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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BUNZO FAREWELL \*\*\*

# BUNZO FAREWELL

By CHARLES V. DE VET

*"Have you ever seen a dead mahute, or even one  
that was ill? Or anything that looks like a  
graveyard?" Tang and Lutscher knew not the  
answer ... but maybe Bunzo, the clober, knew.*

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Sometime during the one hundred and seventh day out of Gascol 11 the hourly signal of the tracer beam changed from a tired burp to a sharp ping. Sammy Tang knew then that Lutscher had landed and that the long chase was nearing its end. Over three years on the trail of the system's most wanted criminal, and now they would meet for the first time.

Tang had dogged his quarry's flight from the first moment his ship's beam had picked up its trace. During refueling stops on a dozen worlds he had sometimes been weeks behind, sometimes only hours, but there had been never a glimpse of Lutscher or his ship.

The chase had led, first, across, and then down the long arm of the spiral nebula known as the Milky Way, through the portion occupied by ever expanding humanity, and beyond.

Lutscher made his final stop for fuel on Gascol 11, the last occupied world at the tip of the arm. When Tang reached there Lutscher had gone—out into the blackness of deep space.

That way, Tang knew, led to suicide, for in that direction lay nothing until the next galaxy, M. 31, and Lutscher had neither the fuel nor the years of life to reach there. Tang followed. In the beginning he had expected that Lutscher's flight would turn out to be only an elusive tactic, and that he would attempt to double back in a dodging curve.

But Tang had underrated his man.

The second week out his ship entered a dust region, or dark nebula, and when it emerged, the third week, he could see ahead a spot of brightness that marked an island star cloud. His respect for Lutscher's ingenuity and resourcefulness went up several points.

Tang spent the next several hours studying his instrument board and making calculations. At the end his forehead was sprinkled with fine drops of perspiration. He had enough fuel to reach the star cloud, but not enough to return! He kept the ship steady on its beam.

The star cloud expanded during the following days into three star systems—one with observable planets—and on one of them Lutscher had landed.

Tang timed his landing to come in during the late daylight. His landing flares would draw attention during the dark hours, and any interval earlier in the day would give the possible inhabitants of this world a better opportunity to investigate before he was ready for them.

He had only time enough to observe that the topography of the planet was mostly stone and sand, with occasional patches of vegetation—and that Lutscher's ship rested less than a hundred yards from his own—before he was enveloped in the swift fall of darkness.

He wasted no time in preparing his ship for possible contingencies.

The first button he pressed on a small wall panel activated the electric eye and automatic guns in the elevated nose of the ship. The second set in motion the instruments, in the blister at the base of the ship, that tested the planet's atmosphere, gravity, moisture content, and temperature. There was nothing more he could do until daylight.

Pulling down his sleeping board he kicked off his shoes and rested his shoulders against the wall of the compartment. He lit a cigar and seemed thoroughly preoccupied with the smoke that curled up and through the air vents.

Even being so near the completion of his task brought Tang no feeling of elation or triumph. The men of his profession came from many worlds but their calling had shaped them into a common mold. The internal discipline that best fitted them to spend long months of solitude in their lonely space ships left them without the high rises or low valleys of emotion experienced by most men. If his mission failed Tang would waste no energy in purposeless regret or worry; if it succeeded his only sensation would be satisfaction.

His cigar finished he straightened his land-muscled form on the sleeping pad and rested his head on his folded hands. When the lights went out three minutes later he was

sleeping dreamlessly.

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Tang prepared himself a substantial breakfast the next morning, and not until he had leisurely consumed it did he check his instruments. He was not too surprised when he found the planet's atmosphere entirely safe for human habitation.

Whatever else might be said about Lutscher he was not stupid. There had been no blind chance involved when he headed this way. The star area was uncharted but Lutscher had either been here before or had learned about it from someone who had.

The planet's temperature, Tang found, ranged from a low of 72 degrees Fahrenheit during the night to a present reading of 78. The atmosphere's only deviation from Earth-normal was a slightly higher oxygen content. Gravity tested 1.29 Gs. A human could function here quite efficiently.

Unhurriedly Tang buckled on a compact electric pistol and a stout knife. He hooked a canteen of water on his belt, and slipped a packet of concentrated food tablets into his shirt pocket. Throwing the sling of his field glasses over his shoulder, he was ready to leave.

He pulled down the port door release and it slid open a bare six inches and stopped with a dull click. It was locked and only a force powerful enough to spring the metal could open it wider until he was ready. He was certain that no moving object had approached nearer the ship than eighty-five feet during the night or the firing of the guns in the nose would have warned him, but the designers of the ship had built it for men who took chances only when necessary.

Dull daylight came in through the port opening. Outside the ship something moved.

Tang studied the moving something intently, but it was too far away to be seen clearly. From where he stood it appeared to be a huge insect. He pressed the lock release all the way down and stepped into the opening left by the sliding door.

