

PLANET STORIES



VOL. 5, No. 3 • A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE • NOVEMBER, 1951

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T. T. SCOTT, President

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The LAST LAUGH

by BRYCE WALTON

The visitor from Mars was a first-rate howl. Earthmen reckoned he was endowed with all the qualities of all the greatest clowns in the history of Buffoonery. Often though, the distance between humor and terror can be too short to be funny.

THE scarred rocket rolled down street canyons away from United Nations City, wheeled toward Madison Square Garden between jam-packed, crazily-cheering millions of citizens from every nation on Earth.

Confetti snow drifted in colorful storm, wild faces shone through drifts of spiraling streamers. Signs floated everywhere. Neon signs blinked off and on. Signs floated from balloons across the kleig-lighted sky. Welcome hero signs. And even signs shouting:

WELCOME TO EARTH—ZEKE!

They spelled the name wrong, Johnson thought with some dismay. But that's the way it sounded, he decided, when I radioed in ahead that there was a Martian with us.

Spelled ZEKE, the name scarcely projected the dignity of the name's sound in Martian language. But, in thinking about it now, Johnson realized that it was the only way it could be spelled or pronounced in English.

This seemingly insignificant fact bothered Johnson now. He felt a growing uneasiness. The Martian was largely his responsibility, he felt. It had been Johnson who had spent most of the time on the first visit to Mars with the few Martians left in that one isolated mountain village, learning their language and ancient, conservative, almost static culture. Being an anthropologist, among other things, it had been natural for Johnson to have manifested this particular interest.

Johnson had also been the one to suggest that perhaps Zeke might like to pay Earth a visit.

Zeke had readily agreed, but now Johnson was beginning to wonder why. In six months another rocket would go to Mars and Zeke could go home, but meanwhile—Johnson suddenly began to wonder about the possible ramifications of a Martian's first visit to Earth.

He had radioed ahead about the Martian but had given no details. The world awaited its first look at a Martian, the expectation overshadowing their hero worship of Captain Stromberg, Atomics Engineer Hinton, and Professor William Johnson—the first successful navigators of deep space.

Right now, Stromberg and Hinton were straightening their dress uniforms preparatory to the feting promised when the rocket was wheeled into Madison Square Garden. UN notables would be there, everyone of any importance, plus every one who could be jammed into the Garden. The rocket would be wheeled up to a speaker's platform, the doors would open and out would step the three heroes and Zeke.

Johnson looked at Zeke now with a new and uneasy appraisal. He slumped and then as Johnson motioned to him, Zeke gave a series of grotesque hops. His face, like a monstrous soft rubber mask bought in a novelty shop, twisted into a series of fantastic grimaces.

Stromberg and Hinton grinned appreciatively. They thought Zeke was pretty funny. Johnson no longer thought so because he had realized the cultural significance of Zeke's actions. Johnson gestured for Zeke to look through the port view plate.

His rubberoid features, which at times suggested a travesty of something very remotely human, bunched up and then spread



in all directions as though running into yellow putty. "They're welcoming you to Earth, Zeke. 'Welcome, Zeke,' the signs say. You'll be royally entertained. You'll be wined and dined as they say. You're probably the most extraordinary visitor ever seen anywhere."

ZEKE swung his long, stick-like arms, or appendages, whatever one chose to call them, in long arcs like pendulums, back and forth and to and fro. His three eyes spread wider and wider in an expression of such intense and gigantic astonishment that Stromberg and Hinton bent over and held their stomachs with uncontrollable laughter.

The flicker of unease in Johnson's stomach flamed a little stronger. The trouble was that Zeke's culture was so serious, so old and wise and serious, there seemed to be absolutely no sense of humor in it. At least none of any human kind that Johnson had been able to discover.

To Zeke, this being an object of humor had no meaning. Zeke could understand, however, the meaning of ridicule, derision and insults and sadness in their actual and realistic sense, divorced from the necessity of contrast that connected these things with laughter, gags, jokes in the human psychology.

So Johnson had never explained to Zeke that he was being laughed at, nor what it would mean if he did know he was being an object of laughter. Somehow now, Johnson wished he hadn't lied, that he hadn't explained to Zeke about Stromberg's and Hinton's laughter: "Well, Zeke, that's a kind of appreciation humans express to each other. It means they accept you. A form of politeness, a social amenity."

Zeke was saying in the peculiar slurred, high-pitched Martian speech. "It is overpowering, so many of you humans! Even in our most ancient records there is no account of there ever having been so many of us as I see of your kind out there!"

