

Bernie the Faust

[by William Tenn](#)

That's what Ricardo calls me. I don't know what I am.

Here I am, I'm sitting in my little nine-by-six office. I'm reading notices of government surplus sales. I'm trying to decide where lies a possible buck and where lies nothing but more headaches.

So the office door opens. This little guy with a dirty face, wearing a very dirty, very wrinkled Palm Beach suit, he walks into my office, and he coughs a bit and he says:

"Would you be interested in buying a twenty for a five?"

That was it. I mean, that's all I had to go on.

I looked him over and I said, "*Wha-at?*"

He shuffled his feet and coughed some more. "A twenty," he mumbled. "A twenty for a five."

I made him drop his eyes and stare at his shoes. They were lousy, cracked shoes, lousy and dirty like the rest of him. Every once in a while, his left shoulder hitched up in a kind of tic. "I give you twenty," he explained to his shoes, "and I buy a five from you with it. I wind up with five, you wind up with twenty."

"How did you get into the building?"

"I just came in," he said, a little mixed up.

"You just *came in*," I put a nasty, mimicking note in my voice. "Now you just go right back downstairs and come the hell out. There's a sign in the lobby—NO BEGGARS ALLOWED."

"I'm not begging." He tugged at the bottom of his jacket. It was like a guy trying to straighten out his slept-in pajamas. "I want to sell you something. A twenty for a five. I give you ..."

"You want me to call a cop?"

He looked very scared. "No. Why should you call a cop? I haven't done anything to make you call a cop!"

"I'll call a cop in just a second. I'm giving you fair warning. I just phone down to the lobby and they'll have a cop up here fast. They don't want beggars in this building. This is a building for business."

He rubbed his hand against his face, taking a little dirt off, then he rubbed the hand against the lapel of his jacket and left the dirt there. "No deal?" he asked. "A twenty for a five? You buy and sell things. What's the matter with my deal?"

I picked up the phone.

"All right," he said, holding up the streaky palm of his hand. "I'll go. I'll go."

"You better. And shut the door behind you."

"Just in case you change your mind." He reached into his dirty, wrinkled pants pocket and pulled out a card. "You can get in touch with me here. Almost any time during the day."

"Blow," I told him.

He reached over, dropped the card on my desk, on top of all the surplus notices, coughed once or twice, looked at me to see if maybe I was biting. No? No. He trudged out.

I picked the card up between the nails of my thumb and forefinger and started to drop it into the wastebasket.

Then I stopped. A card. It was just so damned out of the ordinary—a slob like that with a card. A card, yet.

For that matter, the whole play was out of the ordinary. I began to be a little sorry I hadn't let him run through the whole thing. Listening to a panhandler isn't going to kill me. After all, what was he trying to do but give me an off-beat sales pitch? I can always use an off-beat sales pitch. I work out of a small office, I buy and sell, but half my stock is good ideas. I'll use ideas, even from a bum.

The card was clean and white, except where the smudge from his fingers made a brown blot. Written across it in a kind of ornate handwriting were the words *Mr. Ogo Eksar*. Under that was the name and the telephone number of a hotel in the Times Square area, not far from my office. I knew that hotel: not expensive, but not a fleabag either—somewhere just under the middle line.

There was a room number in one corner of the card. I stared at it and I felt kind of funny. I really didn't know.

Although come to think of it, why couldn't a panhandler be registered at a hotel? "Don't be a snob, Bernie," I told myself.

A twenty for a five, he'd offered. Man, I'd love to have seen his face if I'd said: Okay, give me the twenty, you take the five, and now get the hell out of here.

The government surplus notices caught my eye. I flipped the card into the wastebasket and tried to go back to business.

Twenty for five. What kind of panhandling pitch would follow it? I couldn't get it out of my mind!

There was only one thing to do. Ask somebody about it. Ricardo? A big college professor, after all. One of my best contacts.

He'd thrown a lot my way—a tip on the college building program that was worth a painless fifteen hundred, an office equipment disposal from the United Nations, stuff like that. And any time I had any questions that needed a college education, he was on tap. All for the couple, three hundred, he got out of me in commissions.

I looked at my watch. Ricardo would be in his office now, marking papers or whatever it is he does there. I dialed his number.

"Ogo Eksar?" he repeated after me. "Sounds like a Finnish name. Or maybe Estonian. From the eastern Baltic, I'd say."

"Forget that part," I said. "This is all I care about." And I told him about the twenty-for-five offer.

He laughed. "That thing again!"

"Some old hustle that the Greeks pulled on the Egyptians?"

"No. Something the Americans pulled. And not a con game. During the depression, a New York newspaper sent a reporter around the city with a twenty-dollar bill which he offered to sell for exactly one dollar. There were no takers. The point being, that even with people out of work and on the verge of starvation, they were so intent on not being suckers that they turned down an easy profit of nineteen hundred percent."

"Twenty for one? This was twenty for five."

"Oh, well, you know, Bernie, inflation," he said, laughing again. "And these days it's more likely to be a television show."

"Television? You should have seen the way the guy was dressed!"

"Just an extra, logical touch to make people refuse to take the offer seriously. University research people operate much the same way. A few years back, a group of sociologists began an investigation of the public's reaction to sidewalk solicitors in charity drives. You know, those people who jingle little boxes on street corners: *Help the Two-Headed Children, Relief for Flood-Ravaged Atlantis?* Well, they dressed up some of their students ..."

"You think he was on the level, then, this guy?"

"I think there is a good chance that he was. I don't see why he would have left his card with you, though."

"That I can figure—now. If it's a TV stunt, there must be a lot of other angles wrapped up in it. A giveaway show with cars, refrigerators, a castle in Scotland, all kinds of loot."

"A giveaway show? Well, yes—it could be."

I hung up, took a deep breath, and called Eksar's hotel. He was registered there all right. And he'd just come in.