Slipping his field glasses from their case he put them to his eyes. The creature he had seen stood gazing back at him. It was definitely an insect-type, except that it had only four limbs, and stood almost as tall as a man. Its limbs and body were armored and thin, reminding him of the cartoons he had seen of stick-men. Squatting upright on two large legs it stood motionless, holding its smaller upper limbs bent clawlike at its sides. Sunlight glinted from two eye-lens clusters on each side of its thin sharp head. It resembled a giant praying-mantis.

For several long minutes Tang studied the insect but it made no further movement. He lowered his glasses and sat down in the doorway with his legs hanging outside, making himself plainly visible to his observer. He suspected that it was not a member of the planet's dominant species, but he waited to see how it would react to him. That reaction would be the best demonstration of its intelligence.

After a wait of over fifteen minutes the creature turned slowly and hopped away. It traveled in long awkward jumps much like an Earth grasshopper, its progress aided by short wings which Tang noted then for the first time. It entered a dense copse of brush that grew in large rings like the practice exercises in a schoolboy's penmanship book.

Tang rested in the doorway for a good hour after the insect had disappeared before he stepped to the ground. He looked for the planet's sun but the sky was thick with clouds that seemed not to move. He walked around the ship. There was nothing of immediate interest within sight. Locking the port door he walked toward Lutscher's ship.

His progress became slower as he neared his goal. Whether or not Lutscher was inside he would probably have his guns set for intruders. True, most watch guns when activated gave a warning shot overhead or into the ground, before concentrating on an encroacher,

but with a criminal a man never knew what to expect. And Lutscher could be ruthless. However, he reached the ship without challenge.

Picking up a shiny bit of crystal at his feet he rapped on the vessel's metal skin, and waited. He knew the sound would be heard inside, while his voice probably would not. He repeated the rapping several times before he decided that Lutscher was not inside. Shrugging his shoulders he turned away. His next move would be to investigate the brushland into which the stick-insect had disappeared.

Once there he found that the openings he had noted were not ringlets, as they had appeared through his glasses. Rather they were formed by branches growing up from large flat limbs lying on the ground. The branches were bent inward like barrel staves and gave the limbs the appearance of huge skeleton torsos, with the ribs pointed upward. Small finger-like roots reached from the limbs and buried themselves in the sandy soil.

Progress through the woods, Tang soon found, was possible only by walking through the tunnels made by the branches. Traveling diagonally was slow, tortuous work, while walking alongside the limbs was impossible—they grew too close together. However, the branches of the tunnel only met well above his head, and the limbs themselves offered a hard walking surface. He made good progress.

The temperature had gone up several degrees since morning and Tang was soon perspiring freely. The planet's greater gravity pull brought a loginess to his limbs, but this was compensated for by a strange feeling of well-being. The feeling, he surmised, was caused by the high oxygen content of the air he was breathing.

He walked until he came to the branch tunnel's open end and stepped out into the planet's murky sunlight. Ahead loomed the trunk of a tree, a huge trunk probably thirty feet in diameter. He noted now that the large limbs that ran along the ground grew from this trunk. It took him only a minute to perceive that the entire plot of vegetation, which must have covered over a square mile, originated here.

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With no warning of its approach, a creature, semi-human in form, walked into view from behind the tree trunk. Tang stifled his instinctive urge to reach for his pistol and stood motionless. He had learned long ago, that when playing a strange game, to let the other fellow play first.

The native possessed two limbs upon which he stood, and two others, set where its shoulders should have been, but there his human likeness ceased. Yet there was something about him that more nearly approached the human standard of a man than did the stick-insect which he had observed earlier.

The man-creature's body and limbs were well filled out, and covered with slate-gray skin. There was no neck, his head was merely an extension of his trunk. Two eye clusters, set high on his head and wide apart, and a long, slit, mouth just below were his only facial features. Two flesh-feathered apertures, situated where the breast nipples would have been on a human, and evidently respiration openings, fluttered with each breath the creature took. He was entirely unclothed and in one grubby fist he gripped a long-bladed knife.

About the native's feet frisked a small four-legged animal with the proportions of a pudgy teddybear. It too was neckless, with the same dead-white skin as the native, and reminded Tang of a bouncy little ball of bread dough.

The native stared at him until the silence grew thin and Tang decided that he would have to make the first move.

"Hello," he said. He knew there was little chance the other could understand him. In fact, there were no organs of hearing, as far as he could discern, yet he hoped to convey, by the tone of his voice that he was not a hostile intruder. He knew by experience that almost invariably an animal, or a human, feared a stranger, and reacted to that fear with either

flight or a challenge. Sometimes that fear could be allayed by an early demonstration of animity.

Abruptly the native seemed to lose interest in Tang. He turned and began cutting small branch shoots from one of the surrounding limbs. These he placed on a pile which he had started on the ground.