"That's only a small percent of the world's population," Johnson said. He took hold of one of Zeke's boneless, spongy arms. "Come on. We go on up now to the air-lock doors. In a few minutes we'll be out of here and you'll be presented to the world."

They were inside the Garden now, the rocket being moved by a giant crane to a position beside the speakers' platform. A ramp was connecting the two. The doors started to open and Stromberg and Hinton stood with stiff, glowing expectancy.

Johnson stood behind them, holding on to Zeke whose eight-foot body slumped with its own peculiar kind of expectancy. In all his 32 years Johnson had never been exactly a social animal. Devoted largely to field work, he had accustomed himself either by choice or necessity or both to an extraordinary degree of isolation. The two years in space hadn't bothered him. He was somewhat anxious to see his friends, but not overly so.

In fact the sight of those countless gaping faces, the packed masses of humanity, had frightened him a little. It had been so utterly peaceful out there in space, and on the high, cold plateaus of Mars.

Odd how formidable seemed the prospect of meeting this gigantic social obligation of facing the whole world. Maybe two years away from Earth was too long.

He could hear the interminable speeches droning away outside the opening doors.

Everybody was waiting out there on that platform.

Presidents and envoys from the Big Three nations, and many slightly less important figures. Everybody who could possibly claim to be anybody.

"From now on," whispered Hinton, "we live like Kings! A pension for life. And a hero forever. The dames—"

"Quiet, please," whispered Captain Stromberg.

Hinton dropped back. He nudged Johnson. "Even the thing here, your friend that walks like a man, will be treated by the world like a prince."

Johnson squeezed Hinton's arm and Hinton winced. "Watch what you say, Hinton. It knows some English now."

"You treat it like it's a human being," Hinton said.

Johnson had no answer to that except agreement. Changing Hinton's attitudes was something else again. Johnson didn't consider the project quite worth the time and trouble. He shrugged.

"This is it," Johnson warned Zeke.

Every time he talked in Martian his jaw ached. It was quite a feat.

The present speaker's voice like a worn soundtrack was saying:

"... and now, waiting world, here they are . . ."

"Ready?" Captain Stromberg whispered.

" . . . the first to make a voyage to another planet! The first visitor from another world! . . ."

Their names being called, and then—

" . . . and our guest from the planet Mars—Zeke!"

Zeke shifted his undulating, boneless length as the four of them stepped out onto the platform and into the glare of flood lights, and a sea of smoke and the heat of human bodies. Johnson got the impression, though he couldn't actually see much of it, of a colossal ocean of humanity, great tides of flesh held temporarily motionless and soundless. Microphones slid down. Television and motion picture cameras moved in and back and in again.

Lawrence Spaulding, President of the United States, flanked by big-wigs from the United Nations, moved toward the four. Hands came out, gloved and grasping.

"I—" began the President of the United States, Johnson watched his lips moving but what he said was buried under the onrushing, rising, roaring flood of sound.

Johnson was noticing how the others on the platform were gradually having their attention diverted by the appearance of Zeke. His hands were suddenly moist, and his stomach felt hollow. All of them were beginning to grin. It was universal—he should have known—whenever any human being saw Zeke—laughter.

He didn't know why, exactly, but he decided this was bad, very bad. Even the Russian Ambassador was grinning as Zeke grimaced at the strangeness about him.

As long as Zeke didn't know he excited laughter primarily from everyone, things might go along all right. But that deceptive situation couldn't last long. And trying to make it last for six months was no solution. Johnson's throat felt dry.

Maybe there was no solution. Maybe it was just a devil of a blunder—period! Several scientists spoke at length after the cheering died down enough. Stromberg,

and Hinton were introduced. They talked at length. Johnson was introduced. He was asked to talk about the surprising discovery of intelligent life on Mars, and about Zeke.

He didn't bother to say much because he knew that they weren't really listening. He watched Zeke. The Martian was restless. He made faces at Johnson. He was utterly alone amidst thousands of people, a world full of human beings, Johnson thought. I'm his only point of contact with any living thing, and that is most inadequate. How does he really feel? Desperate probably. Confused. Probably very lonely. And nothing that he does or says will be interpreted realistically—

He bowed, stepped back to where Zeke was amidst a storm of applause. Now every eye was focused on Zeke. Zeke whispered to Johnson in a raspy, high-pitched voice that only added to his humorous appeal because of contrast due to his giant and grotesque body. "I am having difficulty breathing."

