

Alien

LESTER DEL REY

There was only a gentle swell on the Pacific, and the sails of the little thirty-foot sloop were barely filled by the dying breeze. Larry Cross let his stringy body slump over the tiller, staring at the little island of rock and strip of beach off his port; It was the first land he'd seen in three days, and improbable land, at that, since it should have been a coral reef. But it was already slipping astern, and didn't really matter, anyhow.

A drunken snore sounded from the cabin, and Cross frowned, twisting his thin face bitterly. He blew out a breath with a snort that made a wisp of sandy hair quiver annoyingly in front of his eyes, and then shrugged, returning to his dark thoughts of himself and Al Simmonds .

A dozen times when the big man had fuked out during a storm and got himself stinko on his eternal cache of liquor, Cross had considered throwing him overboard. But it had remained with all his other dreams of violence and action. If he'd had any guts, he'd never have let Simmonds talk'him into this crazy attempt to circle the earth in Cross's tiny sloop—or he'd have quit when he first discovered what a lazy bully the big man was.

He'd meant to quit at the first port, and had even tried 46

itat Capetown . But now, with New Zealand behind them, heading homeward, he'd quit pretending. If they got back, he knew he'd wind up writing their book with a joint byline , while Simmonds somehow would get all the glory and most of the money they might make.

The wind died, and the sloop drifted to a stop. Cross considered using the auxiliary, but gasoline was more precious than time. Anyhow, if they were becalmed too long, they were near enough to a regular air route to yell for help with the emergency transmitter. He glanced up, idly seeking a plane he knew had passed two hours before; the sky was bare, and he started to look down again.

Then abruptly, the sky sprouted a red spark that lanced up from the horizon. He jerked his head to follow it. In scant seconds, it bloomed into a cylinder bearing three fins, all glaring with the fury of red-hot metal. It was like the pictures he'd seen of future rockets landing at supersonic speeds. But that was ridiculous. . . .

Now it was arcing down, already the size of a small plane. It hit the ocean in a flat trajectory. A cloud of steam leaped up, and the object bounced, skipped, and came' rushing for the sloop—on a direct collision course.

Cross took one useless step toward the cabin, shouting for Al. But there was no time. He jerked savagely at the inflatable raft, pulling it free and jumping for the water behind the stern. His fingers found the valve, and the raft swelled with the hiss of compressed CO₂ gas. By luck, the raft landed right side up without spilling the attached emergency supplies. He managed to maneuver it under him, and began drifting back from the sloop.

The ocean-skipping monster was slowing, but still seemed to rush down like leviathan. There was a savage crunch and the sound of a thousand banshees wailing by. The raft leaped and spun, while hot air seemed to suck Larry up and drop him back. He bounced up to see the tiling make a final leap and begin to sink, still steaming.

Somehow, he twisted around as the raft quieted, to search for the sloop. But the little ship was tilting forward, with its bow ripped off like matchwood. There was no time to rescue Al or look for more supplies. Larry stared at it,

still not sure it could have happened. He watched the sloop sink until even its mast was gone. Then he reached for the folding paddle.

Something broke the surface, and a shout close to hysteria cut through the air. "Larry! Larry! For God's sake, help me!"

Red spots spread out on the surface as Simmonds thrashed about. Larry leaned his muscles into his paddling until he could reach the bobbing head. Simmonds came scrambling aboard, screaming as his obviously broken leg struck the raft. The collision must have been hell inside the cabin. He was covered with lacerations and bruises; under the dirty scrabble of beard, his face was white with fear and agony."

"Tangled in bunk, going down!" He dropped to the bottom of the raft, shaking sickly. "Dunnohow I got free. Damn torpedo—do something, Larry!"

Larry yanked open the small medical kit and began tearing up his shirt. He couldn't do much for the leg, though, beyond a reasonable overdose of codein . "It wasn't a torpedo, Al. It was a space rocket, out of control."

"You're crazy. We don't have things like that yet. I know!"

Simmondsalways knew everything, but Larry realized he was probably right this time. He shrugged. "Okay, we don't. So it came from Mars. Now lie still, while I paddle over to an island I spotted. We're lucky to be alive—don't crowd it!"

