

## THE IRON STANDARD

Alien races didn't have to be either friendly or unfriendly; they could be stubbornly indifferent-with serious effect.

"So the ghost won't walk for a year-Venusian time," Thirkell said, spooning up cold beans with a disgusted air.

Rufus Munn, the captain, looked up briefly from his task of decockroaching the soup. "Dunno why we had to import these. A year plus four weeks, Steve. There'll be a month at space before we hit Earth again."

Thirkell's round, pudgy face grew solemn. "What happens in the meantime? Do we starve on cold beans?"

Munn sighed, glancing through the open, screened port of the spaceship Goodwill to where dim figures moved in the mists outside. But he didn't answer. Barton Underhill, supercargo and handy man, who had wangled his passage by virtue of his father's wealth, grinned tightly and said, "What d'you expect? We don't dare use fuel. There's just enough to get us home. So it's cold beans or nothing."

"Soon it will be nothing," Thirkell said solemnly. "We have been spendthrifts. Wasting our substance in riotous living."

"Riotous living!" Munn growled. "We gave most of our grub to the Venusians."

"Well," Underhill murmured, "they fed us-for a month."

"Not now. There's an embargo. What do they have against us, anyhow?"

Munn thrust back his stool with sudden decision. "That's something we'll have to figure out. Things can't go on like this. We simply haven't enough food to last us a year. And we can't live off the land-" He stopped as someone unzipped the valve screen and entered, a squat man with high cheekbones and a beak of a nose in a red-bronze face.

"Find anything, Redskin?" Underhill asked.

Mike Soaring Eagle tossed a plastisac on the table. "Six mushrooms. No wonder the Venusians use hydroponics. They have to. Only fungi will grow in this sponge of a world, and most of that's poisonous. No use, skipper."

Munn's mouth tightened. "Yeah. Where's Bronson?"

"Panhandling. But he won't get a fal." The Navaho- nodded towards the port. "Here he comes now."

After a moment the others heard Bronson's slow footsteps. The engineer came in, his face red as his hair. "Don't ask me," he murmured. "Don't say a word, anybody. Me, a Kerry man, trying to bum a lousy fal from a shagreen-skinned so-and-so with an iron ring in his nose like a Ubangi savage. Think of it! The shame will stay with me forever."

"My sympathy," Thirkell said. "But did you get any fais?"

Bronson glared at him. 'Would I have taken his dirty coins if he'd offered them?' the engineer yelled, his eyes bloodshot. "I'd have flung them in his slimy face, and you can take my word for it. I touch their rotten money? Give me some beans." He seized a plate and morosely began to eat.

Thirkell exchanged glances with Underhill. "He didn't get any money," the latter said.

Bronson started back with a snort. "He asked me if I belonged to the Beggars' Guild! Even tramps have to join a union on this planet!"

Captain Munn scowled thoughtfully. "No, it isn't a union, Bronson, or even much like the medieval guilds. The tarkoinars are a lot more powerful and a lot less principled. Unions grew out of a definite social and economic background, and they fill a purpose—a check-and-balance system that keeps building. I'm not talking about unions; on Earth some of 'em are good—like the Air Transport—and some are graft-ridden, like Undersea Dredgers. The tarkoinars are different. They don't fulfil any productive purpose. They just keep the Venusian system in its backwater."

"Yes," Thirkell said, "and unless we're members, we aren't allowed to work-at anything. And we can't be members till we pay the initiation fee—a thousand sofals."

"Easy on those beans," Underhill cautioned. 'We've only ten more cans."

There was silence. Presently Munn passed cigarettes.

'We've got to do something, that's certain," he said. 'We can't get food except from the Venusians, and they Won't give it to us. One thing in our favor: the laws are so arbitrary that they can't refuse to sell us grub—it's illegal to refuse legal tender."

Mike Soaring Eagle glumly sorted his six mushrooms. "Yeah. If we can get our hands on legal tender. We're broke-broke on Venus—and we'll soon be starving to death. If anybody can figure out an answer to that one—"

This was in 1964, three years after the first successful flight to Mars,

five years since Dooley and Hastings had brought their ship down in Mare Imbrium. The Moon, of course, was uninhabited, save by active but unintelligent algae. The big-chested, alert Martians, with their high metabolism and their brilliant, erratic minds, had been friendly, and it was certain that the cultures of Mars and Earth would not clash. As for Venus, till now, no ship had landed there.

The Goodwill was the ambassador. It was an experiment, like the earlier Martian voyage, for no one knew whether or not there was intelligent life on Venus. Supplies for more than a year were stowed aboard, dehydrates, plastibulbs, concentrates and vitamin foods, but every man of the crew had a sneaking hunch that food would be found in plenty on Venus.

There was food—yes. The Venusians grew it, in their hydroponic tanks under the cities. But on the surface of the planet grew nothing edible at all. There

was little animal or bird life, so hunting was impossible, even had the Earthmen been allowed to retain their weapons. And in the beginning it had seemed like a gala holiday after the arduous space trip-a year-long fete and carnival in an alien, fascinating civilization.

It was alien, all right. The Venusians were cOnservative. What was good enough for their remote ancestors was quite good enough for them. They didn't want changes, it seemed. Their current set-up had worked O.K. for centuries; why alter it now?

The Earthmen meant change-that was obvious.

Result: a boycott of the Earthmen.

It was all quite passive. The first month had brought no trouble; Captain Munn had been presented with the keys of the capital city, Vyring, on the outskirts of which the Goodwill now rested, and the Venusians brought food in plenty-odd but tasty dishes from the hydroponic gardens. In return, the Earthmen were lavish with their own stores, depleting them dangerously.

And the Venusian food spoiled quickly. There was no need to preserve it, for the hydroponic tanks turned out a steady, unfailing supply. In the end the Earthmen were left with a few weeks' stock of the food they had brought with them, and a vast pile of garbage that had been lusciously appetizing a few days before.

Then the Venusians stopped bringing their quick-spoiling fruits, vegetables and meat-mushrooms and clamped down. The party was over. They had no intention of harming the Earthmen; they remained carefully friendly. But from now on it was Pay as You're Served-and no checks cashed. A big meat-mushroom, enough for four hungry men, cost ten fals.

Since the Earthmen had no fals, they got no meat-mushrooms-nor anything else.

In the beginning it hadn't seemed important. Not until they got down to cases and began to wonder exactly how they could get food.

