

SCIENCE FICTION

1007

The top science fiction authors choose the best stories they ever wrote

1007

MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY



MY BEST SCIENCE FICTION STORY



EDITED BY
**LEO MARGULIES
& OSCAR J. FRIEND**

POCKET BOOKS INC.

POCKET BOOKS INC.

———— MY BEST ————
SCIENCE FICTION
———— STORY ————

•
As selected by

12

OUTSTANDING AUTHORS

•

Edited by

LEO MARGULIES and OSCAR J. FRIEND



POCKET BOOKS, INC. • NEW YORK, N. Y.

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	vii
ROBOT AL 76 GOES ASTRAY <i>Isaac Asimov</i>	
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	1
STORY	3
THE TEACHER FROM MARS <i>Eando Binder</i>	
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	18
STORY	20
ALMOST HUMAN <i>Robert Bloch</i>	
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	37
STORY	39
BLINDNESS <i>John W. Campbell, Jr.</i>	
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	60
STORY	62
THE INN OUTSIDE THE WORLD <i>Edmond Hamilton</i>	
AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	80
STORY	81

DON'T LOOK NOW

Henry Kuttner

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	98
STORY	99

THE LOST RACE

Murray Leinster

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	114
STORY	116

DOCTOR GRIMSHAW'S SANITARIUM

Fletcher Pratt

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	139
STORY	140

THE ULTIMATE CATALYST

John Taine

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	156
STORY	157

PROJECT—SPACESHIP

A. E. Van Vogt

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	183
STORY	184

SPACE STATION NO. 1

Manly Wade Wellman

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	212
STORY	214

STAR BRIGHT

Jack Williamson

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION	232
STORY	234

WHY I SELECTED

THE TEACHER FROM MARS

It is hard for me to explain just why I choose this as my best short story. It was written nine years ago, yet somehow it still sticks out in my own mind as something I was very pleased about. It was one of those stories that "wrote itself," once I had the basic idea and sat down at the typewriter. It went along smoothly, with rising crescendo, and when finished, I recall that without reservation or modesty I told myself—"Son, you've just done a good job of work!" So many other times I would sweat and struggle with a story and when it was done, I hadn't the least idea whether it was good, bad, or indifferent. But this one—THE TEACHER FROM MARS—gave me a glow of pride and achievement.

Why?

For one thing, I thought the idea of presenting a story in the first person, as told by a Martian, helped make it unique, certainly, not run of the mill. So many Martian stories had been written but none, as far as I knew, giving the "inside story" of the thoughts and feelings of an alien being from another world. How would he think and feel and react, coming to our world? This alone gave the story a certain fire of inspiration.

Second, the story was a good medium for showing the evils of discrimination and intolerance. Sadly enough, we have not yet eliminated those degrading influences on our world. The Martian in this story is the symbol of all such reasonless antagonism between "races." Not that I wrote the story solely for that reason. It just happened to strike me

as the best "human interest" approach. The "moral" was incidental.

That last angle of "human interest" is another reason why I feel this to be my best effort. Too many science fiction stories overplay cold science and underplay human characters. I have been guilty of the same myself too often. For once I wanted to break away from this restriction and produce a living, breathing character. One whose emotions and innermost thoughts you could follow and sympathize with. THE TEACHER FROM MARS seems to me such a real character. At least, while writing the story, I was a Martian, and I was beginning to hate the whole human race for mistreating "my people!" That's how much I was thrown into the story.

I suppose in the last analysis this tale can be classified as a "tear jerker." I freely confess it. And the above summary to the contrary, I still don't know why I picked it. All I know is that in re-reading a dozen of my shorts, of many years' vintage, this one jumped out at me and said—"I'm it! I'm your pet!"

I only hope it finds as much favor in the eyes of the reader as it does in mine.

EANDO BINDER

E A N D O B I N D E R

THE TEACHER FROM MARS

The Old Professor From the Crimson Planet Feared Earth's Savagery—Until Humanity Taught Him a Profound Secret!

