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Title: A Gift For Terra

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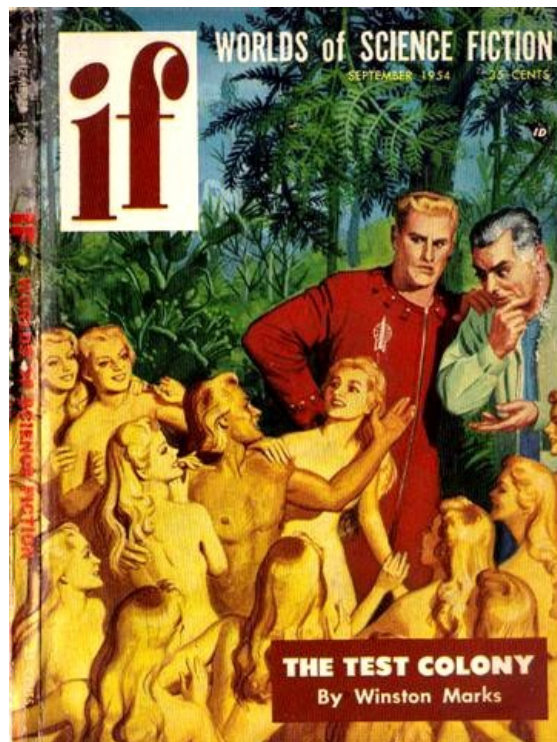
Illustrator: Paul Orban

Release Date: May 23, 2010 [EBook #32487]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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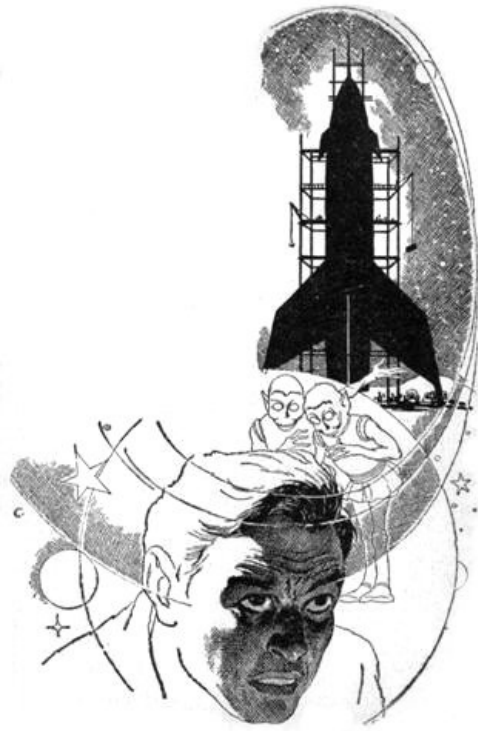


A GIFT FOR TERRA

BY FOX B. HOLDEN

Illustrated by Paul Orban

[Transcriber Note: This etext was produced from If Worlds of Science Fiction September 1954. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]



His head hurt like blazes, but he was alive, and to be alive meant fighting like hell to stay that way.

That was the first thing returning consciousness told him. The next was that his helmet should have been cracked wide open when the bum landing had wrenched the acceleration hammocks out of their suspension sockets and heaved his suited body across the buckled conning deck. It should've been, but it wasn't.

The third thing he knew was that Ferris' helmet had been smashed into a million pieces, and that Ferris was dead.

Sand sifted in a cold, red river through the gaping rent in the side of the ship, trying to bury him before he could stand up and get his balance on the crazily tilted deck. He shook loose with more strength than he needed, gave the rest of the muscles in his blocky body a try, and there wasn't any hurt worse than a bruise. Funny. Ferris was dead.

He had a feeling somewhere at the edge of his brain that there was going to be more to it than just checking his oxygen and food-concentrate supply and walking away from the ship. A man didn't complete the first Earth-Mars flight ever made, smash his ship to hell, and then just walk away from it. His astrogeologer-navigator was dead, and the planet was dead, so a man just didn't walk away.

There was plenty of room for him to scramble through the yawning rip in the buckled hullplates—just a matter of crawling up the river of red sand and out; it was as easy as that.

Then Johnny Love was on his feet again, and the sand clutched at his heavy boots as though to keep him from leaving Ferris and the ship, but it didn't, and he was walking away....

