

# HOPSOIL

(TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *The following story came into my possession through certain hitherto inaccessible channels, the nature of which I am not at liberty to divulge. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the first Martian science-fiction story ever to reach Earth, and, while it makes its own point, there are a number of other points that can be inferred from its pages: (1) Martians are pretty much like us; (2) their civilization is pretty much like our own; (3) all the while Earth science-fiction writers have been using Mars to mirror the foibles of our society, Martian science-fiction writers have been using Earth to mirror the foibles of Martian society; (4) the mirror business has been overdone on Mars as well as on Earth, and certain Martian science-fiction writers have started parodying other Martian science-fiction writers; and (5) the story itself falls into this latter category.*)

The ship came down out of the abysmal immensities and settled like a dark and wingless bird on the blue sands of Earth.

Captain Frimpf opened the door. He stepped out into the sparkling sunshine and filled his lungs with the clean sweet air. All around him the blue sands stretched away to the hazy horizon. In the distance the broken buildings of a long-dead city iridesced like upthrust shards of colored glass. High above him fat little clouds played tag on the big blue playground of the sky.

His eyes misted. Earth, he thought. Earth at last!

The three enlisted men, who made up the rest of the historic crew, came out of the ship and stood beside him. They, too, stared at the land with misted eyes.

"Blue," breathed Birp.

"Blue," murmured Far del.

"Bluer gasped Pempf.

"Well, of course, blue," said the captain gently. "Haven't our astronomers maintained all along that the blueness of Earth could not be wholly attributable to the light-absorbent properties of its atmosphere? The soil *had* to be blue!"

He knelt down and scooped up a handful of the wondrous substance. It trickled through his fingers like blue mist. "The blue sands of Earth," he whispered reverently.

He straightened up and took off his hat and stood in the sparkling sunlight and let the clean Earth wind blow through his hair. In the distance the city tinkled like glass chimes, and the wind wafted the sound across the blue sands to his ears, and he thought of warm Martian summers and long laky days, and hot afternoons, drinking lemonade on Grandmother Frimpf's front porch.

Presently he became aware that someone was breathing down the back of his neck. He turned irritably. "What is it, Birp?"

Birp cleared his throat. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but don't you think the occasion calls for—I mean to say, sir, that it's been a long voyage, and Pempf and Fardel and myself, we're a little thir—I mean, we're a little tense, and we thought—"

He quailed before the scorn in the captain's eyes. "Very well," the captain said coldly. "Open up a case of the rotgut. But only one, understand? And if I find a single empty bottle defiling this virgin landscape I'll clap every one of you in the brig!"

Birp had started off at a gallop toward the ship. He paused at the captain's admonition. "But what'll we do with them, sir? If we put them back in the ship, it'll take just that much more fuel to blast off, and we're already short of fuel as it is."

The captain pondered for a moment. It was not a particularly abstruse problem, and he solved it with a minimum of difficulty. "Bury them," he said.

While the crew chug-a-lugged their beer the captain stood a little to one side, staring at the distant city. He pictured himself telling his wife about it when he got back to Mars, and he saw himself sitting at the dinner table, describing the pastel towers and the shining spires and the sad and shattered buildings.

In spite of himself, he saw his wife, too. She was sitting across the table from him, listening and eating. Mostly eating. Why, she was even fatter now than she'd been when he left. For the thousandth time he found himself wondering why wives had to get so fat—so fat sometimes that their husbands had to wheel them around in wife-barrows. Why couldn't they get up and move around once in a while instead of going in whole hog for every labor-saving device the hucksters put on the market? Why did they have to eat, eat, eat, all the time?

The captain's face paled at the thought of the grocery bill he would have to pay upon his return, and presently the grocery bill directed his mind to other equally distressing items, such as the national sales tax, the mad tax, the tree tax, the gas tax, the grass tax, the air tax, the first-world-war tax, the second-world-war tax, the third-world-war tax and the fourth-world-war tax.

