



# WORLDS of SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL 1955

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IF is published monthly by Quinn Publishing Company, Inc. Volume 5, No. 2. Copyright 1955 by Quinn Publishing Co., Inc. Office of publication, 8 Lord Street, Buffalo, New York. Entered as Second Class Matter at Post Office, Buffalo, New York. Subscription \$3.50 for 12 issues in U.S. and Possessions; Canada \$4 for 12 issues; elsewhere \$4.50. Allow four weeks for change of address. All stories appearing in this magazine are fiction; any similarity to actual persons is coincidental. Not responsible for unsolicited artwork or manuscripts, 35c a copy. Printed in U.S.A.

**EDITORIAL AND BUSINESS OFFICES, KINGSTON, NEW YORK**

*Next issue on sale March 10th*

*The most fitting place for a man to die is where he dies  
for man. Yet Willie chose a sterile, alien world that  
wouldn't even see a man for millions of years . . .*

# WILLIE'S PLANET

BY MIKE ELLIS

**T**OM STOOD in front of the filtered porthole of the tiny cabin and soaked up the sunlight that came through. It felt good after ten months of deep space blackness.

"By golly, Willie, this is luck," he said to the little man standing at the cabin's instruments, "our hundredth and last star, and it's an Earth type sun. How much difference is there from our sun?"

Willie held the color chart up beside the spectrum screen. "Almost on. Couple of degrees difference." He tossed the chart on the desk and came to stand at Tom's

side, the top of his head even with Tom's erect shoulder. His thin face was tense and worried.

"Tom," he said, "I have a hunch about this star." He stared at the screen morosely.

"I don't receive a thing," Tom chuckled, stretching his flat muscled arms to the low ceiling, his body making a triangle from his narrow hips to his wide shoulders. "What's the hunch?"

"Ever have the feeling you'd been some place before when you'd actually never been there? I feel that about this star." Willie glanced at Tom with his bright blue eyes,



*Illustrated by Paul Orban*

then looked quickly away, a bit of a red flush high on his cheeks.

"It's just because it's like our sun, that's all," Tom said.

"No, it's not that, Tom. It's something else. I feel like we ought to get out of here. Maybe it's the planet."

"Planet?" Tom said.

"Yes," Willie said quietly, "an Earth type planet."

"Earth type!" Tom shouted. "Ten thousand credits bonus! Get it on the screen, Willie. Let's see that spending money baby."

Willie turned on the viewer. Dark and shadowy on one side, bright with blue-green color on the other, the planet floated on the screen.

"The blue must be water and the green continents," Tom murmured in awe. "Damn, it's beautiful. We going to pass it close?"

"In about five more minutes of this spiral," Willie answered. "Say, Tom," Willie said hesitantly, "will you check over these figures? I'm not sure I've allowed enough for the pull of the sun." He shifted the papers aimlessly.

"My gosh, Willie," Tom said, "the only thing I know about navigation is what you've taught me this trip. Your figures are right."

"I just wanted to make sure I'm right," Willie said. "I don't like to navigate close in." He pushed the papers back on the desk. "I guess I'd better call the big shot and let him take over." He pressed the button that rang the buzzer in the Captain's tiny cabin.

"Might as well let Pudge in on it too," Tom said, "or the food will be lousy for days."

"Yeah," Willie said, and buzzed the galley.

Captain Bart strode into the cabin, his barrel chest bare and hairy above the shorts he had been napping in. He went straight to the porthole and stood with his fists on his hips, appraising the sun. Then he caught sight of the blue-green ball on the scope.

"Earth type planet! Nice going, Willie," he shouted, and clapped Willie on the back.

Willie flinched slightly, then moved over to the chart desk, a frown making vertical creases in his forehead.

Bart turned to Tom without noticing. "Ten thousand credits, Tom. I knew we'd do it. Even in this forty year old tub. Willie, are we going to pass it close?"

"Two more minutes," Willie murmured, busy with the charts on the desk. "You'd better check my course, though."