It was only after he began paddling that what he had said began to sink in, and the prickle grew along his backbone. Monsters from the stars, using Earth for a landing field! He'd read a book by Charles Fort that claimed such things happened. He'd thought once about it, getting romantic about man's first contact with alien life. But to know there were things on some of the far worlds that could cut through the immense distance of space ... He shivered until the physical ache of paddling drove it from his mind. Simmonds groaned for a while, and then passed out as the codein hit him.

It was beginning to turn dark when Larry beached the

raft. Simmonds was unconscious, but still moaning faintly. There was a narrow strip of sandy beach, obviously covered at high tide, and then rocks ran up steeply for perhaps a total height of forty feet. At its widest, the island was less than half a mile across. Larry had landed where there was a broken slide up the rocky cliff, and now he began to look for a possible shelter. Near the top, a projecting ledge seemed to offer some cover, if he could make it.

He left Al, but picked up one can of water, the medicine and the food. It was rough climbing, but he reached the ledge. It could have offered more shelter, but it was the best he could see. The rocky overhang projected several feet beyond the entrance, and there was a flat surface for them to sleep. He left the supplies and went down again, stumbling as the twilight deepened rapidly.

Simmonds was moaning louder and running a fever. Larry gave him more of the drug. He loaded himself with the rest of the water, picked up the flashlight, worked the big man onto his back, and headed upward again. Each step was a prolonged hell, with the flash necessary most of the way, but he made it at last. Al mumbled as Larry dropped him gently onto the flat rock and slumped beside him to rest.

A little of the water helped. He poured some down Simmonds' throat, dreading the final trip. The raft would make a better bed for Simmonds, and the fishing equipment might be needed. Above all, they had to have the little transmitter; he'd have to be ready to signal when the plane went overhead tomorrow.,

When he finally began the descent, it was completely dark, with no moon. Cross carried the flashlight, using it sparingly. As he reached flatter ground, he cut it off completely to save the batteries. His hands located a large rock and he guided himself around it by touch. He reached down for the raft, found it, and groped about for the transmitter.

It wasn't there. He fumbled with the switch of the flash, swearing as the light cut on. The raft was empty. He jerked the light across the ground, locating the fishing supplies,

but there was no sign of the transmitter. Then he froze, staring at the damp sand.

Footprints criss-crossed his own, circled the raft, and led off down the beach toward the cul-de-sac at the end!

Pictures of cannibals and spears leaped into his mind, to be replaced at once by the need for the pilfered transmitter. His hand jerked to his pocket and came out with a multi-bladed knife, fumbling the big blade open. He took a final look at the curve of the beach and cut off the light.

The beach was fairly flat. He broke into a slow trot, trying not to stumble or make too much noise. He judged his way by the slope of the sand; once around the bend, he quickened his run. The beach ended some four hundred feet further, bounded by the sea and an unscalable cliff nearly fifteen feet high. The sandy part was only a few feet wide at the present tide, and he should have no trouble in locating the

thief, even without the light. He might need the advantage of surprise.

Fifty feet from the end, he ran full-tilt into something with the stubborn softness of flesh. He spilled onto the sand while horror clawed at his nerves. There was a thick grunt, and something sharp raked his face. Then his feet were under him, and he staggered up, flicking on the flash.

It illuminated more horror. The thing had two legs, two arms, and only one head—but there was nothing human about it. The limbs were double-jointed and too long, with cat-like claws on the toes and fingers. There were no visible ears or nose. The skin was mottled gray-green, except for a ridge of quivering purple on the hairless head and warty growths that stuck out irregularly over the whole body. Even crouched, it was taller than Larry. Under one arm, it held the transmitter from the raft; the other hand was digging into what seemed to be a natural abdominal pouch.

Larry jumped forward, swinging the knife. The blade missed, but the thing mewed. Its legs doubled under it, and it leaped upward, a full fifteen feet to the top of the cliff. It landed upright and vanished, carrying the transmitter with it. A second later, a large rock tumbled downward, missing Larry by inches.

He dropped the knife, then had to fumble for it, expect-

ing more rocks. None came. He found the knife, scooped it up, and dashed back toward the raft, beyond the cliff. He swept the rocks with the flash, but could see no sign of the creature.

It was no monster from Mars, Venus or any other solar planet. It was something that had come from a heavier planet, but an oxygen planet, and that meant it circled around another sun. Something that could swim out of a sunken ship at the bottom of thesea, could cover miles of water as fast as he could paddle a raft, and could leap fifteen feet from a standing start. Probably it could even see in the dark!

