

# The Moons of Mars

by Dean Evans,

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Every boy should be able to whistle, except,  
of course, Martians. But this one did!

He seemed a very little boy to be carrying so large a butterfly net. He swung it in his chubby right fist as he walked, and at first glance you couldn't be sure if he were carrying it, or it carrying him.

He came whistling. All little boys whistle. To little boys, whistling is as natural as breathing. However, there was something peculiar about this particular little boy's whistling. Or, rather, there were two things peculiar, but each was related to the other.

The first was that he was a Martian little boy. You could be very sure of that, for Earth little boys have earlobes while Martian little boys do not—and he most certainly didn't.

The second was the tune he whistled—a somehow familiar tune, but one which I should have thought not very appealing to a little boy.

„Hi, there,“ I said when he came near enough. „What's that you're whistling?“

He stopped whistling and he stopped walking, both at the same time, as though he had pulled a switch or turned a tap that shut them off. Then he lifted his little head and stared up into my eyes.

„*The Calm*,“ he said in a sober, little-boy voice.

„The what?“ I asked.

„From the *William Tell* Overture,“ he explained, still looking up at me. He said it deadpan, and his wide brown eyes never once batted.

„Oh,“ I said. „And where did you learn that?“

„My mother taught me.“

I blinked at him. He didn't blink back. His round little face still held no expression, but if it had, I knew it would have matched the title of the tune he whistled.

„You whistle very well,“ I told him.

That pleased him. His eyes lit up and an almost-smile flirted with the corners of his small mouth.

He nodded grave agreement.

„Been after butterflies, I see. I'll bet you didn't get any. This is the wrong season.“

The light in his eyes snapped off. „Well, good-by,“ he said abruptly and very relevantly.

„Good-by,“ I said.

His whistling and his walking started up again in the same spot where they had left off. I mean the note he resumed on was the note which followed the one interrupted; and the step he took was with the left foot, which was the one he would have used if I hadn't stopped him. I followed him with my eyes. An unusual little boy. A most precisely mechanical little boy.

When he was almost out of sight, I took off after him, wondering.

The house he went into was over in that crumbling section which forms a curving boundary line, marking the limits of those frantic and ugly original mine-workings made many years ago by the early colonists. It seems that someone had told someone who had told someone else that here, a mere twenty feet beneath the surface, was a vein as wide as a house and as long as a fisherman's alibi, of pure—pure, mind you—gold.

Back in those days, to be a colonist meant to be a rugged individual. And to be a rugged individual meant to not give a damn one way or another. And to not give a damn one way or another meant to make one hell of a mess on the placid face of Mars.

There had not been any gold found, of course, and now, for the most part, the mining shacks so hastily thrown up were only fever scars of a sickness long gone and little remembered. A few of the houses were still occupied, like the one into which the Martian boy had just disappeared.

So his mother had taught him the *William Tell* Overture, had she? That tickling thought made me chuckle as I stood before the ramshackle building. And then, suddenly, I stopped chuckling and began to think, instead, of something quite astonishing:

How had it been possible for her to teach, and for him to whistle?

All Martians are as tone-deaf as a bucket of lead.

I went up three slab steps and rapped loudly on the weather-beaten door.

The woman who faced me may have been as young as twenty-two, but she didn't look it. That shocked look, which comes with the first realization that

youth has slipped quietly away downstream in the middle of the night, and left nothing but frightening rocks of middle age to show cold and gray in the hard light of dawn, was like the validation stamp of Time itself in her wide, wise eyes. And her voice wasn't young any more, either.

„Well? And what did I do now?“

„I beg your pardon?“ I said.

„You're Mobile Security, aren't you? Or is that badge you're wearing just something to cover a hole in your shirt?“

„Yes, I'm Security, but does it have to mean something?“ I asked. „All I did was knock on your door.“

„I heard it.“ Her lips were curled slightly at one corner.

I worked up a smile for her and let her see it for a few seconds before I answered: „As a matter of fact, I don't want to see you at all. I didn't know you lived here and I don't know who you are. I'm not even interested in who you are. It's the little boy who just went in here that I was interested in. The little Martian boy, I mean.“

Her eyes spread as though somebody had put fingers on her lids at the outside corners and then cruelly jerked them apart.

