

5. THE MISSING ITEM

Emmanuel Rubin, resident polymath of the Black Widowers Society, was visibly chafed. His eyebrows hunched down into the upper portion of his thick - lensed spectacles and his sparse gray beard bristled.

“Not true to life,” he said. “Imagine! Not true to life!”

Mario Gonzalo, who had just reached the head of the stairs and had accepted his dry martini from Henry, the unsurpassable waiter, said, “What’s not true to life?”

Geoffrey Avalon looked down from his seventy - four inches and said solemnly, “It appears that Manny has suffered a rejection.”

“Well, why not?” said Gonzalo, peeling off his gloves. “Editors don’t have to be stupid all the time.”

“It isn’t the rejection,” said Rubin. “I’ve been rejected before by better editors and in connection with better stories. It’s the reason he advanced! How the hell would he know if a story were true to life or not? What’s he ever done but warm an office chair? Would he . . .”

Roger Halsted, whose career as a math teacher in a junior high school had taught him how to interrupt shrill voices, managed to interpose. “Just what did he find not true to life, Manny?”

Rubin waved a hand passionately outward. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Good,” said Thomas Trumbull, scowling from under his neatly waved thatch of white hair. “Then the rest of us can hear each other for a while. Roger, why don’t you introduce your guest to the late Mr. Gonzalo?”

Halsted said, “I’ve just been waiting for the decibel level to decrease. Mario, my friend Jonathan Thatcher. This is Mario Gonzalo, who is an artist by profession. Jonathan is an oboist, Mario.”

Gonzalo grinned and said, “Sounds like fun.”

“Sometimes it almost is,” said Thatcher, “on days when the reed behaves itself.”

Thatcher’s round face and plump cheeks would have made him a natural to play Santa Claus at any Christmas benefit, but he would have needed padding just the same, for his body had that peculiar ersatz slimness that seemed to indicate forty pounds recently lost. His eyebrows were dark and thick, and one took it for granted that they were never drawn together in anger.

Henry said, “Gentlemen, dinner is ready.”

James Drake stubbed out his cigarette and said, “Thanks, Henry. It’s a cold day and I would welcome hot food.”

“Yes, sir,” said Henry with a gentle smile. “Lobster thermidor today, baked potatoes, stuffed eggplant. . .”

“But what’s this, Henry?” demanded Rubin, scowling.

“Hot borscht, Mr. Rubin.”

Rubin looked as though he were searching his soul and then he said grudgingly, “All right.”

Drake, unfolding his napkin, said, “Point of order, Roger.”

“What is it?”

“I’m sitting next to Manny, and if he continues to look like that he’ll curdle my soup and give me indigestion. You’re host and absolute monarch; I move you direct him to tell us what he wrote that isn’t true to life and get it out of his system.”

“Why?” said Trumbull. “Why not let him sulk and be silent for the novelty of it?”

“I’m curious, too,” said Gonzalo, “since nothing he’s ever written has been true to life. ...”

“How would you know, since you can’t read?” said Rubin suddenly.

“It’s generally known,” said Gonzalo. “You hear it everywhere.”

“Oh God, I’d better tell you and end this miasma of pseudowit. Look, I’ve written a novelette, about fifteen thousand words long, about a worldwide organization of locksmiths. . .”

“Locksmiths?” said Avalon, frowning as though he suspected he had not heard correctly.

“Locksmiths,” said Rubin. “These guys are experts, they can open anything - safes, vaults, prison doors. There are no secrets from them, and nothing can be hidden from them. My global organization is of the cream of the profession and no man can join the organization without some document or object of importance stolen from an industrial, political, or governmental unit.

“Naturally, they have the throat of the world in their grip. They can control the stock market, guide diplomacy, make and unmake governments and, at the time my story opens, they are headed by a dangerous megalomaniac. . . .”

Drake interrupted even as he winced in his effort to crack the claw of the lobster. “Who is out to rule the world, of course.”

