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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAPPY ENDING \*\*\*

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*A world had collapsed around this man—a world that would never shout his praises again. The burned-out cities were still and dead, the twisted bodies and twisted souls giving him their last salute in death. And now he was alone, alone surrounded by memories, alone and waiting ...*

---

## happy ending

by MACK REYNOLDS  
and FREDRIC BROWN

**Sometimes the  
queerly shaped  
Venusian trees  
seemed to talk to him,  
but their voices were  
soft. They were loyal  
people.**

THERE were four men in the lifeboat that came down from the space-cruiser. Three of them were still in the uniform of the Galactic Guards.

The fourth sat in the prow of the small craft looking down at their goal, hunched and silent, bundled up in a greatcoat against the coolness of space—a greatcoat which he would never need again after this morning. The brim of his hat was pulled down far over his forehead, and he studied the nearing shore through dark-lensed glasses. Bandages, as though for a broken jaw, covered most of the lower part of his face.

He realized suddenly that the dark glasses, now that they had left the cruiser, were unnecessary. He slipped them off. After the cinematographic grays his eyes had seen through these lenses for so long, the brilliance of the color below him was almost like a blow. He blinked, and looked again.

They were rapidly settling toward a shoreline, a beach. The sand was a dazzling, unbelievable white such as had never been on his home planet. Blue the sky and water, and green the edge of the fantastic jungle. There was a flash of red in the green, as they came still closer, and he realized suddenly that it must be a *marigee*, the semi-intelligent Venusian parrot once so popular as pets throughout the solar system.

Throughout the system blood and steel had fallen from the sky and ravished the planets, but now it fell no more.

And now this. Here in this forgotten portion of an almost completely destroyed world it had not fallen at all.

Only in some place like this, alone, was safety for him. Elsewhere—anywhere—imprisonment or, more likely, death. There was danger, even here. Three of the crew of the space-cruiser knew. Perhaps, someday, one of them would talk. Then they would come for him, even here.

But that was a chance he could not avoid. Nor were the odds bad, for three people out of a whole solar system knew where he was. And those three were loyal fools.

The lifeboat came gently to rest. The hatch swung open and he stepped out and walked a few paces up the beach. He turned and waited while the two spacemen who had guided the craft brought his chest out and carried it across the beach and to the corrugated-tin shack just at the edge of the trees. That shack had once been a space-radar relay station. Now the equipment it had held was long gone, the antenna mast taken down. But the shack still stood. It would be his home for a while. A long while. The two men returned to the lifeboat preparatory to leaving.

And now the captain stood facing him, and the captain's face was a rigid mask. It seemed with an effort that the captain's right arm remained at his side, but that effort had been ordered. No salute.

The captain's voice, too, was rigid with unemotion. "Number One ..."

"Silence!" And then, less bitterly. "Come further from the boat before you again let your tongue run loose. Here." They had reached the shack.

"You are right, Number ..."

"No. I am no longer Number One. You must continue to think of me as *Mister Smith*, your cousin, whom you brought here for the reasons you explained to the under-officers, before you surrender your ship. If you *think* of me so, you will be less likely to slip in your speech."

"There is nothing further I can do—Mister Smith?"

"Nothing. Go now."

"And I am ordered to surrender the—"

"There are no orders. The war is over, lost. I would suggest thought as to what spaceport you put into. In some you may receive humane treatment. In others—"

The captain nodded. "In others, there is great hatred. Yes. That is all?"

"That is all. And, Captain, your running of the blockade, your securing of fuel *en route*, have constituted a deed of high valor. All I can give you in reward is my thanks. But now go. Goodbye."

"Not goodbye," the captain blurted impulsively, "but *hasta la vista, auf Wiedersehen, until the day* ... you will permit me, for the last time to address you and salute?"

The man in the greatcoat shrugged. "As you will."

Click of heels and a salute that once greeted the Caesars, and later the pseudo-Aryan of the 20th Century, and, but yesterday, he who was now known as *the last of the dictators*. "Farewell, Number One!"

"Farewell," he answered emotionlessly.

Mr. Smith, a black dot on the dazzling white sand, watched the lifeboat disappear up into the blue, finally into the haze of the upper atmosphere of Venus. That eternal haze that would always be there to mock his failure and his bitter solitude.