THE afternoon Rocket Express train from Chicago came into the station, and I stepped off. It was a warm spring day. The little town of Elkhart, Indiana, sprawled lazily under the golden sunshine. I trudged along quiet, tree-shaded streets toward Caslon Preparatory School for Boys.

Before I had gone far, I was discovered by the children playing here and there. With the dogs, they formed a shrill, raucous procession behind me. Some of the dogs growled, as they might at a wild animal. Housewives looked from their windows and gasped.

So the rumors they had heard were true. The new teacher at Caslon was a Martian!

I suppose I am grotesquely alien to human eyes, extremely tall and incredibly thin. In fact, I am seven feet tall, with what have often been described as broomstick arms and spindly legs. On an otherwise scrawny body, only the Martian chest is filled out, in comparison with Earth people. I was dressed in a cotton kimono that dangled from my narrow shoulders to my bony ankles. Chinese style, I understand.

Thus far I am pseudo-human. For the rest, a Martian is alien, from the Earth viewpoint. Two long tentacles from the

back of my shoulders hang to my knees, appendages that have not vanished in Martian evolution like the human tail. The top of my skull is bulging and hairless, except for a fringe of silver-white fur above large conch-shaped ears. Two wide-set owl-like eyes, a generous nose and a tiny mouth complete my features. All my skin is leathery and tanned a deep mahogany by the sun of our cloudless Martian skies.

Timidly I stopped before the gates of Caslon Prep and looked within the grounds. The spectacles on my large nose were cup-shaped and of tinted glass that cut down the unnatural glare of the brighter, hotter sun. I felt my shoulders drooping wearily from the tug of more than twice the gravity to which I was conditioned.

Luckily, however, I had brought leg-braces. Concealed by my long robe, they were ingenious devices of light metal, bracing the legs against strain. They had been expensive—no less than forty *dhupecs*—but they were worth even that much.

Gripping my cane and duffel-bag, I prepared to step into the sanctuary of the school grounds. It looked so green and inviting in there, like a canalside park. It would be a relief to escape from those Earth children. They had taken to tossing pebbles at me, and some of the canines had snapped at my heels. Of course I didn't blame them, nor must I resent the unwelcome stares I had felt all around me, from adult Earthlings. After all, I was an alien.

I stepped forward, between the gates. At least here, in the school that had hired me to teach, I would be accepted in a more friendly fashion. . . .

Ssss!

The hiss of a thousand snakes filled the air. I reacted violently, dropping my bag and clamping my two hands around my upraised cane. For a moment I was back on Mars, surrounded by a nest of killer-snakes from the vast deserts. I must beat them off with my cane!

But wait. This was Earth, where snakes were a minor class of creature, and mainly harmless. I relaxed, then, panting. The horrible, icy fear drained away. Perhaps you human be-

ings can never quite know the paralyzing dread we have of snakes.

Then I heard a new sound, one that cheered me somewhat.

A group of about fifty laughing boys trooped into view, from where they had been hidden behind the stone wall circling Caslon's campus. They had made the hissing sound, as a boyish prank. How foolish of me to let go of my nerves, I thought wryly.

I smiled at the group in greeting, for these were the boys I would teach.

"I am Professor Mun Zeerohs, your new teacher," I introduced myself in what, compared with the human tone, is a reedy voice. "The Sun shine upon you. Or, in your Earthly greeting, I am happy to meet you."

Grins answered me. And then murmurs arose.

"It talks, fellows."

"Up from the canals!"

"Is that thing alive?"

One of the boys stepped forward. He was about sixteen, with blue eyes that were mocking.

"I'm Tom Blaine, senior classman. Tell me, sir, is it true that Mars is inhabited?"

It was rather a cruel reception, though merely another prank. I waved my two tentacles in distress for a moment, hardly knowing what to do or say next.

"Boys! Gentlemen!"