“Of course,” said Rubin, “and our hero must stop him. He is himself a skilled locksmith. . . .”

Trumbull interrupted. “In the first place, Manny, what the hell do you know about locksmithery or locksmithmanship or whatever you call it?”

“More than you think,” retorted Rubin.

“I doubt that very much,” said Trumbull, “and the editor is right. This is utter and complete implausibility. I know a few locksmiths, and they’re gentle and inoffensive mechanics with IQ’s . . .”

Rubin said, “And I suppose when you were in the army you knew a few corporals and, on the

basis of your knowledge, you'll tell me that Napoleon and Hitler were implausible."

The guest for that evening, who had listened to the exchange with a darkening expression, spoke up. "Pardon me, gentlemen, I know I'm to be grilled at the conclusion of dinner. Does that mean I cannot join the dinner conversation beforehand?"

"Heavens, no," said Halsted. "Talk all you want - if you can get a word in now and then."

"In that case, let me put myself forcefully on the side of Mr. Rubin. A conspiracy of locksmiths may sound implausible to us who sit here, but what counts is not what a few rational people think but what the great outside world does. How can your editor turn down anything at all as implausible when everything . . ." He caught himself, took a deep breath, and said, in an altered tone, "Well, I don't mean to tell you your business. I'm not a writer. After all, I don't expect you to tell me how to play the oboe," but his smile as he said it was a weak one.

"Manny will tell you how to play the oboe," said Gonzalo, "if you give him a chance."

"Still," Thatcher said, as though he had not heard Gonzalo's comment, "I live in the world and observe it. Anything these days is believed. There is no such thing as 'not true to life.' Just spout any nonsense solemnly and swear it's true and there will be millions rallying round you."

Avalon nodded magisterially and said, "Quite right, Mr. Thatcher. I don't know that this is simply characteristic of our times, but the fact that we have better communications now makes it easier to reach many people quickly so that a phenomenon such as Herr Hitler of unmentioned memory is possible. And to those who can believe in Mr von Daniken's ancient astronauts and in Mr. Berlitz's Bermuda Triangle, a little thing like a conspiracy of locksmiths could be swallowed with the morning porridge."

Thatcher waved his hand. "Ancient astronauts and Bermuda Triangles are nothing. Suppose you were to say that you frequently visited Mars in astral projection and that Mars was, in fact, a haven for the worthy souls of this world. There would be those who would believe you."

"I imagine so," began Avalon.

"You don't have to imagine," said Thatcher. "It is so. I take it you haven't heard of Tri - Lucifer. That's t - r - i."

"Tri - Lucifer?" said Halsted, looking a little dumfounded. "You mean three Lucifers. What's that?"

Thatcher looked from one face to another and the Black Widowers all remained silent.

And then Henry, who was clearing away some of the lobster shells, said, "If I may be permitted, gentlemen, I have heard of it. There were a group of them soliciting contributions at this restaurant last week."

"Like the Moonies?" said Drake, pushing his dish in Henry's direction and preparing to light up.

“There is a resemblance,” said Henry, his face a bit thoughtful, “but the Tri - Luciferians, if that is the term to use, give a more other - worldly appearance.”

“That’s right,” said Thatcher, “they have to divorce themselves from this world so as to achieve astral projection to Mars and facilitate the transfer of their souls there after death.”

“But why - “ began Gonzalo.

And Trumbull suddenly roared out with a blast of anger, “Come on, Roger, make them wait for the grilling to start. Change the subject.”

Gonzalo said, “I just want to know why they call them . . .”

Halsted sighed and said, ‘Let’s wait a while, Mario.’

Henry was making his way about the table with the brandy when Halsted tapped his water glass and said, “I think we can begin the grilling now, and Manny, since it was your remark about true - to - lifeness that roused Jonathan’s interest over the main course, why don’t you begin.”