I went downstairs fast and took a cab. Who knew what other connections he'd made by now?

Going up in the elevator, I kept wondering. How did I go from the twenty-dollar bill to the real big stuff, the TV giveaway stuff, without letting Eksar know that I was on to what it was all about? Well, maybe I'd be lucky. Maybe he'd give me an opening.

I knocked on the door. When he said, "Come in," I came in. But for a second or two I couldn't see a thing.

It was a little room, like all the rooms in that hotel, little and smelly and stuffy. But he didn't have the lights on, any electric lights. The window shade was pulled all the way down.

When my eyes got used to the dark, I was able to pick out this Ogo Eksar character. He was sitting on the bed, on the side nearest me. He was still wearing that crazy rumpled Palm Beach suit.

And you know what? He was watching a program on a funny little portable TV set that he had on the bureau. Color TV. Only it wasn't working right. There were no faces, no pictures, nothing but colors chasing around. A big blob of red, a big blob of orange, and a wiggly border of blue and green and black. A voice was talking from it, but all the words were fouled up. "*Wah-wah, de-wah, de-wah.*"

Just as I came in, he turned it off. "Times Square is a bad neighborhood for TV," I told him. "Too much interference."

"Yes," he said. "Too much interference." He closed up the set and put it away. I wished I'd seen it when it was working right.

Funny thing, you know? I would have expected a smell of liquor in the room, I would have expected to see a couple of empties in the tin trash basket near the bureau. Not a sign.

The only smell in the room was a smell I couldn't recognize. I guess it was the smell of Eksar himself, concentrated.

"Hi," I said, feeling a little uncomfortable because of the way I'd been with him back in the office. So rough I'd been.

He stayed on the bed. "I've got the twenty," he said. "You've got the five?"

"Oh, I guess I've got the five, all right," I said, looking in my wallet hard and trying to be funny. He didn't say a word, didn't even invite me to sit down. I pulled out a bill. "Okay?"

He leaned forward and stared, as if he could see—in all that dimness—what kind of a bill it was. "Okay," he said. "But I'll want a receipt. A notarized receipt."

Well, what the hell, I thought, a notarized receipt. "Then we'll have to go down. There's a druggist on Forty-fifth."

"Okay," he said, getting to his feet with a couple of small coughs that came one, two, three, four, right after one another. "The bathroom's out in the hall. Let me wash up and we'll go down."

I waited for him outside the bathroom, thinking that he'd grown a whole hell of a lot more sanitary all of a sudden.

I could have saved my worries. I don't know what he did in the bathroom, but one thing I knew for sure when he came out: soap and water had nothing to do with it. His face, his neck, his clothes, his hands—they were all as dirty as ever. He still looked like he'd been crawling over a garbage dump all night long.

On the way to the druggist, I stopped in a stationery store and bought a book of blank receipts. I filled out most of it right there. *New York, N.Y.* and the date. *Received from Mr. Ogo Eksar the sum of twenty dollars for a five-dollar bill bearing the serial number ... ..* "That okay?" I asked him. "I'm putting in the serial number to make it look as if you want that particular bill, you know, what the lawyers call the value-received angle."

He screwed his head around and read the receipt. Then he checked the serial number of the bill I was holding. He nodded.

We had to wait for the druggist to get through with a couple of customers. When I signed the receipt, he read it to himself, shrugged and went ahead and stamped it with his seal.

I paid him the two bits: I was the one making the profit.

Eksar slid a crisp new twenty to me along the glass of the counter. He watched while I held it up to the light, first one side, then the other.

"Good bill?" he asked.

"Yes. You understand: I don't know you, I don't know your money."

"Sure. I'd do it myself with a stranger." He put the receipt and my five-dollar bill in his pocket and started to walk away.

"Hey," I said. "You in a hurry?"

"No." He stopped, looking puzzled. "No hurry. But you've got the twenty for a five. We made the deal. It's all over."

"All right, so we made the deal. How about a cup of coffee?"

He hesitated.

"It's on me," I told him. "I'll be a big shot for a dime. Come on, let's have a cup of coffee."

Now he looked worried. "You don't want to back out? I've got the receipt. It's all notarized. I gave you a twenty, you gave me a five. We made a deal."

"It's a deal, it's a deal," I said, shoving him into an empty booth. "It's a deal, it's all signed, sealed and delivered. Nobody's backing out. I just want to buy you a cup of coffee."

His face cleared up, all the way through that dirt. "No coffee. Soup. I'll have some mushroom soup."

"Fine, fine. Soup, coffee, I don't care. I'll have coffee."

I sat there and studied him. He hunched over the soup and dragged it into his mouth, spoonful after spoonful, the living picture of a bum who hadn't eaten all day. But pure essence of bum, triple-distilled, the label of a fine old firm.

A guy like this should be lying in a doorway trying to say no to a cop's nightstick, he should be coughing his alcoholic guts out. He shouldn't be living in a real honest-to-God hotel, or giving me a twenty for a five, or swallowing anything as respectable as mushroom soup.

But it made sense. A TV giveaway show, they want to do this, they hire a damn good actor, the best money can buy, to toss their dough away. A guy who'll be so good a bum that people'll just laugh in his face when he tries to give them a deal with a profit.

"You don't want to buy anything else?" I asked him.

He held the spoon halfway to his mouth and stared at me suspiciously. "Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Like maybe you want to buy a ten for a fifty. Or a twenty for a hundred dollars?"

He thought about it, Eksar did. Then he went back to his soup, shoveling away. "That's no deal," he said contemptuously. "What kind of a deal is that?"

"Excuse me for living. I just thought I'd ask. I wasn't trying to take advantage of you." I lit a cigarette and waited.

My friend with the dirty face finished the soup and reached for a paper napkin. He wiped his lips. I watched him: he didn't smudge a spot of the grime around his mouth. He just blotted the drops of soup up. He was dainty in his own special way.