„Come in,“ she almost gasped.

I followed her. When I leaned back against the plain door, it closed protestingly. I looked around. It wasn't much of a room, but then you couldn't expect much of a room in a little ghost of a place like this. A few knickknacks of the locality stood about on two tables and a shelf, bits of rock with streak-veins of fused corundum; not bad if you like the appearance of squeezed blood.

There were two chairs and a large table intended to match the chairs, and a rough divan kind of thing made of discarded cratings which had probably been hauled here from the International Spaceport, ten miles to the West. In the back wall of the room was a doorway that led dimly to somewhere else in the house. Nowhere did I see the little boy. I looked once again at the woman.

„What about him?“ she whispered.

Her eyes were still startled.

I smiled reassuringly. „Nothing, lady, nothing. I'm sorry I upset you. I was just being nosy is all, and that's the truth of it. You see, the little boy went by me a while ago and he was whistling. He whistles remarkably well. I asked him what the name of the tune was and he told me it was the *Calm* from *William Tell*. He also told me his mother had taught him.“

Her eyes hadn't budged from mine, hadn't flickered. They might have been bright, moist marbles glued above her cheeks.

She said one word only: „Well?“

„Nothing,“ I answered. „Except that Martians are supposed to be tone-deaf, aren't they? It's something lacking in their sense of hearing. So when I heard this little boy, and saw he was a Martian, and when he told me his mother had taught him—“ I shrugged and laughed a little. „Like I said before, I guess I got just plain nosy.“

She nodded. „We agree on that last part.“

Perhaps it was her eyes. Or perhaps it was the tone of her voice. Or perhaps, and more simply, it was her attitude in general. But whatever it was, I suddenly felt that, nosy or not, I was being treated shabbily.

„I would like to speak to the Martian lady,“ I said.

„There isn't any Martian lady.“

„There has to be, doesn't there?“ I said it with little sharp pricklers on the words.

But she did, too: „Does there?“

I gawked at her and she stared back. And the stare she gave me was hard and at the same time curiously defiant—as though she would dare me to go on with it. As though she figured I hadn't the guts.

For a moment, I just blinked stupidly at her, as I had blinked stupidly at the little boy when he told me his mother had taught him how to whistle. And then—after what seemed to me a very long while—I slowly tumbled to what she meant.

Her eyes were telling me that the little Martian boy wasn't a little Martian boy at all, that he was cross-breed, a little chap who had a Martian father and a human, Earthwoman mother.

It was a startling thought, for there just aren't any such mixed marriages. Or at least I had thought there weren't. Physically, spiritually, mentally, or by any other standard you can think of, compared to a human male the Martian isn't anything you'd want around the house.

I finally said: „So that is why he is able to whistle.“

She didn't answer. Even before I spoke, her eyes had seen the correct guess which had probably flashed naked and astounded in my own eyes. And then she swallowed with a labored breath that went trembling down inside her.

„There isn't anything to be ashamed of,“ I said gently. „Back on Earth there's a lot of mixtures, you know. Some people even claim there's no such thing as a pure race. I don't know, but I guess we all started somewhere and intermarried plenty since.“

She nodded. Somehow her eyes didn't look defiant any more.

„Where's his father?“ I asked.

„H-he's dead.“

„I'm sorry. Are you all right? I mean do you get along okay and everything, now that...?“

I stopped. I wanted to ask her if she was starving by slow degrees and needed help. Lord knows the careworn look about her didn't show it was luxurious living she was doing—at least not lately.

„Look,“ I said suddenly. „Would you like to go home to Earth? I could fix—“

But that was the wrong approach. Her eyes snapped and her shoulders stiffened angrily and the words that ripped out of her mouth were not coated with honey.

„Get the hell out of here, you fool!“

I blinked again. When the flame in her eyes suddenly seemed to grow even hotter, I turned on my heel and went to the door. I opened it, went out on the top slab step. I turned back to close the door—and looked straight into her eyes.