Tang drew a deep breath of relief. Still keeping a wary eye on the native he walked over to the tree trunk and stood leaning against it. The other ignored him and went on with his work.

When the pile of shoots reached a size that satisfied him, the native picked them up and entered one of the branch tunnels leading in the opposite direction from which Tang had come. Tang followed.

They came out of the woods onto the same type of sandy plain that Tang had found when he first landed. A half mile away he could see a small river, and collected along its banks were dozens of adobe-like dwellings. They stretched away along the river banks until lost to sight among the foothills.

The small animal made a sound like the tinkling of little bells and the native walked three more steps and stopped. He bent down and the teddybear pet sprang up onto the pile of branches and rode there. Once the native turned his body to see if Tang was still following, then paid no further attention to him until they reached the village.

On the way they met several more of the man-type creatures, each with one of the doughballs tagging along, but none of them did more than glance at Tang. Most of them ignored him completely.

Once five of the stick-insects cut across their path. The native stopped to let them pass before he walked on. Ignoring each other seemed to be the custom here, Tang thought whimsically.

The same held true after they entered the village: Men, insects, and pets mingled indiscriminately, each seemingly oblivious to the presence of the others.

"Welcome to our fair city," a voice said, and Tang spun halfway around.

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## II

Tang pulled his sidearm part way out before he noted that the man standing in the doorway of one of the huts was unarmed. He was also shoeless and bare to the waist. Sweat ran down the blond hairs on his chest and a week's growth of blond whiskers sprouted from his face. The visible portion of his features, and his candid blue eyes, were young, but his temples were peppered with gray.

"Surely you can't be as surprised to see me as you seem," the stranger said. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Bill Lutscher; and, of course, you are the famous man-hunter, Sammy Tang."

Lutscher smiled and stepped from the doorway with his hand extended. Tang gripped the hand unhesitatingly, astounded to find himself liking the man. Then he remembered ruefully that Lutscher was famous for his charm. In fact, that charm was the very quality that had indirectly made him the sought-after man he was.

"I'm certain that the pleasure is more mine than yours," Tang said, responding to the other's display of lightness.

"Won't you come in?" Lutscher asked. "Perhaps I can give you a drink? I have saved a bottle just for this momentous occasion."

Tang acknowledged the invitation with a nod of his head. They walked into the hut together. Lutscher had evidently brought most of the movable furniture from his space

ship with him, Tang observed, for the room was quite well furnished.

"Be careful not to stumble over Bunzo," Lutscher said, nodding toward a side wall of the room. Tang followed his gaze and saw that Bunzo was one of the doughball pets that seemed so universal here. But Bunzo was as large as an average-sized dog.

Strangely, while the little pets had intrigued Tang, he found this one repulsive. It lay sprawled on the floor of the hut, its body gross and over-fed, looking up at Tang with little pig eyes, mean and quiet. On one side of its white skin was a dark patch shaped like a fist.

"He's a repulsive looking brute," Tang said.

"Isn't he though?" Lutscher agreed. "But he's company, and he has his uses." Lutscher laughed: He was a laughing man. "I wouldn't trade him for anything I can think of offhand," he said as he turned to a row of boxes piled against the far wall of the hut. "Now let's see. Which box is it in? Ah, here it is."

He turned and found himself staring at the pistol in Tang's hand. "I'm afraid we'll have to reverse the roles," Tang said. "I'll be the host—in my ship."

Lutscher seemed genuinely surprised. He staggered back a step and sank heavily into a chair next to his pet. He held the bottle of whiskey in his lap with one hand, while the other idly stroked the blubbery head of the drowsing Bunzo. "For a minute I'd forgotten," he said, recovering his composure. "You still think that you can take me away from here, don't you? But of course you can't understand yet that the cards are stacked against you."

"Is there anything you'd like to take with you when we leave?" Tang asked.

"It won't work, Sammy," Lutscher warned.

"On your feet," Tang said.

Lutscher rose without hesitation and walked to the door ahead of Tang. Outside they found a dozen of the natives waiting. Others were coming up fast. They blocked the way with their bodies.

"You might kill a few of them," Lutscher said, "but you'll never get away."

It took Tang only a second to weigh the odds and make his decision. "It looks like the first round is yours," he said, putting up his gun.

They walked back into the hut and sat down. "Tell me," Tang said. "Am I a prisoner?"

"Not at all," Lutscher answered. "You may leave anytime you like. But you can't take me with you."

Tang eased himself down on the cot Lutscher offered and sat in deep introspection. But not for long. He decided quickly that he must learn more about the present set-up before he made his next move. Perhaps he could get the information he needed from Lutscher. "What's the deal here, Bill?" he asked. "Have they set you up as some sort of demi-god?"

Lutscher seemed eager to talk. "Part of the deal, as you call it, will have to remain my secret," he said. "I'd be a fool to show you all my cards. But ask any questions you care to. I'll answer some of them at least."

