

NEW LAMPS

Robert Moore Williams

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NEW LAMPS

By Robert Moore Williams

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Ronson came to the Red Planet on the strangest mission of all ... he only knew he wanted to see Les Ro, but he didn't know exactly why. It was because he knew that Les Ro had the answer to something that had never been answered before, if indeed, it had ever been asked! For Les Ro traded new lamps for old—and they were the lamps of life itself!

On Mars, the dust is yellow, and microscopically fine. With the result that it penetrates to the sensitive lung tissues of a human being, causing distress. Crossing the street toward the dive set into the towering wall of the cliff overhead, Jim Ronson sneezed violently. He wished fervidly that he might get another glimpse of what Robert Heinlein, two centuries before, had nostalgically called **The Cool Green Hills of Earth**, and again smell air that had no dust in it. Deep inside of him a small voice whispered that he would be very lucky if he ever saw the green hills of Earth again.

Somewhere ahead of him, in the granite core of the mountain, was something that no human had ever seen. Rumors of what was here had reached Jim Ronson. They had been sufficiently exciting to lift him out of an Earth laboratory and to bring him on a space ship to Mars, feverishly sleep-learning the Martian language as he made the hop, to investigate what might be here in this granite mountain near the south pole of the Red Planet. Some Martians knew what was here. In Mars Port, Ronson had talked to one who obviously knew. But the Martian either could not or would not tell what he knew.

Across the street, squatting against the wall, were a dozen Martians. One was segregated from the rest. They watched the human get out of the **dothar** drawn cart that had brought him from the jet taxi that had landed on the sand outside this village, pay his fare, and come

toward them. Taking a half-hitch around his courage, Ronson moved past them. He glanced down at the one sitting apart from the rest, then averted his eyes, unease and discomfort rising in him. The Martian was a leper. Ronson forced himself to look again. The sores were clearly visible, the eyes were dull and apathetic, without hope. As if some of the leper's hopelessness were communicated to him, Ronson felt a touch of despair. In this place, if the rumors were true, how could there be a leper? How—He paused as one of the Martians squatting on the sidewalk rose to bar his way.

On the Red Planet, humans were strictly on their own. If they got themselves into trouble, no consular agent was available to help them. If they got killed, no representative of Earth law came to ask why or to bring the killers to human justice. No amount of argument or persuasion on the part of delegates from Earth had ever produced a treaty guaranteeing the lives or even the safety of humans who went beyond the limits of Mars Port. The Martians simply could not see any reason for protecting these strange creatures who had come uninvited across space. Let humans look out for themselves!

The Martian who rose in front of Ronson was big and looked mean. Four knives hung from the belt circling his waist. Ronson did not doubt that the fellow could stab very expertly with the knives or that he could throw them with the accuracy of a bullet within a range of thirty feet. In the side pocket of the heavy **dothar**-skin coat that he wore, Ronson had a **zen** gun which he had purchased before leaving Mars Port. The little weapon threw an explosive bullet guaranteed to change forever the mind of any human or any Martian who got in the way of it. Ronson did not doubt that he could draw and fire the gun before the Martian could use one of the knives but he also knew that he did not want to start a fight here in the street. What was inside the mountain was too important to risk.

"Happy wind time," Ronson said. This greeting was good manners anywhere on Mars. He bowed to the Martian. As he bowed, the fellow snatched his hat, held it aloft as a trophy.

Laughter echoed through the watching Martians. Only the leper was unmoved. The Martian put the hat on his own head, where it sank

down over his ears. He wiggled his scalp and the hat danced. The laughter grew stronger.

Ronson kept his temper. "I'll take my hat back," he said, politely.

"Ho!" the Martian said. "Try and get it."

"I want my hat back," Ronson said, a little less politely. Inside, he was coming to a boil. Like a stupid child, this Martian was playing a silly game. To them, this was fun. To the human, it was not fun. A wrong move on his part, or even no move, and they might be on him like wolves, endangering the purpose that had brought him here. Or had Les Ro, catching wind somehow of his visit, set these stupid creatures across his path? At the thought, the anger rising inside of him became a feeling of cold.

"I want—"

Another squatting Martian rose. "I'll take his coat," the second one announced.

A third was rising. "Me for his breeks!"

They were going to disrobe him, strip him naked, for the sake of his clothes. Ronson did not in the least doubt that they would do it, or try to do it. The only law protecting humans on this planet was what they could make up as individuals and enforce for themselves. He reached for the gun in the side pocket of the **dothar** skin coat.

The Martian who had taken his hat reached out and grabbed his arm. The fellow had steel claws for hands instead of flesh and blood. The claws clamped over Ronson's arm with a paralyzing grip that seemed to squeeze the very nerves in their sheaths.

Ronson slugged with his left fist, very hard and very fast, a blow that landed flush on the jaw of the Martian. The fellow blinked but was not damaged. He grinned. "Ho! Human wants to fight!" He seemed to find satisfaction in the idea. He reached out with his other hand, grasping for Ronson's neck this time.

Ronson had not been in a rough and tumble fight since he was a kid but he discovered that he had not forgotten how to bring up his knee and jab his antagonist in the stomach. Only this time it didn't work.

The Martian brought down an elbow and deflected the rising leg. His groping fingers found Ronson's neck, closed there with a grip that was as tight as the grip around the human's right arm. The other Martians drew closer. As soon as Te Hold had subdued this alien, they intended to have his clothes right down to the skin. Maybe they would take the skin too, if they could find any value in it. They were so engrossed in watching Te Hold tame this human that they did not notice the door of the joint open behind them. Nor did they see the girl come out.

She was not in the least surprised at the fight in the street, nor was she in any doubt as to what to do about it. In her hand, she had a spring gun, one of those little weapons that are spring powered and which throw steel needles coated with the extremely powerful synthetic narcotic, thormoline. Hardly seeming to take aim, she shot the Martian who was holding Ronson in the back. Te Hold jumped as the needle stung him but he did not let go of Ronson. The spring gun pinged again as the girl put another needle in his back.

Te Hold jumped again. He released his grip on Ronson's throat. The human gulped air, and slugged Te Hold again, harder this time. The fast-acting narcotic was already taking effect. Te Hold went over like a falling tree.

Jim Ronson snatched the zen gun from his pocket, then saw that he did not need it. The girl had been busy with the needle weapon. Two of the Martians were also down and the rest were in full flight, except the leper, who had not moved. Standing in front of the door, the girl was calmly shooting needles at their legs as they ran.

