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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK FROM AN UNSEEN CENSOR ***



FROM AN UNSEEN CENSOR

By ROSEL GEORGE BROWN

Illustrated by DILLON

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You can't beat my Uncle Isadore—he's dead but he's quick—yet that is just what he was daring me to try and do!

Uncle Isadore's ship wasn't in bad shape, at first glance. But a second look showed the combustion chamber was crumpled to pieces and the jets were fused into the rocks, making a smooth depression.

The ship had tilted into a horizontal position, nestling in the hollow its last blasts had made. Dust had sifted in around it, piling over the almost invisible seam of the port and filming the whole ship.



We circled around the ship. It was all closed and sealed, blind as a bullet.

"Okay," Rene said. "He's dead. My regrets." He coughed the word out as though it were something he had swallowed by accident.

"But how do you know?" I asked. "He might be in there."

"That port hasn't been opened for months. Maybe years. I told you the converter wouldn't last more than a month in dock. He couldn't live locked up in there without air and water. Let's go." My guide had no further interest in the ship. He hadn't even looked to see what the planet was like.

I stood shivering in my warm clothes. The ship seemed to radiate a chill. I looked around at the lumpy, unimaginative landscape of Alvarla. There was nothing in sight but a scraggly, dun heather sprouting here and there in the rocks and dust, and making hirsute patches on the low hills.

I had some wild idea, I think, that Uncle Izzy might come sauntering nonchalantly over the hills, one hand in the pocket of a grilch-down jacket and the other holding a Martian cigarene. And he would have on his face that look which makes everything he says seem cynical and slightly clever even if it isn't.

"The scenery is dull," he might say, "but it makes a nice back-drop for you." Something like that, leaving the impression he'd illuminated a side of your character for you to figure out later on.

Nothing of the kind happened, of course. I just got colder standing there.

"All right," Rene said. "We've had a moment of silence. Now let's go."

"I—there's something wrong," I told him. "Let's go in and *see* the—the body."

"We can't go in. That ship's sealed from the inside. You think they make those things so any painted alien can open the door and shoot in poisoned arrows? Believe me, he *has* to be inside if those outside ports are sealed. And he *has* to be dead because that port hasn't been opened in months. Look at the dust! It's a fourth of the way up the port."

Rene lumbered over to it and blew away some of the lighter dust higher up.

"See that?" he asked.

"No."

He groaned. "Well, you'll have to take my word for it. It's a raindrop. Almost four months old. A very light rain. You could see the faint, crusted outline of the drop if you knew how to look."

"I believe you," I said. "I hired you because you know which side of the trees the moss grows on and things like that. Still...."

Rene was beginning to stomp around impatiently. "Still *what*?"

"It just isn't like Uncle Isadore." I was trying to search out, myself, what it was that struck me as incongruous. "It's out of character."

"It's out of character for *anybody* to die," Rene said. "But I've seen a lot of them dead."

"I mean at least he would have died outside."

"Oh, for Pete's sake! Why outside? You think he took rat poison?"

I went around to the other side of the spaceship, mostly to get away from Rene for a moment. I'm only a studs and neck clasp man and Rene had twenty years' experience on alien planets. So he was right, of course, about the evidence. There was no getting around it. Still....

I circled back around to where Rene was smoking his first cigarette since we left Earth. His face was a mask of sunbaked wrinkles pointing down to the cigarette smack in the middle of his mouth.

"Uncle Izzy wouldn't die like an ordinary mortal," I said. "He'd have a brass band. Or we'd find his body lying in a bed of roses with a big lily in his hand. Or he might even disappear into thin air. But not *this*." I waved a hand toward the dead ship.

"Look," Rene said. "My job was to find your Uncle Isadore. I've found him. We can't get inside that ship with anything short of a matter reducer, which I *don't* happen to have along since they weigh several tons. You'll have to take my word for it that his body's in there. Now let's go home." He managed to talk without moving the cigarette at all.

"You said a week," I reminded Rene.

"I said if I didn't find him in a week, then he wasn't there. I've found him. I'm sorry if he was your favorite uncle or something."

"As a matter of fact, I never liked him. He was—frivolous. He never had a job. He thought life was a big game."

"Then how come he got so rich?"

"He always won."

"Not this time, brother! But if he's not your favorite uncle, why all this concern? You can take my word for it he's dead and you've done your duty."

"There are two things that bother me. One is curiosity. I just don't believe Uncle Izzy died in an ordinary fashion locked up in a spaceship. You don't know him, so you wouldn't understand. The other thing I'm concerned about is—well, his will."

Rene barked a couple of times. I had learned this indicated laughter. "I figured what you were really after was his money."

Under my yellow overskin, I could feel myself coloring. That wasn't at all the point. I'd mortgaged Mother's bonds to finance this trip, confident that Uncle Izzy would make it good when we found him. If I couldn't get Mother's bonds out of hock, she'd have to live out her life in a Comfort Park. I shuddered at the thought. Uncle Isadore must have known that when he radared for help. He must have provided some way....

"You said a week and we're staying a week," I told Rene as authoritatively as I could manage. "You haven't actually *showed* me Uncle Izzy's—er—corpus delicti, so I have you on a legal technicality." I didn't know whether or not this was true, but it sounded good.