"Hold on a while," Johnson said, managing to smile at everybody. "I have a big apartment we can go to, and no one will bother us there. You can rest. It's air-conditioned. It'll be cooler there too."

JOHNSON prayed. The thing had to get over with fast. He felt afraid for Zeke now. The novelty, the magnitude of the thing was over. They had to get out of here.

His uneasiness had been growing. Those on the speakers' platform were grinning more widely at Zeke's antics. The uneasiness was growing into a kind of fear. And then he heard someone introducing Zeke.

"Oh no," Johnson whispered. "Wait a minute—he's not up to this . . . not now . . ."

"What is the trouble?" Zeke asked.

The United Nations Secretary was introducing Zeke. Something about inter-world friendship . . . the beginning of an inter-world union that would spread to the stars . . .

Someone was saying in Johnson's ear. "Go ahead. You act as interpreter . . ."

"What is everyone looking at me for?" Zeke asked.

"You are to make a speech like the rest of us," Johnson whispered dryly. "Just say

something . . . anything . . . something short. They won't know what you're saying anyway. Just a gesture— ”

To Zeke everything was deadly serious. A long historical background had made the Martians that way. They were old. "About how much I want to learn about you here on Earth? How I will enjoy my stay here? How glad I am that the Earth and Mars are in contact and are friends?"

"Yes, yes, anything. Just a formality anyway."

"But I think that I am somewhat afraid," Zeke said. "Things I am not accustomed to. Too many people. Too much noise and confusion. And the air. I cannot seem to breathe properly."

The air was thinner on Mars, Johnson thought as he stepped toward the microphones again, in front of television eyes. But it's the air here too—the people—the suppression—

Zeke was there standing beside him. Johnson stepped aside. Zeke stood there in his place. Johnson's knees got weak. He felt the sweat running down his face then, and the cold shivery feeling as though he'd suddenly contracted a high fever. The laughter was starting. It was starting around the platform as the big spotlights caught Zeke full, and it spread backward and upward, growing and expanding.

Zeke, in his alien way talked, and he gestured with his entire body as he talked sincerely, with deep feeling, about how he felt about this first visit to Earth. The laughter rose higher and more voluminous until Johnson's body began to quiver as though from some physical assault. The trouble was a complete misunderstanding of Zeke, his grotesqueness, the fact that no one had any idea what he was really saying. What his gestures meant. All that—and whatever it was in human beings that made them laugh.

Zeke leaned toward Johnson, yelled in his ear. "Look, they are all doing it now."

"Yes," Johnson managed to scream. "They like you. They're all stirred up with excitement. Think nothing of it. They're expressing their extreme excitement and appreciation— ”

The twistings of Zeke's body, his facial distortions as he sought to express himself

in the best and most intelligible manner, grew more intense. Laughter became a sweeping thunder. No one could hear Johnson's interpretation. He stopped interpreting.

Zeke came back away from the cameras and microphones. No one but Johnson realized his growing panic. Johnson said to someone, "The air's bad for the Martian here. I'm taking him back inside the rocket. You say something."

The man who happened to be a highly important figure in the United Nations Supreme Court, an Englishman named Gordon Humphreys, nodded. He was grinning, yet Johnson seemed to see a glint of understanding in Humphreys' eyes.

THE rocket held out most of the thunder. Zeke sat in the corner. His eyes were frightened, confused. "They certainly do appreciate me a great deal, do they not."

"Yes," whispered Johnson. "They certainly do."

"I do not understand. But it would seem that all of this is not being treated with due seriousness."

Johnson said, "Don't try to figure us out down here, not this time. We discussed that, Zeke. Society and the individual here is too complex. Specialists here, psychologists, trying to figure that out about themselves are running into difficulty. Just take it as easy as you can and don't get too curious. We'll get you out somewhere where you won't be bothered much, and you can study at your leisure. Remember, you only have six months of this, then you'll be on your way home to Mars."

Zeke said. "Yes. Martian culture must have been complex like this once, but that was very long ago. It seems to frighten me a bit. This—what you call laughter. There seems no analogy for it in my own language or culture. Why is it directed in such volume specifically at me? I mean as a sign of appreciation and like, why is so little of it going on between two or more of your own kind? I do not— ”

"You know the meaning of tragedy, sadness, bereavement. We have an opposite. Laughter. You make people very happy, Zeke. You make them enjoy themselves very much."

Zeke thought about this.

Johnson forced a laugh. "You see you shouldn't try to figure it out! Just make your visit here as enjoyable as possible. It won't be long before you'll be on your way back home—"

"All right," Zeke said. "I want to study here. I want to take back to Mars an understanding of humans."