"O.K.," Bart said. "Let her go as she's headed."

Pudge came in from the galley and took his place beside Tom without comment.

"Okay," Bart said, as he sat down in the control board chair, "let's get to work. Willie, I'll run us past just outside the atmosphere. Tom, you do the life search. Pudge, get the pictures."

The cabin was silent except for the hum of the instruments. The radar probed the height of the mountains, the depth of the seas, the shape of the continents by recording the patterns of the reflections.

The electron telescopes hunted down the movement of life, the artificial straight lines of civilization, the classification of plants; and typed the metals in the ground

with the aid of a spectrum.

The wave lengths of radio and TV were checked and recorded.

One special instrument, sealed in its cabinet and booby-trapped with explosives against tampering, probed for the faint waves of any kind of life, down to single cells in the seas.

They made four passes, the last one at a hundred miles from the ground at its closest point. Then, as each man finished his task and relaxed from his instruments, they waited for the automatic tally of the results.

The computer glowed and clicked in its dull grey cabinet on the bulkhead, then dropped the tally card in the slot.

Bart snatched it out, his grin fading to a blank look as he read it. "Nothing. Not a damn thing, no life at all." He went over to the screen, folded his thick arms across his chest, and stared at it in disgust.

Tom picked up the card and studied it. "This is goofy," he said aloud, "the planet's got plant life, plenty of it, but not a trace of animal life, not even plankton in the sea. How'd that happen?"

Willie came over and studied the card with Tom. "Could have bacteria we didn't get from this height, but it sure as hell hasn't got anything else."

Pudge held up the pictures; they showed close-ups of a tangled mass of plants. "All ferns," he said. "Doesn't seem to be anything else."

"Why would a planet have ferns and nothing else, not even the beginning of animal life?" Tom wondered aloud.

"I once read an account of finding the tiny seeds of Earth's plants

millions of miles out in space," Willie said. "Seems the winds blow them right off the planet and they're so light they just keep going." He looked at the pictures, then at Tom. "Suppose some of them drifted here?"

"That's as good a guess as anything else," Tom said. "Maybe the master minds at home can figure it out."

"Only seven or eight Earth-type planets in all these years of star mapping and I had to find one with nothing but ferns on it," Bart said in disgust to the screen. "Oh, well, maybe it'll do as a colony. No alien life to worry about, anyway. We'll call it Bart McDonald Planet."

"Hey," Tom spoke up, "Willie found the planet. He should get to name it."

Bart was curt. "I'm the captain of this ship; new planets are named after the captain that discovers them."

"Nuts," Tom muttered. "We all had a hand in this. It ought to be named after all of us."

"How about calling it the ship's name," Willie put in quietly.

Bart strode over and yanked the log's keyboard out. He banged furiously on the keys for a moment, and then read aloud. "At 1430 this date, discovered McDonald's planet, an Earth class planet, signed, Bart McDonald, Captain." He slammed the log shut.

Tom snorted.

Bart gave him a dirty look and went over and sat in the control board chair. Pudge had disappeared in the galley as he always did when there was an argument. There were a few minutes of

strained silence as they worked over the instruments.

Bart turned from the control board. "As long as this place has no life, we'd be safe in landing. Suppose we earn the bonus by bringing back a full report on whether it's fit for a colony or not?"

Willie's head jerked up, his face white.

Tom frowned, and said nothing. He wanted to land but he didn't want to agree with Bart on anything.

"What say?" Bart said. "I'll even put it up for a vote."

"Okay," Tom said, thinking of walking in the sun, feeling firm ground under his feet. "It would be a shame to come all this way and then not be able to say we had explored the country."

"No," Willie said quickly. "It's dangerous. And—and besides, we'd have to go in quarantine when we got back."

"So we go in quarantine," Bart said. "We'll get paid for it." He turned to the control board. "Buzz Pudge, so he can get ready." He began punching buttons.