The slow days snarled by, and the sun shone dimly, and the *marigees* screamed in the early dawn and all day and at sunset, and sometimes there were the six-legged *baroons*, monkey-like in the trees, that gibbered at him. And the rains came and went away again.

At nights there were drums in the distance. Not the martial roll of marching, nor yet a threatening note of savage hate. Just drums, many miles away, throbbing rhythm for native dances or exorcising, perhaps, the forest-night demons. He assumed these Venusians had their superstitions, all other races had. There was no threat, for him, in that throbbing that was like the beating of the jungle's heart.

Mr. Smith knew that, for although his choice of destinations had been a hasty choice, yet there had been time for him to read the available reports. The natives were harmless and friendly. A Terran missionary had lived among them some time ago—before the outbreak of the war. They were a simple, weak race. They seldom went far from their villages; the space-radar operator who had once occupied the shack reported that he had never seen one of them.

So, there would be no difficulty in avoiding the natives, nor danger if he did encounter them.

Nothing to worry about, except the bitterness.

Not the bitterness of regret, but of defeat. Defeat at the hands of the defeated. The damned Martians who came back after he had driven them halfway across their damned arid planet. The Jupiter Satellite Confederation landing endlessly on the home planet, sending their vast armadas of spacecraft daily and nightly to turn his mighty cities into dust. In spite of everything; in spite of his score of ultra-vicious secret weapons and the last desperate efforts of his weakened armies, most of whose men were under twenty or over forty.

The treachery even in his own army, among his own generals and admirals. The turn of Luna, that had been the end.

His people would rise again. But not, now after Armageddon, in his lifetime. Not under him, nor another like him. The last of the dictators.

Hated by a solar system, and hating it.

It would have been intolerable, save that he was alone. He had foreseen that—the need for solitude. Alone, he was still Number One. The presence of others would have forced recognition of his miserably changed status. Alone, his pride was undamaged. His ego was intact.

The long days, and the *marigees'* screams, the slithering swish of the surf, the ghost-quiet movements of the *baroons* in the trees and the raucousness of their shrill voices. Drums.

Those sounds, and those alone. But perhaps silence would have been worse.

For the times of silence were louder. Times he would pace the beach at night and overhead would be the roar of jets and rockets, the ships that had roared over New Albuquerque, his capitol, in those last days before he had fled. The crump of bombs and the screams and the blood, and the flat voices of his folding generals.

Those were the days when the waves of hatred from the conquered peoples beat upon his country as the waves of a stormy sea beat upon crumbling cliffs. Leagues back of the battered lines, you could *feel* that hate and vengeance as a tangible thing, a thing that thickened the air, that made breathing difficult and talking futile.

And the spacecraft, the jets, the rockets, the damnable rockets, more every day and every night, and ten coming for every one shot down. Rocket ships raining hell from the sky, havoc and chaos and the end of hope.

And then he knew that he had been hearing another sound, hearing it often and long at a time. It was a voice that shouted invective and ranted hatred and glorified the steel might of his planet and the destiny of a man and a people.

It was his own voice, and it beat back the waves from the white shore, it stopped their wet encroachment upon this, his domain. It screamed back at the *baroons* and they were silent. And at times he laughed, and the *marigees* laughed. Sometimes, the queerly shaped Venusian trees talked too, but their voices were quieter. The trees were submissive, they were good subjects.

Sometimes, fantastic thoughts went through his head. The race of trees, the pure race of trees that never interbred, that stood firm always. Someday the trees—

But that was just a dream, a fancy. More real were the *marigees* and the *kifs*. They were the ones who persecuted him. There was the *marigee* who would shriek "*All is lost!*" He had shot at it a hundred times with his needle gun, but always it flew away unharmed. Sometimes it did not even fly away.

"*All is lost!*"

At last he wasted no more needle darts. He stalked it to strangle it with his bare hands. That was better. On what might have been the thousandth try, he caught it and killed it, and there was warm blood on his hands and feathers were flying.

That should have ended it, but it didn't. Now there were a dozen *marigees* that screamed that all was lost. Perhaps there had been a dozen all along. Now he merely shook his fist at them or threw stones.