The good Martian Samaritans rescued Johnny Love and offered him "the stars". Now, maybe, Johnny didn't look closely enough into the "gift horse's" mouth, but there were others who did ... and found therein the answer to life....

Even one hundred and forty million miles from the Sun, the unfiltered daylight was harsh and the reflection of it from the crimson sand hurt his eyes. The vault of the blue-black sky was too high; the desert plain was too flat and too silent, and save for the thin Martian wind that whorled delicately-fluted traceries in the low dunes that were the only interruption in the flatness, there was no motion, and the planet was too still.

Johnny Love stopped his walking. Even in the lesser gravity, it seemed too great an effort to place one booted foot before the other. He looked back, and the plume of still-rising smoke from the broken thing that had been his ship was like a solid black pillar that had been hastily built by some evil djinn.

How far had he walked; how long?

He turned his back on the glinting speck and made his legs move again, and there was the hollow sound of laughter in his helmet. Here he was, Johnny Love, the first Martian! and the last! Using the last of the strength in his bruised body to go forward, when there was no forward and no backward, no direction at all; breathing when there was no purpose in breathing.

Why not shut off the valves now?

He was too tired for hysteria. Men had died alone before. *Alone, but never without hope! And here there was no hope, for there was no life, and no man had ever lived where there was not life!*

But he had come to see, and he was seeing, and in the remaining hours left to him he would see what no man had seen in a half a million years.

Harrison and Janes or Lamson and Fowler would not be down for twenty days at the inside; that had been the time-table. Twenty days, twenty years ... he heard himself laugh again. Time-table!

He and Ferris first. Then Harrison and Janes. Then Lamson and Fowler, all at twenty-day intervals. If all landed safely, they would use Exploration Plan I, Condition Optimum. If only two crews made it down, Plan II; Condition Limited. And if only one made the 273-day journey from the orbit of Terra—that would be Plan III; Condition Untenable, Return. The twenty-day interval idea had come from some Earth-bound swivel-chair genius who had probably never even set foot in a Satellite operations room. Somebody had impressed on him when he was young that egg-carrying was a safer mission with a multiplicity of baskets; it was common sense that if anything happened to Mars-I touching down, at least it wouldn't happen to II and III at the same time.

Common sense, Johnny thought, and he laughed again. Space was not common, and it was not sensible. And nobody had ever taught it the rules men made.

He kept walking, seeing, thinking and breathing.

For a long time. He fell once or twice and picked himself up again to walk some more, and then he fell a final time, and did not get up. Red sand whispered over him, danced lightly, drifted...

The flat, wide-tracked vehicle swerved in a tight arc, throwing up low ruby-colored clouds on either side. Its engines throbbed a new note of power, and it scuttled in a straight line across the desert floor like a fleck of shiny metal drawn by an unseen magnet. Behind it rose a thinning monument of green-black smoke, and between its tracks was a wavering line of indentations in the sand already half-obliterated by the weight of their own shallow walls. But they became deeper as the vehicle raced ahead; and then at length they ended, and the vehicle halted.

There was a mound of sand that the winds, in their caprice, would not have made alone, for they sculptured in a freer symmetry. And the child-like figures seemed to realize that at once.

With quick precision they levelled the mound and found Johnny Love. They took him into their vehicle, and deftly matched and replenished the waning gas mixture in the cylindrical tanks on his back.

Then they drove away with him.

"Ferris?"

"Ferris was your astrogeologer-navigator. He died when you crashed."

"Harrison ... *Janes?*"

"Harrison and Janes are not due for nine more days. But you are in no danger."

There was darkness and warmth; his throat was dry and it burned. It was hard to talk, and Ferris was dead. Harrison and Janes were not due for nine more days. Somebody said so. Nine more days and then everything would be—

Panic shook him, sent blood throbbing to his head and brought consciousness back hard. His eyes opened and he was suddenly sitting bolt upright.

"But Lamson, you were twenty days behind—" And the racing thought froze solid in his fumbling brain. Then there was a torrent of thoughts and memory overran them, buried them, and red desert was rushing up to engulf him. He screamed and fell back with his hands clawing at his eyes.

"You are in no danger. You had thought our planet lifeless; it was an error. We live underground, John Love. That is why you did not see us, or surface indications of our existence. A group of us speak your language, because for eleven days we have been studying your brain and analyzing your thought-patterns."