He scooped up what bits of driftwood he could find and loaded them into the raft, before heaving it onto his back. He fought his way up to the shelter, sweating with expectation of attack at every step. But none came. And now the moon was rising, casting its light over the island.

Larry caught a brief rest and again swept the flash over all the surface nearby. Half-satisfied, he turned to Simmonds. He peeled back the trouser leg, finding no sign that the bone had broken through the skin. It seemed to be a simple fracture. He pored over the first-aid book, getting little help, and then began making a crude set of splints, using their belts and what else he could find.

He tied Al's arms to his sides and dropped down on the man's thighs. Then, sick and shaken, he began the messy business of trying to set the bone. Simmonds came out of the stupor at the first twinge, to thresh about violently and howl piteously. But eventually, the bone seemed to be set, and Larry tightened the splints around it. He picked up the sobbing man and put him into the still-inflated raft.

Simmonds dragged himself to a half-sitting position where he could stare accusingly at Larry. "You could at least have given me a drink. I'm a sick man. That's what we packed the emergency bottle for."

"You drank that the third day out of New York," Larry told him woodenly. "And a dozen times later. Here, take this." He poured out two more of the codein pills, noticing how few were left, and trying to listen for sounds from outside.

Simmonds broke into a torrent of insults, and it took half an hour to quiet him, while Larry cursed himself for not leaving the man hi the sea. But he swallowed the words as he'd learned to swallow all other knocks in a world where he didn't count for anything.

If there had been anything to stay for, he probably would never have left with the man on this trip. But he'd lost his parents early, and lived about with relatives who didn't want him. He'd missed a college scholarship by one point. He'd tried to write fiction and ended up doing articles about fishing and sailing. Of course, there'd been a girl once—but not after his savings ran out. The only good thing he could remember was inheriting the sloop from an uncle—and now the alien's ship had sunk that.

With Simmonds asleep again, Larry went out to scan what he could see of the island. Everything was apparently quiet. The monster was still hiding, probably investigating the transmitter, unless it had dismissed it as too simple already.

He tried to realize that the creature came from a race who could travel between the stars, and that to it he was only a savage on a backward world. It was a civilized being, not a beast of prey. It was probably as desperate and frightened as he was. If he went out to make overtures of friendship . . .

He shook his head quickly. All right, so he was the savage. But what would he do if he knew a wild, possibly cannibalistic savage was on the island with him? If indeed he was even that close. Maybe he was only a semi-intelligent beast to the thing. He wouldn't trust a gorilla, though men and gorillas came from the same family and the same world. In a situation like this, each would have to assume the other meant

to kill him. And if both were creatures of good will, neither could afford to show it.

The memory of the claws on the creature's hands came back to remind him that it had natural weapons. He stared at the shadows along the rough trail, shivering and yawning. He couldn't sleep with that out there—but he caught himself dozing off, all the same. Finally, he got up to

scatterloose rocks near the head of the trail where they would rattle at the first step. Then he found a place in the deepest shadows where he could still watch, forced himself into an uncomfortable position, and tried to believe he'd waken at the first sound. It was a scream from Simmonds that jerked him out of his sleep, just as something tall and inhuman darted past him in long leaps for the trail. It was carrying something, but he couldn't focus or stir until it was already gone. He shook his way out of the nightmare fear and the acid shock of awakening and groped for the flashlight.

Simmonds was still screaming, but now in words. "Satan! The devil, coming for me! Oh, God! God, don't let him get me! Don't——"

Larry slapped him heavily, driving the hysteria back from him. "Cut it out, Al. It's just the alien out of that rocket. It came from the stars—not from any hell you're imagining. I saw it before, down on the beach. It's just another form of life, no more a devil than I am—I hope!"

"He had a long knife pointed right at me. He wanted to kill me. You'd have let him kill me!" Simmonds drew in a deep breath, held it, and then let it dribble out while sanity returned to him. His skin had been hot to Larry's touch, but he wasn't delirious yet. Now sudden excitement hit him, washing away the last of the terror.

"We're rich. Damn it, kid, we're made. What a piece of luck—all alone on this island with the first freak from Mars. Man, this is hotter than Lindbergh's first flight! You still got that knife? Yeah. And if he swam here, out of that sinking rocket, he can't have any weapons. Sure, I was just imagining the knife—too dark hi here to see if he had one, anyhow." His eyes darted about the shelter, still illuminated in the dimming light of the flash. "That paddle and the knife—it'll make a fair spear."