"Nothing else you want to buy? I'm here, I've got time right now. Anything else on your mind, we might as well look into it."

He balled up the paper napkin and dropped it into the soup plate. It got wet. He'd eaten all the mushrooms and left the soup.

"The Golden Gate Bridge," he said all of a sudden.

I dropped the cigarette. "What?"

"The Golden Gate Bridge. The one in San Francisco. I'll buy that. I'll buy it for ..." he lifted his eyes to the fluorescent fixtures in the ceiling and thought for a couple of seconds "... say a hundred and twenty-five dollars. Cash on the barrel."

"Why the Golden Gate Bridge?" I asked him like an idiot.

"That's the one I want. You asked me what else I want to buy—well, that's what else. The Golden Gate Bridge."

"What's the matter with the George Washington Bridge? It's right here in New York, it's across the Hudson River. It's a newer bridge. Why buy something all the way out on the coast?"

He grinned at me as if he admired my cleverness. "Oh, no," he said, twitching his left shoulder hard. Up, down, up, down. "I know what I want. The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. A hundred and a quarter. Take it or leave it."

"The *George Washington* Bridge," I argued, talking my head off just so I'd have a chance to think, "has a nice toll set-up, fifty cents a throw, and lots of traffic, plenty of traffic. I don't know what the tolls are on the Golden Gate, but I'm damn sure you don't have anywhere near the kind of traffic that New York can draw. And then there's maintenance. The Golden Gate's one of the longest bridges in the world, you'll go broke trying to keep it in shape. Dollar for dollar, location for location, I'd say the George Washington's a better deal for a man who's buying a bridge."

"The Golden Gate," he said, slamming the table with his open hand and letting a whole series of tics tumble through his face. "I want the Golden Gate and nothing but the Golden Gate. Don't give me a hard time again. Do you want to sell or don't you?"

I'd had a chance to think it through. And I knew that Ricardo's angle had been the angle. I was in.

"Sure I'll sell. If that's what you want, you're the doctor. But look—all I can sell you is my share of the Golden Gate Bridge, whatever equity in it I may happen to own."

He nodded. "I want a receipt. Put that down on the receipt."

I put it down on the receipt. And back we went. The druggist notarized the receipt, shoved the stamping outfit in the drawer under the counter and turned his back on us. Eksar counted out six twenties and one five from a big roll of bills, all of them starchy new. He put the roll back into his pants pocket and started away again.

"More coffee?" I said, catching up. "A refill on the soup?"

He turned a very puzzled look at me and kind of twitched all over. "Why? What do you want to sell now?"

I shrugged. "What do you want to buy? You name it. Let's see what other deals we can work out."

This was all taking one hell of a lot of time, but I had no complaints. I'd made a hundred and forty dollars

in fifteen minutes. Say a hundred and thirty-eight fifty, if you deducted expenses like notary fees, coffee, soup—all legitimate expenses, all low. I had no complaints.

But I was waiting for the big one. There had to be a big one.

Of course, it could maybe wait until the TV program itself. They'd be asking me what was on my mind when I was selling Eksar all that crap, and I'd be explaining, and they'd start handing out refrigerators and gift certificates at Tiffany's and ...

Eksar had said something while I was away in cloud-land. Something damn unfamiliar. I asked him to say it again.

"The Sea of Azov," he told me. "In Russia. I'll give you three hundred and eighty dollars for it."

I'd never heard of the place. I pursed my lips and thought for a second. A funny amount—three hundred and eighty. And for a whole damn sea. I tried an angle.

"Make it four hundred and you've got a deal."

He began coughing his head off, and he looked mad. "What's the matter," he said between coughs, "three hundred and eighty is a bad price? It's a small sea, one of the smallest. It's only 14,000 square miles. And do you know what the maximum depth is?"

I looked wise. "It's deep enough."

"Forty-nine feet," Eksar shouted. "That's all, forty-nine feet! Where are you going to do better than three hundred and eighty dollars for a sea like that?"

"Take it easy," I said, patting his dirty shoulder. "Let's split the difference. You say three eighty, I want four hundred. How about leaving it at three ninety?" I didn't really care: ten bucks more, ten bucks less. But I wanted to see what would happen.

He calmed down. "Three hundred and ninety dollars for the Sea of Azov," he muttered to himself, a little sore at being a sucker, at being taken. "All I want is the sea itself; it's not as if I'm asking you to throw in the Kerch Strait, or maybe a port like Taganrog or Osipenko ..."

"Tell you what." I held up my hands. "I don't want to be hard. Give me my three ninety and I'll throw in the Kerch Strait as a bonus. Now how about that?"

He studied the idea. He sniffled. He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "All right," he said, finally. "It's a deal. Azov *and* the Kerch Strait for three hundred ninety."

Bang! went the druggist's stamp. The bangs were getting louder.

Eksar paid me with six fifties, four twenties and a ten, all new-looking bills from that thick roll in his pants pocket.

I thought about the fifties still on the roll, and I felt the spit start to ball up in my mouth.

"Okay," I said. "Now what?"

"You still selling?"

"For the right price, sure. You name it."

"There's lots of stuff I could use," he sighed. "But do I need it right now? That's what I have to ask myself."

"Right now is when you've got a chance to buy it. Later—who knows? I may not be around, there may be other guys bidding against you, all kinds of things can happen." I waited a while, but he just kept scowling and coughing. "How about Australia?" I suggested. "Could you use Australia for, say, five hundred bucks? Or Antarctica? I could give you a real nice deal on Antarctica."

He looked interested. "Antarctica? What would you want for it? No—I'm not getting anywhere. A little piece here, a little piece there. It all costs so much."

"You're getting damn favorable prices, buddy, and you know it. You couldn't do better buying at wholesale."

"Then how about wholesale? How much for the whole thing?"

I shook my head. "I don't know what you're talking about. What whole thing?"