"If you take that back you'll take back more than anyone I ever heard of has to give," muttered Johnson.

The immediately subsequent events were too incredible and fast-paced for Johnson to cope with with any degree of effectiveness. With Zeke, he was swirled away in a mad maelstrom of activity. He went with Zeke on a crazy toboggan ride that gained momentum all the way toward an end Johnson was horrified to imagine.

The newspapers and television and newsreel cameras started the toboggan going. They started the whole world laughing at Zeke. It was too big a novelty to be ignored by American advertisers, or by any other agencies standing to profit from the greatest novelty in history. Zeke seemed to have all the qualities of all the greatest clowns in the history of clowndom, plus unique characteristics of his own which in turn seemed to bring out something else in the misty realms of human psychology where so much was suspected but of which so little was known.

Johnson tried to object but he couldn't without revealing the truth to Zeke. Besides, Zeke wanted to please. He wanted to make people like him and his kind. He wanted humans and Martians always to get along, so he went along with compliancy on the crazy ride.

They insisted that Johnson get a cut of the fabulous profits accruing from Zeke's endorsements, his television, radio, and stage performances. Johnson refused. The money went to charity. He explained that to Zeke. That made Zeke feel good for a while. He appeared at benefit performances. Everywhere, everyone was laughing louder and louder. Johnson somehow kept Zeke convinced that his lectures were received in the serious regard Zeke intended . . . that the laughter was only appreciation and so forth.

During a tour, Johnson stopped off in Chicago to see a friend. A clinical psychologist, Philip Billington. Johnson had lost weight. His nerves were frayed.

Philip's study was comfortable. And there were cool drinks and dim light, and Johnson sat there like a man paroled another day from a death chamber. Philip, a quiet little man with a rather prominent nose and soft eyes, regarded Johnson quietly for a while.

Finally Johnson said. "Physically I'm not built for it. Martians only sleep six hours out of every three weeks of Earth time. I have to keep up with him, try to keep him from being completely sucked up by—"

"How are you helping him?"

Johnson explained. "He doesn't know what laughter is. I mean what it is in his case as far as his audiences are concerned. I'm not sure what it is myself. Except that it's pretty horrible!"

"The whole thing's rather horrible," Billington agreed. "Are you doing anything to get your Martian out of all this madness? I'll admit that it could result in something tragic. If you've been keeping him in ignorance—"

"What else could I do? What if he found out he's regarded as a clown, a buffoon, a ludicrous, sham-clumsy sort of animal? I've written out a full report to the United Nations, and I've contacted James Hatcher, a UN lawyer friend of mine and he's working on it. So far there's been no results from either source. I say there must be some legal angles."

"Maybe there is," Billington mused. "But I'm just a psychologist. You say Zeke has no sense of humor? Rather an abstract term. Even to us, humans and psychologists alike, the anatomy of humor is pretty complex, contradictory, confusing and inconsistent."

"But why do they go so insanely hysterical with laughter at Zeke?"

"Why? There's a question all right, Bill. It's contrast in humorous situations, such as this one, that sometimes makes it horrible. In this case it's the fact that people are laughing at what we know is something deadly serious, which only makes it more grotesque. Add to this the vast cultural differences, the unbridgeable gap, the psy-

chological isolation, and you have that thin line between farce and tragedy—”

“There’s never been anything like this though,” Johnson moaned. “It’s all out of line. Here we have the first visitor from another planet. An important, dignified individual, and the world regards him as a buffoon! Something’s got to be done!”

“I agree. But what?”

PHILIP looked at the ceiling, then back at Johnson. “Humor. What are its basic elements? Surprise. Aberrancy. Ah, we have that element. Oddity, singularity, peculiarity, nonconformity in what is supposed to be a well-ordered world. Also irrationalism, we have that too. A form of aberrancy. Zeke acts in a manner people regard as foolish, mistaken, ill-advised . . . oddity of character behavior. People like this kind of humor; it allows him to feel superior. Here we find the element of sadism in humor, you see. Humor can be horrible in retrospect, or looking at it from a distance. Kinds of humor change. They used to write jokes about burning witches alive. Cripples and insane people used to be funny.”

“All right,” Johnson said. “But there’s something more here.”