Johnny was bolt upright again, and now his eyes were wide and his hands were knotted, and where there had been only light and shadow before there was full sight now. Swiftly he was off the low cot and on his feet looking for the speaker, arms ready to lash out and hit.

But he was alone in the small, sterile-looking chamber, and his muscles were so much excess baggage. He tried to recover his balance: he had forgotten about the slight gravity. He tried too hard, and his body crashed, confused, into a wall. A—damn them, a *padded* wall!

He regained his feet. Stood still, and raced his eyes about him. There it was—above the cot. A small round, shuttered opening—some sort of two-way communication system. He wondered if they could see him, too. If they could, that part of it worked only one way.

"All right, whoever you are, so you've analyzed me!" He had to direct his sudden anger at something, so he shouted at the shuttered aperture. "Now what..."

There was silence for a tiny eternity, and he could feel them probing, evaluating him, as a human scientist would study a rare species in a cage. The feeling ignited a new anger in him, and made him want to curse the teachings that had conditioned his lifetime of thinking to the belief that Man *was* more than an animal.

He'd been sold short....

"Damn you! God damn you, what are you going to do to me?"

In a corner of his mind he was aware of a gentle hissing sound, but he did not listen. The fear and terror had to be broken. Make them tell, *make* them tell....

His muscles grew heavy and his face was feverish with his effort, and his eyes stung. Something ... like roses. But there were no roses on dead planets—

"Earthman, can you still hear?"

"I can hear," Johnny said. It was suddenly easier to talk. Even easier to understand. They had done something....

"We are surprised that your state of shock was not more severe. In the process of analyzing you, we discovered that you were totally unprepared for Space-flight, and therefore—"

"Unprepared? What do you think all those months of physical conditioning were for? Yeah, and all those damned textbooks? You think that barrel I cracked up was built in a Kindergarten class—"

"Space-flight requires but a relative minimum of those things, Earthman. Required most is psychological and philosophical conditioning."

"To what?"

"To all things unreal. Because they are the most real; infinity applies to probability and possibility far more directly than to simple Space and Time. But—are you calm now?" The voice was growing deeper, and seemed almost friendly. Johnny tried his muscles; they weren't paralyzed—he could move easily, and his head was clear. And there was no anger, now. No "shock."

"Go ahead," he said.

"Our examination of you has indicated that your race is a potentially effective one, with a superior survival factor. We feel that, properly instructed and assisted, such a race might be of great value as a friend and ally. In short, we receive you in peace and friendship, Earthman. Will you accept us in like manner?"

Johnny tried to think. Hard thoughts, the way men were supposed to think. What kind of game was it? What were the strings? The angles ... the gimmicks. What did they really want?

His lips were dry and barely moved over his teeth, but the words came easily. "Who says you're a friend?"

"We would have learned as much about you by examining your corpse, Earthman."

So he was alive, and that had to prove something. And it might have been a lot of trouble to keep him that way. The hell of it was you couldn't *know* ... *Anything* ... you couldn't know anything when you were tossed into the middle of the impossible. He felt the skin on the back of his neck chill and tighten.

But who held out their hand like this?

Whoever did anything like that?

No.

"We wish to help you, Earthman, and your race. We have observed your kind at close quarters, yet we have never landed among you nor attempted communication because of fear for ourselves. But with proper help, there need be no fear between us. We offer you friendship and progress."

"You keep talking about what *we* get out of it." Johnny stared upward at the ceiling, got his eyes off the little shuttered aperture. He wished he had a cigarette. "You sound too damned much like a politician."

"Perhaps at this point you should be informed that your ship is completely repaired, and ready for your return to Earth whenever you desire."

"So, it's—You said Harrison and Janis would be here in nine days! That means I've been out for nearly two weeks! For a nap that's a long time, but nobody could get that bucket back in one piece in eleven days! Not after what I did to it—"

"Your ship is completely repaired, Earthman."

Johnny knew somehow that the voice wasn't lying. So maybe when you got off of Earth miracles did happen. He just didn't *know* enough.

"We wish to give you data to take back to your Earth which will banish disease for you—*all* disease. Data which will give you spacecraft that match our own in technical perfection. Data that will make you the undisputed masters of your environment. We offer you the stars, Earthman."

