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Martian Avenger

By
POLTON CROSS
(John Russell Fearn)

**A baby born of two worlds was
this Martian, but even after
thousands of years he remembered that
revenge was his mission on Earth**

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CHAPTER I The Cell Cluster from Mars

"Mr. Halworthy is in the laboratory, Miss Crawford. Working late, I guess."

Vera Crawford nodded her thanks as the old Institute janitor resumed his mop and pail. She strode on purposefully down the white enameled corridor, finally flung open the green door at the far end.

"Who the hell's opened that door?" demanded Halworthy's irate voice. "I don't want any cold air in here, and— Why hello, Vera!"

The scientist broke off in surprised greeting as he came round a bench piled up with bottles and paraphernalia. Young, good looking after a fashion, his blue eyes became rather sheepish as he found the girl accusingly regarding him.

"Are you aware, Lance Halworthy, that you had an appointment with me tonight for the television theater?" she asked bitterly. "It may interest you to know I've got feet as cold as icebergs from waiting down town for you!"

"I forgot all about it," he said solemnly. "Yes—seriously I did. I'm engaged on such an important experiment—"

"Experiment! When do I ever hear any other excuse?" The girl came forward and rubbed her chilled hands over the electric stove. Then as Lance said nothing further she turned a curious pair of brown eyes upon him. "Well, what is it?" she asked resignedly. "Might as well give me *some* reason for your neglect. And it had better be a good one else I'll think twice about marrying you when the time comes!"

The threat was wasted on Lance. He merely smiled, took her arm, and led the way to a square case of glass bound around on three of its sides with strangely fashioned machines. There were tubes that contained a rose colored fluid, thermostatic heating devices, thermometers, and then a wired apparatus containing a spotless, wafer-thin piece of metal which beat to and fro with metronomic rhythm. Somehow, it resembled a heart.

Vera only glanced at these details: they were merely laboratory technique. Most of her attention was concentrated on an object repulsively

like a large blood red worm, its substance shot through with veins of darker hue. It lay inside the case curled up in a semi-circle, palpating steadily.

Vera looked up sharply, vaguely horrified. "What are you trying to do? Cultivate a new species of snake?"

"Nothing like that," Lance laughed. "That thing came from Mars, and it's been entrusted to me by the Space Navigation Company. So you see I'm on an important job."

"But I thought explorers had proven Mars dead long ago?"

"That's so, but Valmerlik, who takes a delight in probing into places where ordinary space explorers have more sense than look, came across six preserved cell clusters buried near one of the Martian cases—hidden in an underground chamber which had unquestionably been made by intelligent means. Five of the cell clusters aggregates were useless: the Martian air, though mighty thin, had somehow gotten through to them and rotted them. The sixth cluster was in perfect condition, and here it is. We were stuck to know what to do, so we finally took the only course and fertilized it artificially on earth here. This is the result: life has begun. The cells have formed and produced fusion. Thanks to all this artificial incubation those cells are growing into a living thing.

"Then—then it's a Martian?" the girl whispered, fascinated.

"Not entirely. It's a hybrid, born of two worlds. Martian life cells fertilized by earth sperm. Naturally, we can only reproduce the chemical substances we know on our own planet. We've no means of knowing what a Martian sperm would be like... Call it a half breed."

To Lance's surprise the girl gave a little shudder. The thing in the case had uncoiled very slightly. Dimly, she could already make out the vague details of head, shoulders, and arms.

"I think it is basically cellulose," Lance murmured pensively. "Pure cellulose, wherein it differs from our own type of life."

"It's horrible!" Vera's declaration was dimly emphatic. "It's time you scientists stopped playing around with things like this! What good is there in it, anyway?"

"Plenty! There will be certain strong hereditary tendencies in the full grown creature. From him we may be able to reconstruct the history of Mars, learn the red planet's secrets, learn why his cell clusters, along with five others, were removed from female Martians to be buried in a vault. There's no end to what we might discover. Notice his metabolism—it's terrific."

