



If your God is so powerful, then why doesn't he help you now? Where are these miracles you speak about?

LEGION OF MARS

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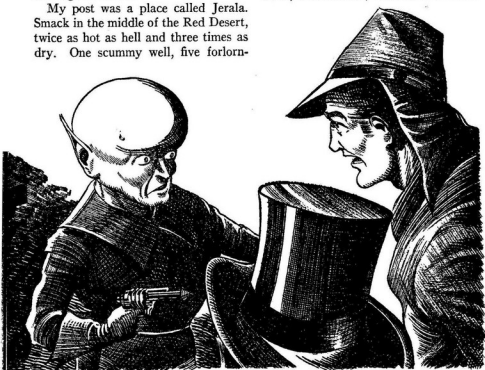
**Hard-bitten legionnaires, a mercenary Earthman, and
a fervent missionary didn't mix with the Martians.**

IT happened when I was just a youngster, holding down a trading station on Mars. I was a sergeant in the Alien Legion at the time. You remember the Legion. Scum of the cosmos, picked up in gutters throughout the Solar System, and supposed to keep the Martians in order while our traders stole the fillings out of their teeth. And me thinking it all glorious adventure and high romance!

My post was a place called Jerala. Smack in the middle of the Red Desert, twice as hot as hell and three times as dry. One scummy well, five forlorn-

looking *holu* trees, and a dirty rabbit warren of a native village, all filth and fleas. In front of the village and strung out along the edge of the space-port were our barracks, the radio shack, and Blackie Slane's ramshackle trading post. And that damned desert, flat as a table, as far as the eye could see. Oh, it was a lovely spot!

Slane was in a bad humor that afternoon, I remember, what with the sun



beating down outside the wireless shack like brass hammers, and his belly too full of Martian *tong*. He kept growling at the cards . . . we were playing black jack . . . and cursing one of our native servants for being slow in bringing ice, and taking dirty cracks at Wilke, our radio operator, for keeping the receiver open on Terrestrial, just because it reminded him of the girl he'd left in New York.

Around five o'clock, Martian, of course, I put on my coat and went over to the barracks to sober up my men for the night patrol. I had a squad of six, complete with heat guns, sand-skis, and sun helmets, and felt pretty important, even though my force consisted of one Jovian, as broad as he was tall, who could jump out of sight with one bound . . . and usually did at the first sign of trouble; two Venusians, always drunk; and three raddies, Martians, slinky birds who claimed to be pro-terrestrial but not to be trusted out of ray range. Still, with only a few hundred bulge-eyed, web-fingered desert aborigines to ride herd on, armed mostly with short native throwing knives and an occasional old-fashioned bullet gun they'd taken in trade, I wasn't bothered.

I'd just reached the door of the barracks when I heard a hell of a row, squealing, howling, like a small-sized riot. Wheeling about, I saw Blackie Slane standing in front of the radio shack with two of our native servants, one in each hand, pounding their scaly, hairless heads together like a couple of coconuts and at the same time roaring out curses so loud it almost drowned the poor devils' cries.

I whipped out my gun, headed for the radio shack on the run. It looked like trouble. Slane was a big, solid man with dark hair and beard that gave him his nickname of Blackie. His nose had

been tinted by every strange drink in the solar system . . . he was the only man I ever saw who could hurl down Neptunian *olo* without a chaser . . . and was reported to have a wife and brats on every planet to say nothing of a couple of the asteroids. He'd started out as a smuggler, done time in the prison colony at Phobos, and was now legally robbing the Martian natives by exchanging alarm clocks, pocket radio sets, and cheap gold-filled watches for desert rubies, blue *thorene* crystals from the sand-caves, and skins of the Martian *hulla*, which is something like a kangaroo and worth more than sable, or even sea-otter, in the terrestrial market.

Well as I was saying, Blackie was beating those poor devils' heads together like a trap drummer working his cymbals, and a hundred or more natives kneeling around at the doors of their little conical huts, letting out queer cries for help to the sun, which they worshipped. Some of them, not contented with calling on the sun, were fondling their copper knives. Their ugly, squinched-up faces were motionless, as always, but the look in their round bulging eyes wasn't pretty.