He shut a thousand racing thoughts out of his head. "Maybe I'll believe this fairy tale of yours on one condition," Johnny said, "because I can't intelligently do otherwise."

"And that—condition?"

"Tell me *why*."

There was a pause, and it was as though something forever unknowable to men hung in the silence.

"Picture, if you can, Earthman," the answer came at last, "several small islands in the center of a great sea; all without life, save two. The men on one have learned to build boats which can successfully sail the sea within certain limits—they can visit the other islands, but are too frail and too limited in power to venture past the horizon. It is infinitely frustrating to them. The only places to which they may go are dead places. Save for one—only one, and it becomes magnified in importance—it becomes an entire *raison d'être* in itself. For without it, the men with the boats sail uselessly...."

"We are old, Earthman. We have watched you—waited for you for a long time. And now you have grown up. You have burst your tiny bubble of human experience. You have set out upon the sea yourselves...."

"You guys should give graduation talks. I didn't ask for a scaled-down philosophy. You tell me that you want to give us every trick in your hat—for free, no questions asked. So I asked why. And the question isn't changing any."

"The answer should be self-evident, Earthman. We are old. And we are lonely."

There was a logic at work somewhere in his brain even during the dream. It told him that he was exhausted from the day's tour with the child-like men of Mars, and that the dream was only the vagaries of a reeling, tired mind of a badly jarred subconscious. It told him that the things he had seen had been too alien for his relatively inflexible adult Earth mind to accept without painful reaction, and this was the reaction.

This, the dream. That was all it was; his logic said so.

Faith spread out before the undisciplined eye of his dreaming brain, and the near-conscious instant of logic faded. The fertile plains that once had been yellow desert-land mounted golden fruits to a temperate sun, and beyond the distant green of gently-rolling hills spread the resplendent city, and there were other cities as gracefully civilized beyond the untroubled horizon.

And in the dream, these were all things men had done, as though sanity had invaded their minds overnight. It was the Earth that men had intended, rather than that which they had built.

The sun dimmed. The air chilled, and the grains and fruits wilted, and the rolling hills were a darker hue than green as the shadow lengthened, spread to the gleaming cities beyond and then as it touched them and ran soundlessly the length and breadth of their wide malls, there were other changes....

Skeletons, reaching upward to a puffy, leaden sky.

The horizon split into jagged, broken moats of dark flame, and Earth was no longer what men had built, but what they eternally feared they must one day create....

Then Johnny Love was suddenly awake bolt upright in his cot and his eyes were open wide. His muscles were taut and cramped. And he was afraid although the men of Mars had offered friendship and told him that there was nothing for him to fear.

Slowly, he lay down again. And gradually, the cold perspiration that had encased him vanished; his body relaxed, and the fear subsided.

The day's tour had been exhausting both mentally and physically, and there was the excitement of knowing that in five more days Harrison and Janes would land. If they did not, his own ship would carry him safely back to Earth on the day following, for the little men had miraculously repaired it; they had shown him. They had shown him, and he wanted to go home.

Johnny Love rolled over on the wide, soft cot, sighed, and went back to sleep.

"He sleeps again, Andruul."

"Yes, but the damage is probably done."

"No, or he would not sleep again so easily. His kind do not have such emotional control."

The two turned away from the fading transparency of the sleeping-room wall, and their short, thin bodies were in incongruous contrast to the spaciousness of the metal-sheathed corridor down which they walked.

"Psychoanalysis showed up the difference in his brain structure—that apparently accounts for the poor efficiency our screens are showing. What does Kaarn say?"

"He says we should never have allowed the theft."

Andruul cursed. "Allowed it! Those nomadic scum are like flies! No matter how many you exterminate, they never fail to come back in double their number. And they strike at the precise moment you are certain the bones of the last one are sinking beneath the sand. Somehow Central Patrol has got to get that unit back."

"You're certain it was a theft, then?"

"Don't be an idiot. Since when can those gypsies build anything more complex than a crude electrical generator? Let alone a psibeam unit? They've forgotten what little their civilization ever knew."

"They are clever enough at evading directed over-surface missiles."

Andruul muttered something, and lapsed into silence.

