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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TERRIBLE ANSWER ***

They came to Mars inquiring after the stuff of Empire. They got—

The TERRIBLE ANSWER

By Arthur G. Hill

THEY came down to Mars ahead of the rest because Larkin had bought an unfair advantage—a copy of the Primary Report. There were seven of them, all varying in appearance, but with one thing in common; in the eyes of each glowed the greed for Empire. They came down in a flash of orange tail-fire and they looked first at the Martians.

"Green," marveled Evans. "What a queer shade of green!"

"Not important," Cleve, the psychologist, replied. "Merely a matter of pigmentation. White, yellow, black, green. It proves only that God loves variety."

"And lord how they grin!"

Cleve peered learnedly. "Doesn't indicate a thing. They were born with those grins. They'll die with them."

Of the seven strong men, Larkin exuded the most power. Thus, his role of leader was a natural one. No man would ever stand in front of Larkin. He said, "To hell with color or the shape of their mouths. What we're after lies inside. Come on. Let's set up a camp."

"For the time being," Cleve cautioned, "we must ignore them. Later—we know what to do. I'll give the nod."

They brought what they needed out of the ship. They brought the plastic tents, broke the small, attached cylinders, and watched the tents bulge up into living quarters. They set up the vapor condenser and it began filling the water tank from the air about them. They plugged a line into the ship and attached it to the tent-line. Immediately the gasses in the plastic tents began to glow and give off both light and heat.

They did many things while the Martians stood silently by with their arms hanging, their splay-feet flat on the ground, their slash-mouths grinning.

The seven sat down to their first meal under the Martian stars and while they ate the rich, delicate foods, they listened to the words of Larkin. "A new empire waiting to be built. A whole planet—virgin—new."

"Not new," Dane, the archeologist, said. "It's older than Earth. It's been worked before."

Larkin waved an impatient hand. "But hardly scratched. It can have risen and fallen a thousand

times for all we care. The important thing is the vital ingredient of empire. Is it here? Can it be harnessed? Are we or are we not, on the threshold of wealth, splendor, and progress so great as to take away the breath?"

And as Larkin spoke, all seven men looked at the Martians; looked covertly while appearing to study the rolling plain and the purple ridges far away; the texture of the soil; the color of the sky; the food on their plates; the steaming fragrance of their coffee. They looked at all these things but they studied the Martians.

"Stupid-looking animals," Evans muttered. "Odd though. So like us—yet so different."

At first there had been only a handful of Martians to grin at the landing of the ship. Now they numbered over a hundred, their ranks augmented by stragglers who came to stare with their fellows in happy silence.

"The prospects are excellent," Cleve said. Then he jerked his attention back to Larkin from whom it had momentarily wandered. When Larkin spoke, one listened.

LARKIN had been directing his words toward a young man named Smith. Smith had inherited a great deal of money which was fine. But Larkin wasn't too sure of his qualifications otherwise. "—the pyramids," Larkin was saying. "Would they have ever been built if the men up above—the men with vision—had had to worry about a payroll?"

Smith regarded the Martians with not quite the impersonal stare of the other six Earthlings. Once or twice he grinned back at them. "I'll grant the truth of what you say," he told Larkin, "but what good were the pyramids? They're something I could never figure."

Smith had a sardonic twist of mouth that annoyed Larkin. "Let's not quibble, man. I merely used the pyramids as an example. Call them Empire; call them any Empire on Earth from the beginning of known history and let's face facts."

"Facts?" Smith asked. He had been looking at a six-foot-six Martian, thinking what a magnificent specimen he was. If only they'd wipe off those silly grins.

"Yes, facts. The building must be done. It is a law of nature. Man must progress or not. And what empire can arise without free labor? Can we develop this planet at union scale? Impossible! Yet it's crying to be developed."

Cleve knocked the ashes off his cigar and frowned. Being a man of direct action, he inquired. "Do you want your money back, Smith?"

The latter shook his head. "Oh no! Don't get me wrong, gentlemen. I'm for empire first, last and always. And if we can lay the foundations of one on the backs of these stupid creatures, I'm for it."

"I still don't like your—"

"My outspoken manner? Don't give it a thought, old man. I just don't want to be all cloyed up with platitudes. If we're going to chain the children of Israel into the house of bondage, let's get on with it."