"All right. How did you get word to your friends to stop me when I started out with you? Or did you station them outside your door when I first came?"

Lutscher shook his head. "I didn't, and, as you can see, they aren't there now. But just try to take me out of here and they'll be back before you can walk two steps. Incidentally, they call themselves mahutes. The stick-insects are ankites, and the pets, like Bunzo here, are clobbers. Now you know the names of the only denizens of this world I've seen so far."

"How did you know about this place?"

"In my business you either have something like this in reserve up your sleeve, or the long arm of the law, represented by yourself, my friend, will soon pull you in. Enough to say that I learned about it from someone who had been here. I'll confess, though, that I had my anxious moments coming in. I was afraid that the information I had about the place

might have been, ah ... colored, by the imagination of my informer. But, as you can see, it turned out to be a very delightful place."

"You know I'll never leave without you, don't you?" Tang asked abruptly. "Why haven't you had me killed?"

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"At first I planned that," Lutscher answered with friendly frankness. "But after I investigated the situation, and understood it, I saw no reason to do so. In fact, I have strong hopes of convincing you to stay here of your own free will."

"You must have picked up a touch of madness somewhere along the line if you think that."

"No, I don't think so," Lutscher said, growing very earnest. "Look at me. What kind of a man do you see?"

"I see nothing except the man I'm going to bring in for trial."

"You must have my record," Lutscher said, disregarding the reply. "And you've probably studied it and my characteristics until you know me better than I know myself. Remember them? I'm the highstrung, hypertension, ulcer type of guy. A doctor told me once that my metabolism burns too fast."

"I've gotten into most of my trouble because of an inner drive too great for my own good. I always had to try to change the status quo, to incite unrest and rebellion among the natives of the occupied worlds, to steal the unstealable, to pit one world against another. Is that the kind of man you're seeing now?"

"No, it isn't," Tang said thoughtfully. "I'd best describe you now as a contented man. If I didn't know better, I'd say you hadn't a care in the world."

"And you'd be right," Lutscher said, leaning forward in his desire to emphasize his sincerity. "You haven't been here long enough to feel it, but this planet does something to you. I don't know what it is. I've gained twenty pounds in the two months I've been here. I've lost my unrest, my drive to change things. I'm happy now. Why should I want to return to the outside where life is like a thin crust that you walk on carefully, always afraid of breaking through? And some morning you'll wake up and you'll have the key, the answer to the universe, and you won't want to leave either."

"I've wondered briefly about you, myself," Tang said. "And I'll admit you're not the type of man I expected to find. But I've formed conclusions different than yours. And I don't envy you. A dope addict has the same feeling you have when he's under the influence of the drug. But I don't envy him. What have you been eating since you've been here? Anything at all native to this planet?"

Lutscher nodded. "You may be right about that," he said. "I'm not so stupid that I've missed thinking of it myself. At first I thought the good feeling might be just the lethargy induced by the atmosphere's high oxygen content and the greater gravity."

"But my final conclusion was pretty much the same as yours. During the past month and a half I've lived exclusively on the diet of the mahutes—that's the shoots you saw one of them gathering. But what do I care about the source of my well-being? The only thing that concerns me is that it's there."

"I'm afraid that to me the source would be more important," Tang said, "and I'll stick to my own food. Right now everything looks very rosy to you. But if it turns out that you've been eating a dangerous drug and it begins to wreck your system, how will it look then? Especially if you find that you can't break the habit?"

"But it's not dangerous," Lutscher insisted, "and I'll prove it to you. Tomorrow we'll take a stroll through the village. I'll point out a few things that will surprise you. I presume you'll be spending the night with me?"



Tang nodded.

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### III

That night Tang slept with a guarded alertness. It was a part of him, which he could turn on and off, as the occasion demanded. Six hours after he dropped off to sleep he awoke, with all his senses alive and ready for action. Without moving he listened. Inside and outside the hut all was silent.

Rising quietly he drew his gun and walked over to Lutscher's cot. He shook the sleeping figure.

"What...?" Lutscher asked sleepily, sitting up.

"We're going to try it again," Tang said. "Get dressed. Quietly."

"Get dressed?" Lutscher's brain was still sleep-clogged. "Why? Oh, I get it," he answered himself. "You think you can take me away while the mahutes are sleeping. Well, I suppose the only way you can find out is by trying."

"Don't waste time," Tang snapped.

Lutscher rolled out of bed and began pulling on his trousers. Over in the corner Bunzo grunted, and stirred uneasily.

"I'm ready," Lutscher said a minute later.

"You'd better put on your shoes," Tang said.

"I assure you I won't need them," Lutscher answered. Behind the words Tang could sense his silent laughter.

Outside they found that the first streaks of dawn were breaking over the river. They walked fifty feet before one of the mahutes shuffled out of a hut ahead of them. Another came from their right, and behind them they heard two more running toward them.

