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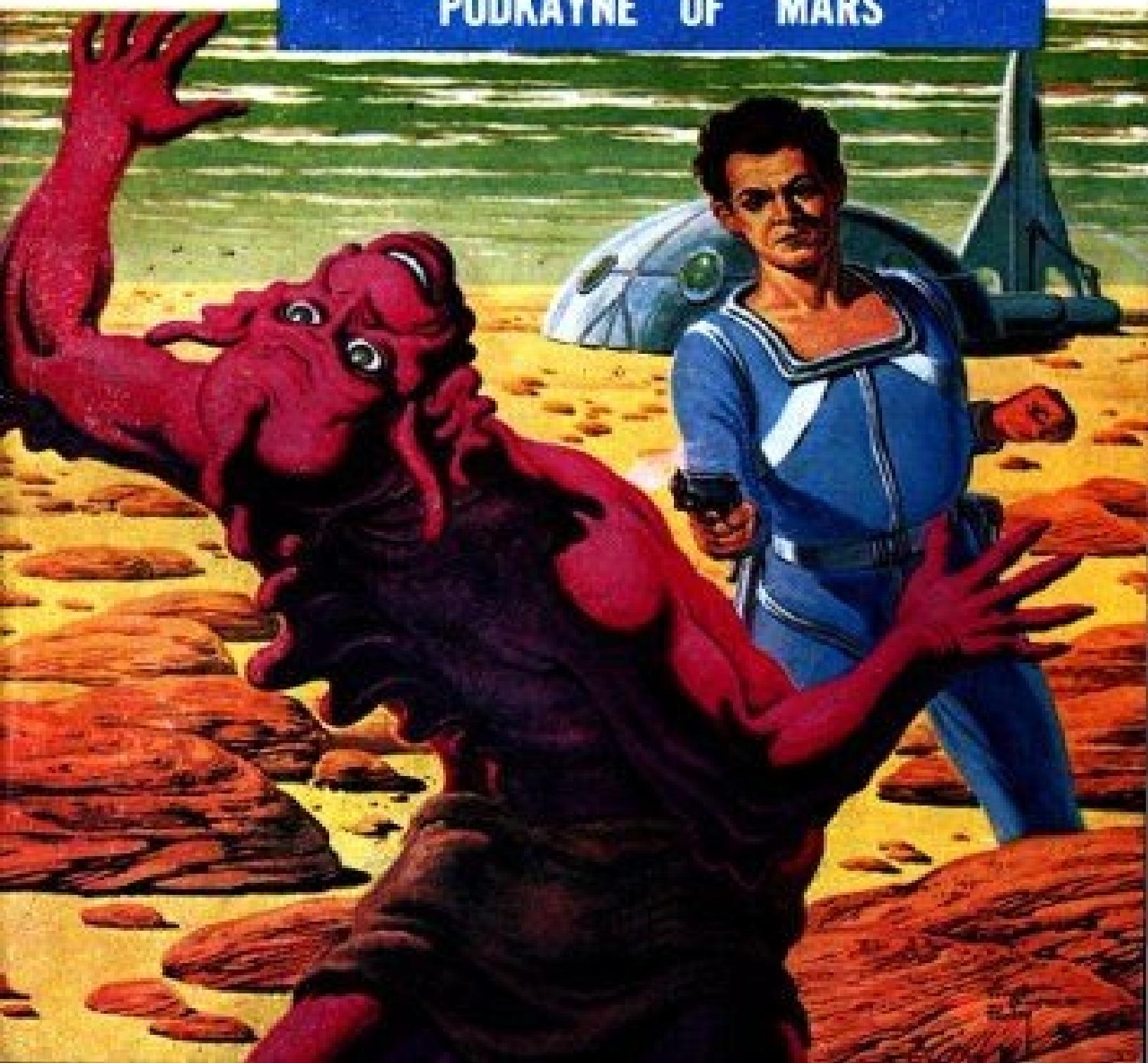
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THE DRAGON-SLAYERS

BY FRANK BANTA

**Got any dragons to kill? Here's
the fastest—and wildest—way!**

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In a gleaming chrome and glass federal building located at the center of Venusport, Division Chief Carl Wattles wearily arose from his office couch. He had been taking his usual two-hour, after-lunch nap, but today it had brought him little refreshment. Earlier he had received an unexpected report that made sleep impossible.