The *kifs*, the Venusian equivalent of the Terran ant, stole his food. But that did not matter; there was plenty of food. There had been a cache of it in the shack, meant to restock a space-cruiser, and never used. The *kifs* would not get at it until he opened a can, but then, unless he ate it all at once, they ate whatever he left. That did not matter. There were plenty of cans. And always fresh fruit from the jungle. Always in season, for there were no seasons here, except the rains.

But the *kifs* served a purpose for him. They kept him sane, by giving him something tangible, something inferior, to hate.

Oh, it wasn't hatred, at first. Mere annoyance. He killed them in a routine sort of way at first. But they kept coming back. Always there were *kifs*. In his larder, wherever he did it. In his bed. He sat the legs of the cot in dishes of gasoline, but the *kifs* still got in. Perhaps they dropped from the ceiling, although he never caught them doing it.

They bothered his sleep. He'd feel them running over him, even when he'd spent an hour picking the bed clean of them by the light of the carbide lantern. They scurried with tickling little feet and he could not sleep.

He grew to hate them, and the very misery of his nights made his days more tolerable by giving them an increasing purpose. A pogrom against the *kifs*. He sought out their holes by patiently following one bearing a bit of food, and he poured gasoline into the hole and the earth around it, taking satisfaction in the thought of the writhings in agony below. He went about hunting *kifs*, to step on them. To stamp them out. He must have killed millions of *kifs*.

But always there were as many left. Never did their number seem to diminish in the slightest. Like the Martians—but unlike the Martians, they did not fight back.

Theirs was the passive resistance of a vast productivity that bred *kifs* ceaselessly, overwhelmingly, billions to replace millions. Individual *kifs* could be killed, and he took savage satisfaction in their killing, but he knew his methods were useless save for the pleasure and the purpose they gave him. Sometimes the pleasure would pall in the shadow of its futility, and he would dream of mechanized means of killing them.

He read carefully what little material there was in his tiny library about the *kif*. They were astonishingly like the ants of Terra. So much that there had been speculation about their relationship—that didn't interest him. How could they be killed, *en masse*? Once a year, for a

brief period, they took on the characteristics of the army ants of Terra. They came from their holes in endless numbers and swept everything before them in their devouring march. He wet his lips when he read that. Perhaps the opportunity would come then to destroy, to destroy, *and destroy*.

Almost, Mr. Smith forgot people and the solar system and what had been. Here in this new world, there was only he and the *kifs*. The *baroons* and the *marigees* didn't count. They had no order and no system. The *kifs*—

In the intensity of his hatred there slowly filtered through a grudging admiration. The *kifs* were true totalitarians. They practiced what he had preached to a mightier race, practiced it with a thoroughness beyond the kind of man to comprehend.

Theirs the complete submergence of the individual to the state, theirs the complete ruthlessness of the true conqueror, the perfect selfless bravery of the true soldier.

But they got into his bed, into his clothes, into his food.

They crawled with intolerable tickling feet.

Nights he walked the beach, and that night was one of the noisy nights. There were high-flying, high-whining jet-craft up there in the moonlight sky and their shadows dappled the black water of the sea. The planes, the rockets, the jet-craft, they were what had ravaged his cities, had turned his railroads into twisted steel, had dropped their H-Bombs on his most vital factories.

He shook his fist at them and shrieked imprecations at the sky.

And when he had ceased shouting, there were voices on the beach. Conrad's voice in his ear, as it had sounded that day when Conrad had walked into the palace, white-faced, and forgotten the salute. "There is a breakthrough at Denver, Number One! Toronto and Monterey are in danger. And in the other hemispheres—" His voice cracked. "—the damned Martians and the traitors from Luna are driving over the Argentine. Others have landed near New Petrograd. It is a rout. All is lost!"

Voices crying, "Number One, *hai!* Number One, *hai!*"

A sea of hysterical voices. "Number One, *hai!* Number One—"

A voice that was louder, higher, more frenetic than any of the others. His memory of his own voice, calculated but inspired, as he'd heard it on play-backs of his own speeches.