"Well there is one thing for certain at any rate.... A psibeam unit is unaccounted for, and despite our protective screening, the Earthman was visibly disturbed in his sleep. His encephalotapes show that clearly. They know about him, Andruul, and they're making their bid. Central Patrol had better be quick and certain this time."

Andruul kept his silence. But he thought. He thought Central Patrol was getting less efficient and more stupid every day.

It was a strange feeling; a feeling with which no human was emotionally equipped to deal.

Johnny looked at his flawlessly renovated ship, poised like a snub-nosed bullet against the blue-black brittleness of the Martian sky, and then looked behind him at the crescent-shaped formation of tracked vehicles that had escorted him back across the sucking red sand to this place. With each heavy-booted step away from them he closed the short distance between them and his ship, and there was not enough time to think about the feeling. Or about the heavy sealed tube they had given him to take back to his people.

Usually, when a man ventured beyond the bounds of familiar existence, there was conflict. Either a struggle to win, or, immediately recognizable success, with no struggle or hint of conflict at all.

But not this. Not this success that seemed—what was the *word*? Hostile? That was ridiculous. These people were friendly. *But somehow—there was an empty ring—*

Hell! They had saved his life. Rebuilt his ship. Given him the tube that contained transcriptions, in his own language, of every scientific secret his people could ever hope to learn for themselves in the next thousand years! And, they had even buried Ferris....

Use the brains of a mature man, Johnny Love! You've pulled it off without even trying! The most stupendous thing any man in any age has ever pulled off ... without even trying! For God's sake don't question—don't question things you don't understand! Take the credit and let the soul-searching go!

He looked behind him again. They were still there. A special, smiling farewell escort, watching a single, solitary figure cross a short expanse of sand to a towering, glistening thing of power.

He raised a booted foot to the bottom fin-step, hauled himself up by the stern mounting rungs, hammered the outer lock stud with his gloved fist and the hatch swung open. Like a trap.

He could feel the skin at the back of his neck tighten but he forced himself to ignore it. The lock cycled up to thirteen psi and the inner port swung automatically inward, and then he was inside, clambering up the narrow ladder past the titanium alloy fuel tanks and the spidery catwalks between them to the tiny control room in the forehull.

He would not be waiting for Harrison and Janes. He would get the hell out of here and then radio them and let them make all the decisions from there. Earth for him. Home. He ached for it.

He strapped himself in the hammock, punched the warming studs for each engine, and there was a dull, muffled throb below him as each jumped into subdued life. The banks of dials that curved in front of him glowed softly, and he started an almost automatic blast-off check. It took twelve precious minutes.

Then he was ready. Scanners on, heat up ... ready.

The Martian sky was like frozen ink above him and his hands were wet inside his gloves and there was a choking dryness in his throat. *Now...*

And he could not move. There was a sudden, awful nausea and his head spun, and before his eyes there spread a bleeding Earth; the sun dimmed, and fertile plains were cast in sudden shadow.... The air chilled, the shadow spread, and there were skeletons reaching upward to a puffy, leaden sky!

And Earth was no longer what Men had built!

Then the horror in his head was gone, and he felt an awful pressure on each side of it. His hands ... he had been pressing with insane strength at both sides of his skull as if to crush it with his bare hands.... His face was wet, and he was breathing, choking, in strangling gulps.

A scanner alarm clanged.

He forced his eyes to focus on the center screen.

"Earthman! Emergency! There has been a flaw discovered in the repair of your ship! Do not blast off! Do not...."

The other image caught him as his arm was in mid-flight toward the control bank. Sweet and warm ... the fertile plains mounting their golden fruits to a mellowed sun, and beyond the distant gently-rolling hills spread the resplendent city, and there were other cities....

But his arm kept going, its muscles loose, and it fell. Heavily. Squarely on the stud-complex toward which its fist had been aimed a split-second before.

The engines roared, and the ship lurched upward from the red sand.

The command flicked into the Captain's brain like a lash of ice.

"Slaazar! Converge, sheaf!"

"Converging, sir..." It would be no use, of course. If the high brass had been content to rely on the beams rather than on their own subtlety in the first place, the Earthman would never have fallen prey to the Nomads, even for a second. But they had wanted to be as forthright as possible—force, they said, would only arouse suspicion. Psibeam units only as a last resort.... The lowliest Patrol Lancer could have told them the folly of that!