He sighed. It was enough to drive a man to drink, paying for wars your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather and your great-great-grandfather had fought in! He looked enviously at Birp and Pempf and Fardel. *They* weren't worried about *their* taxes. *They* weren't worried about anything. They were dancing around the empty beer case like a trio of barbarians, and already they had made up a dirty song about the blue sands of Earth.

Captain Frimpf listened to the words. His ears grew warm, then hot "All right, men, that's enough!" he said abruptly. "Bury your bottles, burn the case and turn in. We've got a hard day ahead of us tomorrow."

Obediently, Birp and Pempf and Fardel dug four rows of little holes in the blue soil and covered up their dead soldiers one by one. Then, after burning the case and saying good night to the captain, they went back into the ship.

The captain lingered outside. The moon was rising, and such a moon! Its magic radiance turned the plain into a vast midnight-blue tablecloth and transformed the city into a silvery candelabrum. He was captivated all over again.

The mystery of those distant empty buildings and silent forsaken streets crept across the plain and touched his marrow. What had happened to the inhabitants? he wondered. What had happened to the inhabitants of the other broken cities he had seen while the ship was orbiting in?

He shook his head. He did not know, and probably he never would. His ignorance saddened him, and suddenly he could no longer endure the poignancy of the plain and the uninterrupted silence of the night, and he crept into the ship and closed the door behind him. For a long time he lay in the darkness of his stateroom, thinking of the people of Earth; of the noble civilization that had come and gone its way and had left nothing behind it but a handful of crystal memories. Finally he slept.

When he went outside the next morning there were twenty-four beer trees growing in front of the ship.

The classification had leaped automatically into Captain Frimpf's mind. He had never seen beer trees before, in fact he had never even heard of them; but what better name could you give to a group of large woody plants with bottles of amber fluid hanging from their branches like fruit ready to be plucked?

Some of the fruit had already been plucked, and there was a party in progress in the young orchard. Moreover, judging from the row of little hummocks along the orchard's edge, more seed had been planted.

The captain was dumfounded. How could any kind of soil—even Earth soil—grow beer trees overnight from empty bottles? He began to have a glimmering of what might have happened to the people of Earth.

Pempf came up to him, a bottle in each hand. "Here, try some, sir," he said enthusiastically. "You never tasted anything like it!"

The captain put him in his place with a scathing glance. "I'm an officer, Pempf. Officers don't drink *beer!*"

"Oh. I—I forgot, sir. Sorry."

"You should be sorry. You and those other two! Who gave you permission to eat—I mean to drink—Earth fruit?"

Pempf hung his head just enough to show that he was repentant, but not any more repentant than his inferior status demanded. "No one, sir. I—I guess we kind of got carried away."

"Aren't you even curious about how these trees happened to come up? You're the expedition's chemist—why aren't you testing the soil?"

"There wouldn't be any point in testing it, sir. A topsoil with properties in it capable of growing trees like this out of empty beer bottles is the product of a science a million years ahead of our own. Besides, sir, I don't think it's the soil alone that's responsible. I think that the sunlight striking on the surface of the moon combines with certain lunar radiations and gives the resultant moonlight the ability to replenish and to multiply anything planted on the planet."

The captain looked at him. "*Anything*, you say?"

"Why not, sir? We planted empty beer bottles and got beer trees, didn't we?"

"Hmm," the captain said.

He turned abruptly and re-entered the ship. He spent the day in his stateroom, lost in thought, the busy schedule he had mapped out for the day completely forgotten. After the sun had set, he went outside and buried all the credit notes he had brought with him in back of the ship. He regretted that he hadn't had more to bring, but it didn't make any difference really, because as soon as the credit trees bloomed he would have all the seed he needed.

That night, for the first time in years, he slept without dreaming about his grocery bill and his taxes.

But the next morning when he hurried outside and ran around the ship he found no credit trees blooming in the sunlight. He found nothing but the little hummocks he himself had made the night before.