"All right, we'll stay." Rene spat the sentence out onto the ground. "But if you think I'm going to do any more looking, take another guess."

He tramped back into his own ship, leaving the outside port and the pressure chamber open.

If only Uncle Izzy had done that!

I went over his ship inch by inch, feeling with my hands, to be sure there was no extra door that might be opened. Rene would have laughed, but I was beginning to build up antibodies against Rene's laughter.

I got the bottom part of the ship dusted off and found nothing.

I pushed open the door of Rene's ship and asked him for a ladder.

"You'll have to pay for it," he warned. "Once it's open, I can't carry it in my ship and I'll have to get another."

"Okay, okay! I'll *pay* for it."

He handed me a synthetic affair that looked like a meshed rope, wound tight, about the size of a Venusian cigar.

"This is a ladder?" I asked incredulously, but he had shut the door in my face.

I slipped the cellophane off and unrolled it. It seemed to unroll endlessly. When it was ten feet long and four feet wide, I stopped unrolling. Sure enough, it hardened into a ladder in about ten minutes. It was so strong I couldn't begin to bend it over my knee.

I set it against the side of the ship and began to investigate the view ports. The first two were sealed tight as a drum.

The third slipped off in my hands and clattered over the side of the ship onto the rocks.

I was almost afraid to look through the "glass" beneath. I needn't have been. I could see absolutely nothing. It was space-black inside.

I went back to Rene's ship for a flashlight. He was unimpressed by my discovery.

"Even if you could break the glass, which you can't," he said, "you still couldn't get through that little porthole. Here's the flash. You won't be able to see anything."

He came with me this time. Not because he was interested, but because he wanted another cigarette and never smoked in the ship.

He was right. I couldn't see a darned thing in the ship with the flashlight. But I found something—a little lead object that looked like a coin. It had rolled into a corner of the port.

Now I don't like adventure. I don't like strange planets. All I've ever asked of life was my little four-by-six cubby in the Brooklyn Bloc and my job. A job I know inside out. It's a comfortable, happy, harmless way to live and I test 10:9 on job adjustment.

All the same, it was a thrill to discover a clue that Rene would have thrown away if he'd been the one looking.

I tossed it casually in the air and showed it to Rene.

"Know what that is?" I asked.

"Slug for a halfdec slot machine?"

"Nope. Know what I can do with it?"

He didn't say.

"I'm going to open Uncle Izzy's ship from the *inside*."

Rene lighted a fresh cigarette from the old one and let the smoke out of his nose. It gave rather the impression of a bull resting between picadors.

"Can you show me, on the outside, approximately where the button is that you push on the inside to unseal the ship?" I inquired casually.

"I can show you exactly."

He pointed to a spot next to the entrance port. I wet my finger and made a mark in the dust so I could get it just right. Then I found a sharp stone and cut around the edges of the lead. As I slipped off the back half of the coinlike affair, I clapped it over the finger mark.

The entrance port swung open.

If I'd had a feather, I would have taken great pleasure in knocking Rene over with it.

"It'd be worth a million dollars," he breathed, "to know how you did that."

"Oh, a lot less than that," I said airily.

"Well? Explain!"

"Uncle Isadore had it set up," I told him, using the same patiently impatient tone he used on me. "He knew I'd recognize that lead coin. There was a cuff link in it."

"A cuff link!"

"A studs and neck clasp man has to know about cuff links, too. This happens to be an expensive

cuff link, but worth only about a year's salary, not a million dollars. They're held together by a jazzed-up electromagnetic force rather than by a clasp. This force is so strong it would take a derrick to pull them apart. The idea is to keep you from losing one. If you drop it to the floor, you just wave the mate around a little and it pops up through the air."

"How do you get them apart?"

"Just slip them sideways, like a magnet. You can sheathe them in lead, like the one I found, to cut down the attraction. This is how they're packaged. You don't know about them because they're not advertised—that keeps them a luxury item, you know."

"So your Uncle Isadore pasted one of them on the port button."

"He didn't have to paste. All he had to do was stick it on. All I had to do was line up the mate to it and the attractive force pushed the button."

"That's very neat," Rene said. "But why the hell didn't he just leave the port open? He'd hardly do this sort of thing with his dying gasp."

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "As a matter of fact, I wonder why he radared *me* if he really wanted to be rescued. He had plenty of friends who could rescue him more reliably."

I had an inkling of what had been on Uncle Isadore's mind. Although Uncle Izzy had had three—or was it four?—wives, he'd very carefully had no children. And it had occurred to him at an advanced age to take an interest in me.

He'd sent me through two years of general studies and reluctantly let me specialize in studs and neck clasps.

"You were a grilch hop expert in Middle School," he had told me. "How come you're getting so stuffy?"

"Because I can't be an adolescent all my life, Uncle Isadore," I had replied stiffly. "I would like to get into some solid line of work and be a good citizen."

"Phooey!" he'd said. But he had let me do what I'd wanted. It was because of this that I had felt duty bound to answer his call for help.