Hastily, Slaazar issued orders to his battery crews tracking the ascending Spaceship, their units already nearing overload potential. But the desert-scum would see some real psi-power now! They'd see it wasted completely if they saw it at all.... Because they'd outmaneuvered the brass again!

"Convergence impossible, sir."

As he had expected.

"Colonel Truul, this is Captain Slaazar. Target has passed critical planetary curvature. Convergence impossible. Standing by, sir."

For several moments after that, the thin atmosphere of Mars was warmed a little....

Acceleration blackout had not been total; leaving Mars was even easier than leaving the surface of Earth for the orbits of the Stations. But there was a period of no-thought, no-time, no-being. And then full consciousness seeped back slowly. But not as it was supposed to.

Johnny Love knew he had come to because he could see the banked instruments glowing palely before him; because he could realize from reading them that his ship was doing its job to perfection. Almost ready to complete the blast-off ogee, and—

Angrily he belted the scanner switches off and the dull red sphere faded from the viewplates.

And he could feel the sweat start again all over his body. No, the returning consciousness was all wrong.... All wrong, and the image wouldn't go away....

Red desert he had seen before, yet had not seen. There were dark ridges of brown-green at its horizon; oddly-formed crater-places that might once have held placid lakes. And on all the vast surface there was no hint of the Patrol tracks, no sign of—anything.

But he had to descend to the place.

He did not know how to locate it, but the image told him that it did not matter. The image said merely that he must begin cutting his power.

There was no strength in his arms and hands, yet they moved in front of him as though things detached from his body; skillfully, surely, playing deftly across the colored studs.

Scanners on. Scanners on, kid....

He watched the screens again, unconscious of what his fingers did on the panels. The dull red sphere loomed large once more. The picture was off-center; without knowing what he did he rectified course with the bow jets; it was centered again. But it was a different place. Still the desert, but with ridges of brown-green at its horizon; oddly-formed crater-places....

It was coming up fast, now; faster, until the horizon was only a gentle arc against a thin span of blackness, and the rest was cold red.

Hardly knowing what he did, his fingers suddenly raced over the control console, even before the scanner-alarms began their ear-splitting clanging!

The ship lurched into a direction-change that threatened to wrench the hull apart, and the picture in the scanner reeled crazily. He knew his own brain was not dictating the commands of control to his fingertips, nor was it evaluating for itself the madly fluctuating values indicated on the panels. A human brain could not have done it, he knew that....

He had cut power. At least there was no power. He was falling at a crazy angle and the desert was rushing up now, hurtling up to smash him. They'd hit him, then, yet he'd felt nothing....

It was getting hot. His hull must be glowing, now, even in the thin atmosphere of Mars—it was a long fall. Slower than a fall on Earth, through thinner air layers, yet he was glowing like a torch.

The ocean of sand rushed up.

And suddenly his left hand rammed the full-power stud.

It was as though he'd been hit from behind with all the brute force of some gigantic fist, and there were two things. There was the split-second glimpse of a crescent formation suddenly wheeling toward him and there was the clang of the scanner-alarm. There were those two things his brain registered before the titanic force of full power squeezed consciousness from it and left him helpless.

He was running. In a nightmare of a dead planet that was not dead, he ran, away from something.

That was how his consciousness returned. While he ran. He stopped, stumbling, turned to look behind him.

And the ship was there. Landed perfectly, stubby bullet-nose pointing to the sky. And above it—

Run!

The command hit his brain with almost physical force. A will that was not his own took hold of his whole being, and he was running again, plowing his way through the sucking sand with strength summoned from a well of energy within his body that had never been there before.

Through the thin glassite walls of his helmet he could hear the *thuk, thuk, thuk* of his boots as they pounded somewhere below him, and there was another pounding, a deadly rhythmic bursting pressure in his chest. And a whine in his ears....

The wind-strewn sand stretched flat and infinitely before him. Then leaped at him headlong and there was no horizon; there was only the sudden awful wrench of concussion, a tremor of pure sound which would, in denser atmosphere, have destroyed him with the inertia of his own body.

He could not move. Only cling to the shifting desert floor that rocked sickeningly beneath his outstretched body ... cling to it for dear life.

There was no thought, no understanding. Only a sensation which he could not comprehend, and the sure knowledge that none of this was real. Not real, but the end of survival nonetheless.