"What am I supposed to do? Go out and kill the thing, just so we'll have a trophy to take back?" Larry asked sickly.

Simmonds nodded. "And what a trophy! We'll make a million bucks. What a book! Of course, if I could

get

around, I'd figure out something to catch him alive. But you're not that much of a man, kid. You'd better just spear him. Then when you signal the plane tomorrow——"

"He's got the transmitter!"

Simmonds swore hotly as Larry gave him the details. Then he shrugged. "Okay. When you get him, you'll have it back. All the more, reason. How about some water, Larry? I'm burning up."

Larry handed over the container and waited while the other drank noisily. He started to take a swallow himself, then stopped, staring at the empty spot where the second container should be. He raked his eyes over the shelter, but it was gone. The alien had taken the full container!

There was probably no fresh water on the island. If the creature needed water, and kept the transmitter so that he couldn't signal for rescue, the issue was no longer one of ethics; it was a case of kill or die of thirst. He located the paddle and some line from the fishing kit, clicked off the dying light, and went out grimly to begin on the spear Simmonds had suggested. It seemed necessary now..

Civilized beings! When a civilized man could strip the first contact with alien life down to a matter of trophies, where did good will enter? Maybe the alien had been hunting trophies, too. Maybe it had missed him and gone for Simmonds with head-hunting ideas.

The sun was up before he finished the spear. It was clumsy and awkward, but it had to do. He went inside for a sip of water, noticing that Simmonds was breathing heavily and with more fever. Then he found his way around the overhang, and to the top of the island.

It was mostly solid rock, split into two plateaus by a break beginning at the trail to the shelter. His half was forty feet above the sea, and almost level; the other side was rougher, but at an average height of about fifteen feet. Except for the beach, the island rose up directly from the sea. There was no trace of water.

But he spotted the alien. It had taken a spot on the lower plateau, opposite the shelter, partly hidden

among a group of boulders, where it could watch them. Around it, the wreck of the transmitter lay spread out, beside the water

container. Larry stared down sickly, knowing that they could never reassemble the transmitter now, even if he could get it back.

Then a sound from overhead made him look up to see the big plane going directly over the island on its regular route! With the transmitter, he could have had help in minutes; but it was too high to make anything of his frantic gestures.

The alien had looked up, too. Now it looked at Larry, who shook the spear at it and smarted down the slide. The alien watched his advance for a second. Then it lifted a boulder that must have weighed fifty pounds and threw it casually—farther than Larry could have thrown his spear.

He lowered his useless weapon, while the other went back to whatever it was doing to the transmitter. Larry went down the slide and into the shelter, where Simmonds was tossing about.

"Drink," the big man was moaning. "Hot— gotta get a drink. Hey, barmaid, don't I get no service here? Got a new second baseman—all green. Real hot. Hot. Gimme a drink!"

Larry picked up the container and handed it to the other. Simmonds raised it uncertainly to his mouth, took a swallow, and another. Then he let out a yell. "Try'n trick me, would you? Water!"

His arms heaved the container, sending it spuming to the back of the shelter, where it landed on its side! Larry let out a sick cry and leaped for it, tilting it back. But there was only a trickle left. The rest ran across the floor, to collect in a puddle and dribble through a crack slowly.

He dropped to the rock, burying his lips in the dirty water, sucking at it greedily before it could vanish. He got some of it, along with dust and bits of rock. Then he was looking at the damp floor, cursing himself and Simmonds.

Across the slide, he could see the alien staring at them. He shook his fist at it. But there was no time for anger now, even. Without water, the vague idea he had developed would have to be rushed. He grabbed

up the ram cover for the raft, knotting its corners together to form a sack, and headed down for the beach.

He worked through most of the day, carrying sand up to the plateau and spreading it into a great SOS sign. His only hope now was to have someone in the plane spot it; he couldn't be too optimistic, but the sand seemed to show up well on the darker rock.

The alien was busy with the transmitter still, seeming to be rewinding wires and making tests. About mid-day, the thing took time off to leap from the cliff out into the ocean. Minutes later, it was back with a fish. It repeated the action several times, for no reason Larry could see, and then sprawled out in the shade, as if sleeping. He debated an attempt to surprise it, decided against it, and finally slept for a couple of hours himself. It was safer during the light of day. He'd have to be up and on guard at night.