“Sure.” Rubin looked solemnly across the table at Thatcher and said, “Mr. Thatcher, at this point it would be traditional to ask you how you justify your existence, and we would then go into a discussion of the oboe as an instrument of torture for oboists. But let me guess and say that at this moment you would consider your life justified if you could wipe out a few Tri - Luciferians. Am I right?”

“You are, you are,” said Thatcher, energetically. “The whole thing has filled my life and my thoughts for over a month now. It is ruining . . .”

Gonzalo interrupted. “What I want to know is why they call themselves TriLuciferians. Are they devil worshipers or what?”

Rubin began, “You’re interrupting the man. ...”

“It’s all right,” said Thatcher. “I’ll tell him. I’m just sorry that I know enough about that organization to be able to tell him. Apparently, Lucifer means the morning star, though I’m not sure why. . . .”

“Lucifer,” said Avalon, running his finger about the lip of his water glass, “is from Latin words meaning ‘light bringer.’ The rising of the morning star in the dawn heralds the soon - following rising of the Sun. In an era in which there were no clocks that was an important piece of information to anyone awake at the time.”

“Then why is Lucifer the name of the devil?” asked Gonzalo.

Avalon said, “Because the Babylonian King was apparently referred to as the Morning Star by his flattering courtiers, and the Prophet Isaiah predicted his destruction. Can you quote the passage, Manny?”

Rubin said, “We can read it out of the Bible, if we want to. It’s the Fourteenth Chapter of Isaiah. The key sentence goes, ‘How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!’ It was just a bit of poetic hyperbole, and very effective too, but it was interpreted

literally later, and that one sentence gave rise to the whole myth of a rebellion against God by hordes of angels under the leadership of Lucifer, which came to be considered Satan's name while still in heaven. Of course, the rebels were defeated and expelled from heaven by loyalist angels under the leadership of the Archangel Michael."

"As in Paradise Lost?" said Gonzalo,

"Exactly as in Paradise Lost."

Thatcher said, "The devil isn't part of it, though. To the Tri - Luciferians, Lucifer just means the morning star. There are two of them on Earth, Venus and Mercury."

Drake squinted through the curling tobacco smoke and said, "They're also evening stars, depending on which side of the Sun they happen to be. They're either east of the Sun and set shortly after sunset, or west of the Sun and rise shortly before sunrise."

Thatcher said, with clear evidence of hope, "Do they have to be both together, both one or both the other?"

"No," said Drake, "they move independently. They can be both evening stars, or both morning stars, or one can be an evening star and one a morning star. Or one or the other or both can be nearly in a line with the Sun and be invisible altogether, morning or evening."

"Too bad," said Thatcher, shaking his head, "that's what they say. Anyway, the point is that from Mars you see three morning stars in the sky, or you can see them if they're in the right position; not only Mercury and Venus, but Earth as well."

"That's right," said Rubin.

"And," said Thatcher, "I suppose then it's true that they can be in any position. They can all be evening stars or all morning stars, or two can be one and one can be the other?"

"Yes," said Drake, "or one or more can be too close to the Sun to be visible."

Thatcher sighed. "So they call Mars by their mystic name of Tri - Lucifer - the world with the three morning stars."

"I suppose," said Gonzalo, "that Jupiter would have four morning stars, Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars, and so on out to Pluto, which would have eight morning stars."

"The trouble is," said Halsted, "that the farther out you go, the dimmer the inner planets are. Viewed from one of the satellites of Jupiter, for instance, I doubt that Mercury would appear more than a medium - bright star, and it might be too close to the Sun for anyone ever to get a good look at it."

"What about the view from Mars? Could you see Mercury?" asked Thatcher.

"Oh yes, I'm sure of that," said Halsted, "I could work out what the brightness would be in a matter of minutes."

"Would you?" said Thatcher.

“Sure,” said Halsted, “if I’ve remembered to bring my pocket calculator. Yes, I have it. Henry, bring me the Columbia Encyclopedia, would you?”