Pain, and seeing two bright objects transiting the darkness at which he looked; seeing something then between.

His brain began identifying. The darkness; sky. The bright objects; Diemos, Phobos.... And the something between—

It was a transparency of some sort; curved, or he would not have been able to detect it at all. A vaulted ceiling through which he could see....

His full consciousness came flooding back, then. He tried the muscles in his neck, they hurt, but they worked, and he could move his head from side to side. There was the same transparency, as though he were covered by some huge, invisible bowl.

And there were men. Big, muscular creatures, yet thin, tall.... Not like the others at all....

He sat bolt upright, and they did not move. It was not the same as before. No small room. No voice that he could not see. They had not even removed his suit or his helmet, and he was lying on a hard, cold substance.

Then he saw what they were doing. There were two of them apart from the others, working to bring a compact-looking machine into position near him. A gleaming, short cylinder, swung on gymbals between slender forks, mounted on a thin wheeled standard. They were aiming it at him.

"No! *No*—" He tried to get to his knees, but it was as though there were no muscles in his body.

"Man of—Earth! We are friendly. Is that understood?"

The thought-words formed in his brain as the strange images had before, and then he knew. *Should have guessed it*, part of his mind was telling him in a fantastically detached way, *the dreams ... the compulsions over which he had had no control in the ship.... This—thing. It probably—*

"You are quite astute, Earthman. But it is not our technology which created this device. To save you and the civilization which you represent—and ultimately, our own—it was necessary for us to steal it. It cost six lives."

"Steal...."

"From your former captors. It is their invention, as are so many things with which they destroy. With this instrument, they have succeeded in taking one of Nature's more subtle phenomenon—psychokinesis—and amplifying its energies nearly a million-fold. Those stepped-up energies can then be projected in a tight or fanned beam at will.

"They can make a man 'dream,' as you did—or they can destroy him outright, depending on which of the 'psi' factors, ESP or PK, is given dominance during projection. But we are not skilled in its operation—they detected our use of it on you while you slept, and from that moment on you were so well screened that even at the risk of burning this unit out, we were not able to project powerfully enough to do more than merely touch your brain—"

There was a strange calm in his mind, now. He understood the words and accepted them as matter-of-factly as they were given. Even now they were manipulating him like some intangible puppet, yet he was convinced it was not a malevolent manipulation. Convinced. The conviction—manipulation, too....

"Only partly, Earthman. We said we are friendly, and we are. We have calmed you and erased your fear. From this point on, we will use this instrument only for communication."

And then he felt the fear in him again, gnawing, and his body was again damp and cold. But he had control, now. Control enough to speak.

They stood before him, immobile, watching.

Somewhere, Johnny Love found his voice.

"Look, I've been through this 'friendly' act before...." He hesitated, and they did not try to interrupt him. "Well don't just stand there!" The fear was suddenly turning to the bitter anger of frustration, they had him whipped, and he was tired. "Tell me why! You stick that thing into my head when I'm blasting for home. You force me to drop back. You blow up my ship. Real friendly! Real sports!" For a moment he had run out of words, and again they made no effort to answer him. "All right! I don't understand you—I don't know what you want. But nobody is trying to hurt you, nobody's after your little desert paradise. We had an idea, that's all. We thought we could make it work. People have been talking 'go to Mars' on my planet for longer than most of 'em can remember. So we finally gave it a whirl! Sorry!"

He looked at them hard, then, and thought that there was something almost like a smile on the face of one. Smile, then, damn you....

"We want nothing, Earthman, but to prevent from happening on your planet the thing that happened on this. If they succeed in destroying you as they have us, then this System will always be under their heel, and we shall never be rid of them. Understand, their numbers were too few ever to conquer a planet with a civilization as large and as highly organized as that of Earth, by physical means.

"Knowing that, we—they call us gypsies, nomads, desert-scum today—we were not too alarmed when they landed here two centuries ago. We were glad to take from them, without paying a price. We were awed by their gifts. Their papers and their books, which would show us how to rebuild our waning civilization—advance us a thousand years in less than fifty; restore to us our lost arts.... And compared to you, we were so very few.

"In return, they said that all they wanted was permission to set up a research site. They told us they were a scientific expedition from far out-System. Aldeberan, they said. Part of a vast exploratory program which they had been conducting for centuries.