Simmonds was crying for water now, and he gave the man half of what was left. His own lips were burning, but he barely wet them. Then he went back to enlarging his signal. It seemed to be a lot of work for a man who had nothing to return to.

He gave Simmonds the last of the water. Al was over his delirium for the time being, scared and angry over the lost water. He sat sucking at the empty container, trying to draw a last drop from it, and wailing. Larry licked his own lips and went on with his work.

The moon was coming up as he made his last trip, to put a tip on the big arrow pointing to the letters. He finished it, and began heading down again, wondering if the alien eyes were still staring at him.

Then a scream from the cave sent him stumbling forward. He heard a mewling sound, and rocks grated below as a shadowy thing leaped away. Larry grabbed a rock and heaved it, but the thing was gone. He dashed into the shelter and stopped.

Simmonds was sitting up with a can tilted to his mouth. The sound of gurgling liquid came from it. Larry jerked the container away and capped it before Simmonds could bloat himself. "How'd you get this?"

"From him," Simmonds answered. His fear was giving place to mock bravery now. "Came sneaking up, holding it out so I could see it. I knew what he was up to. Meant to

let me get it, keep my attention on the water, then kill me. So I played dumb—even made like I was scared, see? When he set the water down where I'd have to reach forward, I fooled him. Let out a yell, fell back and got that big rock back there. I gave it to him good, right in the face. If I'd had a good leg——"

The rock part was a lie, Larry realized. There had been no rock within Al's reach. But the rest of it ... He couldn't decide. It might have been a gesture of friendship. Maybe the alien didn't use water. Maybe the water was poisoned. Or maybe it had been used as a decoy, as Simmonds had said. He didn't mention the poison possibility; if it existed, the damage was done and there was no use in scaring Al. Then he stared at a group of fish on the floor.

Al followed his gaze and blinked. "Huh? I didn't see them. Now why'd he bring a bunch of dead fish around?"

"So we'd eat them, maybe," Larry guessed. "He could see which we ate and know whether any of them are poison to us—the way we do with monkeys in a jungle. Let him worry."

He threw the fish out toward the ocean. Judging by the strength of the alien, it must have a higher metabolism than men, with a greater need of food. He and Al could live on their concentrates and let it starve.

Then a hunch hit him, and he went dashing back to the top again.

He was right. Silhouetted in the moonlight, the thing was just finishing its work. As he came to the top, it let out a mewling cry and leaped over the edge. He heard it strike the water, where he couldn't follow it.

His carefully built signal was ruined. The sand had been scattered smoothly about, without any pattern. Somehow, it had guessed what he was doing and had ruined it.

Suddenly he swung, cursing his own slowness. Now was the one time when the transmitter was unguarded. It was almost certainly wrecked, but he might get it to work somehow, enough to send some kind of a signal. Al claimed he understood electronics—it was probably a lie, but might have some truth in it. And even the alien couldn't reach the top without swimming all the way around to the beach.

He dived down the slide and began scrambling over the rocks toward the alien's camp.

The mess of the transmitter now had assumed some order; it was back together, but in a different way, with thin wire stretched out into a queer spider-web all around it. And even to Larry, the purpose was almost certain. The thing was setting up an attempt to signal for help. There must be others, somewhere near in space. It seemed inconceivable that the small power of the transmitter could be made to work for that—but to a savage, it would be impossible that the few watts of power needed could carry a man's voice around the world.

Larry leaped forward toward it. One alien was bad, but a rescue party would spell the end, almost certainly. He no longer worried about reclaiming the set—he had to wreck this attempt first.

He skirted the last rock near the cliffs edge and lunged for the webbing, just as something came up in a leap from below, fifty feet away. The thing let out a shrieking mew and jumped toward him. His hand caught the thin wires of the web.

And his nerves went crazy! His muscles leaped and bucked wildly, while every pain and sensation he had ever felt hit at him. He could see the alien rushing forward and realized he was tottering at the edge of the cliff. But there was nothing he could do. His leaping muscles cried in frenzy and leaped again. And suddenly the wire was torn from his hand and he was falling.

More by luck than skill, he landed on the sand on his feet. It jolted him sickly, but he began crawling away rapidly, unhurt. The effects of the force in the webbing had vanished as soon as he broke contact.