They went around to the middle of the day side of the planet, swinging in closer. The continents formed a rough belt around the equator of the planet, with no land extending to the small ice caps on the poles.

Tom felt his stomach knot with the thrill of going into the unknown as he watched the screen, but part of the time he was running the lights of the control board through his mind, checking the actions of Bart's big fingers as Bart confidently punched the keys. Then he caught sight of Willie's tense

face. It was white, with little splotches of pink, and his slender hands were gripping the chair he was sitting in.

"Here we go," Bart shouted exultantly, as the big green light flashed on. He hit the big green key with a stubby forefinger. The auto pilot fired the jets, the ship slowed in its descent, and they were pushed down gently in their chairs. As the spot Bart had picked came up on the screen, they could see the bare red of the ridge sticking up out of the yellow-green of the flat land. Then the yellow-green was right below them, turning black as the jets burned it to ashes. They hovered a minute, then came to rest with a creaking thud that echoed through the ship. The jets cut out, leaving their ears ringing.

"Didn't know whether we'd make it or not," Willie said. He unobtrusively wiped the glistening sweat off this slender palms on his coveralls, as he took his place at the panel.

When the tests were done, Bart grabbed the tally card as soon as the computer dropped it. "No bacteria at all. Planet's completely sterile. Let's get outside."

**T**OM stopped beside Bart on the narrow strip of red sand at the edge of the vast blue plain of smooth water. The water came right up to their feet without movement, just small ripples that lapped the red sand. The air was clean and brisk, and the wind was soft on his cheek.

Bart arched his thick chest and pulled in a great lung full of air. "This is wonderful. Makes a man

feel alive again." He yanked the zipper on his coveralls and pulled them off. Then he jumped in the air, swinging his thick arms.

Tom grinned at the calisthenics as he peeled off his own coveralls. The sun was warm on his bare white skin.

Bart had pulled off his boots and with just his shorts left, charged into the water, and made a flat smashing dive. He leaped and splashed the water like a porpoise.

Tom grinned at him, and just as he had done during most of his boyhood on Earth, took a gulp of air and dived down into the clear silent depths to the twenty foot deep bottom. He drifted slowly among the rocks. Bart drifted beside him as the seconds ticked by. Tom wished this was Earth and there were some fish to hunt in the clear water with a three pronged spear. Then, as his lungs seemed bursting and he had to have air, he put his feet against the bottom and shoved himself to the surface. Several seconds later, Bart burst through the surface and bobbed beside him. They floated until they got their wind back.

"You don't use a suit and oxygen tanks," Bart said. "You couldn't stay under two seconds if you did."

"I learned to hunt as a boy," Tom said. "I even had to make my own spear out of scraps. Kids don't have the credits for suits and stuff."

"No sport to it with a suit," Bart said, as they paddled lazily along with their heads up, toward shore. "As bad as hunting animals with rifles. They killed off all the animals with guns, now they're fishing out the seas with suits."

"Yeah," Tom answered, "might

as well buy the fish from the hatcheries as to go after them with a portable sub."

They dived under, and worked their way along the bottom toward shore, coming up for air, then diving again, until they were back to the beach.

They walked out and dropped on the sand to rest, the sun warm on them.

"Notice the water?" Tom asked.

"Yeah," Bart said, "no waves. Calm as hell. Can't be waves without a moon to pull them."

"Doesn't seem to be as salty as the seas at home, either," Tom said.

"Yeah, I noticed that too. Must not be as much salt in the ground as at home."

"Could be it's a young planet that hasn't had much time to wash it out of the ground, too," Tom said.

They rested in silence for a few minutes, the only sound all about them was the wind blowing across the empty land.

Then Bart jumped to his feet and started pulling on his clothes. "Come on, Tom," he said, "Let's take a look around while it's still light."

After they dressed, Bart led the way along the strip of red sand towards the ridge. The tangled mass of yellow-green vegetation grew right down to the strip of red sand, and in some places, grew right over it to stop at the sea.

