

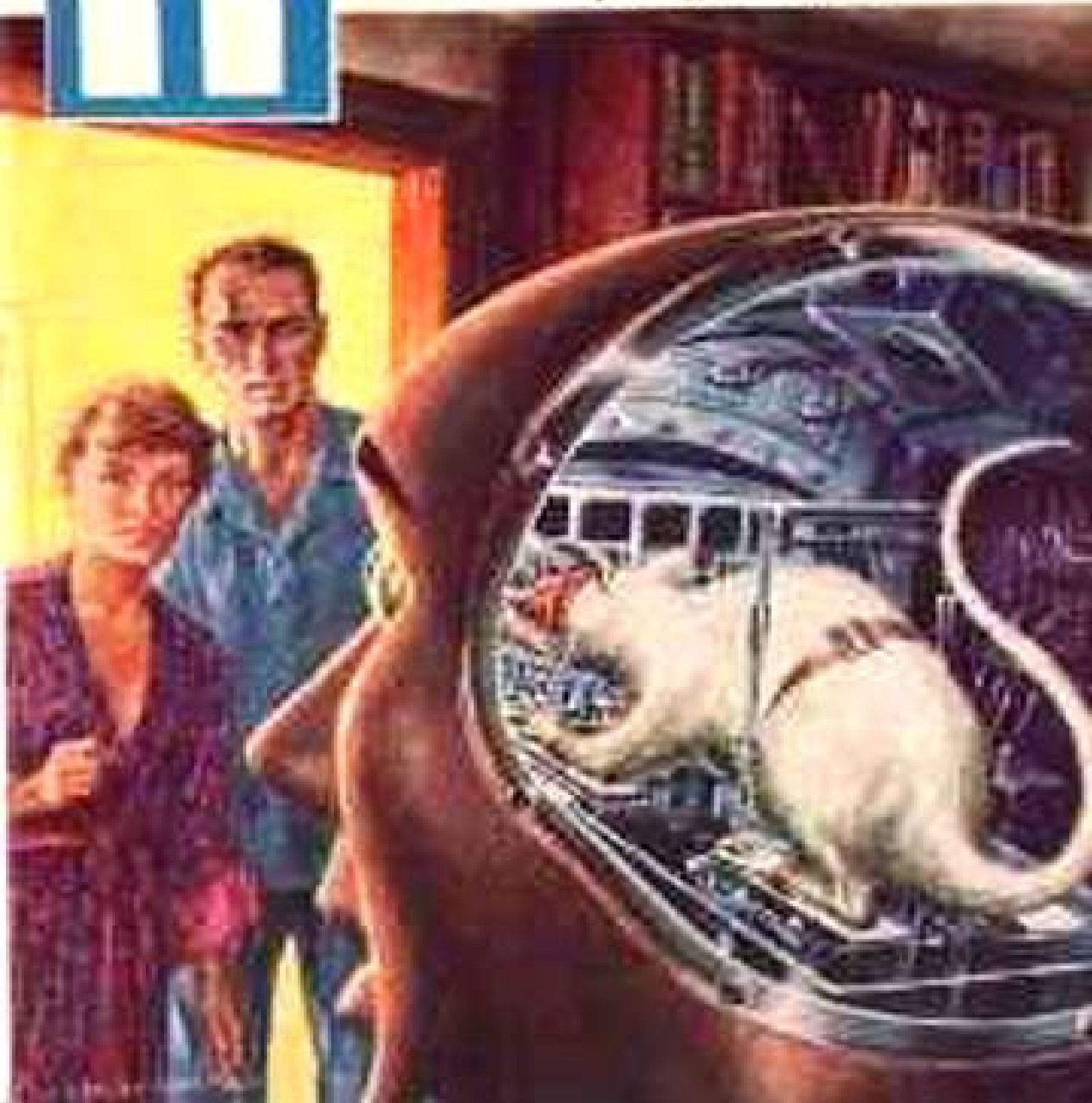


SCIENCE FICTION

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Rat in the Skull

by Rog Phillips



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WESTERN SCIENCE IS SO WONDERFUL

*The tale of a Martian and
three Communists, told with
tongue firmly in cheek.*

BY CORDWAINER SMITH

The Martian was sitting at the top of a granite cliff. In order to enjoy the breeze better he had taken on the shape of a small fir tree. The wind always felt very pleasant through non-deciduous needles.

