

DELAYED ACTION

By CHARLES V. DeVET

This planet gave him the perfect chance to commit the perfect crime — only he couldn't remember just what it was he had committed.

IT was just a hunch. Johnson knew that, but his hunches had often paid off in the past, and now he waited with a big man's patience: For five hours he sat in the wooden stands, under the rumpled canvas the concessionaires had put up to protect the tourists from Marlock's yellow sun.

The sun was hot and soon Johnson's clothing was marked with large soiled patches of sweat. Now and then a light breeze blew across the stands from the native section and at each breath his nostrils crinkled in protest at the acrid smell.

Marlock wasn't much of a planet. Its one claim to fame was its widely advertised Nature's Moebius Strip. For eighteen months of the year—nine months of sub-zero cold, and nine months of sultry, sand-driven summer—the only outsiders to visit the planet came to buy its one export, the fur of the desert ox. But during the two months of fall and two months of spring the tourists poured in to gape at the Strip.

Idly, for the hundredth time, Johnson let his gaze run over the tourists lining up for their "thrill" journey out onto the Strip. Most of them wouldn't go far; they only wanted to be able to say they'd been on it. They would build up some pretty exciting stories about it by the time they returned home.

There was no sign of Johnson's man.

THE party started out onto the Strip. At the first sensation of giddiness women squealed and most of them turned back. Their men came with them, secretly relieved at the excuse.

Johnson watched disinterestedly until only two remained: the young couple he had designated in his mind as honeymooners. The girl had grit. Perhaps more than the young fellow with her. He was affecting bored bravado, laughing loudly as the girl hesitated, but white streaks had appeared along his jawline and across his temples as he waited his turn.

The young couple had gone far enough out now so that they were in the first bend of the Strip's twisting dip. Already their bodies were leaning sharply, as the mysterious gravity of the Strip held them perpendicular with their pathway. From where he sat Johnson could read nausea on their faces.

When they had followed the Strip around until they were leaning at a 35-degree angle, the girl seemed to lose her nerve. She stopped and stood gripping the guide rope with both hands. The boy said something to her, but she shook her head. He'd have to show his superiority now by going on, but it wouldn't be for much farther, Johnson was willing to wager.

The boy took three more steps and paused. Then his body bent in the middle and he was sick. He'd had enough.

Both turned and hurried back. The crowd of tourists, watching or waiting their turn, cheered. In a few minutes, Johnson knew, the kid would be thinking of himself as a hero.

Suddenly Johnson straightened up, having spotted a new arrival, who gripped a tan brief case tightly under one arm, buying a ticket. He had bulky shoulders and a black beard. Johnson's man had come.

When he saw the bearded man go out with the next bunch to brave the Strip, Johnson rose and walked rapidly to the entrance. Elbowing his way through, with a murmured apology, he joined the waiting group.

A thin-faced odd-job man opened the rope gate and they shuffled through. The group must have walked fifty paces, with the bearded man well up in front and Johnson somewhere in the middle, before Johnson's stomach sent him its first warning of unrest. Most of those ahead had stopped and Johnson threaded his way carefully past them.

Another twenty-five steps and he left the others behind. All except the bearded man. He neither paused nor looked back,

Johnson's stomach had drawn up into a tight knot now, and his head was beginning to feel light. There was a faint ringing in his ears.

By the time he reached the end of the guide rope, nausea was creeping up from his stomach and into his throat. This was as far as it was supposed to be safe to go; the advertising literature had it that here was the point of no return. Up ahead his quarry was walking half doubled over, weaving back and forth, as though he were intoxicated. But he did not pause.

Johnson turned to look back, and felt his breakfast fighting to come up. From his perspective, the ground and the spectators watching him had swung to a position almost perpendicular to him. He felt that he was about to slide off into space. A wave of vertigo swept over him, his legs folded and he fell to the ground—sicker than he had ever been before in his life. Now he knew why the man ahead never looked back.

For a moment Johnson wondered whether he should give up. But, even as he debated, tenacity pulled him to his feet and forced him on.

