all kinds of little luxuries on which a very stiff duty should have been paid. The Old Man came in every morning, as part of his ship's business routine, and Jane came too.

I heard him talking to her the day before *Martian Queen* was to blast off. "Look after him, Miss Meredith," I heard him say. "Don't let him get into mischief."

"Of course, Captain Brown," said Jane, doing her best to look like a blond Sunday schoolbook angel. "I'll see that he keeps away from the more sordid dives. After all, I feel responsible for him as it was really my fault."

"We all make mistakes, Miss Meredith. I'm glad that you're here to keep him out of trouble."

Of that I had my doubts—but I kept my big mouth shut.

Actually there was no reason why I should not have rejoined before sailing. No reason at all—except that the surgeon who was handling my case insisted on finishing the job. There was a little professional

jealousy there. He hated the idea that poor old Parks—who, in any case, was an Earthman—should get the credit.

Jane Meredith was with me when *Martian Queen* blasted off. We heard the muffled thunder of her jets as she warmed them up and then came the peculiar screaming roar of a big rocket in flight. I followed her in my imagination—up through the thin air, up past the orbits of Phobos and Deimos, out and away toward the Sun and Earth.

I felt very lost and lonely here on this arid world, where one's Earth citizenship counts for less than nothing. On the other runs you don't get that kind of thing. The mere fact that you're from Home makes you a little tin god.

"You'll be out in a week," said Jane.

"So they tell me."

"And there's nothing homeward bound for another five weeks."

"No."

"Would you like a job?"

"That depends."

"Quite a nice job. It's like this, Peter. I.P.N.S. allows me practically unlimited funds—more than enough to buy a nice little rocket plane. It's essential, really, for getting around on this world—the public transport services are vile.

"But here's the snag—I have no pilot's license. Had one once, but . . . Anyhow, skip it. Your license, they tell me, covers handling any kind of rocket-propelled craft inside atmospheric limits as well as

in deep space. As your qualifications are international and interplanetary they'll hold good on Mars. Right?"

"Yes, but . . ." I knew what was coming.

"And I can't hire me a pilot for love or money. I can get the ship—but someone has tipped off the Aviators' Guild that I'm not, repeat, *not* to hire any help. That Carmichael knows I'm here—and knows I'm onto something. But he can't stop me from hiring you."

"Provided I want to be hired. But if I were you I'd keep it quiet—Carmichael might have enough pull to have me kept in my virtuous couch until the next homeward bound ship."

On the whole I wasn't sorry when they threw me out of the hospital. Not that they were a bad crowd—they certainly looked after me well. And their continual harping on the theme of how vastly superior Martian medical science was to that of Earth failed to bother me—all that I knew was that they had done a remarkably good job on my leg.

I didn't even mind when they told me all about their marvellous *Collinsia*—and was amused rather than otherwise at the impression they gave that they personally had created the beastly thing out of nothing.

It was quite a plant—from the same root could grow a dozen different specialized forms, so unlike as to seem different species. The difference went far deeper than externals—the actual chemistry of

leaves and stem were of an extreme diversity.

Nor was that all—it seemed that the chemistry was liable to change. Certain leaves of *Collinsia* had long been used as a sort of smoking tobacco—and very palatable it was too. But lately a subtle difference had crept in—very hard to detect unless one knew it was there. What had been a harmless pleasant narcotic was now a dangerous habit-forming drug.

The seeds of the apple-like fruit—which alone was standard—were largely used for spices. And those spices had of late developed poisonous characteristics. But the chemists in the various processing plants were on the alert and there was no longer any real danger.

To get back to the hospital—it was amusing to listen to the nurses at one moment running down Earth and all things Earthly, the next avid for information about the planet they affected so to despise.

It was the consul who took care of me the day that I left. Jane was out of the city, I learned later, taking a run in a hired launch along the main canal running north and south from Port Gregory. But she had hinted at her intentions the previous day so I was not unduly disappointed.

The consul wasn't a bad old boy, although a trifle pompous, and insisted on supporting me to the monotaxi waiting outside the hospital doors. And he had certainly done me well in the matter of ac-

commodation—although it would be I.C.C. that was paying.

He had found me a three-room service apartment on the very periphery of the city, an apartment whose transparent side walls overlooked the desert landing fields of the spaceport. Not that there were any deep space-ships in just then to make me homesick—although there was an abundance of little rockets—both planes for use inside atmospheric limits and larger vessels capable of making the run to Phobos or Deimos.

But it was a mistaken kindness. The average spaceman always remembers what happened when *King Charles' Wain* sat down hard in the middle of Manchester and prefers the Terran practice, subsequent to that spectacularly unpleasant incident, of keeping the ports as far as possible from large centers of population.

There were flowers on the table of the living room—a large vase of tastefully arranged gorgeous blossoms. I guessed that this would be my first visual introduction to the fabulous *Collinsia*. There was a note too, propped against the side of the vase. The writing was unfamiliar—but I guessed whom it was from.

"Miss Meredith sent the blossoms," said the Consul needlessly. He made an harumphing sound and caressed the ends of his long moustache. "A very charming young lady."

I agreed absently while opening the envelope. Apologizing, I read

the note. It was short and to the point.

Sorry I wasn't on hand to meet you out but I heard reports that a large covey(??) of crabs had been sighted advancing upon the city along the bank of Casartelli's Canal. Everything I take will have to go through the censor—but it may be worthwhile. Have told the Walrus to look after you. Give him my love and a couple or so drinks. You'll find the bottles in the cabinet by the telesaudio. Will call for you, if back, at nineteen thirty.

J.

So I found the bottles and gave the Walrus his drinks.

We chatted awhile of this and that—and having learned what Jane's very apt name for him was I found it hard to keep a straight face. It was all getting to be too too Lewis Carroll. Crabs and rabbits and now the Walrus. It was a pity that my name wasn't Carpenter. But after the third drink I began to feel like the Dormouse.

"You'll have to excuse me," I said, yawning, "but I find this local brew a trifle strong."

The Walrus looked at his watch. "And I must be running along, Mr. Basset-Wills. Remember me to Miss Meredith when you see her again. You must both of you come to the Consulate some night for dinner. And don't forget—I'm here to be of service."

He left and I decided to see if the settee along one wall was as

soft as it looked. The next thing I knew was Jane Meredith shaking me and telling me to look lively and get my boozing suit on.

My number ones would certainly have been out of place in the dives to which I was taken that night. Jane must have explored the city very thoroughly during my spell in the hospital—explored it with an eye to local color of the more mercetricious variety. It wasn't to the East Gate she took me—that was the doorway through which traffic from the air and spaceport entered.

Nor was it the North or the South Gate—the taverns in their vicinity were patronized by the crews of the powered lighters that plied their trade along the canals. The West Gate was the obvious place to look for information of the kind she was seeking. Through it came the land traffic—the big tractors called "sand-cats" or "desert schooners," the prospectors, the trappers and hunters.

It wasn't too savory a locality. It was clean and well lit—but over all hung an indefinable air of raffishness. Jane managed to blend well with the background. It occurred to me later that she must have had long and educational experience of this kind of thing—but at the time I felt more than a little hurt that she should cheapen her appearance as she had done.

It was done cleverly enough. Just a little too much make-up, a very slight discord in the color scheme of blouse and skirt. The rest was

a matter of bearing, of speech and accent. It was enough. Even her hair seemed to take on a brassy tint.

The handbag too—it was larger and more ornate than sanctioned by good taste. But it had to be—even a miniature camera when packed with a few spare spools is quite bulky. And the glittering decorations helped to conceal the lens.

As for me—Jane gave me up as hopeless.

"You're like just like what you are," she said, "a mug of a spaceman taken in tow by a designing blonde. But it doesn't really matter."

From my apartment we walked to the nearest corridor through which the westbound moving way ran. Jane seemed to know the city like a native, transferred from level way to ramp and again to level way until we reached what she called the ground floor.

In a short space of time we came to the end of the run, stepped out into a vast domed hall. At one side of it were the doors of the air-locks—big for vehicular traffic, small for the rare pedestrians. It was noisy too on this level—the air compressors can't have been too far distant.

Three big tractors had just come in and were discharging bales of furs onto an endless belt running into the heart of the city. The polished deck was gritty underfoot—in spite of all measures taken to prevent it some of the fine Martian sand was certain to seep in.

Not far from where we were standing was a flickering sign.

EDDY'S BAR & GRILL, it proclaimed, FINEST IMPORTED EATS & DRINX. Somebody came out as we watched, staggering slightly, and through the open door poured a wave of sound and scent—the latter composed of cheap liquor, hot cooked meats and tobacco smoke.

"This'll do for a start," said Jane. She put up her hand, ruffled her hair a little more and dragged me towards the entrance.

Inside it was typical of such places on all the worlds. I knew, without sampling its wares, that the imported drinks would be merely the local brew with synthetic flavoring and a fancy bottle label added.

The imported food would be the ubiquitous crab and rabbit and *Collinsia* camouflaged by a cook whose ambition must inevitably be far in excess of his ability. Music and entertainment were provided by juke boxes, on the screens of which the same old scantily clad lovelies went through the same old gyrations to the same old strains of last year's swing.

Not that I minded particularly—I rather like such places. But I was ashamed to bring Jane there. Of course—she was bringing me but I had forgotten that.

We chose a table near the bar and when the slatternly waitress came, to clear the deck of the debris left by the last diners and to take our orders, Jane put on her act. It was wasted, I thought, since there were only the girl and a couple of barflies to hear her impersonation

of a spaceport blonde fleecing a poor innocent spaceman.

But in a voice that she deliberately coarsened just the right amount she ordered everything that was most expensive. Oysters she wanted—they were imported—and champagne at an imported wine price.