At the bottom of the cliff stood an American, the first the Martian had ever seen.

The American extracted from his pocket a fantastically ingenious device. It was a small metal box with a nozzle which lifted up and produced an immediate flame. From this miraculous device the American readily lit a tube of bliss-giving herbs. The Martian understood that these were called *cigarettes* by the Americans. As the American finished lighting his cigarette, the Martian changed his shape to that of a fifteen-foot, red-faced, black-whiskered Chinese demagogue, and shouted to the American in English, "Hello, friend!"

The American looked up and almost dropped his teeth.

The Martian stepped off the cliff and floated gently down toward the American, approaching slowly so as not to affright him too much.

Nevertheless, the American did seem to be concerned, because he said, "You're not real, are you? You can't be. Or can you?"

Modestly the Martian looked into the mind of the American and realized that fifteen-foot Chinese demagogues were not reassuring visual images in an everyday American psychology. He peeked modestly into the mind of the American, seeking a reassuring image. The first image he saw was that of the American's mother, so the Martian promptly changed into the form of the American's mother and answered, "What is real, darling?"

With this the American turned slightly green and put his hand over his eyes. The Martian looked once again into the mind of the American and saw a slightly confused image.

When the American opened his eyes, the Martian had taken on the form of a Red Cross girl halfway through a strip-tease act. Although the maneuver was designed to be pleasant, the American was not reassured. His fear began to change into anger and he said, "What the hell are you?"

The Martian gave up trying to be obliging. He changed himself into a Chinese Nationalist major general with an Oxford education and said in a distinct British accent. "I'm by way of being one of the local characters, a bit on the Supernatural side, you know. I do hope you do not mind. Western science is so wonderful that I had to examine that fantastic machine you have in your hand. Would you like to chat a bit before you go on?"

The Martian caught a confused glimpse of images in the American's mind. They seemed to be concerned with something called *prohibition*, something else called "on the wagon," and the reiterated question. "How the hell did I get here?"

Meanwhile the Martian examined the lighter.

He handed it back to the American, who looked stunned.

"Very fine magic," said the Martian. "We do not do anything of that sort in these hills. I am a fairly low class Demon. I see that you are a captain in the illustrious army of the United States. Allow me to introduce myself. I am the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan. Do you have time for a chat?"

The American looked at the Chinese Nationalist uniform. Then he looked behind him. His Chinese porters and interpreter lay like bundles of rags on the meadowy floor of the valley; they had all fainted dead away. The American held himself together long enough to say, "What is a Lohan?"

"A Lohan is an Arhat," said the Martian.

The American did not take in this information either and the Martian concluded that something must have been missing from the usual amenities of getting acquainted with American officers. Regretfully the Martian erased all memory of himself from the mind of the American and from the minds of the swooned Chinese. He planted himself back on the cliff top, resumed the shape of a fir tree, and woke the entire gathering. He saw the Chinese interpreter gesticulating at the American and he knew that the Chinese was saying, "There are Demons in these hills..."

The Martian rather liked the hearty laugh with which the American greeted this piece of superstitious Chinese nonsense.

He watched the party disappear as they went around the miraculously beautiful little Lake of the Right-Mouthed River.

That was in 1945.

The Martian spent many thoughtful hours trying to materialize a lighter, but he never managed to create one which did not dissolve back into some unpleasant primordial effluvium within hours.

Then it was 1955. The Martian heard that a Soviet officer was coming, and he looked forward with genuine pleasure to making the acquaintance of another person from the miraculously up-to-date Western world.