He looked impatient. "The whole thing. The world. Earth."

"Hey," I said. "That's a lot."

"Well, I'm tired of buying a piece at a time. Will you give me a wholesale price if I buy it all?"

I shook my head, kind of in and out, not yes, not no. Money was coming up, the big money. This was where I was supposed to laugh in his face and walk away. I didn't even crack a smile. "For the whole planet—sure, you're entitled to a wholesale price. But what is it, I mean, exactly *what* do you want to buy?"

"Earth," he said, moving close to me so that I could smell his stinking breath. "I want to buy Earth. Lock, stock and barrel."

"It's got to be a good price. I'll be selling out completely."

"I'll make it a good price. But this is the deal. I pay two thousand dollars, cash. I get Earth, the whole planet, and you have to throw in some stuff on the Moon. Fishing rights, mineral rights and rights to Moon-buried treasure. How about it?"

"It's a hell of a lot."

"I know it's a lot," he agreed. "But I'm paying a lot."

"Not for what you're asking. Let me think about it."

This was the big deal, the big giveaway. I didn't know how much money the TV people had given him to fool around with, but I was pretty sure two thousand was just a starting point. Only what was a sensible, businesslike price for the whole world?

I mustn't be made to look like a penny-ante chiseler on TV. There was a top figure Eksar had been given by the program director.

"You really want the whole thing," I said, turning back to him, "the Earth and the Moon?"

He held up a dirty hand. "Not all the Moon. Just those rights on it. The rest of the Moon you can keep."



"It's still a lot. You've got to go a hell of a lot higher than two thousand dollars for any hunk of real estate that big."

Eksar began wrinkling and twitching. "How—how much higher?"

"Well, let's not kid each other. This is the big time now! We're not talking about bridges or rivers or seas. This is a whole world and part of another that you're buying. It takes dough. You've got to be prepared to spend dough."

"How much?" He looked as if he were jumping up and down inside his dirty Palm Beach suit. People going in and out of the store kept staring at us. "How *much*?" he whispered.

"Fifty thousand. It's a damn low price. And you know it."

Eksar went limp all over. Even his weird eyes seemed to sag. "You're crazy," he said in a low, hopeless voice. "You're out of your head."

He turned and started for the revolving door, walking in a kind of used-up way that told me I'd really gone over the line. He didn't look back once. He just wanted to get far, far away.

I went through the door after him. I grabbed the bottom of his filthy jacket and held on tight.

"Look, Eksar," I said, fast, as he pulled. "I went over your budget, way over, I can see that. But you know you can do better than two thousand. I want as much as I can get. What the hell, I'm taking time out to bother with you. How many other guys would?"

That got him. He cocked his head, then began nodding. I let go of his jacket as he came around. We were connecting again!

"Good. You level with me, and I'll level with you. Go up a little higher. What's your best price? What's the best you can do?"

He stared down the street, thinking, and his tongue came out and licked at the side of his dirty mouth. His tongue was dirty, too. I mean that! Some kind of black stuff, grease or grime, was all over his tongue.

"How about," he said, after a while, "how about twenty-five hundred? That's as high as I can go. I don't have another cent."

I didn't think so. I've got a feeling when a guy says this is as high as he can go that actually he's prepared to go a little higher. Eksar wanted to make the deal real bad, but he couldn't resist pulling back just a little. He was the kind of guy, he could be absolutely dying of thirst, ready to kick off in a second if he didn't get something to drink. You offer him a glass of water, and you say you want a buck for it. He looks at it with his eyes popping and his tongue all swollen, and he asks will you take ninety-five cents?

He was like me: he was a natural bargainer.

"You can go to three thousand," I urged. "How much is three thousand? Only another five hundred. Look what you get for it. Earth, the whole planet, and fishing and mineral rights and buried treasure, all that stuff on the Moon. How's about it?"

"I can't. I just can't. I wish I could." He shook his head as if to shake loose all those tics and twitches. "Maybe this way. I'll go as high as twenty-six hundred. For that, will you give me Earth and just fishing rights and buried treasure rights on the Moon? You keep the mineral rights. I'll do without them."

"Make it twenty-eight hundred, and you can have the mineral rights, too. You want them, I can tell you do. Treat yourself. Just two hundred bucks more, and you can have them."

"I can't have everything. Some things cost too much. How about twenty-six fifty, without the mineral rights and without the buried treasure rights?"

We were both really swinging now. I could feel it.

"This is my absolutely last offer," I told him. "I can't spend all day on this. I'll go down to twenty-seven hundred and fifty, and not a penny less. For that, I'll give you Earth, and just fishing rights on the Moon. Or just buried treasure rights. You pick whichever one you want."

"All right," he said. "You're a hard man: we'll do it your way."

"Twenty-seven fifty for the Earth, and either fishing or buried treasure rights on the Moon?"

"No, twenty-seven even, and no rights on the Moon. I'll forget about that. Twenty-seven even, and all I get is the Earth."

"Deal!" I sang out, and we struck hands. We shook on it.

Then, with my arm around his shoulders—what did I care about the dirt on his clothes when the guy was worth twenty-seven hundred dollars to me?—we marched back to the drug store.

"I want a receipt," he reminded me.

"Right," I said. "But I put the same stuff on it: that I'm selling you whatever equity I own or have a right to sell. You're getting a lot for your money."

"You're getting a lot of money for what you're selling," he came right back. I liked him. Twitches and dirt or not, he was my kind of guy.

We got back to the druggist for notarization, and, honest, I've never seen a man look more disgusted in my life. "Business is good, huh?" he said. "You two are sure hotting it up."

"Listen, you," I told him. "You just notarize." I showed the receipt to Eksar. "This the way you want it?"

He studied it, coughing. "Whatever equity you own or have a right to sell. All right. And put in, you know, in your capacity as sales agent, your professional capacity."