I'd *not* felt duty bound to take all the opportunities he'd tried to force on me when I got out of school. Mining the semi-solid seas of Alphard kappa. Fur trading on Procyon beta. And a hundred others, all obviously doomed to failure unless there was one lucky chance.

"But I'm *happy* here with my little room and my little job," I kept telling Uncle Isadore.

"You only think you're happy because you don't know any better," he kept telling me.

Only, now that he was dead, he seemed to have me where he wanted me. Now that nothing could matter to him any longer.

"Maybe he was getting senile," Rene suggested.

"Uncle Izzy always said he'd rather die than—he *did* die," I replied, suddenly recalling myself to the present and the open outside port of the ship. I realized how reluctant I was to go in. It was one thing to admit Uncle Izzy was dead—I cherished no great affection for him—but it was something else to have to face his dead body.

"Would you mind going in first?" I asked Rene.

He shrugged and shouldered the inside door open.

He came out, his face a study in perplexity. "Not here!" he said. "This is the first time I've been wrong in fifteen years!"

"That's because it's the first time you've been up against Uncle Izzy. He must have closed the port behind him the same way I opened it."

I climbed through the door, feeling immensely relieved. I realized then what had really been worrying me. If the gods had abandoned Isadore at the last, what did they have in mind for the rest of us mere mortals?

I kicked at my mind irritably, knowing these were young thoughts. But then I *am* young, I explained to myself.

The inside of the ship was neat and empty. Stuck on the instrument panel with a vaccup was a note, in Uncle Izzy's flowery script.

My boy. I have died of boredom. Do not look for the remains. I have hidden my body to avoid the banality of a decent burial. I bequeath you my entire fortune. Find it.

Rene groaned. "I suppose now you want to look for the body."

"No. If he says it's hidden, it's hidden. But it would be a little silly to go off without finding his fortune, wouldn't it?"

"Looking for buried treasure wasn't in the contract," Rene pointed out. "You'll have to make it worth my while."

"Another five thousand," I said.

"Make it ten. Payable if I find it."

"Suppose *I* find it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. You'd be a fool to take two steps on this planet without me."

He was right, of course. And if we left, I wouldn't get anything. I thought of Mother living by the bells at a Comfort Park. "All right," I said.

"What form was his fortune in?" Rene asked. "Money? Bonds? Polarian droplets? It would help to know what I'm looking for."

"I have no idea," I confessed. "Ordinarily it would take a computer to figure out Uncle Isadore's financial affairs. But he'd have been perfectly capable of selling out everything and taking his entire fortune along with him for some new project."

Rene had skillfully unscrewed the instrument panel and he lifted it off and began poking inside and removing mysterious bits of machinery. "That makes it harder. You don't know whether he sold out or not?"

"I have no idea. He might have all his money piled in the locker of the Whist Club of Sirius beta. In that case, we look for a key. Or he might have a block of Eretrevium buried somewhere. Your guess is as good as mine."

"If he's dug up the ground," Rene said, "I'll recognize the spot. But that'll mean walking over every inch of ground for a day's journey around. Or more, if he did any overnight traveling."

"Not Uncle Izzy," I said. "He wouldn't be at all likely to spend a freezing night out on Alvarla, even for a good joke."

"Radar equipment's in perfect shape," Rene said, shifting his activities to another segment of the ship's equipment. "I wonder why he didn't leave it on so we could locate him easier. Not that we had any trouble. Or why he didn't continue broadcasting for help until he died.... Mind if I take some of the equipment?"

"You haven't been exactly generous with me."

"I intend to subtract its value from the cost of supplies and mileage on my ship. I never said I was generous, but, by God, I'm honest."

Rene slid out the compartment of lunch packages, dumped them on the floor.

"All unopened," he was saying disgustedly. Then he picked up a heavy, square object with sharp corners, open on three sides. "What the hell is this?"

"A book," I informed him.

Rene opened it "Hey! A real, antique book! Must be worth at least a thousand! Look at the *size* of that print! You can read it with the naked eye, like an instrument panel! Well, here's a little piece of your fortune."

He tossed it to me and went on examining the lunch packages. He didn't trust me to help him because *I* wouldn't be able to tell if they'd been opened and something inserted.

I hung the book by the covers and let the pages flip open. Nothing fell out. I sighed. I'd have to go through the whole damn thing.

"I'm going back to your ship and read in comfort," I told Rene.

"You're no help here anyway," he said, putting the lunch packages in a large plastic bag he'd found somewhere. "No use letting these go to waste."

I didn't tell him I had the clue to Uncle Isadore's fortune in my hand. He didn't know Uncle Isadore, so he wouldn't have believed me.

Nothing is more uncomfortable than reading an antique book. There is no way to lie back and flash it on a screen or run the tape over your reading glasses while you lie prone and relax. You have to *hold* it. If you try to hold it lying down, your arms get tired. If you put it down on a table to read, your neck gets tired from bending over. And the pages keep flipping and make you lose your place.

Still, I read it all the way through. It wasn't too bad. Not like Edgar Guest, of course, who was the only ancient author I liked in General Studies. But I found there was a sort of Grilch Hop beat to it that reminded me of the Footlooses I used to go to in Middle School. I grinned. It was funny to think of now.