I must have winced. After all, the only cash I had was such money as had been due when I paid off from the *Queen*. It would have to last me until the next homeward bound ship.

"Cheer up, duckie," whispered Jane. "The I.P.N.S. is paying for this. You're on our payroll now anyhow."

Some of the loungers must have heard the lavish order being given—as they were intended to. There was one gentleman who apparently figured he had as much right to a share of my wad as Jane. He left the bar to stand up by itself and sauntered across to our table. He pulled a chair up, sat down facing us both.

"Thought you was a stranger here, Jack," he said. "Just out from Home?"

"Yes."

"Hope I'm not talkin' out o' turn—but I don't like ter see a nice young fella like yerself gettin' with the wrong sort o' people from the very start."

"Meanin' me?" demanded Jane.

"Since you're askin', sister, yes. Come ter think of it—haven't seen yer around here before. Who's yer patron? If yer got one."

Jane's voice was sullen as she replied, "Haven't got one yet. Just come in from Tamaragrad—couldn't stand them Russians at any price. But what's it to you?"

"Oh, nothin', nothin'. Just that I don't want ter see the young fella skinned. An' what's it worth for me not ter pass the word around ter the girls that there's a freelance operatin' in their territory? If I do it won't be pleasant."

IV

The situation looked ugly. I shot Jane Meredith a worried glance—but she was enjoying herself. I began considering ways and means of getting her out of EDDY'S BAR & GRILL and at the same time shaking off this gentleman who had taken my moral welfare so much to heart.

By this time the champagne and the oysters had arrived. The bottle was in a regulation ice bucket and, if the label was to be believed, was good. When I saw the bill—the girl insisted on payment on delivery—I thought they must have brought us bottled radium by mistake.

The oysters were real imported oysters—fresh from the can. And the price started me doing sums in my head involving the number of cans and the amount of freight payable per case. Unasked the waitress set out three glasses. I was going to protest but Jane kicked me hard under the table.

Then she started treading on my foot. It was some little time before I had a rush of brains to the head

and decoded, *Go and powder your nose.*

Well, orders were orders. I got up and asked my guide, philosopher and friend where to go. He insisted on coming with me and kept up a running fire of admonition and advice. His greatest ambition in life was to take me to a place kept by a friend of his where the drinks were so much better and so much cheaper, where one could have a friendly game of cards and where one could meet some really respectable girls.

I was half listening and wondering whether Jane had intended that I should knock him out when I got him alone. It didn't seem a very good idea—apart from the fact that he probably carried arms of some kind he was bigger than me. And I was ready to be convinced he knew far more about rough-and-tumble fighting than I ever dreamed of on the darkest night.

So we wandered back to our table—and from the way he looked at Jane I was sorry that I hadn't taken a poke at him. But that crazy girl actually gave him a smile of welcome and began pouring out his glass of wine before he sat down. Having an innocent mind I should not have expected any deception. But our friend did not have an innocent mind.

Jane, having murmured the conventional, "Happy days," had her own glass to her lips when he reached across and took it.

"Pardon me," he said, "but your mug is chipped, sister. Take mine!"

If he had been a man of normal sensibilities the glare from Jane's blue eyes would have withered him. But he just leered and passed his own glass to the girl.

"Happy days!" he said, drained the wine and went out like a light.

"It always works," said Jane happily. "At least, with that type. Here's to Mickey. All right, you can drink yours. It's quite safe." Then, "What's *that*?"

The door to the outside was open, a group of men were standing just inside it on the verge of departure, talking. The two juke boxes were momentarily silent and over the loud coarse voices the noises of the city drifted in.

Mainly mechanical they were—the murmur of wheeled transport, the whine of compressor fans and the faint rhythmic clatter of the nearest moving way. There was someone outside singing, singing singing and slowly approaching, and slowly approaching, singing an old old song in a cracked voice.

"... come a-waltzing Matilda with me!"

"Up came the squatter, mounted on his thoroughbred,

Down came the troopers—one, two, three;

"Where's that jolly jumbuk you've got in your tucker bag?"

You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!"

"Waltzing Matilda, waltzing Matilda,

"You'll . . ."

The singer drew abreast of the doorway—and passed on.

"... come a-waltzing Matilda with me!"

"Come on!" cried Jane. "I smell news, news!"

As she jumped to her feet the remains of the bottle of synthetic champagne were upset, running over the table, cascading into the lap of the receiver of knockout drops. But nobody worried—except the slatternly waitress.

"Here!" she demanded. What have yer done to Whitey Snow?"

"He'll be all right," I said hopefully. "Just let him sleep it off!"

"Give the wench a ten spot to keep quiet!" An intense whisper from the pride of the I.P.N.S. "And ask her . . ."

The note changed hands.

"Who was that singing outside?" I said casually.

"Singing? Oh, *him*. That was Mad Mullins, the Australian. Last of the Swagmen he calls himself. But what do you want with the likes of him?"

"Nothing, nothing—just curious."

I elbowed my way through the crowd with a certain haste. Jane was already streaking out of the door.

It wasn't hard to track the self-styled Last of the Swagmen. He knew only one song, and he liked it. We followed him out of the main corridor along a smaller one, that ran off from it at an angle. It was little more than a tunnel.

We couldn't see far ahead—the lighting was sparse and the reflections from the curved polished walls were confusing. But there floated back to us snatches of the misadventures of the immortal swagman—and in accompaniment to the ballad came the subdued whirring noise of the camera in Jane's handbag. Evidently this seemed to her worth recording.

We were gaining on him. We could see his tall thin figure, fantastic in the confused lighting, with the bag swinging on his back. The bag—the "swag"—Waltzing Matilda herself. I was still wondering what it was all about as Mad Mullins led us down, down and down.

Then the noise of machinery—faint at first but rapidly becoming louder—added its repetitious throbbing to the monotony of the song from ahead. We lost sight of Mullins as he turned a bend of the tunnel—then, as we rounded the angle, we saw before us a platform past which was running a moving way.

The gaunt old man stood poised for a moment on the brink of this fast-flowing mechanical river, then jumped. We saw him stagger as he fought to retain his balance and then he was gone, carried into obscurity through the tunnel mouth into which the moving way ran.

We hurried down to the platform. Jane, clutching her precious handbag, was the first to jump. She misjudged the speed of the way and fell heavily, holding the bag up and

away from her so that whatever else befell it would not be damaged. I was luckier when I followed—and hurried along the rocking vibrating surface to Jane's side.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not permanently. There's a portion of the human anatomy designed to be sat on hard—and I sat on it hard—*very!* But now I'm down I'm staying down until we get to wherever we're going. This tunnel is high enough here—but what it will be like later on I don't know."

I sat down too. We knew that Mullins was still with us—from somewhere ahead came a mournful voice informing us that somebody's ghost can be heard as you pass by that billabong and that Matilda was still in the dance marathon.

We looked around. There was nothing to see. Just bare rough walls that flashed by at high speed, just an occasional dim light that did little beyond making the darkness tangible. More than once we were tempted to crawl forward along the moving way, to see the old madman at close quarters, to find out on what errand he was bound.

Had it been up to me I think we would have done so. But Jane, after careful consideration, refused to budge. If we made the acquaintance of Mad Mullins now we might find out where he was going and what he intended to do—and we might feel impelled to stop him. It might be public spirited—but would it be news? Jane didn't think so.

"Why are we following this crazy

old coot anyway?" I wanted to know.

"Because I've discovered something while you were laid up," she told me. "Mullins has been coming down from the Pole—and trouble has been coming down with him. I want to find out why."

Two hours after the start of our dark journey we saw the glimmer of brighter light ahead. Then we were abruptly swept out of the tunnel into a large artificial cavern. The moving track curved back upon itself gently, ran back in the direction of Port Gregory through another tunnel which must have been roughly parallel with that through which we had come.

But the actual recurvature was hidden under a platform—a platform designed to scoop any object off the incoming moving way and send it sliding down a chute. We had no desire to be scooped and chuted, especially since the mad Australian had already left the moving way and was walking, slowly yet purposefully, towards a doorway in the rock opening upon the outgoing track.

There were men working about the doorway, loading crates and boxes upon the conveyor that would bear them to the city. We saw guards as well—and the gleaming of the light on their automatic weapons.

Mullins approached the door in the rock, slouching forward with the peculiar gait of the hobo, his swag wobbling on his shoulders like a thing alive. Jane had her camera-handbag unlimbered, and I could

hear the faint whirr of its mechanism over the clatter of the moving way. She was peering into the viewfinder.

"Damn!" she ejaculated, "What is the matter with the man's head? It's coming in fuzzy." Then, "He's wearing his respirator!"

Luckily we had not been long enough on Mars to become careless about carrying the little haversacks with us. The idea that our lives depended upon a series of pumps and fans was still sufficiently novel even to me—after all, in a ship only a breach of the hull can reduce the pressure—to breed caution. It was the work of seconds to pull out the transparent headpieces, to connect them with the oxygen cylinders carried in the same haversacks.

The men loading crates and packages on the moving way stopped working. The guards challenged Mullins. He was advancing more slowly now, his hands raised above his head. We approached within twenty yards or so, then edged behind a stout pillar running from roof to floor to watch developments.

We saw Mullins stop, saw him back against the rock wall with the muzzle of a gun in his belly. Whatever was in his swag, I remember thinking, would be crushed against the stone. And whatever was in his bag must have been remarkably quick acting.

There was a clatter as the guards dropped their weapons, a concert of thuds as guards and workers fell like ninepins. Mullins stepped over the body of the man who had prodded him in the belly, vanished through

the doorway with the air of one hurrying to keep an appointment.

