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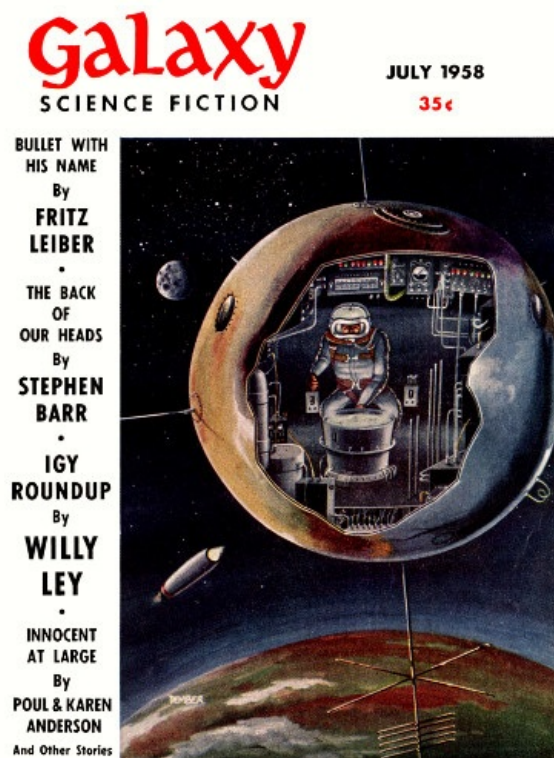
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK INNOCENT AT LARGE ***



INNOCENT AT LARGE

By POUL AND KAREN ANDERSON

Illustrated by WOOD

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A hayseed Martian among big-planet slickers ... of course he would get into trouble. But that was nothing compared to the trouble he would be in if he did not get into trouble!

The visiphone chimed when Peri had just gotten into her dinner gown. She peeled it off again and slipped on a casual bathrobe: a wisp of translucence which had set the president of Antarctic Enterprise—or had it been the chairman of the board?—back several thousand dollars. Then she pulled a lock of lion-colored hair down over one eye, checked with a mirror, ruffled it a tiny bit more and wrapped the robe loosely on top and tight around the hips.

After all, some of the men who knew her private number were important.

She undulated to the phone and pressed its Accept. "Hello-o, there," she said automatically. "So sorry to keep you waiting. I was just taking a bath and—Oh. It's you."

Gus Doran's prawnlike eyes popped at her. "Holy Success," he whispered in awe. "You sure the wires can carry that much voltage?"



"Well, hurry up with whatever it is," snapped Peri. "I got a date tonight."

"I'll say you do! With a Martian!"

Peri narrowed her silver-blue gaze and looked icily at him. "You must have heard wrong, Gus. He's the heir apparent of Indonesia, Inc., that's who, and if you called up to ask for a piece of him, you can just blank right out again. I saw him first!"

Doran's thin sharp face grinned. "You break that date, Peri. Put it off or something. I got this Martian for you, see?"

"So? Since when has all Mars had as much spending money as one big-time marijuana rancher? Not to mention the heir ap—"

"Sure, sure. But how much are those boys going to spend on any girl, even a high-level type like you? Listen, I need you just for tonight, see? This Martian is strictly from gone. He is here on official business, but he is a yokel and I do mean hayseed. Like he asked me what the Christmas decorations in all the stores were! And here is the solar nexus of it, Peri, kid."

Doran leaned forward as if to climb out of the screen. "He has got a hundred million dollars

expense money, and they are not going to audit his accounts at home. One hundred million good green certificates, legal tender anywhere in the United Protectorates. And he has about as much backbone as a piece of steak alga. Kid, if I did not happen to have experience otherwise with a small nephew, I would say this will be like taking candy from a baby."

Peri's peaches-and-cream countenance began to resemble peaches and cream left overnight on Pluto. "Badger?" she asked.

"Sure. You and Sam Wendt handle the routine. I will take the go-between angle, so he will think of me as still his friend, because I have other plans for him too. But if we can't shake a million out of him for this one night's work, there is something akliter. And your share of a million is three hundred thirty-three—"

"Is five hundred thousand flat," said Peri. "Too bad I just got an awful headache and can't see Mr. Sastro tonight. Where you at, Gus?"

The gravity was not as hard to take as Peter Matheny had expected. Three generations on Mars might lengthen the legs and expand the chest a trifle, but the genes had come from Earth and the organism readjusts. What set him gasping was the air. It weighed like a ton of wool and had apparently sopped up half the Atlantic Ocean. Ears trained to listen through the Martian atmosphere shuddered from the racket conducted by Earth's. The passport official seemed to bellow at him.

