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THE WEAPON

by H. B. OGDEN



“You ask us of Mars for a weapon to save your world. We have it—but it is not for you, Earthman. Men may die and planets perish, but we break not the law of the universe — ‘Every civilization must work out its own destiny!’ ”

THE council-room was in absolute silence. From a raised dais, five Martians looked down upon the Earthman standing before them. Their strange feline faces were entirely expressionless. Only their eyes exhibited signs of life. Glowing greenly, they seemed to pierce the innermost core of Preston Calvin's being.

The Chief Elder of Mars spoke from his seat in the center. “Your request for

an audience has been granted, Earthman. What do you want of the Elders of Mars?"

"Assistance." Calvin's voice cut like a knife. With these Martians bluntness was the best diplomacy. "Assistance in our fight against the forces of ruthlessness and evil."

The Chief Elder's gray vibrissae twitched. "Mars does not interfere with Earth. We give no assistance."

"You are doubtless unacquainted with the facts, Excellency," Calvin urged. "In the name of all humanity, I beg for aid. Democracy must not lose."

"Affairs on Earth have been followed with keen interest," came the calm answer, "but every world must work out its own destiny."

Calvin's shoulders sagged. He had been warned of this emotionless super-race, this product of countless eons of evolution, but the reality was hard to face.

He shifted his ground. "Aid us for your own sakes then, if not for ours. If the brutes win, Earth will be dominated by a cult of hate. Mars itself may not be safe from danger."

"We don't fear Earth; you should know that." There was no anger, merely the coldest indifference in the Martian's voice. "We allowed you to colonize the Jovian and Saturnian worlds which we ourselves had forsaken long before, but Mars itself we will *keep*."

Calvin sighed. "I do not ask for material assistance. I want only a weapon. You, who are so powerful and wise, who could have had a universe yet rejected it. Surely of your vast knowledge, you can spare a crumb to the younger civilization of Earth, that we, too, may wax great and flourish?"

There was a low murmur from the five assembled Elders. The Chief Elder spoke slowly in answer. "You are right—our wisdom *is* great. It is so great that we know this: Every civilization must

work out its own destiny. We shall give no assistance."

Their indifference seemed impregnable but Calvin forced himself to one last effort.

"You fear, I suppose, that I ask for a powerful instrument of destruction with which to lay Earth waste. That you would be right to refuse. The fact is, however, that I ask for the opposite—for something which played its part in your own history.

"We have studied the history of Mars and discovered a few things. Your early history, like ours, is one of war and destruction; then, overnight, you emerged into your present emotionless state, in which war and evil cannot exist. We have discovered how that change came about, and we ask for a similar change back on Earth."

A pause here elicited no answer other than a motion to continue.

"There exists a gland in the human body, atrophied and apparently useless—the pineal. There is a way, known only to you, to activate that gland and restore its proper functions. These functions, we feel sure, are to act as counterweights to the fear and anger-producing adrenal glands.

"A world with functional pineals would then be a world without anger or fear, a world of reason. Is Mars ready to refuse information so beneficial? It would be against reason."

"You are wrong," the Chief Elder informed him. "It is not against reason. Does Earth wish to be as emotionless as Mars?"

"No," Calvin admitted, "but to go that far is unnecessary. Yours is an extreme of hypertrophied pineals. In great dilution, the chemical I seek would merely soften the violent emotions of fear, anger, and hate. That is all."

"You know then that it is a chemical that produces the desired effect?"

"Yes, and an inorganic one," was the answer. A small bottle of iodine dropped in a city reservoir will restore to normal the thyroids of the entire city. The 'pineal chemical' would, no doubt, react similarly. I ask only the method of preparation of this chemical. That is all the weapon I wish."

The Chief Elder of Mars leaned closer to Calvin and spoke very softly indeed. "Once Mars, facing destruction, found the means of its own salvation. Earth must do likewise. Were the raising of a finger all that were required of us to save it, the finger would not be raised. Earth must save itself."