I changed the receipt and signed it. The druggist notarized.

Eksar brought that lump of money out of his pants pocket. He counted out fifty-four crisp new fifties and laid them on the glass counter. Then he picked up the receipt, folded it and put it away. He started for the door.

I grabbed the money up and went with him. "Anything else?"

"Nothing else," he said. "It's all over. We made our deal."

"I know, but we might find something else, another item."

"There's nothing else to find. We made our deal." And his voice told me he really meant it. It didn't have a trace of the tell-me-more whine that you've got to hear before there's business.

I came to a stop and watched him push out through the revolving door. He went right out into the street and turned left and kept moving, all fast, as if he was in a hell of a hurry.

There was no more business. Okay. I had thirty-two hundred and thirty dollars in my wallet that I'd made in one morning.

But how good had I really been? I mean, what was the top figure in the show's budget? How close had I come to it?

I had a contact who maybe could find out—Morris Burlap.

Morris Burlap is in business like me, only he's a theatrical agent, sharp, real sharp. Instead of selling a load of used copper wire, say, or an option on a corner lot in Brooklyn, he sells talent. He sells a bunch of dancers to a hotel in the mountains, a piano player to a bar, a disc jockey or a comic to late-night radio. The reason he's called Morris Burlap is because of these heavy Harris tweed suits he wears winter and summer, every day in the year. They reinforce the image, he says.

I called him from a telephone booth near the entrance and filled him in on the giveaway show. "Now, what I want to find out—"

"Nothing to find out," he cut in. "There's no such show, Bernie."

"There sure as hell is, Morris. One you haven't heard of."

"There's no such show. Not in the works, not being rehearsed, not anywhere. Look: before a show gets to where it's handing out this kind of dough, it's got to have a slot, it's got to have air time all bought. And before it even buys air time, a packager has prepared a pilot. By then I'd have gotten a casting call—I'd have heard about it a dozen different ways. Don't try to tell me my business, Bernie: when I say there's no such show, there's no such show."

So damn positive he was. I had a crazy idea all of a sudden and turned it off. No. Not that. No.

"Then it's a newspaper or college research thing, like Ricardo said?"

He thought it over. I was willing to sit in that stuffy telephone booth and wait: Morris Burlap has a good head. "Those damn documents, those receipts, newspapers and colleges doing research don't operate that way. And nuts don't either. I think you're being taken, Bernie. How you're being taken, I don't know, but you're being taken."

That was enough for me. Morris Burlap can smell a hustle through sixteen feet of rockwool insulation. He's never wrong. Never.

I hung up, sat, thought. The crazy idea came back and exploded.

A bunch of characters from outer space, say they want Earth. They want it for a colony, for a vacation resort, who the hell knows what they want it for? They got their reasons. They're strong enough and advanced enough to come right down and take over. But they don't want to do it cold.

You know, a big country wants to invade a small country, it doesn't start until there's at least a riot on the border. It gives them a legal leg. Even a big country needs a legal leg.

All right. These characters from outer space, maybe all they had to have was a piece of paper from just one genuine, accredited human being, signing the Earth over to them. No, that couldn't be right. *Any* piece of paper? Signed by *any* Joe Jerk?

I jammed a dime into the telephone and called Ricardo's college. He wasn't in. I told the switchboard girl it was very important: she said, all right, she'd ring around and try to spot him.

All that stuff, I kept thinking, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sea of Azov—they were as much a part of the hook as the twenty-for-a-five routine. There's one sure test of what an operator is really after: when he stops talking, closes up shop and goes away.

With Eksar, it had been the Earth. All that baloney about extra rights on the Moon! They were put in to cover up the real thing he was after, for extra bargaining power.

I go out to buy a shipment of small travel alarm clocks that I've heard a jobber is stuck with. Do I start arguing about the price of clocks? I do not. I tell the jobber I want to buy a truckload of folding ladies' umbrellas, maybe a couple of gross of alarm clocks, say travel alarms if he's got a nice buy in them, and can he do me any good in the men's wallet line?

That's what Eksar had worked on me. It was like he'd made a special study of how I operate. From me alone, he had to buy.

But why me?

All that stuff on the receipt, about my equity, about my professional capacity, what the hell did it mean? I don't own Earth; I'm not in the planet-selling business. You have to own a planet before you can sell it. That's law.

So what could I have sold Eksar? I don't own any real estate. Are they going to take over my office, claim the piece of sidewalk I walk on, attach the stool in the diner where I have my coffee?

That brought me back to my first question. Who was this "they"? Who the holy hell were "they"?

The switchboard girl finally dug up Ricardo. He was irritated. "I'm in the middle of a faculty meeting, Bernie. Call you back?"

"Just listen a second," I begged. "I'm in something, I don't know whether I'm coming or going. I've got to have some advice."

Talking fast—I could hear a lot of big-shot voices in the background—I ran through the story from the time I'd called him in the morning. What Eksar looked like and smelled like, the funny portable color TV he had, the way he'd dropped all those Moon rights and gone charging off once he'd been sure of the Earth. What Morris Burlap had said, the suspicions I'd been building up, everything. "Only thing is," I laughed a little to show that maybe I wasn't really serious about it, "who am I to make such a deal, huh?"

He seemed to be thinking hard for a while. "I don't know, Bernie, it's possible. It does fit together. There's the U.N. aspect."

"U.N. aspect? Which U.N. aspect?"

"The U.N. aspect of the situation. The—uh—study of the U.N. on which we collaborated two years ago." He was using double-talk because of the college people around him. But I got it. I got it.

Eksar must have known all along about the deal that Ricardo had thrown my way, getting rid of old, used-up office equipment for the United Nations here in New York. They'd given me what they called an authorizing document. In a file somewhere there was a piece of paper, United Nations stationery, saying that I was their authorized sales agent for surplus, second-hand equipment and installations.

Talk about a legal leg!