And now something new was added to his vast discomfort. Tiny twinges of pain, like small electric shocks, began shooting up his legs, increasing in intensity with each step he took. The pain built up until the rusty taste of blood in his mouth told him that he had bitten into the flesh of his lower lip.

Johnson's only consolation now was the thought that the man ahead of him must be suffering worse than he. At each step the pain increased its tempo, and the sound within his head grew to a battering roar. Although he felt himself at the last frayed ends of his vitality, he managed to stagger on.

Abruptly he realized that he had very nearly overtaken the man ahead. Through eyes glazed with pain, he saw the other, still standing, but swaying with agony and sickness. The man seemed to be gathering his resources for some supreme effort.

He tottered ahead two more steps, threw himself forward—and disappeared!

If he paused now, Johnson knew he would never be able to move again. Only will power and momentum carried him on. He stumbled and pitched forward. A searing pain traced a path through his head and he felt himself falling.

HE was certain that he had never lost consciousness. The ground came up to meet him, and, with a last effort, he twisted his right shoulder inward. His cheek slid along the dirt and he lay on his side without strength. His legs pushed forward in a steady jerking movement as he fought to quiet his quivering muscles.

Gradually a soothing lethargy bathed Johnson's body. His pains vanished, and the sickness left his stomach.

But something was wrong—terribly wrong!

Slowly he climbed to his feet and stood looking about him. He was still on the narrow arm of the Strip. On either side of him banks of white clouds, with the consistency of thick smoke, billowed and curled about the Strip—but somehow they left its pathway clear.

Johnson shook his head. The wrongness, he guessed, was in his own mind. But he was unable to determine what it was. Desperately he marshalled his scattered thoughts. Nothing. He took one groping step in the direction from which he had come—and staggered back from a wall of pain as tangible as a concrete structure.

He had no choice except to go forward. There was something he must do, he realized, but what was it? With the question came the answer to what was troubling him.

His memory was gone!

Or, at least, a great gap had been torn through it as though carved out by a giant blade. Briefly, despair threatened to overwhelm him.

"Hold it!" Johnson spoke aloud, and the words sobered him.

All fears became worse when not looked at. He had to bring this disaster out into the open where he could face it; where he could assay the damage. He had always taken pride in having a logical mind, with

thought processes as clear and orderly as a bookkeeper's ledger. Closing his eyes, he went swiftly over his recollections, placing each in its appropriate column.

When he finished he found the balance extremely unfavorable, but not hopeless. On the asset side he remembered: His name. Donald Johnson. Right now he was on Nature's Moebius Strip, on the planet, Marlock. There was some man he had been following . . . The rest was on the liability side of his balance sheet.

HIS name remained: All other memory of his own identity was gone. There was no recollection of his reason for being on Marlock, or whom he had been following or why. That left him little with which to work.

On the other hand, he mused, he might never be able to get off the Strip, so that didn't matter much. He doubted his ability to stand the stress of penetrating that electric curtain again. His body had been able to take the punishment the first time because the force had built up gradually. Going back would be something else again.

Still he planned his next actions methodically—only in that way could he retain his sanity. He would go forward for one hour, he decided—he checked his wrist watch and discovered it had run down—and, if he found nothing, he would return and take his chances on getting through the curtain.

At the end of ten minutes he sighted land ahead of him. When he stepped off the Strip, he stopped in amazement!

Somehow the Strip had doubled back on itself, and he had returned to his starting place!

To his right was the rough wooden viewing platform, with its green umbrella gone. The stands were empty, and not a person—tourist or concessionaire—was in sight.

As Johnson stood, perplexed, he became aware of numbness spreading over his body. He brought up his hands and watched them slowly turn blue with cold. He realized then, in a burst of wonder, that winter had come to Marlock. Yet it had been spring when he had gone out on the Strip!

"GOOD God, man!" the clerk exclaimed. "Have you been out in that cold without a coat and hat? It must be thirty below."

Johnson was unable to answer. He had run from the Strip—luckily he remembered its location in relation to the town—but it must have been over a mile to the hotel. Now, as he stamped his feet and beat at his sides with numbed hands, he breathed heavily, gasping great gulps of air into his tortured lungs.