Rubin said, “While Roger is bending his limited mathematical mind to the problem, Mr. Thatcher, tell us what your interest is in all this. You seem to be interested in exposing them as fakers. Why? Have you been a member? Are you now disillusioned?”

“No, I’ve never been a member. I ...” He nibbed his temple hesitantly. “It’s my wife. I don’t like talking about it, you understand.”

Avalon said solemnly, “Please be assured, Mr. Thatcher, that whatever is said here never passes beyond the bounds of this room. That includes our valued waiter, Henry. You may speak freely.”

“Well, there’s nothing criminal or disgraceful in it. I just don’t like to seem to be so helpless in such a silly . . . It’s breaking up my marriage, gentlemen.”

There was a discreet silence around the table, broken only by the mild sound of Halsted turning the pages of the encyclopedia.

Thatcher went on. “Roger knows my wife. He’ll tell you she’s a sensible woman. . . .”

Halsted looked up briefly and nodded. “I’ll vouch for that, but I didn’t know you were having this . . .”

“Lately, Carol has not been social, you understand, and I certainly haven’t talked about it. It was with great difficulty, you know, that I managed to agree to come out tonight. I dread leaving her to herself. You see, even sensible people have their weaknesses. Carol worries about death.”

“So do we all,” said Drake.

“So do I,” said Thatcher, “but in a normal way, I hope. We all know we’ll die someday and we don’t particularly look forward to it, and we may worry about hell or nothingness or hope for heaven, but we don’t think about it much. Carol has been fascinated, however, by the possibility of demonstrating the actual existence of life after death. It may have all started with the Bridey Murphy case when she was a teen - ager - I don’t know if any of you remember that . . .”

“I do,” said Rubin. “A woman under hypnosis seemed to be possessed by an Irishwoman who had died a long time before.”

“Yes,” said Thatcher. “She saw through that, eventually. Then she grew interested in spiritualism and gave that up. I always relied on her to understand folly when she finally stopped to think about it - and then she came up against the Tri - Luciferians. I never saw her like this. She wants to join them. She has money of her own and she wants to give it to them. I don’t care about the money - well, I do, but that’s not the main thing - I care about her. You know, she’s going to join them in their retreat somewhere, become a daughter of Tri - Lucifer, or whatever they call it, and wait for translation to the Abode of the Blessed. One of these days, she’ll be gone. I just won’t see her anymore. She promised me it wouldn’t be tonight, but I wonder.”

Rubin said, "I take it you suppose that the organization is just interested in her money."

"At least the leader of it is," said Thatcher grimly. "I'm sure of it. What else can he be after?"

"Do you know him? Have you met him?" said Rubin.

"No. He keeps himself isolated," said Thatcher, "but I hear he has recently bought a fancy mansion in Florida, and I doubt that it's for the use of the membership."

"Funny thing about that," said Drake. "It doesn't matter how lavishly a cult leader lives; how extravagantly he throws money around. The followers who support him and see their money clearly used for that purpose never seem to mind."

"They identify," said Rubin. "The more he spends, the more successful they consider the cause. It's the basis of ostentatious waste in governmental display, too."

"Just the same," said Thatcher, "I don't think Carol will ever commit herself entirely. She might not be bothered by the leader's actions, but if I can prove him wrong, she'll drop it."

"Wrong about what?" asked Rubin.

"Wrong about Mars. This head of the group claims he has been on Mars often - in astral projection, of course. He describes Mars in detail, but can he be describing it accurately?"

"Why not?" asked Rubin. "If he reads up on what is known about Mars, he can describe it as astronomers would. The Viking photographs even show a part of the surface in detail. It's not difficult to be accurate."

"Yes, but it may be that somewhere he has made a mistake, something I can show Carol."

Halsted looked up and said, "Here, I've worked out the dozen brightest objects in the Martian sky, together with their magnitudes. I may be off a little here and there, but not by much." He passed a slip of paper around.