“Yes. Yes, there is. I think I have it, some of it anyway. There’s a connection between terror and humor. Build up a suspense, an anticipation of terror, then present something harmless, and you get a tremendous relief through laughter. People have been conditioned to fear the alien, particularly the alien from outer space, and particularly the bogey-man Martian who has been popularized in fiction for a long time. Maybe the whole world’s reacting to Zeke as a kind of anticlimax. A long build-up to expect some fearsome monster, maybe with super weapons capable of wiping out the Earth in one fell swoop of deadly rays, and then they get Zeke!”

“And add to that the other free-floating anxieties people suffer in a too-complex society, sourceless fears they don’t even realize exist. They project all that into the surprise twist too. And we get a world practically prostrated with laughter because they expect a monster and get the most, to

them at least, exaggerated kind of loping, rubberoid, harmless clown.”

“But a clinical diagnosis doesn’t help Zeke any.”

“No. No, it doesn’t. Not now anyway. It might—”

“The UN should do something. America’s exploiting Zeke for commercial purposes primarily. Zeke isn’t a guest of the United States. He’s from another planet. He’s really visiting the whole world. No one nation—”

Billington nodded. “I hope something happens. I hate to see you in such a state, Bill. Pretty soon, if you don’t snap out of this and find some solution, you’ll end up coming to me for treatment.”

Johnson needed treatment when Hollywood decided to make a movie featuring Zeke. He didn’t go to Philip Billington though. He fought this to the end but the fight was futile. They gave Zeke a good sales talk, and of course it wasn’t Johnson’s position to tell Zeke what, or what not, to do. He had trapped himself nicely so that he couldn’t explain to Zeke the real reasons for his objections.

The movie was called *MARS INVADES THE EARTH*. They told Zeke it would be a semi-documentary; that it would assure good relations between Earth and Mars and acquaint the whole world with Martian culture.

There was a special preview showing in the United Nations Cultural Building in United Nations City. Johnson was there, waiting in the lobby for the fiasco to end. He had seen the first part of it but had been unable to stomach the rest. He paced nervously back and forth across the lush carpet wondering how Zeke was taking it. It wasn’t at all what they had led Zeke to believe it was. It was pure fiction in which a Martian monster invaded the Earth with a weapon capable of blowing the world into component atoms, but the Martian was so funny he conquered the Earth with laughter.

Johnson could hear the UN Officials invited to the showing laughing uproariously in there. What—what would Zeke be thinking now?

He stopped pacing. Zeke was in the lobby with him, and the picture wasn’t

nearly over. Zeke's whole body stood there very stiffly. Johnson felt sick.

"You have been lying to me," Zeke said. His face twisted with that odd rubber-mask plasticity that seemed to be so funny.

"No, Zeke, you've got to let me explain."

"All this time you have never told me the truth about this laughter. Everybody thinks that I am funny. They look upon me as something ridiculous."

"I—"

"They lied to me also. This picture is not what they said it would be. I heard them talking in there. They did not know I was sitting there by them in the dark. I found out why all this laughter should be always directed at me! Why at me? Why always at me? I have found out!"

"Zeke—!"

"What is this humor of yours? What is so funny that gives you satisfaction in freaks and fools? In the misfortunes of others? You think we Martians do not know what this laughter really means? Maybe we know. I guess it is just that we knew a long time back and have forgotten it. Now I know what it is and what it means."

JOHNSON was trying to say something. It didn't make any difference now. Laughter came from inside the big auditorium. Zeke's huge ungainly body loped toward the exit. He turned. "I do not want to see or talk to you or to any other human beings. I do not like to see or talk to any of you any more. I will go to your place, if you will permit me to do so, and there I will seclude myself until your next rocket goes back to Mars. I do not want any one to come out there to see or to talk with me. I do not want to be in any more televison shows or radio broadcasts or moving pictures."

"All right!" Johnson yelled above the laughter. "But let me take you to my apartment. How you going to get there? You can't speak English."

The guard stood in front of the exit. He turned and grinned up at Zeke. He began to laugh as Zeke swung back and forth, wanting out. Zeke made gestures and spoke. "I wish to go outside. Would you be so kind as to step out of the doorway, please?"

The guard had no idea what Zeke was saying, nor what his movements meant. All the guard knew was that Zeke was a Martian bogey turned clown and he laughed louder. "You will step to one side, please."

Johnson started toward them.

"I wish you would step aside and stop laughing at me," Zeke said.

Johnson started to yell something but he was too late. He knew there was no malicious intent in Zeke's action, only desperation, confusion, bewilderment, humility. He pushed the guard out of the way, but his strength was much greater than Zeke was used to exerting under any such circumstances.

