

ASK ME NO

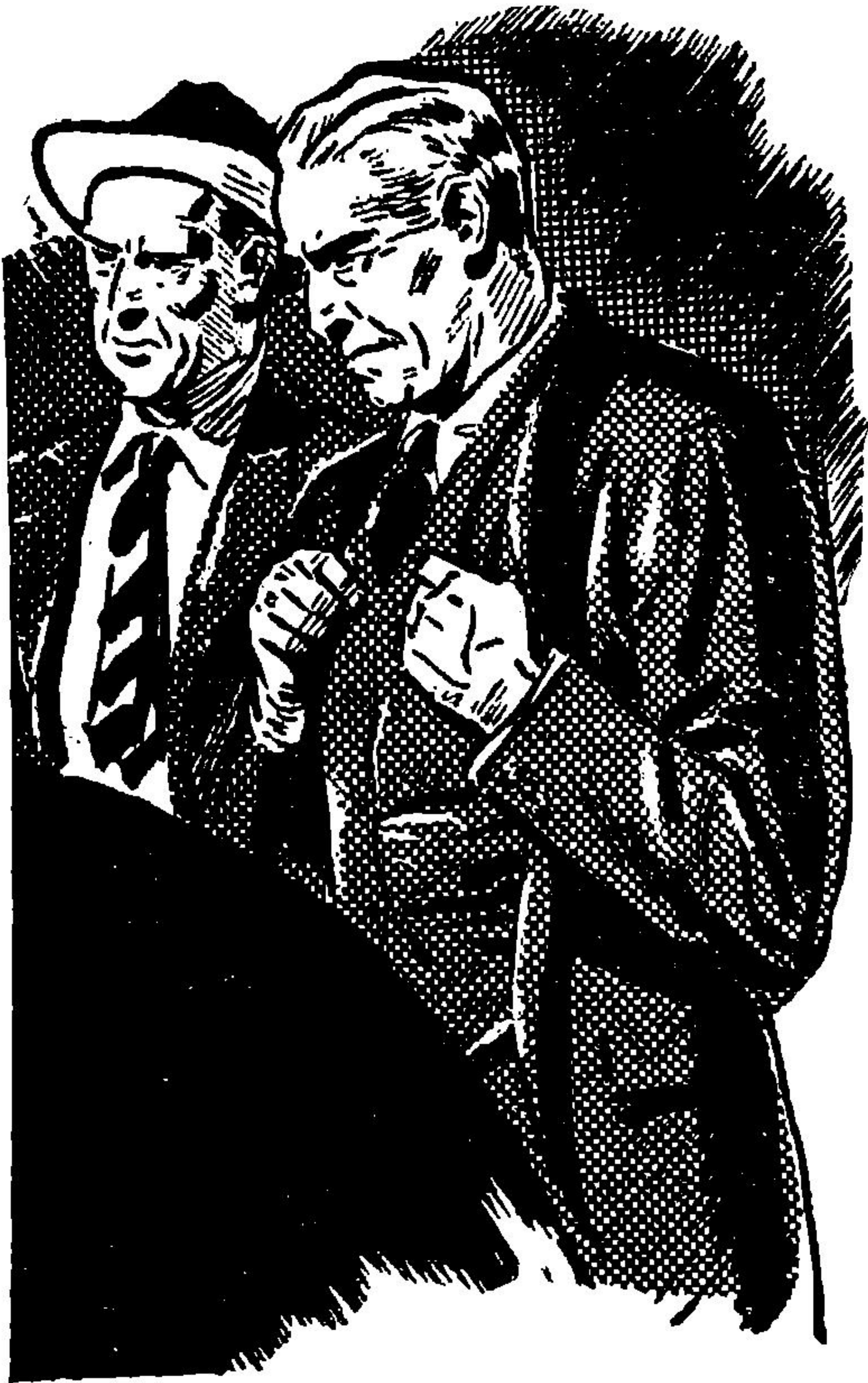
By Mack Reynolds



The gun blasted, and behind the bound figure in the chair the wall disintegrated . . .

QUESTIONS!

They knew that the Martians were in the drug business on Earth. They wanted to know why — and strangely, so did the Martians!