"Come and warm yourself," the clerk said, leading him over to a hot water radiator.

Johnson made no protest. He let the heat penetrate until it scorched the skin on his back. Only after the coldness left his body and was replaced by a drowsy inertia did his attention return to the clerk.

"Did you ever see me before?" Johnson asked.

The clerk shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Any further investigation would have to wait until the next day, Johnson decided. He was dead tired, and he had to have some sleep. "Sign me up for a room, will you?" he asked.

Once up in his room, Johnson counted his money. One hundred and fifty-four credits. Enough to buy winter clothing and pay his room and board for a week. Maybe two. What would he do if he could learn nothing about himself before then?

The next day Johnson left the hotel to buy warm clothes. The town's only store was a half-block down the street—as he remembered it, one of the big Interplanet Company stores.

Johnson waited until the storekeeper finished with two of the hairy-eared natives before giving his order. As he paid for the purchase, he asked: "Have you ever seen me before?"

The storekeeper glanced at him uneasily, and shifted his feet before answering. "Am I supposed to have?"

Johnson ignored the question. "Where can I find the manager?" he asked, slipping into the heavy coat the clerk held for him.

"Go up that stairway by the door," the clerk said. "You'll find him in his office."

THE manager was an old man. Old and black, with the deep blackness only an Earthborn Negro possesses. But his eyes retained their youthful alertness.

"Come in and sit down," he told Johnson as he looked up and saw him standing in the doorway.

Johnson walked over and took the chair at the manager's left. "I've had an accident," he said, without preliminary, "and I seem to have lost my memory. Do you, by any chance, know who I am?"

"Never saw you before in my life," the manager answered. "What's your name?"

"Don Johnson."

"Well, at least you remember something," the old man said shrewdly. "You didn't come during the last six months, if that'll help any. There've been only two ships in that time. Both the Company's. I meet all Company ships. If you came in during the tourist season I wouldn't know."

"Where else could I make inquiries?"

"Son," the old man said kindly, "there's three Earthmen on Marlock, that I know of—besides yourself, of course—the clerk at the hotel, my storekeeper, and myself. If you started asking questions at the hotel, you're at the end of the line now."

Something in Johnson's expression caused the old man to go on. "How you fixed for money, son?"

Johnson drew a deep breath. "I've got enough to last me about two weeks."

The manager hesitated, and carefully surveyed the ceiling with his eyes before he spoke again. "I've always felt we Earthmen should stick together," he said. "If you want a job, I'll find something for you to do and put you on the payroll."

Twenty minutes later Johnson took the job—and twenty years later he was still working for the Company. He worked for them until . . .

JOHNSON was glad when the first twinge of fear came that it brought no panic. Instead it washed through his body, sharpening his reflexes and alerting his muscles for action.

He never ceased to wonder about this faculty he had acquired for sensing the presence of danger. There was no doubt in his mind that it had come into active function through the influence of his environment. But it must have been an intrinsic part of him even before that, waiting to be activated.

A moment before he had localized the source of his uneasiness—an Earthman, following perhaps fifty paces behind him. The one quick glance Johnson had allowed himself told him his follower was above average in height, and lean—with the wiry, muscular command of himself that marked him as a man capable of well-coordinated action.

He fought the rising force of the next "sand-blast" boiling in from the desert, until he was unable to take a step against it. Then he moved behind a mud-packed arm projecting from the native dwelling at his right. Every building had one of these protecting arms added on; even the concrete buildings in the newer, Earth-built section of the city conformed to the custom. The sandstorms raged intermittently on Marlock through the entire nine month summer season, and could not be ignored, either by visitors or natives.

Johnson huddled against the projection, but the sand whipped around the corner and pounded at his back. Fine grains sifted through his clothing and mingled with the clammy sweat of his body. He resisted the frantic urge to scratch his itching, tormented skin, for he knew the flesh would be rubbed raw in a minute and increase the irritation to maddening proportions.

As the "sand-blast" lost its intensity, he came out from his shelter and walked away as rapidly as the diminishing force of the wind would permit. If he could reach his office before his stalker closed in, he would be safe.