V

They weren't dead. Whatever had hit the guards and the workers was not lethal—at least not immediately. But we couldn't revive them—and not knowing what gas had been used there was not much we could do about it. Our best chance of finding help for the unconscious men lay in following Mullins into what was obviously an industrial establishment of some kind.

We saw what it was when we passed through the doorway. The leaves of the door were thick and so made that when the door was closed they would form an airtight seal. In structure they were like a sandwich. The ten feet between outer and inner surfaces was composed of layers of steel and concrete and lead.

Hurrying after Mullins we passed rooms in which machinery of all kinds was operating, rooms whose occupants lay in attitudes of careless sleep. The bag was still giving out its gas, still securing a free passage for the man who carried it. The fact that a draught was setting in from the outer door meant that the cloud of sleep would precede him.

"To hell with this!" I said at last. "This is an atomic power station. News or no news I'm going to stop that crazy old coot from doing whatever he wants to do!"

I broke into a run. And then Mullins turned round, saw that he

was being followed. And he too started running. He was an old man but he was used to moving in the feeble gravitational field of Mars. We were hopelessly outdistanced.

There was little time to lose when we burst into the generator room. The power station was of the old outdated uranium-pile type, long since superseded by the Flackmann Converter, to which all matter is an energy source. But those old uranium-pile stations hang on and hang on. Enormous amounts of capital went into their construction—and they are still paying handsome dividends.

Mullins was already at work when we burst into the generator room. Before the control board lay the engineers of the watch—and Mullins, working with skillful deliberation, was striving to demolish the plant.

We could not see what was happening in the pile itself—that was behind feet of lead and concrete. But we could read the labels on the remote control switches—although we hadn't time for that just then. We knew, without reading any labels, that Mullins was withdrawing screens, inserting additional slugs of uranium, draining the heavy water that was both a moderator and a source of steam for the turbo-generators.

The old man snarled as I flung myself upon him. It was hard to get a grip on his body—he was still wearing his outdoor clothing, heavy drill with a fur lining, and it was foul and slippery with years of

grease and dirt. But I got my fingers in his collar, tried hard to rip the breathing mask from his head. I had to forfeit my hard-won advantage as he all but tore off my own respirator.

Out of the corner of an eye I could see Jane. She was frantically manipulating controls—replacing screens and withdrawing uranium slugs. It was impossible that she should hit the right combination—the only men who could do that lay unconscious at our feet.

But she erred on the side of safety. The whine of the generators, of which we had not been conscious until its cessation, faded and died. There was momentary, confusing darkness as the power failed—and when the emergency batteries took over the lamps were sparse and dim.

But before this happened Mullins and I were on the floor. He was an old man and weak—he should have been weak anyway—but he had what I lacked, co-ordination with local gravitational conditions. He may, too, have had the desperate consuming surge of strength that comes to the insane.

At any rate he was sitting astride my body and had both hands at my throat, tearing at the neckband of my mask. Both of mine were on his skinny wrists—but struggle as I might I knew that it was only a matter of seconds before the mask would be off.

The supreme irony of it all was hearing, faintly but unmistakably, the penetrating whirr of Jane's little

camera. It would make a good picture, I told myself, a swell picture. But neither of us would live to see it.

Jane was still at the control panel. How . . . ?

When the lights went out Mullins whipped one of his hands away from my throat. When they came on again that hand was holding a gun—an ugly long-barreled pistol of point-five caliber. I saw his thin gnarled finger tighten on the trigger.

And then Jane was on him, both hands on his gun wrist, wrenching and twisting. The gun went off, its report thunderous at such close quarters. The heavy slug from his own weapon took Mullins in the side. The fight was over.

We knelt by the body of the old man.

The thin plastic of his breathing mask was rising and falling ever so gently. Had it not been for this we would have thought him dead—it was impossible to detect any heartbeat through the thick clothing. He wasn't dead—which meant he would be able to talk.

"Get the clothes off him!" ordered Jane.

While I was busy with this unsavory task—it must have been the first time in years it had been done—Jane turned her back to me and I heard the sound of something ripping. Whatever garment she was wearing under her skirt was being pressed into service for a bandage. She didn't know until later that her camera, perched on the bench from which it had recorded the fight, had

not failed to function on this occasion.

I got Mullins' fur-lined jacket off and two or three shirts which, when new, might have been any color, then a layer of thick, woolen under-wear. There wasn't as much blood as I had anticipated. The bullet had caught him just below the ribs on the right side, had gone right through without penetrating deeply on its way.

"He'll live," said Jane. With deft fingers she began to bandage the wound to staunch the flow of blood. "But it's a pity that we have no germicide handy. I don't see how that mess can possibly fail to turn septic."

The next thing was to return the Last of the Swagmen to consciousness. There was a valve on the oxygen cylinder in his haversack, a valve whereby the oxygen supply could be regulated. This we opened to its fullest extent, then sat back and awaited developments.

While we sat and waited we marveled that this dirty unkempt creature should have held briefly in his hands the power of a god. For we now had time to work out what *would* have happened had the pile got out of control.

The power station would, of course, have ceased to exist—but there was another more modern station handling the bulk of the Martian energy demands. A few square miles of desert would have been fused and vaporized—but that would not have caused serious inconvenience except to the few who

happened to be in the immediate vicinity.

However the door to the tunnel leading to Port Gregory had been left open—we found afterwards that Mullins had sabotaged the controls that should have slammed it shut seconds before the blast. And along the tunnel would have rushed a wave of searing gas—a projectile along the bore of a sixty-mile-long gun-barrel.

The dome of the capital city would have burst like a soap bubble—and any who were lucky enough to survive the actual explosion would have died far more unpleasantly as the lethal radiations burned out eyes and lungs. It wasn't nice to think about it.

And this—*this*—had held the power of life and death over half a million fellow beings!

Mullins stirred and muttered—a tall thin dirty old man. His beard and sparse hair should have been white—but they were so encrusted and stained as to be green instead. I looked more closely, interested in spite of myself. That green could hardly be the result of even years of neglect—it looked for all the world as though some tiny plant were growing on his scalp.

"It thinks I'm dead," came a cracked voice from behind the swagman's breathing mask. "It's left me alone. But 'oo are you?"

"Never mind," said Jane crisply. "You tell us what *you* were doing—and who told you to do it."

"A sheila—yair. You're the one wot shot me, ain't yer? Yer 'ad ter

save yer boy friend. But yer ain't Johns, are yer?"

"No. We're not police."

"Then I'll tell yer. It was way up north, past Paris du Ciel, past Tamaragrad even. Right up where the ice and snow march down to the edge o' the thirsty red desert. An' there's forests up there—forests of this 'ere *Collinsia*.

"It ain't any good to the chemists the way it grows there—like trees it is, like trees with spiky leaves and big spikes growin' out o' the trunks like knives. An' there's rabbit there—thousands of 'em, all colors. An' them bastards 'ide in the forest an' come out now an' again for an 'op over the desert. When they see me they all bolted back among the trees an' 'id. .

"But I waited an' watched an' saw that there was paths runnin' into the woods. Paths big enough an' wide enough so that yer can just squeeze along 'em without them knives rippin' yer ter shreds. An' I thought as I'd set my traps along them paths.

"But first of all I wanted to see where them paths led to—for all I know there might be anything be'ind all them spikes an' spines. An' when *Collinsia* puts up that sort o' barricade you can bet yer boots that there's somethin' worthwhile be'ind it.

"I must 'a' gone miles an' miles an' miles—an' still nothin' but them damn' livin' bayonets. Just them an' now an' again a sort o' clearin' where there was *Collinsia* of another

sort—but the rabbits 'ad 'ad all that.

"It was in one o' them clearin's that I bedded down for the night. I 'ad some rabbit meat in my tucker bag an' I made a little fire an' boiled a billy o' tea. An' I got out my little airtight tent an' I was all set fer a good night's kip. I could 'ear them rabbits thumpin' around under me—the ground must 'a' been like an 'oneycomb.

"And then, just as I was droppin' off, I 'eard the noise of somethin' crashin' around in the bush. It should 'a' made me careful—but I'd left the fire burnin' outside the tent an' that'd keep anything off.

"When the tent was ripped away in the night it was pitch dark. An' there I was, gaspin' an' chokin'—an' when that sort o' thing 'appens to yer the first thing yer reaches for is yer mask.

"They let me put it on—an' then they grabbed me by the arms an' legs so I couldn't move. I couldn't see 'oo they was—but I could 'ear that chitterin' sound they makes wi' them funny sideways mouths o' theirs an' I could feel their claws grippin' me.

"Then they got me to me feet an' started shovin' me down the path. An' when I was trippin' every second step they lifted me up an' carried me. Phobos was just beginnin' to show over the tops o' the trees when they dived down into a tunnel. 'Mullins,' says I to meself, 'this is where you makes a meal for Baby Crab an' all 'is little brothers an' sisters an' cousins an' aunts.'

"It was a long tunnel—an' though we'd lost sight o' the sky long since there was still light—a sort o' glow like wot yer gets from the 'ands of yer watch. I noticed that the air was pressin' me mask against me face—an' that meant that it must be thick enough ter breath.

"But when I tried to reach up to take it off them crabs just dug their claws in all the 'arder. And then damme if one of 'em didn't do it 'imself—careful like so as not to tear the plastic—as we was passin' through part o' the tunnel wot was all overgrown wi' creepers an' such.

"An' then we came to where *It* was. Don't ask me about *It*; I just can't remember that part. But *It* told me what to do—an' one o' the crabs took most o' the gear out o' my tucker bag an' filled it up wi' things like kids' toy balloons. An' *It* told me that they was full of a gas or somethin', and that once they was bust anyone 'oo wasn't wearin' a mask'd pass out.

