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Author: Lucius Daniel

Illustrator: Ed Emshwiller

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martians never die

By LUCIUS DANIEL

It was a wonderful bodyguard: no bark, no bite, no sting ... just conversion of the enemy!

AT three-fifteen, a young man walked into the circular brick building and took a flattened package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket.

"Mr. Stern?" he asked, throwing away the empty package.

Stern looked with hard eyes at the youthful reporter. He recognized the type.

"So they're sending around cubs now," he said.

"I'm no cub—I've been on the paper a whole year," the reporter protested, and then stopped, realizing his annoyance had betrayed him.

"Only a year. The first time they sent their best man."

"This ain't the first time," said the young man, assuming a bored look. "It's the fourth time, and next year I don't think anybody will come at all. Why should they?"

"Why, because they might be able to make it," Beryl spoke up. "Something must have happened before."

Stern watched the reporter drink in Beryl's loveliness.

"Well, Mrs. Curtis," the young man said, "everyone has it figured out that Dr. Curtis got stuck in the fourth dimension, or else lost, or died, maybe. Even Einstein can't work out the stellar currents your husband was depending on."

"It's very simple," replied Beryl, "but I can't explain it intelligibly. I wish you could have talked to Dr. Curtis."

"Why is it that we have to come out here just once a year to wait for him? Is that how the fourth dimension works?"

"It's the only time when the stellar currents permit the trip back to Earth. And it's *not* the fourth dimension! Clyde was always irritated when anyone would talk about his traveling to Mars in the fourth dimension."

"It's interdimensional," Stern put in.

"And you're his broker?" asked the reporter, throwing his cigarette down on the brick floor and stepping on it. "You're his old friend from college days, handled his financial affairs, and helped him raise enough money to build his machine?"

"Yes," Stern replied, a little pompously. "It was through my efforts that several wealthy men took an interest in the machine, so that Dr. Curtis did not have to bear the entire expense himself."

"Yeah, yeah," the reporter sighed. "I read an old story on it before I came here. Now I'm out of cigarettes." He looked hopefully at Stern.

Stern returned the look coldly. "There's a store where you can buy some about three blocks down the road."

"Is that the room where he's expected to materialize with his machine?" The reporter pointed to an inner door.

"Yes. Dr. Curtis wanted to be sure no one would be injured. This inner circular room was built first; then

he had the outer wall put up as an added precaution. The circular passageway we're in leads all around the old room, but this doorway is the only entrance."

"And what are those holes in the top of the door for?"

"If he returns, we can tell by the displaced air rushing out. Then the door will open automatically."

"And when is the return scheduled for?" asked the reporter.

"Three-forty-seven and twenty-nine seconds."

"If it happens," the reporter added skeptically. "And if it doesn't, we have to wait another year."

"Optimum conditions occur just once a year."

"Well, I'm going out to get some cigarettes. I've got time ... and probably nothing to wait for. I'll return though."

He walked briskly through the outer door.

"THIS is the hardest part of the year, especially now. Suppose he did come back," Beryl said plaintively.

"You don't have to worry," Stern assured her. "Clyde himself said that if he didn't come back the second year, he might not make it at all." Stern opened his gold case now and offered Beryl a cigarette.

She shook her head. "But he made two trial runs in it first and came back."

"That was for a short distance only—that is, a short distance astronomically. Figuring for Mars was another story. Maybe he missed the planet and ..."

"Oh, don't! It's just not *knowing* that I can't stand."

"Well," he said drily, "we'll know in—" he stopped and looked at his wristwatch—"in just about fifteen minutes."

"I can't wait," she moaned.

He put his arm around her. "Relax. Take it easy and stop worrying. It'll just be like last time."

"Not the last time at all. We hadn't—"

"As soon as we are able to leave here," he said, drawing her close and squeezing her gently, "I'll take steps to have him declared legally dead. Then we'll get married."

"That's not much of a proposal," she smiled. "But I guess I'll have to accept you. You have Clyde's power of attorney."

"And we'll be rich. Richer than ever. I'll be able to use some of my own ideas about the investments. As a matter of fact, I have already." And he frowned slightly.

"We have enough," Beryl said quickly. "Don't try to speculate. You know how Clyde felt about that."

"But he spent so damned much on the machine. I had to make back those expenses somehow."

Steps sounded outside and they drew apart. The reporter came in with a companion of about his own age.

"Better wipe the lipstick off," he grinned. "It's almost time for something to happen."

Stern dabbed at his mouth angrily with his handkerchief.