"I'll be darned," Tom said, stopping at the edge of the plants. The ferns covered the ground solidly; small ones, medium ones, big ones. He crashed back into the thicker growth and kicked some of it aside with his boot. The cloud of dust choked him for a minute.



Bart came crashing in to Tom. "What you got?"

"Look," Tom said. "All these dead ferns underneath, then just the sand. They haven't decayed." He searched under the dead growth. "The dead ones just fall down underneath and the live ones just grow on top. There's not only no life here, but no decay either. Just ferns. I wonder if Willie was right."

"Don't ask me," Bart said. "Come on, let's look from that ridge."

They followed the sand around the impassable vegetation to the ridge and scrambled a little way up the barren red rocks. As far as they could see over the flat land, it was covered with the sickly yellow-green of the ferns.

They looked out and rested, then noting the sun was getting close to the horizon, they made their way back to the huge grey splotched aluminum hulk of their ship.

As Tom was about to follow Bart up the ladder, he noticed a solitary figure sitting at the edge of the sea.

"Hey, Willie," he hollered, "Come to chow." His voice echoed in the quiet. The figure waved and Tom turned back to join him. He sat down on a small boulder near where Willie was sitting and lit his tiny pipe.

Willie was sitting leaning back against a rock, and gazing dreamily out to sea. He didn't notice Tom.

"Hey, Willie," Tom said, puffing on his pipe.

Willie started and turned to Tom. "Oh, hi, Tom. I didn't know you'd come out."

"You wouldn't," Tom laughed, "not in that daydream. Thinking of

some gal back home?"

"No, just thinking," Willie said. "Find anything interesting?"

"Just a lot of rock and ferns," he answered.

"Notice how the dead plants just pack under and don't decay?" Willie asked.

"Yeah," Tom puffed his pipe. "Looks like your idea of seeds drifting through space is as good as any to explain it. Sure is an odd place. Full grown plants, but no decay and no sign of evolution."

"This is a wonderful place," Willie said as he leaned back against the rock. "I'd like to stay here for ten years."

"Why?" Tom asked. The red of the sunset was fading from the high clouds, turning them dark grey.

"Because it's so quiet." Willie smiled at him. "This is the quietest place I've ever been in. Does something to you."

"You should have been a colonist," Tom said, "then you could live on a place like this and farm it."

"I'm going to, someday," Willie answered. "I'm saving my pay to buy a charter and I'm going to buy a place like this."

Tom blew out a cloud of smoke. Seems like every guy working on crowded Earth had the same dream. A little farm on a distant planet. But few of them ever did anything about it. It was a nice dream to relieve the monotony of working, but a hell of a lot of hard work if you actually did it.

"I've even got seeds I saved when I was working on the truck farms of the West," Willie talked on, more to himself than Tom, "I saved them from some of the biggest and



heaviest producing plants. I've got tomatoes, beans, corn, squash. They'll make a fine beginning."

Tom thought of Willie leaving the safety and comfort of living that was found only in the crowded cities of Earth. "Think you'd like the loneliness of farming?" he asked.

Willie spoke with conviction. "There's nothing I'd like more. That's why I started star mapping, to get out of the mobs. That's why I'm out here."

"Dinner's on," Pudge called from the ship.

Tom knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "Let's eat." He led the way to the ship.

**T**HE MEAL was eaten in an appreciative silence, for Pudge had spread a feast of celebration. When the last of the unaccustomed delicacies was gone, they pushed their plates away.

"Boy," Bart grunted out as he lit his pipe, "I haven't eaten like that since the last time I was hunting. Say, Tom, what say you and I go fishing on the Florida coast when we get back. We can get a fish a day down there."

"We'll do that," Tom said without conviction. He knew when they got back they would go their different ways in the eternal quest of spacemen back home.

"I'm due to get a bigger ship when I get back," Bart said expansively, "and I'm sure going to have Pudge for my cook. How about you, Tom? You're due to step up, now. Want to be my navigator?"