"Then the crabs took me back to the surface, bein' careful ter see that I 'ad me respirator back on. I remember that my 'ead was itchin' worse than usual but I couldn't scratch it wi' me 'eadpiece in the way.

"An' there was somethin' inside my brain that kep' me goin' without food an' without sleep—although it let me drink from the canals as I 'eaded south. I wanted to tell the guards on the gate at Port Gregory wot I 'ad ter do but *It* wouldn't let me.

"I thought that perhaps if I sung

to meself, loud-like, it might break the spell, but it didn't do no good. An' all the time that I was fightin' your man 'ere, Missus, I was a-tryin' to make meself lose. *It* made me pull the gun—I've never used it on anything but crabs"

Then, in a pleading voice, "You won't turn me over to the Johns, will yer? They'll *make* me talk, they'll make me say wotever they want me to."

"No," said Jane.

Abruptly there were sounds of voices from the corridor outside, a clatter of booted feet running over the stone floor. Men were all around us, uniformed, armed. Jane and I raised our hands high before the menace of their leveled guns. Mullins—lying supine with a blood-stained bandage about his torso—they ignored.

"Shoot the rats now!" yelped somebody. "They'd have blown Port Gregory clear to Pluto if we hadn't got here in time!"

"It wasn't them," came a thin, cracked voice from the floor. "It was me—Mullins." The voice took on a note of pride. "The Last o' the Swagmen. They stopped me."

"Mullins!" said one of the troopers. "Who'd 'a' thought the old creep had it in him? Pick him up, men. We'll take 'em all back for questioning."

"You'll never take *me* alive!" cried Mullins.

With surprising agility he sprang to his feet, pushed through the ring of men surrounding us. Shots were fired—but the light was bad and

the Australian was weaving as he ran. Briefly he bent over a metal manhole cover in the stone floor, sent it in a clattering trajectory that swept the first of his pursuers off his feet. He stood briefly poised over the black hole—then he was gone. A long time afterwards we heard the splash.

There were technicians with the troopers and they busied themselves getting things running once more. We heard one of them say, "D'ye remember when poor old Malcolm fell into the boiler feed? We got his bones next time we cleaned out—absolutely clean and white they were."

Somewhere something was starting up. Its rhythmic chatter seemed to match the meter of a song, an old song—

"Up jumped the swagman, sprang into the billabong,
'You'll never catch me alive!' said he;
And his ghost may be heard as you pass by that billabong—
'You'll come a-waltzing Matilda with me!'"

I've often wondered since if the generator room of that power station is haunted now.

VI

Explanations were in order when we got back to Port Gregory. Luckily for us those who had been on duty at the power station door were able to confirm our story in part, as soon as they recovered from

the effects of the anaesthetic gas.

There was Mullins' swag with some twisted and dried shreds of vegetable matter in it—shreds that might well have been all that remained of bladders that once had held something of a gaseous nature.

And there were Jane's films—these gave a complete sound and visual record of the events of that night from EDDY'S BAR & GRILL onwards. The last part, that dealing with Mullins' story, Jane managed to remove and hide. If it had occurred to anybody that anything was being suppressed the missing portion would have had to be produced. But the shots, inadvertently recorded, of Jane tearing up her slip to make bandages were proof positive of her candor.

Nevertheless we had a sticky time. It was only our Terran citizenship, plus the fact that we were both employees of powerful corporations, that saved us from a stickier one. The most galling part of it was to have Carmichael—Jane pointed him out to me, one of those little dark clever looking characters—sitting in on the interrogation we were put through.

But he wouldn't use the story—it showed Interplanetarily News Services and its gallant news hounds in far too good a light. He could use his influence with the censor to have it killed if Jane wanted to broadcast it from any of the Martian stations. But Jane didn't want to broadcast it until she had the full story. Carmichael wanted that story too, for his Extra-Terran News.

Then there was the Walrus bumbling around, very distressed about it all. "You shouldn't do these things," he kept on saying. "You shouldn't do these things."

"Look, Mr. Consul," I said at last, "if we hadn't done these things, as you put it, there'd be none of us alive to talk about it."

"But the police, Mr. Basset-Wills. It's what they're paid for."

"Fat chance a mere Terran has of getting a Martian cop interested in anything," said Jane.

The Walrus made no verbal reply. He just glared.

I looked about me and felt, not for the first time, that I was getting rather tired of the environment. We were in a room in the Port Gregory Police Headquarters. It was plain but comfortable enough—if one ignored the fact that the best easy chair was firmly occupied by Carmichael of the E.T.N.

I met Carmichael's eyes, then, annoyed by the look of tolerant amusement that was all too evident in them, shifted my regard to the old Consul. He had gone to the faucet in one corner beneath which was a container of paper cups.

He took a cup from the container, held it beneath the tap and pressed the spring lever. Instead of the anticipated steam of clear ice water only a thin muddy trickle emerged. He muttered something under his breath and threw the cup from him.

"Didn't you know, Mr. Consul?" asked the E.T.N. man lazily. "The

water's been off since zero seven hundred this morning."

"Why?" demanded Jane.

"Because, Meredith, we are at war. While you and Mr. Basset Hyphen Wills were cavorting around the Old Power Plant every city on Mars went to Action Stations."

"Action Stations?" I gasped. My dread, the feeling of sick fear that made my stomach drop a helluva long way into nothingness, must have been written large on my face for any observer to read. We had had the beginnings of an atomic war once—and every sane person knew that such a conflict on a large scale can but have only one finish.

"You needn't get alarmed, Wills. We're still on speaking terms with the Terran Central Government," Carmichael added.

"But who *are* you fighting?" This was Jane and even then I had an idea that she was demanding confirmation rather than information. "Who *are* you fighting?"

"Of course," put in the Walrus, "all Terran nationals must take shelter in the Consulate."

Nobody paid any attention. Carmichael took out his cigarette case, selected a cigarette with much care. Then, "I don't know," he admitted. "Do you, Meredith?"

"I don't *know* either," said Jane. The verb was ever so subtly accented. "But what's the dope?"

"You were with us when we went out to get shots of the crabs headed towards Port Gregory along Casartelli's Canal. You saw the way

that they seemed ot be marching almost in military formation. And you saw the way that they broke and scattered when our plane came low and its jets started to cook them.

"There was no intelligence there—it was just a mob of mindless animals bolting for cover—and the bulk of 'em didn't even have the savvy to go for the cover that was nearest and most obvious, the canal itself.

"Nobody worried much about the things until the water went off this morning. Everybody knew what the cause was—just a dust storm that had passed a few miles north of the city and had not been observed or reported. The usual crews went out in their usual *sandcats* with their usual tools. They did not come back. And the water did not come on at all.

"The Department of Water Transport and Irrigation finally got tired of calling the gang boss on the radio telephone and decided to send a plane. It had a crew of two. One man, the pilot, came back.

"It appears that he reached the place where the canal was blocked by what looked like a sand dune. The sluggishly flowing water from the north was just spreading out on each side of the obstruction—spreading out and soaking into the sand. Not far from the dry bed of the canal, just south of the obstruction, he saw the *sandcats* of the working gang. All three machines were standing idle and there was no sign of life in or around them. He

came lower—and saw that the dune had a peculiarly mottled appearance. And he saw something white littered on the sand beside one of the *sandcats*.

"Well, he came down on his jets, landed and the co-pilot put on his respirator and went out to see what was what. The pilot didn't like the looks of things and decided he'd better stay put and keep his jets warm for a quick getaway.

"The co-pilot went first of all to the litter of white rubbish beside the stranded *sandcats*. The pilot saw him bend down to examine it—then he straightened up in a hurry and started running back to the plane. And then the desert simply vomited crabs—thousands of them there must have been.

"The co-pilot had his gun out and was letting fly right and left—but he had to stop to reload. And that was the end of him. The pilot was shooting too—but there were so many of 'em that he made no impression. He kept the door open as long as he dared, hoping that his mate would make it.

"When he saw nothing but a heap of crabs with shreds of cloth and pieces of red meat in their claws he knew it was useless. He slammed the door in a hurry—there were a few hundred of the beasts headed his way from what was left of the co-pilot—and gave her the gun. And nearly went crashing over on to his side.

"While he had been firing at the crabs attacking his mate others had come up on his blind side, had

crawled over his wings and fuselage. Luckily he was able to get his jets balanced—and after a few minutes in the air he had most of 'em shaken off.

"Then he came down again. He saw then, what had caused the mottled appearance of the dune choking the canal—it was the bodies of myriads of crabs. When he saw what was left of his co-pilot he tried to come low over the desert and blast the beasts with his jets—but they burrowed down into the sand before he could get near them."

"And so?" asked Jane softly.

"The crabs have declared war on us. Reports have been coming in from all the cities. Canals have been choked, isolated hunters and trappers and prospectors ambushed and massacred. A caravan between Paris du Ciel and Nieu Arnhem has been attacked—the crabs stopped the *desert schooners* by sheer weight of numbers, jammed the caterpillar tracks with their bodies.

"The only way to get the passengers and crews out is by air—and that's not as easy as you might think. One plane landed a little way from the *sandcats*—and as soon as its doors were open the crabs were all over it and into it.

"The next pilot was smarter. He tried to make a really close landing—and incinerated the *desert-schooner* and everybody inside it. They're going to try flame throwers and asbestos suits next. Meanwhile, with bars of metal that they got from somewhere, the crabs have

pried open one of the *sandcats*."

"You didn't see the caravan that left here this afternoon for Marsala, did you? No, you wouldn't. But you should have—it wasn't a caravan, it was a convoy. A dozen *desert schooners* armed with flame throwers—and an air escort."

