

THE MAGAZINE OF

# Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 6, No. 3

MARCH

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*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 6, No. 3, March, 1954. Published monthly by Fantasy House, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription, \$4.00 in U. S. and possessions; \$5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y. Editorial office, 2643 Dana St., Berkeley 4, Calif. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Concord, N. H., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Printed in U. S. A. Copyright, 1954, by Fantasy House, Inc. All rights, including translation into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelopes; the Publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.*

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*If the literature of today is harsh and violent, surely we can expect even more emphasis on such qualities in the literature of the future, and the day will come when the descendants of I, THE JURY and THE MARTIAN CHRONICLES represent not two branches of art, but one. This respectable family magazine has hitherto held itself aloof from excesses of sex and sadism; but we must face future realities, as in this explosive (and implosive) tale of a Private Orb, a Martian, a Venusian . . . and the Chocolate Maltese Falcon — the first of many F&SF stories by one of the most rapidly rising younger authors of science-fantasy.*

## The Last Caper

by CHARLES BEAUMONT

"So YOU'RE Mike Mallet," I said, feeding him some knuckles. He went down — fast — and began to whimper. When he came back up I got my knee under his chin and teeth flew out like the popcorn they used to pop on those drowsy October porches when I was a kid and Mom and Dad used to say "Ah! Ah!" and we'd drink the lemonade and eat the popcorn and breathe the Illinois air which was like old wine.

"Spill it, Mallet," I snarled, but I guess he thought I meant blood. It wasn't pretty. What is?

I tapped him on the forehead with the chromalloy butt of my blaster, just for kicks, and started through his pockets.

There wasn't much. A ray pistol disguised as a ball point pen, a shiv, a sap, a set of knuckles, a paralyzer, a Monopoly score card, eight candy bars, a bottle of Bromo-Seltzer, a picture of an old dame with a funny look (with *For Mikey, with love, Mommy* scrawled suspiciously underneath in crayon), a paint brush, a ticket to Mars (out-dated), a copy of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a can of Sterno and a card marked: HONORARY MEMBER — EAST ORANGE CHAPTER LADIES LEAGUE FOR PRESERVATION OF THE AMERICAN BEAUTY ROSE.

And that was all!

If he had it, if Mallet really did have what I was after — the Chocolate Maltese Falcon — it wasn't on him. I toed at his face and jammed the candy

bars into my mouth: they tasted real fine, mostly because I'd had nothing in my stomach except straight rye for over seventeen days. The rest of the junk I tossed out the window.

"Come on, friend," I said, but he just lay there bleeding. It made me a little mad, and I'm kind of ugly when I get mad. I went through the door into his outer office. His secretary was there.

"Next time *open* the door before you come through it, big boy," she spat.

I didn't answer. My eyes were riveted to her body. She was wearing a slinky gold gown that looked like it had been painted on and she was lying on a big leather couch, writhing. I still felt pretty mean, so I moved in — fast.

I've got to admit I was plenty surprised when I found out that the gown really *was* painted on; but it made things easier.

"Get much hot weather around here?" I snapped, my eyes traveling up and down her body like ball-bearings over a washboard.

"Sometimes yes," she said evasively, "sometimes no. It comes and it goes."

"Oh yeah?" She was all right: a little wildcat, and I like wildcats just fine. She threw a vicious kick at my groin but I dodged and grabbed her leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Oh, she was different, all right. But good!

After I finished with her I jammed her into the typewriter cabinet and let the door slam shut. Dames!

I was feeling a lot better by now, though. Kind of like spring in the air and the first time you carried the books home for that freckle-faced girl next door and goodbye and hello and the dead years of your childhood. I knew I could find that Chocolate Maltese Falcon now no matter how cleverly Mallet had hidden it.

I stormed back into his office. He was coming to, getting to his knees. This time I used a poker on his head — it'll make somebody a good scythe some day. The poker, that is.

I went to work, thinking it's got to be here, it's *got* to be here! I kicked over the book case, took an ax to the desk, piled the chairs into the fireplace, pushed the safe out the window, cut the carpet into Band-Aides, ripped out the light fixtures, flooded the restroom and wrote a couple things on the walls with some charcoal. Mallet was starting to groan a little so I dropped the bathtub on him: he stopped groaning.

Still no Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

The place was getting pretty untidy by now. I decided I'd better ease up or somebody'd figure there'd been trouble.

Just then a movement caught my eye. I jerked around. A tall blonde

was walking by the window. I knew she was tall — Mallet's office was on the ninth floor. She looked all February, silos in the rain, clear lakes full of trout. I started after her and was halfway out when there was a knock at the door.

Rat-tat! Rat-tat!