Not until then did Ronson really see the girl. He blinked startled eyes at her. Human women were rare on Mars, here in this place near the south pole they should not exist at all. No woman in her right mind would come here. But one was here, and a darned attractive one at that. She was tall, lithe, and full breasted. The hair peeping out from under the tight fitting-helmet was a shade of red. If she had a fault in her figure, it was the fact that her hips were too narrow—she was as slender as a boy—but Ronson was not inclined to criticize her for that. Not when she had just saved his clothes and maybe his life.

As the last Martian dodged around the corner, she turned her attention to him. A smile lit her face.

"Dr. Ronson! A privilege to meet you, sir." Hand outstretched, smiling, she moved around the victims of her needle gun and came toward him.

Ronson stared at her in bewildered consternation. He had not thought that anyone on Mars would even know his name, he had not wanted anyone to know his identity. Especially not in this place. He barely remembered his manners in time to take the hand offered him.

"I'm Jennie Ware," the girl said.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Ware." Where had he heard or seen this name before? "I want—ah—to thank you for helping me out of a spot."

"It was nothing," she said smiling. "Always glad to help my fellow men."

"You certainly went into action fast." He glanced at Te Hold, sleeping in the street. On the sidewalk near the corner, another Martian was taking a nap. Only the leper was still in sight and awake.

"I had these needles coated with a special narcotic designed to affect the Martian nervous system. As to my going into action fast, I've discovered that you have to be firm with these Martians," she answered smiling.

Stooping, he retrieved his hat. "How did you know me?"

A little flicker of amusement showed in her eyes. "Why shouldn't I recognize Earth's foremost bio-physicist and leading authority on cellular structure? Come on in. I'll buy you a drink. You'll love this place. They've even got a waiter who thinks he can speak English."

"Thanks," Ronson said. "I'll take you up on that." He was astonished and bewildered by this woman. He had spent most of his life in the laboratories of Earth. The women who had been there had been flat-breasted, pale creatures in low-heeled shoes who had called him "Sir," and "Doctor," and who had obviously been greatly in awe of

him but who had apparently never had a red-blooded thought in their lives. He had regarded them as a sort of neuter sex, creatures who had obviously been intended by nature to be female but who had gotten their hormones mixed up somewhere along the line. This girl was different.

Her name, somehow, had a haunting familiarity, as if he had heard it somewhere before. But he couldn't remember where.

She went through the door ahead of him. As Ronson passed through, a Martian thrust his head around the corner outside and threw a knife. The steel blade buried in the door facing within six inches of the human's head. He hastily ducked through the door.

Looking annoyed, the girl started back to the street outside. "I'll fix him," she said, pulling the needle gun.

Ronson caught her shoulder. "Let well enough alone," he said firmly. "Anyhow you were going to buy me a drink."

Her eyes held a curious mixture of annoyance, defiance, and longing. Her gaze went down to his hand on her shoulder. Ronson grinned at her. "You look as if you are about to bite me," he said. "Go ahead, if you want to." He did not move his hand.

Wonder came into her face. "A great many men have tried to paw me, without getting very far. But somehow, I don't think you're trying to do that."

"About that drink?" Ronson said.

"Sure." She moved toward a table set against the far wall.

Ronson dared to breathe again. Whatever else this girl was, she was certainly full of fight and fury. She could have gone out into the street, in the face of thrown knives, if he hadn't stopped her. As she moved toward the table, he had a chance to look at the place in which he found himself.

What he saw was not reassuring. Except for a big circle in the center of the room, the place was crammed with Martian males of all sizes and descriptions. Waiters scurried through the crowd. The circle on

the floor was outlined in red. No customer and no Martian ventured within it. Ronson glanced at it, asked the girl a question.

"I just got here too," she said. "I haven't had time to find out about it. Some superstition of theirs, I think." She led him to the table. Two glasses were already on it. A waiter appeared out of nowhere. "This is the one who speaks English. Talk to the gentleman, Tocko."

"Oh, yessen, missen. Me talken ze English and but very gooden. Me learnen ze human talken at Mars Porten. Don't I talk him gooden?" The last was directed at Ronson.

"You speak him very wonderfullen," Ronson answered. The waiter beamed.

"Bring the gentleman a mariwaukee," the girl said.

"Oh, yessen, missen."

"On second thought, make it a double shot," the girl said. "The gentleman looks like he needs it." She nodded brightly to Ronson as if she had selected the very medicine he needed. "Now tell me what you are doing on Mars, Dr. Ronson?"

Ronson glanced hastily at the waiter, to make certain that he was out of earshot. "I—I came here on a vacation," he said firmly and loudly. "I've wanted to see Mars ever since I was a kid. Who—ah—was sitting here with you before I came?"

"A man," she answered. "He went to the little boy's room just before you got into trouble in the street. I guess he's still there, if some Martian hasn't slit his throat. Are you enjoying your vacation?"

"Of course."

"Do you mind if I call you Jim?" She smiled at him.

"I would be very pleased."

"Good. You can call me Jennie."

"Thanks."

"Then you are enjoying your vacation." Her smile was very sweet. "Are you also enjoying trying to lie to me—Jim?"

Ronson caught his start of surprise. Jennie Ware bewildered him but this was a game that two could play. "Of course I'm enjoying it. Lying to a woman as beautiful as you are is always a pleasure—Jennie." He grinned at her and watched the anger come up on her face. Why should she be angry?

The anger was gone as swiftly as it had come. She leaned across the table, put her hand on his. "I like you Jim. I really do. And not because you called me a beautiful woman but because you kicked me in the teeth with my own act. I had it coming and you gave it to me very neatly."

The touch of her hand was very pleasant. "No hard feelings. What—ah—are you doing here, Jennie?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "I'm on a vacation too, Jim."

"Touche!" The females in the laboratories back on earth had never touched his hand or called him by his first name. He wondered about the man with whom she had been drinking. Also he was very uneasy about her real reason for being here. No woman with good sense would make the rough rocket trip to Mars for a vacation; presuming she did come to Mars, she would not willingly come to this place. But Jennie Ware was here, an enigma wrapped up in a beautiful smile. He took his eyes off her long enough to look around the place again.

In Mars Port, he had seen the native dives, but Mars Port had nothing like this. To the natives, this was a place of pleasure, filled with sights, sounds, and smells that made them happy. Over against the farther wall a tribal chieftan was absorbing **narseeth** through the skin of his hands, thrusting them again and again into the sirupy, smoky-colored mixture in the bowl in front of him. Every so often he stopped, whereupon the Martian female with him carefully dried his hands. After they were dry, he made fumbling passes at her. She accepted the passes without resistance. Ronson stared at the sight.