"Pardon me for asking this. The United Protectorates welcome all visitors to Earth and I assure you, sir, an ordinary five-year visa provokes no questions. But since you came on an official courier boat of your planet, Mr. Matheny, regulations force me to ask your business."

"Well—recruiting."

The official patted his comfortable stomach, iridescent in neolon, and chuckled patronizingly. "I am afraid, sir, you won't find many people who wish to leave. They wouldn't be able to see the Teamsters Hour on Mars, would they?"

"Oh, we don't expect immigration," said Matheny shyly. He was a fairly young man, but small, with a dark-thatched, snub-nosed, gray-eyed head that seemed too large for his slender body. "We learned long ago that no one is interested any more in giving up even second-class citizenship on Earth to live in the Republic. But we only wanted to hire—uh, I mean engage—an, an advisor. We're not businessmen. We know our export trade hasn't a chance among all your corporations unless we get some—a five-year contract...?"

He heard his words trailing off idiotically, and swore at himself.

"Well, good luck." The official's tone was skeptical. He stamped the passport and handed it back. "There, now, you are free to travel anywhere in the Protectorates. But I would advise you to leave the capital and get into the sticks—um, I mean the provinces. I am sure there must be tolerably competent sales executives in Russia or Congolese Belgium or such regions. Frankly, sir, I do not believe you can attract anyone out of Newer York."

"Thanks," said Matheny, "but, you see, I—we need—that is.... Oh, well. Thanks. Good-by."

He backed out of the office.

A dropshaft deposited him on a walkway. The crowd, a rainbow of men in pajamas and robes, women in Neo-Sino dresses and goldleaf hats, swept him against the rail. For a moment, squashed to the wire, he stared a hundred feet down at the river of automobiles. *Phobos!* he thought wildly. *If the barrier gives, I'll be sliced in two by a dorsal fin before I hit the pavement!*

The August twilight wrapped him in heat and stickiness. He could see neither stars nor even moon through the city's blaze. The forest of multi-colored towers, cataracting half a mile skyward across more acreage than his eyes reached, was impressive and all that, but—he used to stroll out in the rock garden behind his cottage and smoke a pipe in company with Orion. On summer evenings, that is, when the temperature wasn't too far below zero.

Why did they tap me for this job? he asked himself in a surge of homesickness. *What the hell is the Martian Embassy here for?*

He, Peter Matheny, was no more than a peaceful professor of sociodynamics at Devil's Kettle University. Of course, he had advised his government before now—in fact, the Red Ankh Society had been his idea—but still he was at ease only with his books and his chess and his mineral collection, a faculty poker party on Tenthday night and an occasional trip to Swindletown—

My God, thought Matheny, here I am, one solitary outlander in the greatest commercial empire the human race has ever seen, and I'm supposed to find my planet a con man!

He began walking, disconsolately, at random. His lizardskin shirt and black culottes drew glances, but derisive ones: their cut was forty years out of date. He should find himself a hotel, he thought drearily, but he wasn't tired; the spaceport would pneumo his baggage to him whenever he did check in. The few Martians who had been to Earth had gone into ecstasies over the automation which put any service you could name on a twenty-four-hour basis. But it would be a

long time before Mars had such machines. If ever.

The city roared at him.

He fumbled after his pipe. *Of course*, he told himself, *that's why the Embassy can't act. I may find it advisable to go outside the law. Please, sir, where can I contact the underworld?*

He wished gambling were legal on Earth. The Constitution of the Martian Republic forbade sumptuary and moral legislation; quite apart from the rambunctious individualism which that document formulated, the article was a practical necessity. Life was bleak enough on the deserts, without being denied the pleasure of trying to bottom-deal some friend who was happily trying to mark the cards. Matheny would have found a few spins of roulette soothing: it was always an intellectual challenge to work out the system by which the management operated a wheel. But more, he would have been among people he understood.

The frightful thing about the Earthman was the way he seemed to exist only in organized masses. A gypsy snake oil peddler, plodding his syrtosaur wagon across Martian sands, just didn't have a prayer against, say, the Grant, Harding & Adams Public Relations Agency.

Matheny puffed smoke and looked around. His feet ached from the weight on them. Where could a man sit down? It was hard to make out any individual sign through all that flimmering neon. His eye fell on one that was distinguished by relative austerity.

THE CHURCH OF CHOICE

Enter, Play, Pray

That would do. He took an upward slideramp through several hundred feet of altitude, stepped past an aurora curtain, and found himself in a marble lobby next to an inspirational newsstand.

"Ah, brother, welcome," said a red-haired usherette in demure black leotards. "The peace that passeth all understanding be with you. The restaurant is right up those stairs."

"I—I'm not hungry," stammered Matheny. "I just wanted to sit in—"

"To your left, sir."