"John?" he mumbled.

John Claxson, the generously padded assistant division chief, stopped drilling out his earwax but did not remove his feet from the blotter of his desk. "Yeah, Chief?"

"I've heard from the Kentons again."

"I thought something was deviling you, the way you was carrying on in your sleep." He raised thick eyebrows. "Is their production down again?"

"Worse than that, John. Kenton has had the gall to request time off to build a new house!"

"No! I can't believe it."

"I can't either, John. They know it's not in the Manual."

"Certainly it's not, Chief. The nerve of those people wanting to do something that's not in the Manual!"

"People like us wrote the Manual, John," the Chief added with simple modesty. "That is why it is so good, good, good."

"I know," said John, accepting the weight. Then he complained bitterly, "Wanting to build a new house! They are supposed to do personal stuff at night, or when it's raining."

The Chief allowed his rage to climb. "They've got nothing to do but

go out into the jungle and pick a little old bale of pretzins every day, but do you think they are going to do it? No. They want *me* to go and do it for them!"

"You can't do it, Chief!" protested John.

"You know I can't, John," agreed Wattles as he stretched. "I got all I can manage right here. More."

"What you got to do, Chief?" John asked curiously, forgetting caution for a moment.

"Plenty!" retorted the Chief.

"I guess you have at that," John admitted, getting back aboard.

"Time was," brooded the Chief, "when that Kenton was a fair pretzin finder. But all he can think of to do now is to find excuses to goldbrick. Wait until he sees the stiff memorandum I'm sending him...."

Bliss Kenton had not gone far from their Venusian jungle cabin that morning before the vacuum snake hung one on her. The thick, two-foot-long pest lay very still on the ground, and she only got a glimpse of it before it jumped. Out it whipped to its full, slim, six-foot length and wrapped around her throat. Fangs struck, and in three seconds—with a loud *slurp*—it had withdrawn a quart of her blood. Then it unwrapped just as swiftly as it had come, and leaped into the cover of the jungle.

The hefty young matron wobbled back to the cabin.

"Pole!" she called as she hurried in. "I've been slurped!"

"Again?" her lanky husband asked, looking up from the reports on his desk.

"I'm so sorry, Pole," she said contritely.

"Well, sit down and start recovering, Bliss," he said in a kindly manner. "You can't pick any pretzins today."

"But I wanted to pick pretzins, Pole. Darn that vacuum snake and his fast draft."

"I just hope the neighborhood dragon doesn't come around while you're in that weakened condition, Bliss," Pole worried as he totaled up the month's production on his reports. He decided, "I had better take time off from pretzin hunting today so I can be handy to help you with your getaway, if need arises."

"Oh, the dragon never bothers us," Bliss said uneasily.

"He has gotten close enough to burn up several of our pretzin patches, though. He may get to this cabin some day."

"He doesn't mean any harm," defended Bliss. "I'm sure he wouldn't want to eat us. They are known to be strictly vegetarians."

"No, he won't eat us. He'll cook us, unless we can run away fast enough—but he'll never eat us."

They heard a faraway sound.

"What is that crisp crackling that sounds like a dank forest burning?" wondered Bliss.

Pole scrambled to the door. "The dragon is coming! He's headed straight for this cabin!"

"Shall we be going?" asked Bliss, grabbing her clothes.

A few minutes later, at a distance of a thousand yards, Pole and Bliss, loaded with all their portable possessions, watched their cabin burst into flames as a roaring, forty-foot lizard, with fifty-foot flames gouting from his mouth, ambled through their clearing.

"There, he's gone," said Pole as the dragon passed on. "I'd better put out the fire."

Dipping water from a nearby pond with a bucket, Pole had, after fifty-three fast buckets, a blackened ruin of what had formerly been their rude jungle cabin.

Pole moved a new, nearly finished split-pole settee he had been working on back in the jungle to their front porch. As they seated themselves, he complacently surveyed the slits burned between the charred boards of the walls and roof. "The roof will leak a mite when it rains, but it will let in lots of light," he observed optimistically.

"There's nothing like lots of light," Bliss agreed.

"Charcoal is healthful, too."

"It absorbs poison like nobody's business!"