"Relax. You'll get used to it," Jennie Ware said.

At another table a huge Martian was sitting. Two others were with him. One sat facing the rear, the other faced the front. Ronson had

the impression of two alert dogs guarding their master. A little chill passed through him at the thought.

Odors were in the place, of sweat dried into **dothar** skin garments, of stale drinks. Dim but distinct was the all-pervading clinging, cloying odor of **tamil**, the Martian equivalent of musk. Through an opening at the right, Ronson could see females lounging at ease in what was apparently a reception room to a brothel.

Unease came up in him again. How could this place be the way to Les Ro? But the rumors he had picked up and carefully checked in Mars Port had all been in agreement, if you wanted to see Les Ro, you came here. What happened after that was obviously fate.

Watching, Ronson saw that no Martian entered the circle on the floor.

He nodded toward the Martian females. "What do you think of this?"

"Oh, a girl has to live," she said, shrugging. "What do you think?"

"Oh, a Martian has to have fun, I suppose." His shrug was as indifferent as hers had been. For an instant, he thought she was going to spit at him.

The waiter arrived with the drink.

"I have putten you on ze listen," he said, confidentially, to Ronson.

"On the **listen**?"

"He means **list**," Jennie Ware said.

"What list?" Ronson asked.

"On ze listen of zoen waiten to see ze great Les Ro," the waiter answered.

Inside of him, Ronson felt cold come up. Strictly on his own, he had to decide how he was going to handle this. He made up his mind on impulse. "Who the devil is Les Ro?"

Across the table, Jennie Ware lifted startled eyes toward Ronson. The waiter's face showed astonishment, then embarrassment, at the idea that anyone existed who had not heard of Les Ro, Ronson

thought. "You do not knowen ze great Les Ro. He is ze greatest zinker, ze greatest doer, ze greatest—"

"Stinker?" Jennie Ware said. "That sounds about right."

"You are maken ze kidden wiz me," the waiter said, indignation in his voice. "You have hearden of ze great Les Ro. You came here to see him. You musten haven. Everybody who comes here, comes to see him." The waiter spoke with authority.

"I'm sorry," Ronson said. "If he is that important, I would like to talk to him, of course. But do you mean all of these Martians are waiting to see him?" A wave of his hand indicated the group in the room.

The waiter, mollified, leered at Ronson. "Ze girls didn't. Ze girls come here for anuzzer purpose." The leering gesture included Jennie Ware in it. It said that obviously she had come here for the same purpose. What other purpose was there?

The girl gasped. Fire shot from her eyes. "I'll have you know—"

"Shut up," Ronson said.

Fire flashed at him. "Hasn't it occurred to you that you are in danger of getting your pretty little throat slit if you talk out of turn here?" Ronson whispered.

"Even ze noffers outside are on ze listen," the waiter added.

"What about me? Am I on it?" Jennie asked.

The waiter showed great astonishment. "But of course not. You are a female."

"What difference does that make?" This time the fire really shot from her eyes.

"How long do you have to wait after you're on the listen?" Ronson hastily asked.

The waiter spread his hands and twisted his shoulders. "Who knows? Some of ze noffers outside have been waiting since last wind time—"

"Almost an Earth year," Ronson said, calculating rapidly. Once during each circle of the sun the great winds blew across Mars. This was the biggest natural event on the planet. Since it occurred with the regularity of clock work, it served as the starting point for their year.

"Sometimes ze great Les Ro call you right away," the waiter said.

"How will I know if I'm called?" Ronson said.

A shudder passed over the waiter. "You vill know. Of a most certain, you vill know. Ze Messenger vill call." The shudder came again. As if he had already said too much, the waiter hurried away. Ronson turned back to Jennie Ware. She was sparkling with fury.

"If they think they're going to keep me from seeing Les Ro just because I'm a woman—"

"Why do you want to see him? He probably isn't pretty."

"Because I want to write a book about him."

"A book—" Ronson's memory suddenly came alive and he remembered where he had seen her name before. He stared at her, startled and almost aghast. Back on Earth, this woman was almost a legend. Every tabloid and every Sunday supplement had carried her picture and stories about her. The programs beamed to space had carried tales of her exploits. She had explored the depths of the Venusian jungles, she had ridden a **dothar** across half of Mars. When Deep Space Flight One had blasted off from Pluto, bound for the exploration of deep space, the news telecasts back to Earth had carried the information that a stowaway had been discovered and ejected from the ship just before blast off. No one had been surprised when this stowaway had turned out to be Jennie Ware. Subsequent rumors had whispered that she had practically torn Pluto Dome apart because she had been ejected from the ship. Even the fact that the ship had never returned had not cooled her anger.

In addition, she was also a very competent author. Ronson had read two of her books and had admired her deft touch with words and the deep sincerity that had showed through in even the most hard-boiled

and raucous passages. Unquestionably Jennie Ware was a very unusual human being.

But in spite of this, Ronson stared at her in growing horror. Her reputation across the solar system was that of an uninhibited vixen. Here in this place, where their lives might ride on the blinking of an eye-lash, or on not blinking it, a temper tantrum thrown by Jennie Ware—or by anybody else—was the last thing he wanted to see.

A tall figure loomed beside the table. A deep voice asked, laughingly, "Well, Jim, since you've already met our lady authoress, how do you like her?"

Ronson looked up, then got up, his hand going out, a grin spurting to his face. The man standing there, Sam Crick, took the outstretched hand and grinned back at him.

Crick was tall and lean. His skin was tanned a deep brown, a color that had resulted from facing all the winds that had ever blown on Mars and all the sun that had ever shown there. Crick was something of a legend on the Red Planet. He was the eternal adventurer, the lonely wanderer of the waste place, the type of human who was always looking for something that lay just over the edge of the horizon.

Jim Ronson and Sam Crick had grown up together as boys on Earth. Ronson had gone into a laboratory, Crick had hopped a freighter bound for Mars. Ronson had not seen his old friend in many years, but he had heard from him and about him. A feeling of deep warmth came up inside the scientist at the sight of the tanned face grinning at him.

"Then you did get my space radio?" Ronson said. "I couldn't locate you in Mars Port and I was never sure." Relief at finding Crick here was a surging feeling deep within him. With Crick here, he not only had a man experienced in Martian ways and customs to help him, but what was more important, he had a friend.