A grown man with gray hair came hurrying up from one of the buildings. The boys parted to let him through. He extended a hand to me, introducing himself.

"Robert Graham, Dean of Caslon. You're Professor Mun Zeerohs, of course." He turned, facing the group reprovably. "This is your new instructor, gentlemen. He will teach Interplanetary History and the Martian language."

A groan went up. I knew why, of course. The Martian tongue has two case endings to every one in Latin.

"Now, gentlemen, this is for your own good," Dean Graham continued sternly. "Remember your manners. I'm sure you'll like our new professor—"

"I'm sure we won't!" It was Tom Blaine again. Behind him, an air of hostility replaced the less worrisome mockery. "We've never had a Martian teacher before, and we don't want one!"

"Don't want one?" The dean was more aghast than I.

"My father says Martians are cowards," Tom Blaine continued loudly. "He ought to know. He's in the Space Patrol. He says that in the War, the Martians captured Earthmen and cut them to pieces slowly. First their hands, then—"

"Nonsense!" Dean Graham snapped. "Besides, the War is over. Martians are in the Space Patrol, too. Now, no more argument. Go to your dormitory. Professor Zeerohs will begin conducting class tomorrow morning. Oscar, take the professor's bag to his quarters."

Oscar, the school's menial robot, obediently stalked forward and picked up the bag. Somehow, I felt almost a warm tide of friendship for the robot. In his mechanical, rudimentary reflex mind, it was all the same to him—Martian or Earthman. He made no discrimination against me, as these human boys did.

As Oscar turned, Tom Blaine stood as though to block the way. Having his orders, the robot brushed past him. A metal elbow accidentally jabbed the boy in the ribs. Deciding against grabbing the bag away from steel fingers, Tom Blaine picked up a stone and flung it clanging against the robot's metal body. Another dent was added to the many I could see over Oscar's shiny form.

The rebellion was over—for the time being.

I realized that the boys were still hostile as I followed the dean to his rooms. My shoulders seemed to droop a little more.

"Don't mind them," the dean was saying apologetically. "They're usually outspoken at that age. They've never had a Martian teacher before, you see."

"Why have you engaged one for the first time?" I asked.

Graham answered half patronizingly, half respectfully.

"Many other schools have tried Martian teachers, and found them highly satisfactory." He didn't think it necessary to add, "And cheaper."

I sighed. Times had been hard on Mars lately, with so many dust storms raging up and down the canal regions, withering the crops. This post on Earth, though at a meager salary, was better than utter poverty. I was old and could live cheaply. Quite a few Martians had been drifting to Earth, since the War. By nature, we are docile, industrious, intelligent, and make dependable teachers, engineers, chemists, artists.

"They always haze the new teachers," Dean Graham said, smiling uneasily. "Your first class is at nine o'clock tomorrow morning. Interplanetary History."

Freshened after a night's sleep, I entered the class room with enthusiasm for my new job. A hundred cold, unfriendly eyes watched me with terrifying intensity.

"Good morning," I greeted as warmly as I could.

"Good morning, Professor *Zero!*" a chorus bellowed back, startling me.

So the hazing campaign was still on. No, I wouldn't correct them. After all, even the Martian children I had taught had invariably tagged me with that name.

I glanced around the room, approving its high windows and controlled sunlight. My eyes came to rest on the blackboard behind me. A chalk drawing occupied its space. It depicted, with some skill, a Martian crouching behind an Earthman. Both were members of the Space Patrol and apparently were battling some space desperado. It was young Tom Blaine's work, no doubt. His father claimed all Martians to be cowards and weaklings.

My leathery face showed little of my feelings as I erased the humiliating sketch. Ignoring the snickers behind me, I grasped two pieces of chalk in both tentacles, writing with one and listing dates with the other.