"I don't like your attitude," Larkin said stubbornly. "In the long run, it will benefit these people."

"Let's say, rather, that it may benefit their children. I doubt if these jokers will be around very long after we start cracking the whip."

Dane was stirred. "The whip," he murmured. "Symbol of empire." But nobody heard him. They were too busy listening to Larkin and Smith—and watching the Martians.

The Martians stood around grinning, waiting patiently for something to happen. Larkin's attitude toward them had changed again. First there had been curiosity. Then a narrow-eyed calculation; now he regarded them with contempt. The careful, studied checks and tests would be made of course. But Larkin, a man of sure instincts, had already made up his mind.

He stretched luxuriously. "Let's call it a day and turn in. Tomorrow we'll go about the business at hand with clearer heads."

"A good idea," Cleve said, "but first, one little gesture. I think it would be judicious." He eyed the Martians, settling finally upon one—a male—standing close and somewhat apart from the rest. Cleve scowled. Standing erect, he called, "Hey—you!" He interpreted the words with a beckoning gesture of his arm. "Come here! Here, boy! Over here!"

The Martian reacted with a typically Earthian gesture. He pointed to his own chest with one green finger, while a questioning expression reflected through the eternal grin.

"Yes, you! On the double."

THE Martian came forward. There was in his manner a slight hesitation, and Smith expected to see his hind quarters wriggle like that of a dog—uncertain, but eager to please.

Cleve pointed with a martinet gesture toward the smoked-out cigar butt he'd thrown to the ground. "Pick it up!"

The Martian stood motionless.

"Pick—it—*up*, you stupid lout!"

The Martian understood. With a glad little whimper, he bent over and took the cigar butt in his hand.

"There," Cleve said. "Garbage can! Get it? *Garbage can*. Place for trash—for cigar butts. Put it in there."

Smith wasn't sure whether the grin deepened or not. He thought it did, as the Martian laid the cigar butt carefully into the trash can.

"Okay, you fella," Cleve barked, still scowling. "Back and away now. Stay out there! Get it? Only come when you're called."

It took a few eloquent gestures, including the pantomime of swinging a whip, before the Martian understood and complied. After he backed into the circle of his fellows, Cleve dropped the cruel overseer manner and turned with satisfaction to Larkin. "I think there will be no trouble at all," he said. "Tomorrow we'll really get down to cases. I predict smooth sailing."

They said goodnight to each other and went about the business of preparing for slumber. As he raised the glowing flap of his tent, Larkin saw Smith lounging in a chair before the electric heat unit. "Aren't you going to get some sleep?"

"In a little while. I'm going to wait around until those two famous moons come. Want to see them first hand."

"A waste of time," Larkin said. "Better keep your mind on more important things."

"Goodnight," Smith said. Larkin did not reply, and Smith turned his head to look at the Martians. He wondered where they had come from. They probably had a village somewhere over the rise. He regarded them without fear or apprehension of what might occur during the sleeping hours. He had read the Primary Report, brought back by the pioneer expedition. These people were entirely harmless. Also they were possessed of remarkable stamina. They had stood for days, watching the first expedition, grinning at it, without nourishment of any kind.

Maybe they live off the atmosphere, Smith told himself dreamily. At any rate, they were ideal specimens to use as the foundation stones of an empire. He lay back, thinking of Larkin; he did not like Larkin personally, but he had to admire the steel in the man; the unswerving determination that had made him what he was.

His mind drifted back to the things of beauty around him. The far purple ridges had changed now, as a light bloomed behind them to gleam like azure through old crystal. Then the two moons shot over the horizon; huge silver bullets riding the thin atmosphere.

The oldest planet. Had it ever been great? Were the bones of any dead civilizations mouldering beneath this strange yellow soil? Smith closed his eyes while the cool Martian breezes soothed his face. Greatness. What was greatness after all? Merely a matter of viewpoint perhaps.

Smith got up and moved slowly toward his tent. Out in the shadows he could feel the grins of the Martians. "Goodnight," he called.

But there was no answer.

"PUT them out there," Cleve said. "It seemed as good a place as any."