"He seems to be growing even as I look at him," Vera admitted dubiously.

"In a week, at this speed, he'll have reached maturity!" Lance's eyes were shining at the speculation. "I think there is a reason for such speed, too. Martian cells mature at a terrific pace because they have an inherited strain to work against gravity far less than ours. Though the gravity here is of course earth normal, I believe those cells are constructed to work with terrific energy against that drag, producing growth far faster than anything we know."

Vera sighed a little. "I suppose," she said slowly, "I ought to be interested, but somehow I'm not. Despite the science of this year of 1987 I think some things are better left alone. It piques me to think that our theater date was cancelled because of a glorified worm."

Lance put an arm about her shoulders. "Don't take it too hard, honey. This experiment if properly conducted may put me right in line for being boss of this Institute. That means plenty of money for us, I've got to give this thing all the attention I can. I've even made arrangements to sleep in the building for the time being in case of sudden developments. In a week the experiment will be finished... I've got your penknife for good luck," he finished, smiling, and pulled a much worn pearl handled knife from his smock.

The girl laughed a little. "You do rely on that, don't you?" she said. "Still I appreciate the thought—that my present to you last Christmas should bring you luck. Better than rabbit's feet and all that kind of old fashioned stuff..." She broke off and gave a little shrug. "Well, I think I know the truth now. Guess the only thing I can do is be a good little girl and not bother you for a week—but if you postpone me again after that I'll walk out on you forever!"

Lance hugged her gently to him. "I won't do it again," he murmured. "That's a promise..."

Vera went quite effectually out of Lance's life during the week that followed—her business firm sent her on an urgent mission to Philadelphia, from which she only returned to New York late on the Saturday night. Before she thought of her own apartment she headed direct for the Public Laboratories, met the janitor as usual in the hallway with his bucket and mop.

"Just a minute, Miss Crawford!" He caught the girl's arm as she made to pass by. Surprised, she stopped.

"What's wrong, Briggs? I was going along to see Lance."

"Ay, I know—but I don't think you oughta." The old man's rheumy eyes searched her face. He glanced quickly toward the solitary laboratory door at the end of the passage.

"Mr. Halworthy's been acting strange these last few days," he went on anxiously. "This morning we found him in the lab. all bent up like a man who's had a terrific disappointment. He'd smashed the case too that had that horrible thing inside it—I reckon the experiment failed and he got savage. That's what the staff think. Several times today he's been out, carrying stuff. Once he had a sack full of stuff on his shoulder—"

"Well, so what?" the girl asked, impatient at the old fellow's rambling talk. "His car's outside, I notice. What's the matter, anyway?"

"I dunno..." Briggs ruminated. "He's locked himself in that laboratory, and won't come out. Now no man should do that—"

"I'll get him," Vera broke in quickly. "Thanks for the news, anyway."

She swung round and headed for the laboratory door, rapped on the panels.

"Lance, let me in! It's me—Vera. Open up!"

For a second or two there was no response, then came the sound of quick footsteps. The lock clicked and the door opened gently. The girl slipped inside and closed the door quietly, turned to face Lance...

To her surprise he was neither weary nor dishevelled. Instead he was remarkably neat, dressed in his best suit, his black hair brushed firmly into place. Only his face, deathlike in its pallor, seemed to indicate some hidden strain.

Vera glanced past him for a moment towards the smashed case wherein the Martian embryo had been growing. She turned back again, smiling sympathetically.

"Then it failed, Lance?"

"Partly," he answered rather ambiguously, and frowned for a moment. Then his blue eyes turned to the girl with a brooding stare. Somehow she didn't like that stare: it had not the calm, balanced intensity she usually admired. In some way it was furtive, yet in another, paradoxically enough, it was masterful.

"Well, I—er—" She hesitated, vaguely puzzled. Then asked as brightly as she could, "Well, what do we do now? No good moping around here, is it? Besides, you're all dressed to go out. Maybe you were expecting me?"