1955—First space flight

1978—Earthmen claim all planets

1992—Pioneer-wave to Mars

2011—Rebellion and war

2019—Mars wins freedom

2040—Earth-Mars relations friendly today

"Interplanetary History," I began my lecture, "centers about these dates and events. Not till Nineteen fifty-five were Earth people assured that intelligent beings had built the mysterious canals of Mars. Nor were we Martians positive till then that the so-called Winking Lights of your cities at night denoted the handiwork of thinking creatures. The exploring Earthmen of the last century found only the Martians equal to them in intelligence. Earth has its great cities, and Mars has its great canal-system, built ten thousand Martian years ago. Civilization began on Mars fifty centuries previous to that, before the first glimmering of it on Earth—"

"See, fellows?" Tom Blaine interrupted loudly. "I told you all they like to do is rub that in." He became mockingly polite. "Please, sir, may I ask why you brilliant Martians had to wait for Earthmen to open up space travel?"

I was shocked, but managed to answer patiently.

"We ran out of metal deposits for building, keeping our canals in repair. Our history has been a constant struggle against the danger of extinction. In fact, when Earth pioneers migrated in Nineteen ninety-two, it was just in time to patch up the canals and stave off a tremendous famine for Mars."

"And that was the appreciation Earth got," the boy charged bitterly. "Rebellion!"

"You forget that the Earth pioneers on Mars started the rebellion against taxation, and fought side by side with us—"

"They were traitors," he stated bluntly.

I hurdled the point, and continued the lecture.

"Mars won its independence after a nine-year struggle—"

Again I was interrupted.

"Not *won*. Earth *granted* independence, though it could have won easily."

"At any rate," I resumed quietly, "Earth and Mars today, in Twenty-forty, are amicable, and have forgotten that episode."

"We haven't forgotten!" Tom Blaine cried angrily. "Every true Earthman despises Martians."

He sat down amidst a murmur of defiant approval from the others. I knew my tentacles hung limply. How aggressive and intolerant Earth people were! It accounted for their domina-

tion of the Solar System. A vigorous, pushing race, they sneered at the Martian ideals of peaceful culture. Their pirates, legal and otherwise, still roamed the spaceways for loot.

Young Tom Blaine was representative of the race. He was determined to make things so miserable here for me that I would quit. He was the leader of the upper-class boys. Strange, that Earthpeople always follow one who is not wise, but merely compelling. There would have to be a test of authority, I told myself with a sinking heart.

"I am the teacher," I reminded him. "You are the pupil, Mr. Blaine."

"Oh, yes, sir," he retorted in false humility. "But you'd better teach history right, Professor Nothing, or not at all!"

I hastily switched to the Martian language.

"The Martian language as is well known, is today the official language of science and trade," I went on guardedly. "Through long usage, the tongue has become perfected. Official Earth English is comparatively cumbersome. For instance, the series of words meaning exaggerated size—big, large, great, huge, enormous, mighty, cyclopean, gargantuan. Is 'big' more than 'large,' or less? You cannot tell. In Martian, there is one root, with a definite progression of size suffixes."

I wrote on the blackboard:

bol, bola, boli, bolo, bolu—bolas, bolis, bolos, bolus—bolasa, bolisi, boloso, bolusu

"Martian is a scientific language, you see."

"Bragging again," sneered a voice.

An eraser sailed toward me just as I turned from the board. It struck full in my face in a cloud of chalk-dust. As if at a signal, a barrage of erasers flew at me. They had been sneaked previously from the boards around the classroom. I stood helplessly, desperately warding off the missiles with my tentacles. The boys were yelling and hooting, excited by the sport.

The pandemonium abruptly stopped as Oscar stumped into

the room. His mechanical eyes took in the scene without emotion. One belated eraser flew toward him. His steel arm reflexively raised, caught it, then hurled it back with stunning force. To a robot, anything that came toward it must be returned, unless otherwise commanded. Tom Blaine yelped as the eraser bounced off his forehead.

"Dean Graham," said Oscar like a phonograph, "wants to know if everything is going along smoothly."

I could see the boys hold their breaths. Oscar went the rounds daily, asking that routine question in all the classes. If this disturbance were reported, the boys would lose an afternoon of freedom.