"You think it'll stand up?" I asked Ricardo. "I can see how the Earth is second-hand equipment and installations. But surplus?"

"International law is a tangled field, Bernie. And this might be even more complex. You'd be wise to do something about it."

"But what? What should I do, Ricardo?"

"Bernie," he said, sounding sore as hell, "I told you I'm in a faculty meeting, damn it! A *faculty* meeting!" And he hung up.

I ran out of the drug store like a wild man and grabbed a cab back to Eksar's hotel.

What was I most afraid of? I didn't know, I was so hysterical. This thing was too big-time for a little guy like me, too damn dangerously big-time. It would put my name up in lights as the biggest sellout sucker in history. Who could ever trust me again to make a deal? I had the feeling like somebody had asked me to sell him a snapshot, and I'd said sure, and it turned out to be a picture of the Nike Zeus, you know, one of those top-secret atomic missiles. Only this was worse: I'd sold out my whole goddamn world. I had to buy it back—I had to!

When I got to Eksar's room, I knew he was about ready to check out. He was shoving his funny portable TV in one of those cheap leather grips they sell in chain stores. I left the door open, for the light.

"We made our deal," he said. "It's over. No more deals."

I stood there, blocking his way. "Eksar," I told him, "listen to what I figured out. First, you're not human. Like me, I mean."

"I'm a hell of a lot more human than you, buddy boy."

"Oh, sure. You're a custom-built Cadillac and I'm a four-cylinder factory job. But you're not from Earth—that's my point. My point is why you want Earth. You can't personally need a—"

"I *don't* need it. I'm an agent. I represent someone."

And there it was, straight out, you are right, Morris Burlap! I stared into his fish eyes, practically pushing into my face. I wouldn't budge an inch if he killed me. "You're an agent for someone," I repeated slowly. "Who? What do they want Earth for?"

"That's their business. I'm an agent. I just buy for them."

"You work on a commission?"

"I'm not in business for my health."

*You sure as hell aren't in it for your health*, I thought. *That cough, those tics and twitches*—Then I realized what they meant. This wasn't the kind of air he was used to. Like if I go up to Canada, right away I'm down with diarrhea. It's the water or something.

The dirt on his face was a kind of suntan oil! A protection against our sunlight. Blinds pulled down, face smeared over—and dirt all over his clothes so they'd fit in with his face.

Eksar was no bum. He was anything but. I was the bum. Think, Bernie, I said to myself. Think and hustle

and operate like you never did before in your whole life. This guy took you, and big!

"How much you work on—ten percent?" No answer: he leaned his chest against mine, and he breathed and he twitched, he breathed and he twitched. "I'll top any deal you have, Eksar. You know what I'll give you? Fifteen percent! I'm the kind of a guy, I hate to see someone running back and forth for a lousy ten percent."

"What about ethics?" he said hoarsely. "I got a client."

"Look who's bringing up ethics! A guy goes out to buy the whole damn Earth for twenty-seven hundred! You call that ethics?"

Now he got sore. He set down the grip and punched his fist into his hand. "No, I call that business. A deal. I offer, you take. You go away happy, you feel you made out. All of a sudden, here you are back, crying you didn't mean it, you sold too much for the price. Too bad! I got ethics: I don't screw my client for a crybaby."

"I'm not a crybaby. I'm just a poor schnook trying to scratch out a living. But who are you? You're a big-time operator from another world with all kinds of gimmicks going for you, buttons you can press, angles I can't even begin to figure."

"You had these angles, these gimmicks, you wouldn't use them?"

"Certain things I wouldn't use, certain things I wouldn't do. Don't laugh, Eksar, I mean it. I wouldn't hustle a guy in an iron lung no matter how much of a buck was in it. And I wouldn't hustle a poor schnook with a hole-in-the-wall office and leave him looking like he's sold out his entire planet."

"Sold out isn't the word for it," he said. "That receipt you signed will stand up anywhere. We got the legal machinery to make it stand up, and we got other machinery, too, planet-size machinery. Once my client takes possession, the human race is finished, it's *kaput*, gone with the wind, forget about it. And you're Mr. Patsy."

It was hot in that hotel room doorway, and I was sweating like crazy. But I was feeling better. First that ethics pitch, now this routine of trying to scare the hell out of me. Maybe his deal with his client wasn't so good, maybe something else, but one thing I knew—Eksar wanted to do business with me. I grinned at him.

He got it. He changed color a little under all that dirt. "What's your offer, anyway?" he asked, coughing. "Name a figure."

"Well, I'll admit you're entitled to a profit. That's only fair. Let's say thirty-one hundred and five. The twenty-seven you paid, plus a full fifteen percent. Do we have a deal?"

"Hell no!" he screamed. "On all three deals, you got a total of thirty-two hundred and thirty dollars out of me—and you're offering thirty-one hundred five to buy it back? You're going down, buddy, you're going down instead of up! Get out of my way—I'm wasting time."

He turned a little and pushed me out of the way. I banged across the corridor. He was *strong!* I ran after him to the elevator—that receipt was still in his pocket.

"How much *do* you want, Eksar?" I asked him as we were going down. Get him to name a price, then I can bargain from it, I figured.

A shrug. "I got a planet, and I got a buyer for it. You, you're in a jam. The one in a pickle is the one

who's got to tickle."

The louse! For every one of my moves, he knew the countermove.

He checked out and I followed him into the street. Down Broadway we went, people staring at a respectable guy like me walking with such a Bowery-type character.

I threw up my hands and offered him the thirty-two hundred and thirty he'd paid me. He said he couldn't make a living out of shoving the same amount of money back and forth all day.

"Thirty-four, then? I mean, you know, thirty-four fifty?"

He didn't say anything. He just kept walking.

"You want it all?" I said. "Okay, take it all, thirty-seven hundred—every last cent. You win."