"There'll be more waiting for us up ahead," Lutscher said. "Are you going to try to shoot your way through them?"

Tang let his shoulders droop. "We'll go back to the hut," he said.

"You think you've won again," he told Lutscher, once they were there. "But I had a double purpose in taking our little trip. I think I know now how you communicate with your friends."

Lutscher glanced up. "You do?"

"Yes. Of the three species here only the clobbers have vocal chords. I suspect the others are deaf as well as mute. Therefore, they either have a symbiosis among themselves, which you've somehow learned to penetrate, or their communication is telepathic."

"Good boy," Lutscher said enthusiastically. He seemed to harbor no resentment. "I'll admit you figured it out faster than I did," he said. "But I knew you would in time. And I allowed for that. You're right. All life on the planet, as far as I have been able to learn, is telepathic. But I still have the advantage. You don't know how to contact them. And I don't think you ever will find out."

"You're stupid if you think that." Despite himself Tang found that he was losing his temper. The man was so cocksure, and so far so untouchable. "It may take me time but I'll find it. I'll lay you odds on that."

"Yes, I guess you will," Lutscher said thoughtfully. "Sammy, you're like a bulldog with a bone. You never let go, do you? I suppose I should admire that quality in you, but I find myself wondering if I shouldn't have killed you when I first saw you."

"You probably should have," Tang said. "Because from here in I'm going to make certain that you never get the chance. Right now we're going to go through your things."

A motion of anger went over Lutscher's face as he caught the implication of Tang's words. "Damn you," he said.

"Get your boxes and dump them on your cot one at a time," Tang said. "I'll pick out what I want."

For a moment it seemed that Lutscher was going to be stubborn. But then, with a trait he had of moving his eyes and not turning his head, he glanced at the gun on Tang's hip and shrugged. He rose to his feet and walked over to his pile of boxes.

As Lutscher dumped the contents of each one on the cot Tang went through them and picked out what he wanted. At the end he had two pistols, a rifle, and several knives. "Now I'll take the key to your ship," he said.

Wordlessly Lutscher reached into his pocket and pulled out a chain with a small key on the end. He tossed it on the cot.

"I'll leave you for awhile," Tang said. "But I'll be back. And if I get any interference from your friends I'll kill them and you too. I don't *have* to bring you back alive, you know."

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Back at Lutscher's space ship Tang spent an hour transferring the fuel remaining in Lutscher's tanks to his own ship. When he finished his tanks were well over three-quarters full, more than enough to get him back to Gascol 11. He made no attempt to remove the weapons from Lutscher's vessel. He had the key, and if Lutscher were able to get that away from him there would be no stopping him anyway.

As he walked leisurely back to the village he wondered how Lutscher would receive him.

Unexpectedly Lutscher appeared to bear no grudge. "I'll admit I was a bit riled when you took my guns," he said. "But I suppose it's just the cop in you. And there's no point in our carrying a grudge. After all, we're the only humans on the planet and we're going to be here a long time, so we might as well stay friends."

Tang nodded but made no reply.

"Another thing," Lutscher said. "You've missed an angle in your calculations. You think that if you can discover how I communicate with the mahutes you'll be able to get your way. But once again you've underestimated me, my friend. The impression I've emphasized on them is that you're a bit demented. You act illogically. You're driven by compulsions that have to be restrained. And the mahutes are very susceptible."

Tang smiled. "You're clever," he said. "I'll admit it. But some day not too long from now you and I will be heading back to civilization. I promise you that."

"That remains to be seen," Lutscher answered. "Do you still want to take that trip through the village we were talking about last night?"

"Why not?"

They walked out of the hut and into the clouded sunlight of the outdoors. "Have you any idea just how intelligent the mahutes are?" Tang asked.

"Very low quotient," Lutscher answered. "In fact I'd say that most of their reactions were prompted by instinct rather than intelligence. They have approximately the same reasoning power as smart dogs."

"What else have you learned about them?"

"Not too much," Lutscher said. "But I've made a few surmises." He seemed to have entirely dismissed from his mind the unpleasant morning occurrence. "Have you ever heard the word, androgynous?"

"It refers to flowers, doesn't it? Something about their being able to seed themselves without stamin from other flowers?"

"That's pretty much it," Lutscher agreed. "I think that biologically the mahutes are the same as those flowers. Each possesses within himself the complete mechanism for self-fertilization. At least to me there's no apparent sexual differences in any I've seen, or even evidence of reproductive organs."

"That's interesting," Tang said. "How about the clobers? Could there possibly be any biological connection between them and the mahutes? Without exception each mahute has one with him wherever he goes."

"That's true," Lutscher replied. "But I suppose they just like pets. By the way, we'll have to stop here. We're at the edge of the section where the ankites—the stick-insects—live. It's taboo territory."