"Everything is well," I murmured, though for a moment I was sadly tempted to take revenge. "You may go, Oscar."

With a click of internal relays, the robot left impassively. He had seen or heard nothing, without being otherwise commanded.

"Afraid to report it, eh?" Tom Blaine jeered. "I told you Martians are yellow!"

It was more than gravity now that made my shoulders sag. I dreaded the days that must follow.

Even outside the classroom, I was hounded. I can use only that word. Tom Blaine thought of the diabolical trick of deliberately spilling a glass of water before my eyes.

"Don't—don't!" I instinctively groaned, clutching at the glass.

"What's the matter, Professor?" he asked blandly. "This is nothing but water."

"It's sacrilege—"

I stopped there. They wouldn't understand. How horrible to see water spill to the ground in utter waste! For ten thousand years, on Mars, that precious fluid has been the object of our greatest ingenuity. It hurt to see it wantonly flung away, as they might flinch if blood were shed uselessly before them.

As I stumbled away from their laughter, I heard Tom Blaine confide to his cohorts:

"I got the idea last night, looking in his room. He was playing with a bowl of water. Running it through his fingers, like a

miser. I've got another idea, fellows. Follow me to the kitchen."

I wasn't aware till half through the solitary evening meal in my rooms that the food tasted odd. It was salty! The boys had stolen into the kitchen and salted my special saltless foods. My stomach revolted against the alien condiment. Mars' seas, from which our life originated long ago, held no sodium chloride, only magnesium chloride, with which all Martian food is "salted."

I went to bed, groaning with a severe headache and upset stomach from an outraged metabolism. Worse, it rained that night. I tried to shut my ears to that pattering sound. Millions of gallons of water were going to waste, while millions of Martians on my home world were painfully hoarding water for their thirsty crops.

The pains eased before morning. What torment would Tom Blaine and his relentless pack think of next? The answer came when I found my spectacles missing. My eyes were almost blinded that day, more from glare than senile failing of vision. They watered and blinked in light that was fifty per cent stronger than on more remote Mars.

"Lower the blinds, Oscar," I ordered the robot when he appeared as usual.

"But, Professor," Tom Blaine protested, jumping up as though waiting for the moment, "think of our eyes. We can't read our lessons in the dark."

"Never mind, Oscar," I said wearily.

The robot stood for a moment, relays clashing at the reversed orders. When he finally left, he seemed to shrug at the strange doings of his masters, Earthmen and Martians alike.

"Have you any idea where my glasses are, Mr. Blaine?" I asked in direct appeal. I tried not to sound timid.

"No, of course not," he retorted virtuously.

I nodded to myself and reached for the lower left-hand drawer of my desk, then changed my mind.

"Will you all help me look for them?" I pleaded.

They ransacked the desk with deliberate brutality.

"Why, here they are, Professor!"

Tom held them up from the lower left-hand drawer in mock triumph. I put them on with trembling hands.

"How careless of me to leave them here yesterday." I smiled. "One must have a sense of humor about these things. Now we will decline the verb *krun*, to move."

I went on as though nothing had happened, but my whole head ached from hours of straining my eyes against the cruel glare.

That night, utterly exhausted, I went to bed only to find my anti-gravity unit jammed, obviously by human hands. One of my few pleasures was the ability to sink into restful slumber in the low-gravity field, after suffering the tug of Earth gravity at my vitals all day. Earthmen on Jupiter know how agonizing it becomes.

I passed a sleepless night, panting and aching under what grew to be the pressure of a mountain. How could I go on against such heartlessness? Tom Blaine and his friends were ruthlessly determined to drive out their despised Martian teacher. If I complained to Dean Graham, it would be an admission of cowardice. I didn't want to betray my race. But I was miserably aware that I had not a single friend in the academy.