The voices of children chanting, "To thee, O Number One—" He couldn't remember the rest of the words, but they had been beautiful words. That had been at the public school meet in the New Los Angeles. How strange that he should remember, here and now, the very tone of his voice and inflection, the shining wonder in their children's eyes. Children only, but they were willing to kill and die, *for him*, convinced that all that was needed to cure the ills of the race was a suitable leader to follow.

"*All is lost!*"

And suddenly the monster jet-craft were swooping downward and starkly he realized what a clear target he presented, here against the white moonlit beach. They must see him.

The crescendo of motors as he ran, sobbing now in fear, for the cover of the jungle. Into the screening shadow of the giant trees, and the sheltering blackness.

He stumbled and fell, was up and running again. And now his eyes could see in the dimmer moonlight that filtered through the branches overhead. Stirrings there, in the branches. Stirrings and voices in the night. Voices in and of the night. Whispers and shrieks of pain. Yes, he'd shown them pain, and now their tortured voices ran with him through the knee-deep, night-wet grass among the trees.

The night was hideous with noise. Red noises, an almost *tangible* din that he could nearly *feel* as well as he could see and hear it. And after a while his breath came raspingly, and there was a thumping sound that was the beating of his heart and the beating of the night.

And then, he could run no longer, and he clutched a tree to keep from falling, his arms trembling about it, and his face pressed against the impersonal roughness of the bark. There was no wind, but the tree swayed back and forth and his body with it.

Then, as abruptly as light goes on when a switch is thrown, the noise vanished. Utter silence, and at last he was strong enough to let go his grip on the tree and stand erect again, to look about to get his bearings.

One tree was like another, and for a moment he thought he'd have to stay here until daylight. Then he remembered that the sound of the surf would give him his directions. He listened hard and heard it, faint and far away.

And another sound—one that he had never heard before—faint, also, but seeming to come from his right and quite near.

He looked that way, and there was a patch of opening in the trees above. The grass was waving strangely in that area of moonlight. It moved, although there was no breeze to move it. And there

was an almost sudden *edge*, beyond which the blades thinned out quickly to barrenness.

And the sound—it was like the sound of the surf, but it was continuous. It was more like the rustle of dry leaves, but there were no dry leaves to rustle.

Mr. Smith took a step toward the sound and looked down. More grass bent, and fell, and vanished, even as he looked. Beyond the moving edge of devastation was a brown floor of the moving bodies of *kifs*.

Row after row, orderly rank after orderly rank, marching resistlessly onward. Billions of *kifs*, an army of *kifs*, eating their way across the night.

Fascinated, he stared down at them. There was no danger, for their progress was slow. He retreated a step to keep beyond their front rank. The sound, then, was the sound of chewing.

He could see one edge of the column, and it was a neat, orderly edge. And there was discipline, for the ones on the outside were larger than those in the center.

He retreated another step—and then, quite suddenly, his body was afire in several spreading places. The vanguard. Ahead of the rank that ate away the grass.

His boots were brown with *kifs*.

Screaming with pain, he whirled about and ran, beating with his hands at the burning spots on his body. He ran head-on into a tree, bruising his face horribly, and the night was scarlet with pain and shooting fire.

But he staggered on, almost blindly, running, writhing, tearing off his clothes as he ran.

This, then, was *pain*. There was a shrill screaming in his ears that must have been the sound of his own voice.

When he could no longer run, he crawled. Naked, now, and with only a few *kifs* still clinging to him. And the blind tangent of his flight had taken him well out of the path of the advancing army.

But stark fear and the memory of unendurable pain drove him on. His knees raw now, he could no longer crawl. But he got himself erect again on trembling legs, and staggered on. Catching hold of a tree and pushing himself away from it to catch the next.

Falling, rising, falling again. His throat raw from the screaming invective of his hate. Bushes and the rough bark of trees tore his flesh.

Into the village compound just before dawn, staggered a man, a naked terrestrial. He looked about with dull eyes that seemed to see nothing and understand nothing.

The females and young ran before him, even the males retreated.

He stood there, swaying, and the incredulous eyes of the natives widened as they saw the condition of his body, and the blankness of his eyes.

When he made no hostile move, they came closer again, formed a wondering, chattering circle about him, these Venusian humanoids. Some ran to bring the chief and the chief's son, who knew everything.