I found no clues in the book. The only thing to do was read it again, more carefully.

I noticed there was one poem with a *real* Grilch Hop beat. I thought suddenly of Sally, my regular

partner at the Footlooses. She was very blonde and she affected a green crestwave in her hair, pulled over her forehead with a diamond clip. She was a beauty, all right. But she was a little silly. And she had that tendency to overdress.

No, I sighed, she wouldn't have done for a studs and neck clasp man. But I couldn't help wondering where she was now and what she was like now. Did she remember me, and did she think about me when she heard that song we used to dance to, because it was about a girl named Sally?

*Once I knew a girl named Sally
Met her at a Footloose rally*

I began humming the Grilch Hop tune to the ancient poem in Uncle Algy's book. It was fantastic how closely it fitted, though, of course, the words in the poem were plain silly.

But imagine finding a poem with a perfect Grilch Hop beat before anybody even knew what a grilch was! Before Venus was even discovered. Jump on both feet. Hop three times on the left foot. Jump. Hop three times on the right foot. The rhythm was correct, right down to the breakaway and four-step at the end of each run.

It was while I was singing this poem to a Grilch Hop tune that I noticed the clue. The poem was named "The Dodo." And the rhyming was very smooth until I came to the lines:

*"Though thy crest be shorn and shaven,
Thou," I said, "art like a Raven
Ghastly, grim, and ancient Dodo,
Wandering from the Nightly shore;
Tell me what thy lordly name is
On the Night's Plutonian shore."
Quoth the Dodo, "Isadore."*

Now the author had gone to a lot of trouble in the previous verse not to break the Grilch Hop rhyme scheme. He made "thereat is" rhyme with "lattice" and "that is." Why did he follow "shaven" and "raven" with "Dodo"?

Furthermore, it had not struck me the first time I read the poem quickly that there was anything odd about a bird being named "Isadore." People who keep pet grilches frequently name them after famous Reed players and Isadore is a common name.

On the other hand, it was my Uncle's name. And the word "Dodo" didn't rhyme as it should.

I got out a magnifying glass to examine the ancient print. Sure enough, it had been tampered with. The print looked so odd to me, anyway, I hadn't noticed the part that had been changed. But it was obvious under the glass that "Dodo" had been substituted for a word of almost equal length. The same with "Isadore."

I went over the whole poem now, carefully, to see which words had been changed. There weren't many. "White" in a couple of places. "Dodo" and "Isadore" wherever they occurred. An "o" in the line "Perfume from an unseen censor." "S" in the line "'Wretch,' I cried, 'Isadore hath sent thee....'"

Sitting back, I thought about what I had read. It made no sense at all. Was I to look for a white bird, "grim, ungainly, ghastly"? And what if I found him? Why was he like a raven? What was this perfume from an unseen censor? I could picture the ghost of Uncle Isadore, knowing his financial imagination, as the "unseen censor" because he always criticized me. Was I to look for perfume? Did he have a fortune in perfume stowed somewhere? It seemed to me it would take an awful lot of even the most expensive perfume to comprise a fortune.

I decided to start with the bird. I went outside Rene's ship and looked around. No birds.

"Rene!" I called. He was still looking through Uncle Izzy's ship. "Have you seen an ungainly white bird around?"

"What!" he snapped, sticking an indignant face out of the door.

"I guess you haven't. Can your woodsy lore tell if there *are* birds on this planet?"

"Obviously," Rene said. "I don't know why you can't find your own spoor. I noticed the droppings immediately."

"Where are the birds?"

"How the hell would I know?" But he couldn't contain his special knowledge. "They're probably night birds," he said.

"Oh, yes." It checked. "Wandering from the Night's Plutonian shore."

He looked at me suspiciously. "You ever had a nervous breakdown?"

"I have *not*. I test 10:9 on job adjustment and 10:8 on life adjustment."

"Some people crack on alien planets," he said. "I have a padded room in my ship. You'd be surprised how often I have to use it."

I told him about the poem I found in Uncle Izzy's book. "We look for a white bird," I said. "Or perfume."

"You're nuts," he pointed out with some justice, because he hadn't known Uncle Isadore. "How do you know these changes weren't made by somebody else a long time ago? Maybe this ancient printer printed it wrong and had to change it afterward."

"I don't think they were that primitive back then."

But I didn't know what "back then" meant or how primitive ancient printing was. All I knew for sure was that, as the poem stood, it sounded as if somebody had loused up a perfect Grilch Hop rhyme. And Uncle Izzy knew I was a Grilch Hop expert in Middle School and this was the only *real* Grilch Hop rhythm in the book. What's more, Uncle Izzy could depend on me to go over that book in painstaking detail because a studs and neck clasp man has to be good on details.

"All right," I said. "You look your way and I'll look my way."

"We're not looking any more any way today," Rene said, emerging from Uncle Isadore's ship loaded down with movings. "It'll be night and below freezing in half an hour."

"What do you think," I asked, "a dodo would like to eat?"

"A *what?*"

"The birds. I want to put something out to attract them. Crackers or something?"