The guard hurtled ten feet away. Johnson heard the sickening thud of his head against the wall. Johnson ran over there, saw the open, staring eyes of the guard, and then he saw Zeke running across the rain-splattered street through the neon-shining dark. He saw a few people stop and wonder a moment, then laugh.

Johnson leaned against the wall and closed his eyes before he went to the public phone booth. He could still hear the laughter from the auditorium as he called the police.

They figured Johnson would know where Zeke was. They questioned him for what seemed hours. He had no idea where Zeke would go to hide or where he would be now. Zeke could speak only a few words of English. No, Zeke wouldn't harm anybody. Yes, I know he killed the guard, but that was an accident. A misunderstanding.

No, God no! I don't know where he would go!

Yes, yes, I'll make tape recorded messages to be broadcast to Zeke. I'll make some television kinescopes too. Maybe Zeke will hear me and give himself up without any trouble. Play the recordings and show the kinescopes on every station in the city.

Sure I will. But why don't you send out broadcasts and telecasts to the people instead of to Zeke? That would be more logical. Tell them not to be afraid of him. That he wouldn't hurt anybody. Tell them not to incite any more confusion in Zeke.

I know, I know, somebody hit Zeke with a cane, but he wasn't trying to attack the old man! You've got everyone scared of him

now. A few hours ago everybody was laughing, and now you've got everyone thinking he's some kind of horrible monster.

I know . . . the woman wheeling the baby. But she was hysterical when she saw Zeke there on that side street. She screamed and went crazy. But that isn't Zeke's fault. That's your fault. No! I said I don't know where he would be hiding now!

You can leave now, Johnson. But stay where we can get in touch with you at once. You're the only way we can establish any contact with Zeke—unless of course we have to kill it.

SO JOHNSON made the tape recordings and the television kinescopes, and he sat in a kind of daze in the semi-darkness of the apartment of Hatcher, a friend of his, looking at his own image speaking Martian to millions of people, and listened to his voice.

No one knew what he had said on those lengths of tape and on those kinescopes. He hadn't said what he was supposed to say—not for Zeke to give himself up. Zeke might not understand that, and he might get shot. He told Zeke to meet him just outside the UN grounds at the West end of a public park that had been built to replace a former slum area—to beautify the area surrounding the UN territory. A high wall flanked the West end of the park and thick brush and trees were there affording a good hiding place.

And Johnson would meet Zeke there as soon as he could. Don't do anything else, if possible, until I can talk with you, Zeke.

The newscasts came on frequently, mostly about Zeke. He was seen first here and then there.

The city was supposedly gripped in a reign of terror. Kids playing in a vacant lot near the UN grounds had dug a small cave and had found Zeke hiding in it. The Martian had made horrible sounds and leaped at them, the kids said. The kids had thrown rocks at him. They said he looked funny at first, all covered with dirt, and stumbling around like he was drunk or something.

The police had thrown up nets and blockades everywhere. The number of cars in surrounding precincts were tripled. Walls

went up everywhere. State, county, sheriff deputies' cars formed wall after wall that were tightening. Information about the crime and a description of Zeke had been spread over such a wide area from the crime scene that five states away the police had thrown up blockades. The description was a formality.

Everyone knew what the Martian looked like.

Johnson waited there in Hatcher's apartment.

He tried to get in touch with the lawyer, but that seemed impossible. No one knew where Hatcher was. But Johnson knew the police were shadowing him, hoping he would lead them to where Zeke was hiding.

He had to get over there to that park where Zeke might be hiding, waiting for him, without being trailed there. That wouldn't be easy. It was out of Johnson's line.

The newscast said that Zeke had blundered into someone's estate near the UN grounds and had had a couple of big dogs sent after him. In protecting himself, Zeke had killed the dogs. It would seem that killing the two dogs was worse in some ways than if Zeke had killed two more human beings.

No one, of course, even remembered ever having laughed at Zeke. He had become the typical alien Martian menace, a Welles and Wells character. A monster from another world, a bogey Martian, a menace, a stalking terror, an inhuman monster.

"They'll kill him," Johnson whispered. He got up and got Hatcher's topcoat out of the closet and put on Hatcher's hat. "They'll kill him and he won't have any idea what's happened or why." That's the worst part of it, he thought. Somewhere in the rainy dark was Zeke, feeling terribly the hostility of his human surroundings. Confused, desperate, panic-stricken. Not understanding any of it.

Johnson went out into the hall of the apartment-hotel. Empty. The police would be guarding the front entrance certainly, maybe the back. But there was another exit out of the basement into the vacant lot, and maybe they wouldn't know about that.