*And oft though wine has played
the infidel,
And robbed me of my robes of
honor, well,
I wonder often what the vintners
buy
One half so precious as the stuff
they sell.*

—Omar

THEY'D chosen me to interrogate our Martian prisoner, not because I'd had any more experience than the others, but largely due to my research in 20th Century novels and films. Then too, I suppose, my scorn of cosmetic surgery might have had something to do with it. I've never even had my beard permanently removed and for this occasion I had let it grow several days so that my face would look as brutal as possible.

I'd rehearsed for hours, running over again motion picture films of the mid-20th Century. I had my props at hand and thought I was as ready as I'd ever be.

After the kidnapping—the first such crime in more than two and a half centuries—they'd brought him immediately to the small suburban underground house which we'd used for our base for the past six months. It was a comfortable enough establishment, typical of the neighborhood, but we'd altered one room in preparation for him; barren except for a small table and a battered chair to which he was tied, it looked as much like the den of a gang of thieves as we could make it.

He was allowed to remain there, bound and gagged, and—we were

hoping—terrified, for several hours. Then I entered.

I had a cigarette dangling from the side of my mouth. I let the smoke spiral upward from it, and refrained from puffing. For one thing, that's the way they did in the films; for another, I was afraid it would make me deathly ill. Tobacco is used only in some of the most isolated spots of Terra, and only by those who are as yet unacquainted with *dwarf*, or Martian Poppy as it is usually called.

I sat on the edge of the table and looked at him, cold faced, emotionless; trying to appear vicious. Finally, I took the cigarette from my lips and ground out the burning tip in the palm of my left hand. Doctr Gardnr, one of our group, had prepared the palm earlier with resin, but, of course, the Martian didn't know that. His antenna twitched as he saw me extinguish the stub on what seemed bare flesh.

Still not taking my eyes from his face, I reached my hand into my jacket under my left arm and brought forth the revolver. I'd been practicing handling the horrible thing for several days, but I was still clumsy at it; however, it was unlikely that he'd know the difference.

I reached over and pulled the gag from his tiny mouth and stuck the muzzle of the revolver to within inches of his face.

"Know what this is?" I growled.

He shook his head in negation.

THAT WAS something to be thankful for. He'd been kidnapped at random; at least we'd picked one that knew Amer-English even well enough to be familiar with our gestures.

"No," he said, his tone wistful, as is always the case with Martians; invariably they look and speak as though they'd just received news of their mother's death.

"It's a gat," I told him, trying to work an element of the sinister into my voice, "a rod."

His antenna flinched, and his melancholy eyes went a deeper green. "You mean ith a weapon?" he lisped unbelievably.

I waved the muzzle near his face. "That's right, pal," I said from the side of my mouth. "Pretty hard to come by now, but just as lethal as ever." I gestured with it. "Now this just happens to be a .358 Magnum; one of the deadliest hand-guns the ancients made; great favorite with the boys back in the old days. I picked it up in a museum. Watch!"

I leveled it at the far wall, turning my back to him so he wouldn't be able to see me close my eyes, and pulled the trigger.

In reconstructing the ancient weapon from diagrams in publications of the time, we'd had to make various improvisations. For one thing, we hadn't been able to decide whether or not the pellets, or bullets, the things threw exploded upon contact. We decided they did but that it would be a mistake for us, perhaps an injurious one, to try and copy that feature. Instead, Franz Mect, one of the engineers of our group, volunteered to conceal a small explosive in the wall of the chamber in which we were going to question our prisoner. In this manner, we planned to simulate the effect of the gun, rather than go through the actual experience.

At any rate, the results were gratifying. The revolver jumped in my hand and made a slight noise; Franz, stationed at a peephole, ignited the explosive in the wall; the wall exploded and when the dust cleared there was a hole large enough for a man to walk through.

I turned back to the Martian and nonchalantly returned the revolver to the holster under my arm.

"We mean business, pal," I grunted at him. "Now then, are you going to talk, or do I have to go to work on you?"

"I'm thor I don't know what you mean," he lisped, obviously shaken, but still defiant.

I laughed hoarsely, sneeringly. "Why do you Martians sell *dwarf* here on Terra?"

A deeper fear showed in the wilting of his antenna, and his eyes went green as emerald.

THE VARIOUS Terran governments had already established two or three Space Stations, revolving around our planet at varying distances and had sent several expeditions to Luna at the time of the arrival of the first Martian spacecraft. Had the Martians waited even another two or three years, we would have visited them first, although it's unlikely it would have made much difference.