There was no way.

So they sat in the Goodwill eating cold beans and looking like five of the Seven Dwarfs, a quintet of stocky, short, husky men, big-boned and muscular, especially chosen for their physiques to stand the rigors of space flight-and their brains, also specially chosen, couldn't help them now.

It was a simple problem-simple and primitive. They, the representatives of Earth's mightiest culture, were hungry. They would soon be hungrier.

And they didn't have a fai-nothing but worthless gold, silver and paper currency. There was metal in the ship, but none of the pure metal they needed, except in alloys that couldn't be broken down.

Venus was on the iron standard.

"-there's got to be an answer," Munn said stubbornly, his hard-bitten, harsh face somber. He pushed back his plate with an angry gesture. "I'm going to

see the Council again."

"What good will that do?" Thirkell wanted to know. "We're on the spot, there's no getting around it. Money talks."

"Just the same, I'm going to talk to Jorust," the captain growled. "She's no fool."

"Exactly," Thirkell said cryptically.

Munn stared at him, beckoned to Mike Soaring Eagle and turned towards the valve. Underhill jumped up eagerly.

"May I go?"

Bronson gloomily toyed with his beans. "Why do you want to go? You couldn't even play a slot machine in Vyring's skid row-if they had slot machines. Maybe you think if you tell 'em your old man's a Tycoon of Amalgamated Ores, they'll break down and hand out meal tickets- eh?"

But his tone was friendly enough, and Underhill merely grinned. Captain Munn said, "Come along, if you want, but hurry up." The three men went out into the steaming mists, their feet sloshing through sticky mud.

It wasn't uncomfortably hot; the high winds of Venus provided for quick evaporation, a natural air conditioning that kept the men from feeling the humidity. Munn referred to his compass. The outskirts of Vyring were half a mile away, but the fog was, as usual, like pea soup.

On Venus it is always bird-walking weather. Silently the trio slogged on.

"I thought Indians knew how to live off the land," Underhill presently remarked to the Navaho. Mike Soaring Eagle looked at him quizzically. -

"I'm not a Venusian Indian," he explained. "Maybe I could make a bow and arrow and bring down a Venusian-but that wouldn't help, unless he had a lot of sofals in his purse."

"We might eat him," Underhill murmured. "Wonder what roast Venusian would taste like?"

"Find out and you can write a best seller when you get back home," Munn remarked. "If you get back home. Vyring's got a police force, chum." -

"Oh, well," Underhill said, and left it at that. "Here's the Water Gate. Lord-I smell somebody's dinner!"

"So do I," the Navaho grunted, "but I hoped nobody would mention it. Shut up and keep walking."

The wall around Vyring was in the nature of a dike, not a fortification. Venus was both civilized and unified; there were, apparently, no wars and no tariffs-a natural development for a world state. Air transports made

sizzling noises as they shot past, out of sight in the fog overhead. Mist shrouded the streets, torn into tatters by occasional huge fans. Vyring, shielded from the winds, was unpleasantly hot, except indoors where artificial air conditioning could be brought into use.

Underhill was reminded of Venice: the streets were canals. Water craft of various shapes and sizes drifted, glided or raced past. Even the beggars travelled by water. There were rutted, muddy footpaths beside the canals, but no one with a fal to his name ever walked.

The Earthmen walked, cursing fervently as they splashed through the muck. They were, for the most part, ignored.

A water taxi scooted towards the bank, its pilot, wearing the blue badge of his tarkoinar, hailing them. "May I escort you?" he wanted to know.

Underhill exhibited a silver dollar. "If you'll take this-sure." All the Earthmen had learned Venusian quickly; they were good linguists, having been chosen for this as well as other transplanetary virtues. The phonetic Venusian tongue was far from difficult.

It was no trouble at all to understand the taxi pilot when he said no.

"Toss you for it," Underhill said hopefully. "Double or nothing."

But the Venusians weren't gamblers. "Double what?" the pilot in-

quired. "That coin? It's silver." He indicated the silver, rococo filigree on the prow of his craft. "Junk!"

"This would be a swell place for Benjamin Franklin," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked. "His false teeth were made of iron, weren't they?"

"If they were, he had a Venusian fortune in his mouth," Underhill said.

"Not quite."

"If it could buy a full-course dinner, it's a fortune," Underhill insisted.

The pilot, eyeing the Earthmen scornfully, drifted off in search of wealthier fares. Munn, doggedly plodding on, wiped sweat from his forehead. Swell place, Vyring, he thought. Swell place to starve to death.

Half an hour of difficult hiking roused Munn to a slow, dull anger. If Jorust refused to see him, he thought, there was going to be trouble, even though they'd taken away his guns. He felt capable of tearing down Vyring with his teeth. And eating the more edible portions.

Luckily, Jorust was available. The Earthmen were ushered into her office, a big, luxurious room high above the city, with windows open to the cooling breezes. Jorust was skittering around the room on a high chair, equipped with wheels and some sort of motor. Along the walls ran a slanting shelf, like a desk and presumably serving the same function. It was shoulder-high, but Jorust's chair raised her to its level. She probably started in one corner in the morning, Munn thought, and worked her way around the room during the day.

Jorust was a slim, gray-haired Venusian woman with a skin the texture of fine shagreen, and alert black eyes that were wary now. She climbed down from her chair, gestured the men to seats, and took one herself. She lit a pipe that looked like an oversized cigarette holder, stuffing it with a cylinder of pressed yellow herbs. Aromatic smoke drifted up. Underhill sniffed wistfully.

"May you be worthy of your fathers," Jorust said politely, extending her six-fingered hand in greeting. "What brings you?"

"Hunger," Munn said bluntly. "I think it's about time for a showdown."

Jorust watched him inscrutably. "Well?"

"We don't like being pushed around."

"Have we harmed you?" the Council head asked.

Munn looked at her. "Let's put our cards on the table. We're getting the squeeze play. You're a big shot here, and you're either responsible or you know why. How about it?"

"No," Jorust said after a pause, "no, I'm not as powerful as you seem to think. I am one of the administrators. I do not make the laws. I merely see that they are carried out. We are not enemies."

"That might happen," Munn said grimly. "If another expedition comes from Earth and finds us dead-"

"We would not kill you. It is untraditional."

"You could starve us to death, though."

Jorust narrowed her eyes. "Buy food. Any man can do that, no matter what his race."