The Martian crossed the lobby. His pipe went out in the breeze from an animated angel. Organ music sighed through an open doorway. The series of rooms beyond was dim, Gothic, interminable.

"Get your chips right here, sir," said the girl in the booth.

"Hm?" said Matheny.

She explained. He bought a few hundred-dollar tokens, dropped a fifty-buck coin down a slot marked CONTRIBUTIONS, and sipped the martini he got back while he strolled around studying the games. He stopped, frowned. Bingo? No, he didn't want to bother learning something new. He decided that the roulette wheels were either honest or too deep for him. He'd have to relax with a crap game instead.

He had been standing at the table for some time before the rest of the congregation really noticed him. Then it was with awe. The first few passes he had made were unsuccessful. Earth gravity threw him off. But when he got the rhythm of it, he tossed a row of sevens. It was a customary form of challenge on Mars. Here, though, they simply pushed chips toward him. He missed a throw, as anyone would at home: simple courtesy. The next time around, he threw for a seven just to get the feel. He got a seven. The dice had not been substituted on him.

"I say!" he exclaimed. He looked up into eyes and eyes, all around the green table. "I'm sorry. I guess I don't know your rules."

"You did all right, brother," said a middle-aged lady with an obviously surgical bodice.

"But—I mean—when do we start actually *playing*? What happened to the cocked dice?"

The lady drew herself up and jutted an indignant brow at him. "Sir! This is a church!"

"Oh—I see—excuse me, I, I, I—" Matheny backed out of the crowd, shuddering. He looked around for some place to hide his burning ears.

"You forgot your chips, pal," said a voice.

"Oh. Thanks. Thanks ever so much. I, I, that is—" Matheny cursed his knotting tongue. *Damn it, just because they're so much more sophisticated than I, do I have to talk like a leaky boiler?*

The helpful Earthman was not tall. He was dark and chisel-faced and sleekly pomaded, dapper in blue pajamas with a red zigzag, a sleighbell cloak and curly-toed slippers.

"You're from Mars, aren't you?" he asked in the friendliest tone Matheny had yet heard.

"Yes. Yes, I am. M-my name's Peter Matheny. I, I—" He stuck out his hand to shake and chips rolled over the floor. "Damn! Oh, excuse me, I forgot this was a church. Never mind the chips. No, please. I just want to g-g-get the hell out of here."

"Good idea. How about a drink? I know a bar downshaft."

Matheny sighed. "A drink is what I need the very most."

"My name's Doran. Gus Doran. Call me Gus."

They walked back to the deaconette's booth and Matheny cashed what remained of his winnings.

"I don't want to—I mean if you're busy tonight, Mr. Doran—"

"Nah. I am not doing one thing in particular. Besides, I have never met a Martian. I am very interested."

"There aren't many of us on Earth," agreed Matheny. "Just a small embassy staff and an occasional like me."

"I should think you would do a lot of traveling here. The old mother planet and so on."

"We can't afford it," said Matheny. "What with gravitation and distance, such voyages are much too expensive for us to make them for pleasure. Not to mention our dollar shortage." As they entered the shaft, he added wistfully: "You Earth people have that kind of money, at least in your more prosperous brackets. Why don't you send a few tourists to us?"

"I always wanted to," said Doran. "I would like to see the what they call City of Time, and so on. As a matter of fact, I have given my girl one of those Old Martian rings last Ike's Birthday and she was just gazzo about it. A jewel dug out of the City of Time, like, made a million years ago by a, uh, extinct race ... I tell you, she *appreciated* me for it!" He winked and nudged.

"Oh," said Matheny.

He felt a certain guilt. Doran was too pleasant a little man to deserve—

"Of course," Matheny said ritually, "I agree with all the archeologists it's a crime to sell such scientifically priceless artifacts, but what can we do? We must live, and the tourist trade is almost nonexistent."

"Trouble with it is, I hear Mars is not so comfortable," said Doran. "I mean, do not get me wrong, I don't want to insult you or anything, but people come back saying you have given the planet just barely enough air to keep a man alive. And there are no cities, just little towns and villages and ranches out in the bush. I mean you are being pioneers and making a new nation and all that, but people paying half a megabuck for their ticket expect some comfort and, uh, you know."

"I do know," said Matheny. "But we're poor—a handful of people trying to make a world of dust and sand and scrub thorn into fields and woods and seas. We can't do it without substantial help from Earth, equipment and supplies—which can only be paid for in Earth dollars—and we can't export enough to Earth to earn those dollars."

By that time, they were entering the Paul Bunyan Knotty Pine Bar & Grill, on the 73rd Level. Matheny's jaw clanked down.

"Whassa matter?" asked Doran. "Ain't you ever seen a ecdysiastic technician before?"