From the first, intercourse between the two planets was on the friendliest plane. The Martians, somewhat smaller and more delicate than the Terrans in appearance, were approximately equal intellectually; the slightly higher I.Q. enjoyed by the humans being offset by the antiquity of the Martian civilization.

They had been receiving our radio emanations for generations and had painstakingly managed to decipher our means of communication to the point that even their first explorers to land among us were able to speak not one, but several of our languages. That, of course, was before Amer-English had become universal on Terra.

During the first decades of our relationship with the sad eyed, lisping life forms from Mars, we earthlings had profited greatly as a result of their suggestions and assistance in various fields. World government was

established, for one thing, and a stable socio-economic system. Various fundamental diseases were wiped out and earth entered a new era of health and prosperity.

Trade between the two planets consisted principally in exchange of techniques, although there was considerable interest in each other's art forms. In fact, the dream art of Mars became exceedingly popular overnight on Terra, and the Martians became quite intrigued with Terran music, especially the more primitive types such as Calypso.

Conflict between the Martians and ourselves was unthought of, especially after the first half century of relations with them. War on Mars itself had been eliminated so many millenniums before that even the historic accounts of their conflicts were lost in antiquity, confused with legend; and with the establishment of the World Government, it became impossible on our own planet. Weapons soon became as illegal and unknown on Terra as they had been for centuries on Mars.

Seemingly, we were set for an indefinite period of peace and friendly relations with the only other planet in the Solar System which supported intelligent life.

Perhaps that last is misleading. According to the Martians, there was life on Venus, but it was hostile, backward, and living conditions on the planet so impractical for either Terran or Martian, that after one or two half-hearted attempts, we gave up our efforts to communicate with them. Perhaps, we reasoned, in a few thousand years they would have developed on their own to the point where they could take their place with Mars and Earth in a three way relationship as satisfactory as that between the two of us.

It is unknown, exactly, when the Terran use of *dwarr* first began. Introduced on a small scale in the beginning, its use grew only infinitesimally. It was decades before its spread had reached the point where it was investigated—discreetly, of course, since its source was Mars and we had no wish to cast aspersions on our friendly neighbors in the sky.

IT WASN'T a narcotic; not in the ordinary sense of the word. The use of narcotics on Terra had disappeared except for medicinal reasons, long years before. But *dwarr* did have a good many of the effects of the opium poppy of long ago.

It wasn't habit forming, there was no known case of a person becoming addicted, but it did lead to a dream world that was utterly desirable. In the early stages of its use—it was usually taken in beverage form—it wasn't much more effective than tea, or coffee, those mild narcotics of yesteryear. It gave a slight *lift*. As the user continued to indulge, however, the effect became stronger and after a period of years the use of *dwarr* led to a dream world beyond anything accomplished with opium or even hashish.

Dwarr had the ability to select each person's most inner desires and give him realization of them. Were you a would-be poet, your *dwarr* inspired dreams had you writing sonnets that put Shakespeare and Spencer to shame; were you a scientist, *dwarr* had you conquering the problems of the universe. Were you a lover, *dwarr* gave you hours far more beautiful than Mohammed had ever conceived in his paradise for the faithful.

There seemed to be no physical or mental after effects to condemn the Martian Poppy. A *dwarr* drinker could be taken from its use for any period and never feel the worse for

it, except, of course, a desire to enjoy its pleasures again as soon as it was possible.

The most thorough investigation showed no injurious effects as a result of the beverage's use, and the government dropped its probe of what some had feared a dangerous narcotic.

Fifty years later, half the population of Terra used *dwarr* and another investigation into its nature took place. There were still no signs that either mental or physical damage was done by its continual use, and eventually the second government investigation was dropped as had been the first.

Our friendly relations with Mars continued; we exchanged scientific developments, we traded our art objects. And they sent us *dwarr* in return for titanium which was evidently almost unknown on their planet. Several attempts were made to grow the Martian Poppy in Terran soil, but they were unsuccessful; its use continued to depend upon our Martian friends.

The final government investigation into the use of *dwarr* was made approximately one hundred years ago, and was less successful even than previously. Perhaps this was due to the fact that for all practical purposes *all* Terra was now using the beverage. Even those who investigated its use were enamored of it; and the bare news that such an investigation was taking place had been enough to bring waves of protest from all earth. The probe was dropped.