"And what do we use for money?" Munn asked. "You won't take our currency. We haven't any of yours."

"Your currency is worthless," Jorust explained. "We have gold and silver for the mining-it is common here. A difal-twelve fals-will buy a good deal of food. A sofal will buy even more than that."

She was right, of course, Munn knew. A sofal was one thousand seven hundred twenty-eight fals. Yeah!

"And how do you expect us to get any of your iron money?" he snapped.

"Work for it, as our own people do. The fact that you are from another world does not dispose of your obligatory duty to create through labor."

"All right," Munn pursued, "we're willing. Get us a job."

"What kind?"

"Dredging canals! Anything!"

"Are you a member of the canal dredgers' tarkoinar?"

"No," Munn said. "How could I have forgotten to join?" Jorust ignored the sarcasm. "You must join. All trades here have their tarkomars."

"Lend me a thousand sofals and I'll join one."

"You have tried that before," Jorust told him. "Our moneylenders reported that your collateral was worthless."

"Worthless! D'you mean to say we've nothing in our ship worth a thousand sofals to your race? It's a squeeze play and you know it. Our water purifier alone is worth six times that to you."

Jorust seemed affronted. "For a thousand years we have cleansed our water with charcoal. If we changed now, we would be naming our ancestors fools. They were not fools; they were great and wise."

"\Alhat about progress?"

"I see no need for it," Jorust said. "Our civilization is a perfect unit as it stands. Even the beggars are well fed. There is no unhappiness on Venus. The ways of our ancestors have been tested and found good. So why change?"

"But-" -

"We would merely upset the status quo if we altered the balance," Jorust said decisively, rising. "May you be worthy of your fathers' names."

"Listen-" Munn began.

But Jorust was back on her chair, no longer listening.

The three Earthmen looked at one another, shrugged and went out. The answer was definitely no.

"And that," Munn said, as they descended in the elevator, "is emphatically that. Jorust plans to have us starve to death. The word's out."

Underhill was inclined to disagree. "She's all right. As she said, she's just an administrator. It's the tcirkomars who are the pressure group here. They're a powerful bloc."

"They run Venus. I know." Munn grimaced. "It's difficult to understand the psychology of these people. They seem unalterably opposed to change. We represent change. So they figure they'll simply ignore us.,"'

"It won't work, '~ Underhill said. "Even if we starve to death, there'll be more Earth ships later."

"The same gag could work on them, too."

"Starvation? But-"

"Passive resistance. There's no law compelling Venusians to treat with Earthmen. They can simply adopt a closed-door policy, and there's not a

thing we can do about it. There's no welcome mat on Venus."

Mike Soaring Eagle broke a long silence as they emerged to the canal bank. "It's a variation of ancestor worship, their psychology. Transferred egotism, perhaps-a racial inferiority complex."

Munn shook his head. "You're drawing it a bit fine."

"All right, maybe I am. But it boils down to worship of the past. And fear. Their present social culture has worked for centuries. They want no intrusions. It's logical. If you had a machine that worked perfectly at the job for which it had been designed, would you want improvements?"

"Why not?" Munn said. "Certainly I would."

"Why?"

"Well-to save time. If a new attachment would make the machine double its production, I'd want that."

The Navaho looked thoughtful. "Suppose it turned out-say-refrigerators. There'd be repercussions. You'd need less labor, which would upset the economic structure."

"Microscopically."

"In that case. But there'd also be a change in the consumer's angle. More people would have refrigerators. More people would make homemade ice cream. Sales on ice cream would drop-retail sales. The wholesalers would buy less milk. The farmers would-"

"I know," Munn said. "For want of a nail the kingdom was lost. You're speaking of microcosms. Even if you weren't, there are automatic adjustments-there always are."

"An experimental, growing civilization is willing to stand for such adjustments," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out. "The Venusians are ultraconservative. They figure they don't need to grow or change any more. Their system has worked for centuries. It's perfectly integrated. Intrusion of anything might upset the apple cart. The tarko-inars have the power, and they intend to keep it." -

"So we starve," Underhill put in.

The Indian grinned at him. "Looks like it. Unless we can dope out some way of making money."

"We ought to," Munn said. "We were chosen for our I.Q., among other things."

"Our talents aren't too suitable," Mike Soaring Eagle remarked, kicking a stone into the canal. "You're a physicist. I'm a naturalist. Bronson's an engineer and Steve Thirkell's a sawbones. You, my useless young friend, are a rich man's son."

Underhill smiled in an embarrassed fashion. "Well, dad flame up the hard



way. He knew how to make money. That's what we need now, isn't it?"

"How did he clean up?"

"Stock market."

"That helps a lot," Munn said. "I think our best plan is to find some process the Venusians really need, and then sell it to them."

"If we could wireless back to Earth for help-" Underhill began.

"-then we'd have nothing to worry about," the Navaho ended.

"Unfortunately Venus has a Heaviside layer, so we can't wireless. You'd better try your hand at inventing something, skipper. But whether or not the Venusians will want it afterwards, I don't know."

Munn brooded. "The status quo can't remain permanently that way. It ain't sensible, as my grandfather used to say about practically everything. There are always inventors. New processes-they've got to be assimilated into the social set-up. I should be able to dope out a gadget. Even a good preservative for foods might do it."

"Not with the hydroponic gardens producing as they do."

"Urn-rn. A better mousetrap-something useless but intriguing. A one-armed bandit-"

"They'd pass a law against it."

"Well, you suggest something."

"The Venusians don't seem to know much about genetics. If I could produce some unusual foods by crossbreeding. . . eh?"

"Maybe," Munn said. "Maybe."

Steve Thirkell's pudgy face looked into the port. The rest of the party were seated at the table, scribbling on stylopads and drinking weak coffee.

"I have an idea," Thirkell said.

Munn grunted. "I know your ideas. What is it now?"

"Very simple. A plague strikes the Venusians and I find an antivirus that will save them. They will be grateful-"

"-and you'll marry Jorust and rule the planet," Munn finished. "Ha!"

"Not exactly," Thirkell went on imperturbably. "If they're not grateful, we'll simply hold out on the antitoxin till they pay up."

"The only thing wrong with that brainstorm is that the Venusians don't seem to be suffering from a plague," Mike Soaring Eagle pointed out.

"Otherwise it's perfect."