"Sure," Tom said, surprised.

"We'll really do some star map-

ping," Bart said. "With a bigger and newer ship, we can go clear to the end of the galaxy. Who knows what we'll find for the Astral Service."

"What about me?" Willie said. "Am I going to be retired as your First Mate?"

Tom looked at Willie, he had almost forgotten Willie was there because he was so quiet. Willie was trying to look bright and happy, but even through the happy haze, Tom could see he looked tired and depressed. The wine hadn't done a thing for him, and his dinner was only half eaten.

Bart had looked down at his plate, frowning, at Willie's question. He knocked out the ashes of his pipe and tossed it on the table. He looked Willie squarely in the eye. "I was going to save it until we got back, but since you asked, I'll give it to you straight. Willie, I'm sending you back for a check-up when we get in. You can't seem to do a darn thing anymore, without having somebody doublecheck it. Tom and I have had to navigate the ship most of this trip, when you were supposed to do it. There's no place out here for a man that can't do his job. It puts too much on the others. I think you need a long rest or something."

Willie sat there, his face white, blinking his eyes rapidly. Then he lurched to the door, his chair spinning behind him. Pudge got up and went to the galley.

"What the hell did you do that for?" Tom asked Bart. "Why didn't you kid him along and give it to him easy when we got back. It would have been easier on his feelings."

"That's not my way," Bart said. "He asked me and I gave it to him straight. He's no good out here anymore. In fact, he's dangerous. If something should come up that needs quick action, we'd all be wiped out by the time he called me."

"Okay," Tom said. "It was honest, and it was truthful. But it sure as hell hurt him. I'm going to see him and try to ease it over."

"You'll be a good first mate, Tom," Bart said. "But don't baby the crew too much. They've either got it or they haven't."

Tom went down the narrow passageway to Willie's cabin and knocked on the door. When he didn't get an answer, he opened the door. Willie was lying on his bunk with his face to the wall. He didn't move as Tom sat in the chair.

"Hey, Willie," Tom said. "You got company. I come in to shoot the breeze with you."

Willie turned over reluctantly. "I'm sorry, Tom. I hate Bart's guts. He's always so goddam right." Willie clasped his hands behind his head on the pillow, and stared at the ceiling. "He'll wash me out of this job and then what will I do? I've failed at everything else I've tried to do. It's the people, Tom. I can't do anything in front of people. What am I going to do when they ground me? I can't stand the crowds of people on Earth." He rolled over against the wall.

Tom worked his big knuckled long fingers together. "Maybe it won't amount to anything. The brass will just put you on another ship."

"Not if he puts in that report," Willie said, his voice muffled against

the wall.

Tom sat there. There was nothing more to say. Willie was right. "Well, I'll see you on the morning." He got up. "Maybe we can go for a hike or something." When Willie didn't answer, he went out and carefully shut the door behind him.

In his own bunk, he tried to think of something else, but the problem of Willie bothered him for a long, restless time. Then it was morning and the clock was chiming.

Pudge came in to the table where Tom and Bart were waiting for breakfast. "Some one's been in the stores. A couple of cases of emergency rations are missing. It must have been in the night."

"What the hell," Bart said, jumping up. "In the stores?"

"Where's Willie?" Tom said, getting up.

"Who cares," Bart said. "There's no one on this planet but us. Who'd get into our stores? Or what?"

"That's what I mean," Tom said angrily. "Where's Willie?"

Bart gave him a startled glance, then led the way to Willie's cabin. He wasn't there. They went through the ship. They dropped out of the lock, one after the other, into the blinding sunlight and looked around. Willie was gone.

"We'd better find him before he gets too far," Tom said. "I've got a hunch he's not coming back. That's why the food."

"I'll wring the little coward's neck," Bart said as he led the way along the one trail of footprints they had all made to the sand by the sea. They scattered out, calling and looking. Tom, on a hunch, headed for the shoulder of the mountain that jutted out in the sea, while

Bart and Pudge went the other way.