"I think you're crazy. If you have any idea of sitting outside to wait for them, you'll freeze to death. Not only that, there's no moon. You wouldn't be able to see your hand in front of your face."

"How do the birds see?"

"Maybe they aren't night birds. Maybe they migrated somewhere else."

"And if I use a light, it might scare them away," I mused. "Well, maybe I'm not supposed to wait outside, anyway."

Rene went in and switched on the heat and lights.

"Leave the outside port open," I said.

"Why?"

"So the birds can knock."

"Can *what?*"

"Well, it's possible," I said defensively. "It won't hurt anything to leave it open."

"All right," he consented, curving his mouth around unpleasantly, "just to show you what a jackass you are."

Rene had the heat turned low, for sleeping, and the lights off, as soon as we had eaten and fed the converter. I hydrated a package of crackers so that they were full-sized but not soggy, broke them into pieces and tossed them out.

I admit I felt a little embarrassed.

I sat there in the chill quiet, on this ugly, alien world, reading "The Dodo" by the light of a miniature flash, so as not to disturb Rene.

Pretty soon I began to feel creepy. "The Dodo" is a ghastly poem. There's an insidious morbidity about it. It had sounded merely funny the first time I read it.

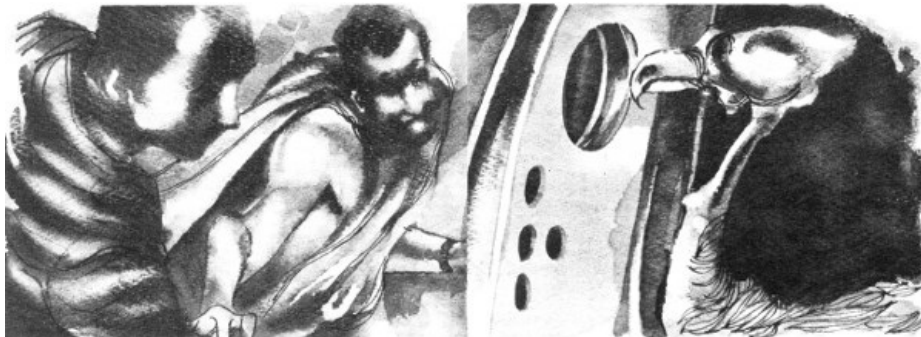
Now, the more I read it, the more I began to hear strange, impossible creakings and sighs, which might or might not be due to temperature changes.

The night outside was a deep, cold cup of darkness where no human thing moved.

There was a knock at the door.

I dropped the book and flashlight. Rene was up like a cat. He didn't turn on the light.

"Who's there?" he shouted.



There was a scratching noise at the door. Then a voice croaked, "My name is Isadore Summers."

I reached a trembling hand for the door.

"Wait, you fool!" Rene cried. He picked up the flash and got his gun. "Stand behind me and keep your hands off your gun. I know when to shoot and when not to shoot. You don't."

"If it's Uncle Isadore...."

"I tell you you've got to leave it up to me, if you want to get off this planet alive. Now stand back and keep your mouth shut, no matter what happens."

He kicked the door open and stood back and to one side of it. "Come in with your arms up!"

There was a sort of rustling sound and in walked a huge, white, wingless bird.

"My name," the dodo repeated, somewhat plaintively this time, with a glance toward the lunch compartment, "is Isadore Summers."

I couldn't help it. I rolled all over the ship with laughter. Rene looked a little shamefaced, tossed his gun onto the rack and punched the lighting on.

Obviously the dodo recognized our lunch compartment from familiarity with Uncle Izzy's ship. Then he looked at the alcohol tap that led from the fuel conversion. "Nepenthe?" he begged.

I hesitated. "Isn't there something," I asked Rene, "about corrupting the natives of a primitive planet?"

But Rene was sitting on his bunk, his jaw slack. "This is the first time I've ever been made a fool of by an alcoholic bird."

"If it's *just* a bird, of course. Like a parrot...."

I addressed the bird. "Sir," I began, and caught myself, "or perhaps madam, can you say anything else?"

"Nepenthe," the bird said firmly.

I shrugged and drew a cup. The dodo lifted the cup and drained it in one smooth gesture. This, as it turned out, was the only thing it seemed to do smoothly.

It began a wild attempt to scratch its head with one claw and remain upright. Then, abandoning all dignity, it rolled to its side and scratched furiously to satisfaction. After that, it began what looked like a hopeless attempt to right its awkward body, legs struggling in the air and back bumping around the ship.

I couldn't help remembering Uncle Izzy after a meal, slim and suave, lighting up a tapered, perfectly packed cigarene and blowing out one round, shapely smoke ring that hovered before his light, sardonic grin like a comment on his thoughts.

An uncomfortable comparison. I shook myself to life.

I righted the bird, no small problem, for he weighed almost two hundred pounds.

"Well," Rene finally said, coming out of his mood, "now that you have this bird, what are you going to do with it?"

"I had thought it might lead us to Uncle Izzy's fortune," I explained.

The bird obviously had no such intention. It was getting ready to take a nap.

"A night bird," I told it reprovingly, "shouldn't take a nap in the middle of the night."