Thirkell sighed. "I was afraid you'd mention that. Maybe we could be unethical-just a little, you know-and start a plague. Typhoid or something."

"What a man!" the Navaho said admiringly. "You'd make a grand murderer, Steve."

"I have often thought so. But I didn't intend to go as far as murder. A painful, incapacitating disease-

"Such as?" Munn asked.

"Diphtheria?" the murderous physician suggested hopefully.

"A cheerful prospect," Mike Soaring Eagle muttered. "You sound like an Apache."

"Diphtheria, beriberi, leprosy, bubonic plague," Pat Bronson said violently. "I vote for all of 'em. Give the nasty little frogs a taste of their own medicine. Wallop 'em good."

"Suppose we let you start a mild plague," Munn said. "Something that couldn't conceivably be fatal-how would you go about it?"

"Pollute the water supply or something. . . eh?"

"S,?S.That with?"

Thirkell suddenly looked heartbroken. "Oh! Oh!"

Munn nodded. "The Goodwill isn't stocked for that sort of thing. We're germless. Antiseptic inside and out. Have you forgotten the physical treatment they gave us before we left?"

Bronson cursed. "Never will I forget that-a hypo every hour! Antitoxins, shots, ultraviolet X-rays, till my bones turned green."

"Exactly," Munn said. "We're practically germless. It's a precaution they had to take, to prevent our starting a plague on Venus."

"But we want to start a plague," Thirkell said plaintively. -

"You couldn't even give a Venusian a head cold," Munn told him. "So that's out. What about Venusian anaesthetics? Are they as good as ours?"

"Better," the physician admitted. "Not that they need them, except for the children. Their synapses are funny. They've mastered self-hypnosis so they can block pain when it's necessary."

"Sulfa drugs?"

"I've thought of that. They've got those, too."

"My idea," Bronson broke in, "is water power. Or dams. Whenever it rains, there's a flood."

"There's good drainage, though," Munn said. "The canals take care of that."

"Now let me finish! Those fish-skinned so-and-sos have hydropower, but it isn't efficient. There's so much fast water all over the place that they build plants wherever it seems best-thousands of them-and half the time they're

useless, when the rains concentrate on another district. Half of the plants are inoperable all the time. Which costs money. If they'd build dams, they'd have a steady source of power - without the terrific overhead."

"It's a thought," Munn acknowledged.

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "I'll stick to my crossbreeds in the hydroponic gardens. I can raise beefsteak-mushrooms to taste of Worcester-shire sauce or something. An appeal to the palate, you know-

"Fair enough. Steve?"

Thirkell rumped his hair. "I'll think of an angle. Don't rush me."

Munn looked at tJnderhill. "Any flashes of intellect, chum?"

The youngster grimaced. "Not just now. All I can think of is manipulating the stock market."

"Without money?"

"That's the trouble."

Munn nodded. "Well, my own idea is advertising. As a physicist, it's in my line."

"How?" Bronson wanted to know. "Demonstrating atom-smashing? A strong-man act?"

"Pipe down. Advertising isn't known on Venus, though commerce is. That's funny. I should think the retailers would jump at the chance."

"They've got radio commercials."

"Stylized and ritualistic. Their televisions are ready-made for splash advertising. A visual blurb. . . yeah. Trick gadgets I could make to demonstrate the products. Why not?"

"I think I'll build an X-ray machine," Thirkell said suddenly, "if you'll help me, skipper."

Munn said sure. "We've got the equipment-and the blueprints. Tomorrow we'll start. It must be pretty late."

It was, though there was no sunset on Venus. The quintet retired, to dream of full-course dinners-all but Thirkell, who dreamed he was eating a roast chicken that abruptly turned into a Venusian and began to devour him, starting at the feet. He woke up sweating arid cursing, took some nembatal, and finally slept again.

The next morning they scattered. Mike Soaring Eagle took a microscope and other gadgets to the nearest hydroponic center and went to work. He wasn't allowed to carry spores back to the Goodwill, but there was no objection to his experimenting in Vyring itself. He made cultures and used forced-growth vitamin complexes and hoped for the best.

Pat Bronson went to see Skottery, head of Water Power. Skottery was a

tall, saturnine Venusian who knew a lot about engineering and insisted on showing Bronson the models in his office before they settled down to a talk.

"How many power stations do you have?" Bronson asked.

"Third power twelve times four dozens. Forty-two dozen in this district."

Nearly a million altogether, Bronson made it. "How many in actual operation now?" he carried on.

"About seventeen dozen."

"That means three hundred idle-twenty-five dozen, that is. Isn't the upkeep a factor?"

"Quite a factor," Skottery acknowledged. "Aside from the fact that some of those stations are now permanently inoperable. The terrain changes rapidly. Erosion, you know. We'll build one station on a gorge one year, and the next the water will be taking a different route. We build about a dozen a day. But we salvage something from the old ones, of course."

Bronson had a brainstorm. "No watershed?"

"Eh?"

The Earthman explained. Skottery shook his shoulders in negation. "We have a different type of vegetation here. There's so much water that roots don't have to strike deeply."

"But they need soil?"

"No. The elements they need are in suspension in the water."

Bronson described how watersheds worked. "Suppose you imported Earth plants and trees and forested the mountains. And built dams to retain your water. You'd have power all the time, and you'd need only a few big stations. And they'd be permanent."

Skottery thought that over. "We have all the power we need."

"But look at the expense!"

"Our rates cover that."

"You could make more money-difals and sofals-"

"We have made exactly the same profits for three hundred years," Skottery explained. "Our net remains constant. It works perfectly. You fail to understand our economic system, I see. Since we have everything we need, there's no use making more money-not even a fal more." -

"Your competitors-"

"We have only three, and they are satisfied with their profits."

"Suppose I interest them in my plan?"

"But you couldn't," Skottery said patiently. "They wouldn't be interested any more than I am. I'm glad you dropped in. May you be worthy of your father's name."

"Ye soulless fish!" Bronson yelled, losing his temper. "Is there no red blood in your green-skinned carcass? Does no one on this world know what fight means?" He hammered a fist into his palm. "I wouldn't be worthy of the old Seumas Bronson's name unless I took a poke at that ugly phiz of yours right now-"

Skottery had pressed a button. Two large Venusians appeared. The head of Water Power pointed to Bronson.

"Remove it," he said.