At first the sound was so soft that it could hardly be heard, but soon a whistling grew until it became a threat to the eardrums. The reporters looked at each other with glad, excited eyes.

The whistling stopped abruptly and, slowly, the door opened. The reporters rushed in immediately.

Beryl gripped Stern's hand convulsively. "He's come back."

"Yes, but that mustn't change our plans, Beryl dear."

"But, Al ... Oh, why were we so foolish?"

"Not foolish, dear. Not at all foolish. Now we have to go in."

Inside the room was the large sphere of metalloy. It had lost its original gleam and was stained and battered, standing silent, closed, enigmatic.

"Where's the door?" called the first reporter.

The sphere rested on a number of metal stilts, reaching out from the lower hemisphere, which held it about three feet from the floor, like a great pincushion turned upside down.

Slowly, a round section of the sphere's wall swung outward and steps descended. As they touched the floor, both reporters, caught by the same idea, sprinted for it and fought to see which would climb it first.

"Wait!" shouted Stern.

The reporters stopped their scuffling and followed Stern's gaze.

SOMETHING old and leathery and horrible was emerging from the circular doorway. Several tentacles, like so many snakes, slid around the hand rail which ran down the steps. Then, at the top, it paused.

Stern felt an immediate and unreasoning hate for the thing, whatever it was, a hate so strong that he forgot to feel fear. It seemed to him to combine the repulsive qualities of a spider and a toad. The body, fat and repugnant, was covered by a loose skin, dull and leathery, and the fatness seemed to be pulled downward below the lower tentacles like an insect's body, until it was wider at the bottom than at the top.

Like a salt shaker, Stern thought.

It turned its head—it had no neck; the loose skin of the body just turned with it—and looked back inside the sphere. The head resembled a toad's, but a long trident tongue slid in and out quickly, changing the resemblance to that of a malformed snake.

From the interior, Dr. Curtis appeared beside the creature and stood there vaguely for a moment. Stern noticed that his clothes seemed just as new as when he had left, but he had grown a long, untrimmed beard, and his face had a vacant expression, as if he were hypnotized.

The creature looked upward at Curtis, who was head and shoulders taller, and its resemblance changed again in Stern's mind, so that now it looked like a dog, at least in attitude. From its mouth came a low hissing noise.

Illustrated by WILLER

Curtis looked down at the dog-spider-toad, his eyes slowly beginning to focus. The creature wiggled like a seal with a fish in sight, then slid and bumped down the steps, with Curtis following him.

"Clyde!" cried Beryl and rushed toward Curtis.

The outstretched tentacles of the beast stopped her, but at a touch from Curtis they fell away and Beryl was in his arms.

Stern watched the scene sourly and with rage in his heart. Why hadn't Clyde waited another year? Then nothing could have changed things. Now he would lose not only Beryl, but the management of the money that was left, and the marketing of new patents on the machine. Curtis did not approve of speculation, especially when it lost money.

"You've changed, Clyde," Beryl was saying as she hugged him. "What is the matter—do you need a doctor?"

"No, I don't want a doctor, but I have to get home," said Curtis.

Stern felt anger again beating in his brain like heavy surf on a beach. Curtis was sick. The least he could have done was die. Well, maybe he still would. And if he didn't he could be helped to—Stern saw the beast looking at him intently, malevolently. Its face might have looked almost human, now that it was so close, if it had possessed eyebrows and hair. As it was, its nose rose abruptly and flared into two really enormous nostrils, but its mouth looked small and wrinkled, like that of an old grandmother without any teeth.

They turned to the doorway without noticing the absence of the reporters, who had long since run off to telephone and get photographers.

Curtis walked slowly. He would stop for a moment, look about as if expecting something entirely different, and then he would move forward again.

They all got into the car, Curtis and Beryl on the front seat, with Beryl driving, and Stern and the creature in the rear. As Beryl drove, Stern looked savagely at the back of Curtis's head, but he felt the beast staring at him balefully. Could it be a mind reader? That was ridiculous. How could anything that couldn't speak read a person's mind?

He turned to study it. The Martian, if that was what it was, had only six tentacles, three on each side. The lower ones were heavy and almost as thick as legs. The upper ones were small and were obviously used as hands, while it was possible that the middle ones could be used either way. A series of suction cups or sucking pads were at the end of each tentacle. With equipment like this, it could walk right up the side of a building, except, perhaps, for the higher gravity of Earth.

Stern could smell it now, a dry, desert smell, and that made it more revolting than ever. They were born to hate each other.

WHEN they got home, Beryl was all solicitousness. The way a woman is when she has a man to impress, Stern thought.