Peter Farrer was a vulgar German.

The vulgar Germans are about as much Russian as the Pennsylvania Dutch are Americans.

They have lived in Russia for more than two hundred years, but the terrible bitterness of the Second World War led to the breakup of most of their communities.

Farrer himself had fared well in this. After holding the noncommissioned rank of *yefreitor* in the Red Army for some years he had become a sub-lieutenant. In a technikum he had studied geology and survey.

The chief of the Soviet military mission to the province of Yunnan in the People's Republic of China had said to him, "Farrer, you are getting a real holiday. There is no danger in this trip, but we do want to get an estimate on the feasibility of building a secondary mountain highway along the rock cliffs west of Lake Pakou. I think well of you, Farrer. You have lived down your German name and you're a good Soviet citizen and officer. I know that you will not cause any trouble with our Chinese allies or with the mountain people among whom you must travel. Go easy with them, Farrer. They are very superstitious. We need their full support, but we can take our time to get it. The liberation of India is still a long way off, but when we must move to help the Indians throw off American imperialism we do not

want to have any soft areas in our rear. Do not push things too hard, Farrer. Be sure that you get a good technical job done, but that you make friends with everyone other than imperialist reactionary elements."

Farrer nodded very seriously. "You mean, comrade Colonel, that I must make friends with *everything*?"

"Everything," said the colonel firmly.

Farrer was young and he liked doing a bit of crusading on his own. "I'm a militant atheist, Colonel. Do I have to be pleasant to priests?"

"Priests, too," said the colonel, "especially priests."

The colonel looked sharply at Farrer. "You make friends with everything, everything except women. You hear me, comrade? Stay out of trouble."

Farrer saluted and went back to his desk to make preparations for the trip.

Three weeks later Farrer was climbing up past the small cascades which led to the River of the Golden Sands, the Chinsh Chiang, as the Long River or Yangtze was known locally.

Beside him there trotted Party Secretary Kungsun. Kungsun was a Peking aristocrat who had joined the Communist Party in his youth. Sharp-faced, sharp-voiced, he made up for his aristocracy by being the most violent Communist in all of northwestern Yunnan. Though they had only a squad of troops and a lot of local bearers for their supplies, they did have an officer of the old People's Liberation Army to assure their military well-being and to keep an eye on Farrer's technical competence. Comrade Captain Li, roly-poly and jolly, sweated wearily behind them as they climbed the steep cliffs.

Li called after them, "If you want to be heroes of labor let's keep climbing, but if you are following sound military logistics let's all sit down and drink some tea. We can't possibly get to Pakouhu before nightfall anyhow."

Kungsun looked back contemptuously. The ribbon of soldiers and bearers reached back two hundred yards, making a snake of dust clutched to the rocky slope of the mountain. From this perspective he saw the caps of the soldiers and the barrels of their rifles pointing upward toward him as they climbed. He saw the towel-wrapped heads of the liberated porters and he knew without speaking to them that they were cursing him in language just as violent as the language with which they had cursed their capitalist oppressors in days gone past. Far below them all the thread of the Chinsh Chiang was woven like a single strand of gold into the gray-green of the twilight valley floor.

He spat at the army captain, "If you had your way about it, we'd still be sitting there in an inn drinking the hot tea while the men slept."

The captain did not take offense. He had seen many party secretaries in his day. In the New China it was much safer to be a captain. A few of the party secretaries he had known had got to be very important men. One of them had even got to Peking and had been assigned a whole Buick to himself together with three Parker 51 pens. In the minds of the Communist bureaucracy this represented a state close to absolute bliss. Captain Li wanted none of that. Two square meals a day and an endless succession of patriotic farm girls, preferably chubby ones, represented his view of a wholly liberated China.