Crick's face lost its smile. Wrinkles showed on his forehead. "What space radio, Jim?"

"The one I sent you, asking you to meet me here. Quit kidding me. If you didn't get my space radio, how does it happen that you're here? Don't tell me this is a coincidence."

Crick shook his head. A doleful expression appeared on his face. "I sure didn't get it, Jim. As to what I'm doing here, I'm chaperoning our lady authoress. Meet my boss." He nodded to Jennie Ware.

Ronson turned startled eyes toward the girl.

"I caught him flat broke in Mars Port just before you arrived," she answered. "Since he was broke, I took advantage of him and hired him as my bodyguard. Not that I would really need a bodyguard, but in case I fell and broke a leg, he might be handy. But his being here wasn't a coincidence."

"Eh?" Ronson said. It was difficult to follow her thinking. She seemed to say a lot, or nothing, all with the same words, the only difference being the voice tone she used. If she chose, she had all the gifts of a man in concealing her true feelings and real opinions.

Her voice was calm, her face expressionless. "The grapevine in Mars Port said the Earth's top-flight bio-physicist was coming here, that old Les Ro was thought to have something that human scientists were all hotted up about, and that you were coming here to investigate, and to chisel Les Ro out of a piece of it, if he would stand still for such treatment."

Ronson blinked at her. She had delivered a bombshell and she had done it as if she thought what she said was of no importance: "I'm not trying to chisel Les Ro or anybody out of anything." His calm matched her aplomb.

"That's not the way the grapevine had it."

"I don't care how the grapevine had it. I know my own motives and my purpose in coming here." An edge crept into his voice as he realized one possible result of what she was saying.

"That may be true. But do the Martians know them?"

Ronson was silent, his thinking perturbed.

"So I hired Sam and came here," Jennie Ware continued. "If Les Ro was big enough to attract you, he was also big enough to provide me with copy for my next book."

"So you could find copy for a damned book, you risked my neck!" Ronson said, his voice hot.

"I didn't risk it a tenth as much as you're doing, by yelling at the top of your lungs where half of Mars can hear you. Anyhow, I saved your clothes and maybe your hide out in front a while ago. Doesn't that count for something?"

"Sorry," Ronson said abruptly. "I lost my temper."

"I'd like to make one point," Crick said. "We've got a mighty hot collection of thieves, crooks, and killers present in this joint."

Jennie Ware and Jim Ronson stared at him.

Crick gestured toward the Martian with the two guards. "That's Tal Bock. He belongs in the upper lantz country, where he is the leader of a gang of killers and thieves. The one over there soaking his hands in smoke is Kus Dorken. He's not any better than Tal Bock."

"What are they doing here?" the girl asked.

"I don't know," Crick answered. "Unless maybe they've been listening in on the grapevine too."

For a moment, it looked as if Jennie Ware was about to cry. She seemed, suddenly, to become a small girl who had done something wrong and was very sorry for it and was trying to find some way to express her sorrow. Her hand came across the table again, touched Ronson's hand hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, Jim, if I got you into trouble. But I knew your reputation. If you were coming here, something big was here. I—I wanted to be in on it. I guess all my life I've wanted to be in on something big. If I actually got you into trouble, Sam and I are here to help you get out of it. Isn't that right, Sam?"

"Right, Jennie." A growl sounded in the tall adventurer's voice. "Thanks, both of you," Ronson said. He was deeply touched. In spite

of the shell of bravado that she wore, and her sudden spurting anger, he liked this girl. She might have the reputation of an uninhibited vixen, but somewhere inside of her was a small girl looking out from awed and wondering eyes at the vastness of the world.

"Watch it!" Crick's whisper was shrill and sharp. His eyes were focused on the ceiling.

All the sounds of the place, the rattle of glasses, the sharp giggling of soliciting women, the deep voices of the Martian males, had gone into sudden and complete silence. Like Crick, they were looking upward. Ronson followed their gaze to the ceiling. Jennie Ware gave a quick cry. Glass tinkled and broke as she dropped her drink.

Jim Ronson did not hear the sound. His entire attention was focused on what was happening on the ceiling.

The dive itself had been cut into the side of the cliff. The solid rock of the ceiling had not been disguised or masked.

At first glance, Ronson thought his eyes were deceiving him. The solid stone itself seemed to be in motion. A sort of melting, shifting flow seemed to be taking place as if the molecules and perhaps even the atoms themselves were dissolving.

"That's atomic disintegration, or atomic shifting, under control!" Sam Crick gasped.

"It's a mirage," Jennie Ware whispered. "It must be."

"If it's a mirage, everybody in the place is seeing it," Ronson said.

There was not a sound in the huge room. The waiters had come to attention like trained soldiers. The females had abruptly lost all interest in what they were doing. Out of the corner of his eyes, Ronson saw one female make a sudden darting movement across the room. One foot touched the circle on the floor as she ran. She took two more steps and fell, sagging downward as if every muscle in her body had suddenly refused to function. She lay on the floor without moving. Not a head was turned toward her, not a Martian moved to help her. In her action Ronson saw one reason why the

Martians avoided the circle on the floor. Something was definitely wrong with that circle. Looking at the roof, he saw the reason.

The flowing, shifting movement there had formed into a circle the same size as the circle on the floor and directly above it. Little flickers of light, like the discharge of high frequency currents, were flowing between the two circles. Swiftly the flickers of light became an opaque cylinder of misty flame extending from the ceiling to the floor.

From the opaque cylinder of light, a Martian stepped.

Without quite knowing how he knew it, Ronson knew that this was Les Ro's Messenger.

The Messenger was old, perhaps as old as the granite mountain above them, if the network of fine wrinkles on his face were an accurate indication of his age. With age, calmness and serenity had come to this Martian. His eyes gave the impression that they had seen everything. What they had not seen, the brain behind them had imagined. Peace was in the eyes and on the face, the deep peace that many human saints had sought and had found.

"I like him," Jennie Ware whispered.

The Messenger carried himself with a sureness that was full of meaning. He glanced around the room. His eyes settled on the three humans at the table. A sort of a glow appeared on his face, lighting it as if with a halo. He moved toward them, stopped and stood looking down at them. For a moment, his face was blank, and even his eyes seemed to be withdrawn.

"ESP!" Crick whispered. "Guard your thinking."

The eyes flicked toward Crick, then came to Ronson. The human felt a touch that was feather-light appear in his brain. It seemed to run like lightning through the nerve cells. Then it was withdrawn. The smile came back to the face of the Messenger.