He nodded very slowly. "Yes—I was expecting you." Again he studied her in silence, then suddenly he seemed to make up his mind.

"I've something important to show you. Come with me."

He put on hat and coat, then took her arm in a tight grip. Puzzled but submissive she marched beside him as they left the building: she noticed he completely ignored Briggs—went right out to his parked car and held the door open.

"Hop in," he ordered briefly, then he settled beside her and started up the engine...

"But where are we going?" she demanded, as he drove away from the main street leading to the heart of the town.

"I've an experimental cellar over on the east side which you've never known anything about," he answered shortly. "I've got something there that's going to interest you..."

"Oh..." Vera became silent, inwardly perplexed. For a reason she could not understand she felt oddly afraid. Lance's manner was so strange, his voice so cold and jerky. It seemed that some deep inner emotion was holding him...

Her wonderment deepened as he skillfully swept the car in and out of side roads, skirted the edge of the city center, and at last drove into the dingy regions of a deserted quarter of the east side. She gazed out frowning, on long disused graneries and almost windowless, obsolete factories... At length they came to a drearily lighted stretch of harbor wharf. Lance pulled up with a jerk and scrambled out.

He helped the girl to alight. Mist clung around them, full of the oily odor of the harbor waters slapping round wooden columns beneath their feet.

"Where on earth are we?" Vera whispered, turning up her collar.

"This way," was Lance's brief answer, and he led her down a gloomy stretch of alley way to a solitary, shadowy building. He stopped before an old and grimy window, raised the sash and climbed through, helping her in after him.

"Used to be a chemical storage warehouse," he said curtly, and pulling out his torch flashed it around long forgotten supplies against the wall. There were straw wrapped acid bottles, coated in dust, crates falling to pieces from disuse.

"Useful place," he went on, in the same short way. "Nobody ever comes here—that's why I use it. My cellar is down below here."

He strode to an iron ring in the floor and lifted up a square of stone, waved his beam down a flight of mildewed steps. Filled with growing doubts the girl obeyed his behest to descend, went down into a huge cellar, obviously long forgotten, its floor thickly coated with dust. Against the walls were tiny iron gratings for ventilation.

Carefully Lance lowered the stone back into place, waved his torch beam on the walls, allowed it to halt at length on a massive dusty chain stapled to the brickwork. At the end of the chain was a circle of metal with a heavy padlock in its center.

A little chill crept through Vera as she stared at it. She turned suddenly.

"What's that for?"

"Dunno—unless perhaps wild animals were once stored down here. No telling."

"And—and you experiment in this awful place?"

"I *shall*," Lance answered very slowly, and in the reflected torch beam Vera saw his eyes very cold and clear watching her. His face too was different—set and hard, with a mouth compressed into a tight, cruel line. Her fear leaped suddenly to the surface.

"Lance," she whispered, her throat dry, "what's come over you? Why do you look at me like that? I—"

Then she broke off with a sudden scream as, dropping his torch to the floor, he suddenly seized her arms in a grip of iron, forced her backward relentlessly.

She kicked and struggled as she was lifted from her feet and hurled against the wall. Something of rigid hardness snapped round her waist with a sharp click. Once that happened, Lance released her and she stared dumbly down to see that circlet of metal round her middle, the padlock securely snapped in position.. With a faint grin Lance dropped the key in his pocket, picked his torch up and stood surveying her.

"Lance, let me go!" she screamed hoarsely. "Lance, you—"

"Shut up!" he broke in curtly. "You'll be safe enough like that for the moment. I'm not trying to hurt you—nor do I intend to. Just that I prefer you locked up for the moment. I'm leaving you now. I'll be back shortly."

"Not alone—like this!" she shouted desperately.

"Yes," he said stonily, and with that he turned. Horrified, Vera watched him go with his torch up to the slab in the roof. Then it closed down and she was alone in the darkness.