"Uh, yes, but—well, not in a 3-D image under ten magnifications."

Matheny followed Doran past a sign announcing that this show was for purely artistic purposes, into a booth. There a soundproof curtain reduced the noise level enough so they could talk in normal voices.

"What'll you have?" asked Doran. "It's on me."

"Oh, I couldn't let you. I mean—"

"Nonsense. Welcome to Earth! Care for a thyle and vermouthe?"

Matheny shuddered. "Good Lord, no!"

"Huh? But they make thyle right on Mars, don't they?"

"Yes. And it all goes to Earth and sells at 2000 dollars a fifth. But you don't think we'd *drink* it, do you? I mean—well, I imagine it doesn't absolutely *ruin* vermouthe. But we don't see those Earthside commercials about how sophisticated people like it so much."

"Well, I'll be a socialist creeper!" Doran's face split in a grin. "You know, all my life I've hated the stuff and never dared admit it!" He raised a hand. "Don't worry, I won't blabbo. But I am wondering, if you control the thyle industry and sell all those relics at fancy prices, why do you call yourselves poor?"

"Because we are," said Matheny. "By the time the shipping costs have been paid on a bottle, and the Earth wholesaler and jobber and sales engineer and so on, down to the retailer, have taken their percentage, and the advertising agency has been paid, and about fifty separate Earth taxes—there's very little profit going back to the distillery on Mars. The same principle is what's strangling us on everything. Old Martian artifacts aren't really rare, for instance, but freight charges and the middlemen here put them out of the mass market."

"Have you not got some other business?"

"Well, we do sell a lot of color slides, postcards, baggage labels and so on to people who like to act cosmopolitan, and I understand our travel posters are quite popular as wall decoration. But all that has to be printed on Earth, and the printer and distributor keep most of the money. We've sold some books and show tapes, of course, but only one has been really successful—*I Was a Slave Girl on Mars*.

"Our most prominent novelist was co-opted to ghostwrite that one. Again, though, local income taxes took most of the money; authors never have been protected the way a businessman is. We do make a high percentage of profit on those little certificates you see around—you know, the title deeds to one square inch of Mars—but expressed absolutely, in dollars, it doesn't amount to much when we start shopping for bulldozers and thermonuclear power plants."

"How about postage stamps?" inquired Doran. "Philately is a big business, I have heard."

"It was our mainstay," admitted Matheny, "but it's been overworked. Martian stamps are a drug on the market. What we'd like to operate is a sweepstakes, but the anti-gambling laws on Earth forbid that."

Doran whistled. "I got to give your people credit for enterprise, anyway!" He fingered his mustache. "Uh, pardon me, but have you tried to, well, attract capital from Earth?"

"Of course," said Matheny bitterly. "We offer the most liberal concessions in the Solar System. Any little mining company or transport firm or—or anybody—who wanted to come and actually invest a few dollars in Mars—why, we'd probably give him the President's daughter as security. No, the Minister of Ecology has a better-looking one. But who's interested? We haven't a thing that Earth hasn't got more of. We're only the descendants of a few scientists, a few political malcontents, oddballs who happen to prefer elbow room and a bill of liberties to the incorporated state—what could General Nucleonics hope to get from Mars?"

"I see. Well, what are you having to drink?"

"Beer," said Matheny without hesitation.

"Huh? Look, pal, this is on me."

"The only beer on Mars comes forty million miles, with interplanetary freight charges tacked on," said Matheny. "Heineken's!"

Doran shrugged, dialed the dispenser and fed it coins.

"This is a real interesting talk, Pete," he said. "You are being very frank with me. I like a man that is frank."

Matheny shrugged. "I haven't told you anything that isn't known to every economist."

Of course I haven't. I've not so much as mentioned the Red Ankh, for instance. But, in principle, I have told him the truth, told him of our need; for even the secret operations do not yield us enough.

The beer arrived. Matheny engulfed himself in it. Doran sipped at a whiskey sour and unobtrusively set another full bottle in front of the Martian.

"Ahhh!" said Matheny. "Bless you, my friend."

"A pleasure."

"But now you must let me buy you one."

"That is not necessary. After all," said Doran with great tact, "with the situation as you have been describing—"

"Oh, we're not *that* poor! My expense allowance assumes I will entertain quite a bit."

Doran's brows lifted a few minutes of arc. "You're here on business, then?"

"Yes. I told you we haven't any tourists. I was sent to hire a business manager for the Martian export trade."

"What's wrong with your own people? I mean, Pete, it is not your fault there are so many rackets—uh, taxes—and middlemen and agencies and et cetera. That is just the way Earth is set up these days."

