**The Singing Bell**

Isaac Asimov

Louis Peyton never discussed publicly the methods by which he had bested the police of Earth in a dozen duels of wits and bluff, with the psychoprobe always waiting and always foiled. He would have been foolish to do so, of course, but in his more complacent moments, he fondled the notion of leaving a testament to be opened only after his death, one in which his unbroken success could clearly be seen to be due to ability and not to luck.

In such a testament he would say, “No false pattern can be created to cover a crime without bearing upon it some trace of its creator. It is better, then, to seek in events some pattern that already exists and then adjust your actions to it.”

It was with that principle in mind that Peyton planned the murder of Albert Cornwell.

Cornwell, that small-time retailer of stolen things, first approached Peyton at the latter’s usual table-for-one at Grinnell’s. Cornwell’s blue suit seemed to have a special shine, his lined face a special grin, and his faded mustache a special bristle.

“Mr. Peyton,” he said, greeting his future murderer with no fourth-dimensional qualm, “it is so nice to see you. I’d almost given up, sir, almost given up.”

Peyton, who disliked being approached over his newspaper and dessert at Grinnell’s, said, “If you have business with me, Cornwell, you know where you can reach me.” Peyton was past forty and his hair was past its earlier blackness, but his back was rigid, his bearing youthful, his eyes dark, and his voice could cut the more sharply for long practice.

“Not for this, Mr. Peyton,” said Cornwell, “not for this. I know of a cache, sir, a cache of ... you know, sir.” The forefinger of his right hand moved gently, as though it were a clapper striking invisible substance, and his left hand momentarily cupped his ear.

Peyton turned a page of the paper, still somewhat damp from its tele-dispenser, folded it flat and said, “Singing Bells ?”

“Oh, hush, Mr. Peyton,” said Cornwell in whispered agony

Peyton said. “Come with me.”

They walked through the park. It was another Peyton axiom that to be reasonably secret there was nothing like a low-voiced discussion out of doors.

Cornwell whispered, “A cache of Singing Bells; an accumulated cache of Singing Bells. Unpolished, but such beauties, Mr. Peyton.”

“Have you seen them?”

“No, sir, but I have spoken with one who has. He had proofs enough to convince me. There is enough there to enable you and me to retire in affluence. In absolute affluence, sir.”

“Who was this other man ?”

A look of cunning lit Cornwell’s face like a smoking torch, obscuring more than it showed and lending it a repulsive oiliness. The man was a lunar grubstaker who had a method for locating the Bells in the crater sides. I don’t knowhis method; he never told me that. But he has gathered dozens, hidden them on the Moon, and come to Earth to arrange the disposing of them.”

“He died, I suppose?”

“Yes. A most shocking accident, Mr. Peyton. A fall from a height. Very sad. Of course, his activities on the Moon were quite illegal. The Dominion is very strict about unauthorized Bell-mining. So perhaps it was a judgment upon him after all... In any case, I have his map.”

Peyton said, a look of calm indifference on his face, “I don’t want any of the details of your little transaction. What I want to know is why you’ve come to me.”

Cornwell said, “Well, now, there’s enough for both of us, Mr. Peyton, and we can both do our bit. For my part, I know where the cache is located and I can get a spaceship. You ’Yes?”

“You can pilot a spaceship, and you have such excellent contacts for disposing of the Bells. It is a very fair division of labor, Mr. Peyton. Wouldn’t you say so, now?”

Cornwell considered the pattern of his life—the pattern that already existed—and matters seemed to fit.

He said, “We will leave for the Moon on August the tenth.”

Cornwell stopped walking and said, “Mr. Peyton! It’s only April now.”

Peyton maintained an even gait and Cornwell had to hurry to catch up. “Do you hear me, Mr. Peyton ?”

Peyton said, “August the tenth. I will get in touch with you at the proper time, tell you where to bring your ship. Make no attempt to see me personally till then. Good-bye, Cornwell.”

Cornwell said, “Fifty-fifty?”

“Quite,” said Peyton. “Good-bye.”