CHAPTER II

Vera Learns the Truth

For several seconds the stunning shock of her position did not penetrate—then gradually vitality and awareness returned to her. With a savage desperation she twisted and turned on the chain holding her, tore at the manacle of steel round her waist—but nothing yielded in the slightest. The lock, what little she could see of it in the dim light filtering through the ventilators, was a brand new one, self locking, only released by the key Lance had in his pocket. Then he had deliberately bought it to hold her!

Weakly she relaxed, sank down slowly to the stone floor and tried vainly to figure out what was wrong, what Lance was getting at, what had happened to him during the Martian experiment to make him behave so queerly. Solution failed her. She finally gave herself up to fearful waiting—then after what seemed eternities sounds reached her, the circle of the torch appeared in the roof.

Scrambling to her feet she called huskily.

"Lance, in Heaven's name what are you trying to do? Release me—please! *Please!*"

He took no notice. She fell quiet, watching him as he moved around. He made several journeys up above, each time bringing down a piece of apparatus that glittered brightly in the light of the torch. He was engaged on the job for at least an hour, then apparently satisfied, the stone back in place, he came forward. With unwavering steadiness he pointed the torch beam at the girl and she slitted her eyes against the glare.

"Before you have something to eat there is something you must see," he said, and his voice was very slow and gentle now. Gradually he

turned the torch back towards himself, held it below his face so that the girl saw only his eyes thrown in relief.

"Look at me!" he commanded, going closer to her. "Look at me very steadily."

She tried to look everywhere else but at those eyes. She tried to scream, and could not—tried to speak but her tongue was still. Everywhere was black: there was only those two eyes. She felt forced to stare into them, and the longer she stared the more she felt her senses were reeling...

The darkness became shot with bars of light. Her head began to ache intolerably. Then, with dazed wonderment, she realized she was somehow a detached observer of events unknown...

The cellar had gone. Instead she gazed, from a considerable height apparently, upon an other red planet—now not a dead world streaked with the lines of drying canals, but a world of seas and continents like Earth. It teemed with life in every direction, bore the mark of prosperity upon it—

Then out of nowhere came sudden cataclysm and destruction!

Writhing skies, hurtling bolts of electric energy, incredible flame and winds. Cities crumbled like decks of cards, oceans boiled and whirled upwards. Martians, weirdly fashioned, died by the untold thousands...

The view switched to a green world—Earth. Earth receded until it assumed its proper planetary perspective in the cosmos. Earth and Mars were both in view, but between them, clear against the ebony black of space, was a plainly visible green bar that seemed to connect the two worlds together.

From somewhere a voice was talking, low and droning.

"Centuries ago Earth was dry, even as Mars is today. It came about because a stupendous inner expansion of gases started a great fault across the world, which caused the mountains of the present day—otherwise Earth would be flat, as Mars is. The fault sent water pouring into the Earth's hot interior. There was a conflict of titanic forces. Earth's seas were converted into steam, blasted forth with such terrific power that they went far beyond atmospheric limits into space, never to return.

"There was rain afterwards, but utterly insufficient to provide the world with the seas it had lost. At that time life of a very high intelligence existed on the Earth, the cities of which people are still found in part today. Those minds understood the forces of the cosmos, moulded machinery and, to replenish the Earth robbed Mars of its seas and practically all its atmosphere. The Deluge of Biblical history refers to the coming of the Martian seas to Earth through electrically devised space tubes. *Nearly* every Martian was destroyed.

"A few survived. Someday, presumably scientists would come to the red planet and conduct a thorough investigation. It was decided that life cells should be removed from several chosen female Martians and be sealed in the tallest towers of the city. As time passed, the cities sank under the sand—but at last one set of cells was found, was artificially fertilized and brought to life.

"But the deep rooted Martian hereditary strain remained—remembrance, and desire for revenge. To destroy Earth, even as in the dim past it had overthrown Mars for its own selfish ends...."