He staggered up the slide to the shelter, hardly hearing Al's semi-delirious groaning. Whatever current had been in the web-work had been like nothing he'd known before. He'd had electric shocks, and this was completely unlike them. Another few seconds, and the misbehavior of his heart and lungs would have killed him.

Maybe it was a signal device. But it had also been a trap—and he'd walked right into it.

Then he shook his head. It proved the danger of the alien again, but not the ill will of the thing. It might have been a deliberate attempt to kill him that had failed accidentally; or it might be that the alien signal

was accidentally dangerous to men. The mewling scream might even have been warning. He couldn't tell.

The next day, Al was worse, and their water supply was dwindling rapidly. Larry cursed himself for throwing away the fish—he'd finally remembered that juice could be pressed from fish that was perfectly drinkable, a fair substitute for fresh water. He'd have to try fishing, if they couldn't get help hi time.

He went up to the top, carrying fresh sand. But this time, he saw that the alien had settled that. The entire top was dusted with sand now. The thing must have been busy through the whole night, and even so it seemed an impossible feat. He tried sweeping the sand away, but it had settled into every crack, and a wind was blowing, moving it back as he cleared the rock. At least for that day, there was nothing he could do.

The alien was working on the transmitter again, this time rewinding wires from the web. It leaped into the sea twice, but its movements seemed slower. He tried sneaking down while it was gone. Before he was there, a mewling cry from the slide called his attention back to where the thing stood outside the shelter.

It was stalemate. It could still travel faster than he could. But neither could get to a position to harm the other without endangering all that was at stake.

The wind picked up at night, scouring the plateau clean of sand by morning. Al had spent a hard night, but now he was quiet. Either the fever had broken and he was resting, or the trouble was getting worse. Larry had no way of knowing which. And there was nothing to could do.

He started down for sand to begin his marker again. It was too late for this morning's plane—that would come before he could carry half enough sand. But he had to be ready the next day.

Then he stopped, staring at the alien's camp. The transmitter now rested in plain view. The thing was crawling

away from it—literally crawling on all fours. It stopped, sinking to its stomach, and then laboriously began inching along again, heading for a group of rocks that would give it protection.

Larry considered it doubtfully. The outwardly reassembled transmitter was too obviously good for bait.

And the creature could be feigning. On the other hand, it was possible that he'd been right about its higher metabolism resulting in quick starvation. All that energy couldn't come from nowhere.

He moved forward cautiously, studying the lower plateau for traps. The thing saw him coming, and began frantic efforts to hitch itself along into the shelter of rocks. It was between him and the transmitter now, but trying to get out of the way.

Then it collapsed. Larry stopped and considered it again. The way around offered a perfect chance for some pre-set rock to be shoved down on his head. The way near the creature seemed clear, except for the possible faking of the thing itself.

His hands were clammy as he moved forward, and his parched lips burned. How could a man who'd been stinting on water sweat so freely while suffering all the pangs of thirst? He was within twenty steps of the thing—then ten— then——

Its eyes snapped open, and it came upright, staggering a little. A hissing growl came from its lips, and the hand shot for the stomach pouch again. Larry jerked the crude spear back and drove it forward.

The thing avoided it by millimeters . It staggered back and slumped to the ground. For a second, it fought to stand again, and then gave up with an almost human shrug. Its eyes opened fully on Larry, and it seemed to be waiting.

He lifted the spear and centered it. The creature made no move. Then he dropped the spear back to his side slowly. He couldn't do it. He'd made a bow and arrow once, and gone hunting. He'd stunned a squirrel, too—and then lacked the heart to kill it. Now he was seeing another dream of his ability to be a man go up hi smoke.

He swung on bis heel and started for the transmitter. He

stillhalf expected it to be booby-trapped, but he had to take the chance. He picked it up and moved back. The eyes of the thing followed him, and a sharp tongue of purple hue ran weakly over its lips.

Larry stopped. There was still concentrated food in the shelter—and sugar should be food for almost

any protoplasmic thing. He started on again, however. He couldn't afford to risk it. It was the old rhyme about the devil turning saint when he was sick.

Thunder struck from the sky. It struck again, roaring out savagely in a bull bellow. He jerked his eyes up. Coming straight down toward him was a flat-ended cylinder two hundred feet or more tall and more than half as wide. There were no fins or signs of rocket exhaust, but the air shook around it as the booming sounded.