Farrer's Chinese was poor, but he got the intent of the argument. In thick but understandable mandarin he called, half laughing at them, "Come along, comrades. We may not make it to the lake by nightfall, but we certainly can't bivouac on this cliff either." He whistled, *Ich hatt' ein Kameraden* through his teeth as he pulled ahead of Kungsun and led the climb on up the mountain.

Thus it was Farrer who first came over the lip of the cliff and met the Martian face to face.

This time the Martian was ready. He remembered his disappointing experience with the American, and he did not want to affright his guest so as to spoil the social nature of the occasion. While Farrer had been climbing the cliff, the Martian had been climbing Farrer's mind, chasing in and out of Farrer's memories as happily as a squirrel chases around inside an immense oak tree. From Farrer's own mind he had extracted a great many pleasant memories. He had then hastened back to the top of the cliff and had incorporated these in very substantial-looking phantoms.

Farrer got halfway across the lip of the cliff before he realized what he was looking at. Two Soviet military trucks were parked in a tiny glade. Each of them had tables in front of it. One of the tables was set with a very elaborate Russian *sakouska* (the Soviet equivalent of a smorgasbord). The Martian hoped he would be able to keep these objects materialized while Farrer ate them, but he was afraid they might disappear each time Farrer swallowed them because the Martian was not very well acquainted with digestive processes of human beings and did not want to give his guest a violent stomachache by allowing him to deposit through his esophagus and into his stomach objects of extremely improvised and uncertain chemical makeup.

The first truck had a big red flag on it with white Russian letters reading "WELCOME TO THE HEROES OF BRYANSK."

The second truck was even better. The Martian could see that Farrer was very fond of women, so he had materialized four very pretty Soviet girls, a blonde, a brunette, a redhead, and an albino just to make it interesting. The Martian did not trust himself to make them all speak the correctly feminine and appealing forms of the Russian language, so having materialized them he set them all in lounge chairs and put them to sleep. He had wondered what form he himself should take and decided that it would be very hospitable to assume the appearance of Mao-tze-tung.

Farrer did not come on over the cliff. He stayed where he was. He looked at the Martian and the Martian said, very oilily, "Come on up. We are waiting for you."

"Who the hell are you?" barked Farrer.

"I am a pro-Soviet Demon," said the apparent Mr. Mao-tze-tung, "and these are materialized Communist hospitality arrangements. I hope you like them."

At this point both Kungsun and Li appeared. Li climbed up the left side of Farrer, Kungsun on the right. All three stopped, gaping.

Kungsun recovered his wits first. He recognized Mao-tze-tung. He never passed up a chance to get acquainted with the higher command of the Communist Party. He said in a very weak, strained, incredulous voice, "Mr. Party Chairman Mao, I never thought that we would see you here in these hills, or are you you, and if you aren't you, who are you?"

"I am not your party chairman," said the Martian. "I am merely a local Demon who has strong pro-Communist sentiments and would like to meet companionable people like yourselves."

At this point Li fainted and would have rolled back down the cliff knocking over soldiers and porters if the Martian had not reached out his left arm, concurrently changing the left arm into the shape of a python, picking up the unconscious Li and resting his body gently against the side of the picnic truck. The Soviet sleeping beauties slept on. The python turned back into an arm.

Kungsun's face had turned completely white; since he was a pale and pleasant ivory color to start with, his whiteness had a very marked tinge.

"I think this *wang-pa* is a counter-revolutionary impostor," he said weakly, "but I don't know what to do about him. I am glad that the Chinese People's Republic has a representative from the Soviet Union to instruct us in difficult party procedure."

Farrer snapped, "If he is a goose, he is a Chinese goose. He is not a Russian goose. You'd better not call him that dirty name. He seems to have some powers that do work. Look at what he did to Li."

The Martian decided to show off his education and said very conciliatorily, "If I am a *wang-pa* you are a *wang-*

pen." He added brightly, in the Russian language, "That's an ingrate, you know. Much worse than an illegitimate one. Do you like my shape, comrade Farrer? Do you have a cigarette lighter with you? Western science is so wonderful, I can never make very solid things, and you people make airplanes, atom bombs, and all sorts of refreshing entertainments of that kind."