Calvin's lips twisted in a wry grin as he realized that his last bolt had been shot. His hand was played; his aces trumped. He turned away in despair and left the assembly room.

His mind worked feverishly as he was whirled upward to Mars' dead and barren surface. Somehow, he must snatch the knowledge from the reluctant lips of these living icebergs. Without it, he could not return to a world where democracy clung precariously to its last foothold on the western seaboard of what was once the United States. Rather he would die in space.

It was then he thought of Deimos!

DEIMOS! The giant laboratory of Mars! There, the scientific secrets of the race were assembled—even that of the weapon he had asked for. And he formed the mad plan of assaulting that impregnable fortress of knowledge and carrying off by force what he could not obtain by his pleas and prayers.

He refused to consider, for reasoning would have halted him. Once, before the super-race of Mars had been discovered, an exploratory expedition had attempted a landing on Deimos and been warned away by a strange space-vessel. When a

second and larger expedition ignored the warnings and pressed on, they never returned.

Calvin had no illusions, then, as to the certain failure of his attempt—but he did not care. The alternative to success was martyrdom, and in his present state of mind that would have been as welcome.

The hours it took to reach the little moon passed with incredible slowness but finally its jagged crags loomed before him. As he circled it cautiously, he wondered if there were some sort of protecting screen surrounding it. That was the first obstacle, for Calvin dared not land until he could assure himself he would not be killed in the process.

He made a few adjustments and one of the two lifeboats with which the ship was equipped slid from its sheath and slowly floated down to the moon beneath. It was an old trick but an effective one.

Under the infinitesimal pull of Deimos, the boat seemed scarcely to travel, in spite of the initial push. Half an hour—three-quarters—a full hour, and then the tiny projectile hit the surface. There was a small smudge visible as it landed, a tiny cloud of dust raised by its impact, and there it lay, entirely unharmed.

A faint glow of triumph welled within him. There was no screen!

Gently, he lowered the ship and landed in a hollow, a miniature valley on the side away from Mars. The sun would not reach it for a while yet; and there the ship, hidden in the dark recess, might most easily escape detection.

He emerged, a muffled, space-suited figure, teetering uncertainly on Deimos' rocky floor. First, he impressed the surroundings deeply on his mind that he might have no trouble locating the ship when and if he returned, and then turned his thoughts toward the laboratory itself.

His problem was threefold: to find a way into the lab, to avoid notice, and to locate the pineal chemical.

First, he must locate the entrance.

He tried to move, but scarcely had his leg muscles contracted when he felt himself thrown off his feet, arch high into the air, and float downwards with tantalizing slowness. When he attempted to raise himself, he went into a second crazy, tumbling somersault.

Calvin cursed bitterly. On Deimos, he was practically weightless and almost entirely helpless. It was a case for ingenuity. Clutching an outstretched projection of rock, he pulled himself forward, using an absolute minimum of force. Over he went, heels high above his head, his grip broken. This time, however, he had made horizontal progress, and when he came to rest, it was some ten yards from where he had started.

He had no idea where he was going, nor did he care much. Obviously, remaining in one place would get him nowhere, whereas moving, he ought to stumble upon something sooner or later. That was his vague rationalization. Then, in the midst of one of his weirdly-flopping handsprings, he went rigid and fell flat, scarcely breathing.

The harsh, discordant tone of Martian speech sounded from somewhere ahead. His receiver picked up the sounds clearly but he could understand nothing of it. He understood Martian only when spoken slowly and as for speaking it himself—well, it was organically impossible for an Earthman to imitate the Martian sounds.

There were two of them. Calvin saw them through a cleft in the boulders at his right. He scarcely breathed. Had there been a screen? Were they searching for him? If so, he could not long hope to remain hidden.

Then, suddenly, he caught the words *rest period*, and speech halted as quickly as it had begun. One of the creatures walked speedily toward the ridiculously near horizon. Calvin envied his normal gait, while the other approached a wall

of rock, touched a spring, and entered the cavity that yawned in response.