Captain Rufus Munn was in one of the telecasting studios with Bart Underhill. They were sitting beside Hakkapuy, owner of Veetsy- which might be freely translated as Wet Tingles. They were watching the telecast commercial plug for Hakkapuy's product, on the 'visor screen high on the wall.

A Venusian faded in, legs wide apart, arms akimbo. He raised one hand, six fingers spread wide.

"All men drink water. Water is good. Life needs water. Veetsy is good also. Four fals buys a globe of Veetsy. That is all."

He vanished. Colors rippled across the screen and music played in off-beat rhythm. Munn turned to Hakkapuy.

"That isn't advertising. You can't get customers that way."

"Well, it's traditional," Hakkapuy said weakly.

Munn opened the pack at his feet, brought out a tall glass beaker,

and asked for a globe of Veetsy. It was given him, and he emptied the green fluid into his beaker. After that, he dropped in a half dozen colored balls and added a chunk of dry ice, which sank to the bottom. The balls went up and down rapidly.

"See?" Munn said. "Visual effect. The marbles are only slightly heavier than Veetsy. It's the visual equivalent of Wet Tingles. Show that on the televisor, with a good sales talk, and see how your sales curve jumps."

Hakkapuy looked interested. "I'm not sure-"

Munn dragged out a sheaf of papers and hammered at the breach in the wall. After a time a fat Venusian came in and said, "May you be worthy of your ancestors' names." Haklcapuy introduced him as Lorish.

"I thought Lorish had better see this. Would you mind going over it again?"

"Sure," Munn said. "Now the principle of display windows-" When he had finished, Hakkapuy looked at Lorish, who shook his shoulders slowly.

"No," he said.

Hakkapuy blew out his lips. "It would sell more Veetsy."

"And upset the economy charts," Lorish said. "No."

Munn glared at him. "Why not? Hakkapuy owns Veetsy, doesn't he? Who are you, anyhow-a censor?"

"I represent the advertisers' tarkomar," Lorish explained. "You see, advertising on Venus is strongly ritual. It is never changed. Why should it be? If we let Hakkapuy use your ideas, it would be unfair to other makers of soft drinks."

"They could do the same thing," Munn pointed out.

"A pyramiding competition leading to ultimate collapse. Hakkapuy makes enough money. Don't you, Hakkapuy?"

"I suppose so."

"Are you questioning the motives of the tarkomars?"

Hakkapuy gulped. "No," he said hastily. "No, no, no! You're perfectly right."

Lorish looked at him. "Very well. As for you, Earthman, you had better not waste your time pursuing this-scheme-further."

Munn reddened. "Are you threatening me?"

"Of course not. I simply mean that no advertiser could use your idea without consulting my tarkoinar, and we would veto it."

"Sure," Munn said. "O.K. Come on, Bert. Let's get out of here." They departed, to stroll along a canal bank and confer. Underhill was thoughtful.

"The tarkomars have held the balance of power for a long time, it looks like. They want things to stay as they are. That's obvious."

Munn growled.

Underhill went on, "We'd have to upset the whole apple cart to get anywhere. There's one thing in our favor, though."

"WThat?"

"The laws."

"How do you figure that out?" Munn asked. "They're all against us."

"So far-yes. But they're traditionally rigid and unswerving. A decision made three hundred years ago can't be changed except by a long court process. If we can find a loophole in those laws, they can't touch us."

"All right, find the loophole," Munn said grumpily. "I'm going back to the ship and help Steve build an X-ray machine."

"I think I'll go down to the stock exchange and snoop," Underhill said. "It's

just possible-

After a week, the X-ray device was finished. Munn and Thirkell looked through the Vyring law records and found they were permitted to sell a self-created device without belonging to a tarkomar, provided they obeyed certain trivial restrictions. Leaflets were printed and strewed around the city, and the Venusians came to watch Munn and Thirkell demonstrating the merits of Roentgen rays. -

Mike Soaring Eagle knocked off work for the day and recklessly smoked a dozen cigarettes from his scanty store, burning with dull fury as he puffed. He had run into trouble with his hydroponic cultures.

"Crazy!" he told Bronson. "Luther Burbank would have gone nuts- the way I'm going. How the devil can I guess-pollinate those ambiguous specimens of Venusian flora?"

"Well, it doesn't seem exactly fair," Bronson consoled. "Eighteen sexes, eh?"

"Eighteen so far. And four varieties that apparently haven't any sex at all. How can you crossbreed those perverted mushrooms? You'd have to exhibit the result in a side show."

"You're getting nowhere?"

"Oh, I'm getting places," Mike Soaring Eagle said bitterly. "I'm getting all sorts of results. The trouble is nothing stays constant. I get a rum-flavored fungus one day, and it doesn't breed true-its spores turn into something that tastes like turpentine. So you see."

Bronson looked sympathetic. "Can't you swipe some grub when they're not looking? That way the job wouldn't be a complete washout."

"They search me," the Navaho said.

"The dirty skunks," Bronson yelped. "What do they think we are? Crooks?"

"Mph. Something's going on outside. Let's take a look."

They went out of the Goodwill to find Munn arguing passionately with Jorust, who had come in person to examine the X-ray machine. A crowd of Venusians watched avidly. Munn's face was crimson.

"I looked it up," he was saying. "You can't stop me this time, Jorust. It's perfectly legal to build a machine and sell it outside the city limits."

"Certainly," Jorust said. "I'm not complaining about that."

"Well? We're not breaking any law."

The woman beckoned, and a fat Venusian waddled forward. "Patent three gross squared fourteen two dozen, issued to Metz-Stang of Mylosh year fourth power twelve, subject sensitized plates."

"What's that?" Munn asked.

"It's a patent," Jorust told him. "It was issued some time ago to a Venusian inventor named Metz-Stang. A tarkoinar bought and suppressed the process, but it's still illegal to infringe on it."

"You mean somebody's already invented an X-ray machine on Venus?"

"No. Merely sensitized film. But that's part of your device, so you can't sell it."

Thirkell pushed forward. "I don't need film—"

The fat Venusian said, "Vibratory patent three gross two dozen and seven—"

"What now?" Munn broke in.

Jorust smiled. "Machines employing vibration must not infringe on that patent."

"This is an X-ray machine," Thirkell snapped.

"Light is vibration," Jorust told him. "You can't sell it without buying permission from the tarkomar now owning that patent. It should cost—let's see—five thousand sofals or so."