"All you're proving is that he has no self-respect," Rene pointed out. "Why don't you look to see if he's got a note tagged to his leg or something?"

I did. He didn't.

"I think this whole thing is crazy," Rene said, "but since he's a talking bird, you might ask him a few questions. Maybe he's trained to say something else."

"Where is Uncle Izzy's fortune?" I asked, when I had tugged at the dodo's feathers until he opened one eye.

He closed it.

"Do you have a message for me?"

He drew away from me irritably and closed the eye again, ruffling down into his feathers.

"He may be keyed to respond to certain phrases. Try your uncle's name—he obviously knows that," Rene suggested coldly, wanting no part of this but unable to hold down the suggestion.

"My name," I screamed at the somnolent dodo, "is Isadore Summers."

He reared back and pecked the hell out of me.

I picked the book up off the floor and flipped through the bent pages until I found "The Dodo." Maybe there'd be something in *that*.

"Listen to this, Rene," I said, "and see if you catch anything I might have missed."

Rene looked discomfited, but he didn't stop up his ears.

When I came to the part, "'Tell me what thy lordly name is/On the Night's Plutonian shore....'" the dodo looked up and said, "Isadore."

Clearly, this was it, although I couldn't recall that any of the questions in the poem were to the point.

I got to, "'On the morrow he will leave me/As my hopes have flown before./Then the bird said....'"

"Ask me more," said the dodo without missing a beat.

I read on, getting excited. "'Quaff, oh, quaff this kind nepenthe,/And forget this lost Lenore./Quoth the Dodo....'"

"Give me more," he supplied, pointing his beak at the alcohol tap.

I gave him another cup and continued, sure that he must be going to say *something* relevant to Uncle Izzy's fortune.

"'Is there—*is* there balm in Gilead?—Tell me, tell me, I implore!' Quoth the Dodo...."

"Probably not," the dodo said, breaking the Grilch Hop rhythm at last, "but there are perfume trees on Alvarla."

"Perfume trees!" Rene shouted. "That bird's lying. It's impossible."

"Shut up!" I yelled at him. "The poem's not over."

I read on, somewhat ashamed of having to say such inhospitable words to a dodo who had been, after all, cooperating with me.

"'Take thy beak from out my heart,/And take thy form from off my door!'/Quoth the Dodo...."

"I was just leaving," the bird said, and struggled to his feet and went and stood by the door expectantly.

I got up. "Wait!" I commanded the bird, who couldn't do much else because the door was closed. "Do you know what perfume trees are, Rene?"

"Yeah, I know what they are, and they don't grow on this planet. You can take my word for it. They need a warm, moist soil to germinate in. They need to have their soil cultivated every day for a year. They die fast on contact with any sort of industrial fumes. They die in captivity, like some wild animals. They die if you sweat on them. They die if you breathe on them. They need to start off warm and get colder every month until they form their flowers. Then they need a frost for the pods to fill with the perfume, along with the seeds."

"There aren't any industrial fumes here," I pointed out, "and they could get plenty of frost."

"That's all they'd get. Where's the warm, moist climate to germinate in? Where's the parasitical Rhns to cultivate their soil? The Rhns couldn't exist without their Gleees and the Gleees can't exist without—never mind. The only place perfume trees can grow is on Odoria and that's why the perfume is worth two thousand dollars an ounce."

"I have never heard of anything," I informed him, "that spelled 'Uncle Isadore' so exactly. He always said, 'If it can't be done, I can do it.' Well, there's only one way to find out. Surely there's something on the ship I can wear."

"You mean you're going out into that frozen inkpot after that idiotic bird?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

"For Pete's sake! You're as brainless as the bird is!" But I think, for all his attitude, he was curious, too.

He began to spray me with something. "Close your eyes and mouth. If you don't wash this off with soap and water in twenty-four hours, you'll die. But it sure keeps in the body heat."

I stuck the book in my pocket for good luck, and Rene handed me a gun, some lunch packages, an antibiotic kit and a water purification kit.

"All right," I said, pocketing them, "but it can't be far. Uncle Izzy wouldn't have gone more than a day's journey."

"Then why haven't we smelled the perfume? And why would he have gone through all this rigmarole when he must have known you'd search that far?"

I didn't know why.

I pushed the door open. The bird hopped out and I realized how easy it would be to lose him from the small, round glow of my flash.

He looked curiously at me, as though expecting something further.

I looked curiously at him, wondering where he would lead to.

Then he was off. There was no question of following him. That big, awkward bird ran so fast that in a few minutes we could no longer hear the beat of his huge claws on the rocks, even in the perfectly still, dry air.

"How fast do you figure he's going?" I asked Rene.

"How the hell would I know?"

"Roughly."

"Roughly? Maybe fifty miles an hour."

"But that's incredible!"

"The big point-tails on Aldebaran kappa can do eighty with a native on their backs."

"Ah!" I said. "So *that's* it! Maybe tomorrow night..."

But we could hear the drumming of the returning dodo.

"Don't be stupid," Rene said. "He can't carry both of us and you'd be a fool either to go alone or stay here alone."

"As a tribute to my deceased uncle, I'm going to be a fool."