"Fine," Larkin rumbled. He wore boots and britches and a big, wide-brimmed hat. He had on soft leather gloves. He looked like an empire builder.

The Martians were standing around grinning at the pile of shovels lying in the fuzz-bush. The Martians seemed interested and appeared to communicate with one another in some



Larkin—now beyond sanity—was gibbering in the grave.

imperceptible manner.

Larkin shoved through the circle of green men, pushing rudely. He stopped, picked up one of the shovels; thrust it toward a Martian. The Martian took it in his hands.

"It's very important that you *tell* them—that you don't show them," Cleve said. "You must not do any of the work yourself."

"I'll handle it," Larkin snapped. "Now, you—all of you! Grab a shovel. Pick 'em up, see? Pick 'em up! We've got work to do. A ditch to dig."

Larkin's pantomime was a universal language. "We start the ditch here. Right here—you fella! Get digging! And put your back into that shovel. Hit hard or maybe it gives the whip—understand?" Larkin made a threatening motion toward the lash coiled at his belt.

Smith, already on the scene, turned as Evans and Dane arrived carrying undefined plastic. They snapped the cylinders and chairs appeared; chairs—and a table upon which Carter and Lewis, bringing up the rear, placed a pitcher of beer, glasses and a box of cigars.

Cleve, the psychologist, looked with satisfaction upon the string of Martians manipulating the shovels. "All right," he said. "Let's sit down. Pour the beer, one of you."

"Allow me," Smith said. He fought to straighten the smile bending his lips. He picked up the pitcher and poured beer into the glasses. It all seemed so absurd; these grim-faced men acting out an asinine tableau.

Cleve caught the smile. "I wish you'd take this seriously," he said. "It's a mighty touchy and important business."

"Sorry," Smith said, raising his glass. "Here's to empire."

Larkin was striding up and down the line of straining Martians. The scowl had become a part of him.

It's getting him, Smith marveled. Act or no act, he likes it. Experiment or not, he's in his element.

The six men sat drinking their beer and watching Larkin. But only Cleve was aware of the skill with which the man worked. The gradual application of pressure; the careful moving forward from bog to bog with the path of retreat always open. From sharpness to brusqueness. From the brusque to the harsh. From the harsh to the brutal.

"Will you tell me," Smith asked, "why we have to sit here drinking like a pack of fools? I don't like beer."

"I'm not enjoying it, either," Cleve said. "But you can certainly understand that the roles must be set right from the beginning. They must understand we are their masters, so we must conduct ourselves in that manner. Never any sign that could be interpreted as compromise."

Larkin, satisfied with the progress of the entirely useless ditch, came to the table and raised a glass of beer. He wiped the foam from his mustache and asked, "What do you think?" directing the question toward Cleve.

THE latter regarded the sweating Martians with calculating eyes. "It's going entirely as I predicted. The next step is in order, I believe."

"You think it's safe?"

"I'm certain of it."

Smith, studying Larkin, saw the latter smile, and was again struck by its quality.

Whatever the test, Larkin's for it, even above the call of scientific experimentation.

Larkin was uncoiling the whip from his belt. He strode toward the fast-deepening ditch. He selected a subject. "You—fella. You're lazy, huh? You like to gold-brick it? Then see how you like this!" He laid the whip across the green shoulders of the Martian.

The Martian winced. He raised an arm to shield off the whip. Again it curled against his flesh. He whimpered. His grin was stark, inquiring.

"Hit that shovel, you green bastard!" Larkin roared.

The Martian understood. So did the other Martians. Their muscles quivered as they drove into their work.

Larkin came back, smiling—almost dreamily, Smith thought. Cleve said, "Excellent. I'd hardly hoped for such conformity. Hardly expected it."

"You mean," Smith asked, "that this little scene can be projected from a dozen to a hundred? From a hundred to a thousand—?"

"From this little plot to the whole, surface of the planet," Cleve said. "The mass is nothing more

than a collection of individuals. Control the individual and you've got the mob. That is if you follow through with the original method. Set the hard pattern."

"Then we're in—is that it? They've passed every test with flying colors."

"I'm sure they will," Cleve said, frowning. "But we must be thorough."

"There's still another test?"