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For some reason Tang received the distinct impression that Lutscher had changed the subject to avoid speaking further of the clobers. In the back of his mind he filed that away for future reference. "Why should this area be taboo?" he asked. "The ankites seem to come and go among the mahutes without hindrance. Or is it taboo just to you and me?"

"No. A mahute wouldn't think of entering here. They have some deep fear of the place. What it is I don't know. They don't seem to fear the ankites themselves."

They turned and started back for their own section of the village. "There's another thing that puzzles me," Tang said. "That's the sealed huts. What do you know about them?"

"Nothing, except that about one in every three is sealed. I don't know why. The strange part is that I've seen the mahutes sealing them with mud and sand from the river—that's what the huts are made of originally—and I've tried to investigate but they won't let me near them then. I suppose it'll be quite awhile before we fully understand the organization here."

"What do the ankites and the clobers eat?" Tang asked.

"The same tree shoots that the mahutes eat," Lutscher answered. "The mahutes gather it for them."

"Doesn't that seem strange?" Tang asked. "Do you think there's any possibility that the ankites are in control here? You said the mahutes weren't very intelligent."

"I hadn't thought of that before," Lutscher answered. "But I don't think so. I believe they're simply two primitive species that have found the means of living together in mutual cooperation."

"Just what do the ankites contribute to that cooperation?"

Lutscher shook his head. "You've got me."

"By the way, you were going to show me something that would explain your theory of well-being."

"That's right," Lutscher said, "I was, wasn't I? Well, this is it. Have you noticed that there are young mahutes, and middle-aged ones, but none that are old? I'm convinced that the food here is the source of immortality!"

"That's absurd," Tang said, startled at the other's suggestion. "In the first place, how could you tell how old they are? Perhaps some of those you think are middle-aged are really old, or even ready to die."

"You know better than that," Lutscher answered. "There are always signs of advanced age, such as slow movements, wrinkled skin, or bent figures, that can be read by anyone looking for them. Those signs are not present here. Furthermore, have you seen a dead mahute, or even one that was ill? Or anything that looks like a graveyard?"

"I haven't," Tang answered. "But that would prove nothing. I haven't been here long enough to say that there aren't any because I haven't seen them. Neither have you. And naturally these people would have their own rituals for disposing of their dead. Perhaps the burying is done in secret." Suddenly he stopped walking. "I have it," he said. "The sealed huts! I'll wager that's their burial custom. When one of them dies the others seal his body in his hut."

For the time it took him to draw two deep breaths Lutscher seemed half convinced. Then, "I'm sure you're wrong," he said, but there was an excitement in his voice: The kind of excitement that pleased him. "If you're game let's find out," he urged. "As soon as we get the chance we'll break into one of the sealed huts and see what's there."

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#### IV

The next day Lutscher was missing.

Tang had gone to the space ship for a box of cigars and when he returned he found that Lutscher's hut had been freshly sealed. As he stood, uncertain what his next move should be, one of the mahutes came up and took him by the arm.

He allowed the mahute to lead him to another hut nearby. Inside he found all of Lutscher's possessions and his own. The furniture had been carefully placed in the same positions it had occupied in the original hut. But Lutscher was nowhere in sight.

During the time it took Tang to smoke one cigar he debated with himself. If they were holding Lutscher prisoner he should be in no immediate danger. Each sealed hut had air vents in the top that were never closed. If they had killed him then no amount of haste could help him. On the other hand, he decided, perhaps they were subjecting him to some ritualistic torture. He rose to his feet and buckled on his gun. He'd have to try to get into the sealed hut. If the mahutes hadn't killed Lutscher he might still be able to save him.

Once outside Tang found the mahutes maintaining their guard. He walked toward them and they bunched themselves ahead of him. He drove his shoulder against the nearest one. The native reeled aside but made no effort to strike back. The other mahutes pressed forward, bearing Tang back by the very weight of their numbers. He'd have to use more drastic measures.

He drew his gun but he doubted that they were intelligent enough to recognize it as a weapon. Pointing the gun at the feet of the nearest mahutes he squeezed the grip and held it tight while the lethal ray burned the sand to a bubbling, smoking cauldron. The mahutes stared stupidly at the molten spot, moving back only when the heat scorched their legs.

Tang forced them to either side until he had cleared a path to Lutscher's hut. Taking advantage of their distraction he dashed forward and turned with his back to the hut.

The mahutes did not hesitate. They rushed him in a body.

That left him no choice, Tang realized. He shot the first to reach him in the leg. As the native stumbled and fell, others climbed over his body to get at Tang. He shot a second and a third and still the mahutes came on. He tried to hold them back by playing the gun's beam at their feet but they walked into the beam and fell dead or mutilated. Several of the inevitable accompanying clobbers died with them.