The Earthman's heart leaped in joyful astonishment. The gods of space were beaming kindly down upon him, for there before him was the means of entrance. He felt a bit of superiority over these Martians who hid their secrets so poorly.

Laboriously, he inched towards the wall into which the other had gone. The tiny metallic lever was easily found; no attempt had been made to hide it. On Earth, he would have immediately smelled treachery in this, but he knew well that the Martians were far too powerful and far too emotionless to stoop to trickery.

He entered, as he had expected, into an airlock. The inner door opened; he found himself at the threshold of a long, narrow corridor, the walls of which shone with a soft yellow luminescence. It was perfectly straight and its lack of cover dismayed Calvin. Yet it was empty and he could do nothing but step inside.

Even the light Mars-normal gravity felt comfortable after his weightlessness, as he strode the length of the corridor, his steel-shod shoes making no noise against the shock-absorbent floor. The corridor ended in a balcony, and there Calvin stood for the barest moment and gazed at the prospect before him.

THE whole interior lay exposed, carved into one gigantic room, partitioned into levels and sections. Elevator shafts and supporting pillars shot up dizzying heights in bewildering multiplicity. Down below, so far that it seemed lost in haze, bulky machinery loomed. Nearer at hand an astonishing variety of apparatus of all types could be seen. And all about were scurrying Martians.

A door was ajar behind him and into it he leaped. It led into an empty room, a closet or storeroom of sorts. There he unscrewed his helmet, took a deep breath

of the fresh, invigorating air, and paused to consider his next step.

For the moment he was stalemated, for the place simply swarmed with Martians. His unbelievable luck was bound to break soon, and, indeed, he was not over-safe where he was. Then, suddenly, the yellow glow of the walls faded and died and in its place a dim, ghostly blue appeared.

Calvin jumped to his feet in tense anticipation. Was this a signal which warned of his discovery? Had they been playing with him after all?

And then another change forced itself upon his attention. The busy noise that had pervaded the entire place had died down and given way to deep silence. Fear gave way to curiosity, and Calvin edged the door open very slowly and tiptoed out. The entire giant laboratory was bathed in the same weird blue light, and Calvin felt little cold fingers of uneasiness dance up and down his spine as he surveyed what was now a realm of dimly-seen shadows and dark, sad-looking light.

He remembered the two words he had heard one of the Martians on the surface utter: *rest period*. This then was what was meant. His spirits rose again. His luck had held!

The next step was to locate the secret of the pineal chemical. As he glanced about at the murky expanse, so terrifying in its vastness and so mysterious in what it hid, he first realized the immensity of the task he had set himself.

He stopped and considered. The laboratory would have to be arranged in an orderly fashion to suit the Martians. He would first have to locate the section devoted to chemistry and if that proved useless (supposing he still remained at large) he would try the biologic section.

The elevator, dimly seen in the blue-ness, was a short distance to the right. Fortunately, its power had not been shut off for the duration of the *rest period* and Calvin descended to the lowest level at a

speed that left him standing, gasping.

Calvin drew his flashlight. He would have to use it now, daring all risk of discovery. Its thin shaft of light revealed him to be among giant structures which stretched higher than the beam could reach. The Earthman did not recognize them, in spite of a familiarity with Terrestrial science, but they seemed to have nothing to do with chemistry. Picking his way carefully through narrow lanes running between these structures, with the flashlight pointing the way at all times, he finally emerged into relatively open space.

Evidently, he was in a power-room of sorts. At his right, a gigantic motor lay idle, even in rest giving out a terrifying aura of strength and power. Directly ahead was a small atomic-power generator. It was with some interest that he inspected this for Earth had as yet made only the first few stumbling steps in the direction of atomic power. But his time was limited and he passed on.

HE WANDERED into a spacious section of the laboratory occupied only by low tables on which shrouded objects lay, bulking dimly in the blue light and jumping suddenly out of the shadows as the flashlight swept over them.

The odor of formalin stung Calvin's nostrils and it struck him that he was in a dissecting room. He shuddered at the thought of what might lay under those concealing shrouds and hurried on quickly.