Mario held up the paper when it reached him. "Would you like to see it, Henry?"

"Thank you, sir," murmured Henry, and as he glanced at it briefly, one eyebrow raised itself just slightly, just briefly.

The paper came to rest before Thatcher eventually and he gazed at it earnestly. What he saw was this:

Sun - 26

Phobos -9.6

Deimos -5.1

Earth -4.5

Jupiter -3.1

Venus -2.6

Sirius -1.4

Saturn -0.8

Canopus -0.7

Alpha Centauri – 0.3

Arcturus -0.1

Mercury 0.0

Thatcher said, “Phobos and Deimos are the two satellites of Mars. Do these numbers mean they’re very bright?”

“The greater the negative number,” said Halsted, “the brighter the object. A - 2 object is 2.5 times brighter than a - 1 object, and a - 3 object is 2.5 times brighter still, and so on. Next to the Sun, Phobos is the brightest object in the Martian sky, and Deimos is next.”

“And next to the Sun and the two satellites, Earth is the brightest object in the sky, then.”

“Yes, but only at or near its maximum brightness,” said Halsted. “It can be much dimmer depending on where Mars and Earth are in their respective orbits. Most of the time it’s probably less bright than Jupiter, which doesn’t change much in brightness as it moves in its orbit.”

Thatcher shook his head and looked disappointed. “But it can be that bright. Too bad. There’s a special prayer or psalm or something that the Tri - Luciferians have that appears in almost all their literature. I’ve seen it so often in the stuff Carol brings home, I can quote it exactly. It goes, ‘When Earth shines high in the sky, like a glorious jewel, and when the other Lucifers have fled beyond the horizon, so that Earth shines alone in splendor, single in beauty, unmatched in brightness, it is then that the souls of those ready to receive the call must prepare to rise from Earth and cross the gulf.’ And what you’re saying, Roger, is that Earth can be the brightest object in the Martian sky.”

Halsted nodded. “At night, if Phobos and Deimos are below the horizon, and Earth is near maximum brightness, it is certainly the brightest object in the sky. It would be 3 times as bright as Jupiter, if that were in the sky, and 6 times as bright as Venus at its brightest.”

“And it could be the only morning star in the sky.”

“Or the only evening star. Sure. The other two, Venus and Mercury, could be on the other side of the Sun from Earth.”

Thatcher kept staring at the list. “But would Mercury be visible? It’s at the bottom of the list.”

Halsted said, “The bottom just means that it’s twelfth brightest, but there are thousands of stars that are dimmer and still visible. There would be only four stars brighter than Mercury as seen from Mars: Sirius, Canopus, Alpha Centauri, and Arcturus.”

Thatcher said, “If they’d only make a mistake.”

Avalon said in a grave and somewhat hesitant baritone, "Mr. Thatcher, I think perhaps you had better face the facts. It is my experience that even if you do find a flaw in the thesis of the Tri - Luciferians it won't help you. Those who follow cults for emotional reasons are not deterred by demonstrations of the illogic of what they are doing."

Thatcher said, "I agree with you, and I wouldn't dream of arguing with the ordinary cultist. But I know Carol. I have seen her turn away from a system of beliefs she would very much like to have followed, simply because she saw the illogic of it. If I could find something of the sort here, I'm sure she'd come back."

Gonzalo said, "Some of us here ought to think of something. After all, he's never really been on Mars. He's got to have made a mistake."

"Not at all," said Avalon. "He probably knows as much about Mars as we do. Therefore, even if he's made a mistake it may be because he fails to understand something we also fail to understand and we won't catch him."

Thatcher nodded his head. "I suppose you're right."

"I don't know," said Gonzalo. "How about the canals? The Tri - Luciferians are bound to talk about the canals. Everyone believed in them and then just lately we found out they weren't there; isn't that right? So if he talks about them, he's caught."

Drake said, "Not everybody believed in them, Mario. Hardly any astronomers did."

"The general public did," said Gonzalo.