Soon the blood and the slaughter of the single-minded natives sickened Tang and he loosened his grip on his weapon. The mahutes grabbed him by the arms and legs and carried him away from the hut, making no attempt to disarm him. They deposited him some yards away and went back to their posts. Other mahutes came up and carried off the dead and wounded. Tang cursed and staggered into his own hut.

For a long while he sat with his head in his hands, lost in a gray obsession. Lutscher had undoubtedly caused the interference of the mahutes by the picture he had given them of Tang being insane. But whatever the reason, as a fellow human, it was his duty to rescue

Lutscher, if at all possible. But there was a limit to what lengths he would go to do it. After all, was the life of one criminal worth that of all the mahutes he would have to slaughter, or even of the ones he had already killed? The decision was a hard one.

He heard a noise and looked up. A mahute was standing in the doorway. In his arms the native held one of the little doughball pets. He set the clober on the floor and withdrew.

A peace offering? Tang didn't know, but he decided to wait. Perhaps he would have a better chance to rescue Lutscher later.

What he needed now was some way to communicate with the mahutes. If he only knew Lutscher's secret. For a moment he debated eating the native food. Perhaps that was the necessary first step. But his whole nature shrank from the thought. The risk of making himself an addict was too much to ask—at least until all else failed.

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The clober *was* company. And it seemed to crave affection. It frisked about Tang's feet until he picked it up and held it in his lap. As he went through his troubled thoughts he idly stroked and fondled the little pet.

Tang set himself on a schedule. Once every hour he walked to the door and looked across to Lutscher's hut. Always the situation remained the same.

Late that night he finally fell asleep. The little clober crawled up on the bed and curled into the crook of his arm.

He awoke twice during the night. Each time, by the light of his flash, he could see the patient mahutes keeping their vigil. And each time he returned to his bed the clober crawled back into its sleeping place in the crook of his elbow. He found himself growing quite fond of the little beast.

The third time Tang awoke he saw, through the slit in the eye he opened, that it was daylight.

*Father?* For a moment Tang thought he was still dreaming. Had he heard a voice? He lay quietly, his mind still not functioning too clearly.

*Father?* the voice came again. But was it a voice? Now that he thought of it he was certain that there had been no actual sound. It was more like an audible thought.

A faint inkling of what was happening penetrated his consciousness. He remained quiet, deliberately keeping his mind in its drowsy, slow-functioning sleep fog. And then he caught the call in all its inflections. The sense-impression he caught was not father, exactly; rather it was a compound picture of benefactor, loved one, guardian.

And Tang was certain the mind picture had been communicated to him by the clober at his side. He had made his first telepathic contact with the planet's denizens!

For a half-hour after he arose Tang was unable to reestablish contact with the little doughball. Then he realized that he was trying too hard.

He sat down and forced himself to relax. His mind gradually calmed and made itself receptive. *Food? Hungry?* the clober's thoughts reached him.

Tang rose and walked to the door. The mahutes had left a small bundle of shoots at the side of the hut, as they had done every morning for Lutscher. He brought several of them in with him.

All during the morning he spent his time perfecting his ability to catch the clober's thoughts. By noon he had it mastered. The little beast's intellect was quite rudimentary, registering its need for food, desire to sleep, for affection, and love for its benefactor, himself.

When it became hungry again at noon Tang tried his next experiment. Lutscher had been able to communicate with the mahutes, and quite probably with Bunzo. He should be able

to do the same.

*Food ... hungry*, the clober broadcast. Tang looked at it, and in his mind commanded it to go out the door and get a tree shoot. At the second attempt the little pet turned and obeyed!

So far so good. Now to try his luck with the mahutes.

He went to the door and tried to project his thoughts to the passing natives. He failed. An hour later he came back in, tired and discouraged. His head ached with a dull pain that seemed to be trying to force its way through his skull. He let his body sag across the bed. The clober climbed up and joined him.

Suddenly he had the answer. The natives were never seen without an accompanying clober. And Lutscher had had his Bunzo. They were unable to make direct telepathic contact: It had to be done through the clobers!

He sprang to his feet and went outside, with the clober clutched in his arms. A mahute was passing in the packed-sand street. Directing his thought to the mahute, but through the clober, Tang thought, *Stop*. The mahute stopped!

*Go*, Tang commanded, and the mahute went on. Success.

He made one more test. The next mahute to pass was carrying a load of shoots. *Leave them by my door*, Tang directed. Without hesitation the mahute turned and deposited the shoots.

Next Tang felt for the mahute's thoughts and caught them readily, but they were almost purely functional, bearing little resemblance to the activity of a reasoning intellect. There was no chance of his learning anything of Lutscher's whereabouts there. However he had succeeded in what he set out to do.

Now for the final step. He went inside and buckled on his sidearm.

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## V

Suddenly the clober squirmed in his arms and a chaos of mad, slobbering, disconnected thoughts washed against Tang's mind and staggered it with their very morbidity and black, hopeless fear.