Vera felt herself slowly floating back to the consciousness of her own self. Lance's eyes were still watching her, but their mesmeric power had gone. Incredulously she realized that he had literally hypnotized her into seeing those things, those visions of another long dead world. Hypnotism of a power beyond all normal bounds.

"Before the Martian died I learned these things," he said slowly. "He changed me—willed me to perform a certain task in life. I was ordered to avenge, and nothing can stop me!"

For a long time the girl stood in silence. Strange thoughts were battering at the back of her mind.

"Then—then the Martian spoke to you in English?" she faltered.

"No: he hypnotized me just as I have just done with you. I saw what you have seen. Then something happened to my brain. I was given certain scientific secrets and commanded to avenge. It was an inescapable order.... Then the Martian died. Atmospheric pressure was wrong—I think I went mad. I destroyed the corpse and smashed the case...."

"And why should I be fastened up like a criminal?" Vera demanded curtly.

Lance moved forward and unfastened the padlock, released her with a quiet movement.

"It was only while I was absent. I can't allow you to escape until my work is finished. Had you done so you might have died with the rest of the people, and I don't want that."

"Died?" She stared at him blankly. He smiled coldly.

"I have rather an ingenious plan to follow out," he explained. "The Martian outlined it to me. The atmosphere, as you may know is made up of oxygen and nitrogen, both retaining their ability to stay isolated. The nitrogen takes up four fifths of the atmospheric volume and it also prevents the savage burning of energy which would take place with only oxygen present.

"Now, under certain conditions, nitrogen will unite with oxygen to produce N₂O, nitrous oxide—better known as laughing gas. But, fortunately for human beings, this unity does not take place in the normal atmosphere. The production of two atoms of nitrogen to one of oxygen can only be accomplished as a rule by terrific heat or a lightning flash. The latter means obviously indicates electricity—but it is not the strength of the voltage which is so essential to produce a unity but the length of the ether wave disturbing the basic atoms to a common unity.

"It does not require vast machinery to unite oxygen and nitrogen in the proportions of two to one; it merely requires the electric energy of a specified wavelength. That wavelength was given to me by the Martian. Right here I have the machinery necessary for the job, brought from the laboratory. That was where I went when I left you. Deep under this cellar is a sluice from the harbor, strong enough to run that small turbogenerator there..."

"But what are you going to *do*?" Vera cried.

"Isn't it obvious? An electrical wavelength generated from here will pass through the intervening concrete and affect the atmosphere in whatever direction it is aimed. More than that—the atmosphere is never still. It moves ceaselessly, with a circular whirlpool motion. Imagine then that part of the atmosphere immediately over us is altered in its basic elements—the nitrogen combines with the oxygen. The changed area drifts onward and another atmospheric area floats into position to be likewise changed. Gradually an increasing expanse of nitrous oxide will be on the move. Around New York there will begin to settle an atmosphere that is actually anaesthetic ... and which will never alter once the combination is effectually started."

Vera could only stare in dazed horror. The words she uttered were scarcely audible.

"You mean poison the atmosphere of the whole *world*?"

"The whole world will take a long time," Lance said, brooding. "I propose to wipe out city after city. First, this great metropolis—then unless the atmosphere has drifted to other cities, I shall attack them as well. Little by little I'll destroy them all—wipe out humanity entirely."

"But it's fantastic—impossible!"

"Not at all. I have the apparatus and I know the wavelength. The rest is merely continuing the duty the Martian assigned to me."

"You can't do it, Lance!" The girl seized his arms in sudden desperation. "Lance—you can't do it! You've gone mad, or are hypnotized, or something.... Besides, even supposing you tried to get away with this, don't forget that humanity will wear gas-masks for protection. They'll go underground..." she wound up desperately.

"Gas-masks were ruled out with the Peace Pact of ten years ago," he answered grimly. "Humanity will fly underground, I agree—but in time the gas will reach them. In five years not a thing will be alive on the planet, except you and I. Then we'll talk further. We have masks," he finished quietly, nodding to them as they lay on the floor. "They're laboratory masks, and quite effective."