Farrer reached into his pocket, groping for his lighter.

A scream sounded behind him. One of the Chinese enlisted men had left the stopped column behind and had stuck his head over the edge of the cliff to see what was happening. When he saw the trucks and the figure of Mao-tze-tung he began shrieking, "There are devils here! There are devils here!"

From centuries of experience, the Martian knew there was no use trying to get along with the local people unless they were very, very young or very, very old. He walked to the edge of the cliff so that all the men could see him. He expanded the shape of Mao-tze-tung until it was thirty-five feet high. Then he changed himself into the embodiment of an ancient Chinese god of war with whiskers, ribbons, and sword tassels blowing in the breeze. They all fainted dead away as he had intended. He packed them snugly against the rocks so that none of them would fall back down the slope. Then he took on the shape of a Soviet WAC—a rather pretty little blonde with sergeant's insignia—and re-materialized himself beside Farrer.

By this point Farrer had his lighter out.

The pretty little blonde said to Farrer, "Do you like this shape better?"

Farrer said, "I don't believe this at all. I am a militant atheist. I have fought against superstition all my life." Farrer was twenty-four.

The Martian said, "I don't think you like me being a girl. It bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Since you do not exist you cannot bother me. But if you don't mind could you please change your shape again?"

The Martian took on the appearance of a chubby little Buddha. He knew this was a little impious, but he felt Farrer give a sigh of relief. Even Li seemed cheered up, now that the Martian had taken on a proper religious form.

"Listen, you obscene demonic monstrosity," snarled Kungsun, "this is the Chinese People's Republic. You have absolutely no business taking on supernatural images or conducting unatheistic activities. Please abolish yourself and those illusions yonder. What do you want, anyhow?"

"I would like," said the Martian mildly, "to become a member of the Chinese Communist Party."

Farrer and Kungsun stared at each other. Then they both spoke at once, Farrer in Russian and Kungsun in Chinese. "But we can't let you in the Party."

Kungsun said, "If you're a demon you don't exist, and if you do exist you're illegal."

The Martian smiled. "Take some refreshments. You may change your minds. Would you like a girl?" he said, pointing at the assorted Russian beauties who still slept in their lounge chairs.

But Kungsun and Farrer shook their heads.

With a sigh the Martian dematerialized the girls and replaced them with three striped Siberian tigers. The tigers approached.

One tiger stopped cozily behind the Martian and sat down. The Martian sat on him. Said the Martian brightly, "I like tigers to sit on. They're so comfortable. Have a tiger."

Farrer and Kungsun were staring open-mouthed at their respective tigers. The tigers yawned at them and stretched out.

With a tremendous effort of will the two young men sat down on the ground in front of their tigers. Farrer sighed, "What do you want? I suppose you won this trick...."

Said the Martian, "Have a jug of wine."

He materialized a jug of wine and a porcelain cup in front of each, including himself. He poured himself a drink and looked at them through shrewd, narrowed eyes. "I would like to learn all about Western science. You see, I am a Martian student who was exiled here to become the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan and I have been here more than two thousand years, and I can only perceive in a radius of ten leagues. Western science is very interesting. If I could, I would like to be an engineering student, but since I cannot leave this place I would like to join the Communist Party and have many visitors come to see me."

By this time Kungsun made up his mind. He was a Communist, but he was also a Chinese—an aristocratic Chinese and a man well versed in the folklore of his own country. Kungsun used a politely archaic form of the Peking court dialect when he spoke again in much milder terms, "Honored, esteemed Demon, sir, it's just no use at all your trying to get into the Communist Party. I admit it is very patriotic of you as a Chinese Demon to want to join the progressive group which leads the Chinese people in their endless struggle against the vicious American imperialists. Even if you convinced me I don't think you can convince the party authorities, esteemed sir. The only thing for you to do in our new Communist world of the New China is to become a counter-revolutionary refugee and migrate to capitalist territory."