She was crying, but that didn't mean exactly what it looked like it might mean. Her right hand had the door edge gripped tightly and she was swinging it with all the strength she possessed. And while I still stared, the door slammed savagely into the casing with a shock that jarred the slab under my feet, and flying splinters from the rotten woodwork stung my flinching cheeks.

I shrugged and turned around and went down the steps. „And that is the way it goes,“ I muttered disgustedly to myself. Thinking to be helpful with the

firewood problem, you give a woman a nice sharp axe and she immediately puts it to use—on you.

I looked up just in time to avoid running into a spread-legged man who was standing motionless directly in the middle of the sand-path in front of the door. His hands were on his hips and there was something in his eyes which might have been a leer.

„Pulled a howler in there, eh, mate?“ he said. He chuckled hoarsely in his throat. „Not being exactly deaf, I heard the tail end of it.“ His chuckle was a lewd thing, a thing usually reserved—if it ever was reserved at all—for the mens' rooms of some of the lower class dives. And then he stopped chuckling and frowned instead and said complainingly:

„Regular little spitfire, ain't she? I ask you now, wouldn't you think a gal which had got herself in a little jam, so to speak, would be more reasonable—“

His words chopped short and he almost choked on the final unuttered syllable. His glance had dropped to my badge and the look on his face was one of startled surprise.

„I—“ he said.

I cocked a frown of my own at him.

„Well, so long, mate,“ he grunted, and spun around and dug his toes in the sand and was away. I stood there staring at his rapidly disappearing form for a few moments and then looked back once more at the house. A tattered cotton curtain was just swinging to in the dirty, sand-blown window. That seemed to mean the woman had been watching. I sighed, shrugged again and went away myself.

When I got back to Security Headquarters, I went to the file and began to rifle through pictures. I didn't find the woman, but I did find the man.

He was a killer named Harry Smythe.

I took the picture into the Chief's office and laid it on his desk, waited for him to look down at it and study it for an instant, and then to look back up to me. Which he did.

„So?“ he said.

„Wanted, isn't he?“

He nodded. „But a lot of good that'll do. He's holed up somewhere back on Earth.“

„No,“ I said. „He's right here. I just saw him.“

„What?“ He nearly leaped out of his chair.

„I didn't know who he was at first,“ I said. „It wasn't until I looked in the files—“

He cut me off. His hand darted into his desk drawer and pulled out an Authority Card. He shoved the card at me. He growled: „Kill or capture, I'm not especially fussy which. Just get him!“

I nodded and took the card. As I left the office, I was thinking of something which struck me as somewhat more than odd.

I had idly listened to a little half-breed Martian boy whistling part of the *William Tell* Overture, and it had led me to a wanted killer named Harry Smythe.

Understandably, Mr. Smythe did not produce himself on a silver platter. I spent the remainder of the afternoon trying to get a lead on him and got nowhere. If he was hiding in any of the places I went to, then he was doing it

with mirrors, for on Mars an Authority Card is the big stick than which there is no bigger. Not solely is it a warrant, it is a commandeer of help from anyone to whom it is presented; and wherever I showed it I got respect.

I got instant attention. I got even more: those wraithlike tremblings in the darker corners of saloons, those corners where light never seems quite to penetrate. You don't look into those. Not if you're anything more than a ghoul, you don't.

Not finding him wasn't especially alarming. What was alarming, though, was not finding the Earthwoman and her little half-breed Martian son when I went back to the tumbledown shack where they lived. It was empty. She had moved fast. She hadn't even left me a note saying good-by.

That night I went into the Great Northern desert to the Haremheb Reservation, where the Martians still try to act like Martians.

It was Festival night, and when I got there they were doing the dance to the two moons. At times like this you want to leave the Martians alone. With that thought in mind, I pinned my Authority Card to my lapel directly above my badge, and went through the gates.

The huge circle fire was burning and the dance was in progress. Briefly, this can be described as something like the ceremonial dances put on centuries ago by the ancient aborigines of North America. There was one important exception, however. Instead of a central fire, the Martians dig a huge circular trench and fill it with dried roots of the belu tree and set fire to it. Being pitch-like, the gnarled fragments burn for hours. Inside this ring sit the spectators, and in the exact center are the dancers. For music, they use the drums.