A little further he passed among wire cages and the sickly smell of animal life rose to meet him. Martian "wombos", European "skorats" and common Terrestrial white mice squeaked and whined at the intrusion. Calvin scarcely glanced at them and passed on.

There were shelves and shelves of cubical bottles containing the quick-breeding Martian insect that had displaced the

classical fruit-fly—even on Earth; rows and rows of bacterial cultures; piles upon piles of lenses, mirrors, and other optical paraphernalia. Calvin felt as if he were in some museum which at every turn presented something new and startling, but which never, under any circumstances, repeated itself.

He estimated having spent over an hour and a half in a vain search before stumbling upon a chemical supply room. Partitioned off by a low waist-high wall, its walls were laden from top to bottom by myriads of containers—glass, wax and rubber, containing test solutions in infinite variety. Over all hovered the odors inseparable from chemicals, the sharp, tangy atmosphere which recalled vivid memories of chem courses back in college.

Upwards went the flashlight, to be stopped short by a "ceiling" which marked the bottom of the second level. One of the ubiquitous elevators was almost at his side. He stepped in and shot noiselessly upwards.

On the second level, and the third and the fourth, much the same sight met his eyes. There were hosts of other supplies necessary to chemistry; beakers, flasks, burettes, all sorts of complicated glassware, rubber tubing, porcelain dishes, platinum crucibles.

Then he reached the experimental labs and here he could not help but linger. There was a vat filled with a green, miasmic gas, evidently chlorine, connected through a series of intricately arranged tubing (at present shut off by stopcocks) into a small beaker filled with a colorless liquid. Further away a pair of yard-long burettes dripped, ever so slowly, drops of cloudy fluid into two flasks filled with a simmering purple chemical.

At the far end, almost beyond the reach of the flashlight beam, was a complicated web of glass tubing, in the center of which a beaker sat spider-like over a small flame. A viscous, red liquid gurgled and bubbled

within, and Calvin smelled the faint, tarry odor that issued.

The levels through which he rose seemed endless. Past the seventeenth, he came upon the analytic labs. At the twenty-fifth he recognized organic chemistry set-ups; at the thirty-fifth, physical chemistry; at the fortieth, bio-chemistry.

It was a complete achievement worthy of the Martian supermen, yet through it all Calvin saw only defeat. All that he saw gave no slightest hint of the nature and identity of the pineal chemical, and upon not a single level had he been able to locate a single file of notes, let alone anything in the nature of a chemical library.

There was only the top level to be investigated now and it was all but empty. It was very large, more than a hundred yards in each direction as nearly as he could estimate in the blue gloom, but all that occupied it were squat, cubical structures which stood flush against the wall.

There were hundreds of these, circling the entire room, all alike. They were a yard high, equally wide and equally deep, and each stood on four stubby legs. The side towards the center of the room was of cloudy, glass-like material, the rest were of featureless metal.

And on the top of each was etched in golden letters a single Martian ideograph, and below it a Martian numeral. Calvin understood its meaning immediately. It said "Summary 18."

Calvin's eyes narrowed—summary of what? The logical explanation would be that it was a summary of all chemical data known to the Martians, a chemical encyclopedia. He approached the cubes again with devouring curiosity, noticed further that each cube was marked by a separate number, and selected the one marked "1".

Probing fingers located a protruding segment on the upper right hand corner of the side facing him. A slight pressure shoved it aside revealing a small

lever protruding from the center of a half-moon slit. Without hesitation, he edged the lever slightly to the left. Immediately the vitreous frontal face came to life—a bright illumination from within making it resemble a television screen back on Earth.

Nor did this constitute all, for from the bottom of the screen a long column of print began working upwards slowly. Calvin read it slowly and laboriously, for the language was technical. It is difficult to learn a language one cannot pronounce and recognize, at once. His guess had been correct. It was an encyclopedia, alphabetically arranged.