**T**HE SUN was high in the clear blue sky when Tom at last came around the point to the little cove a stream had made in the side of the mountain. He walked up the narrow sandy bank between the red cliffs until a short way in, he found the cases of food and a pile of blankets. His yell echoed off the red cliffs several times before he looked up to see Willie standing on top of the cliff twenty feet above him.

"Come on back to the ship, Willie," Tom called as though Willie was just out for a walk. "We're going to blast off this afternoon. Got to head home."

"I'm not coming back," Willie said. "I'm staying here."

"Be reasonable," Tom shouted, "you can't stay here. Come on back to the ship."

"I'm going to live here. I'm going to colonize," Willie said.

"What?" Tom's voice was unbelieving.

"I'm going to live here," Willie repeated. "Tom, give me your word you won't force me to go back and I'll come down so we can talk."

"O.K.," Tom said, "you have my word."

"Bart isn't around, is he?" Willie slid down the cliff in a shower of loose rock and dirt.

"You can't stay here, Willie," Tom began, "how are you going to live, to eat?"

"I've got my seeds," Willie said dreamily. "I'll have a real farm." He waved vaguely at the ferns. "Look at the stuff grow. The climate is ideal. I'll build a hut and

farm enough to eat."

"Willie," Tom said, trying another angle. "There are no other people here. What'll you do if you get sick or need help?"

"I won't get sick and I won't need help," Willie said. "That's why I want to stay here, 'cause there aren't any people. I can have a thousand acres all to myself. I can stake out a whole square mile and live right in the middle of it." He laughed like a little kid. "Tom, this is what I've wanted all my life. Why should I go back to Earth and then try to come back later, I'm staying here, now."

Tom had the feeling he was trying to argue with an ostrich with its head in the sand. What would Willie do for food if his crops failed when the emergency rations were gone? Willie was gambling his life for a dream, but he didn't know it. Willie saw only what he wanted to see, disregarding everything else. Arguing was useless. The only way they could get Willie back aboard was to carry him back.

"Well, okay, Willie," Tom said. "I'll go back and tell Bart. But I'll get him to hold the ship until tomorrow if you should change your mind."

"I won't," Willie said. "So long, Tom." He held out his hand. "You've been a swell guy."

Tom took the hand and shook it. "So long, Willie. I'll be back someday, to see how you're making out." He started back down the narrow beach. Along the way, he decided that they would have to catch Willie and take him back to Earth for hospitalization. Coming back with Bart wouldn't be breaking his word. That had only been

for the time he had talked to Willie.

Bart heard Tom's report in his usual way. "Let's go," was his only comment.

They climbed up the crumbling red rock and followed the edge of the cliff. They climbed over the small boulders, around the huge ones, endlessly finding the way blocked, but each time going back a little and by going around, finding a new way that was clear. The sun was halfway to the western horizon when they stopped to rest on a pile of small boulders near the top. Tom leaned back against the rock behind him. A trickle of sweat ran down his ribs from his armpit under his coveralls.

Bart snorted through his nose. "It'll be dark soon." He wiped his arm across his forehead, the sweat making a dark stain on the sleeve. "Damn that fool Willie. He'll pay for this when we get him back to Earth. He must be crazy or something."

"My God," Tom said. "Is that finally dawning on you?"

Bart looked up at Tom, his dark brown eyes small in his broad sweat-streaked face. As he continued to stare at Tom without saying anything, Tom felt the stir of annoyance, then the beginning of hot tempered anger. They sat and waited, looking for the movement Willie would make if he showed himself. Nothing stirred in the yellow-green ferns below. After an hour of watching, Bart got to his feet.

"He's holed up somewhere and pulled the hole in after him. Let's get down there and drag him out." He started back down the ridge the way they had come up.