Vera stared at them, frowned momentarily. "But there are three masks there—not two—"

"I believe in being prepared..."

CHAPTER III

Vera Makes a Discovery

Lance turned suddenly, and motioned the girl across the cellar.

"Better eat something," he said briefly, picking up a tin of corned beef from the supplies he had brought along. "I'll bring some more tinned stuff later. This will do for now..."

Vera took the tin from him, began to twist the key in her slim fingers. The strip of tin snapped off. Impatiently she swung on Lance as he

stood surveying his machinery in the torchlight.

"Here—you open it," she said brusquely. "You've a can opener on that pocket knife of yours..."

He felt in his pockets and shrugged.

"Guess I've left it behind..."

"What! Your lucky mascot, and on an occasion like this!" Vera stared at him incredulously. He failed to return her look, took the tin, then picked up a short, blunt bar of steel from his equipment and rammed it into the gap—rather too vigorously, for he misapplied the pressure and slashed his palm along the jagged tin edge.

Vera winced in sympathy with him, knew instinctively that that cut had gone to the bone. Almost automatically she tugged out her handkerchief... then it dropped from her fingers as Lance merely shook his hand a little and went on pulling. At last he had the tin open, threw away the lid.

"Didn't—didn't you cut yourself?" Vera stammered, dumbfounded.

He shook his head slowly as he handed the tin to her. She saw quite clearly his hand was not even marked.

She took the tin absently, was hardly aware how she started to eat. She had a remembrance of raking out the stuff from the tin and of drinking some unpleasantly fizzy pop—but it was not her physical reactions that were concerning her. She was thinking—hard, fitting together certain little odd incidents and remembering half forgotten facts.

The three gasmasks, the missing pen-knife, and now a hand that should have been cut, and was not. And the memory of that all powerful hypnotism: the even remoter memory of something about cellulose...

"Say, any objections if I walk around?" she asked suddenly.

"None at all—but don't try and escape." Lance was too busy with his machinery to take much notice of her.

She turned and strolled casually enough along the length of the cellar, going further and further into the deeper shadows at the remote end. Once or twice she glanced back to behold Lance still busy with his apparatus—

Then suddenly she stopped, her heart beating faster. The cellar was not complete in itself. At its remoter end was a massive, ancient door, obviously leading to yet another underground place beyond. The girl regarded it thoughtfully for a moment, then stared at the dust ridden floor. She stooped, stared fixedly at two long troughs gouged into the film, troughs such as heels might make if a body were dragged! And they vanished right at that door!

The sack Lance had carried from the laboratory which the janitor had seen...? Vera's eyes narrowed in thought. She tried the door; it was locked. Just in time she turned back to Lance as he stood regarding her suspiciously.

"Satisfied?" he demanded bluntly, as she came up to him.

She nodded slowly, glanced at the short metal bar he had used to open the tin. Then she stood in silence until the interest of his machinery got him again. Slowly, without distracting his attention, she picked the bar up. It was comfortably heavy in her hand....

It took all her courage to perform the next action. With every ounce of her strength she whirled the bar through the air directly on the back of the head in front of her. Lance dropped instantly, to the floor.

In a moment the girl was down on her knees, searched through his pockets and pulled out every key she could find, then holding out the one that obviously fitted the cellar door she raced towards it, torch in her free hand.

The lock turned under the key. She saw as she swung the door wide that it was of tremendous thickness—clearly explained why no sounds, if her guess was right, had penetrated through.

A figure against the far wall turned slowly as she flashed her torch before her—a figure only half dressed and shackled to the wall by chain and waist manacle, even as she had been.

"Lance!" she screamed. "Lance! It is you! I was right...."

Instantly she flung herself forward, searched through the keys until she found the right one to the manacle. Lance tore it aside, flung the

tumbled hair from before his eyes.