For a moment he stood mentally numbed, desperately striving to sort the hodgepodge of impressions into a semblance of lucidity.

But they hit him, wave upon wave, as tangible as physical blows, and he fought the nausea they brought as he read them. *I'm dead ... like a spider ... wasps! My God, this can't be happening! The bastards, bastards, bastards. Move. I've got to move! I can't!* The thoughts ran together like the incoherent mass of a madman's ravings.

Then the mind Tang was hearing seemed to halt, as though it felt a new thing. *Sammy? Sammy? Can you hear me?*

"I hear you!" Tang burst out, speaking aloud, but remembering, distractedly, to keep the clober in the forefront of his mind.

*Then come and kill me. For God's sake, come and kill me!*

Fighting down the shock that threatened to overwhelm him Tang dashed from the hut, still clutching the little clober. They wouldn't stop him this time, he vowed.

A semblance of reason came to him before he reached Lutscher's hut and he halted. There was something he should try, he realized, before he began killing. He looked down at the clober and then sent his message at the mahutes. *Go back to your huts!* he commanded. They made no move to leave.

Then he understood that he was unable to contact the whole group at one time. It had to be done individually.

*Return to your home*, he directed, concentrating on the nearest mahute. Silently it turned and left. Tang repeated the order to another. Again and again until he was alone.

There was no time to waste. He aimed his pistol to fire at a tangent and blasted a hole through the wall of Lutscher's sealed hut. He crawled in.

The sight that met his eyes was one that Tang knew he would see in his nightmares the rest of his life.

On the ground against the far wall lay the hide of one of the large clobbers. He recognized the dark fist-shaped mark on the hide's side as having belonged to Bunzo. Standing on the hide was one of the young stick-insects, its sharp little face ugly with some emotion and its mouth casing drawn back from its pointed teeth.

At Tang's feet lay Lutscher. He was muttering hoarsely to himself, and in his eyes that glared at the ceiling was madness—stark, terrible madness!

The flesh had been torn from Lutscher's left arm, stripping it to the bone. A shiny, gelatinous coating, covering the raw meat of the shoulder, seemed to have stopped the blood flow. Great chunks of flesh had been torn from one hip, and his teeth showed through where Lutscher's cheeks had been.

The ankite insect moved toward them and Tang beamed the ugly little head from its body.

Lutscher muttered something and Tang knelt at his side. God help you, he thought. "Is there anything I can do, Bill?" he asked softly.

"It's too late to help me now," Lutscher rasped feebly. "But there's no pain, Sammy." He seemed rational now, but Tang knew it would not last for long. "Just kill me, Sammy. And get out while you still can."

"What happened?"

"One of the ankites came ... when was it? Yester—yesterday?" Lutscher's whispering voice broke on the last word and he seemed about to slip back into his madness, but he drew a deep breath and went on talking.

"The ankite bit me. It must have injected a poison. I couldn't move. They sealed me in with Bunzo. Soon after Bunzo screamed and burst. You see the set-up now, don't you Sammy? The clobbers are like cocoons on Earth. I think metamorphosis is the word. The ankites emerge from the clobbers, like butterflies come from cocoons. And the poor, stupid mahutes feed them, care for their clobbers, and then furnish the *piece d'occasion* for the transformation feast." He laughed, and the utter lack of mirth caused a spasm of sickness in Tang's stomach.

"And you ..." Tang started to say.

"And I.... To the ankites I'm just another mahute. I'm like the spider that the wasp paralyzes and brings to its nest to be consumed by the young while it's still alive." Lutscher's voice rose to a shrill whisper. "Sammy! Kill me. Please! I can't take anymore!"

"I'll get you back to the ship," Tang said.

"I'm too far gone for ..." Lutscher stopped. His eyes seemed to try to smile. "Go ahead, Sammy," he said. "Try."

Tang put one arm under Lutscher's shoulders and the other under his knees and lifted him off the ground.

Lutscher's body came unhinged in the middle. A groan started in his throat and blood gushed from the raw places on his body. Tang put him down and Lutscher's mouth opened and a long sigh came out. He knew they would never be able to hurt Lutscher again.

Tang's mind had gone cold now. There was little he could do for Lutscher, but what little he could do, he would. He drew his gun and sprayed its beam up and down the length of

Lutscher's body until nothing remained except a charred lump. At least he'd furnish no more meals for the ankites.

On the way back to the space ship Tang met exactly eight of the stick-insects. He counted them.

"One for you, Bill. Two for you, Bill," he counted as he burned each one down. Nothing he had ever done gave him as great a sense of fierce satisfaction.



*Almost tonelessly Tang counted as he burned the stick-insects one by one: "One for you, Bill. Two for you, Bill...."*

Less than an hour after he left Lutscher's remains he blasted off the planet. He hated to think of the three months he would have to spend alone before he reached Gascol 11.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BUNZO FAREWELL \*\*\*

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