The Martian looked hurt and sullen. He frowned at them as he sipped his wine. Behind him Li began snoring where he slept against the wheel of a truck.

Very persuasively the Martian began to speak: "I see, young man, that you're beginning to believe in me. You don't have to recognize me. Just believe in me a little bit. I am happy to see that you, Party Secretary Kungsun, are prepared to be polite. I am not a Chinese demon, since I was originally a Martian who was elected to the Lesser Assembly of Concord, but who made an inopportune remark and who must live on as the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan for three hundred thousand springs and autumns before I can return. I expect to be around a very long time indeed. On the other hand, I would like to study engineering and I think it would be much better for me to become a member of the Communist Party than to go to a strange place."

Farrer had an inspiration. Said he to the Martian, "I have an idea. Before I explain it, though, would you please take those damned trucks away and remove that *sakouska*? It makes my mouth water and I'm very sorry, but I just can't accept your hospitality."

The Martian complied with a wave of his hand. The trucks and the tables disappeared. Li had been leaning against a truck. His head went thump against the grass. He muttered something in his sleep and then resumed his snoring. The Martian turned back to his guests.

Farrer picked up the thread of his own thoughts. "Leaving aside the question of whether you exist or not, I can assure you that I know the Russian Communist Party and my colleague, Comrade Kungsun here, knows the Chinese Communist Party. Communist parties are very wonderful things. They lead the masses in the fight against wicked Americans. Do you realize that if we didn't fight on with the revolutionary struggle all of us would have to drink coca-cola every day?"

"What is coca-cola?" asked the Demon.

"I don't know," replied Farrer.

"Then why be afraid to drink any?"

"Don't be irrelevant. I hear that the capitalists make everybody drink it. The Communist Party cannot take time to open up supernatural secretariats. It would spoil irreligious campaigns for us to have a demonic secretary. I can tell you the Russian Communist Party won't put up with it and our friend here will tell you there is no place in the Chinese

Communist Party. We want you to be happy. You seem to be a very friendly demon. Why don't you just go away? The capitalists will welcome you. They are very reactionary and very religious. You might even find people there who would believe in you."

The Martian changed his shape from that of a roly-poly Buddha and assumed the appearance and dress of a young Chinese man, a student of engineering at the University of the Revolution in Peking. In the shape of the student he continued, "I don't want to be believed in. I want to study engineering, and I want to learn all about Western science."

Kungsun came to Farrer's support. He said, "It's just no use trying to be a Communist engineer. You look like a very absent-minded demon to me and I think that even if you tried to pass yourself off as a human being you would keep forgetting and changing shapes. That would ruin the morale of any class."

The Martian thought to himself that the young man had a point there. He hated keeping any one particular shape for more than half an hour. Staying in one bodily form made him itch. He also liked to change sexes every few times; it seemed sort of refreshing. He did not admit to the young man that Kungsun had scored a point with that remark about shape-changing, but he nodded amiably at them and asked, "But how could I get abroad?"

"Just go," said Kungsun, wearily. "Just go. You're a demon. You can do anything."

"I can't do that," snapped the student-Martian. "I have to have something to go by."

He turned to Farrer. "It won't do any good, your giving me something. If you gave me something Russian and I would end up in Russia, from what you say they won't want to have a Communist Martian any more than these Chinese people do. I won't like to leave my beautiful lake anyhow, but I suppose I will have to if I am to get acquainted with Western science."

Farrer said, "I have an idea." He took off his wristwatch and handed it to the Martian.

The Martian inspected it. Many years before, the watch had been manufactured in the United States of America. It had been traded by a G.I. to a fraulein, by the fraulein's grandmother to a Red Army man for three sacks of potatoes, and by the Red Army man for five hundred rubles to Farrer when the two of them met in Kuibyshev. The numbers were painted with radium, as were the hands. The second hand was missing, so the Martian materialized a new one. He changed the shape of it several times before it fitted. On the watch there was written in English, "MARVIN WATCH COMPANY." At the bottom of the face of the watch there was the name of a town: "WATERBURY, CONN."