"Why don't you use atom bombs?" I asked.

"Use your head, man! The blasted things hide in the sand as soon as they see a rocket plane coming. The only time we see 'em is when they're besieging a stalled caravan—as between Paris du Ciel and Nieu Arnhem—or when there's a mob of 'em too close to a canal or to a city for safety."

"And we've got to make 'em—which takes time, especially with the water supply so uncertain. It's cut off now from the Old Power Station. But if this goes on we shall have to drop some—canals or no canals."

He turned to Jane, "What do you know about this, Meredith?"

"I know nothing."

Again there was the faint accent on the *know*. Carmichael noticed it this time. "Oh, I see. One of your famous hunches. And if you're allowed to follow it what do you propose to do?"

"There's a Spurling Three at the spaceport—you probably know that I purchased it some few days ago. The local Aviators' Guild won't play—but I have my own pilot here. Mr. Basset-Wills is already on the I.P.N.S. payroll."

"I should have thought of that.

But a Master Astronaut's Certificate isn't as good as local knowledge. You can have your pilot now—you can have your pick of the pilots in the Guild."

"Thank you. But I think I'll stick to Peter. He should be able to read a map. I take it that you're speaking for the big white chiefs, Carmichael? What strings are tied to this lovely proposition?"

"None," replied the E.T.N. man. "At least—not so you'd notice it. Any visual or sound recordings you make will, of course, have to go through the censor—but that's routine. Frankly we want to get to the bottom of this—and fast. You can ferret out the truth if anybody can."

"Thank you, kind sir. When can we go?"

"Any time you like. Your Spur-Jing is stocked up with food and water. There are maps and instruments. There are two automatic rifles with ammunition, two flame throwers and a couple of hand guns each."

"And no strings?"

"No strings."

"Good. But we'll not start till daylight tomorrow morning. There are a few things to check first. To begin with—have you any of these crabs in captivity?"

"Yes. They found two still clinging on to the wings of the Department of Water Transport and Irrigation plane."

"Take us to 'em."

"Really, Miss Meredith," bleated the Walrus plaintively, "in times

like these all Earth nationals should . . ."

". . . take refuge in the Consulate," finished Jane. "But whoever or whatever is behind all this doesn't give a damn if you're a Terran or an Alpha Centaurian. All we are is crab fodder. Or," she added under her breath, "fertiliser sounds a lot more like it."

VII

Before we did anything else we saw the first—and only—two prisoners of this strange campaign. We had to go outside the dome to see them and, frankly, it hardly seemed worth the trouble of putting on outdoor clothing and respirators just to look at two such ugly specimens.

They have a half dozen or so in the London Interplanetary Zoo back on Earth—and once you've seen them you've seen all Martian land crabs. True—these, not having to labor against the pull of a heavier gravity, were a little more spry. But they were no more handsome.

I don't know whether you've seen the beasts. They aren't very prepossessing. Their body is about twelve inches in diameter by nine in thickness and is balanced on top of a bunch of spidery stilts fully five feet in length.

The limbs on which the claws are mounted are elongated far beyond the proportions of those of their Terran ancestors. The eyes are on long telescopic stalks, so that when the creature is submerged in the sea of sand it can use them as periscopes. And there are two antennae

which can, in the Martian variety, be used as a sort of lasso.

These two were in a cage of stout wire toward the edge of the landing field. Now and again they would seize the thick strands with their massive claws, shake and strain with uncoordinated fury. There was no concerted action, no evidence of intelligent co-operation. We felt that the two prisoners were dimly aware of us only as food, as enemies larger than themselves.

"I thought so," said Jane softly. "I thought so . . ."

What with the thin air and our masks I barely heard her. Carmichael, who was standing further from her than I was, did not. He was not intended to. I bent towards Jane until the transparent plastic fronts of our helmets were touching and demanded what it was she thought.

"The vegetable gardens on the crabs' backs, you fool. Don't you see the connection between them and poor old Mossy Whiskers?"

"Mossy Whiskers? Oh, you mean Mullins. Frankly, no."

"It's obvious. It—"

Just then a shift of the thin wind brought a great cloud of black oily smoke billowing over us from the trench that had been hastily dug around the city. Masked as we were it made no difference whatsoever to our breathing—but it seemed that it should.

Involuntarily I held my breath. After I had brought up my sleeve to wipe my facepiece clear I saw that Jane was headed in the direc-

tion of the trench full of burning oil, the flame throwers and the asbestos-suited figures like demons from some medieval hell.

I followed but there was nothing much to see. Just a ditch packed with lurid fire, just the flame throwers on its nearer edge, standing to the alert like the artillery of a beleaguered city. They *were* the artillery of a beleaguered city—and upon them devolved the task of keeping the gates and the landing field clear of the investing hosts.

We watched for awhile. The scene had its fascination—but there was no action to compel the interest. Action there had been—the piles of crustacean corpses with burst carapaces and cindery legs attested to that. But nothing was happening just then.

So Jane went back into Port Gregory to pack whatever gear she required for the morrow's trip and I got Carmichael to show me our Spurling Three. By the time I had assured myself that all was in order the last of the daylight was gone and the cold stars were looking down on the ruddy fires, Man's age-old defense against a hostile Nature.

She was a nice little job, that Spurling Three. I had flown similar turret-drive ships on Gannymede—flying transport is essentially the same on all the worlds with thin or non-existent atmosphere. Carmichael—or the people he was representing—had certainly done us proud in the matter of equipment. Charts for the whole of Mars, cor-

rected almost to the latest second, and a chronometer and a bubble sextant for use in the event—far from impossible these days—of a failure of the Martian Loran stations.

She was commodious too. We could live in her pressure cabin for days at a stretch, if need be, without suffering more than minor discomforts. And whoever had looked after the commissariat must have had a siege of at least a month's duration in mind.

Dawn was just coloring the desert rim when we blasted off that morning. The smoke from the flame defenses hung low and oily and through the dark artificial clouds the sun struggled with a dim ruddiness foreign to Mars with its clear thin atmosphere. But it was a matter of seconds only before our roaring jets lifted us above the smokescreen. Port Gregory looked like an island, like a strangely symmetrical rock lifting its ivory pinnacles above a black swirling sea.

For awhile I busied myself with the turret drive, trying to strike the correct combination of jet angle and power feed that would give me desired forward momentum without loss or gain of altitude.

I could have left it all to the automatic pilot—but one thing we are taught in the Service is never to place too implicit a faith in any machine. Man, with all his shortcomings, is a robust robot who can take over when conditions have caused a breakdown of the often

more fragile, invariably more specialized, mechanisms.

"Set the course zero, zero, zero," said Jane. "Speed six hundred knots."

"Terran or Martian?"

"What does it matter? Anyhow you'd better navigate this beast. Follow the canal to Paris du Ciel, then circle the city at low speed. I want some shots. While we're about it we may as well have a look at Marsala—and Nieu Arnhem—and Tamaragrad—and Collisburg—and the others."

"And what time do you plan on getting to the tulgey wood just south of the North Pole?"

"It's not important. Just about dark will do. We'll set the jets to hover, get in a good night's sleep, then we'll have a full day to explore."

"Okay. You're the captain."

So all that day we spent sweeping along the canals, observing the damage wrought by the crustacean armies. We could see that while progress had been made in clearing the worst blockages the work of blocking was still going on.

Hordes of crabs we glimpsed, hordes that melted speedily into the desert sand at our approach. Looking astern we saw them break surface, mottling the rusty expanse with a darker brown, looking for all the world like some fantastically swift-growing form of plant life springing up in our wake.

Other planes were in the air, planes bearing the insignia of the Martian Government. Most of them

ignored us but now and again some officious patrol commander would demand our identity and destination. But they let us go on our lawful occasions without hindrance.

But our observations of the Martian cities between Port Gregory and the northern polar cap taught us nothing new. The domes themselves differed only in minor details from each other—Paris du Ciel could be distinguished by the graceful latticework towers surmounting it, Tamaragrad by the huge statue of Tamara Rynin, commander of the first Soviet expedition and first woman on Mars—but the scene around each was a repetition of that around Port Gregory.

There was the same moat dug deep into the sand, filled with burning oil, the same batteries of improvised flame throwers. We saw only one thing fresh, a convoy of the *desert schooners* fighting its way into Nieu Arnhem. And when the dozen big tractors had forced their way through the myriad armored bodies of the crabs one of their number was left stalled, its caterpillar tracks clogged by the crushed bodies of the enemy.

Its flame throwers spurted viciously but briefly—they must have been in use almost continuously on the run from whatever city the convoy had come. And then the crabs were all around and all over it.

One of the patrolling aircraft swooped low over the scene, trailing a fine, misty spray. When it had passed the crabs were motionless and masked figures emerged

from the body of the tractor, worked frantically to clear the tracks before fresh hordes would be upon them.

There was nothing we could do to help and in any case the situation appeared to be well under control. So having obtained our shots we pushed on. The sun was fountaining fast below the desert's western rim when a low glare in the sky ahead told of the nearness of the polar icefield. A dark mass short of the glare had to be the forest of which Mullins had talked.

VIII

Dark and forbidding, black against the pale glare to the northward, stretched the forest. Its edge was a seemingly unbroken wall set against the southern sands, a living wall, a wall whose face was set with knives and spines, with yard-long bayonets presented against any possible invader.

To the east the forest was bounded by Casartelli's Canal. We followed the waterway north to the edge of the ice and snow, to the white dead plains that were harshly scintillant in the aching beams of our searchlights. The sun had now set and only Deimos, low in the sky, cast its shifting radiance over the scene.