The dancers were both men and women and they were as naked as Martians can get, but their dance was a thing of grace and loveliness. For an instant—before anyone observed me—I stood motionless and watched the sinuously undulating movements, and I thought, as I have often thought before, that this is the one thing the Martians can still do beautifully. Which, in a sad sort of way, is a commentary on the way things have gone since the first rocket-blasting ship set down on these purple sands.

I felt the knife dig my spine. Carefully I turned around and pointed my index finger to my badge and card. Bared teeth glittered at me in the flickering light, and then the knife disappeared as quickly as it had come.

„Wahanhk,“ I said. „The Chief. Take me to him.“

The Martian turned, went away from the half-light of the circle. He led me some yards off to the north to a swooping-tent. Then he stopped, pointed.

„Wahanhk,“ he said.

I watched him slip away.

Wahanhk is an old Martian. I don't think any Martian before him has ever lived so long—and doubtless none after him will, either. His leathery, almost purple-black skin was rough and had a charred look about it, and up around the eyes were little plaits and folds that had the appearance of being done deliberately by a Martian sand-artist.

„Good evening,“ I said, and sat down before him and crossed my legs.

He nodded slowly. His old eyes went to my badge.

From there they went to the Authority Card.

„Power sign of the Earthmen,“ he muttered.

„Not necessarily,“ I said. „I’m not here for trouble. I know as well as you do that, before tonight is finished, more than half of your men and women will be drunk on illegal whiskey.“

He didn’t reply to that.

„And I don’t give a damn about it,“ I added distinctly.

His eyes came deliberately up to mine and stopped there. He said nothing. He waited. Outside, the drums throbbed, slowly at first, then moderated in tempo. It was like the throbbing—or sobbing, if you prefer—of the old, old pumps whose shafts go so tirelessly down into the planet for such pitifully thin streams of water.

„I’m looking for an Earthwoman,“ I said. „This particular Earthwoman took a Martian for a husband.“

„That is impossible,“ he grunted bitterly.

„I would have said so, too,“ I agreed. „Until this afternoon, that is.“

His old, dried lips began to purse and wrinkle.

„I met her little son,“ I went on. „A little semi-human boy with Martian features. Or, if you want to turn it around and look at the other side, a little Martian boy who whistles.“

His teeth went together with a snap.

I nodded and smiled. „You know who I’m talking about.“

For a long long while he didn’t answer. His eyes remained unblinking on mine and if, earlier in the day, I had thought the little boy’s face was expressionless, then I didn’t completely appreciate the meaning of that word. Wahanhk’s face was more than expressionless; it was simply blank.

„They disappeared from the shack they were living in,“ I said. „They went in a hurry—a very great hurry.“

That one he didn’t answer, either.

„I would like to know where she is.“

„Why?“ His whisper was brittle.

„She’s not in trouble,“ I told him quickly. „She’s not wanted. Nor her child, either. It’s just that I have to talk to her.“

„Why?“

I pulled out the file photo of Harry Smythe and handed it across to him. His wrinkled hand took it, pinched it, held it up close to a lamp hanging from one of the ridge poles. His eyes squinted at it for a long moment before he handed it back.

„I have never seen this Earthman,“ he said.

„All right,“ I answered. „There wasn’t anything that made me think you had. The point is that he knows the woman. It follows, naturally, that she might know him.“

„This one is wanted?“ His old, broken tones went up slightly on the last word.

I nodded. „For murder.“

„Murder.“ He spat the word. „But not for the murder of a Martian, eh? Martians are not that important any more.“ His old eyes hated me with an intensity I didn’t relish.

„You said that, old man, not I.“

A little time went by. The drums began to beat faster. They were rolling out a lively tempo now, a tempo you could put music to.

He said at last: „I do not know where the woman is. Nor the child.“

He looked me straight in the eyes when he said it—and almost before the words were out of his mouth, they were whipped in again on a drawn-back, great, sucking breath. For, somewhere outside, somewhere near that dancing circle, in perfect time with the lively beat of the drums, somebody was whistling.

It was a clear, clean sound, a merry, bright, happy sound, as sharp and as precise as the thrust of a razor through a piece of soft yellow cheese.