I jumped to answer it but my foot skidded on some blood and I went down for the ten count, hitting my head on one of the Brancusi statuettes Mallet kept around for laughs. Right away an inky black pool came at me: it splashed over my brain and pretty soon it was like laying on your back high on a hill somewhere on a black night where the stars are coruscating and dancing their cosmic rigadoun. Before I blacked out completely, though, I felt the butt of a blaster hit the side of my face. Then it was curtains. . . .

The voice cut through the brain-fog like a knife going through butter. There was a million firecrackers going off inside my head. Pow!

Pow! Pow!

"You Gunther Awl?" a voice said.

I spit out a couple teeth. "Yeah," I choked, "I'm Gunther Awl." It was a lie. I wasn't Gunther Awl at all. But I figured I'd better play it safe.

"C'mon, snap out of it," the voice ordered. I got up, slow-like, and staggered to a chair.

"All right," the voice said, "let's have it."

I focused my eyes. It was a fat guy, with curly hair and jowls and a tattoo of Botticelli's *Venus on the Half Shell* on his forehead. A fink. A patsy.

"Anything particular in mind, badman?" I drawled. The gun butt came down again with savage force and I found myself spiraling into that inky black pool again. Only this time it was like being inside a kaleidoscope and the kaleidoscope is turning like the Giant Barrel over at Coney and you're trying to stand up but the Barrel keeps turning too fast and you keep falling down and every time you fall you slide a little closer to the sparkling fragments of color at the top of the kaleidoscope and the bright white light filters through like it's a big pool with hundreds of jeweled fishes with bright white teeth swimming around in it. Then suddenly you're at the top . . . and you come to again.

"Where's the Falcon, Awl?" the fat man said. "And don't get funny this time."

"No spikka da Heenglish," I faked, but it wasn't any good — I could see that. It didn't stop him for more than two minutes, three at the outside.

He hawked convulsively and I thought he was going to heave, then I saw that he was laughing. What at? I wondered. He stopped laughing before I could dope it out.

"Don't push it, rocket-jockey," he said. I could tell he wasn't joking. This monkey was playing for keeps.

"Look," I said, "you got the wrong boy. I ain't Gunther Awl. My name's Bartholomew Cornblossom."

"Yeah," he said, grinning, "I know." He shifted the blaster to his left hand and let me have a backside right across the puss.

When his hand came off and dropped to the floor, I knew *I* was in for some surprises myself.

He started to change form — fast — and in less time than it takes to skin a jackrabbit, like the hick says, I was staring at a lousy Venusian. I hated him right away because I didn't understand him and I always hate what I don't understand. Sometimes I hate what I *do* understand.

I had to stall. "What's your angle, cousin?" I asked. "What good's the Chocolate Maltese Falcon to a Venusian?"

There was that laugh again, coming from one of his ears. I did a quick mental flashback as that green blob of jelly came at me.

How had it all started . . .

I'd been sitting in my office that day playing euchre with 1742-A, my secretary. She was beating me — bad — and that made me plenty sore, because I don't dig getting beat; not by a robot, anyway. 1742-A was a robot. Who can afford real secretaries at fifty credits a caper? Besides, business had kind of slacked off.

Well, I was reaching over to turn her off, when this redhead walks in like she owned the place, which she didn't: I rented from a Mrs. Murfreesboro over in Jersey — a bigmouth dame that liked me okay.

"Hello, Bart," the redhead said. She had on a fur coat. It was dead — murdered. I told her to sit down and she said thanks I will and sat down. So far it figured.

She got out a flask from her purse and gave it to me before I could say boo. I shot her a look and let the rye trickle down my craw. It was good rye, fine rye.

"What's the caper?" I snapped.

Then she told me about this thing, the Chocolate Maltese Falcon. She said it was a family heirloom that her old man left to her when he kicked off. She said not only was it worth plenty scratch on the open market, but it had great sentimental value to boot. She said she hired Mike Mallet as a guard, and that's when the trouble started. Next morning: no Mallet, no Falcon.

My job: Find Mallet, get the Falcon, bring it back.

"I suppose," she said, pulling out some vitamin capsules, "that you're in

business for your health." She did big things with her eyes. I was impressed.

"No," I told her, "I ain't in business for my health."

She pouted a little. "All right," she said then, "how'd you like a nice new C-note, Handsome?"

"I'd like it fine, ma'am," I said.

"And if you're successful," she cooed, "maybe — who knows? — maybe there'll be a little bonus. . . ."

"You mean?" I pulled her onto my lap and grabbed some lip. It was plenty great. It made me think of oceans crashing against lonely rocks and cotton candy and the carnival where the man in the bright vest says "Hurry! Hurry!"