Suddenly a second Earthman, a short length of pipe in his right hand, came out of a doorway across the street and ran toward him.

Johnson realized that here was the source of the warning his intuition had sent—not the man behind him.

FOR a brief instant, he weighed the situation. The man was equipped for assault, but the chances were he was interested only in robbery. Johnson could probably save himself a beating by surrendering

his money without resistance. He rejected the thought. A man had to live with his pride, and his self-respect; they were more necessary than physical well-being. Setting his shoulders firmly against the wall, he waited.

The man slowed to a walk when he saw his intended victim on guard. Johnson had the chance to observe him closely. He was a short and dark man, heavy of bone, with the lower half of his face thickly bearded, and sweat making a thin glistening film on his high cheekbones.

Abruptly a voice said, "I wouldn't touch him if I were you."

Johnson followed the gaze of his near-attacker to his left where the lean man he had noted before stood with a flat blue pistol pointed in their direction. He held the pistol like a man who knew how to use it.

"A gun!" the man in the street gasped. "Are you crazy?"

"Better put it away—fast," Johnson warned his ally. "If the native police catch you with that gun, you're in bad trouble."

The lean man hesitated a moment, then shrugged and pocketed the gun. But he kept his hand in the pocket. "I can still use it," he said, to no one in particular.

"Look, chum," the bearded thug grated. "You're evidently a stranger here. Let me give you a tip. If you get caught using a gun, or even having one on you, the police'll slap you in jail with an automatic sentence of ten years. An Earthman couldn't stay alive in one of their so-called jails for a year.

"Now I've got a little business to attend to with Mr. Johnson, and I don't want any interference. So be smart and run along."

The smile never left the stranger's face. "Right now," he said, "I am interested in seeing that Mr. Johnson remains in good health. If you take another step toward him, I'll shoot. And, if I'm not successful in evading the police afterwards, you won't be alive to know it."

"You're bluffing," the bearded man said. "I . . ."

"Let me point out something," Johnson interrupted. "Suppose he is bluffing and doesn't use the gun: The odds are still two to one against you. Are you sure you could handle both of us—even with the help of that pipe?"

The man wasn't sure. He stood undecided, then his face showed black frustration. He mouthed a few choice phrases through his beard, turned and walked away.

THE lean man extended his hand. "My name's Alton Hawkes."

The rising whine of the next "sand-blast" drowned out Johnson's answer. He drew his new acquaintance into the shelter of a sand-arm.

As they hugged the corner, they felt a third body press against them. The musky odor, mingled with the taint of old leather, told Johnson that their companion was a native.

The storm eased its force and the two Earthmen raised their heads to regard the corner's other occupant. He was a mahogany brown, almost the exact color of the ankle-length leather skirt he wore. "Man, he stinks!" Hawkes said.

Their visitor spread his hairy, wide-nostriled nose into the native equivalent of a smile. His hairy ears twitched with pleasure and he swelled his chest. "Blee strong all over," he said. "Want him guard?"

"Why not?" Johnson answered, glancing inquiringly at Hawkes. He slipped a coin into the extended brown palm. "Guard us until we get to the big-house section."

"Pale-smells be very safe," the native said.

They left their shelter as the wind died down and started toward the taller buildings of the foreign section. "I must have said the right thing when I said he stinks," Hawkes remarked.

"Telling a native that is the same thing, to him, as calling him strong and virile," Johnson answered. "They admit, reluctantly, that we foreigners have some good fighting qualities, but we're still regarded as unmanly because of our weak odor. Their females wouldn't look twice at either of us."

When they reached one of the few three-story structures in the city, Johnson dismissed their guard. They entered the building and walked down a short corridor and through a door lettered:

DONALD H. JOHNSON
District Manager
Interplanets Trade Company

"To be frank with you," Hawkes said, as he eased his lank body into the chair Johnson offered, "I had planned to learn more about your local activities before I introduced myself. However, I've found in the past that my first judgment of a man is usually right, so I think I'll get down to business immediately." He drew a set of papers from an inside pocket and tossed them on the desk in front of Johnson. "I'm a Company Secret Service man," he said.