Thirkell turned abruptly and went into the ship, where he mixed a whisky-and-soda and thought wistfully about diphtheria germs. After a time the others appeared, looking disconsolate.

"Can she do it?" Thirkell asked.

Munn nodded. "She can do it, chum. She's done it."

"We're not infringing on their patents."

"We're not on Earth. The patent laws here are so wide that if a man invents a gun, nobody else can make telescopic sights. We're rooked again."

Underhill said, "It's the tarkoniars again. When they see a new proc

ess or invention that might mean change, they buy it up and suppress it. I can't think of any gadget we could make that wouldn't be an infringement on some Venusian patent or other."

"They stay within the law," Munn pointed out. "Their law. So we can't even challenge them. As long as we're on Venus, we're subject to their jurisprudence."

"The beans are getting low," Thirkell said morosely.

"Everything is," the captain told him. "Any ideas, somebody?"

There was silence. Presently Underhill took out a globe of Veetsy and put it on the table.

"Where'd you, get that?" Bronson asked. "It costs four fris."



"It's empty," Underhill said. "I found it in an ash can. I've been-investigating glassite-the stuff they use for things like this."

"What about it?"

"I found out how they make it. It's a difficult, expensive process. It's no better than our flexiglass, and a lot harder to make. If we had a flexiglass factory here--"

"Well?"

"The bottom would drop out of Amalgamated Glassite."

"I don't get it," Bronson said. "So what?"

"Ever heard of a whispering campaign?" Underhill asked. "My father wangled many an election that way, the old devil. Suppose we passed the word around that there was a new process for making a cheaper, better substitute for glassite? Wouldn't Amalgamated stock drop?"

"Possibly," Munn said. "We could clean up." "What with?"

"Oh." Underhill was silent. "It takes money to make money."

"Always."

"I wonder. Here's another idea. Venus is on the iron standard. Iron's cheap on Earth. Suppose we talked about bringing in iron here

-strewing it broadcast. There'd be a panic, wouldn't there?"

"Not without some iron to strew around," Munn said. "Counterpropaganda would be telecast; we couldn't compete with it. Our whispering campaign would be squashed before we got it started. The Venusian government-the tarkomars-would simply deny that Earth had unlimited iron supplies. We wouldn't profit, anyway."

"There must be some angle," Underhill scowled. "There's got to be. Let's see. What's the basis of the Venusian system?"

"No competition," Mike Soaring Eagle said. "Everybody has all he wants."

"Maybe. At the top. But the competitive instinct is too strong to be suppressed like that. I'll bet plenty of Venusians would like to make a few extra fals."

"Where does that get us?" Munn wanted to know.

"The way my father did it . . . Hm-m-m. He manipulated, pulled the wires, made people come to him. What's the weak spot in Venusian economy?"

Munn hesitated. "Nothing we can strike at-we're too handicapped." Underhill shut his eyes. "The basis of an economic and social system is-what?"

"Money," Bronson said.

"No. Earth's on the radium standard. Years ago it was gold or silver. Venus is on iron. And there's the barter system, too. Money's a variable."

"Money represents natural resources-" Thirkell began.

"Man-hours," Munn put in quietly.

Underhill jumped. "That's it! Of course-man-hours! That's the constant. The amount of production a man can turn out in an hour represents an arbitrary constant-two dollars, a dozen difals or whatever it

is. That's the base for any economic set-up. And it's the base we've got to hit. The ancestor worship, the power of the tarkomars-they're superficial really. Once the basic system is challenged, they'll go down."

"I don't see where it gets us," Thirkell said.

"Make the man-hours variable," Underhill explained. "Once we do that, anything can happen."

"Something had better happen," Bronson said, "and quick. We've little food left."

"Shut up," Munn said. "I think the kid's got the right angle. Alter the man-hour constant, eh? How can we do that? Specialized training? Train a Venusian to turn out twice as much stuff in the same period of time? Skilled labor?"

"They've got skilled labor," Underhill said. "If we could make 'em work faster, or increase their stamina-"

"Benzedrine plus," Thirkell interrupted. "With enough caffeine, vitamin complex and riboflavin-I could whip up a speeder-upper, all right."

Munn nodded slowly. "Pills, not shots. If this works out, we'll have to do it undercover after a while."

"What the devil will it get us to make the Venusians work faster?" Bronson asked.

Underhill snapped his fingers. "Don't you see? Venus is ultraconservative. The economic system is frozen static. It isn't adapted to change. There'll be hell popping!"

Munn said, "We'll need advertising to arouse public interest first of all. A practical demonstration." He looked around the table, his gaze settling on Mike Soaring Eagle. "Looks like you're elected, Redskin. You've more stamina than any of us, according to the tests we took back on Earth."

"All right," the Navaho said. "What do I do?"

"Work!" Underhill told him. "Work till you drop!"

It began early the next morning in the main plaza of Vyring. Munn had checked up carefully, determined to make sure nothing would go wrong, and had learned that a recreation building was to be constructed on the site of

the plaza. "Work won't start for several weeks," Jorust said. "Why?"

"We want to dig a hole there," Munn said. "Is it legal?"

The Venusian smiled. "Why, of course. That's public domain-until the contractors begin. But a demonstration of your muscular prowess won't help you, I'm afraid."

"Eh?"

"I'm not a fool. You're trying to land a job. You hope to do that by advertising your abilities. But why do it in just this way? Anybody can dig a hole. It isn't specialized."

Munn grunted. If Jorust wanted to jump at that conclusion, swell. He said, "It pays to advertise. Put a steam shovel to work, back on Earth, and a crowd will gather to watch it. We don't have a steam shovel, but-

"Well, whatever you like. Legally you're within your rights. Nevertheless you can't hold a job without joining a tarkoinar."

"Sometimes I think your planet would be a lot better off without the tarkoinars," Munn said bluntly.

Jorust moved her shoulders. "Between ourselves, I have often thought so. I am merely an administrator, however. I have no real power. I do what I'm told to do. If I were permitted, I would be glad to lend you the money you need-

"What?" Munn looked at her. "I thought-

The woman froze. "It is not permitted. Tradition is not always wisdom, but I can do nothing about it. To defy the tarkomars is unthinkable and useless. I am sorry."

Munn felt a little better after that, somehow. The Venusians weren't all enemies. The all-powerful tarko-mars, jealous of their power, fanati-

cally desirous of preserving the status quo, were responsible for this mess.