Peyton continued his walk alone and considered the pattern of his life again. At the age of twenty-seven, he had bought a tract of land in the Rockies on which some past owner had built a house designed as refuge against the threatened atomic wars of two centuries back, the ones that had never come to pass after all. The house remained, however, a monument to a frightened drive for self-sufficiency.

It was of steel and concrete in as isolated a spot as could well be found on Earth, set high above sea level and protected on nearly all sides by mountain peaks that reached higher still. It had its self-contained power unit, its water supply fed by mountain streams, its freezers in which ten sides of beef could hang comfortably, its cellar outfitted like a fortress with an arsenal of weapons designed to stave off hungry, panicked hordes that never came. It had its air-conditioning unit that could scrub and scrub the air until anything but radioactivity (alas for human frailty) could be scrubbed out of it.

In that house of survival, Peyton passed the month of August every subsequent year of his perennially bachelor life. He took out the communicators, the television, the newspaper tele-dispenser. He built a force-field fence about his property and left a short-distance signal mechanism to the house from the point where the fence crossed the one trail winding through the mountains.

For one month each year, he could be thoroughly alone. No one saw him, no one could reach him. In absolute solitude, he could have the only vacation he valued after eleven months of contact with a humanity for which he could feel only a cold contempt.

Even the police—and Peyton smiled—knew of his rigid regard for August. He had once jumped bail and risked the psychoprobe rather than forgo his August.

Peyton considered another aphorism for possible inclusion in his testament: There is nothing so conducive to an appearance of innocence as the triumphant lack of an alibi.

On July 30, as on July 30 of every year, Louis Peyton took the 9.15 a.m. non-grav stratojet at New York and arrived in Denver at 12.30 p.m. There he lunched and took the 1.45 p.m. semi-grav bus to Hump’s Point, from which Sam Leibman took him by ancient ground-car—full grav! —up the trail to the boundaries of his property. Sam Leibman gravely accepted the ten-dollar tip that he always received, touched his hat as he had done on July 30 for fifteen years.

On July 31, as on July 31 of every year, Louis Peyton returned to Hump’s Point in his non-grav aeroflitter and placed an order through the Hump’s Point general store for such supplies as he needed for the coming month. There was nothing unusual about the order. It was virtually the duplicate of previous such orders.

MacIntyre, manager of the store, checked gravely over the list, put it through to Central Warehouse, Mountain District, in Denver, and the whole of it came pushing over the mass-transference beam within the hour. Peyton loaded the supplies onto his aeroflitter with Maclntyre’s help, left his usual ten-dollar tip and returned to his house.

On August 1, at 12.01 a.m., the force field that surrounded his property was set to full power and Peyton was isolated.

And now the pattern changed. Deliberately he had left himself eight days. In that time he slowly and meticulously destroyed just enough of his supplies to account for all of August. He used the dusting chambers which served the house as a garbage-disposal unit. They were of an advanced model capable of reducing all matter up to and including metals and silicates to an impalpable and undetectable molecular dust. The excess energy formed in the process was carried away by the mountain stream that ran through his property. It ran five degrees warmer than normal for a week.

On August 9 his aeroflitter carried him to a spot in Wyoming where Albert Cornwell and a spaceship waited.

The spaceship, itself, was a weak point, of course, since there were men who had sold it, men who had transported ft and helped prepare it for flight. All those men, however, led only as far as Cornwell, and Cornwell, Peyton thought— with the trace of a smile on his cold lips—would be a dead end. A very dead end.

On August 10 the spaceship, with Peyton at the controls and Cornwell—and his map—as passenger, left the surface of Earth. Its non-grav field was excellent. At full power, the ship’s weight was reduced to less than an ounce. The micro-piles fed energy efficiently and noiselessly, and without flame or sound the ship rose through the atmosphere, shrank to a point, and was gone.

It was very unlikely that there would be witnesses to the flight, or that in these weak, piping times of peace there would be a radar watch as in days of yore. In point of fact, there was none.

Two days in space; now two weeks on the Moon. Almost instinctively Peyton had allowed for those two weeks from the first. He was under no illusions as to the value of homemade maps by non-cartographers. Useful they might be to the designer himself, who had the help of memory. To a stranger, they could be nothing more than a cryptogram.