JOHNSON raised his eyebrows, but looked at the papers without comment. He glanced up at Hawkes.

"Do you recognize either of the men in the pictures?" Hawkes asked, when he saw that Johnson had no intention of speaking.

Unhurriedly Johnson picked up the papers and removed a rubber binder. He pulled out two photos and laid them on the desk in front of him. "The bearded one is the man who waylaid me," he said. "Of course."

"Look at both a little closer," Hawkes suggested, "and see if you don't notice something else."

Johnson studied the pictures. "There's no doubt about the first," he murmured. "Evidently I'm supposed to recognize the other also." Abruptly he sat erect. "They're both the same man," he exclaimed. "Only in the second picture he's clean-shaven."

Hawkes nodded. "There's a story about those two pictures," he said. "But first, let me fill you in on some background. You know that Interplanets has branches on more than a thousand worlds. Because of this widespread operation it's particularly vulnerable to robbery. But it would cost more than the Company's earnings to post adequate guards on every station. And it would be impractical to depend on the protection of the local governments, many of which are extremely primitive. On the other hand, allowing themselves to be robbed with impunity would be financial suicide."

Johnson nodded. "Of course."

"That," Hawkes continued, "is where the Company's Secret Service comes in. It never lets up on the effort it will make to solve a robbery and bring the perpetrators to justice. And it never quits, once it begins an investigation. That policy has proven very effective in discouraging thievery. During the Company's entire tenure there have been less than a dozen unsolved thefts—and two of them occurred right here on Marlock."

"I was a clerk with the Company at the time of the second," Johnson said reminiscently. "Been with them about three years then. That must have been over twenty years ago. I ..." He paused and looked down. "I remember," he said. "The picture without the beard . . . That's the thief. The photograph was taken by one of the automatic cameras set up for just that purpose; we still use them. But they never found the man."

"That's right," Hawkes agreed. "That robbery occurred a little over twenty years ago. And the other picture you have was taken at the time of the first robbery—approximately twenty-five years before that."

"But it isn't possible," Johnson protested. "These pictures are of the same man. And there's obviously no twenty-five year spread in age between them. Unless . . ."

"Unless one is the other's father, or a relative that resembles him very closely?" Hawkes finished. "Look at the pictures again. There's the same scar on both foreheads, the same pockmark on the right cheek; our special section has even made measurements of the comparative sizes of the nose, ears and other features. There's no possible doubt that the pictures are of the same man."

"HOW do you explain it?" Johnson asked.

"I don't," Hawkes replied quietly. "That's one of the things I'm here to learn. But did you notice this? The man we encountered this afternoon was not only the same as the one on those pictures: he still looks the same. We might, for the sake of argument, grant that a man's appearance would change only slightly in twenty-five years. But when you add another twenty-three on top of that—and he's still unchanged . . . ?"

"If you're certain that he's the man, why don't you arrest him?" Johnson asked:

"Can we arrest a man apparently about thirty years old and accuse him of a crime committed forty-eight years ago—or even twenty-three years ago?"

"I suppose not," Johnson agreed. "What do you intend to do?"

"I haven't decided yet. First I'll have to learn more about the situation here. You can help me with that. Right now I'd like to know something about the native customs—especially in regard to legal matters."

"Their laws are fairly simple," Johnson began. "There's no law against stealing or taking by force anything you can get away with. That sounds absurd by Earth standards, it prevents the amassing of more goods than an individual needs, and makes for fairly equitable distribution. If a native somehow acquires a sudden amount of wealth—goods, in their case—he must hire guards to protect it. Guarding is a major occupation. They do especially big business during the tourist seasons. In time the pay of the guards will eat up any native's surplus. Either way—by loss or guard pay—the wealth is soon redistributed."

"Can they even kill one another with impunity?"

"No. Their laws are rigid in that respect. In the process of—relieving another of his property, they must neither break a major bone, nor inflict permanent damage. If they disobey, they are tortured to death in the public square."

Hawkes asked, "Who enforces their law?"

"One of the clans. Its members are supported in their duties by all the others. And there's a permanent open season on murderers. Anyone, police or civilian, may revenge a victim."