Matheny's finger stabbed in the general direction of Doran's pajama top. "Exactly. And who set it up that way? Earthmen. We Martians are babes in the desert. What chance do we have to earn dollars on the scale we need them, in competition with corporations which could buy and sell our whole planet before breakfast? Why, we couldn't afford three seconds of commercial time on a Lullaby Pillow 'cast. What we need, what we have to hire, is an executive who knows Earth, who's an Earthman himself. Let him tell us what will appeal to your people, and how to dodge the tax bite and—and—well, you see how it goes, that sort of, uh, thing."

Matheny felt his eloquence running down and grabbed for the second bottle of beer.

"But where do I start?" he asked plaintively, for his loneliness smote him anew. "I'm just a college professor at home. How would I even get to see—"

"It might be arranged," said Doran in a thoughtful tone. "It just might. How much could you pay this fellow?"

"A hundred megabucks a year, if he'll sign a five-year contract. That's Earth years, mind you."

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Pete," said Doran, "but while that is not bad money, it is not what a high-powered sales scientist gets in Newer York. Plus his retirement benefits, which he would lose if he quit where he is now at. And I am sure he would not want to settle on Mars permanently."

"I could offer a certain amount of, uh, lagniappe," said Matheny. "That is, well, I can draw up to a hundred megabucks myself for, uh, expenses and, well ... let me buy you a drink!"

Doran's black eyes frogged at him. "You might at that," said the Earthman very softly. "Yes, you might at that."

Matheny found himself warming. Gus Doran was an authentic bobber. A hell of a swell chap. He explained modestly that he was a free-lance business consultant and it was barely possible that he could arrange some contacts....

"No, no, no commission, all done in the interest of interplanetary friendship ... well, anyhow, let's not talk business now. If you have got to stick to beer, Pete, make it a chaser to akvavit. What is akvavit? Well, I will just take and show you."

A hell of a good bloke. He knew some very funny stories, too, and he laughed at Matheny's, though they were probably too rustic for a big-city taste like his.

"What I really want," said Matheny, "what I really want—I mean what Mars really needs, get me? —is a confidence man."

"A what?"

"The best and slickest one on Earth, to operate a world-size con game for us and make us some real money."

"Con man? Oh. A slipstring."

"A con by any other name," said Matheny, pouring down an akvavit.

Doran squinted through cigarette smoke. "You are interesting me strangely, my friend. Say on."

"No." Matheny realized his head was a bit smoky. The walls of the booth seemed odd, somehow. They were just leatheroid walls, but they had an odd quality.

"No, sorry, Gus," he said. "I spoke too much."

"Okay. Forget it. I do not like a man that pries. But look, let's bomb out of here, how about it? Go have a little fun."

"By all means." Matheny disposed of his last beer. "I could use some gaiety."

"You have come to the right town then. But let us get you a hotel room first and some more up-to-date clothes."

"*Allez*," said Matheny. "If I don't mean *allons*, or maybe *alors*."

The drop down to cab-ramp level and the short ride afterward sobered him; the room rate at the Jupiter-Astoria sobered him still more.

Oh, well, he thought, *if I succeed in this job, no one at home will quibble*.

And the chamber to which he and Doran were shown was spectacular enough, with a pneumo direct to the bar and a full-wall transparency to show the vertical incandescence of the towers.

"Whoof!" Matheny sat down. The chair slithered sensuously about his contours. He jumped. "What the dusty hell—Oh." He tried to grin, but his face burned. "I see."

"That is a sexy type of furniture, all right," agreed Doran. He lowered himself into another chair, cocked his feet on the 3-D and waved a cigarette. "Which speaking of, what say we get some girls? It is not too late to catch them at home. A date here will usually start around 2100 hours earliest."

"What?"

"You know. Dames. Like a certain blonde warhead with twin radar and swivel mounting, and she just loves exotics. Such as you."

"Me?" Matheny heard his voice climb to a schoolboy squeak. "Me? Exotic? Why, I'm just a little college professor. I g-g-g, that is—" His tongue got stuck on his palate. He pulled it loose and moistened uncertain lips.

"You are from Mars. Okay? So you fought bushcats barehanded in an abandoned canal."

"What's a bushcat? And we don't have canals. The evaporation rate—"

"Look, Pete," said Doran patiently. "She don't have to know that, does she?"

"Well—well, no. I guess not No."

"Let's order you some clothes on the pneumo," said Doran. "I recommend you buy from Schwartzherz. Everybody knows he is expensive."

While Matheny jittered about, shaving and showering and struggling with his new raiment, Doran kept him supplied with akvavit and beer.

"You said one thing, Pete," Doran remarked. "About needing a slipstring. A con man, you would call it."

"Forget that. Please. I spoke out of turn."