At a height of fifty feet, it skipped nimbly sidewise and began settling on a cleared space on the higher plateau. He felt the ground shake, and then it was quiet. A door began to open, and a ramp shot out.

Larry's legs finally responded. He leaped back of the rocks to which the alien had headed. He started to dive through them, then stopped. There was a hollow there, and a flat rock that could nearly cover it. It was poor shelter, but better than none, and he still had his spear.

He grinned sickly at that. But he hung onto it as he twisted the rock frantically over the hollow and eased into it. He could still see the shelter at the top of the slide, and part of the cleared section where the alien lay now with its eyes closed.

Creatures erupted from the ship and began spreading out. One suddenly pointed, and the others came swarming down the slide in great leaps. They were beside their comrade in seconds, pouring something out of balloon-like things down its throat. In a second, the alien sat up and began helping itself to an incredible quantity of whatever it was.

Its recuperative powers were fantastic. Larry expected it to point him out, but in that it seemed he was wrong. It gave a series of what seemed to be orders. Others broke away and began heading toward the ship, while the alien

Larry knew moved more slowly after them, carrying the transmitter.

Minutes later, a group came out of the ship and headed toward the shelter, carrying bundles. Over the distance, a series of screams in Al's voice sounded, and then died down. Larry could see a group of them carrying him out on something like a stretcher, while one of them seemed to be examining his thorax with some kind of instrument.

They were quick, at least. It had taken Larry days to guess that Al must be suffering from internal injuries. Working on a new form of life, they'd guessed it at once. Specimen, Larry thought. Maybe they'd even try to save Al's life. He'd make a nice trophy! At least, the alien doing the examining was suddenly motioning for speed as they headed toward the ship.

Others had been doing something inside the shelter. Now they came out empty-handed and headed up the slide, except for one who was still carrying the transmitter, doing something to it as they moved along. That one bounded toward Larry's hideout, dropped the transmitter where it had been before, and headed after the others.

Larry frowned. They couldn't leave him behind to tell about them, of course. But did they really think he was so simple that he'd try their death traps? Use the transmitter and blow up; go back to the shelter and do the same.

Then he realized he'd have to do something like that. The only hope of survival he had was through the transmitter or the food and water in the shelter. With them, he might live for a few days; without them, it would take less time. The aliens couldn't lose!

He shoved out of the hollow and headed toward the transmitter, wondering if he could somehow find what they'd done to it. Then his foot slipped on a damp spot on the rock. He caught himself, and looked down to see liquid oozing from one of the balloons they had brought the alien.

Doubtfully, he sniffed it. There was one partly full, and he lifted it to his lips, tasting it carefully, and then gulping it down. It was water. The alien had been dying of thirst, not of hunger. And yet, it had brought back the container to Simmonds . . .

Empathy! Somehow, it had realized that Simmonds was sick and suffering. And it had taken a chance on its own rescue. Just as Larry had done, he realized; he'd hated Simmonds , but he'd let the other have most of the water. He couldn't help it. And the alien had been forced to rob itself to prevent the suffering of another.

Suddenly Larry grabbed the transmitter and flung its cover open, cutting it on. The batteries were missing, but something had replaced them. He was sure now that it would work again—any mistakes the alien had made in reassembling it had been corrected in the big ship. In another half hour, the airplane would fly over on its regular course. He could signal for help. The alien hadn't meant him to die.

In two days, he could be home.

His eyes swung up to the ship, where the ramp was now being drawn in. They'd be going back to the stars while he'd be going home—taking with them Al Simmonds, who must be too sick to wait for human rescue. And except for Simmonds and himself, they were probably glad to be going.

He kicked the transmitter with his foot, smashing it beyond repair. He let out a yell at the top of his voice, and went running across the plateau, waving his arms madly. There was nothing here for him—not even the sloop now. The only man who'd ever done him a favor without any selfish motive and against self-interest was up there in the ship—a green and ugly man with iron muscles and a heart as soft as Larry had hated his own for being.

Besides, he couldn't let a race that traveled among the stars and might be coming back some day get their ideas of mankind from a man like Al Simmonds.

He reached the top of the slide, still yelling. The ramp had begun to run out again. He reached it, grabbing the outstretched arm of the alien who was waiting for him there.⁷

Twenty minutes later, he was the first man to see the other side of the moon.