But in the powerful light of the lamps we could find no break in the wall of greenery. West we flew, along the forest's northern edge, then south down Duval's Canal, its western boundary. Over the forest we flew—and there was no sign of even a small clearing.

Our original scheme had been to hover for the night just south of the wood. No better plan presented itself and so it was that I set the controls to maintain a comfortable five-hundred-foot altitude. I didn't feel too happy about it.

In Space, if your drive should fail, you have plenty of time to do something about it. Here, over a planetary surface, it seemed very risky. Still it was less risky than making a landing and having whatever monsters were harbored by the forest swarm over the Spurling while we slept.

For awhile we sat in the pilots' chairs and smoked and talked. Both moons came up, hurtled eerily across the black sky. The dark mass below and to the north seemed to shift and stir. We knew that it was only a trick of the light—but it seemed to be the enchanted wood of all the less pleasant fairy stories of our childhood.

And then a portion of the shadowy bulk seemed to put out pseudopods, stretched hungry arms out over the desert. Jane reached for her camera fast, and I just sat and stared. It wasn't possible, but . . . There was an evil magic in the night that made anything possible.

Anticlimactically the arms of darkness broke off from the parent body, split each into a hundred black blobs. Over the sand they raced with a peculiarly jerky motion, coalesced and then exploded into a thousand leaping fragments.

The rabbits were making high festival under the light of the

moons, were sporting with a care-free abandon unknown to higher life forms weighed down with the cares and troubles brought by intelligence and the responsibilities of civilization.

From the shadowy wood marched other shadows, compactly grouped, military. Moving with fast precision they wheeled over the moonlit sands, encircled the gamboling rabbits with a thin cordon. This drew in towards the edge of the woods, for all the world as though it were a loop of rope, a noose, being drawn tight by somebody within the shadows. Somebody—or something.

"So the party's over," said Jane at last. "The bunnies have had their fun and frolic, their evening's exercise. The sheepdogs have rounded up the flock for the night. And I think it's time to get some sleep."

She bedded down on the settee in the little living cabin and I made a passable enough couch with the two pilots' chairs. The next thing we knew the time-alarm was shrilling and the sun was just toppling the eastern horizon.

There were no signs of life when we grounded gently on the fine sand. We put on our fur-lined coveralls over our indoor clothing and asbestos woven fabric suits on top of everything. We buckled on the belts with the heavy pistols in their holsters, with ammunition pouches for both the hand guns and the automatic rifles.

We assisted each other with the harnesses to which were affixed the

canisters of the portable flame throwers. We put on our respirators. And then we found that we couldn't get out of the cabin door. It was the flame throwers that were the trouble. So we had to take them off and put them on again when we got outside.

The next job was bedding the grapnel. It didn't seem possible that any anchoring device could find a grip in the dry pulverized sand of Mars. But whoever had designed these grapnels had done a masterly job. Their many spidery arms, their spatulate extensions, would catch and hold. Whether or not they could have held against a wind with the weight of Earth's atmosphere behind it is a moot point—but on Earth you'd have something a little more solid in which to anchor.

About six feet above the grapnel, attached to the mooring cable, was a remote control device. On its button being depressed the drive would start, the ship would rise vertically and hover at a predetermined altitude, well clear of any inquisitive or hostile animals or humans.

It was necessary, on actuating the remote control mechanism, to step well back to avoid being caught by the backblast of the jets. Then the tiny control panel could be unshipped with a simple anti-clockwise half-turn. It was like a key inasmuch as only this panel would fit into this particular socket.

All very ingenious and all very foolproof—provided one did not

want to get away in a tearing hurry. I, for one, hoped this would not be the case.

Walking along the edge of the forest we looked in vain for an opening. It would have been suicidal to attempt to force a way in—this we found with our first tentative experiments. The needle-thin ends of the vegetable bayonets penetrated with ease the thicknesses of asbestos weave and fur-lined drill, inflicted a painful prick on the inquisitive finger.

The cutting edge of the defenses was tried upon the tough plastic leather of a pistol holster—and the ease with which it sheared through the stout synthetic made it plain that it would be far healthier to go for a swim in a sea of broken bottles.

It was perhaps half an hour after we had commenced our exploration that we found the pathway. We would have passed it without seeing it as in all probability we had passed many similar openings, had it not been for the white rabbit. The animal was standing there quite quietly, its snowy fur in startling contrast to the dark foliage. It let us approach within a few feet of it before it turned and loped into the shadows.

It was the first time that I had seen one of the rabbits at close quarters. I was familiar enough with their terrestrial ancestors—and it came as a shock to see for myself what changes had been wrought in the homely stock by an alien environment.

Fully five feet high the animal stood. Had it not been for the absence of tail it could have passed for a kangaroo of sorts. The chest was developed to house the big lungs demanded by the thin atmosphere, making the creature, in spite of its powerful hind legs, look absurdly topheavy.

It stood—or rather squatted—and regarded us with faintly curious pink eyes. The split upper lip worked over the big projecting incisors. We knew that rabbits, even on Mars, weren't carnivorous but those over-large teeth looked to be capable of inflicting considerable damage at close quarters. So did the claws with which both fore and hind feet were armed.

We stood and looked at the white rabbit and the white rabbit stood and looked at us and it wasn't until we brought our automatic rifles to the ready that the albino decided it didn't care for our company. It turned, dropped to all fours and vanished into the wood. It was all too Alice-in-Wonderlandish. And so, with unreality strong upon us, we followed—or tried to follow.

It was the flame throwers that got in the way. They were too bulky, much too bulky. It didn't matter whether we tried a frontal approach or sought to sidle in through the opening. They caught and held.

When our protective clothing was shredded by a score of deep slashes, each one barely missing the skin beneath, we decided that we

would have to abandon what was, probably, our most effective weapon. It never occurred to us to use these same projectors to clear a path through the undergrowth that cut at us.

It wouldn't have mattered much if we had—it is probable that had we done so their charges would have been exhausted long before we wished to use them for anything else but road clearance.

Her voice muffled by her head-piece, thin in the thin air, Jane was saying something. I strained my ears to catch it.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son,
The jaws that bite, the claws
that catch,
Beware the Jub-jub tree and
shun
The frumious bandersnatch."

It was all very apposite—and in this forest of spiny growths that stretched their bayonet leaves a hundred or more feet into the thin air it was not very cheering. The light—or lack of it—was all wrong for one to be able to appreciate Lewis Carroll's nonsense as it was meant to be appreciated.

In this green gloom the Jub-jub "tree," with its sharp swords and knives lining the narrow winding path along which we trod, was indeed a thing of which to beware. It had ceased to be *Collinsia Utilensis*, a mere plant existing for the use and convenience of the master race of the known Universe.

It was something older, stronger, something guarding its secrets with a quietly vicious determination.

And all the time I was mentally kicking myself for letting a few lines of absurd doggerel send my mind wandering along such nonsensical tracks.

We saw no more of our friend the white rabbit. Once or twice we thought we glimpsed movement along the trail, figures that vanished behind the next corner just before we could see them properly. It may have been imagination, it may not. But so far we had encountered nothing but the purely passive hostility of the spiky plants.

Then we came to the clearing. It was roughly circular, about twenty feet in diameter. The ground was covered with a short mossy growth, springy under the feet. It may have been only another manifestation of the versatile *Collinsia*—but it was hard to appreciate the fact that it was all part of the same plant whose towering upthrust shut out the very sky. In any case we had more important things than botany on our minds. For there were the remains of a plastic tent strewn over the ground. Something had tried to eat the inedible synthetic, something else had shredded it with sharp claws.

But it was obviously a portable shelter of the type used by the trappers and prospectors, such as had been used by the Last of the Swagmen. And a smoke-blackened cylinder of thin aluminium was proof positive that this was where

Mullins had made his last camp. Not that I realized what it was at first, I didn't realize until I heard Jane softly singing—

"And he sang as he watched and waited while his billy boiled,
You'll come a-waltzing Ma-tilda with me!"

But the evocation of the ghost of the dead Mullins would get us nowhere. I fought to throw off the mood of doubt, of indecision, that had somehow descended upon us. I tried not to hear the furtive rustlings that came from all around us, where something stirred in the thick undergrowth.

I think these pitiful relics of the Last of the Swagmen had brought it home to us that we were fools rushing in where any angel would fear to tread, that the only advantage we had over the Australian was that we were forewarned. But we were no better armed.

Jane, of course, regarded this, of all moments, as a time suitable for further quotation from Carroll

"And as in uffish thought he stood
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood
And burbled as it came . . ."

It would be incorrect to describe the sound as *whiffling*. That word conveys an impression of speed. This was more the noise of ar-

mored bodies forcing themselves not too rapidly through a natural barbed-wire entanglement. There were plenty of them. And they didn't burble.

The sound that came from their multitudinous mouths was more of a dry rustling, the grating of horny surface on horny surface as the disgustingly complex machinery of crustacean jaws worked avidly and unceasingly.

Had we stayed in the clearing we could have held them off indefinitely—given an inexhaustible supply of ammunition. It was simple—as soon as an armored carapace pushed through the undergrowth a heavy slug from a pistol or a high velocity rifle bullet would smash it. At that range we couldn't miss. The slaughter was great but it was getting us precisely nowhere. Our only hope of escape lay in fighting our way back to the desert and the Spurling Three.

Speaking hastily in broken sentences between bursts from our guns, we arranged a plan of campaign. I was to go first, clearing a way ahead, and Jane was to follow, her back to my back, fighting off pursuit.

For the first few yards it worked. It seemed as if our enemies were discouraged by the accuracy of our fire. We allowed ourselves to feel hopeful. But we had forgotten one thing—the fact that they could climb. And when a shower of heavy bodies—all legs and pincers and flinty armor—dropped on us from above we knew the fight was over.