Rubin said, "Not lately. It was in 1964 that Mariner 4 took the first pictures of Mars and that pretty much gave away the fact the canals didn't exist. Once Mariner 9 mapped the whole planet in 1969 there was no further argument. When did the Tri - Luciferians come into existence, Mr. Thatcher?"

"As I recall," said Thatcher, "about 1970. Maybe 1971."

"There you are," said Rubin. "Once we had Mars down cold this guy, whoever he is who runs it, decided to start a new religion based on it. Listen, if you want to get rich quick, no questions asked, start a new religion. Between the First Amendment and the tax breaks you get, it amounts to a license to help yourself to everything in sight. I'll bet he talks about volcanoes."

Thatcher nodded. "The Martian headquarters of the astral projections are in Olympus Mons. That means Mount Olympus, and that's where the souls of the righteous gather. That's the big volcano, isn't it?"

"The biggest in the solar system," said Rubin. "At least, that we know of. It's been known since 1969."

Thatcher said, "The Tri - Luciferians say that G. V. Schiaparelli - he's the one who named the different places on Mars - was astrally inspired to name that spot Olympus to signify it was the home of the godly. In ancient Greece, you see, Mount Olympus was . . ."

"Yes," said Avalon, nodding gravely, "we know."

“Isn’t Schiaparelli the fellow who first reported the canals?” asked Gonzalo.

“Yes,” said Halsted, “although actually when he said canal he meant natural waterways.”

“Even so, why didn’t the same astral inspiration tell him the canals weren’t there?” asked Gonzalo.

Drake nodded and said, “That’s something you can point out to your wife.”

“No,” said Thatcher, “I guess they thought of that. They say the canals were part of the inspiration because that increased interest in Mars and that that was needed to make the astral - projection process more effective.”

Trumbull, who had maintained a sullen silence through the discussion, as though he were waiting his chance to shift the discussion to oboes, said suddenly, “That makes a diseased kind of sense.”

Thatcher said, “Too much makes sense. That’s the trouble. There are times when I want to find a mistake not so much to save Carol as to save myself. I tell you that when I listen to Carol talking there’s sometimes more danger she’ll argue me into being crazy than that I’ll persuade her to be rational.”

Trumbull waved a hand at him soothingly. “Just take it easy and let’s think it out. Do they say anything about the satellites?”

“They talk about them, yes. Phobos and Deimos. Sure.”

“Do they say anything about how they cross the sky?” Trumbull’s smile was nearly a smirk.

“Yes,” said Thatcher, “and I looked it up because I didn’t believe them and I thought I had something. In their description of the Martian scene, they talk about Phobos rising in the west and setting in the east. And it turns out that’s true. And they say that whenever either Phobos or Deimos cross the sky at night, they are eclipsed by Mars’s shadow for part of the time. And that’s true, too.”

Halsted shrugged. “The satellites were discovered a century ago, in 1877, by Asaph Hall. As soon as their distance from Mars and their period of revolution were determined, which were almost at once, their behavior in Mars’s sky was known.”

“I didn’t know it,” said Thatcher.

“No,” said Halsted, “but this fellow who started the religion apparently did his homework. It wasn’t really hard.”

“Hold on,” said Trumbull truculently, “some things aren’t as obvious and don’t get put into the average elementary - astronomy textbook. For instance, I read somewhere that Phobos can’t be seen from the Martian polar regions. It’s so close to Mars that the bulge of Mars’s spherical surface hides the satellite, if you go far enough north or south. Do the Tri - Luciferians say anything about Phobos being invisible from certain places on Mars, Thatcher?”

“Not that I recall,” said Thatcher, “but they don’t say it’s always visible. If they just don’t

mention the matter, what does that prove?”

“Besides,” said Halsted, “Olympus Mons is less than twenty degrees north of the Martian equator, and Phobos is certainly visible from there any time it is above the horizon and not in eclipse. And if that’s the headquarters for the souls from Earth, Mars would certainly be described as viewed from that place.”