He went down into the basement, went

out that entrance and into the vacant lot among the dripping trees. He stood there, listening, watching. He put his hands in Hatcher's topcoat pocket and felt the small snub-nosed revolver there. He jerked his hand out.

He heard nothing but the rain on the palm fronds and the tires humming on wet pavement. Above him, the gray night's hand cupped over the city, reflecting its neon life through misty rain.

He went cautiously through the trees, through a pit being excavated for building, and emerged onto the street a block and a half away. And still no one.

He walked faster, signaled a cab. He sat there stiffly and numb with tension as the cab took him with casual speed to the park.

HE WALKED slowly along past the high dense brush of the park next to the wall, his shoes squeeshing on the wet turf. Beyond the wall he could see a tall bulky building with little yellow window eyes that blinked in the rain. Absently, he remembered it was the big Community Hospital.

"Zeke," he called as he walked past the high dense brush. "Zeke."

He went the length of the park's West end, started back, continuing to call Zeke's name. The strange alien whisper sent a chill down his arms.

"Mr. Johnson—"

The brush shivered. Zeke had heard the message all right. "Mr. Johnson. I am ill. I am cold and I am tried. I do not have any idea what to do."

Johnson said. "Come out here, Zeke. You have to turn yourself in to the proper authorities here that maintain law and order. I've explained something about that. I promise you it will be all right. You've got to trust me, Zeke."

"People are afraid of me. They throw stones at me and run away when I approach them. I cannot understand—"

Johnson explained quickly that the guard Zeke had shoved was dead. "It has to be straightened out, that's all, Zeke. Then things will be all right."

Johnson saw the shape back there in the dim wet shadows under the wall, crouching,

hardly distinguishable. He saw Zeke for what he was, a lost stranger, helpless, incomprehensible. Too bewildered now to understand, too weary to see anything, too anxious perhaps to care. Alien, sick, abominably unhappy, taken out of his knowledge, bitter in utter loneliness, his home so far away—so very far away.

It moved toward him, rising up, rising taller, its undulating hugeness bending and swaying above the brush. It stood unsteady on its legs, its rubberoid flesh dripping and shining. Surrounded by the wet night, Johnson saw him as something cast out mysteriously by the sea on some alien shore to perish in the supreme disaster of loneliness. Zeke's body shivered all over suddenly. Johnson sucked in his breath, felt the quick sick emptiness. He turned. Shapes running, footsteps slipping and scrambling toward them out of the brush. The glint and shine of uniforms and guns. They had trailed him after all—

"Stop, don't move! We'll shoot!"

"Don't!" Johnson yelled frantically. "For God's sake, listen." Zeke's grotesque body crashed backward and Johnson saw the bursts of orange flame flowering to horror in his brain. Shots blared flatly. Zeke went up, over the wall and was gone on the other side.

Johnson scrambled into the brush. He felt the gun in his hand and he felt himself squeeze the trigger once, twice. He was screaming. "Stay back, you crazy fools! I'll shoot anyone I see moving in here!"

"What's the matter with you—hey—that you, Johnson?"

"He's flipped," someone shouted.

"Johnson! You'll get yourself in a lot of trouble. You might kill somebody."

"He's crazy," someone said.

"You guys crawl back and go round into the hospital and round up the Martian."

Johnson crawled along the wall on his hands and knees. He kept crawling and then, wedging himself between a tree trunk and the wall, edged up the wall, over it, and dropped to the other side. He ran across the grounds desperately looking for Zeke.

He saw nothing on the grounds, no sign of anything or anybody. Then he saw Zeke up there in the gray drizzle, three

stories up on the fire-escape platform. He didn't yell. He ran and then he felt the harsh wet cold of the metal as he climbed.

He followed wet tracks down the floor of the hall, found a door. As he started to open it he saw the police come around the corner at the other end of the hall. They stopped when they saw him. Johnson heard laughter coming from beyond the door. The laughter got louder. The shrill, high, spontaneous and abandoned laughter of children.

The police moved cautiously toward him. Johnson opened the door and went in, shut it quickly behind him.

A nurse came over to Johnson, smiled at him.

She stood with her arms folded and stood beside him and the both of them watched Zeke in the middle of the big hospital ward.

"We're so glad Zeke came back," the nurse said. "And surprising us this way makes it so much delightful for the children."

Yes, thought Johnson dully, Zeke was here before, once. A benefit performance. For crippled children. And neither the kids nor the two nurses in here had heard about Zeke's sudden status as a criminal. No radios in here—only recording machines playing pleasant things for the kids. Too much unpleasantness on the regular programs.

