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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SMILER ***

Have you ever written science fiction? Have your stories been rejected? Herein may lie the reason.

The Smiler

By Albert Hernhunter

"YOUR NAME?"

"Cole. Martin Cole."

"Your profession?"

"A very important one. I am a literary agent specializing in science fiction. I sell the work of various authors to magazine and book publishers."

The Coroner paused to study Cole; to ponder the thin, mirthless smile. The Coroner said, "Mr. Cole, this inquest has been called to look into the death of one Sanford Smith, who was found near your home with a gun in his hand and a bullet in his brain. The theory of suicide has been—"

"—rather hard to rationalize?"

The Coroner blinked. "You could put it that way."

"I would put it even stronger. The theory is obviously ridiculous. It was a weak cover-up. The best I could do under the circumstances."

"You are saying that you killed Sanford Smith?"

"Of course."

The Coroner glanced at his six-man jury, at the two police officers, at the scattering of spectators. They all seemed stunned. Even the reporter sent to cover the hearing made no move toward the telephone. The Coroner could think of only the obvious question: "Why did you kill him?"

"He was dangerous to us."

"Whom do you mean by *us*?"

"We Martians, who plan to take over your world."

The Coroner was disappointed. A lunatic. But a lunatic can murder. Best to proceed, the Coroner thought. "I was not aware that we have Martians to contend with."

"If I'd had the right weapon to use on Smith, you wouldn't be aware of it now. We still exercise caution."

The Coroner felt a certain pity. "Why did you kill Smith?"

"We Martians have found science-fiction writers to be our greatest danger. Through the medium of imaginative fiction, such writers have more than once revealed our plans. If the public suddenly realized that—"

THE CORONER broke in. "You killed Smith because he revealed something in his writings?"

"Yes. He refused to take my word that it was unsalable. He threatened to submit it direct. It was vital material."

"But there are many other such writers. You can't control—"

"We control ninety percent of the output. We have concentrated on the field and all of the science-fiction agencies are in our hands. This control was imperative."

"I see." The Coroner spoke in the gentle tones one uses with the insane. "Any writing dangerous to your cause is deleted or changed by the agents."

"Not exactly. The agent usually persuades the writer to make any such changes, as the agent is considered an authority on what will or will not sell."

"The writers always agree?"

"Not always. If stubbornness is encountered, the agent merely shelves the manuscript and tells the writer it has been repeatedly rejected."

The Coroner glanced at the two policemen. Both were obviously puzzled. They returned the Coroner's look, apparently ready to move on his order.

The thin, mirthless smile was still on Cole's lips. Maniacal violence could lie just behind it. Possibly Cole was armed. Better to play for time—try to quiet the madness within. The Coroner continued speaking. "You Martians have infiltrated other fields also?"

"Oh, yes. We are in government, industry, education. We are everywhere. We have, of course, concentrated mainly upon the ranks of labor and in the masses of ordinary, everyday people. It is from these sources that we will draw our shock troops when the time comes."

"That time will be—?"

"Soon, very soon."

The Coroner could not forebear a smile. "You find the science-fiction writers more dangerous than the true scientists?"

"Oh, yes. The scientific mind tends to reject anything science disproves." There was now a mocking edge to Cole's voice. "Science can easily prove we do not exist."

"But the science-fiction writer?"

"The danger from the imaginative mind cannot be overestimated."

The Coroner knew he must soon order the officers to lay hands upon this madman. He regretted his own lack of experience with such situations. He tried to put a soothing, confidential note into his voice. "You said a moment ago that if you'd had the right kind of weapon to use on Smith—"

Cole reached into his pocket and brought out what appeared to be a fountain pen. "This. It kills instantly and leaves no mark whatever. Heart failure is invariably stated as the cause of death."

The Coroner felt better. Obviously, Cole was not armed. As the Coroner raised a hand to signal the officers, Cole said, "You understand, of course, that I can't let you live."

"Take this man into custody."

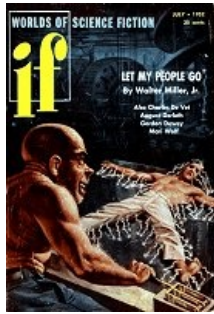
The police officers did not move. The Coroner turned on them sharply. They were smiling. Cole pointed the fountain pen. The Coroner felt a sharp chill on his flesh. He looked at the jury, at the newspaperman, the spectators. They were all smiling cold, thin, terrible smiles....

A SHORT time later, the newspaperman phoned in his story. The afternoon editions carried it:

CORONER BELL DIES OF HEART ATTACK

Shortly after this morning's inquest, which resulted in a jury verdict of suicide in the case of Sanford Smith, Coroner James Bell dropped dead of heart failure in the hearing room of the County building. Mr. Bell leaves a wife and—

THE END



Transcriber's Note:

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SMILER ***

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