Then she scrambled. Without leaving a deposit.

"Are you going to turn over the Falcon peacefully?" the green snake guy was saying, "or must we resort to measures best described as strong?"

I laughed in his faces. The butt flashed out and I was sinking, sinking into that old inky black pool. . . .

When I woke up, my arms were tied. My legs were tied. I was sitting in a straight-back chair. It wouldn't have been so bad, maybe — except I was hanging upside down.

"We shall see now how bravely the Earthling struts!" The Venusian slithered over toward the radio. I wondered: What's his pitch? How come he's so interested in a family heirloom?

"You'll never get nothing out of me," I snarled.

The radio hummed into life.

"What the —" I began, lamely.

The Venusian crammed a gag into my mouth. "Listen!" he said.

I listened. . . .

"Monday . . . Monday . . . *Monday!*"

"No, David, please — don't touch me. I came to see you tonight to say . . . goodbye."

"*Goodbye?!?*"

"Yes! For a few blind, crazy — wonderful — hours, you made me forget that I'm over thirty-five, a married woman and mother of six. But now —"

"Now?"

"— Lord Henri is back. He's — brought the children. I — oh David! Don't touch me! Hold me close!

"Monday!"

"David!"

Then I got it. Leave it to a stinking wet-belly Venusian to think up the *real* tortures. A soap opera!

I listened to the electric organ's moo. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I can't stand soap operas. Oh, I know, *One Man's Cosmos* is mainly what's kept the planets from all-out war, but . . . well, they give me a pain in the gut.

I tried to shut my ears, but it was no dice. . . .

". . . Will Monday be able to make David understand? *How* can she explain to him that she remains loyal to her husband, Lord Henri Winthrop, *not* because she loves him but because he has come back from the Erosian uprising a hopeless paralytic? And what of David? How can he tell Monday that her husband is really dead — murdered — and that his, Lord Henri's, neurotic twin brother, Hugo Winthrop, is playing the part of the invalid husband? How can David let her know that the portals to their happiness lie open — when Hugo threatens to expose David's lurid past as a privateer and *tsi-tso* frond smuggler for the Martians? . . . and the children! Will the operation actually restore little Tuesday's eyesight? Will Wednesday be able to exorcise the Uranian bandit who has inhabited her body? Will Friday regain her memory in time to stop Nick Branzetti's evil plan? . . . Tune in tomorrow at this time to see what Fate has in store for — OUR GAL MONDAY: *The Réal Life Story that Asks the Question: Can a Girl rom a Little Lunar Rocketport Find Happiness with Jupiter's Richest, Most Handsome Queek?* . . . And now, a word from —"

"Would you care to tell me the location of the Falcon *now*, Mr. Cornblossom?" asked the Venusian, removing the gag.

"I don't know where it is," I snapped. "I don't know. I don't know!"

"Very well . . ."

He turned the radio higher. And I thought: My God — it might have been television. . . .

". . . your dishes and thurpets sparkling bright, dazzling white, with the new washday miracle that requires no rinsing, in fact, requires no water: STAR-FLAKES! . . . Just open the cage, let out a few flakes, turn them loose on those greasy pots and torgums and — just watch 'em eat up that grime! PRESTO! The job is finished. Then all you have to do is drop the dead flakes into a handy container and bury them somewhere. Remember! STAR-FLAKES are 99.44 per cent ALIVE! . . ."

"Where is the Falcon?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

“ . . . and now stay tuned for the program that follows: The best loved, most respected program in the world: ONE MAN'S COSMOS: *The Story of Just Plain Gratch, the Friendly Tendril-Tender of Betelgeuseville* —”

“All right, you damned fiend!” I screamed. “All right! I'll tell you!”

“Ah.” The Venusian turned the program off just as my mind was beginning to go. He let me down.

“Before I give it to you,” I said, “would you mind letting me know why you're so interested? After all, even if the statue's worth money, you don't need —”

“Statue!” The snake guy chortled and choked. “Statue!” I thought he'd break up; then he sobered — fast. “The bird with the whimsical cognomen,” he hissed, “happens to contain enough D-plus-4-over-X grains to blow up a planet!”

Well, that was a kick in the pants, all right.

The government had been going ape trying to figure out who'd stolen the secret D-plus-4-over-X grains. Now I had the picture. Redhead. My beautiful employer. A lousy spy. She'd lifted the bomb from the government and then somebody'd lifted it from her.

Real sweet. Where did it leave me, Bart Cornblossom, Private Orb? At the short end of the stick, that's where.

“The planet I refer to,” the Venusian was saying, “is, needless to remark, your own.”