"How about the law against carrying firearms?"

"With them, intent is tantamount to commission," Johnson replied. "Only foreigners are ever foolish enough to be caught armed. However, all native laws apply to them also. The only concession the Company has been able to force is that a foreign offender isn't, tortured: He's put in jail for ten years. None ever lives to come out."

"I see," Hawkes said. "Interesting. However, the immediate situation is this. I've been sent here because the Service received reports that our bearded friend had made another appearance. And we believe it's safe to assume that he's here to attempt a third robbery. Right now we'll have to pass over his trick of longevity. Our problem is to catch him in the act. When do you think he'll make his play?"

"It'll have to be some time before tomorrow noon," Johnson answered. "Under our setup we accept furs from the natives whenever they're brought in. But we pay off only once a year. That way I'm not burdened with guarding money the whole year around. I have well over fifty thousand credits in the safe now. And tomorrow I begin paying off."

"Then we'll have to be ready for him," Hawkes said, "though I don't expect him until tonight. Probably just about the time you're ready to close. He'll need you to open the safe. I can count on your help?"

Johnson nodded.

THAT night as they waited in his office, Johnson turned to Hawkes. "I've been giving some thought to what you told me this afternoon about the robberies. I have a theory that might account for some of the things we don't understand."

"Yes?" Hawkes looked closely at Johnson.

"You've probably heard of our tourist attraction called Nature's Moebius Strip? As far as we know, no one has ever gone beyond a certain point—and returned. Suppose there's a time flaw at that point—and the bearded man has somehow learned about it. Suppose anyone completing the Moebius

circle, and returning, finds—say, twenty years have elapsed, while to him only a few minutes have passed?"

"Go on." Hawkes leaned forward intently.

"He makes his first holdup," Johnson continued, "and goes around the Strip. When he comes out twenty years later they're no longer looking for him. He leaves Marlock, and during the next five years he goes through the money he stole. He returns and repeats the process. This time the money lasts only, three years. Now he's back to try it again. Do you see how that would tie everything up in a neat little package?"

Hawkes smiled, as he relaxed and sat back. "A bit too neat," he said. "Also, you don't have an ounce of concrete evidence to back up your theory."

"That's right. I don't," Johnson agreed.

Outside the door a board creaked. Johnson glanced quickly across the room to where Hawkes sat with a pistol on his lap. Hawkes' eyebrows raised, but he made no sound.

SUDDENLY the door was kicked open and the black-bearded stranger stood framed in the doorway. "Raise 'em!" he barked. The gun in his hand was aimed at Johnson.

The man took two steps into the room. Hawkes shifted slightly in his chair and the gunman's head swiveled in his direction. The slug from Hawkes' pistol made a small blue hole in the upper left corner of his forehead.

The thug's face tipped up, shocked and unbelieving. He swayed slowly before he fell backward, his body rigid. His fur cap flew from his head as he struck the floor.

"I thought we'd better play it safe," Hawkes said as he rose and walked over to the fallen man. He slipped his gun into his pocket before he bent and picked up the cap at his feet. He dropped it over the upturned face.

For a long moment the silence held thin as the two men looked at each other. Hawkes stood, wiping his right hand on his trouser leg. Johnson toyed idly with the gun he had picked up from the desk in front of him.

Finally Hawkes let his body sag into a chair at Johnson's, right. "This is always a dirty business," he said sourly.

Johnson sat down also. "Did you notice the look on his face when he saw you, and you shot him?" he asked, abstractedly turning the pistol in his hand. "Funny thing. In that half-second before he fell an article I read somewhere flashed into my mind. It seems that during the French Revolution a certain doctor got to wondering just how long a man's brain remained active after his head had been cut off. He persuaded some of his friends who were due to be guillotined to cooperate in a series of tests. Each man was to keep blinking his eyes as long as possible after his head left his body, as a sign that he was still conscious. The doctor counted as high as six winks."

"Very interesting, I'm sure," Hawkes said guardedly. "But a bit morbid, isn't it?"

"I was wondering," Johnson went on as though he had not heard the other, "whether he was still conscious for that instant after you shot him. And if that brought the look of surprise to his face."