"Les Ro has waited a long time for one like you, my son. He will see you." The voice was deep and pleasant. Somewhere in it were tones that were bell pure.

Ronson rose to his feet.

"Watch it!" Crick whispered. "This may not be on the up and up."

"I came here to see Les Ro." Ronson answered. "I'm not going to back out now. Which way do I go?" The last was spoken to the Messenger.

The Martian bowed. The wave of his hand indicated the cylinder of misty radiance flowing from the ceiling to the floor. "Just step into the light, my son."

"Jim!" Jennie's voice had a frantic plea in it.

"May my friends go with me?" Ronson said.

The Messenger shook his head. His face said he was very sorry but that the answer was no. "I have no instructions for them. Only you, my son. Les Ro has waited very long for someone like you."

Ronson did not know whether he was pleased or not. But he knew he was greatly excited. If the rumors had been right, if the grapevine had reported correctly, something was here in the heart of the Martian mountain that had never existed before in the solar system—and perhaps not in the universe. He stepped boldly into the opaque radiance.

To Jennie Ware and Sam Crick it looked as if he had stepped out of existence.

To Jim Ronson, when he stepped into the light, it seemed to him that millions of tiny hands instantly grasped him. They lifted him upward. It seemed as if they changed directions, but he could not be sure of that. The motion stopped. He felt a firm substance under his feet. The tiny hands released him, the opaque light fell away from him. He was standing in the center of a circle in a room cut out of solid stone, a room that had no exit and no entrance except the one under his feet, the solid stone floor through which the microscopic hands had lifted him.

Panic came up in him then and his hand dived for the gun in his coat pocket. It came away empty. The gun had been removed without his knowledge on the transit upward. Examination revealed that every

bit of metal had been removed from his pockets. Only his wrist watch had been left and that apparently because the metal strap around his wrist had resisted removal. Automatically he pushed the button on the side of the watch. On the dial the tiny green light glowed. Neither the light that had lifted him upward nor this room contained lethal radiations. The sight of the green light made him feel better. But not much. Sweat appeared on his skin as he waited. Inside his chest, he felt his heart begin to speed up its beating.

Light danced in the wall. The stone seemed to dissolve. The Messenger came through. The wrinkles on the fine face glowed like ivory at the sight of Ronson.

"I hope you will forgive me for keeping you waiting. Other—ah—tasks demanded my attention at the moment."

"It's quite all right. Finding myself here unexpectedly was a little hard on my nerves but the chance to see Les Ro will be worth the shock to my nervous system. I assume this is the way." Ronson moved toward the light dancing on the wall, then stopped as he saw the Martian was not following. "What's wrong?"

The smile was gone from the face of the Messenger. "One must prove himself worthy of seeing Les Ro."

"Eh?" A little touch of fear came up in the human. "Worthy?"

"Also, it would be well to tell me why you want to see Les Ro. I will carry your request to him."

"But you said Les Ro wanted to see me, that he had waited a long time for someone like me. Though how he knows anything about me—" Ronson's voice went into uneasy silence. Had the grapevine reported his coming here? Or had Crick's whisper about extra-sensory perception in operation had some basis in fact?

"I said Les Ro waited a long time for someone **like** you." For a moment hope showed on the wrinkled face. "But not necessarily for you. You have certain qualities that Les Ro seeks, but until you have proved that you have other qualities as well—" Sadness replaced the hope. "Tell me what you seek here?"

Ronson felt rebellion come up in him. Then he remembered that on Mars the only law protecting humans was what they could make and enforce for themselves. "Rumors have reached us on Earth of Les Ro's great accomplishments. It is our hope that we can share our knowledge, pool our discoveries. It is our belief that great advances can come from this sharing—for both humans and Martians."

Ronson spoke quietly. Only the tone of his voice expressed the very deep and very real feeling he was putting into words. Yet in the quietly spoken words his dream was expressed—and the dream of every real scientist in the history of Earth—of progress, of forward motion, of leaving behind them a world a little better than the one they had known. Once this dream had been only for humans. Now it included Martians too, and every other race within the solar system.

The Messenger smiled at the words. But under the smile was concern.

"Do you mean that you humans still face problems that you cannot solve? But you have made tremendous scientific advances, much greater than we of Mars have made. Space flight is only one illustration—"

"Unfortunately, many of our scientific advances have brought more problems than they have solved." Grimness crept into Ronson's voice "Before atomic energy was released, it was prophesied that the release of this energy would solve all the problems of our planet. This was over two hundred years ago. We are still striving to regain the losses suffered in the first and second atomic wars."

"Wars?" The face of the Martian showed amazement. "You humans are fools."

"We are trying to stop being fools. Or some of us are. But something seems to defeat our efforts."

"Yes." Keen interest showed on the face of the Martian. "Do you have this problem too? I wonder if it's the same something—"

"We live in the same universe."

"Can you state the problem more exactly?"

"I can give you an illustration of it. At the same time, I will give you my reason for being here." Ronson took a deep breath, considered the words he was going to use. "I'm a bio-physicist. This means that my specialty is the living cell and the changes that can and do take place in it. We have a name for one of the changes that may take place there—cancer."

"A disease."

"Yes. And a very serious one. Often tied up with radioactivity, it is a change that takes place in the interior of a living cell."

"I know—"

"No less than eight times in the past hundred years, human doctors have found a cure for this mutation within the cell. Each cure worked, perfectly, for a time."

"And then—"

"Then this something defeated their efforts. A change took place. A new form of cancer appeared, which did not yield to the treatment that had been effective previously." Ronson found his breathing was becoming heavier.

The Messenger moved up and down the cell, pacing, his right hand rubbing his chin. "Yes, it is the same something. Les Ro has talked of it often. It has defeated even him. He calls it **change**. There seems to be a law in this universe against anything remaining the same—But why did you come here? Do you seek a new way to cure this disease called cancer?"

"Yes. A permanent way. A way that goes behind the law of change."

"Do you think you could find such a thing here?"

"Yes. And here I have proof. Detailed reports from human physicians at Mars Port. In three instances, Martian patients admitted to the human hospital there were found to be suffering from inoperable cancer. Each was discharged, as incurable. Within the following two years, each patient returned to the hospital there, one to have a knife wound treated, a second to have a broken bone set, a third because of injuries suffered in an accident. As soon as they were admitted,

the records were checked, and the previous diagnosis of cancer was found. Each case of cancer had been cured. Each Martian told the same story, that he had been here, and that Les Ro had cured the disease."