I stuck my heat gun into Slane's back and told him to stop it. The two raddies were groaning on the sand, with concussion of the brain, or worse.

"How do you expect me to keep order in camp?" I growled at him, "if you start things like this? Go sleep it off . . . you're drunk!"

Blackie gave me an opaque look; his eyes were glazed.

"These damn thieving little devils," he muttered. "And the heat . . . it's getting me . . ."

That was all I needed to snap my frayed nerves. I leaped at him with rancor rising high.

"It's just as hot on my back as

yours!" I grated. "One more break like this, and I'll have your trading license canceled!"

Slane stared at me, his shaggy brows meeting in one straight line. He didn't make a pretty picture in his dirty cello-silk singlet, his wrinkled trousers stuffed into the tops of his old boots. His arms, I remember, were covered with purple blotches, burns from a score of heat ray battles. The crowd of reddies, sensing trouble, edged closer, watching the pair of us intently.

"Well?" I snapped, gripping my gun.

Still Slane didn't answer. I could see his big muscles tense, as though he were ready to spring. I knew if I missed my first shot . . .

Then I heard Wilke calling to me from the radio shack.

"The supply ship!" he yelled. "She's in!"

AT once the tension snapped. Slane and I both whirled about, faced the big patch of sand they humorously called the space port. And sure enough, there was the old *Vestric*, settling down on her columns of fire with my squad standing around acting like they hadn't been asleep all day.

Wilke ran to get the mail. His girl wrote him once a month. I followed to see if the ship had brought any tobacco.

The *Vestric's* main locks clanged open and a dark, bent little man came down the gangplank, rubbing his hands. He had on a dingy fibroid raincoat, though God knows he didn't need one on Mars, and behind him a porter was carrying an oversized trunk.

Slane, waiting for the cargo lifts to discharge his supply of trading trinkets, frowned, he must have thought the man a rival trader.

"And who the devil may you be?" he demanded, truculently.

The little fellow made motions like

washing his hands.

"John Anson, traveling man," he said. "Gold and silver electroplating done at rock-bottom prices. Maybe you gents got some silver service that needs replating. . . ."

I thought Blackie Slane would explode.

"Silver service!" he bellowed. "What in hell do you think this is . . . a suburban development?"

"No offense, sir . . . no offense," Anson said hastily. "My business is with the natives, really. They're like children, fond of shiny things. Their gold-filled watches and chromium-plated knives get dull. I brighten them up . . ."

Children was right. I looked at the little man, grinning. There were plenty of his kind on Mars, in those days. Starting out with a pack on their backs and ending up millionaires. A ruby, perhaps, in payment for replating an alarm clock. Or a *hulla* skin for "transmuting" a dull iron bracelet into gold or silver. A good racket, since iron and copper were the only two metals found in any quantity on Mars.

"If I could find a room," Anson went on.

I told one of my men to give him a shakedown in the warehouse, turned to inspect our second visitor. A tall, stoop-shouldered man, dressed in sombre black. His eyes were grey and friendly and he looked a little like Abraham Lincoln.

"The Reverend Hezekiah Jones," he announced. "Come to do a little missionary work among the heathen."

That stopped me. I mumbled some sort of a greeting. Missionary work. . . .

"So happy to meet you, gentlemen," the Reverend Jones went on. "I bring the great traditions of Terra to the benighted natives of this lonely outpost

of the Lord. The spirit of law and order which has made our civilization great."

I didn't say anything. I was thinking of law and order, as represented by my half-drunk squad, Slane's products of civilization, guns and liquor, and the Christian spirit which most of us had left on Terra. I glanced at Slane. He was absolutely incandescent. His face was scarlet and his eyes as cold and bleak as a lunar landscape. The way he jumped you'd have thought he'd been bitten by one of those green, sharp-stinging Martian ants.

"No!" he roared, shaking a hairy fist. "By all space, no! I'll not have a mealy-mouthed psalm-singer in this post, stirring up trouble among the reddies, poking his long nose into my affairs! I'm damned if I will!" And he commenced to give his personal views on missionarying in the choicest language of nine planets.