When he got back to the plaza, the others were waiting. Bronson had rigged up a scoreboard, in phonetic Venusian, and had laid out mattock, pick, shovel, wheelbarrow and boards for the Navaho, who stood, a brawny, red-bronze figure, stripped to the waist in the cool wind. A few canal-boats had stopped to watch.

Munn looked at his watch. "O.K., Redskin. Let's go. Steve can start-

Underhill began to beat a drum. Bronson put figures on the scoreboard: 4:03:00, Venusian Vyring Time. Thirkell went to a nearby camp table, littered with bottles and medical equipment, shook from a vial one of the stimulant pills he had concocted, and gave it to Mike Soaring Eagle. The Indian ate it, heaved up the mattock and went to work.

That was all.

A man digging a hole. Just why the spectacle should be so fascinating no one has ever figured out. The principle remains the same, whether it's a steam shovel scooping out half a ton of earth at a bite, or a sweating, stocky Navaho wielding shovel and pick. The boats grew thicker.

Mike Soaring Eagle kept working. An hour passed. Another. There were regular, brief rest periods, and Mike kept rotating his tools, to get all his muscles into play. After breaking earth for a while with the mattock, he would shovel it into the wheelbarrow, roll his burden up a plank and dump it on an ever growing pile some distance away. Three hours. Four. Mike knocked off for a brief lunch. Bronson kept track of the time on his scoreboard.

Thirkell gave the Navaho another pill. "How're you doing?"

"Fine. I'm tough enough."

"I know, but these stimulants-they'll help."

Underhill was at a typewriter. He had already ground out a tremendous lot of copy, for he had been working since Mike Soaring Eagle started. Bronson had discovered a long-forgotten talent and was juggling makeshift Indian clubs and colored balls. He'd been keeping that up for quite a while, too.

Captain Rufus Munn was working a sewing machine. He didn't especially like the task, but it was precision work, and therefore helpful to the plan. All the party except Thirkell was doing something, and the physician was busy administering pills and trying to look like an alchemist.

Occasionally he visited Munn and Underhill, collected stacks of

paper and carefully sewn scraps of cloth, and deposited them in various boxes near the canal, labelled, "Take One." On the cloth a legend was machine-embroidered in Venusian: "A Souvenir from Earth." The crowds thickened.

The Earthmen worked on. Bronson kept juggling, with pauses for refreshment. Eventually he experimented with coin and card tricks. Mike Soaring Eagle kept digging. Munn sewed. Underhill continued to type-and the Venusians read what his flying fingers turned out.

"Free! Free! Free!" the leaflets said. "Souvenir pillow-case covers from Earth! A free show! Watch the Earthmen demonstrate stamina, dexterity and precision in four separate ways. How long can they keep it up? With the aid of POWER PILLS-indefinitely! Their output is doubled and their precision increased by POWER PILLS-they pep you up~ A medical product of Earth that can make any man worth twice his weight in sofals!"

It went on like that. The old army game-with variations. The Venusians couldn't resist. Word got around. The mob thickened. How long could the Earthmen keep up the pace?

They kept it up. Thirkell's stimulant pills-as well as the complex shots he had given his companions that morning-seemed to be working. Mike Soaring Eagle dug like a beaver. Sweat poured from his shining red-bronze torso. He

drank prodigiously and ate salt tablets.

Munn kept sewing, without missing a stitch. He knew that his products were being scanned closely for signs of sloppy workmanship. Bronson kept juggling and doing coin tricks, never missing. Underhill typed with aching fingers.

Five hours. Six hours. Even with the rest periods, it was gruelling. They had brought food from the Goodwill, but it wasn't too palatable. Still, Thirkell had selected it carefully for caloric.

Seven hours. Eight hours. The crowds made the canals impassable. A policeman came along and argued with Thirkell, who told him to see Jorust. Jorust must have put a flea in his ear, for he came back to watch, but not to interfere.

Nine hours. Ten hours. Ten hours of Herculean effort. The men were exhausted-but they kept going.

They had made their point by then, though, for a few Venusians approached Thirkell and inquired about the Power Pills. What were they? Did they really make you work faster? How could they buy the- The policeman appeared to stand beside Thirkell. "I've a message from the medical tarkomar," he announced. "If you try to sell any of those things, you go to jail."

"Wouldn't think-of it," Thirkell said. "We're giving away free samples. Here, buddy." He dug into a sack and tossed the nearest Venusian a Power Pill. "Two days' work in that instead of your usual one. Come back for more tomorrow. Want one, pal? Here. You, too. Catch."

"Wait a minute-" the policeman said.

"Go get a warrant," Thirkell told him. "There's no law against making presents."

Jorust appeared with a burly, intolerant-looking Venusian. She introduced the latter as head of the Vyring tarkomars.

"And I'm here to tell you to stop this," the Venusian said.

Thirkell knew what to say. His companions kept on with their work, but he felt them watching and listening.

"What rule do you invoke?"

"Why . . . why, peddling."

"I'm not selling anything. This is public domain; we're putting on a free show."

"Those . . . ah . . . Power Pills-"

"Free gifts," Thirkell said. "Listen, pal. When we gave all our food to you Venusian crooks, did you squawk? No, you took it. And then clamped down. When we asked for our grub back, you just told us that we had no legal recourse; possession is nine points of the law, and we had a perfect right

to make free gifts. That's what we're doing now

-giving presents. So what?"

Jorust's eyes were twinkling, but she hooded them swiftly. "I fear he speaks the truth. The law protects him. It is no great harm."

Thirkell, watching her, wondered. Had Jorust guessed the right answer? Was she on their side? The tarkoinar leader turned dark green, hesitated, swung on his heel and went away. Jorust gave the Earthmen a long, enigmatic look, moved her shoulders and followed.

"I'm still stiff," Mike Soaring Eagle said a week later in the Goodwill. "Hungry, too. When do we get grub?"

Thirkell, at the valve, handed out a Power Pill to a Venusian and came back rubbing his hands and grinning. "Wait. Just wait. What's going on, skipper?"

Munn nodded towards Underhill. "Ask the kid. He got back from Vyring a few minutes ago."

Underhill chuckled. "There was hell popping. All in a week, too. We've certainly struck at the economic base. Every Venusian who labors on a piecework basis wants our pills, so he can speed up his production and make more fals. It's the competitive instinct-which is universal." -

'Well?' Bronson asked. "How do the lizard-faced big shots like that?"