The mad, naked human opened his lips as though he were going to speak, but instead, he fell. He fell, as a dead man falls. But when they turned him over in the dust, they saw that his chest still rose and fell in labored breathing.

And then came Alwa, the aged chieftain, and Nrana, his son. Alwa gave quick, excited orders. Two of the men carried Mr. Smith into the chief's hut, and the wives of the chief and the chief's son took over the Earthling's care, and rubbed him with a soothing and healing salve.

But for days and nights he lay without moving and without speaking or opening his eyes, and they did not know whether he would live or die.

Then, at last, he opened his eyes. And he talked, although they could make out nothing of the things he said.

Nrana came and listened, for Nrana of all of them spoke and understood best the Earthling's language, for he had been the special protege of the Terran missionary who had lived with them for a while.

Nrana listened, but he shook his head. "The words," he said, "the words are of the Terran tongue, but I make nothing of them. His mind is not well."

The aged Alwa said, "Aie. Stay beside him. Perhaps as his body heals, his words will be beautiful words as were the words of the Father-of-Us who, in the Terran tongue, taught us of the gods and their good."

So they cared for him well, and his wounds healed, and the day came when he opened his eyes and saw the handsome blue-complexioned face of Nrana sitting there beside him, and Nrana said softly, "Good day, Mr. Man of Earth. You feel better, no?"

There was no answer, and the deep-sunken eyes of the man on the sleeping mat stared, glared at him. Nrana could see that those eyes were not yet sane, but he saw, too, that the madness in them was not the same that it had been. Nrana did not know the words for delirium and paranoia, but he could distinguish between them.

No longer was the Earthling a raving maniac, and Nrana made a very common error, an error more civilized beings than he have often made. He thought the paranoia was an improvement over the wider madness. He talked on, hoping the Earthling would talk too, and he did not recognize the danger of his silence.

"We welcome you, Earthling," he said, "and hope that you will live among us, as did the Father-of-Us, Mr. Gerhardt. He taught us to worship the true gods of the high heavens. Jehovah, and Jesus and their prophets the men from the skies. He taught us to pray and to love our enemies."

And Nrana shook his head sadly, "But many of our tribe have gone back to the older gods, the cruel gods. They say there has been great strife among the outsiders, and no more remain upon all of Venus. My father, Alwa, and I are glad another one has come. You will be able to help those of us who have gone back. You can teach us love and kindness."

The eyes of the dictator closed. Nrana did not know whether or not he slept, but Nrana stood up quietly to leave the hut. In the doorway, he turned and said, "We pray for you."

And then, joyously, he ran out of the village to seek the others, who were gathering bela-berries for the feast of the fourth event.

When, with several of them, he returned to the village, the Earthling was gone. The hut was empty.

Outside the compound they found, at last, the trail of his passing. They followed and it led to a stream and along the stream until they came to the tabu of the green pool, and could go no farther.

"He went downstream," said Alwa gravely. "He sought the sea and the beach. He was well then, in his mind, for he knew that all streams go to the sea."

"Perhaps he had a ship-of-the-sky there at the beach," Nrana said worriedly. "All Earthlings come from the sky. The Father-of-Us told us that."

"Perhaps he will come back to us," said Alwa. His old eyes misted.

Mr. Smith was coming back all right, and sooner than they had dared to hope. As soon in fact, as he could make the trip to the shack and return. He came back dressed in clothing very different from the garb the other white man had worn. Shining leather boots and the uniform of the Galactic Guard, and a wide leather belt with a holster for his needle gun.

But the gun was in his hand when, at dusk, he strode into the compound.

He said, "I am Number One, the Lord of all the Solar System, and your ruler. Who was chief among you?"

Alwa had been in his hut, but he heard the words and came out. He understood the words, but not their meaning. He said, "Earthling, we welcome you back. I am the chief."

"You were the chief. Now you will serve me. I am the chief."

Alwa's old eyes were bewildered at the strangeness of this. He said, "I will serve you, yes. All of us. But it is not fitting that an Earthling should be chief among—"

The whisper of the needle gun. Alwa's wrinkled hands went to his scrawny neck where, just off the center, was a sudden tiny pin prick of a hole. A faint trickle of red coursed over the dark blue of his skin. The old man's knees gave way under him as the rage of the poisoned needle dart struck him, and he fell. Others started toward him.