The Reverend Hezekiah Jones stood very still while Slane was tearing loose. When it was over he straightened his thin shoulders.

"I am sorry," he said at last. "How can we blame the men of Mars for their sins if we of earth set them Satan's example?" His voice rose, thundering. "Repent, O wicked man, before it is too late!"

Slane's eyes were snapping like a spark-gap and his hand slid toward the heat gun at his waist. He was a dead shot . . . I'd seen him light a cigarette in a man's mouth at fifty feet without so much as singeing a mustache . . . and I figured it was time for me to show a little authority.

"All right, Slane," I said, stepping forward. "No rough stuff. If the Reverend wants to set up shop around here, nobody can stop him. Not while I'm in command of this post. Wilke, you take Mr. Jones down to the bar-

racks. Reckon we can find room for him there."

"Right!" Wilke nodded, grinning. "Come along, Reverend!"

WHEN they had left, I faced Slane. He was standing with his feet spread wide, thumbs hooked over his belt, beard cocked forward at a belligerent angle.

"Well," I said. "What's eating you? What do you care if this parson does a little soul-saving around here? It'd be a load off my shoulders if some of these murdering, thieving little devils got converted."

Slane laughed, harsh-like.

"You're a fool," he said slowly. "Can't you realize how much these little desert rats believe in their god, the Sun? And when this sky-pilot starts his 'enlightenment' there's going to be trouble! Big trouble! You'll see!"

I glanced toward the native quarter. In the square before their yellow-domed temple of the sun the little peddler, Anson, had already started his medicine show. He had changed his old raincoat for a scarlet robe and was making mystic passes over a small but efficient electrolysis outfit. All the gestures and hokum for "transforming" dull iron or muddy copper into gleaming silver or gold.

"Peddlers and preachers," I grinned. "Civilization's coming to Mars, Slane. Better put on a clean shirt and get converted!"

"Not while I know it!" Slane blazed. "Hell, trading's fair and square, with each party believing he's hooked the other! But when it comes to telling the reddies what they should think, or do, what gods to believe in, that's asking for trouble!"

"All of which means you've got a good thing here and don't want to lose

it," I chuckled. "*Alotek*, Slane! See you in church!"

But Blackie, for all his blustering, was right. The next morning I took my six heroes for a week's patrol of the plains, hoping to sweat some of the *tong* out of them. And when I got back the village was changed.

"Not changed physically, of course. Everything looked the same. But the atmosphere was different. Before, the reddies, gliding along the twisty streets in their long dust robes, would nod, turn, as I went by, or maybe stop me with some complaint or petition. But the day I got back! Why, I just wasn't there! Not a nod, not a glance, not a word. I might have been invisible for all the attention I got. And I didn't like it.

Leaving my men at the barracks I made a bee-line for Slane's compound. Blackie was drunk. He was sprawled in a big chair, red-eyed, cleaning a heat gun. Little Anson sat in a corner, adding up some figures in a greasy notebook.

"Hello, Blackie," I grinned. "Have they made you deacon yet?"

"*Gatholi*!" Slane snapped obscenely, and went on cleaning the gun.

"Morning, Sergeant," Anson said, looking up. "Nice trip?"

"Dust-storms, sand-ants, and this cursed, killing heat," I answered. "What's wrong around here? The reddies seem a bit offish?"

"Offish?" Anson repeated. "Oh, no, sir, not at all. Very friendly. Fine village for trade, indeed it is. My first two days here I did a hundred dollars worth of plating, jewelry, ornaments, knives, and such. Now it's mirrors, flat, dish-like things to be silvered . . ."

"Mirrors?" Slane heaved himself out of the chair, his lips tight. "Mirrors, you say?"

"Why, yes." The little peddler nod-

ded. "Dozens of them, copper with a silver reflecting surface. The high priest of the temple brought them to me. They'd been surfaced before, looked like, but the silver was beginning to peel off or wear through. Something to do with their sun worship, I guess. They're such children . . ."