"Yes. The test of final and complete subservience. It must be proven beyond all doubt that they know their masters."

"You don't think they're aware yet that we *are* their masters?"

"I'm sure they know. It only remains to be proven." Cleve glanced up at Larkin. "Maybe this is as far as we should go today. We've made marvelous progress."

That characteristic wave of Larkin's hand; the gesture of the empire builder brushing away mountains. "Why wait? I want to get this thing over with. You said yourself they're under our thumb."

Cleve pondered, staring at the Martians. "Very well. There's really no reason to wait."

Larkin smiled and turned toward the diggers, only half visible now from the depths of the ditch. He walked forward, appearing to exercise more care, this time, in the selection of his subject. Finally, he pointed at one of the Martians. "You—fella! Come here!"

Several of them looked at one another a trifle confused. "You—damn it! What are you waiting for?"

One of them climbed slowly from the trench. While he was engaged in so doing, Smith noticed two things. He saw the look of rage, simulated or otherwise, that came into Larkin's face. And he saw Cleve's fingers tighten on the edge of the table.

Larkin had a gun in his fist; a roar in his voice. "When I talk—you jump! Get that? All of you!"

He fired three bullets into the Martian's brain. The latter slumped grinning to the ground. Larkin, his breath coming jerkily, stood poised on the balls of his feet. The men at the table sat frozen—waiting. Around them—on the plain—some two hundred Martians stood motionless.

The final test, Smith thought. To prove they're cattle.

A FULL minute passed after the echo of the gun faded out. Silence.
And nothing.

The Earthmen picked up their breathing where they'd dropped it. Larkin's breath exploded in savage voice—triumphant voice. The Martians were his.

"Come on, some of you! Dig a hole and bury that carrion! And if anybody still wonders who's boss around here—let him step forward!"

"They took it!" Cleve whispered. "Glory be—they took it!"

Four Martians climbed grinning from the trench. They faced Larkin and stood as though awaiting instructions.

"Dig there," Larkin said.

They went stolidly to work and Larkin pocketed his gun, making the pocketing a gesture of contempt.

"You see," Cleve said, with the tone of one explaining an abstract problem, "we were at somewhat of a disadvantage because they are incapable of indicating emotion by facial expression. Thus the last test was necessary. If we could have judged the degree of fear previously instilled, that last might not have been necessary."

"Just as well to have a double check nonetheless," Dane said. "Look at them! You'd think nothing out of the ordinary had happened."

Larkin strode back to the table. "Glad we got it over with," he said. "Now we *know*. Cleve can head back for Earth tomorrow. Initial supplies will come to about twenty million, I estimate. The rest of us can stay here and really drive these beggars. Get the foundations dug; get the rock down from the hills."

"A planet in glorious resurrection," said Dane, the poet of the group.

"They've got the grave dug," Cleve observed. "They're waiting for orders."

"Such cattle," Evans muttered.

Larkin strode back to the grave. He pointed. "Him—body into the grave. Snap into it. We've got

work to do."

The Martians put the body into the grave.

Then a tall, green man appeared behind Larkin. He put his arms around Larkin's body. Another Martian took the gun from Larkin's pocket.

And they pushed the screaming Earthman down into the grave.

Smith sprang to his feet. "For God's sake!"

"Sit down, you fool!" Cleve hissed. "Do you want to die? We've miscalculated. Something's wrong."

The big Martian was standing on Larkin. The others threw in the soil. Larkin, now beyond sanity, was gibbering like an animal.

Smith sat down. The Earthman presented a frozen tableau. Soon the gibbering could no longer be heard and the big Martian stepped out of the grave.

"Leave everything," Cleve whispered. "Get up very casually and walk back to the ship. Get inside it."

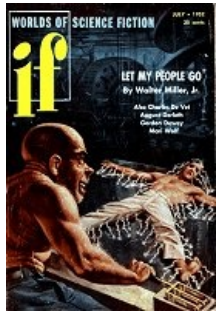
"May God help us," Dane quavered.

"Shut up! Act natural."

They went back and got into the ship while the Martians stood patiently about waiting for something to happen. Their patience was rewarded when the ship arose on a great flaming tail from the surface of the planet.

It was a sight worth waiting for.

THE END

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