"And you came here seeking the ninth solution from Les Ro for your people?"

"Yes. And for one other reason."

"Eh?"

"The cancer I am trying hardest to cure is—here." Very gently, Jim Ronson rubbed his chest. At the action, and at his thought, his heart picked up an anxious beat.

For an instant, the face of the Martian showed blank astonishment. Compassion followed the astonishment, a flood of it. "My son!" The voice had pity and understanding and sympathy in it. "Les Ro will see you."

"Good!" Relief surged up inside Jim Ronson. He had travelled many a weary mile for this moment. He had faced frustration and despair. The best doctors on Earth had told him they could do nothing for him. Now, here, in the heart of a mountain near the south pole of Mars—

"Follow me," the Messenger said.

The wall swirled in front of him. He stepped into the misty opaqueness and Ronson followed him. Inside the light, the human felt the millions of microscopic hands take hold of him. Their touch was gentle and caressing, softly tender. Suddenly their touch was firm and strong. He felt them seize his clothing and rip it from his body. Their gentle, caressing touch was gone. In its place was an almost manic fury. A scream ripped involuntarily from his throat.

The scream was flung into complete silence. No echo of it came back to his ears.

Blackness beat at him, flowed in over him, flowed through him. The blackness ransacked every nook and corner of his body. It probed to the bottom of his soul.

It swallowed him whole. It dissected his consciousness, tore it to shreds, then yanked away even the shreds. He seemed to be falling into a black hole that had no end.

Ronson did not know how long the blackness lasted. The first sense to come back was hearing. Somewhere near him he heard a grunt. Then the sense of feeling came back and he realized he was lying naked on sand. He didn't much want to open his eyes. Finally he forced them open. His vision was blurred and vague. When it cleared he saw the source of the grunt.

The sound had come from Tal Bock, squatting on the sand near him. Tal Bock was also naked. Unlike Ronson, the millions of microscopic hands in the darkness had not left even a wrist watch on the Martian.

"Happy—ah—wind time," Ronson said. Tal Bock grunted, but did not answer.

"Where are we?"

"Hell," Tal Bock said. He got up and walked into the shrubbery behind him.

Ronson rose. He was shaky, his legs seemed too long to reach the sand, a subjective impression that almost amused him, but didn't quite. To the left another Martian was squatting cross-legged on the sand. Ronson looked, then looked again. He moved toward the Martian to make certain.

It was the leper who had been on the street outside the dive. Without the rags, the Martian was hardly recognizable. The sores provided a certain means of identification. There was no mistaking them.

"How did you get here?" Ronson asked.

The leper made a weak gesture with his hands which said, "Go away." His attitude was resigned but about his manner was an air of expectancy.

Ronson discovered that the place in which he had found himself was a cavern about half a mile in diameter. It was adequately lighted though the light sprang from no source that he could detect. The place was pleasant enough. There was water here. It flowed in little

rills set in stonework. Grass and desert shrubs grew here. The air was moist, with a fragrant sweetness somewhere about it.

Something was in the air besides the moisture and the fragrant sweetness. It was intangible, almost imperceptible. Ronson cocked his head, trying to catch this something. It was always out of the range of his sensory perception, an intangible, elusive quality that perplexed him.

"Subliminal," he thought. "Maybe super-sonic sound just above the range of hearing."

Why super-sonic sound? He did not know. He felt dazed. There was a heavy feeling through his whole body. Why was he here? He had been told he would see Les Ro. There was also talk about a man proving if he was worthy—

He did not like this thinking. He tried to shut it off, but it was a persistent gadfly that returned to buzz again and again in his brain.

The out-of-hearing sound seemed to buzz with it, slipping in and out of hearing too fast for the mind to grasp it. Each time it slipped into hearing for the fractional part of a second, it brought a flick of agony with it. At the touch, he became almost giddy. Alarm bells rang suddenly inside his head. The note went out of hearing again, the giddiness passed, the alarm bells went into silence.

In the shrubbery ahead of him, a figure moved—Kus Dorken.

Two of the worst killers on Mars were here in this place. A leper. A human. Unease came up inside Jim Ronson, a sharp stab of it. Inside his chest a surge of pain broke through the barriers he had erected around it, reminding him of what was there.

He had come here seeking relief for that surge of pain. Instead of getting what he had asked for, he had been thrust into place. With two killers and a leper and—A shout broke into his thinking. A Martian was running along the walls, seeking for an exit. It was Te Hold. Te Hold had recovered from the effect of the thormoline and had been brought here. Ronson watched the Martian run along the walls, searching desperately for a way out. Te Hold screamed as he ran but he didn't find an exit. The screams died out as he reached

the far end of the oval, then grew stronger as he came back again upon his own steps.

Kus Dorken slid out of sight. Tal Bock was somewhere in that shrubbery too, where, Ronson didn't know. And didn't care. A feeling of hopelessness was coming up in him. He moved back to the leper, squatted on the sand beside the man, asked a question.

The leper's eyes flicked at him in response but there was no other answer. An ecstasy was in the eyes now. The leper was so lost in this ecstasy that such things as grunted noises from a member of an alien race made no impression on him. Ronson envied him. The leper was close to death but he was so lost in some inner ecstasy that death was unimportant to him.

"Did Les Ro's Messenger promise you that you would be cured of your leprosy?" Ronson asked, persisting.

The leper nodded. Again his hand waved in the "Go away," gesture.

"Go away and let you die in peace?" Ronson said.

"Just go away," the leper answered.

Ronson rose to his feet, angry. What farce was being perpetrated here? What—The super-sonic note came into hearing. Pain stabbed at his chest.

He lifted his hand involuntarily. The sight of the dial on his wrist watch forced itself through the pulses of pain.

As a part of his research into cell structure, Ronson had worked extensively with radioactivity. In order to protect himself, he had had a microscopically small radiation detector built into the watch itself. Three tiny glow tubes were set into the dial. If the green tube glowed, radiation was present but was safe. If the amber light glowed, be wary. If the red light glowed, **get out fast!**

The red light was glowing now. As Ronson stared, it winked out. Before he could take his eyes away from the dial, the red light flicked on again. The super-sonic note came with it. A flick of very real pain came with the note. The red light flicked out, the note vanished. The pain was gone.

"Regular pulsations of radiation are being poured through this place!" Ronson whispered.

It was being done deliberately. The whole cavern was being flooded periodically with bursts of radiation. This meant deliberate intention, purpose, plan. He did not know what impact this radiation might have on Martian flesh but he could guess the effect it might have on human tissue.