Cornwell showed Peyton the map for the first time only after takeoff. He smiled obsequiously. “After all, sir, this was my only trump.”

“Have you checked this against the lunar charts ?”

“I would scarcely know how, Mr. Peyton. I depend upon you.”

Peyton stared at him coldly as he returned the map. The one certain thing upon it was Tycho Crater, the site of the buried Luna City.

In one respect, at least, astronomy was on their side. Tycho was on the daylight side of the Moon at the moment. It meant that patrol ships were less likely to be out, they themselves less likely to be observed.

Peyton brought the ship down in a riskily quick non-grav landing within the safe, cold darkness of the inner shadow of a crater. The sun was past zenith and the shadow would grow no shorter.

Cornwall drew a long face. “Dear, dear, Mr. Peyton. We can scarcely go prospecting in the lunar day.”

The lunar day doesn’t last forever,” said Peyton shortly. There are about a hundred hours of sun left. We can use that time for acclimating ourselves and for working out the map.”

The answer came quickly, but it was plural. Peyton studied the lunar charts over and over, taking meticulous measurements, and trying to find the pattern of craters shown on the homemade scrawl that was the key to— what?

Finally Peyton said. The crater we want could be any one of three: GC-3, GC-5, or MT-10.”

“What do we do, Mr. Peyton?” asked Cornwell anxiously.

“We try them all,” said Peyton, “beginning with the nearest.”

The terminator passed and they were in the night shadow. After that, they spent increasing periods on the lunar surface, getting used to the eternal silence and blackness, the harsh points of the stars and the crack of light that was the Earth peeping over the rim of the crater above. They left hollow, featureless footprints in the dry dust that did not stir or change. Peyton noted them first when they climbed out of the crater into the full light of the gibbous Earth. That was on the eighth day after their arrival on the moon.

The lunar cold put a limit to how long they could remain outside their ship at any one time. Each day, however, they managed for longer. By the eleventh day after arrival they had eliminated GC-5 as the container of the Singing Bells.

By the fifteenth day, Peyton’s cold spirit had grown warm with desperation. It would have to be GC-5. MT-10 was too far away. They would not have time to reach it and explore it and still allow for a return to Earth by August 31.

On that same fifteenth day, however, despair was laid to rest forever when they discovered the Bells.

They were not beautiful. They were merely irregular masses of gray rock, as large as a double fist, vacuum-filled and feather-light in the Moon’s gravity. There were two dozen of them and each one, after proper polishing, could be sold for a hundred thousand dollars at least.

Carefully, in double handfuls, they carried the Bells to the ship, bedded them in excelsior, and returned for more. Three times they made the trip both ways over ground that would have worn them out on Earth but which, under the Moon’s lilliputian gravity, was scarcely a barrier.

Cornwell passed the last of the Bells up to Peyton, who placed them carefully within the outer lock.

“Keep them clear, Mr. Peyton,” he said, his radioed voice sounding harshly in the other’s ear. “I’m coming up.”

He crouched for the slow high leap against lunar gravity, looked up, and froze in panic. His face, clearly visible through the hard carved lusilite of his helmet, froze in a last grimace of terror. “No, Mr. Peyton. Don’t——”

Peyton’s fist tightened on the grip of the blaster he held. It fired. There was an unbearable brilliant flash and Cornwell was a dead fragment of a man, sprawled amid remnants of a spacesuit and flecked with freezing blood.

Peyton paused to stare somberly at the dead man, but only for a second. Then he transferred the last of the Bells to their prepared containers, removed his suit, activated first the non-grav field, then the micropiles, and, potentially a million or two richer than he had been two weeks earlier, set off on the return trip to Earth.

On August 29 Peyton’s ship descended silently, stern bottomward, to the spot in Wyoming from which it had taken off on August 10. The care with which Peyton had chosen the spot was not wasted. His aeroflitter was still there, drawn within the protection of an enclosing wrinkle of the rocky, tortuous countryside.

He moved the Singing Bells once again, in their containers, into the deepest recess of the wrinkle, covering them, loosely and sparsely, with earth. He returned to the ship once more to set the controls and make last adjustments. He climbed out again and two minutes later the ship’s automatics took over.