Oscar appeared in the morning, with a message from Dean Graham. The mechanical servant waited patiently to be told to go. When I swayed a little, he caught me. His reflexes had been patterned not to let things fall.

"Thank you, Oscar." I found my hand on the robot's shiny hard shoulder. It was comfortingly firm. "You're my only friend, Oscar. At least, you're not my enemy. But what am I saying? You're only a machine. You may go, Oscar."

The message read:

Today and tomorrow are examination days. Use the enclosed forms. At three o'clock today, all classes will be excused to the Television Auditorium.

The examinations were routine. Despite my unrested body and mind, I felt an uplift of spirit. My class would do well. I had managed, even against hostility, to impart a sound under-

standing of Interplanetary History and the Martian language.

I looked almost proudly over the bowed, laboring heads. Suddenly I stiffened.

"Mr. Henderson," I said gently, "I wouldn't try that if I were you."

The boy flushed, hastily crammed into his pockets the notes he had been copying from. Then he gaped up in amazement. Tom Blaine, at the desk beside him, also looked up startled. The question was plain in his eyes. How could I know that Henderson was cheating, when even Tom, sitting next to him hadn't suspected?

"You forget," I explained hesitantly, "that Martians use telepathy at will."

Tom Blaine stared, his mouth hanging open. Then he jumped up.

"Are we going to stand for that? Spying on us, even in our minds—" He gasped at a sudden thought. "You knew all the time about the glasses. You didn't expose me." He flushed, but in anger rather than embarrassment. "You made a fool of me!"

"One must have a sense of humor about those things," I said lamely.

The rest of the examination period passed in bristling silence. More than ever, now, they were hostile to me. More than ever would they show their antagonism. How could I ever hope to win them, if patience was taken for cowardice, understanding for malice, and telepathy for deliberate spying?

Why had I ever left Mars, to come to this alien, heart-breaking world?

At three o'clock, examinations were over for that day. The class filed to the Television Auditorium.

A giant screen in the darkened room displayed a drama on Venus, then news-flashes from around the system. An asteroid, scene of the latest radium rush. Ganymede, with its talking plant show. Titan's periodic meteor shower from the rings of Saturn. A cold, dark scene on Pluto, where a great telescope was being built for interstellar observations. Finally Mars, and a file of Earthmen and Martians climbing into a sleek Space Patrol ship.

"The Patrol ship *Greyhound*," informed the announcer, "is being dispatched after pirates. Captain Henry Blaine is determined to blast them, or not come back."

"My father," Tom Blaine said proudly to his classmates.

"My son," I murmured, leaning forward to watch the last of the Martians vanish within.

When the armed ship leaped into space, the television broadcast was over.

There were no more classes that day. I dragged across the campus toward the haven of my rooms, for I needed rest and quiet.

A shriek tore from my throat the instant I saw it. A horrible, wriggling snake lay in my path! It was only a small, harmless garden snake, my reason told me. But a million years of instinct yelled danger, death! I stumbled and fell, trying to run against gravity that froze my muscles. I shrank from the squirming horror as it stopped and defiantly darted out its forked tongue.

The outside world burst into my consciousness with a thunderclap of laughter. Tom Blaine was holding up the wriggling snake. Once the first shock was over, I managed to keep my nerves in check.

"It's only a garter snake," he mocked. "Sorry it frightened you."

But what would they say if a hungry, clawing tiger suddenly appeared before them? How would they feel? I left without a word, painfully compelling my trembling limbs to move.

I was beaten. That thought hammered within my skull.

They had broken my spirit. I came to that conclusion after staring up at a red star that winked soberly and seemed to nod in pity. There was my true home. I longed to go back to its canals and deserts. Harsh they might be, but not so harsh as the unfeeling inhabitants of this incredibly rich planet.

I went to my rooms and started to pack.

Angry voices swiftly approached my door. The boys burst in, led by Tom Blaine.

"Murderer!" Tom yelled. "A man was strangled in town two

hours ago, by a rope—or a tentacle! You looked murder at us this afternoon. Why did you kill him? Just general hate for the human race?”