"Just sit right here in your old chair," she told Curtis, "and I'll call a doctor. Then I'll put some water on to heat." But first she knelt by his side and laid her head on his breast. "Oh, darling," she said with a sob, "Why did you wait so long? I've missed you so."

A very good act, Stern told himself bitterly, without believing it at all.

She got up and turned toward Stern. "Will you help me get some water on, Al?" she asked. "I'm going to phone."

He went into the kitchen. He knew where the kettle was, the refrigerator, the mixings. He could hear her dialing, and then, before he got the kettle on the burner, she came inside and closed the kitchen door.

"Clyde's sick and I have to take care of him," she said anxiously.

It wasn't entirely the money, he confessed to himself now. He hated the situation, but he had to give in—on the surface anyway.

"Okay, let's forget the whole thing," he said.

"Oh, Al dear, I knew you'd understand! I've got to go back now and try the phone again. I got a busy signal."

Stern followed her, still rankling at the way Curtis had forced Beryl to live while he spent so generously on his own expensive interests. Shortly after their marriage, he had built a home for Beryl and himself in an exclusive suburb, on a hilly bit of land with a deep ravine at the back. But it was small and Beryl had not even been allowed maids except when they entertained, which was seldom. Soon he would change all that, Stern told himself. They had not dared to while Clyde was away.

In the modern living room, Curtis sprawled in his easy chair as though he hadn't moved since they had placed him there. But his air of abstraction seemed to have increased. Before him sat the beast, looking, Stern thought, more like a dog than ever. Its head wasn't cocked to one side, but that, less than its alien appearance, was the one thing to spoil the illusion.

Tires screeched in the driveway while Beryl was still at the telephone. Stern went to the front door, closed it and put the chain bolt in place. The back door would still be locked and they would hardly try to force the screen windows.

Heavy steps pounded up the front walk. "Did Dr. Curtis really get back?" The first man shot out. The one who followed had a camera.

"Dr. Curtis has returned," Stern spoke through the opening of the front door which the chain permitted, "but his physical condition won't permit questioning, at least until his doctor has seen him."

"Did he really bring back a Martian? We want to see the Martian anyway."

"We can't have Dr. Curtis disturbed in any way until after his physician has examined him," Stern said bluntly.

"Is he in there?"

"We'll give you a report when we're ready."

A SECOND car pulled up to the house as Stern shut the front door, and went to check the rear one. When he came back, flashes from the window showed the cameraman was trying to take pictures through the glass. Stern drew the shades.

"Well, poor Schaughtowl, so you had to come with me," Curtis was saying to the monster.

The beast wiggled again as it had on the steps of the machine. A tail to wag wasn't really necessary, Stern decided, when there was so much body to wiggle.

Schaughtowl, as Curtis addressed it, seemed to brighten in the darkened room.

"Poor, dear Schaughtowl," said Curtis gently.

It was unmistakable now—the skin actually brightened and emitted a sort of eerie, luminous glow.

Curtis leaned over and put his hand on what would have been Schaughtowl's neck. The loose skin writhed joyously, and, snakelike, the whole body responded in rippling waves of emotion.

"Gull Lup," the monster—said wasn't the right word, but it was not a bark, growl, mew, cheep, squawk or snarl. Gulp was as close as Stern could come, a dry and almost painful gulping noise that expressed devotion in some totally foreign way that Stern found revolting.

He realized that the phone had been ringing for some time. He disconnected it, and then heard loud knocking.

"It's Dr. Anderson," he heard a man's voice calling impatiently and angrily.

Cautiously, Stern opened the door, but his care was needless. With a few testy remarks, the doctor quickly cleared a space about the door and entered.

He went at once to Curtis, with only a single shocked glance at Schaughtowl.

"Where the devil have you been and where in hell did you get that thing?" he asked as he unbuttoned Curtis's coat and shirt.

Since playing with his pet, Curtis seemed more awake. "I went to Mars," he said. "They're incredibly advanced in ways we hardly guess. We're entirely off the track. I just came back to explain how."

"Your friend doesn't look very intelligent," the doctor answered, busy with his stethoscope.

"Animals like Schaughtowl are used for steeds or pets," said Curtis. "The Ladonai are pretty much like mankind, only smaller."

"Why did you stay so long?"

"After I left, the Ladonai told me, they were going to shut off any possible communication with Earth until we advance more. They think we're at a very dangerous animal-like stage of development. Once I came home, I knew I couldn't go back, so I wanted to learn as much as I could before I left them."

"Stand up for a minute," ordered the doctor.

"Not right now," said Curtis. "I'm too tired."

"You'd better get to bed, then."