Slane didn't say anything. He turned, began to bolt the doors and windows, then pulled a case of guns and ammunition from beneath the desk.

"Nuts," I said, shaking my head. "Still, with a face like his I don't blame him for being afraid of mirrors."

"Afraid of mirrors!" Slane whirled about, his black beard bristling. "Rings of Saturn! And they send innocent little pups like you out to handle the reddies! You'll find out . . ." He broke off, listening.

In the street outside a deep, hollow voice was echoing solemnly . . . the voice of the Reverend Hezekiah Jones. He was speaking in stilted Martian, the kind they teach at terrestrial schools, and was laying down the law with gentle firmness.

CURIOUS, I peered out. On the steps of one of the warehouses Jones' tall, spare frame was visible, still clothed, despite the blazing heat, in undertaker black. He looked more like old Abe Lincoln than ever. Wilke, who had religious leanings, was standing beside him, head bared and inviting sun-stroke. The street was crowded with Martians, hundreds of them, very passive, their loose dust-robes swinging free from their shoulders. The red, ugly, wrinkled faces were absolutely blank, as always, and it seemed to me that there was an appraising, mocking gleam in their frog-like eyes. Hezekiah Jones must have felt their hostility, too, for he grew more persuasive than before.

"A god of gentleness, of peace, of love," he was saying. "Not a god of one country, of one race, one planet, but a Creator of all life, throughout the entire universe. Oh, my brothers, do not kneel before the sun, one of God's works no less wonderful than your own bodies, but before Him who has made a thousand suns . . ."

"It's coming now," Slane muttered. "I can feel it! Ah!" He drew a sharp breath.

The crowd of reddies had moved. They didn't shout or jump the way a mob on Earth would. Emotionless, faces inscrutable, without a ripple of excitement, they stepped forward, grabbed Jones and Wilke.

"Good God!" I muttered, snatching for my gun. "We've got to save them! Come on!" And I dashed out into the white-hot sunlight, shooting as I ran.

Slane didn't join me. As I passed through the doorway I heard him mutter something about "damned sky-pilot." He wasn't risking his neck for the Reverend Hezekiah Jones.

I had no time to get sore over Slane's desertion. No sooner had I emerged from the house when a dozen knives came hurtling toward me. Instinctively I fell to one knee and the weapons flew over my head, rattled against the crystalloid walls of the compound. Some of them whistled through the doorway and I remember wondering what Anson must have thought to see the knives he'd so carefully silverplated come whizzing into the room.

Then I was squeezing the trigger of my heat gun, spraying the little devils with red blasts of flame. A dozen blackened, charred figures slumped to the rust-colored sand and a howl of rage arose from the others. Again I let them have it, and black ugly smoke went up from the crowded street. The smell of scorched flesh, like a charnal house,

made my stomach do flip-flops.

THE reddies were answering me now; their old-fashioned bullet guns made a hellish noise and I could see little spurts of dust rising from the roadway about me.

The group of Martians who held Jones and Wilke prisoner were dragging their captives back toward the big yellow-domed temple of the sun. I was afraid to fire for fear of hitting them. Then, over my head, came a blast of flame. Slane was getting in his licks.

As the reddies ducked for shelter, I made a dash for the group holding Wilke and Slane. Ancient bullet guns roared and I felt as though a hot brand had been drawn across my face.

"Lawrence!" Wilke yelled. "For God's sake, hurry!"

I wiped sweat from my eyes, dashed toward them. One of the reddies had a knife raised over Hezekiah Jones' chest. The parson, on his knees in the dirt, was praying. The frog-eyed little devils were howling like mad dogs.

I fired from the hip, a snap shot. Luck was with me. The redddy's arm became a blackened bone and the knife dropped to the ground. Another shot knocked over two more of them, and behind me Slane was keeping the rest of the screaming mob under cover with lightning-like jets of flame.

Suddenly the reddies dropped Wilke and Jones, took to their heels.

"Come on!" I muttered, grabbing the missionary's arm. "Back to Slane's compound!"