"Well, you see, maybe a man like that is just what Mars does need. And maybe I have got a few contacts."

"What?" Matheny gaped out of the bathroom.

Doran cupped his hands around a fresh cigarette, not looking at him. "I am not that man," he said frankly. "But in my line I get a lot of contacts, and not all of them go topside. See what I mean? Like if, say, you wanted somebody terminated and could pay for it, I could not do it. I would not want to know anything about it. But I could tell you a phone number."

He shrugged and gave the Martian a sidelong glance. "Sure, you may not be interested. But if you are, well, Pete, I was not born yesterday. I got tolerance. Like the book says, if you want to get ahead, you have got to think positively."

Matheny hesitated. If only he hadn't taken that last shot! It made him want to say yes, immediately, without reservations. And therefore maybe he became overcautious.

They had instructed him on Mars to take chances if he must.

"I could tell you a thing or two that might give you a better idea," he said slowly. "But it would have to be under security."

"Okay by me. Room service can send us up an oath box right now."

"What? But—but—" Matheny hung onto himself and tried to believe that he had landed on Earth less than six hours ago.

In the end, he did call room service and the machine was trundled in. Doran swallowed the pill and donned the conditioner helmet without an instant's hesitation.

"I shall never reveal to any person unauthorized by yourself whatever you may tell me under security, now or at any other time," he recited. Then, cheerfully: "And that formula, Pete, happens to be the honest-to-zebra truth."

"I know." Matheny stared, embarrassed, at the carpet. "I'm sorry to—to—I mean of course I trust you, but—"

"Forget it. I take a hundred security oaths a year, in my line of work. Maybe I can help you. I like you, Pete, damn if I don't. And, sure, I might stand to get an agent's cut, if I arrange—Go ahead, boy, go ahead." Doran crossed his legs and leaned back.

"Oh, it's simple enough," said Matheny. "It's only that we already are operating con games."

"On Mars, you mean?"

"Yes. There never were any Old Martians. We erected the ruins fifty years ago for the Billingsworth Expedition to find. We've been manufacturing relics ever since."

"*Huh?* Well, why, but—"

"In this case, it helps to be at the far end of an interplanetary haul," said Matheny. "Not many Terrestrial archeologists get to Mars and they depend on our people to—Well, anyhow—"

"I will be clobbered! Good for you!"

Doran blew up in laughter. "That is one thing I would never spill, even without security. I told you about my girl friend, didn't I?"

"Yes, and that calls to mind the Little Girl," said Matheny apologetically. "She was another official project."

"Who?"

"Remember Junie O'Brien? The little golden-haired girl on Mars, a mathematical prodigy, but dying of an incurable disease? She collected Earth coins."

"Oh, that. Sure, I remember—Hey! You didn't!"

"Yes. We made about a billion dollars on that one."

"I will be double damned. You know, Pete, I sent her a hundred-buck piece myself. Say, how is Junie O'Brien?"

"Oh, fine. Under a different name, she's now our finance minister." Matheny stared out the wall, his hands twisting nervously behind his back. "There were no lies involved. She really does have a fatal disease. So do you and I. Every day we grow older."

"Uh!" exclaimed Doran.

"And then the Red Ankh Society. You must have seen or heard their ads. 'What mysterious knowledge did the Old Martians possess? What was the secret wisdom of the Ancient Aliens? Now the incredibly powerful semantics of the Red Ankh (not a religious organization) is available to a select few—' That's our largest dollar-earning enterprise."

He would have liked to say it was his suggestion originally, but it would have been too presumptuous. He was talking to an Earthman, who had heard everything already.

Doran whistled.

"That's about all, so far," confessed Matheny. "Perhaps a con is our only hope. I've been wondering, maybe we could organize a Martian bucket shop, handling Martian securities, but—well, I don't know."

"I think—" Doran removed the helmet and stood up.

"Yes?" Matheny faced around, shivering with his own tension.

"I may be able to find the man you want," said Doran. "I just may. It will take a few days and might get a little expensive."

"You mean.... Mr. Doran—Gus—you could actually—"

"I cannot promise anything yet except that I will try. Now you finish dressing. I will be down in the bar. And I will call up this girl I know. We deserve a celebration!"

Peri was tall. Peri was slim. Peri smoldered when she walked and exploded when she stretched. Her apartment was ivory and ebony, her sea-green dress was poured on, and the Neo-Sino mode had obviously been engineered to her personal specifications.

She waved twelve inches of jade cigarette holder, lifted her glass and murmured throatily: "To you, Pete. To Mars."