“Whose side are you on?” grumbled Trumbull.

“The truth’s,” said Halsted. “Still, it’s true that astronomy books rarely describe any sky but Earth’s. That’s why I had to figure out the brightness of objects in the Martian sky instead of just looking it up. The only trouble is that this cult leader seems to be just as good at figuring.”

“I’ve got an idea,” said Avalon. “I’m not much of an astronomer, but I’ve seen the photographs taken by the Viking landers and I’ve read the newspaper reports about them. For one thing, the Martian sky in the daytime is pink, because of fine particles of the reddish dust in the air. In that case, isn’t it possible that the dust obscures the night sky so that you don’t see anything? Good Lord, it happens often enough in New York City.”

Halsted said, “As a matter of fact, the problem in New York isn’t so much the dust as the scattered light from the buildings and highways, and even in New York you can see the bright stars, if the sky isn’t cloudy.

“On Mars, it would have to work both ways. If there is enough dust to make the sky invisible from the ground, then the ground would be invisible from the sky. For instance, when Mariner 9 reached Mars in 1969, Mars was having a globewide duststorm and none of its surface could be seen by Mariner. At that time, from the Martian surface, the sky would have had to be blanked out. Most of the time, though, we see the surface clearly from our probes, so from the Martian surface, the sky would be clearly visible.

“In fact, considering that Mars’s atmosphere is much thinner than Earth’s, less than a hundredth as thick, it would scatter and absorb far less light than Earth’s does, and the various stars and planets would all look a little brighter than they would with Earth’s atmosphere in the way. I didn’t allow for that in my table.”

Trumbull said, “Geoff mentioned the Viking photographs. They show rocks all over the place. Do the Tri - Luciferians mention rocks?”

“No,” said Thatcher, “not that I ever noticed. But again, they don’t say there aren’t any. They talk about huge canyons and dry riverbeds and terraced icefields.”

Rubin snorted. “All that’s been known since 1969. More homework.”

Avalon said, “What about life? We still don’t know if there’s any life on Mars. The Viking results are ambiguous. Have the Tri - Luciferians committed themselves on that?”

Thatcher thought, then said, “I wish I could say I had read all their literature thoroughly, but I haven’t. Still Carol has forced me to read quite a bit since she said I ought not defame anything without learning about it first.”

“That’s true enough,” said Avalon, “though life is short and there are some things that are so

unlikely on the surface that one hesitates to devote much of one's time to a study of it. However, can you say anything as to their attitude toward Martian life from what you've read of their literature?"

Thatcher said, "They speak about Mars's barren surface, its desert aridity and emptiness. They contrast that with the excitement and fullness of the astral sphere."

"Yes," said Avalon, "and of course, the surface is dry and empty and barren. We know that much. What about microscopic life? That's what we're looking for."

Thatcher shook his head. "No mention of it, as far as I know."

Avalon said, "Well, then, I can't think of anything else. I'm quite certain this whole thing is nonsense. Everyone here is, and none of us need proof of it. If your wife needs proof, we may not be able to supply it."

"I understand," said Thatcher. "I thank you all, of course, and I suppose she may come to her senses after a while, but I must admit I have never seen her quite like this. I would join the cult with her just to keep her in sight but, frankly, I'm afraid I'll end up believing it, too."

And in the silence that followed, Henry said softly, "Perhaps, Mr. Thatcher, you need not go to that extreme."

Thatcher turned suddenly. "Pardon me. Did you say something, waiter?"

Halsted said, "Henry is a member of the club, Jonathan. I don't know that he's an astronomer exactly, but he's the brightest person here. Is there something we've missed, Henry?"

Henry said, "I think so, sir. You said, Mr. Halsted, that astronomy books don't generally describe any sky but Earth's, and I guess that must be why the cult leader seems to have a missing item in his description of Mars. Without it, the whole thing is no more true to life than Mr. Rubin's conspiracy of locksmiths - if I may be forgiven, Mr. Rubin."