Silently hurrying, the ship bounded upward and up, veering to westward somewhat as the Earth rotated beneath it. Peyton watched, shading his narrow eyes, and at the extreme edge of vision there was a tiny gleam of light and a dot of cloud against the blue sky.

Peyton’s mouth twitched into a smile. He had judged well. With the cadmium safety-rods bent back into uselessness, the micropiles had plunged past the unit-sustaining safety level and the ship had vanished in the heat of the nuclear explosion that had followed.

Twenty minutes later, he was back on his property. He was tired and his muscles ached under Earth’s gravity. He slept well.

Twelve hours later, in the earliest dawn, the police came.

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The man who opened the door placed his crossed hands over his paunch and ducked his smiling head two or three times in greeting. The man who entered, H. Seton Davenport of the Terrestrial Bureau of Investigation, looked about uncomfortably.

The room he had entered was large and in semidarkness except for the brilliant viewing lamp focused over a combination armchair-desk. Rows of book-films covered the walls. A suspension of Galactic charts occupied one corner of the room and a Galactic Lens gleamed softly on a stand in another corner.

“You are Dr. Wendell Urth?” asked Davenport, in a tone that suggested he found it hard to believe. Davenport was a stocky man with black hair, a thin and prominent nose, and a star-shaped scar on one cheek which marked permanently the place where a neuronic whip had once struck him at too close a range.

“I am,” said Dr. Urth in a thin, tenor voice. “And you are Inspector Davenport.”

The Inspector presented his credentials and said, The University recommended you to me as an extraterrologist.”

“So you said when you called me half an hour ago,” said Urth agreeably. His features were thick, his nose was a snubby button, and over his somewhat protuberant eyes there were thick glasses.

“I shall get to the point. Dr. Urth. I presume you have visited the Moon ...”

Dr. Urth, who had brought out a bottle of ruddy liquid and two glasses, just a little the worse for dust, from behind a straggling pile of book-films, said with sudden brusqueness, “I have never visited the Moon, Inspector. I never intend to! Space travel is foolishness. I don’t believe in it.” Then, in softer tones, “Sit down, sir, sit down. Have a drink.”

Inspector Davenport did as he was told and said, “But you’re an...”

“Extraterrologist. Yes. I’m interested in other worlds, but it doesn’t mean I have to go there. Good lord, I don’t have to be a time traveler to qualify as a historian, do I?” He sat down, and a broad smile impressed itself upon his round face once more as he said, “Now tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I have come,” said the Inspector, frowning, “to consult you in a case of murder.”

“Murder? What have I to do with murder?”

This murder. Dr. Urth, was on the Moon.”

“Astonishing.”

“It’s more than astonishing. It’s unprecedented, Dr. Urth. In the fifty years since the Lunar Dominion has been established, ships have blown up and spacesuits have sprung leaks. Men have boiled to death on sun-side, frozen on dark-side, and suffocated on both sides. There have been deaths by falls, which, considering lunar gravity, is quite a trick. But in all that time, not one man has been killed on the Moon as the result of another man’s deliberate act of violence—till now.”

Dr. Urth said, “How was it done?”

“A blaster. The authorities were on the scene within the hour through a fortunate set of circumstances. A patrol ship observed a flash of light against the Moon’s surface. You know how far a flash can be seen against the night-side. The pilot notified Luna City and landed. In the process of circling back, he swears that he just managed to see by Earth-light what looked like a ship taking off. Upon landing, he discovered a blasted corpse and footprints.”

The flash of light,” said Dr. Urth, “you suppose to be the firing blaster.”

That’s certain. The corpse was fresh. Interior portions of the body had not yet frozen. The footprints belonged to two people. Careful measurements showed that the depressions fell into two groups of somewhat different diameters, indicating differently sized spaceboots. In the main, they led to craters GC-3 and GC-5, a pair of——”

“1 am acquainted with the official code for naming lunar craters,” said Dr. Urth pleasantly.

“Umm. In any case, GC-3 contained footprints that led to a rift in the crater wall, within which scraps of hardened pumice were found. X-ray diffraction patterns showed——”

“Singing Bells,” put in the extraterrologist in great excitement. “Don’t tell me this murder of yours involves Singing ’Bells!”