Halfway down, as they stopped for a breather, Tom noted the height of the sun. It was going to be dark before they could work their way back to the ship. A low bank of rolling grey clouds lay all along the straight horizon line of the sea; as the sun sank behind the clouds, it turned the edges of them to fiery red.

Bart hurried down the ridge, watching only for a glimpse of Willie, but Tom looked at the sunset occasionally, trying to store up the memory of the color for the months ahead.

As they reached the stream cliff, Tom stopped Bart.

"Bart, I've got an idea. It's almost dark. Willie will think we've headed back to get to the ship before it's too dark to find our way. He's probably sitting on a rock, watching the sunset and daydreaming. Let's look on the edge of this little cliff where it ends at the sea."

"O.K.," Bart said, leading the way. The only light left was the reflected red light of the clouds that made long dark shadows behind the rocks.

They came around the rocks, onto the cliff point overlooking the sea and the cove, and there was Willie, sitting with his back to a big rock, his chin resting on his cupped hands, gazing dreamily out to sea.

"Willie!" Bart shouted, lunging for him.

Willie jerked around to see them, then he was up and sliding down the loose rock into the shadowy cove below.

"Grab him, Tom," Bart shouted as he went sliding and falling down, the loose rock after him.

Tom jumped down the rocks to the bottom and slid to a stop, the loose rocks rolling down around him, but Willie was deep in the ferns with only his head and shoulders showing.

Bart had the automatic pistol out and pointed at Willie. "Stop you crazy fool, or I'll shoot," he shouted, his voice echoing off the cliffs. Willie only crashed into the ferns more desperately.

Bart raised the automatic and fired a burst of shots, the sharp explosions echoing shatteringly around them. Tom made a flying tackle and smashed into Bart. They went down in the ferns, struggling for the gun, until Bart managed to roll and push his way to his feet.

"Knock it off," Bart shouted. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"Keep you from killing him," Tom shouted back as he got to his feet.

"I wasn't trying to kill him," Bart snapped. "I was trying to scare him into stopping so we could grab him, now he's got clean away in those damn ferns." He waved a hand helplessly at the mass of dark vegetation. Willie was gone all right. "Now we'll have to spend days hunting for that lunatic. Next time let me handle it. I'm the captain of this expedition."

"Okay," Tom said angrily, "but let's catch him, not kill him. He hasn't done anything, just wants to be alone, that's all."

"He's deserted," Bart said, "and he signed articles, so that's a crime. How the hell am I going to explain a lost crewman when we go back. And on my first trip as captain."

"That's your worry," Tom said.

"He's colonizing, not deserting."

"You should have been a lawyer," Bart said as he put the gun in his holster. "But this isn't getting that screwball aboard." He groped in the pocket of his coveralls and pulled out a small packlight. The white searchbeam lit up the ferns around them with glaring brightness. "Come on, let's try to find him." He led the way into the ferns.

They hunted through the ferns, forcing their way every step. The searchbeam was only good for a few feet in the dense growth. They knew Willie was close, but in the ferns they could almost step on him and not know it.

At last Bart gave up. "Let's go back to the ship. We'll come back in the morning, when it's light." Following him along the beach toward the ship, Tom had the feeling that in the morning might be too late. Willie might have been hit by the burst of shots, or he might take off in the ferns so far they never could find him.

**T**OM rolled out of his bunk at the first bell, wincing at his sore muscles. After getting the first aid kit from the bathroom, he quietly walked down the narrow passageway and out into the bright sunlight. As he walked through the grey ash to the strip of red sand, the quiet was like a blanket over everything, after the soft hum of the living ship. The breeze blew softly against his face, hummed past his ears, and rustled the ferns. The sea was glass smooth as far as he could see across its surface, smooth right up to where the water turned deep green as it got shal-

lower. He could understand why Willie wanted to stay here. It was a perfect place for anyone who loved solitude and there was probably none like it in the whole system.

He thought of how a man could live here, with no one to bother him, nothing to buy, no need to do any more than just produce enough food to live. A little shack to keep off the rain, a little field to grow food.