We went on fighting—but we knew the fight was over.

IX

We didn't go on fighting long either. Our rifles were snatched from us. We managed to get off a round or two from our pistols—and then they were gone. There was a brief period of the frenzied snapping off of spidery limbs with our hands—a nightmarish business that even now gives me the cold shudders when I think about it.

They got me down first. There were pincers at my arms and legs, gripping painfully. There was the weight of a dozen or more armored bodies on my chest. And there were sharp-clawed spiny feet scrabbling over my clothing and over my helmet until I feared that the tough transparent plastic would tear, that I would asphyxiate helplessly in the too-thin air of Mars.

Looking back on it all I am rather amused that I should have been so concerned about the manner of my going when I was as good as gone. It may have been that Mullins' story, if it were true, promised us at least a few more hours of life. In those few hours anything could happen.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jane go down, saw her picked up and carried, still in a supine position, along the narrow path. I felt the pincers on my wrists and arms, ankles and legs, tighten their grip.

Then the crabs lifted me from the ground and I saw the tracery of

dark spikes and fronds, the tiny infrequent patches of distant sky, begin to move. The pain of serrated claws pressing deep had dulled to numbness when the limited overhead view changed abruptly to the brown earth roof of a tunnel. For a little it was dark and then there was a wan greenish phosphorescence.

It was warm down here. Our heavy clothing had been ideal for the near-freezing midday temperature of the surface but now, even though no muscular effort was being made, it was uncomfortably hot. The desire to scratch, to wipe away the little rivulets of perspiration running down my face, was almost more than I could stand. More than anything else in the world I wanted to tear off my mask, to put an end to the intolerable irritation. But steel-hard pincers would not permit the slightest movement.

The air was getting thicker. The outside pressure was approximating that inside our respirators. They no longer stood out from our faces like inflated balloons, they sagged down and rested clammily on our features like an extra skin. They added considerably to our discomfort. We were helpless to do anything.

We came at last to a place of growing things—a cavern where a thin path or tunnel wound tortuously through a tenticular mass of luminescent foliage. It was here that the crabs stopped, that their appendages with amazing dexterity

loosed the fastenings of our masks. The masks were lifted from our heads and it was then that I heard Jane.

"Peter," she was calling. "Peter! Are you all right?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I'm doin' fine. As well as can be expected, anyhow. I can still breathe—and at last I can talk—*Damn!*"

"What's wrong?"

"A mouthful of some floury stuff. It's coming from these blasted vines. My hair is full of it."

"So is mine. *And* it's itching . . ."

"Then this is it," she said. "Remember poor old Mullins and his mossy hair and whiskers. Remember the crabs and the lichenous growth on their shells."

Things began to add up and make sense.

"But," I objected, "the rabbits. Why can't it do the same to them?"

"I don't know. Maybe their instincts of cleanliness are too strong for it, maybe they go and roll in the sand before this parasitical weed has a chance to catch hold. Perhaps Mullins could have done likewise had his personal hygiene been up to that of the rabbits. It may be strong enough to make me blow up a power station—but it'll have to be stronger still to stop me from washing my hair!"

By this time we were out of the cave of vines, were being carried deeper and deeper still below the surface of Mars. The tunnel was dark again but a dim steady radiance was coming from ahead. There was

light there—and, as we were carried closer to its source, a smell. It was a smell compounded of carrion and of growing things, a smell of life and of death. Of life—but no normal healthy life could smell like this.

The stench was overpowering when at last we were borne into the deepest cavern of all. It came from a pile of animal carcasses that were stacked around what at first sight appeared to be a huge snake. But its black coils were completely motionless, and there was neither head nor tail.

Without tapering, without any diminution of thickness whatsoever, the lower end vanished into the soil of the cavern floor. The upper portion divided itself into scores of tentacles some of which, scarcely less in diameter than the parent body, seemed to have penetrated the earthen roof and walls of the cave. Others, varying in thickness from a thin whiplash to a half-inch wand, drooped listlessly, not unlike the dejected branches of a Terran weeping willow.

But it was alive—of that there was no doubt. And it was powerful. Almost visible waves of force beat out around it. Little tendrils of thought crept from it, insinuated themselves, questing, into our minds. Insinuated themselves—and recoiled.

There was surprise there—and disappointment. Surprise that here were two specimens of *homo sapiens* far less easy to control than the last specimen, until then the

only living one, had been. And disappointment—for the same reason.

"So it didn't catch," Jane said softly. "It didn't catch. I see now—those seeds or spores or whatever they were that were dusted on us in that cave of vines are yet another manifestation of *Collinsia Utilensis*. A very specialized one.

"They are *en rapport*, telepathically, with the parent-root here. Through them this—intelligence controls the organisms on which it has planted its agents. Through them it sees with their eyes. It was easy enough to start them on the crabs—their shells are far from clean. There is dried crusted blood there, all manner of filth, relics of meals ever since the monsters first burst from the egg.

"With rabbits it wouldn't be so easy—they are clean from the word go and keep themselves so. The same applies to us—I hope. But on poor old Mullin's scalp the spores found fertile soil. I hope it can't understand what I'm saying."

I hoped so, too. It had just struck me that while it had Mullins under its control it could have learned English. And the prospects of being rolled in that pile of carrion, of decomposing rabbit carcasses that provided sustenance for the plant intelligence, was not one upon which to dwell with any degree of enthusiasm.

I hoped that it had no organs of hearing.

And when the crabs, still gripping me hard and painfully, carried me to the huge root I feared

that the worst was about to happen. But they halted when still a few feet from the stinking pile, halted and froze into immobility.

The tendrils pendent from the top of the root stirred sluggishly. They writhed into slow, painful movement. I heard Jane gasp with horror behind me. She told me afterwards that she feared this was the vampire plant so beloved of fantasy authors, that I was to be drained of blood to make a meal for the vegetable monster.

From the bunch of tentacles two separated themselves. They were unlike the others inasmuch that each bore on its end what looked like a flat sucking disc. Their appearance was far from reassuring. Down they came with slow deliberation. The first made contact with my left temple. There was a mild tingling shock. Seconds later the other attached itself to my right temple.

It is hard to describe what happened afterward. It is best to say, perhaps, that without volition I found myself remembering *everything*. From my very earliest days right to the present moment the stream of memory flowed through my brain—flowed, I am sure, into whatever alien mind was possessed by our captor. There were things I had forgotten, things that I had often tried to forget. There was all my knowledge, all my experience, all that I was.

And that wasn't the whole of it. Try to imagine a sort of psychological osmosis. It's not the correct

term, I know, but that's how it worked out. It wasn't a one way traffic. I don't think for one moment that *Collinsia* intended things to pan out that way—it just happened.

As far as my end was concerned it was like watching two cinema screens at once. One film I had seen before—but the other had never been seen by Man. It was the story of a world, small, barren—a world to which intelligent life had come relatively late.

It was the story of one intelligence which had grown near the north pole of the planet, which was anchored as much by the shortage of water elsewhere as by its own immobility, to the moisture just south of the polar icecap.

There it preyed upon the stems and leaves and fruit which were the laboratories, the observatories, of the intelligence, a little hardy animal not unlike the earthly armadillo. The intelligence developed spiny protections for its above-the-surface growths, for the unintelligent projections of itself that observed and recorded.

And the armadillo-beast ranged over the surface of the red planet until at last there was no more plant life to be found, until it died vainly in its thousands on the specialized, deadly barriers protecting the intelligence from depredation.

But the intelligence was curious. Its tendrils explored the bodies of the dead armadillos, paid special attention to the brain. And it developed yet another form of itself

—a tiny almost fungoid growth that flourished on any not-too-clean surface of living integument.

It was, in ways that were incomprehensible to me, a sort of telepathic receiving and transmitting set. In various places the spiny barrier was let down. The armadillos found the gaps, penetrated the undergrowth and feasted. And, as the microscopic spores fell on to their carapaces, fell and rooted and flourished, they became the slaves of the intelligence.

It was then that the canals were cut. Driving south, driven by the cold brain outside their bodies, the armadillo-beasts excavated their way clear to the South Pole. Along the canals fresh colonies of the intelligence sprang up, colonies whose seeds were carried in the alimentary canals of the little animals, colonies whose seeds had been embedded within the tempting fruits developed by the intelligence.

With excretions from their own bodies the canal builders cemented the beds of the canals—and built strongly, surely, almost permanently. And the whole of Mars was now one vast laboratory for the intelligence as the roots of the new colonies linked up with those of the parent plant at the northern pole.

It was intended then that most of the armadillos should die, that only a small colony should survive as a reservoir of mobile slaves for the intelligence. The unwanted beasts, their work done, were driven by the intelligence to fall upon each other with tooth and claw, to leave

their rotting bodies where they would best serve as fertilizer.

The small number of favored animals did not survive for long. Out of the wreckage of the slaughter came a tiny enemy, a micro-organism, a disease that ran through the depleted ranks of the armadillos like a consuming fire.

Given time — the intelligence could have coped with the situation. It did find a cure for the disease—but it was too late. Only males were left and barely a score of those. And they, while they lived spread the plant colonies to the last few corners of the planet as yet unsettled. And died.

Years passed, years during which the canals silted up, years which saw the gradual slackening of the grip with which the intelligence had once firmly held its world. It tried to develop mobile forms of itself, achieved a certain limited success with feathery bundles that drifted before the thin winds.

But true mobility, a mobility that could work, that could delve and build, somehow always eluded it. There is no doubt that, given time, the problem would have been solved. But before it was even well begun Man, on his wings of flame and thunder, came down from the stars to take over the planet.