Scientific development lagged, art came to a standstill, ambition was a thing long dead; but the use of *dwarr* continued, increased, expanded.

We were the only ones, our little secret society consisting of perhaps twenty persons in all—what in yesteryear might have been called an un-

derground—who fought the Martian Poppy. Convinced that some sinister purpose was behind its distribution to earthlings, we conducted our study of *dwarr* quietly, determinedly. This kidnapping and interrogation of the Martian trader was the culmination, thus far, of our efforts. From him we must wrest crucial answers, if the fight was to continue.

“I’M THOR I don’t know what you mean,” the little Martian lisped.

I rasped out a laugh, then sneered down at him. I took from a pocket a small clasp knife, another relic from the museums, pressed a button on its side and let the blade flick out only a fraction of an inch from his throat.

“Maybe you need some persuasion,” I growled, wondering if I sounded authentic, and wondering how Doctr Gardnr and the rest who I knew were peering through peek-holes in the door and walls, were taking it.

The very thought of imposing physical violence upon another, turned my stomach slightly, but I must never let him know this. Everything depended upon his believing his life was in danger.

I let the light flicker on the knife blade. “You’re going to talk, Martian,” I told him coldly, “or you’re going to go through something you never knew still took place here on Terra; something our government’s kept secret from you.” I laughed bitterly. “Probably ashamed of it.”

His antenna twitched and his eyes went from aquamarine to emerald in apprehension. “You . . . m e a n . . . tort-thur?” he lisped, shocked.

I whetted the blade on the palm of my hand. “Torture is right, pal.” I put the point to the base of his thin neck. “Now talk, or else,” I grated.

I have never seen such living fear

as that reflected in every facial expression, in every twitching movement of the thin framed, wistful appearing little Martian. I was afraid for a moment that his mind would crack under the pressure, and told myself I should have known better than to have gone so far.

There has been no war, no crime, no physical violence on earth for at least two centuries. From earliest childhood, in our schools, in our homes, our books, our means of entertainment, we are taught to abhor violence. But while it has been so on Terra for two centuries, it has been so on Mars for at least twenty.

It was the very shock effect, that we were depending upon.

His sad face was rigid with alarm, and his voice tight—it undoubtedly would have been shrill were Martians capable of inflection. I let the blade touch his throat, gently.

“Yeth, *Yeth!*” he lisped, “I’ll tell you whatever you wisth to know.”

Victory!

I leaned back and considered him, as though I was sorry he hadn’t given me the opportunity to work on him with the knife. “Okay, pal,” I growled, “Wait’ll I call in some of the other boys.”

I went to the door and stuck my head out into the hallway. Doctr Garnr was there and Franz Mect and two or three of the others. The rest were about the house or scattered around the neighborhood on watch to warn us in case of emergency. The penalty, if our crime was detected, would be sur-amnesia, the equivalent of death, although, of course, our bodies would continue to live supplied with a new personality to replace that which society had rejected as injurious to the majority.

The others came in and stared as coldly as possible down on the little

Martian trader, seated there in his bonds. They attempted to carry on the atmosphere I'd created, but modern cosmetic surgery makes it difficult for a person who has chosen to be made godlike in appearance to look sinister.

I jerked my thumb at the Martian. "He'll talk," I rasped, returning the knife to my pocket. I brought out the revolver again and trained it on his chest.

Doctr Garnr began softly, "In the past, here on Terra, we put our souls, our desires, into many things; into ambition, into investigation of the mysteries of science, into the arts, into love, into good food and good drink, and into a myriad of other things that made life worth the living.

"But what do we have *now*?— Why should we value the work of a master chef when we can eat garbage and afterward take *dwarr* and feast on the food of the gods? Why should we love a beautiful woman when *dwarr* will give us a beauty a thousand times greater. Why should we attempt any ambition, when your Martian Poppy concedes us any desire, any pleasure?"

THE MARTIAN sat, a picture of pathos, his eyes still shining green with fear and his eyes going from the doctor to my revolver and back again.

"Why do you sell *dwarr* to Terrans?" the doctor snapped.

The Martian lisped in fright, "For the titanium we get in exchange for it."

I sneered.