"I, I, I," stammered Matheny. He raised his own glass. It slopped over. "Oh, damn! I mean ... gosh, I'm so sorry, I—"

"No harm done. You aren't used to our gravity yet." Peri extended a flawless leg out of her slit skirt and turned it about on the couch, presumably in search of a more comfortable position. "And it must seem terribly cramped here on Earth, Pete," she continued. "After roaming the desert, hunting, sleeping under the twin moons. Two moons! Why, what girl could resist that?"

"Uh, well, as a matter of fact, the moons are barely visible," floundered Matheny.

"Must you spoil my dreams?" she said. "When I think of Mars, the frontier, where men are still men, why, my breast swells with emotion."

"Uh, yes." Matheny gulped. "Swell. Yes."

She leaned closer to his chair. "Now that I've got you, don't think you'll get away," she smiled. "A live Martian, trapped!"

Doran looked at his watch. "Well," he said, "I have got to get up tomorrow, so I had better run along now."

"Ta-ta," said Peri. Matheny rose. She pulled him down beside her. "Oh, no, you don't, Mars lad. I'm not through with you yet!"

"But, but, but," said Matheny.

Doran chuckled. "I'll meet you on the Terrace at fourteen hundred hours tomorrow," he said. "Have fun, Pete."

The door closed on him.

Peri slithered toward her guest. He felt a nudge and looked down. She had not actually touched him with her hands. "Gus is a good squiff," she said, "but I wondered if he'd ever go."



"Why, why ... what do you mean?" croaked Matheny.

"Haven't you guessed?"

She kissed him. It was rather like being caught in a nuclear turbine with soft blades.

Matheny, said Matheny, *you represent your planet.*

Matheny, said Matheny, *shut up.*

Time passed.

"Have another drink," said Peri, "while I slip into something more comfortable."

Her idea of comfort was modest in one sense of the word: a nightdress or something, like a breath of smoke, and a seat on Matheny's lap.

"If you kiss me like that just once more," she breathed, "I'll forget I'm a nice girl."

Matheny kissed her like that.

The door crashed open. A large man stood there, breathing heavily. "What are you doing with my wife?" he bawled.

"Sam!" screamed Peri. "I thought you were in Australia!"

"And he said he might settle out of court," finished Matheny. He stared in a numb fashion at his beer. "He'll come to my hotel room this afternoon. What am I going to do?"

"It is a great shame," said Doran. "I never thought.... You know, he told everybody he would be gone on business for weeks yet. Pete, I am more sorry than I can express."

"If he thinks I'll pay his miserable blackmail," bristled Matheny, "he can take his head and stick _"

Doran shook his own. "I am sorry, Pete, but I would pay if I was you. He does have a case. It is too bad he just happened to be carrying that loaded camera, but he is a photographer and our laws on Earth are pretty strict about unlicensed correspondents. You could be very heavily fined as well as deported, plus all the civil-damage claims and the publicity. It would ruin your mission and even make trouble for the next man Mars sent."

"But," stuttered Matheny, "b-but it's a badger game!"

"Look," said Doran. He leaned over the table and gripped the Martian's shoulder. "I am your friend, see? I feel real bad this happened. In a way, it is my fault and I want to help you. So let me go talk to Sam Wendt. I will cool him off if I can. I will talk down his figure. It will still cost you, Pete, but you can pad your expense account, can't you? So we will both come see you today. That way there will be two people on your side, you and me, and Sam will not throw his weight around so much. You pay up in cash and it will be the end of the affair. I will see to that, pal!"

Matheny stared at the small dapper man. His aloneness came to him like a blow in the stomach. *Et tu, Brute*, he thought.

He bit his lip. "Thanks, Gus," he said. "You are a real friend."

Sam blocked the doorway with his shoulders as he entered the room. Doran followed like a diminutive tug pushing a very large liner. They closed the door. Matheny stood up, avoiding Sam's glare.

"Okay, louse," said Sam. "You got a better pal here than you deserve, but he ain't managed to talk me into settling for nothing."

"Let me get this—I mean—well," said Matheny. "Look, sir, you claim that I, I mean that your wife and I were, uh, well, we weren't. I was only visiting—"

"Stow it, stow it." Sam towered over the Martian. "Shoot it to the Moon. You had your fun. It'll cost you. One million dollars."

"*One mil*—But—but—Gus," wailed Matheny, "this is out of all reason! I thought you said—"

Doran shrugged. "I am sorry, Pete. I could not get him any farther down. He started asking fifty. You better pay him."

"No!" Matheny scuttled behind a chair. "No, look here! I, Peter Matheny of the Martian Republic, declare you are blackmailing me!"

"I'm asking compensation for damages," growled Sam. "Hand it over or I'll go talk to a lawyer. That ain't blackmail. You got your choice, don't you?"

Matheny wilted. "Yes."