Still no answer. I was getting worried. I had to get him to name a figure, any figure at all, or I'd be dead.

I ran in front of him. "Eksar, let's stop hustling each other. If you didn't want to sell, you wouldn't be talking to me in the first place. You name a figure. Whatever it is, I'll pay it."

That got a reaction. "You mean it? You won't try to chisel?"

"How can I chisel? I'm over a barrel."

"Okay. It's a long, long trip back to where my client is. Why should I knock myself out when I can help somebody who's in trouble? Let's see—we need a figure that's fair for you and fair for me and fair all around. That would be—oh, say, sixteen thousand."

So there it was. I was booked for a thorough bath. Eksar saw my face and began laughing. He laughed himself into a coughing fit.

*Choke, you bastard, I thought, choke! I hope the air of this planet poisons you. I hope you get gangrene of the lungs.*

That sixteen thousand figure—it was exactly twice what I had in the bank. He knew my bank account cold, up to the last statement.

He knew my thoughts cold, too. "You're going to do business with a guy," he said, between coughs, "you check into him a little."

"Tell me more," I said sarcastically.

"All right. You got seven thousand, eight hundred and change. Two hundred more in accounts receivable. The rest you'll borrow."

"That's all I need to do—go into hock on this deal!"

"You can borrow a little," he coaxed. "A guy like you, in your position, with your contacts, you can borrow a little. I'll settle for twelve thousand. I'll be a good guy. Twelve thousand?"

"Baloney, Eksar. You know me so well, you know I can't borrow."

He looked away at the pigeon-green statue of Father Duffy in front of the Palace Theater. "The trouble is," he said in a mournful voice, "that I wouldn't feel right going back to my client and leaving you in such a

jam. I'm just not built that way." He threw back his twitching shoulders—you knew, he was about to take a beating for a friend, and he was proud of himself. "Okay, then. I'll take only the eight thousand you have and we'll call it square."

"Are you through, you mother's little helper you, you Florence Goddamn Nightingale? Then let me set you straight. You're not getting any eight thousand out of me. A profit, yes, a little skin I know I have to give up. But not every cent I own, not in a million years, not for you, not for Earth, not for anybody!"

I'd been yelling, and a cop walking by came in close for a look. I thought of calling out "Help! Police! Aliens invading us!" but I knew it was all up to me. I calmed down and waited until he went away, puzzled. But the Broadway we were all standing on—what would it look like in ten years if I didn't talk Eksar out of that receipt?

"Eksar, your client takes over Earth waving my receipt—I'll be hung high. But I've got only one life, and my life is buying and selling. I can't buy and sell without capital. Take my capital away, and it makes no difference to me who owns Earth and who doesn't."

"Who the hell do you think you're kidding?" he said.

"I'm not kidding anybody. Honest, it's the truth. Take my capital away, and it makes no difference if I'm alive or if I'm dead."

That last bit of hustle seemed to have reached him. Listen, there were practically tears in my eyes the way I was singing it. How much capital did I need, he wanted to know—five hundred? I told him I couldn't operate one single day with less than seven times that. He asked me if I was really seriously trying to buy my lousy little planet back—or was today my birthday and I was expecting a present from him? "Don't give your presents to me," I told him. "Give them to fat people. They're better than going on a diet."

And so we went. Both of us talking ourselves blue in the face, swearing by everything, arguing and bargaining, wheeling and dealing. It was touch and go who was going to give up first.

But neither of us did. We both held out until we reached what I'd figured pretty early we were going to wind up with, maybe a little bit more.

Six thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars.

That was the price over and above what Eksar had given me. The final deal. Listen, it could have been worse.

Even so, we almost broke up when we began talking payment.

"Your bank's not far. We could get there before closing."

"Why walk myself into a heart attack? My check's good as gold."

"Who wants a piece of paper? I want cash. Cash is definite."

Finally, I managed to talk him into a check. I wrote it out, he took it and gave me the receipts, all of them. The twenty for a five, the Golden Gate Bridge, the Sea of Azov—every last receipt I'd signed. Then he picked up his little satchel and marched away.

Straight down Broadway, without even a good-by. All business, Eksar was, nothing but business. He didn't look back once.



All business. I found out next morning he'd gone right to the bank and had my check certified before closing time. What do you think of that? I couldn't do a damn thing: I was out six thousand, one hundred and fifty dollars. Just for talking to someone.

Ricardo said I was a Faust. I walked out of the bank, beating my head with my fist, and I called up him and Morris Burlap and asked them to have lunch with me. I went over the whole story with them in an expensive place that Ricardo picked out. "You're a Faust," he said.

"What Faust?" I asked him. "Who Faust? How Faust?"

So naturally he had to tell us all about Faust. Only I was a new kind of Faust, a twentieth-century American one. The other Fausts, they wanted to know everything. I wanted to own everything.

"But I didn't wind up owning," I pointed out. "I got taken. Six thousand one hundred and fifty dollars worth I got taken."

Ricardo chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "O my sweet gold," he said under his breath. "O my sweet gold."

"What?"

"A quotation, Bernie. From Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. I forget the context, but it seems apt. '*O my sweet gold.*' "

I looked from him to Morris Burlap, but nobody can ever tell when Morris Burlap is puzzled. As a matter of fact, he looks more like a professor than Ricardo, him with those thick Harris tweeds and that heavy, thinking look. Ricardo is, you know, a bit too natty.

The two of them added up to all the brains and sharpness a guy could ask for. That's why I was paying out an arm and a leg for this lunch, on top of all my losses with Eksar.

"Morris, tell the truth. You understand him?"

"What's there to understand, Bernie? A quote about the sweet gold? It might be the answer, right there."

Now I looked at Ricardo. He was eating away at a creamy Italian pudding. Two bucks even, those puddings cost in that place.

"Let's say he was an alien," Morris Burlap said. "Let's say he came from somewhere in outer space. Okay. Now what would an alien want with U.S. dollars? What's the rate of exchange out there? How much is a dollar worth forty, fifty light years away?"