“Not,” somebody said, “if I can help it!” It was Mike Mallet — groggy, but still plenty tough. He got a half-nelson around the Venusian, grabbed the blaster and in a second Mr. Venus-man was out of the story.

“Hiya, Bart —” Mallet said, then he seemed to remember. “You son of a —”

“Drop the gun, Mallet,” a voice said. Mallet whirled around in time to catch three good blasts in the belly. I could smell it clear across the room.

“Hello, Baby,” I snarled.

“Hello, Bart,” she said. “Now be a good boy and play ball. I know you've got the Falcon.”

“Come and get it.”

She ripped off her clothes and sat in my lap. I started to think of July when I saw that she was wavering, changing. She wasn't no redhead — she was a Martian!

“Mallet was going to turn the Falcon back over to your government,” she said, nibbling at my schnoz. “I had to do it. You can see that, can't you?”

“Sure,” I said. “I can see that.”



"But you're not like that, Bart. You're smart — I can tell. Look —" She twiddled her antennae like a couple castanets "— you've always made a mess out of me inside. Ever since that first kiss. Miscegenation be damned, that kiss was for real! So listen — with the money my government'll pay me for the D-plus-4-over-X grains, we could really live it up."

"Sure, baby," I said, "But I ain't going nowheres all tied up in this chair."

She planted one on my kisser and I felt all May and golden fields of ripe wheat and barefoot in soft river mud. She undid the ropes.

"We've got to hurry, though," she whispered. "The grains explode — or, I should say, implode — every 36 hours: we have just barely enough time to ship them away. But first — oh darling, squirrel, my own Bart — we're going to be so very happy. . . ."

She was beautiful, green hair or no green hair, and I held her body — close — and felt her breathing and thought about her next to me at night and the dough and —

I hated it. It made me sick, deep down where it hurts.

"Darling —"

I let her have it in the gut. She sprawled. I grabbed the blaster and pretty soon there was some jam on the floor instead of a dame.

"I'm sorry, baby," I whispered to the sticky heap, "really sorry . . ."

I don't know — maybe I cried, maybe I laughed. I only know I went crazy mad for a few seconds.

Then I straightened up and thought: so, it's all over. End of the caper. Back to the office and a few straight shots and a couple lousy credits.

But wait. Good gravy, I thought: The Falcon! If she was telling the truth and those D-plus-4-over-X grains really were inside — and getting ready to explode, I mean implode . . .

I could hear them coming. Lots of them. I ran to the window — big ones, armed, none of them smiling. Venusians, Martians, Jovians —

There was a wild chuckling then. "Heh heh heh!" I took the lunky out of my mug and snapped it away and went through the door.

The chuckling was coming from the typewriter cabinet. I opened it. I should've known better than to be nice to any chick with three legs. They're poison with two — but with three! "What's the gag?" I snarled.

She told me. I couldn't believe it — I made her go through it four times. Then fear started to tear up my stomach muscles.

Mallet had had the Chocolate Maltese Falcon, all right. But he'd been smart. Yeah, smart.

*He'd had it melted down into candy bars!*

And I'd been hungry, so —

It wasn't easy to take. All the bums in the Galaxy were after the Chocolate

Maltese Falcon. Which meant that all the bums in the Galaxy were after me. Because —

Now I *was* the Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

Sweat Niagaraed down my face. The D-plus-4-over-X grains had been missing for — how long? No, no, I thought. Jeez!

I belted the nutty dame a good one on the smeller and listened to her yell until it got boring. Then the door burst open. The big Jovian started to ankle over, hate in his five little pig eyes.

I squeezed the trigger and turned the Jovian into a blood pudding like they used to serve in those English places with names like Seven Oaks and Ukridge.

Then the Venusians came in and I figured the better part of valor was to blow. A couple squeezes of the trigger and I blew.

I got behind Mallet's desk and loosened my tie and pushed my hat back on my head, thinking, this is it, Bart boy, this is it.

They were getting ready. That door would fly open in a second —

All of a sudden I felt something happening inside my gut, a rumbling like you get after a slug of rye. It started to ache — bad — and the second the scum of the universe spilled in, it came up.

Fast.

And then I wasn't Bart Cornblossom any more. I was Christmas and the smell of afternoon turkey and playgrounds where you fall down and scab up your knees and have to run home to Mom and Dad and hello how are you and a piece of the sky just fell Chicken Little and now it's all falling falling and how long is eternity Gramp? and Gramp saying it's a right smart piece o' time boy and don't cry son because worse things than blowing up can happen to a man lots worse things and you're floating floating out there with the whole world for a teeter-totter for ever and ever and ever. . . .