At first his disappointment stunned him. And then he thought, *Perhaps with money it takes longer. Money is probably as hard to grow as it is to get.* He walked back around the ship and looked at the orchard. It was three times its former size and fronted the ship like a young forest. Wonderingly he walked through the sun-dappled aisles, staring enviously at the clusters of amber fruit.

A trail of beer-bottle caps led him to a little glade where a new party was in progress. Perhaps whingding would have been a better word. Pempf and Fardel and Birp were dancing around in a circle like three bearded woodland nymphs, waving bottles and singing at the top of their voices. The dirty song about the blue sands of Earth now had a second verse.

They came to a startled stop when they saw him; then, after regarding him blearily for a moment, they resumed festivities again. Abruptly Captain Frimpf wondered if they had gone to bed at all last night. He was inclined to doubt it, but whether they had or hadn't, it was painfully clear that discipline was deteriorating rapidly. If he wanted to save the expedition he would have to act quickly.

But for some reason his initiative seemed to have deserted him. The thought of saving the expedition made him think of going back to Mars, and the thought of going back to Mars made him think of his fat wife, and the thought of his fat wife made him think of the grocery bill, and the thought of the grocery bill made him think of his taxes, and for some unfathomable reason the thought of his taxes made him think of the liquor cabinet in his stateroom and of the unopened bottle of bourbon that stood all alone on its single shelf.

He decided to put off reprimanding the crew till tomorrow. Surely, by then, his credit trees would have broken through the soil, thereby giving him some idea of how long he would have to wait before he could harvest his first crop and plant his second. Once his fortune was assured he would be able to cope more competently with the beer-tree problem.

But in the morning the little hummocks behind the ship were still barren. The beer orchard, on the other hand, was a phenomenon to behold. It stretched hallway across the plain in the direction of the dead city, and the sound of the wind in its fruit-laden branches brought to mind a bottling works at capacity production.

There was little doubt in Captain Frimpf's mind now of the fate that had overtaken the people of Earth. But what, he asked himself, had happened to the trees *they* had planted? He was not an obtuse man, and the answer came presently: The people of Earth had performed a function similar to that performed by the bees on Mars. In drinking the fluid fruit they had in effect pollinated the crystal

seed-shells that enclosed it, and it was the pollinating as well as the planting of the shells that had caused new trees to grow.

It must have been a pleasant ecology while it lasted, the captain reflected. But like all good things it had been run into the ground. One by one the people had become heavy pollinators, and finally they had pollinated themselves to death, and the trees, unable any longer to reproduce themselves, had become extinct.

A tragic fate, certainly. But was it any more tragic than being taxed to death?

The captain spent the day in his stateroom trying to figure out a way to pollinate money, his eyes straying, with increasing frequency, to the little paneled door of his liquor cabinet. Toward sunset Birp and Fardel and Pempf appeared and asked for an audience with him.

Fardel was spokesman. "Shir," he said, "we've made up our minds. We aren't going to go back to Marsh."

The captain wasn't surprised, but for some reason he was annoyed. "Oh, go on back to your damned orchard and stop bothering me!" he said, turning away from them.

After they left he went over to his liquor cabinet and opened the paneled door. He picked up the forlorn bottle sitting on the shelf. Its two empty companions had long ago gone down the disposal tube and were somewhere in orbit between Earth and Mars.

"Good thing I saved one," the captain said. He opened it up and pollinated it; then he staggered outside and buried it behind the ship and sat down to watch it grow.

Maybe his credit trees would come up and maybe they wouldn't. If they didn't he was damned if he was going back to Mars, either. He was sick of his fat wife and he was sick of the grocery bill and he was sick of the national sales tax, the road tax, the tree tax, the gas tax, the grass tax, the air tax, the first-world-war tax, the second-world-war tax, the third-world-war tax and the fourth-world-war tax. Most of all he was sick of being a self-righteous martinet with a parched tongue.

Presently the moon came up and he watched delightedly while the first shoot of his whiskey tree broke the surface of the blue sands of Earth.