Fear came up in him, a flood of it. Anger followed it. The lights on his watch danced. Pain, agony, and the shrill note of the super-sonic came again. Grimly, he began to prowl the cavern, searching for the source of the radiations. The radiation counter in his watch led him to it, by the increased intensity of its glow. The radiations were coming from a single spot in the wall of the cavern. So far as he could tell, the wall was solid stone at this place, but he had seen solid stone walls dissolve in this madhouse. Behind this spot there was intelligent direction of the bursts of radiation.

Back there Les Ro, or someone with him, was playing games of life and death with—

Te Hold came past him, screaming. The Martian was beginning to stumble as he ran. The screams were only gasping sounds in his throat.

Voices rose in shouted argument somewhere in the shrubbery. Ronson moved away.

"What's going on there?" he asked the leper.

"Tal Bock—and Kus Dorken—have disagreed—as to which is the bigger killer—and therefore which is the more worthy. They fight—to decide the problem."

The words were quietly spoken. The tone said the matter was of no importance. After he had finished speaking, the leper's eyes went back to the inner ecstasy that he seemed to be watching. Or was it **future** ecstasy that he was imagining?

"I hope there is a heaven for Martians," Ronson said. So far as he knew, only in heaven could this leper's health be restored. Was the

same true for him?

Voices screamed in the shrubbery. Giving ground before the heavy blows Tal Bock was striking at him, Kus Dorken came stumbling backward. He slipped in the sand and fell heavily. Tal Bock leaped at him. Kus Dorken screamed once, a sound that gasped into silence as Tal Bock's fingers closed over his throat. For a time, they thrashed in the sand. Then Kus Dorken went limp. Viciously Tal Bock slapped his foe across the face. When there was no response, he poured sand into Kus Dorken's mouth, scooping it up in handfuls and cramming it down his foe's gullet.

Tal Bock got to his feet. The scream that ripped from his lips was pure triumph. Utterly naked, he stood beside the body of his victim, shaking his fist at the roof of the cavern, screaming defiance at the universe.

Ronson fervidly hoped that the radiation flowing through the Martian would strike him dead. The scream went into silence. Tal Bock's gaze fell on the leper, he moved in that direction. Viciously he kicked the leper.

The sick Martian slipped from his squatting position and lay inert.

Ronson moved forward. With all the strength that he possessed, he hit Tal Bock behind the ear. As he struck the blow, the super-sonic note screamed through him.

Ronson's blow knocked Tal Bock sprawling. Like a gigantic cat, the Martian came to his feet.

Ping!

Tal Bock moved toward Ronson in little short steps. He was like a cat getting ready to pounce. The grin on his face said he was going to anticipate destroying this human.

Ping!

Tal Bock lost his footing. He fell heavily and tried to rise. A confused expression was on his face. The effort to rise was more than he could manage. Collapsing, he lay without moving.

"Jim! Here! Quick!" The voice came from the shrubbery. His first thought was that he was hallucinating. Jennie Ware and Sam Crick could not be there in that shrubbery, fully clothed, Jennie beckoning frantically to him, Crick with a needle gun in his hand.

They came to him, on the run. Jennie caught one arm, Crick caught the other. Supporting him between them, they ran through the shrubbery. In the opposite wall, a hole showed, an honest opening, not a light-swirling mirage. Inside it, Crick swung shut a door. A Martian lay on the floor of the tunnel.

"How—how did you get here?" Ronson gasped.

Crick nodded to the Martian on the floor. "We persuaded Tocko to bring us. He knew a little more about this place than he ever let on. After he brought us here, we gave him a needle, to keep him quiet while we rescued you." The tall adventurer grinned as he spoke.

"Come on, Jim. We know the way out of here. If we get out before they discover what has happened—" The girl was all frantic motion moving toward escape.

"I'm not going," Ronson said.

"What?" the girl gasped.

Ronson turned to Crick. "Do you have an extra gun?"

"Of course. But, Jim—"

"Lend it to me, will you? I may need it before I'm finished here."

"Eh?" Crick was startled.

Ronson explained what he meant. Crick's face grew grim. He took an extra needle gun out of his coat pocket. "I guess maybe you could use a little help on this job, Jim. Eh, Jennie?" He glanced at the girl.

Fear was on her face. She wanted to run, to get away, forever, from this place of horror. But some things were more important than running.

"We'll make it a threesome," she said.

"Good girl!" Ronson spoke.

A passage circled the oval cavern. With Ronson in the lead, they followed it until they came to the spot from which the radiations were being poured into the cavern. Here was a large room. The passage led directly into it.

Inside the room was a tremendous array of complex electrical apparatus. Ronson had never seen anything as good as this in even the best laboratories back on Earth. He could not even guess the purpose of most of the equipment, it had been designed by a Martian mind and constructed by Martian hands—with a Martian goal in view.

Set in the middle of the room were the control panels of the equipment. Directly above the panels was a smoky visio screen that revealed dimly what was happening in the cavern. Just rising from his place at the controls was—the Messenger.

He looked up and into the muzzle of the needle gun Ronson was holding. A tiny startled reaction played across his poised face, disturbing the many wrinkles there, then was gone. A smile replaced it.

"Ah, yes. I had just discovered you were missing and I was starting to look for you."

Behind him, Ronson heard Jennie Ware catch her breath. He knew she was thinking that they should have run while they had the chance.

"We saved you the trouble, Les Ro," Ronson said.

The startled reaction was more pronounced this time. "You guessed?"

"That Les Ro and his Messenger were one and the same? It was obvious when you did not need to communicate what I had said to Les Ro. How many others are here with you?"

The question was important. Their own survival depended on the number of Martians here.

The startled reaction was very real this time. "No one else is here?"

"You are alone!"

"I am alone. Many times I have longed—"

"Watch him Jim." Crick whispered. "This doesn't smell right to me."

"Do you mean to tell me that you alone built this apparatus?" Ronson gestured toward the array of equipment in the room.

"This? This is only a part. It was a long task. Many weary years I have spent here—"

"He's telling the truth, Jim," Jennie Ware whispered.

"But one pair of hands, to build all of this." Shock was in Ronson, perhaps even greater shock than he had experienced in the cavern. He stared at Les Ro. Respect was in him and admiration, if not liking. "Then you are indeed a genius. The rumors were partly right, after all."

"Thank you."

"But why couldn't you get someone to help you?"