"You mean he needed it to buy some merchandise here on Earth?"

"That's exactly what I mean. But what *kind* of merchandise, that's the question. What could Earth have that he'd want?"

Ricardo finished the pudding and wiped his lips with a napkin. "I think you're on the right track, Morris," he said, and I swung my attention back to him. "We can postulate a civilization far in advance of our own. One that would feel we're not quite ready to know about them. One that has placed primitive little Earth strictly off limits—a restriction only desperate criminals dare ignore."

"From where come criminals, Ricardo, if they're so advanced?"

"Laws produce lawbreakers, Bernie, like hens produce eggs. Civilization has nothing to do with it. I'm

beginning to see Eksar now. An unprincipled adventurer, a star-man version of those cutthroats who sailed the South Pacific a hundred years or more ago. Once in a while, a ship would smash up against the coral reefs, and a bloody opportunist out of Boston would be stranded for life among primitive, backward tribesmen. I'm sure you can fill in the rest."

"No, I can't. And if you don't mind, Ricardo—"

Morris Burlap said he'd like another brandy. I ordered it. He came as close to smiling as Morris Burlap ever does and leaned toward me confidentially. "Ricardo's got it, Bernie. Put yourself in this guy Eksar's position. He wraps up his spaceship on a dirty little planet which it's against the law to be near in the first place. He can make some half-assed repairs with merchandise that's available here—but he has to buy the stuff. Any noise, any uproar, and he'll be grabbed for a Federal rap in outer space. Say you're Eksar, what do you do?"

I could see it now. "I'd peddle and I'd parlay. Copper bracelets, strings of beads, dollars—whatever I had to lay my hands on to buy the native merchandise, I'd peddle and I'd parlay in deal after deal. Until I'd run it up to the amount I needed. Maybe I'd get my start with a piece of equipment from the ship, then I'd find some novelty item that the natives would go for. But all this is *Earth* business know-how, *human* business know-how."

"Bernie," Ricardo told me, "Indians once traded pretty little shells for beaver pelts at the exact spot where the Stock Exchange now stands. Some kind of business goes on in Eksar's world, I assure you, but its simplest form would make one of our corporate mergers look like a game of patsy on the sidewalk."

Well, I'd wanted to figure it out. "So I was marked as his fish all the way. I was screwed and blued and tattooed," I mumbled, "by a hustler superman."

Ricardo nodded. "By a businessman's Mephistopheles fleeing the thunderbolts of heaven. He needed to double his money one more time and he'd have enough to repair his ship. He had at his disposal a fantastic sophistication in all the ways of commerce."

"What Ricardo's saying," came an almost-soft voice from Morris Burlap, "is the guy who beat you up was a whole lot bigger than you."

My shoulders felt loose, like they were sliding down off my arms. "What the hell," I said. "You get stepped on by a horse or you get stepped on by an elephant. You're still stepped on."

I paid the check, got myself together and went away.

Then I began to wonder if maybe this was really the story after all. They both enjoyed seeing me up there as an interplanetary jerk. Ricardo's a brilliant guy, Morris Burlap's sharp as hell, but so what? Ideas, yes. Facts, no.

So here's a fact.

My bank statement came at the end of the month with that canceled check I'd given Eksar. It had been endorsed by a big store in the Cortlandt Street area. I know that store. I've dealt with them. I went down and asked them about it.

They handle mostly marked-down, surplus electronic equipment. That's what they said Eksar had bought. A walloping big order of transistors and transformers, resistors and printed circuits, electronic tubes, wiring, tools, gimmicks like that. All mixed up, they said, a lot of components that just didn't go together. He'd given the clerk the impression that he had an emergency job to do—and he'd take as

close as he could get to the things he actually needed. He'd paid a lot of money for freight charges: delivery was to some backwoods town in northern Canada.

That's a fact, now, I have to admit it. But here's another one.

I've dealt with that store, like I said. Their prices are the lowest in the neighborhood. And why is it, do you think, they can sell so cheap? There's only one answer: because they buy so cheap. They buy at the lowest prices; they don't give a damn about quality: all they want to know is, how much mark-up? I've personally sold them job-lots of electronic junk that I couldn't unload anywhere else, condemned stuff, badly wired stuff, stuff that was almost dangerous—it's a place to sell when you've given up on making a profit because you yourself have been stuck with inferior merchandise in the first place.

You get the picture? It makes me feel rosy all over.

There is Eksar out in space, the way I see it. He's fixed up his ship, good enough to travel, and he's on his way to his next big deal. The motors are humming, the ship is running, and he's sitting there with a big smile on his dirty face: he's thinking how he took me, how easy it was.

He's laughing his head off.

All of a sudden, there's a screech and a smell of burning. That circuit that's running the front motor, a wire just got touched through the thin insulation, the circuit's tearing the hell out of itself. He gets scared. He turns on the auxiliaries. The auxiliaries don't go on—you know why? The vacuum tubes he's using have come to the end of their rope, they didn't have much juice to start with. *Blooie!* That's the rear motor developing a short-circuit. *Ka-pow!* That's a defective transformer melting away in the middle of the ship.

And there he is, millions of miles from nowhere, empty space all around him, no more spare parts, tools that practically break in his hands—and not a single, living soul he can hustle.

And here am I, walking up and down in my nine-by-six office, thinking about it, and *I'm* laughing my head off. Because it's just possible, it just could happen, that what goes wrong with his ship is one of the half-dozen or so job-lots of really bad electronic equipment that I personally, me, Bernie the Faust, that I sold to that surplus store at one time or another.

That's all I'd ask. Just to have it happen that way.

Faust. He'd have Faust from me then. Right in the face, Faust. On the head, splitting it open, Faust.

Faust he wants? *Faust* I'd give him!

The End