The doctor said softly, "You underestimate us, my friend. We happen to have spent years in this investigation and know titanium is used practically not at all in your industries. You have no need for it, at least not at all in the quantities we have to

send you in order to supply Terra with *dwarr*."

I tightened my finger on the trigger and his antenna flinched.

The doctor held up a hand as though to restrain me momentarily. "We also happen to know," he said, "that the use of *dwarr* is unknown on Mars. You know its effect, you know what it has done to us; and *you don't use it yourselves*. Why, *why, why!* do you Martians sell *dwarr* to earth. Are you attempting to weaken us so that you may take over our planet and possibly colonize it with your own race?"

There was a touch of scorn in the melancholy face of the Martian. He lisped, "We have no desire for your humid and heavily gravitized planet. We who trade here can hardly wait to return to our home world."

"Then why do you sell us *dwarr*?" Franz Mect cut in. "Is it because your own civilization is on the downgrade, and you're jealous of our potential growth to new heights?"

There was contempt in the other's lisping answer. "Our civilization is on the decline no more than is yours." The green hue of his eyes had lessened, a sign that he was losing his fear of us, becoming defiant.

I growled at him. "The decline on Terra is caused by the Martian Poppy. Why do you sell it to us?"

"We sell you *dwarr* to cure the titanium," he lisped sadly. "It is the only thing we have in quantity that you of earth desire."

Franz Mect snorted, "But you don't use titanium to any extent. What do you do with it?"

The little Martian was silent. His antenna pointed forward slightly, a sign he was being stubborn. Obviously, he'd reached the point where he wanted to go no further.

Doctr Gardnr sensed that we'd

touched on the crucial point. "What do you do with the titanium we give you for your *dwarr*?" he said urgently.

AFTER a long moment of silence from the alien trader, I sneered, "You boys better leave again. I'll do a little work on him." I put my hand into my pocket for the penknife. "He cheated me before," I said, licking my lips nervously, "started talking before I even touched him." I pressed the button and the blade flicked out wickedly.

The desperate little Martian's eyes went verdure in color and his antenna sagged in fear. "Thith ith illegal," he lisped rapidly, "don't let him do thith to me."

"Talk," I barked.

The others turned to go. I noted from the side of my eyes that even Franz, who'd known me all my life was staring at me with an edge of uncomfortableness. They hurried for the door as though to be out of the way before I started the actual horror of physical violence.

"Yeth!" the Martian yelped suddenly, "Yeth, I'll tell you!"

Doctr Gardnr turned and said softly, "What do you do with the titanium?"

The Martian drooped. "We thell it to the Venuthians," he lisped sadly.

We stood silent for a long moment in incredulity.

Finally Franz Mect cleared his throat and said, "But what do you get from the Venusians for the titanium?"

The frail Martian straightened to the extent possible within his bonds, into his wistful face came a gleam as though of inspiration brought on by something greater, something more important than any of us.

He lisped proudly, "They thell us *maridee*. *Maridee*, do you hear? Now do you know why no Martian ever uthuth *dwarr*? Now do you know?" His green eyes blazed fanatically. "Who would ever uth *dwarr* wonth he had tathted the playthurths of *MARIDEE!*"

After long minutes, someone said, unbelievably, "But the Venusians haven't an economy advanced enough to use titanium. What do they do with it?"

The fire had left the little Martian's eyes. He slumped back into his chair again, his face showing puzzlement. "We've often wondered," he lisped sadly.

THE END

Bouncing Conversation!



By MAX LONG



A NUMBER of small telephone installations use microwave radio to do the job. This works fine in the open spaces because the radio waves travel in straight lines just like light does. But what do you do with such a system when there's a mountain or two in the way?

Nothing daunted, the engineers handle that one, too. Instead of sending the directional radio waves straight toward the objective, they seek out clear paths and put suitable reflectors in the way. In this fashion they bounce the radio waves from one screen to another, right around the

intervening mountains, a sort of "Tinkers-to-Evers-to-Chance" proposition.

The use of microwave communication systems holds great promise. It's a lot easier to set up a sending and receiving station than it is to lay wires between two points separated by as much as fifty or seventy-five miles. The time is coming—not immediately of course, but soon—when communications are going to be needed in a very mountainous region—the surface of the Moon! Microwave systems with suitable reflectors are the clear-cut answer!