

The Dessicator

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Mirnish brought the machine into the other room, where Scrodlee was busily bent over the ledgers, and sadly put it down. „I’ve finished it,” he said. „You can start Promoting.”

Scrodlee leaped to his feet. „Antigravity! You have it! A marvelous feat, Mirnish, marvelous! This redeems all of your old blunders.”

The inventor sat down heavily and caressed the small green box with his tentacles, looking at it with rue. „No. Not so, Scrodlee; I’m sorry, but I didn’t quite invent antigravity this time.”

Scrodlee contemplated his partner with a cosmic patience born of long experience. „You finished it, you say, and you were working on antigravity. But you didn’t invent antigravity?”

„No.”

The Promoter spoke slowly, choosing his words with care. „Then—what—did—you—invent?” He looked expectantly at the other, remembering a long history of Mirnish’s inventions.

Mirnish assumed a humble countenance. „I seem,” he said, „to have invented a Desiccator.” He waited for Scrodlee’s reaction, and it was not long in coming.

„A Desiccator?” the Promoter repeated, standing up and beginning to pace up and down the little room. „That is just in line with some of your other things. You mean a machine that dries things out, don’t you? Just what we’ve all been waiting for—here on Mars, the driest planet in the Galaxy, if not the Universe, what does Mirnish the inventor invent but a—a *Desiccator!*”

„I’m sorry, Scrodlee,” Mirnish said; „I was trying to—”

„I know. Forget about it. We’re in a pretty bad way and I can’t afford to let this go to waste.” He picked up the green box. „We’ve got an invention here, of a sort; there must be some use for it somewhere.” He pointed to the ledger. „We’ll have to make the most of it. And I’m not Scrodlee the Promoter for nothing; if we work it right, we can make millions on this thing yet! How does it work?”

„I don’t know,” Mirnish said. „I just put it together, using standard coordinates and all, and it—it desiccates. Say, look: perhaps we could go—”

„Some inventor,” Scrodlee interrupted. „First he invents something completely useless, and then he tells me he doesn’t know what it is. There are times I doubt my sanity, Mirnish; with all the inventors on this planet, whom do I promote? Mirnish.”

„I’m sorry, Scrodlee. But maybe we could take the Desiccator to—”

„Quiet, I’m thinking. How could we find some use for this thing of yours? Perhaps the Grangs could use it; let me check.” He stretched a tentacle up for a reference book, pulled it down from the shelf, and thumbed rapidly through it. „Umm. Guess not; they prefer to dry their victims themselves. Just as well; I hate dealing with them.”

„Scrodlee.”

„Yes, Mirnish?”

„Shut up. I have an idea I’ve been trying to slip in here sideways.”

„You have an idea!” Scrodlee laughed. „*You* have an idea? Well, genius, let’s hear it.”

„Look. The Desiccator is worthless on Mars—everything is desiccated enough as it is. But on Earth—why, they’re flooded down there. Two thirds of the planet is water! The humidity, the rain, everything—it makes me shudder. It’s a miracle they don’t drown in their own atmosphere. There’s a natural market for the Desiccator; they’ll snap it up, and we’ll be doing a service to Civilization as well.”

Scrodlee’s eyes lit up with a familiar gleam. „You’re right. Get your things together, Mirnish; you and I and the Desiccator are going to go to Earth. I’m not Scrodlee the Promoter for nothing!”

They arrived on Earth in due course, having booked third-class passage on the fourth-class liner EDWORM. They put down outside the New York spaceport and Scrodlee procured a hotel room in the heart of the sprawling metropolis, grumbling about the outrageous rates.

Some judicious string-pulling, combined with the fact that they were Martians, got them an audience with the President a few days later. Scrodlee had insisted to

Mimish that they should start at the top in their campaign to market the Desiccator.

Scrodlee led the way into the big room, and Mimish followed, carefully cradling the Desiccator under his end tentacle.

„You have seven minutes,” said an officious-looking secretary.