He nodded dazedly, followed me up the road. Bullets sang all about us and Wilke turned green at sight of the charred bodies littering the space in front of the trading post. Slane stood in the doorway, a gun in each hand, picking off the reddies as they popped up for a shot. Every now and then

you'd hear a scream from behind their huts or one of the warehouses they were using as a fort.

"Keep 'em back another minute!" I shouted. "We . . ."

But while I was calling to him a beam from a heat gun hissed past us and Wilke groaned, pitched forward to his face, blasted to eternity.

"Dirty renegades!" I heard Slane yell. "Damn their souls!"

We were only a step from the trading post now. Pushing the bewildered Hezekiah Jones through the doorway, I glanced back over my shoulder. There, in front of the barracks, lay my Jovian and the two Venusians, limp and sprawling. The three Martians, heat guns in hands, were passing out our spare weapons to the villagers.

"That's your Alien Legion!" Slane snarled. "Nice loyal rats!" He dragged me into the room, let loose a final heat blast, then kicked the door shut. "We've the Reverend Jones to thank for this!" And he shot a venomous glance at the missionary.

Hezekiah Jones was kneeling in a corner of the room, his face raised as he prayed. He wouldn't be any help in holding the fort, I realized. Anson either. The little peddler was rocking back and forth, hands over his face, muttering with fright. I swabbed blood from the gash on my face, crawled over to join Slane at the window.

"Not a chance," Blackie muttered. "Just a question of how many we can get before they nail us. Shoot fast, kid!"

I NODDED, gripping my gun. The reddies had regained courage on receiving the supply of heat guns from the barracks. A dozen or so of them were perched about the warehouse, keeping us under cover while the rest crept across the square. I peered over

the window sill, got in a couple of shots before a blast of flame from the snipers on the warehouse made me duck for safety.

Above the yelling of the reddies I could hear the hiss of Slane's gun at the other window, the preacher's mumbled prayers. We needed prayers, I figured. Still, I couldn't help but feel sorry for the Reverend Jones. He'd tried hard enough to convert the little devils . . . hadn't realized what he was doing. And now he felt that all this bloodshed was his fault. A tough spot for a man with a conscience and Slane's accusations weren't making it any easier for him.

The next five minutes were a lurid, blazing nightmare. Bullets and ray blasts churning up the air, Slane swearing endlessly, and little Anson whimpering like a lost child.

"Yellow dog!" Slane growled. "He and that mealy-mouthed psalm-singer start this and we pay for it! Why don't they die like men, fighting?"

I was too busy at my loophole to answer. The reddies were close now, and the heat had me so groggy that I couldn't even hit the warehouse. Hot? It must have been 200 in that room. The trading post, under the ray barrage, was an inferno. Glass melting in the windows, door blown to flinders, and the crystalloid walls so hot you couldn't touch them. For once I thanked my stars that wood was too scarce on Mars for building.

Slane, at the other end of the room, looked like a demon from the pit. His black beard was singed, his clothes scorched, his face dark with fury and soot. It didn't seem like a second before our guns went dead. Slane and I were fumbling with blistered fingers, trying to put new batteries into them when the remains of the door gave way and the room was full of Martians.

Anson, Jones, and I were grabbed,

bound, before we knew it, but Blackie Slane put up a scrap. He sailed into them, fists flying.

"Don't let 'em get you alive!" he yelled. "Those mirrors. . . ." Which was as far as he got before he went down under a mass of rust-colored flesh.

Soon as Blackie was bound, they carried the four of us out. Down the dusty little street, past poor Wilke's blackened body, and into the maze of acorn-shaped huts behind the warehouses. First thing we knew, we were in the stone-flagged square in front of their big yellow-domed House of the Sun. Dazed, blinking in the fierce sunlight, we stood, all four in a row. We must have made a pretty picture. Jones praying; Slane swearing; Anson mumbling to himself; and me with my knees like castinets, wondering what came next.

I DIDN'T have long to wait. The doors of the big temple opened and a squat, toad-faced Martian came out. Naked, except for a little girdle, he was, and every square inch of him painted a sickly yellow. He walked slowly across the square toward us, his bare feet kicking up spurts of the omnipresent reddish dust.