"We believed them—why not? One day, we thought, we too will be in Space. And with that day would begin one of the greatest projects of exploration that our race had ever known. So we agreed, and gladly."

"Hold it, hold it! 'They'—who the hell are 'they'? You can spare the suspense...."

And then there was no more words. The pictures formed in his mind as before, only stronger, now, and there were no details left out.

The weapons of war had been built, not by the out-System men, but by their hosts. The plans had not proven too difficult to follow....

The new knowledge was not hoarded, was not held under jealous guard by those who had given it, but by those to whom it had been given. One man from another; one group of men from another. States and nations from each other.

Until there was no trust left on all the planet.

There were the wars, then.

And when they were over, the new masters had established their first beachhead in the new System.

"But, it was only a beachhead, and had been only intended as such—" The pictures broke off; the unspoken words resumed. "Your planet was the ultimate target, but at first, your civilization was not adequately advanced to fall prey to their technique. Their weapon is knowledge, but the potentialities of that knowledge must be understood by a people before it can be effectively used to destroy them.

"The rest must be self-evident. After we destroyed ourselves, they sank their infectious, hollow roots into our planet. And from then, investigated your Earth from time to time ... and waited....

"Waited, because they knew you would be coming. And they knew what kind of men you would be. Strong men, with the light of the stars in your eyes. Yet confused, weak men, with the darkness of suspicion and jealousy still in your souls. Such are humans, after all....

"That is why we stopped you, Johnny Love. Once your blast-off ogee had carried you beyond the curvature of their horizon and brought you over us, our psibeam was effective and theirs were not. We are sorry about your ship. Once they realize that you were under our influence, and were returning rather than taking their precious data to your people, they zeroed-in with those damnable guided juggernauts—"

"It wasn't you, then. You mean they—"

"There is little that they cannot do. Destruction is their forte. They could not keep us from preventing your taking their 'gift' to your people, but they could keep that 'gift' from falling into our hands—and they did. They do not always win. But they never lose."

"But I—" Johnny's thoughts raced. The ship, gone. And Harrison and Janes, Lamson, and Fowler. They would be landing in a few days. They—

"Yes," the thoughts of the true Martians before him answered. "And they will be given a 'gift' for Terra as you were. If your friends return successfully to your planet with that 'gift'—then—"

The thought was not completed. But it did not have to be.

A beachhead was one thing. These scattered, struggling people who had once been masters of Mars might one day unseat it, for they were not yet beaten people, and their will to survive was yet strong. But beyond that—

Earth taken, the System taken.

There it was.

There was a sudden coldness inside him now that the fact had crystallized, had become real. Here was no fantasy; no wild surmise.

They left him in silence while he thought, their psibeam turned away, now.

Harrison and Janes. Lamson, and Fowler. Had to stop them. Stop them, and then somehow, get home. He ached for home.

He thought about Ferris, who had given his life for this thing.

No, Ferris would not be going home. Ferris was dead.

He signalled for the psibeam to be turned toward him again.

"You'd have to know their positions out there to make contact, wouldn't you?" They did not answer. He worked to get the words formed, and there was a fleeting thought of a green, lush planet far away, its wide streets and rolling fields bathed in warm sunlight. "I can figure 'em," he said. "I know blast-off schedules, speeds. I know the works! *Those* things they had in the books. Then you guys can do the rest with—that thing. Right?"

They answered him, then.

"Thank you," they said. And that was all.

"Answer me!" the General barked again. "You, Janes! Lamson! Fowler—Harrison! For the last time, what happened out there?"

The four stood silently before the nervous figure of their commander, and it was Fowler who finally spoke.

"Plan III, sir, as we've already said. Condition Untenable—Return...."

"That is all you can say?"

"That is—all, sir."

The General turned away. There was frustration and anger in his face, and it hid the fear beneath it like a mask. Plan III. It would be Plan III for a long time yet.

It was the thing he saw in the faces of the four men that told him that. There had been too many giant steps, too fast. He had seen this thing in the faces of men before, but never so nakedly.

One day, perhaps, men could think of Plan I again. One day, but not now.

He turned back to the four, and looked once more into their faces.

Plan III. Condition Untenable.

"Dismissed!" the General said.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A GIFT FOR TERRA ***

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