„In your teeth, Wahanhk! Right in your teeth!“

He only looked at me for another dull instant and then his eyes slowly closed and his hands folded together in his lap. Being caught in a lie only bores a Martian.

I got up and went out of the tent.

The woman never heard me approach. Her eyes were toward the flaming circle and the dancers within, and, too, I suppose, to her small son who was somewhere in that circle with them, whistling. She leaned against the bole of a belu tree with her arms down and slightly curled backward around it.

„That’s considered bad luck,“ I said.

Her head jerked around with my words, reflected flames from the circle fire still flickering in her eyes.

„That’s a belu tree,“ I said. „Embracing it like that is like looking for a ladder to walk under. Or didn’t you know?“

„Would it make any difference?“ She spoke softly, but the words came to me above the drums and the shouts of the dancers. „How much bad luck can you have in one lifetime, anyway?“

I ignored that. „Why did you pull out of that shack? I told you you had nothing to fear from me.“

She didn’t answer.

„I’m looking for the man you saw me talking with this morning,“ I went on. „Lady, he’s wanted. And this thing, on my lapel is an Authority Card. Assuming you know what it means, I’m asking you where he is.“

„What man?“ Her words were flat.

„His name is Harry Smythe.“

If that meant anything to her, I couldn’t tell. In the flickering light from the fires, subtle changes in expression weren’t easily detected.

„Why should I care about an Earthman? My husband was a Martian. And he’s dead, see? Dead. Just a Martian. Not fit for anything, like all Martians. Just a bum who fell in love with an Earthwoman and had the guts to marry her. Do you understand? So somebody murdered him for it. Ain’t that pretty? Ain’t that something to make you throw back your head and be proud about? Well, ain’t it? And let me tell you, Mister, whoever it was, I’ll get him. I’ll get him!“

I could see her face now, all right. It was a twisted, tortured thing that writhed at me in its agony. It was small yellow teeth that bared at me in viciousness. It was eyes that brimmed with boiling, bubbling hate like a ladle of molten steel splashing down on bare, white flesh. Or, simply, it was the face of a woman who wanted to kill the killer of her man.

And then, suddenly, it wasn’t. Even though the noise of the dance and the dancers was loud enough to command the attention and the senses. I could still hear her quiet sobbing, and I could see the heaving of the small, thin shoulders.



And I knew then the reason for old Wahanhk's bitterness when he had said to me, „But not for the murder of a Martian, eh? Martians are not that important any more.“

What I said then probably sounded as weak as it really was: „I'm sorry, kid. But look, just staking out in that old shack of yours and trying to pry information out of the type of men who drifted your way—well, I mean there wasn't much sense in that, now was there?“

I put an arm around her shoulders. „He must have been a pretty nice guy,“ I said. „I don't think you'd have married him if he wasn't.“

I stopped. Even in my own ears, my words sounded comfortless. I looked up, over at the flaming circle and at the sweat-laved dancers within it. The sound of the drums was a wild cacophonous tattoo now, a rattle of speed and savagery combined; and those who moved to its frenetic jabberings were not dancers any more, but only frenzied, jerking figurines on the strings of a puppeteer gone mad.

I looked down again at the woman. „Your little boy and his butterfly net,“ I said softly. „In a season when no butterflies can be found. What was that for? Was he part of the plan, too, and the net just the alibi that gave him a passport to wander where he chose? So that he could listen, pick up a little information here, a little there?“

She didn't answer. She didn't have to answer. My guesses can be as good as anybody's.

After a long while she looked up into my eyes. „His name was Tahily,“ she said. „He had the secret. He knew where the gold vein was. And soon, in a couple of years maybe, when all the prospectors were gone and he knew it would be safe, he was going to stake a claim and go after it. For us. For the three of us.“

I sighed. There wasn't, isn't, never will be any gold on this planet. But who in the name of God could have the heart to ruin a dream like that?

Next day I followed the little boy. He left the reservation in a cheery frame of mind, his whistle sounding loud and clear on the thin morning air. He didn't go in the direction of town, but the other way—toward the ruins of the ancient Temple City of the Moons. I watched his chubby arm and the swinging of the big butterfly net on the end of that arm. Then I followed along in his sandy tracks.