He turned back to the lever and replaced it in the center, whereupon the movement of the queer, graceful Martian script stopped and the light went out. Again he moved it to the left, further this time, and the movement of the writing was measurably faster. Further and further he pushed the lever, and faster and faster flew the print until it became a grayish blur. Then Calvin stopped for fear of harming the mechanism and brought the lever back to center.

Now he pushed it to the right and the

print moved in the opposite direction speeding backward over the ground it had already covered, until the beginning was reached and the light extinguished.

CALVIN rose with a sigh of satisfaction. It was quite evident what the next move was to be. Find the article under the Martian word for "pineal gland" and there, if anywhere, he would find the information he had come to seek.

Now that he, was so near his aim, Calvin felt a weakening in his knees.

But even as he felt all sorts of clammy fears rising within him, he skimmed down the row of cubes, searching for that article, and thanking his stars that the Martians saw fit to use an alphabetical arrangement.

Upwards drifted the cold, emotionless print, thousands of words on every aspect of the pineal gland. Calvin followed it breathlessly, understanding not more than a tenth, and watching, watching for the one vital fact he was after.

And then it came, so suddenly that it caught him unawares and passed him by. He laughed hysterically as he turned the machine backwards, and for five minutes

shut if off altogether until the almost painful sensation of relief that overwhelmed him had subsided.

Over and over again he read the short description of the chemical and its method of production. It was only bromine, an element that sea-water was filthy with, yet with a difference. The pineal chemical was an isotope of that halogen; an isotope that was not to be found naturally and that would exist for only a limited period when produced artificially. In terse and cryptic language the nature and strength of the neutron bombardment which produced the isotope was described and the description sank deep into Calvin's brain.

And then he was through, all through. To return to Earth—only that was left. Surely, after having completed so much against the laboratory and all of Mars, the return need not frighten him. A sense of bubbling triumph pervaded him, a triumph that shrieked aloud with laughter, and then died suddenly.

The light changed! Dull blue gave way to bright yellow with a suddenness that left him gasping, bewildered, and blinded.

MARTIANS sprang from nowhere and surrounded him. Calvin fell back, utterly bewildered, at the sudden change of the situation. Then, as he recognized the stern, immobile visage of the Chief Elder in the midst of the throng, all emotion was drowned in one flood of tearing, blistering rage.

His needle-ray was drawn, cocked and aimed in one motion, but in the icy gaze of the Martian potentate he felt his arm grow numb and lax. Struggle as he might, he could not compress the trigger finger. Dimly, he heard the gun clang to the floor.

A long silence ensued, and then the Chief Elder spoke. "You did very well, Earthman. You were a little reckless but quick at seizing opportunity."

A look of astonishment spread over

Calvin's face. "You were playing with me?" he demanded. "You allowed me to hope and to all but attain my object that you might snatch it from me in the end?" He felt it difficult to breath. "Then Martians are sufficiently emotional to indulge in cruelty, aren't they?"

Calvin suddenly felt weak and futile.

"I knew your moves from the first," the Chief Elder was saying. "We recognized the possibility of an attempted raid on Deimos as a result of your own individual psychology, and consequently removed the screen from the satellite; showed you the means of entrance; introduced a fictitious rest hour; and refrained from interfering until you had discovered your precious weapon. The experiment was an entire success."

"What are you going to do now?" Calvin asked bitterly. "All your explanations are of no interest to me."

"Do? Why, nothing!" came the answer in slow, measured tones. "Your ship is safe. Return to Earth with your weapon."

Calvin's eyes snapped wide open. His first words were but a meaningless stutter. When he had recovered sufficiently to speak, he cried, "But you refused to give me the secret back on Mars."

"True! But we said nothing about refusing to let you take it. Earth as a suppliant for help, we would refuse, for every world must work out its own destiny. However, when Earth refuses to accept our refusal, to, in your person, attempts a plan foredoomed to failure and carries it out without a moment's hesitation, we no longer refuse. It had not been given you; you have taken it. Return to Earth with your weapon."

And finally Preston Calvin gained an inkling of the mental processes of these alien, incomprehensible people. His head bowed and with trembling voice he whispered, "You are a strange people, but a great one!"