"Khafor, Child o' the Sun," Slane muttered. "High mogul of the works." He shot a sulphurous glance at Hezekiah Jones. "We've you and your pious blathering to thank for this! And me, who don't even believe in your God, up for the same offense!"

Jones, standing very still, head bowed, didn't answer. The whole thing was like a dream to me. The dusty square, the silent, dull-faced reddie, the big dome-shaped House of the Sun. I'd often wondered what went on inside it. We knew so little of the reddie, their customs, their habits, their beliefs. They never talked with us, except to

trade. And now we were to find out. The yellow man slid his big lizard-like eyes to us, began to speak.

"Men of earth!" he said solemnly. "For long years we have traded, dwelt together in peace, neither questioning the other's beliefs. Now there comes this terrestrial bringing new gods, seeking to overthrow the mighty Sun. It may be that his words are true, that the Sun is but a child of his gods. We have brought you here to seek the truth. The face of the Flame of Heaven shall be turned toward you. If, as no other man has done, you can look upon it and live, then surely we shall follow your new faith forever. If you fail, we shall know that our god, the Sun, is stronger than yours."

"No!" Jones' voice was agonized. "Ours is a religion of love, not force!"

"Yet you have said," the yellow man droned, "that your Almighty opened seas, threw down walls, made the sun stand still. Surely to dim it now were a small thing! Let the test begin!"

AT these words, two wooden-faced reddie appeared, carrying a machine of some sort, covered by a blood-red cloth. At sight of it a sibilant hiss went up from the crowd about us. Very carefully the yellow men removed the cloth, revealing a curious jumble of bright, dish-shaped reflectors, set upon a light wooden framework.

"Ha!" Anson muttered. "The mirrors I silver-plated! Why should they use mirrors. . . ."

"You'll find out!" Slane rumbled. "Mr. Jones has given us all a chance to become early Martian martyrs! Why don't you think him, Anson? I'm sure he'll thank you for silvering those mirrors! Maybe this will make him a saint! Rings of Saturn! If I could only get my hands free, I'd fix the pair of you before I die!"

And still Hezekiah Jones said nothing. His hollow, gaunt face was turned toward the sky and his lips moved faintly. Anson's teeth clicked like shaken dice.

Khafor, the yellow man, pointed to Slane. His two attendants placed a small iron chair some distance from the mirror-machine and pushed Blackie into it. For a moment they fiddled with the gleaming reflectors, then swung the machine about. Light from a hundred mirrors, all focused on one point, played upon Slane like a giant searchlight. The trader commenced to swear, not at the reddies, but at Hezekiah Jones; cold fury danced in his eyes and his fingers worked convulsively.

I was still confused as to what they were up to, but suddenly it began to dawn on me. They were slowly pushing the collection of mirrors closer to Slane! And as they did so, the diffused circle of light came together, grew smaller, like the light under a magnifying glass, as it approached the focal point. Now it was the size of a dinner plate, on the middle of Slane's chest. And Blackie was beginning to squirm, his face red, sweaty. It just didn't seem real to me that this hellish business could be going on within a stone's throw of the barracks, the trading post. Blackie, facing those mirrors. . . .

"Good God!" Anson screamed. "They're going to burn a hole right through him!"

I COULDN'T take my eyes from Slane. The circle of light was now only the size of a saucer and little wisps of smoke were going up from his chest. The front of his shirt was turning brown and his eyes were bulging like a Martian's. I began to feel sick. . . . I was only a youngster . . . and Anson whimpered like a whipped dog.

The yellow man leaned forward,

watching Slane intently.

"Where are your gods, earth-men?" he murmured. "Can they not raise up a cloud to veil the face of the Sun?"

But the sky was never clearer and clouds of any sort were a rarity on Mars. Like white rain the sunlight poured down upon the square, to be caught by the flashing mirrors and jetted upon Slane's chest. The crowd of reddies nodded with a sort of placid satisfaction as Blackie groaned.