It was desert country, of course. There wasn't any chance of tailing him without his knowledge and I knew it. I also knew that before long he'd know it, too. And he did—but he didn't let me know he did until we came to the rag-cliffs, those filigree walls of stone that hide the entrance to the valley of the two moons.

Once there, he paused and placed his butterfly net on a rock ledge and then calmly sat down and took off his shoes to dump the sand while he waited for me.

„Well,“ I said. „Good morning.“

He looked up at me. He nodded politely. Then he put on his shoes again and got to his feet.

„You've been following me,“ he said, and his brown eyes stared accusingly into mine.

„I have?“

„That isn't an honorable thing to do,“ he said very gravely. „A gentleman doesn't do that to another gentleman.“

I didn't smile. „And what would you have me do about it?“

„Stop following me, of course, sir.“

„Very well,“ I said. „I won't follow you any more. Will that be satisfactory?“

„Quite, sir.“

Without another word, he picked up his butterfly net and disappeared along a path that led through a rock crevice. Only then did I allow myself to grin. It was a sad and pitying and affectionate kind of grin.

I sat down and did with my shoes as he had done. There wasn't any hurry; I knew where he was going. There could only be one place, of course—the city of Deimos and Phobos. Other than that he had no choice. And I thought I knew the reason for his going.

Several times in the past, there have been men who, bitten with the fever of an idea that somewhere on this red planet there must be gold, have done prospecting among the ruins of the old temples. He had probably heard that there were men there now, and he was carrying out with the thoroughness of his precise little mind the job he had set himself of finding the killer of his daddy.

I took a short-cut over the rag-cliffs and went down a winding, sand-worn path. The temple stones stood out barren and dry-looking, like breast bones from the desiccated carcass of an animal. For a moment I stopped and stared down at the ruins. I didn't see the boy. He was somewhere down there, though, still swinging his butterfly net and, probably, still whistling.

I started up once more.

And then I heard it—a shrill blast of sound in an octave of urgency; a whistle, sure, but a warning one.

I stopped in my tracks from the shock of it. Yes, I knew from whom it had come, all right. But I didn't know why.

And then the whistle broke off short. One instant it was in the air, shrieking with a message. The next it was gone. But it left tailings, like the echo of a death cry slowly floating back over the dead body of the creature that uttered it.

I dropped behind a fragment of the rag-cliff. A shot barked out angrily. Splinters of the rock crazed the morning air.

The little boy screamed. Just once.

I waited. There was a long silence after that. Then, finally, I took off my hat and threw it out into the valley. The gun roared once more. This time I placed it a little to the left below me. I took careful sighting on the hand that held that gun—and I didn't miss it.

It was Harry Smythe, of course. When I reached him, he had the injured hand tucked tightly in the pit of his other arm. There was a grim look in his eyes and he nodded as I approached him.

„Good shooting, mate. Should be a promotion in it for you. Shooting like that, I mean.“

„That's nice to think about,“ I said. „Where's the boy? I owe him a little something. If he hadn't whistled a warning, you could have picked me off neat.“

„I would.“ He nodded calmly.

„Where is he?“

„Behind the rock there. In that little alcove, sort of.“ He indicated with his chin.

I started forward. I watched him, but I went toward the rock.

„Just a minute, mate.“

I stopped. I didn't lower my gun.

„That bloody wench we spoke about yesterday. You know, out in front of that shack? Well, just a thought, of course, but if you pull me in and if I get it, what'll become of her, do you suppose? Mean to say, I couldn't support her when I was dead, could I?“

„Support her?“ Surprise jumped into my voice.

„What I said. She's my wife, you know. Back on Earth, I mean. I skipped out on her a few years back, but yesterday I was on my way to looking her up when you—“

„She didn't recognize the name Harry Smythe,“ I said coldly. „I'm afraid you'll have to think a little faster.“

„Of course she didn't! How could she? That ain't my name. What made you think it was?“

Bright beads of sweat sparkled on his forehead, and his lips had that frantic looseness of lips not entirely under control.