"A megabuck isn't so bad, Pete," soothed Doran. "I personally will see that you earn it back in—"

"Oh, never mind." Tears stood in Matheny's eyes. "You win." He took out his checkbook.

"None of that," rapped Sam. "Cash. Now."

"But you claimed this was a legitimate—"

"You heard me."

"Well—could I have a receipt?" begged Matheny.

Sam grinned.

"I just thought I'd ask," said Matheny. He opened a drawer and counted out one hundred ten-kilo-buck bills. "There! And, and, and I hope you choke on it!"

Sam stuffed the money in a pocket and lumbered out.

Doran lingered. "Look here, Pete," he said, "I will make this up to you. Honest. All you have got to do is trust me."

"Sure." Matheny slumped on the bed. "Not your fault. Let me alone for a while, will you?"

"Listen, I will come back in a few hours and buy you the best dinner in all the Protectorates and —"

"Sure," said Matheny. "Sure."

Doran left, closing the door with great gentleness.

He returned at 1730, entered, and stopped dead. The floor space was half taken up by a screen and a film projector.

"What happened, Pete?" he asked uncertainly.

Matheny smiled. "I took some tourist movies," he said. "Self-developing soundtrack film. Sit down and I'll show you."

"Well, thanks, but I am not so much for home movies."

"It won't take long. Please."

Doran shrugged, found a chair and took out a cigarette. "You seem pretty well cheered up now," he remarked. "That is a spirit I like to see. You have got to have faith."

"I'm thinking of a sideline business in live photography," said the Martian. "Get back my losses of today, you know."

"Well, now, Pete, I like your spirit, like I say. But if you are really interested in making some of that old baroom, and I think you are, then listen—"

"I'll sell prints to people for home viewing," went on Matheny. "I'd like your opinion of this first effort."

He dimmed the transparency and started the projector. The screen sprang into colored motion. Sam Wendt blocked the doorway with his shoulders.

"Who knows, I might even sell you one of the several prints I made today," said Matheny.

"Okay, louse," said Sam.

"Life is hard on Mars," commented Matheny in an idle tone, "and we're an individualistic culture. The result is pretty fierce competition, though on a person-to-person rather than organizational basis. All friendly enough, but—Oh, by the way, how do you like our Martian camera technology? I wore this one inside my buttonhole."



Doran in the screen shrugged and said: "I am sorry, Pete." Doran in the chair stubbed out his cigarette, very carefully, and asked, "How much do you want for that film?"

"Would a megabuck be a fair price?" inquired Matheny.

"Uh ... huh."

"Of course, I am hoping Sam will want a copy too."

Doran swallowed. "Yeah. Yes, I think I can talk him into it."

"Good." Matheny stopped the projector. He sat down on the edge of the table, swinging one leg, and lit his pipe. Its bowl glowed in the dimness like the eye of a small demon. "By the way," he said irrelevantly, "if you check the newscast tapes, you'll find I was runner-up in last year's all-Martian pistol contest. It's a tough contest to win. There are no bad shots on Mars—survival of the fittest, you know."

Doran wet his lips. "Uh, no hard feelings. No, none at all. But say, in case you are, well, you know, looking for a slipstring, what I came here for was to tell you I have located the very guy you want. Only he is in jail right now, see, and it will cost—"

"Oh, no!" groaned Matheny. "Not the Syrtis Prospector! Kids are taught that swindle in kindergarten."

Doran bowed his head. "We call it the Spanish Prisoner here," he said. He got up. "I will send the price of those films around in the morning."

"You'll call your bank and have the cash pneumoed here tonight," said Matheny. "Also Sam's share. I daresay he can pay you back."

"No harm in trying, was there?" asked Doran humbly.

"None at all." Matheny chuckled. "In fact, I'm grateful to you. You helped me solve my major problem."

"Huh? I did what? How?"

"I'll have to investigate further, but I'm sure my hunch will be confirmed. You see, we Martians have stood in awe of Earthmen. And since for a long time there's been very little contact between the two planets except the purely official, impersonal sort, there's been nothing to disabuse us. It's certainly true that our organizations can't compete with yours, because your whole society is based on organizations. But now, by the same token, I wonder if your individuals can match ours. Ever hear of the Third Moon? No? The whipsaw play? The aqueduct squeeze? Good Lord, can't you even load a derrel set?"

Matheny licked his chops. "So there's our Martian export to Earth. Martian con men. I tell you this under security, of course—not that anyone would believe you, till our boys walk home with the shirt off the Terrestrial back."

He waved an imperious pipe-stem. "Hurry up and pay me, please. I've a date tonight with Peri. I just called her up and explained the situation and she really *does* seem to like Martians."

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