Khafor pushed the mirrors nearer, and the beam of light shrank until the spot on Blackie's chest was like a white-hot dime. The smoke came faster now, and there was a smell like grilled beef-steak in the air. Slane's muscles stood out in knobs as he fought against the ropes. The atmosphere was tense, brittle. I remember thinking, dizzy from the heat, that the square was a fragile glass bubble, getting more and more full of emotion until it approached the inevitable breaking point.

"Where are your gods, earth-men?" Khafor chanted softly. "Soon the Sun, the Flame of Heaven, will have swallowed this one's soul!"

As he spoke, Hezekiah Jones fell forward to his knees. The look on his face was somehow like organ music in church. It made you feel religious just to see him. Did me, anyhow.

"Give us a sign, O Lord," he said. "Spare this man who has denied Thee that he may be converted into the path of righteousness. Give us a sign that these poor heathens may know Your presence. Help us, Lord!"

And at that exact instant it happened. A shattering string of explosions like the roar of a rocket exhaust, and a cloud of powdery smoke. Anson gasped and I heard Hezekiah Jones say, "Thank Thee, Lord!" The jumble of mirrors and its framework was blown to bits! Smashed, ruined, wrecked, without a

human hand having touched it! No machinery, no engines, to have gone haywire . . . just mirrors, shattered by . . . a miracle.

RIGHT away I felt my knees get even weaker and I began to think of my misspent, irreligious life. There were the broken mirrors, the yellow Child of the Sun face down, cut and bleeding, and the reddieys with their noses in the dust. If I hadn't been tied up, I'd have joined them.

All at once a little fellow ran out of the crowd, cut our bonds, and fell on his face again. Hezekiah Jones stretched his long limbs and began to preach, his voice rolling like triumphant thunder across the square and the reddieys murmuring in awed assent.

Well, I suppose what'd happened would have been enough to convince any normal man but I'm from Missouri and curious by nature. So after my first fear had worn off, I kept my eye on the reflectors and began to notice things. For one, that explosion hadn't really done much damage, and for another, the copper mirrors hadn't been affected much except that their silver surface had been blown off. Which struck me funny. So while the Reverend Jones is orating, I turned to little Anson, kneeling beside me, and tapped his arm.

"Listen," I whispered. "Just what did you do to those mirrors?"

"Do?" He rubbed his hands nervously. "Why I silvered them, sir! Indeed that's all I did! Of course" . . . he gave me a confidential glance . . . "just between the two of us, I ran out of silver on the bracelets and knives. And when they started bringing me those, now, looking glasses, I couldn't turn away trade, could I? Oh, I was worried for fear of losing good business, yes indeed! Tried everything in Mr.

Slane's warehouse, hoping to get something that would shine like silver. And at last I found some cheap hardware, dirty grey antimony, but it came out just like silver in electrolysis. How should the Martians know the difference, so long as it was shiny? Anyway, I charged less for it. I bought some of the cheap grey dishes from Mr. Slane and used them, only he don't know what for. Trade secret, Mr. Lawrence, eh? You won't say anything, now will you? Nobody would know if it's shiny like silver, and those priests said there would be trouble if I didn't plate the mirrors."

Well, right there the light dawned. Slane had a lot of antimony junk, the same as is used for ashtrays and such back on Earth. Dirty grey, as Anson said, but laid on pure by electrolysis, it shines like silver. And when you get it pure, it does other things, too. Hit it a crack, or heat it a bit, and . . . bam! it explodes! He'd plated those mirrors with pure, explosive antimony and the heat of the sun, or maybe the rough handling of the reddieys, had set off the plating, wrecked the machine!

I was just about to laugh when Anson jogged my elbow.

"Ruin my business if it got around about my using the antimony," he muttered. "Always fair and square, with real silver and gold, but them priests were so threatening and I didn't have time to order any supplies. You won't say anything, eh, Mr. Lawrence?"

At that moment my gaze fell upon Blackie Slane. He was still sitting in the iron chair, eyes on Hezekiah Jones and face dazed, kind of rapt-like. His lips were moving and they weren't cuss-words he was saying.

"No, Anson," I said slowly, "I won't say anything." And I knelt down to join the Reverend Jones' prayer of thanksgiving.