X

Man was always a mystery to the intelligence. It had no opportunities for a thorough examination, no chance for anything more than superficial observation. At first it

seemed that a mutually profitable relationship, a sort of symbiosis, might be possible. Man cleared the canals, set again in motion the sluggish flow north and south from the melting icecaps. Of this the intelligence was coldly appreciative.

But it soon became obvious that Man regarded himself as the master, saw the colonies of the intelligence as no more than a humble life form set on Mars for his use and convenience. To him the thorny barriers protecting the plant laboratories and observatories were no barrier.

And man brought with him humbler life forms. One of these, furry, stupid, might make an ideal slave for the intelligence. But for one thing. The seeds of the telepathic organisms would not flourish in its clean pelt. But it didn't matter. The other creature, carnivorous, heavily armed and armored, could be enslaved. With it other less well equipped life forms could be controlled—or exterminated.

There was more, much more. But the point of view was so hopelessly alien that it was impossible more than vaguely to sense its meaning.

During the latter stages of this strange inquisition, this forced exchange of thoughts and memories, the crabs released my arms. I was free to move—but it was an illusory freedom. As long as the tendrils with their discs were in contact I was able to move only as the intelligence directed.

One by one, reluctantly, I emptied my pockets. Item by item I handed their contents up into the nest of writhing tentacles. And as each article was examined I found myself visualizing its use, its application.

Then it was all over. The big pincers clamped down again on my arms, the discs were withdrawn from my forehead. I managed to turn my head as I passed Jane. She was looking white and sick.

"Cheer up," I was able to say. "It's not too bad. You learn as much about It as It learns about you. When we get out of here you'll have the news beat of all time."

"*When* we get out," she said.

During my own inquisition I had found time to wonder briefly, vaguely, why Jane had kept so silent. Now I found out. I tried to say something reassuring, something showing a hope, a confidence, that I was far from feeling. I never got passed the first syllable.

One of those infernal crabs clapped its pincer down on my mouth—and in its pincer it was holding a pad of some spongy vegetable matter. One taste of it decided me that a dignified silence was the best policy.

I could watch. I was amazed. It seemed to me that the whole process had taken hours—though it could not have endured more than minutes at the most. Then came the handing over and examination of the contents of pockets and pouches. I felt a conviction that it

would break Jane's heart to have to lose her camera, the little machine that already held within its body records that would be invaluable should we ever get back to civilization.

But cigarette case, cosmetics container and handkerchiefs were all dealt with.

Then it was the turn of the photographic and sound-recording equipment and accessories. I didn't see what the first item was. I knew it was something important from Jane's strained expression.

I did not know until afterwards the intensity of the effort with which she had snapped the psychic bonds that held her—snapped them for just long enough to move the index finger of her right hand a fraction of an inch.

With shocking suddenness the little object burst into incandescence. I know now that its light was not of sufficient intensity to be actually dangerous—but our eyes by this time were well accustomed to the dimly glowing dusk of the caves.

I saw the tendrils of the great root writhe and recoil from the source of the searing radiance—and even though I now had no physical contact with the intelligence Its wordless screaming beat strongly inside my brain. And for Jane it was worse. The two sucker pads were still touching her forehead—she was receiving all the *thing's* frightened agony.

The pincers of the crabs grip-

ping my legs and arms relaxed, opened. I fell heavily to the ground. The crabs stood motionless in stiff ungainly attitudes—ugly clockwork toys somebody had forgotten to wind. Not sparing them a second glance I scrambled hastily to my feet. With eyes half closed against the light I lurched forward.

Jane was sprawled where she had been dropped. As each wave of pain, of fear, from the plant intelligence struck her she twitched. Her face was a deathly white in the glare of her daylight lamp. Her eyes were shut.

It took only a second's work to snatch the two tendrils away from her head. They came easily, hung limp and lifeless once they were clear. I wanted to hold her, to protect her. This I did—but not for long. She stirred, the eyes flickered open.

"Where's my camera?" were her first words.

So the moment passed. I found myself holding the flaring light while she took shots of the huge root with its writhing tendrils and tentacles, of the crabs frozen in their attitudes of menacing ugliness.

"It's a pity we couldn't get the rest," she murmured. "But this will have to do."

We found our respirators in our pouches—it was obvious that the thing in the cave had intended us to return to the surface, had intended to use us as It had Mullins. But Mullins had returned to the surface with the aid of all the

queer denizens of this odd corner of Mars. We would have had no such aid—and our weapons were gone.

All but one and that the most powerful of all—light, that was to this dweller in the darkness a searing flame. Light, that would immobilize as long as it lasted the power station from which all the living autoinata of Mars drew their energy. Light, that had by Jane's reckoning but a scant fifteen minutes more to live.

So we left it there. We had a pocket flash, feeble by comparison, that would light us to the surface. We hurried through the tunnels, pausing only to ship our respirators when we came to the cave of the vines.

On our way we passed many of the giant crabs. They were not dead—and they were not as motionless as those in the cavern of the intelligence had been. Their claws twitched hungrily as we hurried past, the spidery legs trembled. The light was dying.

The tunnel seemed unconscionably long. Not until we blundered into the spines and spikes of *Collensia* in its tree-like form did we realize that night had fallen on the upper world during our captivity. Neither Phobos nor Deimos was anywhere near the zenith—all that filtered through the dense canopy was the faint light of such rare stars as were almost directly overhead.

Around us the forest was stirring, was awakening from the sleep into

which we had plunged it. And from the tunnel up which we had fled came rustling and scraping noises. Overhead something droned, shone briefly incandescent through the lattice of spiny fronds.

"I hate to do it," Jane was almost sobbing, "but it's our only chance!"

She directed the beam of her pocket flash upwards. It stabbed the darkness in broken rhythm—three dots, three dashes three dots. The droning roar was growing louder and as the flare of jets struck down through the trees Jane sent her SOS again.

Whoever was up there would have to be fast. The darkness around us was alive with crepitating menace. I do not know to this day why the thing in the cave was so slow in throwing all its forces against us. Weaponless, we stood no chance of survival.

It may be that though the light had died it had still to collect its scattered faculties. Or it may well be that what seemed to us to be long minutes was in reality only short seconds.

The ship in the sky was coming down. She was painfully slow—she had literally to burn her way. And she had to descend in a tight spiral. Otherwise a patch would have been cleared only directly under the jets and her nose and tail assembly would have caught and held in the trees. At the finish we had to retreat into the tunnel to escape being incinerated by the down-stabbing lances of fire.

Jane shone her torch down the

tunnel. Its beam fell on a nightmare jumble of jointed pincers and spidery legs and waving antennae. The crabs were coming up slowly, hesitantly. But they were coming. They were coming up faster than the ship was coming down.

There was something hard and round at my feet—I remembered having stumbled over this same object on my way out. I bent and picked it up. It was a stone, old and rounded. It was a good two feet in diameter.

When I threw it I heard the sound of splintering shells, of spattering body fluids. It was intensely satisfying. But there were no more stones for me to throw.

We felt the unmistakable tremor as the ship grounded and the tunnel mouth flared with multi-colored fire for a second before the drive was cut. As we stumbled out into the open a door in the fuselage gaped suddenly. In it, silhouetted against the light, was a black figure, urgently waving.

We needed no pressing invitation to enter the ship. And even the fact that the waving figure was Carmichael of ETN did little to take the edge off our relief. Frankly, it did nothing to take the edge off mine.

Carmichael was very decent about it all—the discovery of the plant intelligence was an I.P.N.S. scoop and broadcast as such. The rescue of Jane Meredith was an E.T.N. scoop—and neither I.P.N.S. nor Jane herself was inclined to deny

the rival firm full credit for what they had done.

The unfortunate part of it all was that Jane's script and films had to go through the censorship. And the editing—for that was what it was—was beautifully done. It seemed at first glance that almost nothing had been deleted.

Almost nothing was. Such few changes as had been made called it the story of a gallant people fighting a desperate battle against a sinister alien intelligence. And somehow the real unflattering issue was obscured, lost.

We can tell the story now—but it has lost its news value. The beat has been made and has gone down in newscasting history and in the memories of the public. The Martians have gained considerable interplanetary prestige in consequence.

They were grateful to us, these same Martians. Jane was presented with no less than three outfits of finest Martian bunny, of a quality that but rarely finds its way onto the open market. Had she desired they would have clothed her in the precious fur from the skin out.

They were grateful to us—but they didn't like having us around. And when *Thunderflame* put in, outward bound for the Jovian system, they booked first class passages for us, notwithstanding the fact that we wanted to return to Earth by the shortest and quickest route. But they didn't like having us around.

"You'd think we were plague carriers," I complained to Jane.

"In a way we are," she replied. "You know what the native intelligence thinks of humans—to It we're all just a parasitical pest, battenning off a planet where we don't belong. The worst part of it is people here are just going to have to endure it. For if they destroy It, they destroy the entire life-balance of the planet itself."

"So why does that make them not want us around?" I asked.

"Kiss me, you fool," she said. And, when I had done so to her satisfaction, "Does anyone like having people around who have learned from a vegetable that they are nothing but two-legged lice? People who know they are going

to have to play up to this vegetable in spite of what It thinks of them?"

"I begin to see your point," I said. "Come to think of it, Martians being hypersensitive anyway, it couldn't have been fun for them."

Jane looked at me and sighed and shook her beautiful blond head. "It's a good thing I'm going to make an honest man of you as soon as we can get the papers," she informed me. "You're not really bright enough to be wandering around loose, darling."

"Careful," I told her, "or you'll be making me feel the way we make the Martians feel."

"Which," she said loftily, "is entirely fit and proper for husbands."



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