"They don't like it. It's hit the economic set-up they've had for centuries. Till now, one Venusian would make exactly ten sofals a week- say-by turning out five thousand bottle caps. With the pills Steve made up, he's turning out eight or ten thousand and making correspondingly more dough. The guy at the next bench says what the hell, and comes to us for a Power Pill for himself. Thus it goes. And the lovely part is that not all the labor is on piecework basis. It can't be. You need tangibles for piecework. Running a weather machine has got to be measured by time-not by how many raindrops you make in a day."

Munn nodded. "Jealousy, you mean?"

Underhill said, 'Well, look. A weather-machine operator has been making ten sofals a week, the same as a bottle capper on piecework. Now the bottle capper's making twenty sofals. The weather-machine man doesn't see the point. He's willing to take Power Pills, too, but that won't step up his production. He asks for a raise. If he gets it, the economy is upset even more. If he doesn't, other weather-machine operators get together with him and figure it's unfair discrimination. They get mad at the tarkoinars. They strike!"

Mike Soaring Eagle said, "The tarkomars have forbidden work to any Venusian taking Power Pills."

"And still the Venusians ask us for Power Pills. So what? How can you prove a man's been swallowing them? His production st'eps up, sure, but the tarkoinctrs can't clamp down on everybody with a good turnout. They tried that, and a lot of guys who never tried the Power Pills got mad. They were

fast workers, that was all."

"The demonstration we put on was a good idea," Thirkell said. "It was convincing. I've had to cut down the strength of the pills-we're running low-but the power of suggestion helps us."

Underhill grinned. "So the base-the man-hour unit-had gone cockeyed. One little monkey wrench, thrown where it'll do the most good. It's spreading, too. Not only Vyring. The news is going all over Venus, and the workers in the other cities are asking why half of Vyring's laborers should get better pay. That's where the equal standard of exchange helps us-one monetary system all over Venus. Nothing has ever been off par here for centuries. Now-"

Munn said, "Now the system's toppling. It's a natural fault in a perfectly integrated, rigid set-up. For want of a nail the tarkomars are losing their grip. They've forgotten how to adjust."

"It'll spread," Underhill said confidently. "It'll spread. Steve, here comes another customer."

Underhill was wrong. Jorust and the Vyring tarkomar leader came in. "May you be worthy of your ancestors' names," Munn said politely. "Drag up a chair and have a drink. We've still got a few bulbs of beer left."

Jorust obeyed, but the Venusian rocked on his feet and glowered. The woman said, "Malsi is distressed. These Power Pills are causing trouble."

"I don't know why," Munn said. "They increase production, don't they?"

Malsi grimaced. "This is a trick! A stratagem! You are abusing our hospitality!"

"What hospitality?" Bronson wanted to know.

"You threatened the system," Malsi plunged on doggedly. "On Venus there is no change. There must be none."

"Why not?" Underhill asked. "There's only one real reason, and you know it. Any advances might upset the tarkoinars-threaten the power they hold. You racketeers have had the whip hand for centuries. You've suppressed inventions, kept Venus in a backwater, tried to drive initiative out of the race, just so you could stay on top. It can't be done. Changes happen; they always do. If we hadn't come, there'd have been an internal explosion eventually."

Malsi glared at him. "You will stop making these Power Pills."

"Point of law," Thirkell said softly. "Show precedent."

Jorust said, "The right of free gift is one of the oldest on Venus. That law could be changed, Malsi, but I don't think the people would like it."

Munn grinned. "No. They wouldn't. That would be the tipoff. Venusians have learned it's possible to make more money. Take that chance away from them, and the tarko mars won't be the benevolent rulers any more."

Malsi turned darker green. 'We have power-'

"Jorust, you're an administrator. Are we protected by your laws?" Underhill asked.

She moved her shoulders. "Yes, you are. The laws are sacrosanct. Perhaps because they have always been designed to protect the tarkomars."

Malsi swung towards her. "Are you siding with the Earthmen?"

"Why, of course not, Malsi. I'm merely upholding the law, according to my oath of office. Without prejudice-that's it, isn't it?"

Munn said, 'We'll stop making the Power Pills if you like, but I warn you that it's only a respite. You can't halt progress.'

Malsi seemed unconvinced. "You'll stop?"

"Sure. If you pay us."

"We cannot pay you," Malsi said stubbornly. "You belong to no tarho-mar. It would be illegal."

Jorust murmured, "You might give them a free gift of-say-ten thousand sofals."

"Ten thousand!" Malsi yelled. "Ridiculous!"

"So it is," Underhill said. "Fifty thousand is more like it. We can live well for a year on that."

A Venusian came to the valve, peeped in and said: "I made twice as many difals today. May I have another Power Pill?" He saw Malsi and vanished with a small shriek.

Munn shrugged. "Suit yourself. Pay up, or we go on handing out Power Pills-and you'll have to adjust a rigid social economy. I don't think you can do it."

Jorust touched Malsi's arm. "There is no other way."

"I-" The Venusian by now was almost black with impotent rage. "All right," he capitulated, spitting the words between his teeth. "I won't forget this, Jorust."

"But I must administer the laws," the woman said. "Why, Malsi! The rule of the tarkoinars has always been unswerving honesty."

Malsi didn't answer. He scribbled a credit check for fifty thousand sofals, validated it and gave the tag to Munn. After that he sent a parting glare around the cabin and stamped out.

"Well!" Bronson said. "Fifty grand! Tonight we eat!"

"May you be worthy of your fathers' names," Jorust murmured. At the valve she turned. "I'm afraid you've upset Malsi."



"Too bad," Munn said hypocritically.

Jorust moved her shoulders slightly. "Yes. You've upset Malsi. And Malsi represents the tarko-mars-"

"What can he do about it?" Underhill asked.

"Nothing. The laws won't let him. But-it's nice to know the tarkomars aren't infallible. I think the word will get around."

Jorust winked gravely at Munn and departed, looking as innocent as a cat, and as potentially dangerous.

'Well!" Munn said. "What does that mean? The end of the tarkomar's rule, maybe?"

"Maybe," Bronson said. "I don't give a damn. I'm hungry and I want a beefsteak-mushroom. Where can we cash a check for fifty grand?"