"Back," said Mr. Smith. "Let him die slowly that you may all see what happens to—"

But one of the chief's wives, one who did not understand the speech of Earth, was already lifting Alwa's head. The needle gun whispered again, and she fell forward across him.

"I am Number One," said Mr. Smith, "and Lord of all the planets. All who oppose me, die by—"

And then, suddenly all of them were running toward him. His finger pressed the trigger and four of them died before the avalanche of their bodies bore him down and overwhelmed him. Nrana had been first in that rush, and Nrana died.

The others tied the Earthling up and threw him into one of the huts. And then, while the women began wailing for the dead, the men made council.

They elected Kallana chief and he stood before them and said, "The Father-of-Us, the Mister Gerhardt, deceived us." There was fear and worry in his voice and apprehension on his blue face. "If this be indeed the Lord of whom he told us—"

"He is not a god," said another. "He is an Earthling, but there have been such before on Venus,

many many of them who came long and long ago from the skies. Now they are all dead, killed in strife among themselves. It is well. This last one is one of them, but he is mad."

And they talked long and the dusk grew into night while they talked of what they must do. The gleam of firelight upon their bodies, and the waiting drummer.

The problem was difficult. To harm one who was mad was tabu. If he was really a god, it would be worse. Thunder and lightning from the sky would destroy the village. Yet they dared not release him. Even if they took the evil weapon-that-whispered-its-death and buried it, he might find other ways to harm them. He might have another where he had gone for the first.

Yes, it was a difficult problem for them, but the eldest and wisest of them, one M'Ganne, gave them at last the answer.

"O Kallana," he said, "Let us give him to the *kifs*. If *they* harm him—" and old M'Ganne grinned a toothless, mirthless grin "—it would be their doing and not ours."

Kallana shuddered. "It is the most horrible of all deaths. And if he is a god—"

"If he is a god, they will not harm him. If he is mad and not a god, we will not have harmed him. It harms not a man to tie him to a tree."

Kallana considered well, for the safety of his people was at stake. Considering, he remembered how Alwa and Nrana had died.

He said, "It is right."

The waiting drummer began the rhythm of the council-end, and those of the men who were young and fleet lighted torches in the fire and went out into the forest to seek the *kifs*, who were still in their season of marching.

And after a while, having found what they sought, they returned.

They took the Earthling out with them, then, and tied him to a tree. They left him there, and they left the gag over his lips because they did not wish to hear his screams when the *kifs* came.

The cloth of the gag would be eaten, too, but by that time, there would be no flesh under it from which a scream might come.

They left him, and went back to the compound, and the drums took up the rhythm of propitiation to the gods for what they had done. For they had, they knew, cut very close to the corner of a tabu—but the provocation had been great and they hoped they would not be punished.

All night the drums would throb.

The man tied to the tree struggled with his bonds, but they were strong and his writhings made the knots but tighten.

His eyes became accustomed to the darkness.

He tried to shout, "I am Number One, Lord of—"

And then, because he could not shout and because he could not loosen himself, there came a rift in his madness. He remembered who he was, and all the old hatreds and bitterness welled up in him.

He remembered, too, what had happened in the compound, and wondered why the Venusian natives had not killed him. Why, instead, they had tied him here alone in the darkness of the jungle.

Afar, he heard the throbbing of the drums, and they were like the beating of the heart of night, and there was a louder, nearer sound that was the pulse of blood in his ears as the fear came to him.

The fear that he knew why they had tied him here. The horrible, gibbering fear that, for the last time, an army marched against him.

He had time to savor that fear to the uttermost, to have it become a creeping certainty that crawled into the black corners of his soul as would the soldiers of the coming army crawl into his ears and nostrils while others would eat away his eyelids to get at the eyes behind them.

And then, and only then, did he hear the sound that was like the rustle of dry leaves, in a dank, black jungle where there were no dry leaves to rustle nor breeze to rustle them.

Horribly, Number One, the last of the dictators, did not go mad again; not exactly, but he laughed, and laughed and laughed....

renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HAPPY ENDING \*\*\*

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