"Not if you don't supply a missing object, Henry."

Henry said, "On Earth, Mercury and Venus are the morning and evening stars, and we always think of such objects as planets, therefore. Consequently, from Mars, there must be three morning and evening stars, Mercury, Venus, plus Earth in addition. That is memorialized in the very name of the cult and from that alone I could see the whole thing fails."

Halsted said, "I'm not sure I see your point, Henry."

"But, Mr. Halsted," said Henry, "where is the Moon in all this? It is a large object, our Moon, almost the size of Mercury and closer to Mars than Mercury is. If Mercury can be seen from Mars, surely the Moon can be, too. Yet I noticed it was not on your list of bright objects in the Martian sky."

Halsted turned red. "Yes, of course. The list of planets fooled me, too. You just list them without mentioning the Moon." He reached for the paper. "The Moon is smaller than Earth and less reflective, so that it is only one seventieth as bright as the Earth, at equal distance and phase, which means - a magnitude of 0.0. It would be just as bright as Mercury and in fact it could be seen more easily than Mercury could be because it would be higher in the sky."

At sunset. Mercury as evening star would never be higher than 16 degrees above the horizon, while Earth could be as much as 44 degrees above - pretty high in the sky.”

Henry said, “Mars, therefore, would have four morning stars, and the very name Tri - Lucifer is nonsense.”

Avalon said, “But the Moon would always be close to Earth, so wouldn’t Earth’s light drown it out?”

“No,” said Halsted. ‘Let’s see now - never get a pocket calculator that doesn’t have keys for the trigonometric functions - the Moon would be, at times, as much as 23 minutes of arc away from Earth, when viewed from Mars. That’s three quarters the width of the Moon as seen from Earth.”

Henry said, “One more thing. Would you repeat that verse once again, Mr. Thatcher, the one about the Earth being high in the sky?”

Thatcher said, “Certainly. “When Earth shines high in the sky, like a glorious jewel, and when the other Lucifers have fled beyond the horizon, so that Earth shines alone in splendor, single in beauty, unmatched in brightness, it is then that the souls of those ready to receive the call must prepare to rise from Earth and cross the gulf.”“

Henry said, “Earth may be quite high in the sky at times, and Mercury and Venus may be on the other side of the Sun and therefore beyond the horizon - but Earth cannot be ‘alone in splendor’. The Moon has to be with it. Of course, there would be times when the Moon is very nearly in front of Earth or behind it, as seen from Mars, so that the two dots of light merge into one that seems to make Earth brighter than ever, but the Moon is not then beyond the horizon. It seems to me, Mr. Thatcher, that the cult leader was never on Mars, because if he had been he would not have missed a pretty big item, a world 2,160 miles across. Surely you can explain this to your wife.”

“Yes,” said Thatcher, his face brightening into a smile, “she would have to see the whole thing as a fake.”

“If it is true, as you say,” said Henry quietly, “that she is a rational person.”

“The Missing Item” - Afterword

A few of the stories in the first two volumes of Black Widowers stories did not appear in EQMM, but in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (F & SF) instead. This was a bit difficult, for I couldn’t make a Black Widowers tale an outright fantasy or science fiction.

Once in a while, though, I, being what I am, constructed one of the stories in such a way that it dealt at least tangentially with science fiction or fantasy, and then F & SF would get it.

Or did get it, anyway. In 1977, a new magazine reached the news - stands, a sister magazine of EQMM. The new magazine was Isaac Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine (MSFM), and, of course, it was thereafter no longer cricket for me to give a story to any science - fiction magazine unless it had first been offered to IASFM.

In fact, I deliberately tried to construct as distinct a science - fiction mystery as I could for my

own magazine, and “The Missing Item” was the result. It appeared in the Winter 1977 issue of IASFM. (The magazine was a quarterly in its first year.)