„You left her,“ I grunted. „But you followed her across space anyway. Just to tell her you were sorry and you wanted to come back. Is that it?“

„Well—“ His eyes were calculating. „Not the God's honest, mate, no. I didn't know she was here. Not at first. But there was this Spider, see? This Martian. His name was Tahily and he used to hang around the saloons and he talked a lot, see? Then's when I knew...“

„So it was you who killed him,“ I said. „One murder wasn't enough back on Earth; you had to pile them up on the planets.“ I could feel something begin to churn inside of me.

„Wait! Sure, I knocked off the Martian. But a fair fight, see? That Spider jumped my claim. A fair fight it was, and anybody'd done the same. But even without that, he had it coming anyway, wouldn't you say? Bigamist and all that, you know? I mean marrying a woman already married.“

His lips were beginning to slobber. I watched them with revulsion in my stomach.

„Wouldn't you say, mate? Just a lousy, stinking Martian, I mean!“

I swallowed. I turned away and went around the rock and looked down. One look was enough. Blood was running down the cheek of the prone little Martian boy, and it was coming from his mouth. Then I turned back to the shaking man.

„Like I say, mate! I mean, what would you've done in my place? Whistling always did drive me crazy. I can't stand it. A phobia, you know. People suffer from phobias!“

„What did you do?“ I took three steps toward him. I felt my lips straining back from my teeth.

„Wait now, mate! Like I say, it's a phobia. I can't stand whistling. It makes me suffer—“

„So you cut out his tongue?“

I didn't wait for his answer. I couldn't wait. While I was still calm, I raised my gun on his trembling figure. I didn't put the gun up again until his body stopped twitching and his fingers stopped clawing in the sands.

From the desk to the outside door, the hospital corridor runs just a few feet. But I'd have known her at any distance. I sighed, got to my feet and met her halfway.

She stopped before me and stared up into my eyes. She must have run all the way when she got my message, for although she was standing as rigid as a pole in concrete, something of her exhaustion showed in her eyes.

„Tell me,“ she said in a panting whisper.

„Your boy is going to be okay.“ I put my arm around her. „Everything's under control. The doctors say he's going to live and pull through and...“

I stopped. I wondered what words I was going to use when no words that I had ever heard in my life would be the right ones.

„Tell me.“ She pulled from my grasp and tilted her head so that she could look up into my eyes and read them like a printed page. „Tell me!“

„He cut out the boy's—he said he couldn't stand whistling. It was a phobia, he claimed. Eight bullets cured his phobia, if any.“

„He cut out what?“

„Your son's tongue.“

I put my arm around her again, but it wasn't necessary. She didn't cry out, she didn't slump. Her head did go down and her eyes did blink once or twice, but that was all.

„He was the only little boy on Mars who could whistle,“ she said.

All of the emotion within her was somehow squeezed into those few words.

I couldn't get it out of my mind for a long while. I used to lie in bed and think of it somewhat like this:

There was this man, with his feet planted in the purple sands, and he looked up into the night sky when the moon called Deimos was in perigee, and he studied it. And he said to himself, „Well, I shall write a book and I shall say in this book that the moon of Mars is thus and so. And I will be accurately describing it, for in truth the moon is thus and so.“

And on the other side of the planet there was another man. And he, too, looked up into the night sky. And he began to study the moon called Phobos. And he, too, decided to write a book. And he knew he could accurately describe the moon of Mars, for his own eyes had told him it looked like thus and so. And his own eyes did not lie.

I thought of it in a manner somewhat like that. I could tell the woman that Harry Smythe, her first husband, was the man who had killed Tahily, the Martian she loved. I could tell her Smythe had killed him in a fair fight because the Martian had tried to jump a claim. And her heart would be set to rest, for she would know that the whole thing was erased and done with, at last.

Or, on the other hand, I could do what I eventually did do. I could tell her absolutely nothing, in the knowledge that that way she would at least have the strength of hate with which to sustain herself through the years of her life. The strength of her hate against this man, whoever he might be, plus the chill joy of anticipating the day—maybe not tomorrow, but some day—when, like the dream of finding gold on Mars, she'd finally track him down and kill him.

I couldn't leave her without a reason for living. Her man was dead and her son would never whistle again. She had to have something to live for, didn't she?