„You’re a busy man, Mr. President,” Scrodlee said rapidly to the tired-looking chief of state, „but I think we’ve hit on a device that will turn your country into a Mar—pardon me, into a Paradise on Earth.”

Briefly he explained the purpose and function of the Desiccator. The President examined the green box, turned it upside-down, shook it, covertly photographed it with his wristcam just in case it might prove valuable, and handed it back to Mimish.

He leaned back in his chair. „Martian science is indeed a wonderful thing,” he pronounced. „Our brothers of the elder planet are skilled in the ways of the universe.”

„We realized the importance of the Desiccator immediately,” Scrodlee said, „and took it straight to you; we knew you could use it.”

„Sorry,” said the President. „We can’t; we don’t have any use for it. If we removed humidity we’d offend a big chunk of farming people. We’d end up having to balance it by seeding clouds to produce rain. Take away one, give the other, where’s the percentage?”

Scrodlee frowned. „But Earth is such a *humid* place,” he protested; „the Desiccator would remove that excess humidity and make it a livable planet.”

„We find it quite livable,” the President said curtly. He stood up. „You’d be wise to keep such opinions to yourself, Mr. Scroggly. I’m afraid I don’t have any use for your machine—but as a friendly tip, why not try some other country? Look in on one of the South American countries. It’s pretty sticky down there, and maybe you could dry things out a little for them.”

A few days later found the Martians in a white marble palace which housed the dictator of a small republic whose name Scrodlee never did manage to catch. He explained the Desiccator to the tall, much-decorated dictator, whose name Scrodlee likewise could not make out. He sat in silence, listening to Scrodlee’s sales pitch, his fingers folded daintily as if in prayer.

„No,” he said when Scrodlee finished; „never. Take your machine out of my country immediately.”

„You can’t use it?” Mirnish asked meekly.

„Certainly not! It would mean my life. Follow this picture, please: humidity goes down, banana crop fails. Banana crop fails, the Norteamericanos do not buy. They do not buy, we have no money. So we raise taxes to support the government. We raise taxes and we have a revolution and I am hung from lamppost. So I must say no. You would overthrow our entire economy and we cannot allow comfort to come first. It would be nice to have cooler country, but I am much too important to my nation to allow myself to be overthrown so.”

Mirnish looked at Scrodlee, who looked back.

„Not at all?”

The dictator mopped some sweat away with an elegant handkerchief. „No; not at all. I suggest you take your invention back to your native planet.”

„I guess we'll have to,” Mirnish said.

„Maybe one of the neighboring countries—?” Scrodlee suggested.

„I doubt it,” the dictator said. „But you may try.” Scrodlee made a farewell gesture and exited, pushing Mirnish in front, wondering where to turn next.

They returned to New York after a fruitless visit to the east coast of Africa, where the tribal chieftain regarded them somewhat less than favorably. Disillusioned, they returned to their hotel suite and, tentacles drooping, waited despondently for something to happen.

They stared at the green box of the Desiccator sitting on the table.

„Let's go back home,” Mirnish said. „Why not admit it: I failed; I invented something completely useless. So let's throw it away and I'll get to work on antigravity again.”

Scrodlee stiffened with pride. „I'm not giving up so easily. I'm not Scrodlee the Promoter if I'm going to throw away a valuable invention like this; we'll stay here till we sell it.”

Scrodlee contacted a few other buyers without success; most people just laughed at the thought of Martians inventing a Desiccator. They never left their apartment, and found it necessary to use the Desiccator at all times in order to maintain a livable atmosphere. A week passed, with Mirnish complaining bitterly about the soup that the atmosphere was—even with the Desiccator in action—and Scrodlee was becoming more and more convinced that he had finally come up with something that defeated his promoting skills.

He was about ready to give in when, one morning, a young man knocked at the door, and, when Mirnish opened it to see who was there, he entered.

„I'm Dennan. Reporter, *New York Cosmos*. Been some strange stories coming from this place and I want to check. Lord, it's dry in here!”