I stuck my flashlight into one of my many pockets and climbed onto the huge bird's back. The down beneath his outer feathers was as soft and strong as heavy fur. I dug in with my hands and feet, my head braced against the thickened part of his neck.

He started off with a lurch that brought my stomach out of hiding. I kept my eyes squeezed closed. I couldn't have seen anything, anyway. Not even the impossible creature that was rushing through the darkness carrying me, for all I knew, straight to damnation.



The night rushed past my ears in a wild keening and it crossed my mind to wonder what Mr. Picks, my supervisor, would say if he saw me now.

I had a sudden vision of Mr. Picks, even more neatly dressed than I always was, with middle-cost neck clasp and stud discreetly shining from a plain, square-edged bag shirt and dun suit. I pictured him opening a refined little box and holding it two feet under the customer's eyes with a gesture of faint, unconscious supplication. A comfortable, warm, happy picture in which my place, one counter behind Mr. Picks, was reassuringly assured.

Then, out of nowhere, into the picture galloped a yellow-skinned monster astride a huge, white bird. It turned out to be me and I tumbled off the bird, crying, "Mr. Picks! I don't know what came over me!"

But I was answered only by a multitude of squawks, rustles and scratchings.

The bird was home.

I could almost see vague forms. The darkness was beginning to give a little. I was warm, itchy and uncomfortable under whatever it was that Rene had sprayed on me.

Warm?

Perfume trees?

All I could smell were bird roosts.

I stood up, finding my limbs weak, trembling and painful. First, I glanced at my watch. Five hours terran time since we left the ship. At fifty miles per hour, we'd have gone two hundred and fifty miles.

If we'd gone due north, as the bird started out, we must be in the snow zone. And I was *warm!*

I switched my flash around. All I could see were birds. There seemed to be hundreds of them. I couldn't tell which one was my bearer.

"Where is the perfume?" I bawled.

All I got was squawks. Some of the birds were, in fact, standing on one foot and tucking their heads away.

It was growing lighter. The birds were going to bed.

Feverishly, I pulled out Uncle Izzy's old volume of poetry.

Brushing from my mind a vision of Mr. Picks in a state of shock and another picture of Uncle Isadore snickering triumphantly, I stood on that desert land enchanted—on that home by horror haunted, and solemnly read "The Dodo" to a colony of wingless birds.

My dodo identified himself at the proper place, but I kept on, waiting for something to show me my inheritance.

"Then methought the air grew denser," I read.

"Perfume from an unseen censor!" a bird croaked from the back row.

"Where?" I cried, pushing my way through the birds crowding around me in various stages of roost and curiosity.

"Then," I repeated, "the air grew denser."

"Perfume," the bird now in front of me said, "from an unseen censor."

He began to scratch at the ground assiduously under one of four dim shapes about the level of my eyes. Then he yawned gapingly, gave up and went to sleep.

I sat down to wait, because it was almost dawn and the last dodo had tucked his head into his feathers.

Daylight showed me four little trees, nothing like the usual scraggy vegetation of Alvarla. They *must* be perfume trees, I thought. But they were too young to have blossoms or pods.

I didn't go too near them, remembering what Rene had said.

And, remembering that, I began to figure out how they grew here.

This place was a little valley. No, a crater. Several feet deeper than my height, with sloping sides. The birds apparently kept it warm with their body heat, plus the heat the rocky sides would store. Since it was a crater, the winds wouldn't reach it. The crater made a basin to catch the snow which I could see beginning to melt at the edges and ooze down the slope.

The birds provided more than ample fertilizer and Uncle Izzy had apparently trained at least one of them to cultivate the soil under the trees.

I climbed out of the crater to see that I was indeed in the regions of snow. To the north were huge drifts, and far off loomed towering glaciers.

To the south, the hills tapered off from white to spotted brown.

That was the reason for Uncle Izzy's crazy setup. Rene and I would never have come across this crater in an ordinary search. Of course, the setup needn't have been *quite* so crazy. That was the personal equation of which Uncle Izzy was so fond.

The trees would, I assumed, poke their heads up over the crater as they grew, reaching toward the cold, and finally getting the frostbite to fill their pods properly.

At two thousand dollars an ounce.

I had neglected to ask Rene how many pods a tree could be expected to produce or how big the pods were. But, say, half an ounce in each pod and a conservative fifty pods on each tree.

A hundred thousand dollars.

I slid back into the crater, sat leaning against a somnolent dodo and ate a lunch package with a cupful of melted snow.

All sorts of thoughts were jostling my brain.

But I was bone-weary. I hadn't slept since we hit Alvarla and the ride last night had been a tremendous strain, because I wasn't in the habit of getting any exercise at all.

Therefore, I fell asleep in mid-thought.

It was the noon sun that woke me. I wasn't just warm. I was *hot*.

And I was very reluctant to let go of my dream; I kept grabbing at the tag ends of it with both hands. It was the most exciting dream I'd had since the one about succeeding Mr. Picks. Only *very* different.

I'd made a fortune cultivating perfume trees. My dream was full of perfume. Some of it came from the exotic plants of my African estate. Some of it was from a long-legged, pink-haired girl, the kind African millionaires have.