"However, since it rains every day on Venus we will have to have a new cabin." He sighed resignedly. "And you know what that means: Lower production, fewer of the magical, antibiotic pretzins. I'd better radio the Division Chief."

As the jet plane flashed across their vision, the Kentons saw a tiny bundle drop from it. Pole ran out into the jungle and was under the parachute when it landed. He came back into the clearing unwrapping a package.

"It sure was thoughtful of Mr. Wattles to answer so fast," said Pole, as he opened the little package. "And will you look here in the middle! He even sent us a present!"

"It's a beautiful, plain white, rectangular carton of approximately three by seven inches," she said breathlessly.

"But we mustn't be selfish," Pole reminded hastily. "Let's see what Mr. Wattles has to say in his memorandum here first." They both read the green memorandum.

To: Napoleon B. Kenton, Special Agent, Pretzin Division,
Venus

From: Chief, Pretzin Division, Venusport, Venus

Subject: Personal Problems of Special Agents

In a radio message dated January 25, 1982 you related certain personal problems you were experiencing, and you stated that delays might be encountered in your harvesting of pretzins. We regret your difficulties. However, it is believed these misfortunes may be overcome during leisure hours and should be soon resolved without loss of a measurable part of your productive time.

Pole interrupted his reading to beam at his wife. "He's sorry for us, Bliss, and he hopes things will be better for us soon."

"Isn't he the nicest man?"

They read on.

In your radio message you refer to difficulties you are having with a snake and a lizard (which you colloquially refer to as a dragon). It is believed that the enclosed package, serial number 93G-18, will cope with the matter, and that no further report will be necessary with respect to snakes and lizards.

Carl Wattles
Chief, Pretzin Division

Eagerly Bliss Kenton opened the plain white carton bearing the serial number 93G-18. She slid out the two and three-quarter by six and

one-half inch fumigation bomb can.

Bliss read the label. "'Lizards and snakes go 'way and stay. Only \$1.19 F.O.B.U.S.A.' Why, it rhymes!' she said, a wondering smile lighting her face.

"Does it say how long the lizards are that go 'way and stay?" Pole asked anxiously, thinking of the neighborhood's forty-foot hellion.

"All lizards, it says. And only \$1.19."

"Good! But how about snakes that can jump ten feet and wrap around your throat?"

"I read that wrong," she amended. "All lizards *and snakes*. And only \$1.19."

"I'm glad," said Pole, choking up.

"The Division Chief has been thinking of us," said Bliss, wiping away a tear.

"He knows we field personnel have our problems."

"He knew just what we needed," lauded Bliss.

Pole looked up from the canister as he heard a sound. "And here comes the dragon back! Our lizard repellent arrived just in the nick of time!"

Down the rain-forest aisle the roaring mammoth rapidly waddled. Its flames—even longer than its body—withered into blackened ruin all that stood before it. This time, instead of snatching up their possessions and fleeing to safety, the Kentons stood their ground with their pocket-size fumigation bomb that had been designed for pocket-sized lizards. When the dragon was within throwing distance, Pole flipped on the spray jet of the tiny bomb and threw it as straight as he could. Then both of them sped away, leaving all their possessions at the mercy of the advancing, ravening flames....

"Oh, Pole! Isn't our new home just the dandiest that a Venusian pretzin-gathering couple ever had?"

"It *is* dandy," concurred Pole. "Who'd ever have thought we would have a cabin that was only an inch thick, and yet was absolutely water tight?"

"The table makes a dandy smokestack too, when it's propped up. Fireproof."

"How about the mouth when it's propped open?" challenged Pole. "Who could beat a front porch like that?"

"You can't. You just can't!"

"Correct." He ruminated, "We'd never have been able to cut the hide. Not a tough, inch-thick one like this one."

"I'll never get over the way you gutted the dragon. You cut him loose inside, just below the tonsils—"

"And after I lassoed them, I gave a run—"

"And all his guts came stringing out!"

"Had him cleaned to the bone within an hour!" said Pole proudly.

"We would never have had it so good if it hadn't been for Mr. Wattles' helpfulness," reminded Bliss. "That fumigation bomb, besides making a horrible stink—"

"—explodes when it enters a dragon's flaming mouth—and blows his methane tanks."

Banta

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