"What—what on earth are you doing here?" he demanded. "Did that devil capture you as well, then?"

"I walked into it," she answered quickly. "But tell me, how are you? O.K.?"

"Considering everything, yes—but how'd you find me?"

"A hunch, I guess—in fact several hunches. Finally I was convinced that that thing in there wasn't you—but a perfect imitation. It's the Martian, isn't it, and it carried you from the laboratory in a sack?"

Lance nodded grimly. "When it reached maturity it smashed open its case and attacked me. I tore out my knife to save myself but I wasn't quick enough. It hypnotized me, drained my mind of every thought, learned the language—everything. I was shown its whole scheme of vengeance. It told me it would preserve my life because it had more to learn from me. Then, completely under hypnotic control, I was forced to provide the thing with clothes. I went home and got them for it. Then it took me away in a sack, and I couldn't raise a finger to help myself. Some kind of instinct led the thing to this out of the way spot. I got chained up and—" Lance broke off, shrugged. "That's all there is to it."

"For my part," Vera said, "I remembered you saying the thing was pure cellulose. I also remember from my science school days that cellulose can do almost anything from imitating any known object to adapting itself to any known condition. I was finally convinced the thing was cellulose when it cut itself and almost instantly healed itself by adaptation to the circumstance. Somehow, I realized, the thing had imitated you—"

"Exactly," Lance broke in quickly. "It has Martian intelligence of terrific power: it patterned itself after the nearest living object because of its earthly fertilization. *I* was the object.... But—but how did you escape from it?" he demanded in amazement.

"I hit it on the head so hard and so suddenly it hadn't the chance to adapt itself. It's planning world destruction and—"

"I know," Lance broke in seriously. "We've got to..."

He broke off suddenly and gripped the girl's arm. The Martian was standing in the doorway, set faced, eyes glittering.

"Run!" Lance commanded suddenly. "We can't fight this thing. Follow me!"

Simultaneously with the words he hurled the torch straight at the creature: it took it off guard, sent it reeling to one side. In that split second Lance and the girl were through the doorway, stumbled across the black cellar and up the steps to the stone trap. Behind them the Martian's footsteps were pursuing.

Desperately Lance pushed up the stone, flung it to one side, then dragged Vera up behind him—almost hurled her to the open window giving egress to the wharf outside. She got through, but not so Lance. A terrific pain stabbed through his skull as the tremendous hypnotic power of the Martian smote on his nerve centers. He reeled dizzily, came up hard with his back against bellying masses wrapped in straw.

Dimly a thought revolved in his mind. No ordinary weapons would kill this infinitely assimilative creature— But acid? Acid and cellulose...? With a last desperate effort he hurled over the bottle nearest to him and forced himself back.

Fuming, spurting smoke rose on the air, thick with acrid fumes. At that same moment the Martian came forward. He slipped in the sizzling liquid on the concrete, fell face down into it...

Sickened and half blinded Lance staggered round the dry portion to the window, scream after scream ringing in his ears as the deadly stuff decomposed the cellulose hybrid far faster than its assimilative powers could build themselves up to the sudden change.

Somehow, Lance realized he got through the window, stood sucking in great lungfuls of air. The girl's arm was on his shoulders. Things were quieter now: the screamings had ceased.

"Naturally, cellulose dissolves almost instantaneously in nitric acid," Lance muttered, when he got his breath back. He stared into the dark space through the window. "Whoever forgot those acid jars didn't realize they'd saved the world," he went on slowly. "And you, dearest ... Beyond question the Martian only spared your life with ideas of later matchood. He meant to save me too to drain my mind of all earthly knowledge. Hence the three gasmasks and—"

"Forget it," the girl whispered. "It's over. The car's round the corner. Drive home and I'll slip in and get you an overcoat. Then we can come back and throw that machinery into the harbor or somewhere...."

[End of *Martian Avenger*, by John Russell Fearn]