„It's the action of the Desiccator,” Mirnish said. „It keeps us able to breathe.” He explained the function of his invention.

Dennan looked hard at the Martian. „So *that's* it! You guys have been causing it after all. People drying up, groceries crumbling, grass turning brown on the penthouse. Excuse me, please.” And he dashed out, exiting even more abruptly than he had entered.

„What was all that about?” asked Scrodlee, coming in from the other room. Mirnish told him. „Wonder what it means?”

They found out the next morning when the *New York Cosmos* dropped through the telechute and into their living room. Mirnish, who followed the newspapers with considerable interest, unfolded the front strip and began to scan it. Suddenly he gave the equivalent of a whistle and shouted for Scrodlee to come in.

„Look at this!” He held out the paper. The big red headline said:

MARTIANS PLOT NY DOOM

Underneath it was a story which began:

A daring *Cosmos* reporter yesterday uncovered a Martian plot to turn New York City into a desert.

Two Martian agents have established themselves in New York armed with a machine called a Desiccator which is responsible for the present drought and also for the curious reports of „dried-out” people in midtown New York, earlier believed to be a mysterious new epidemic.

The story continued on in that vein for almost two columns.

„Why, they’re crazy!” Scrodlee exclaimed.

„They may be right, though,” said Mirnish. „I never did test the field of the Desiccator. We may be Desiccating all of Manhattan by leaving the machine on.”

Suddenly a rock came crashing through their window. Scrodlee ran to the broken window, coughing a little at the thick Terran air pouring through, and looked out.

There was a mob milling around the street, shouting imprecations and waving fists.

„Some inventor,” Scrodlee said; „the people of Earth are yelling for our scalps.”

„We don’t have scalps,” Mirnish said.

„Shut up; they want blood. We have to find some way of getting off this crazy planet without touching off another interplanetary war. You and your useless inventions!” Another rock came hurtling up from below and bounded off the side of the building.

„What are we going to do?” asked Mirnish.

„Sweat it out, I guess; shut off your damned Desiccator, anyway.”

The visiphone chimed. Mirnish ignored it, but Scrodlee ran toward it and snatched it up. Mirnish walked to the window and stared glumly out at the milling mass of people in the street below.

Scrodlee began talking excitedly into the phone, and Mirnish watched almost with interest, unable to hear what he was saying because of the noise from the street.

When he hung up he returned to Mirnish with a triumphant look on his face. „What now?” Mirnish asked.

„When you deal with Scrodlee, you deal with a *Promotor*,” he said. „Everything’s all right; one of my contacts came through and I sold the Desiccator.”

„What? To whom?”

„You’ll see. He was the last man on my list, but he wants it. I explained our predicament, and he’s going to evacuate us by helicopter and take us to where the Desiccator’s going to be installed. We’ll be whisked right out from under the nose of that mob down there.”

„Let’s go up there and get them,” a stentorian voice from below roared.

„When’s he coming?” Mirnish asked anxiously.

„Any minute now; get your machine packed up, and get ready to leave.”

They waited tensely as the yelling of the mob increased. Finally there came a rapping at the window, and they saw a helicopter hovering outside. It drew close and they cautiously opened a window.

„Suppose it’s a trap,” Mirnish whispered.

„Shut up.”

A well-dressed, dignified gentleman came through the window.

„Mr. Henceford?” Scrodlee asked.

„That’s right,” he said in a deep, rich voice. „Owner of the Universal Vineyards. Your machine is what I’ve been looking for for years. Looks like I just made it in the proverbial nick, I guess. Get into the copter before this mob breaks loose and we’ll fly out to my place and arrange terms.”

Mirnish and Scrodlee returned to Mars the following day, considerably wealthier; Mirnish again set out to conquer gravity, while Scrodlee spurred him on and kept careful watch to see that nothing went wrong this time.

As for the Desiccator, it’s now busily employed in the heart of a deserted part of lower Nevada, pouring forth its desiccating rays day and night without end.

Turning grapes into raisins.