How fantastic it sounded, yet they weren't mere boys, now. They were a blood-lusting mob. All their hate and misunderstanding for me had come to a head. I knew it was no use even to remonstrate.

“Look, fellows! He was packing up to sneak away. He's the killer, all right. Are you going to confess, Professor Zeerohs, or do we have to make you confess!”

It was useless to resist their burly savagery and strong Earth muscles. They held me and ripped away the light metal braces supporting my legs. Then I was forced outside and prodded along. They made me walk up and down, back of the dormitory, in the light of sub-atomic torches.

It became sheer torture within an hour. Without the braces, my weak muscles sagged under my weight. Earth's gravity more than doubled the normal strain.

“Confess!” Tom snapped fiercely. “Then we'll take you to the police.”

I shook my head, as I had each time Tom demanded my confession. My one hopeless comfort was the prayer of an earthly prophet, who begged the First Cause to forgive his children, for they knew not what they did.

For another hour, the terrible march kept up. I became a single mass of aching flesh. My bones seemed to be cracking and crumbling under the weight of the Universe. My mental anguish was still sharper, for the tide of hate beat against me like a surf.

Where was Dean Graham? Then I remembered that he had gone to visit his relatives that evening. There was no one to help me, no one to stop these half-grown men who saw their chance to get rid of me. Only the winking red eye of Mars looked down in compassion for the suffering of a humble son.

“Oscar's coming!” warned a voice.

Ponderously the robot approached, the night-light in his forehead shining. He made the rounds every night, like a mechanical watchman. As he eyed the halted procession, his

patterned reflexes were obviously striving to figure out what its meaning could be.

"Boys will go to the dormitory," his microphonic voice boomed. "Against regulations to be out after ten o'clock."

"Oscar, you may go," barked Tom Blaine.

The robot didn't budge. His selectors were set to obey only the voices of teachers and officials.

"Oscar—" I began with a wild cry.

A boy clamped his hand over my mouth. The last of my strength oozed from me, and I slumped to the ground. Though I was not unconscious, I knew my will would soon be insufficient to make me resist. The boys looked frightened.

"Maybe we've gone too far," one said nervously.

"He deserves it," shrilled Tom uneasily. "He's a cowardly murderer!"

"Tom!" Pete Miller came running up, from the direction of the town. "Just heard the news—the police caught the killer—a maniac with a rope." He recoiled in alarm when he saw my sprawled form. "What did you do, fellows? He's innocent, and he really isn't such a bad old guy."

The boys glanced at one another with guilty eyes. Fer-
vently I blessed young Miller for that statement.

"Don't be sentimental," Tom Blaine said much too loudly. "Martians are cowards. My father says so. I'm glad we did this, anyway. It'll drive him away for sure. We'd better beat it now."

The group melted away, leaving me on the ground. Oscar stalked forward and picked me up. Any fallen person must be helped up, according to his patterned mind. But his steel arms felt softer than Tom Blaine's heartless accusation.

The class gasped almost in chorus the next morning, when their Martian professor entered quietly, as though nothing had happened the night before.

"Examinations will continue," I announced.

It was small wonder that they looked surprised. First, that I had appeared at all, weak and spent by the night's cruel ordeal. Second, that I had not given up and left. Third, that

I hadn't reported the episode to Dean Graham. The punishment would have been severe.

Only I knew I was back because it would be cowardly to leave. Mentally and physically I was sick, but not beaten. Besides, I had heard young Miller insist that I was not such a bad old guy, after all. It was like a well of cool water in a hot desert.

Examinations began. Oscar entered, handed me a spacegram and clanked out again. Nervously I opened and read the message. My tentacles twitched uncontrollably at the ends, then curled around the chair arms and clung desperately. Everything vanished before my eyes except the hideous, shocking words of the spacegram.

My world was ended. Mars or Earth—it made no difference. I could not go on. But existence must continue. I could not let this break me. Grimly I folded the paper and laid it aside.