Sadness showed on Les Ro's face. "You have seen the people in the drinking room below. Which of them could understand how an electron circles in its orbit? Many times I have tried to train the brightest of them. The result was inevitable failure. That is why, when you came—" Longing came into Les Ro's eyes.

"Watch him, Jim," Crick whispered.

"I know it doesn't track," Ronson said. His voice grew grim and hard. Bitterness boiled in it. He was facing his own frustration here, in the failure of his deep hopes in coming to this place. A touch of pain moving through his chest told him what that failure meant to him. He gestured toward the cavern. "Out there I saw Martians destroying each other. In this, they were wiser than they knew. The ones who died quickly were lucky. The choice was between a quick death and slow, horrible death from the radiation pouring through that place."

Pain and consternation showed on Les Ro's face. He seemed to hear only Ronson's last words. "How did you detect the radiation?"

"With this." Ronson nodded toward his watch.

"This is wonderful. You humans actually have a reliable method of detecting radiation! I have striven so hard to build such a device. Let me see it." He moved toward Ronson as if nothing else were of any importance in comparison to the detector.

"Stand back. Kus Dorken and Te Hold and the leper would not have thought the radiation pouring through them was wonderful, if they had known about it. Nor will Tal Bock, before he dies."

Real pain darkened the fine patina of the Martian's face. "Do you really believe this of me?"

"I saw it happen," Ronson answered. "I was there. I saw Tal Bock destroy Kus Dorken—"

"One moment, please." Les Ro's hand moved among the controls. Ronson's hand tightened on the trigger. He held off firing. Somewhere a relay thudded home. Power surged. The wall in the front of the room began to glow with light.

"Wait, please! Wait!"

The leper came first through the swirling mistiness. He walked erect, his back straight and his head up. The light of eager anticipation was still in his eyes but something new had been added now—realization.

"But Tal Bock killed him. I saw it," Ronson whispered.

"No," Les Ro gently negated. "When Tal Bock attacked him, I put him into a trance condition, to save him."

Ronson hardly heard the answer. His eyes were fixed on something else. "The sores—" The sores were not gone but they had diminished in size. Replacing the rotten tissue, new flesh had already begun to form.

"This is what he asked, when he came to me," Les Ro said. "This is what he got."

"But this is a miracle."

Again Les Ro denied the statement. "This is natural law in operation, though to you the laws may be unknown. Watch."

The leper would have dropped to his knees and kissed Les Ro's hand, but the Martian forbade it, sending him to wait elsewhere.

Te Hold came through the swirling light—a Te Hold who was without fear. Then, Kus Dorken came. He was still spitting sand out of his mouth but the bluster and the bravado and the anger were gone from him. He was a new Kus Dorken. Inside, he had been subtly changed. Flowing outward, the change showed on his face as a gentle kindness.

"He was a killer when I saw him first," Jennie Ware said. "Now—he looks like a saint."

Les Ro smiled at her. "He will be a saint, from now on. He knows how to be one, now. As to Tal Bock, he has not yet recovered from your needles. When he does recover, he will come out of the cavern a saint too."

"But why didn't you tell me about this?" Ronson whispered. "Why did you just thrust me, and presumably the others too, in there without warning. Why didn't you tell us?"

"To have told you, might have defeated my purpose, or prolonged its achievement. I put all who come to me in the cavern. There, the killer will try to kill, the coward will run, the brave man will fight. As the killer tries to kill, he will use the reaction patterns he has known all his life. As he uses them, I throw bursts of energy at him. I disconnect the kill patterns. The energy penetrates right down to the levels of the cells, and even goes lower than that, changing old patterns—"

"New lamps for old," the girl whispered.

Ronson was silent. His thinking was perturbed, almost bewildered. What Les Ro had said made sense. Reaction patterns had to change down to and through the cellular level. If the patterns were struck by bursts of radiant energy—but this was the method nature used! This was the method of the **something** they had sought but which had always eluded them. The change in the cells that was

called cancer—again pain flicked through his chest—more often than not this change was brought about by radiant energy operating on cellular structure! Les Ro had organized this something, this wild talent of nature, and was making it do useful work.

"But it did not work for me," Ronson protested.

"Human cellular structure and Martian cellular structure are different," Les Ro answered. "This is the first opportunity I have had to work with humans. More time is needed to produce the changes in them. That is all." A beatific smile lit the face of the old Martian. It went slowly away as his eyes came to focus on the girl. Ronson turned, gasped when he saw what she was doing.

She was stripping herself. Without embarrassment and shame, she took off her clothes. She stood before them, naked.

"A human woman!" Les Ro said.

"Outside, I'm a woman," Jennie Ware answered. "But inside I've got more of the organization of a man than a woman. The result has been that all my life there's been a fight within me. Instead of being a woman, I have only succeeded in being a bitch, all jangle of nerves, always trying to do what the men did, but knowing I really couldn't, because I was a woman. I'm tired of this. I'm sick and tired of it!" Her voice grew frantic for a moment. Then she was calm again.

"I want to be a woman. Do you think that if I went in there—" she gestured toward the cavern, "that you could help me be a—woman?" The appeal in her eyes and in her voice begged for one answer.

"I have never worked with a human woman—"

"Then use me as a guinea pig!" As if the answer were predetermined, her chin up, with not a look behind her, she moved through the misty light and out of sight—like Eve stepping into the Garden of Eden in the dawn of a new world.

Les Ro's hands moved over the switches.

Jim Ronson dropped the needle gun. For a split second, he hesitated. Then he walked toward the swirling light.

Les Ro's voice stopped him. "When you are cured, my son, when you are finished in there, come back, and we will work together on the problems of your world and mine. This I have dreamed of since the first day I began work here, that someone with sufficient intelligence might come to work beside me."

Ronson smiled, nodded. As he stepped into the mistiness, Les Ro's face beamed at him, enhaloed, like a saint.

The girl was wandering through the shrubbery. She seemed not to see him but when he came into step beside her, she looked up and smiled. Arm in arm, they walked together, in a place that had been hell, but was now heaven, waiting for the miracle to take place within them. And little by little, in minute bursts of spurting quanta, Jim Ronson felt the pain in his chest go away.

The girl beside him was no longer the bitter harriden who had almost turned Pluto Dome upside down when she had been ejected from a space ship that never returned. She was no longer the unhappy roamer who had wandered the paths of the planets, defying all creation and herself. She was becoming something else—a woman. The fact showed in the gentleness of her smile.

His arm went around her and she came closer without hesitation. A glow came up inside of both them, and grew stronger.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ***

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