"I think not. It's merely caused by the difference in gravity and heavier air. The Ladonai told me to expect it, but not to lie down. After a while I'll try to take a short walk."

SO Clyde wasn't going to die, after all, Stern thought. He had come home with a message, and, remembering the determination of the man, Stern knew he wouldn't die until he had given it. But he had to die. He would die, and who was competent enough to know that it wasn't from the shock of having come home to denser air and a heavier gravity?

There were ways—an oxygen tube, for example. Pure oxygen to be inhaled in his sleep by lungs accustomed to a rarified atmosphere, or stimulants in his food so it would look like a little too much exertion on a heart already overtaxed. There were ways.

Stern's scalp tingled unpleasantly, and he saw the Martian looking at him intently, coldly. In that moment Stern knew without question that his mind was being read. Not his idea, perhaps, but his intent toward Curtis. The Martian would have to be attended to first.

"Is it true, Dr. Anderson? Will he be all right?" Beryl was sitting on the arm of the chair next to Schaughtowl, and she was looking at Clyde almost as adoringly as the Martian. A few hours had undone all that Stern had managed to do in four years.

If Stern had been uncertain, that alone would have decided him.

"I think so," said the doctor. "He seems to be uncomfortable, rather than in pain. I'll send you a prescription for his heart, if he breathes too heavily. Be sure, though, not to give him more than one pill in three hours."

"Of course." Beryl was never that solicitous toward Stern.

"And you'll be in quarantine here until the government decides what, if any, diseases he and the Martian may have brought back with them."

"None at all, Doctor." Curtis's voice was markedly more slurred, and he stared intently with unblinking eyes at the blank wall.

"Well, that's something we can't tell yet. Well have to keep out the press and television men, anyway, because of your health. If I'm not detained, I'll be back tomorrow morning. Call me if there's any

change."

On his way out, the physician was besieged by reporters and photographers, balked of better subjects. Shortly after the doctor's departure, police sirens came screaming up. The men waiting around the house were moved outside the gate and a guard was set at every entrance.

LATER, a messenger came, was interrogated by the police sergeant who took a small package from him and brought it to the house.

"Medicine," the sergeant said, handing it gingerly to Stern. "You can't leave here without permission." And he walked hurriedly away.

This might be the answer. Stern had a good idea of what the doctor had prescribed—something he'd said, for the heart. It must have been pretty powerful, too, for the doctor to warn against an overdose. Two at once might do it, or another two a little later.

But there was Schaughtowl.

"Al," said Beryl, "stay with Clyde while I fix something for him to eat."

She was more beautiful than ever. Emotions, he thought wryly, become a woman; they thrive on them. In a few minutes a woman could change like this. It was enough to make a man lose faith in the sex.

"Certainly," he said easily.

Curtis seemed to sleep with wide open eyes gazing blankly at the far wall. Schaughtowl sat motionless before him, watchful as a dog, yet still like a snake or spider patiently waiting. Didn't the beast ever sleep?

A drink was what Stern needed. He went to the closet and poured a double brandy. He sipped it slowly. As delicious fire ran down his gullet and warmed his stomach, he felt his tension ease and a sense of confidence pervade his mind.

He needn't worry. He was always successful, except that once with the stocks. And he had calm nerves.

There were guards out in front now in khaki uniform; the Governor must have called out a company of the National Guard. Stern noticed some state police, too. The house was well guarded on the three sides surrounded by a neat, white picket fence. In the back, the severe drop into the ravine made guards there unnecessary.

It was dark before Dr. Curtis moved. Beryl was watching him; she had little to say to Stern now.

"How about some broth, dear?" she asked Curtis immediately.

Slowly, Clyde's eyes focused on her. He smiled. "Let's try it."

He let Beryl feed him, sitting on a stool beside his chair and being unnecessarily motherly and coddling about it.

For a while after he had eaten, Clyde sat in his chair, looking at Beryl with his new and oddly gentle smile. It seemed to activate some hidden response in her, for she glowed with tenderness.

"I suppose," Curtis slurred, "I ought to try to walk now."

"Let me help." Stern rose and crossed the room.

The Martian rustled like snakes in the weeds, and hissed.

Beryl said without suspicion, "Thank you, Al. I knew you'd do whatever you could for Clyde." And she rested her hand trustingly on his arm.

What was past was past, not to be wept over, not to be regretted.

"Like to walk out in the back for the air?" Stern asked. "The breeze is coming from that direction."

"That will do very well," said Curtis, obviously not caring a bit.