An isolated world in which they still saw Zeke only as a clown.

The kids on the beds lining the walls, many of whom would never leave this room except in wheeled chairs, were screaming and hollering and shrieking with laughter at Zeke's antics. Their laughter bubbled higher and louder. Zeke twisted round and round, his arms swinging, as he did a shambling jig, danced this way and that. "The clown's back!" "Dance, dance, dance some more!" "Stand on your head, Zeke!"

"They have so little real happiness," the nurse said. "I've hoped Zeke would come back. Nothing here has ever made them happier and laugh more loudly than Zeke."

Johnson walked through the waves of free wild laughter to Zeke's side. He whispered.

"Stay right here, Zeke. Don't leave

this room until I give you the word. These kids really appreciate you, Zeke. Believe me, I'm not lying this time. These kids are happy now, because of you, and they don't have much happiness. Life's worth living right now for them, Zeke. And it's because of you. Stay right here."

"I am very sick," Zeke said. "I will do as you say. I cannot go further."

JOHNSON backed to the door, managed to smile to the nurse, and went into the hall.

Quickly he shut the door as the police rushed in. Captain Maxson, in charge of some detail or other, a short heavy blond young man, eager to do his duty, grabbed at Johnson.

"You go blundering in there to get Zeke," Johnson said, "and you'll not only take a chance of injuring or killing some of those kids, but what's worse, you may frighten them, disillusion them for the rest of their lives!"

"But that monster's liable to start killing in there," whispered Maxson hoarsely.

"If you go charging in there anything can happen. Let me do it my way and there won't be any trouble."

"What's your way?" Maxson obviously was in a bad predicament.

"Let me make a phone-call first, then I'll take Zeke out and there'll be no trouble. I can handle him. That's your only chance. You don't want to hurt those kids, shock them! They don't know what's happened. They still think Zeke's funny."

Maxson touched his lips. "All right. Make the call. I'll give you ten minutes—"

This time he found Hatcher in. He quickly explained the situation. "Hatcher! You said you'd have the dope from Humphreys at the UN."

"And I have," Hatcher said. "It's all right now. I'll rush a couple of UN Deputies over there with special orders right now!"

"Well hurry!" Johnson yelled. Then he stepped out of the booth practically into Maxson's arms.

"Now, go in there and get him out here, Johnson!"

"We're waiting for two United Nations

Deputies. They'll be here in a minute. They're going to take charge of Zeke from now on."

"What—well, okay, let them arrest him. That's a load off my back—"

"They're not coming here to arrest him. But to protect him from being arrested or otherwise annoyed until he goes back to Mars."

"I don't get it at all. I got orders—"

"Here's how it is," Johnson said. "Now that we've established relations with another planet, Mars, the UN has jurisdiction over all such relationships and transactions. UN City is extra-territorial. It belongs to no nation, including the United States, and therefore the United States has no jurisdiction over Zeke, or anything having to do with inter-world relations."

"That's a UN problem. Furthermore, Zeke is here in the capacity of Martian Ambassador, and the UN has been officially declared the site of the official future Martian Embassy, and therefore Zeke has diplomatic immunity. That guard's death was accidental, caused by a misunderstanding. But regardless, he can't be tried by any nation on Earth because the accident occurred on Martian Embassy grounds officially."

"If Zeke's ever tried for any crime it will have to be on Mars. That's the rule."

And that was the way it was.

After seeking Zeke off in the second Mars-bound rocket, he went to Billington's and sat in his study, relaxed for the first time in six months.

"How was Zeke?" Billington asked. "Seem to feel any better about his visit to Earth?"

"Much better," Johnson said. "In fact, he seemed to feel better about the whole thing than at any time during his stay here. He said he understood a great deal more about us than he might otherwise have learned."

"And he said he understood our laughter too. A safety-valve, he said, and that he was glad if he allowed us to let off a little steam. He said there was a lot of steam here that needs to be let off."

Billington smiled. "That's a concise and astute analysis," he said.

"It seems to be the laughter of those crippled kids that did it," Johnson added. "Zeke got an idea there how beneficial laughter is."

Billington nodded. "However, maybe Zeke's analysis is overly-simplified." His mouth set in a serious line. "The laughter of kids is hardly comparable to the laughter of adults. The kids were laughing *with* Zeke. Does he realize the difference there?"

Johnson said. "Maybe he doesn't. The Martians have a lot to learn about human beings."

"So do we," Billington sighed.