The Martian read it. Said he to Farrer, "Where is this place Waterbury, *Kahn*?"

"The Conn. is the short form of the name of one of the American states. If you are going to be a reactionary capitalist that is a very good place to be a capitalist in."

Still white-faced, but in a sickly ingratiating way, Kungsun added his bit. "I think you would like coca-cola. It's very reactionary."

The student-Martian frowned. He still held the watch in his hand. Said he, "I don't care whether it's reactionary or not. I want to be in a very scientific place."

Farrer said, "You couldn't go any place more scientific than Waterbury, Conn., especially Conn.—that's the most scientific place they have in America and I'm sure they are very pro-Martian and you can join one of the capitalist parties. They won't mind. But the Communist parties would make a lot of trouble for you."

Farrer smiled and his eyes lit up. "Furthermore," he added, as a winning point, "you can keep my watch for yourself, for always."

The Martian frowned. Speaking to himself the student-Martian said, "I can see that Chinese Communism is going to collapse in eight years, eight hundred years, or eighty thousand years. Perhaps I'd better go to this Waterbury, Conn."

The two young Communists nodded their heads vigorously and grinned. They both smiled at the Martian.

"Honored, esteemed Martian, sir, please hurry along because I want to get my men over the edge of the cliff before darkness falls. Go with our blessing."

The Martian changed shape. He took on the image of an Arhat, a subordinate disciple of Buddha. Eight feet tall, he loomed above them. His face radiated unearthly calm. The watch, miraculously provided with a new strap, was firmly strapped to his left wrist.

"Bless you, my boys," said he. "I go to Waterbury." And he did.

Farrer stared at Kungsun. "What's happened to Li?"

Kungsun shook his head dazedly. "I don't know. I feel funny."

(In departing for that marvelous strange place, Waterbury, Conn., the Martian had taken with him all their memories of himself.)

Kungsun walked to the edge of the cliff. Looking over, he saw the men sleeping.

"Look at that," he muttered. He stepped to the edge of the dill and began shouting: "Wake up, you fools, you turtles. Haven't you any more sense than to sleep on a cliff as nightfall approaches?"

The Martian concentrated all his powers on the location of Waterbury, Conn.

He was the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan (or an Arhat), and his powers were limited, impressive though they might seem to outsiders.

With a shock, a thrill, a something of breaking, a sense of things done and undone, he found himself in flat country. Strange darkness surrounded him. Air, which he had never smelled before, flowed quietly around him. Farrer and Li, hanging on a cliff high above the Chinshachiang, lay far behind him in the world from which he had broken. He remembered that he had left his shape behind.

Absent-mindedly he glanced down at himself to see what form he had taken for the trip.

He discovered that he had arrived in the form of a small, laughing Buddha seven inches high, carved in yellowed ivory.

"This will never do!" muttered the Martian to himself. "I must take on one of the local forms...."

He sensed around in his environment, groping telepathically for interesting objects near him.

"Aha, a milk truck."

Thought he, Western science is indeed very wonderful. Imagine a machine made purely for the purpose of transporting milk!

Swiftly he transferred himself into a milk truck.

In the darkness, his telepathic senses had not distinguished the metal of which the milk truck was made nor the color of the paint.

In order to remain inconspicuous, he turned himself into a milk truck made of solid gold. Then, without a driver, he started up his own engine and began driving himself down one of the main highways leading into Waterbury, Connecticut.... So if you happen to be passing through Waterbury, Conn., and see a solid gold milk truck driving itself through the streets, you'll know it's the Martian, otherwise the 1,387,229th Eastern Subordinate Incarnation of a Lohan,

and that he still thinks Western Science is wonderful.

END

[End of *Western Science Is So Wonderful*, by Cordwainer Smith]