STERN helped Curtis from his chair and supported him under the arm. They went out the back door, the Martian slithering after them. It was cooler in the garden. Stern felt a renewed surge of self-confidence.

"The stars—" Curtis stopped to look upward.

The night was almost cloudless and there was no moon. The house hid any view of the crowds and the guards holding them back. They were alone in the dark.

Curtis started forward again, with the Martian scraping along behind. It would never let Curtis out of its sight as long as it lived; that much was clear to Stern.

He guided Curtis to a seat close to the ravine, a favorite spot. Always the Martian was a step—or a slither—behind, and when Curtis sat down, Schaughtowl sat between his beloved master and the precipitous drop.

Stern picked up a rock from the rock garden and tossed it into the ravine. The Martian did not take his eyes off Curtis. Stern picked up a larger rock, a sharp, pointed one. He was behind the Martian and

Curtis was looking away unseeingly into the night.

It was simple, really, and well executed. The beast's skull bashed in easily, being merely thin bones for a thin atmosphere and light gravitation. A push sent it over the edge of the ravine.

Curtis sat unnoticed, and the traffic jam out front created more than enough confusion to drown out any noise from the creature's fall.

Stern's palm stung. He realized that, before the Martian had pitched over the ravine, a suction pad had for a moment caught at his hand. It had done the beast no good, though.

Curiously, the Martian had not guarded itself, only Curtis. Sitting with its back to Stern had really invited attack. The mind-reading ability was just something that Stern had nervously imagined.

The police would not be able to tell his rock from any other. The heavy body, its ungainly movement and thin bones would explain everything. Besides, there was no motive for killing the Martian and what penalty could there be? It couldn't be called murder.

Stern looked at the palm of his right hand, the one that had held the rock. It stung a little, but in the darkness he couldn't see it. A stinger of some kind, like a bee, probably. The hell with it—couldn't be fatal or Curtis would have warned them about it.

The Martian had been walking by the ravine and had clumsily fallen in. He would report it after he had got Curtis back into the house.

Curtis was easy to arouse and didn't seem to miss Schaughtowl. Stern maneuvered him to the living room, where he sank into a chair and fell into his mood of abstraction.

Beryl must be in the kitchen cleaning up, Stern supposed. Perhaps he had better put some kind of germicide on his palm, just to ward off infection.

HE looked at Curtis relaxed in the chair. Clyde suddenly appeared oddly boyish to him, hardly different than he had been in college days. For a moment Stern felt again the adolescent admiration and fellowship he had felt so strongly then. Don't be stupid, he told himself angrily. This man had the money and the woman that had almost belonged to him.

MOVING slowly, Stern deliciously savored the aroma of his triumph. On the table was the bottle. Clyde would be easy, unsuspecting, kindly.

It wouldn't be safe to marry Beryl right away, but there could never be any suspicion.

No need to hurry. For a moment he wanted to watch Curtis. He wondered what kind of pictures Clyde was seeing on the blank wall. Martian landscapes? The strange Ladonai? Too bad he hadn't stayed on Mars. Stern couldn't help having a friendly feeling for his old college chum, pity, too, for what must happen to him soon.

This was no way to kill anyone!

He was growing old and soft!

Nevertheless, Curtis *did* have a noble and striking face. Funny he had never noticed it before. It seemed to glow with an uncanny peace.

Unnoticed, the numbness crept from Stern's palm along his right arm, and a prickly sensation appeared in his right leg.

It was funny to read a person's thoughts like this. Love flowed from Curtis like the warm glow from a burning candle. A sort of halo had formed from the light above his head.

Symbolic.

From Curtis came wave after wave of love. He could feel it pulsating toward him, and he felt his own heart turn over, answer it. Yes, Curtis was noble.

Stern sank cross-legged on the floor beside Curtis and gazed at him. The prickly sensation had ascended from his leg up through his chest and to his neck. But it didn't matter. Now, for a last time, he could feel the spell of that perfect friendship—before the end.

What end? Why should there be any end to this eternal moment?

Curtis noticed him now. Those half-closed eyes were strangely penetrating. They looked him through.

"Well, Al," he said, "so you killed Schaughtowl?"

Stern looked at the kindly, godlike face and loved it.

Killed whom?

"Poor Al," Curtis said. He leaned over and laid his hand on the back of Stern's neck, fondling it much as one would a dog. "Poor old Al."

Stern's heart leaped in joy. This was ecstasy. It must be expressed. It demanded expression. If he had possessed a tail, he would have wagged it. Perhaps there was a word for that bliss. There was, and with immense satisfaction he spoke it.

"Gull Lup," he said.

—LUCIUS DANIEL

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