HAWKES turned in his chair to face Johnson fully. "You're driving at something," he said sharply. "Get to the point."

"Personally I've wondered at a few things about you myself," Johnson said. He held the gun steadily in his hand now, no longer pretending to play with it. "I told you that our second robbery occurred while I was a clerk with the Company," he went on. "They jerked me in to the Home Office, and for a while I had a pretty rough time ... You know, when I joined the Company, I was an amnesiac. I remembered my name, but that's about all . . ."

"No, I didn't know," Hawkes muttered, growing slightly paler. "I learned then from the Home Office

that I had been a member of their Secret Service some twenty years earlier. I'd been sent here to investigate the first robbery. And I had disappeared. Naturally, they had suspected me.

"However, they had no evidence, and when I reappeared twenty years later they played it smart by just waiting, instead of arresting me. When the second robbery occurred, they closed in.

"The only thing that saved me was the fact that tests proved my memory was really gone, and that I had told the truth—as I knew it. From the few scraps of information I retained — about being out on the Moebius Strip they and I arrived at the theory I mentioned a short time ago. I was sent back here to wait. The Company never gives up. Remember?"

"Are you insinuating that I was in cahoots with this fellow here?" Hawkes asked harshly.

"I'd say it was more than an insinuation," Johnson replied. "You made several other slips. In the first place, Secret Service men are usually better informed about a situation they're investigating than you seemed to be. Also, those identification papers you showed me were faked."

THE skin along the bridge of Hawkes' nose had drawn tight, and now his lips grew narrower. "In that case, why did I save you from that man this afternoon?" he asked. "And why would I shoot him now?"

"Your saving me was an act, to get into my confidence. You shot him so you wouldn't have to split the loot. I figure you were in with him on the second robbery also. There had to be someone because his memory would be gone, when he came off the Strip. But you weren't satisfied. Together you decided to pull off another robbery while you were here and double the spoils. Then you decided you wanted it all for yourself and you shot him."

"There's one big flaw in your reasoning," Hawkes pointed out. "How did I plan to get away? The only ships leaving here for several months belong to the Company. Do you think I'd be foolish enough to expect them to let me slip out on one of their ships?"

"No. I think you intended to go out on the Strip yourself."

"All right then," Hawkes countered. "You admitted that this was a two-man job. How could I protect myself when I returned, if I knew in advance that I wouldn't know who I was, let alone what I had done?"

"I'll come back to that in a minute," Johnson said. "But now I'd advise you to drop your gun on the floor and give yourself up. You've got nothing to gain by carrying on the bluff. You know I'll never let you get to the Strip. And, once I put you on the ship, the Company will take over."

HAWKES' shoulders drooped. Finally he smiled raggedly. "There's no use my arguing any longer," he said. "But you've made the mistake of underestimating me, my friend. I've lost my gamble. That's all. You have nothing on me. I'm not as ignorant of native law as I may have pretended. Granted, I am carrying a lethal weapon. But I'm on private property. That's legal. I shot a man. But only in defense of my own life. His gun on the floor will prove he came in armed. So I'm clean as far as the natives are concerned, right?"

Johnson nodded.

"And, as for the Company, what will they hold me for? They can't prove any connection between me and him." Hawkes indicated the man on the floor. "And this robbery—it never actually came off. Earth laws don't allow prosecution for intent. Now, where does that leave you?"

Johnson stood up. "You're right—as far as you went," he said. "But, returning to your earlier question about one man pulling this job, I asked myself how I would do it, if it had to be done alone. And I found a way. You'd probably figure the same one. Now I'll take that paper in your pocket. It will serve very well as a confession."

Suddenly Hawkes' right hand streaked toward a side pocket. Johnson leaned forward and brought the flat of his gun across the other's temple.

As Hawkes sagged, Johnson ripped open his coat and took out a sealed envelope. He removed a sheet of paper and read:

This has been written for my own information. My name is Alton Hawkes. I have robbed the Interplanets Company and gone out on the Strip with the money. When I read this my memory will

be gone and twenty years will have elapsed.

—CHARLES V. DE VET