But there would be no one to talk to, no one to share experiences and troubles and little triumphs, no one to laugh with, no challenge to overcome, no excitement.

"Not for me," Tom said aloud, and his voice was strange in the quiet. "Boy, this place puts a spell on a guy, almost hypnotizes him." He laughed aloud. "Even got me talking to myself." He hurried on to hunt for Willie.

Then he came to the little cove where Willie had his camp. The pile of food and blankets was still there. Willie was there, too. He was lying half in the pool of water. As Tom crunched over the sand and knelt beside him, Willie opened his eyes.

"Hi, Tom," he said faintly. "I'm glad you came alone."

"Hi, Willie," Tom said as he looked at the thin chest with the small neat hole low on the left side. "So he did shoot you, didn't he." He opened the first aid kit. "I'll get you back to the ship and you'll be O.K." He started putting a dressing on the wound.

Willie looked at him with his bright blue eyes. "Never mind, Tom. I just got to stay here in spite of the Captain." His voice was so

low Tom had to lean closer to hear him. Willie coughed slightly and winced with the pain.

Tom finished the bandage. He knew there was nothing he could do; Willie was hurt inside and only a doctor could help him. But there were no doctors here. He wanted to do something for him to make him more comfortable. He started to put an arm under him to move him out of the pool. "I'll get you out of this water," he said.

"No. Tom," Willie said. "Leave me here. I crawled all night to get here. I want to die in this pool."

"In the water?" Tom said in surprise.

"Yes, in the water. Don't you understand? I thought you would." He stared up at the white tracing of the clouds in the sky.

Tom waited, silently. He knelt there, the sun burning hot on his back.

"I wanted to stay," Willie said. "I had to stay. Didn't you feel anything about this planet, Tom?"

Tom thought a moment. "I did feel a little," he admitted. "On the way over here. Like it would be a nice place to live."

"That's it," Willie smiled. "Don't you see. Here was this planet, ripe for life, but without life. Then the seeds of the ferns got blown off Earth and drifted here. But it needed more, it needed animal life to complete the cycle."

"Then we got 'blown off Earth.' Bart for the glory, Pudge for the ride, you for the excitement, and me—me—because I had to, I guess. Because I couldn't stand it back there. Seeds, all four of us, and not knowing it. That's why we had to land. That's why one of us had to



stay and I guess it was just me. Now the rest of you can go back to Earth."

Willie coughed, much longer this time. Then he lay back exhausted. "Tom," he whispered, "look at the edge of my camp. In the ferns."

Tom walked over to the edge of the camp. He looked at the yellow-green ferns, wondering what Willie meant. Then he saw it. The faint steaming from the packed dead ferns under the growing ones, the spreading dark spot, the already darker green of the plants growing around the spot.

Willie had brought the seeds of decay with him, as well as the seeds of life. The dead plants were decaying for the first time on this planet. This spot would spread until the whole planet was covered with dark green; and life would be as it was on Earth.

Tom went back to Willie and stood looking down at him. Then he knelt and gently closed Willie's eyelids. He thought of moving him, digging him a shallow grave. But

kneeling there in the silent cove, he had the hunch that maybe there was more to this. Willie had wanted to stay in the little pool. The stream came down off the ridge through the pool to the sea. Maybe if Willie stayed there, the bacteria of his body would live on, and be washed into the sea. The water was warm and there were no enemies to destroy them and there were plants to feed them. Perhaps, Willie was right. Maybe he *was* the seed of life coming to this planet; and in a million years men might walk these shores.

Tom straightened up. He took a deep breath and looked around the little cove, and then back to Willie.

"It's your planet, now, Willie. Willie's Planet from now on. What Bart put in the log and what space-men will call it as they go by, will be two different things. Or did you know that in your heart, too." He was silent a moment. "So long, Willie. Go with God."

He turned and crunched along the sand towards the ship. ● ● ●