It was the sort of dream, I mused, unable to keep it in mood any longer, as large-minded men have. Men like—Uncle Isadore!

I sat up suddenly. Uncle Isadore—large-minded? Why hadn't he had the avuncular decency to leave me his fortune the usual way?

Why?

Because then he wouldn't be able to play penny-ante psychology and get me dreaming about wild schemes with perfume trees and African estates. That's why.

Or maybe there wasn't any fortune! Suddenly I understood why people smoke. It gives them something to do when they feel helpless.

If there wasn't any fortune, then I was hopelessly tied to the perfume trees. If Uncle Izzy had lost his last cent, it would be very like him to borrow enough from friends to finance a perfume tree scheme. And if he didn't make it to the planet he had in mind—why, he'd make the planet he'd crashed on do.

Anyone else would have shot the birds for fresh meat. Anyone else would have seen immediately that Alvarla was the last planet in the Galaxy where perfume trees would grow.

Anyone else would have seen immediately that I was one of the minor, comfortable people in the world who likes the happy regularities of a little job and an assured, if limited, future. Anyone else would have seen I had the sort of personality that could not be changed.

But Uncle Izzy wasn't anyone else.

Why did I keep smelling the perfume from my dream?

I followed my nose out of the crater and found the snow melting around a water tank about four feet long and two feet in diameter—part of the ruined fuel system from Uncle Izzy's ship.

I dislodged it from the ice beneath and shook it. The perfume was so strong, as it unfroze, that it made me dizzy. And all that smell was coming from a pinhole.

There seemed to be half a gallon in it. Enough to pay off Mother's bonds and whatever I owed Rene, with a handsome sum left over for me.

I could go home and forget about perfume trees and Alvarla and Uncle Isadore.

But that dream of the African estate kept irritating the back of my mind. And the large, free sky of Alvarla was soothing to the eye, when compared to the little squares of blue I noted occasionally when riding the slidewalks of Brooklyn.

What *did* I want out of life, anyway? *Damn* Uncle Isadore. I'd never test 10:9 on job adjustment again.

I was still thinking when evening swept in fast, as it does in dry climates, and the birds began to wake up and climb out of the crater, presumably to forage for food.

"Wait!" I cried. "Isadore!"

I drew out a lunch package and spread it to attract him. It attracted all of them.

I pulled out "The Dodo."

"Tell me what thy lordly name is/On the Night's Plutonian shore."

"Isadore," he volunteered, swallowing fast while I climbed aboard him.

"Take me back."

Then I realized I had made a mistake with the food.

"Go!" I cried. "Spaceship! More food!" He just stood there, his beak poking around the ground for crumbs.

But I had to get that skin spray washed off before twenty-four hours were up.

"Nepenthe!" I shouted desperately.

The dodo was off like a flash and didn't stop till we were back at the ship.

"You were gone quite a while," Rene said nonchalantly. "Find anything?"

"Enough to pay you off," I said. "And we'll make it five thousand because *I* found it. Stow this somewhere. It's perfume."

He did. "Find anything else?"

"Nothing that would interest you. I'll be ready to blast off as soon as I've had a shower."

Rene shrugged.

The perfume, when we returned to Earth, proved to be worth what he'd said it would be. A lot of people wanted to know where I'd gotten it. "The crops on Odoria," they said, "are entirely sewed up by Odoria, Inc."

"They certainly are," I always replied agreeably.

It took all I cleared from the perfume to put a down payment on a ship and hire an expert on fertilizing perfume flowers. But this time *I* wanted to run the show.

Mr. Picks shook his head sadly when I told him to replace me permanently.

"You have a great future ahead of you in studs and neck clasps," he said. "Why not take a little time and reconsider your decision? Or—"

"Nevermore," I answered.

Not until five years later did I find out what happened to the rest of good old Uncle Algernon's fortune.

I was stretched out on a gently undulating force-field in my interior patio, a huge, scarlet fan-flower tree sifting in the sunshine. Leda, her pink hair flowing down to her knees, was just emerging from the pool of grilch milk. She bent to an Aphrodite of Cnidos position.

"Perfect!" I said, and threw away my cigarene.

"Depart!" I told the robot, who came rolling in.

"But, master, it's the Cha'n of Betelgeuse, Lord of the Seven Planets and the Four Hundred Moons."

"Get dressed, Leda," I said regretfully. "We have company."

I'd never met him, but I knew he was one of Uncle Isadore's best friends and I felt obliged to see him.

The Cha'n had several meals and four cigarenes, maintaining a courteous silence all the while. Then he loosened his belt, reached into his furry pouch and handed me a piece of copper scroll.

It was a check for five million dollars.

"You won," he told me. "Or lost, as the case may be."

I just looked at him.

"I was holding it in trust for you," the Cha'n explained, "in accordance with your Uncle Isadore's last wishes."

I blew a perfect smoke ring, let it float before my face for a perfect moment, and then asked, "And suppose I had lost? Or won, as the case may be?"

"I was to save it to try on your son, the gods permitting you have one."

"If necessary," I told him, "I'll try it on him myself, O Cha'n of the Seven Planets and the Four Hundred Moons."

"Call me Charlie," he said.

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