I looked with misted eyes at their lowered heads. I needed a friend as never before, but hostility and hatred were the only emotions they felt for me as I turned to them one by one. They hated their teacher, though they knew him to be wise, humble, patient, as Martians are by nature.

And I was beginning to hate them. They were forcing me to. Savagely I hoped they would all fail in their examinations.

I switched back to young Miller, who was biting his pencil. Forehead beaded with sweat, he was having a difficult time. Thoughts were racing through his brain.

Wanted so much to pass . . . enter Space Point . . . join the Space Patrol some day . . . Not enough time to study . . . job in spare time after school hours . . . help parents . . . In what year did the first explorer step on Neptune's moon? Why, Nineteen-seventy-six! Funny how that came all of a sudden . . . Now what was the root for "planet," in Martian? Why, *jad*, of course! It isn't so hard after all . . .

Wish that old Martian wouldn't stare at me as if he's reading my mind . . . How many moons has Jupiter? Always get it mixed up with Saturn. Eighteen, six found by space ships! Funny, I'm so sure of myself . . . I'll lick this exam yet . . .

Dad's going to be proud of me when I'm wearing that uniform. . . .

I turned my eyes away from Miller's happy face. A deserving boy, he would be a credit to the Space Patrol. Others had their troubles, not just I.

Abruptly there was an interruption. Oscar came clanking in.

"Dean Graham wishes all classes to file out on the campus, for a special event," he boomed.

The boys whispered in curiosity and left the classroom at my unsteady order. The campus was filled with the entire school faculty and enrollment. My group of senior classmen was allowed to stand directly in front of the bandstand. I felt weak and in need of support, but there was no one to give it to me.

Dean Graham raised a hand. "A member of the Space Patrol is here," he spoke, "having come from Space Point by rocket-strato for an important announcement. Major Dawson."

A tall, uniformed man, wearing the blue of the Space Patrol, stepped forward, acknowledging the assembly's unrestrained cheer with a solemn nod. The Patrol is honored throughout the System for its gallant service to civilization.

"Many of you boys," he said, "hope to enter Space Point some day, and join the Service. This bulletin, received an hour ago, will do honor to someone here."

He held up the paper and read aloud.

"Captain Henry Blaine, in command of Patrol ship *Greyhound*, yesterday was wounded in the daring rout of pirates off the Earth-Mars run."

All eyes turned to Tom Blaine, who was proud of the ceremony in honor of his father. The official held up a radium-coated medal—the Cross of Space, for extraordinary service to the forces of law and order in the Solar System. Dean Graham whispered in his ear. He nodded, stepping down from the rostrum and advancing.

My gasp of surprise was deeper than those of the others as he brushed past Tom Blaine. Stopping before me, he pinned the glowing medal on my chest. Then he grasped my hand.

"I think you'll be proud to wear that all your life!" He turned, reading further from his bulletin. "Captain Blaine's life was saved by a youthful Martian recruit, who leaped in front of him and took the full blast that wounded the Earthman. His name was—"

I found myself watching Tom Blaine. He didn't have to hear the name. He was staring at the spacegram he had stolen from my desk, but hadn't had a chance to read till now. He had sensed my momentary agitation over it, and had hoped perhaps to use it against me. It read:

WE DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU OF THE DEATH OF YOUR SON, KOL ZEEROHS, IN HEROIC SERVICE FOR THE SPACE PATROL.

—THE HIGH COMMAND,
SPACE PATROL.

But now my weakness overwhelmed me. I was aware only of someone at my side, supporting me, as my knees threatened to buckle. It must have been Oscar.

No—it was a human being!

"Every one of us here," Tom Blaine said, tightening his grip around me, "is your son now—if that will help a little. You're staying of course, Professor. You couldn't leave now if you tried."

We smiled at each other, and my thin hand was nearly crushed in his young, strong grasp. Yes, the teacher from Mars would stay.