“What if it does ?” demanded Davenport blankly.

“I have one. A University expedition uncovered it and presented it to me in return for——Come, Inspector, I must show it to you.”

Dr. Urth jumped up and pattered across the room, beckoning the other to follow as he did. Davenport, annoyed, followed.

They entered a second room, larger than the first, dimmer, considerably more cluttered. Davenport stared with astonishment at the heterogeneous mass of material that was jumbled together in no pretense at order.

He made out a small lump of ’blue glaze’ from Mars, the sort of thing some romantics considered to be an artifact of long-extinct Martians, a small meteorite, a model of an early spaceship, a sealed bottle of nothing scrawlingly labeled ’Venusian atmosphere.”

Dr. Urth said happily, “I’ve made a museum of my whole house. It’s one of the advantages of being a bachelor. Of course, I haven’t quite got things organized. Someday, when I have a spare week or so ...”

For a moment he looked about, puzzled; then, remembering, he pushed aside a chart showing the evolutionary scheme of development of the marine invertebrates that were the highest life forms on Barnard’s Planet and said, “Here it is. It’s flawed, I’m afraid.”

The Bell hung suspended from a slender wire, soldered delicately onto it. That it was flawed was obvious. It had a constriction line running halfway about it that made it seem like two small globes, firmly but imperfectly squashed together. Despite that, it had been lovingly polished to a dull luster, softly gray, velvety smooth, and faintly pock-marked in a way that laboratories, in their futile efforts to prepare synthetic Bells, had found impossible to duplicate.

Dr. Urth said, “I experimented a good deal before I found a decent stroker. A flawed Bell is temperamental. But bone works. I have one here’—and he held up something that looked like a short thick spoon made of a gray-white substance—’which I had made out of the femur of an ox. Listen.”

With surprising delicacy, his pudgy fingers maneuvered the Bell, feeling for one best spot. He adjusted it, steadying it daintily. Then, letting the Bell swing free, he brought down the thick end of the bone spoon and stroked the Bell softly.

It was as though a million harps had sounded a mile away. It swelled and faded and returned. It came from no particular direction. It sounded inside the head, incredibly sweet and pathetic and tremulous all at once.

It died away lingeringly and both men were silent for a full minute.

Dr. Urth said, “Not bad, eh?” and with a flick of his hand set the Bell to swinging on its wire.

Davenport stirred restlessly. “Careful! Don’t break it.” The fragility of a good Singing Bell was proverbial.

Dr. Urth said, “Geologists say the Bells are only pressure-hardened pumice, enclosing a vacuum in which small beads of rock rattle freely. That’s what they say. But if that’s all it is, why can’t we reproduce one? Now a flawless Bell would make this one sound like a child’s harmonica.”

“Exactly,” said Davenport, “and there aren’t a dozen people on Earth who own a flawless one, and there are a hundred people and institutions who would buy one at any price, no questions asked. A supply of Bells would be worth murder.”

The extraterrologist turned to Davenport and pushed his spectacles back on his inconsequential nose with a stubby forefinger. “I haven’t forgotten your murder case. Please go on.”

That can be done in a sentence. I know the identity of the murderer.”

They had returned to the chairs in the library and Dr. Urth clasped his hands over his ample abdomen. “Indeed? Then surely you have no problem. Inspector.”

“Knowing and proving are not the same, Dr. Urth. Unfortunately he has no alibi.”

“You mean, unfortunately he has, don’t you?”

“I mean what I say. If he had an alibi, I could crack it somehow, because it would be a false one. If there were witnesses who claimed they had seen him on Earth at the time of the murder, their stories could be broken down. If he had documentary proof, it could be exposed as a forgery, or some sort of trickery. Unfortunately he has none of it.”

“What does he have ?”

Carefully Inspector Davenport described the Peyton estate in Colorado. He concluded, “He has spent every August there in the strictest isolation. Even the T.B.I, would have to testify to that. Any jury would have to presume that he was on his estate this August as well, unless we could present definite proof that he was on the Moon.”

“What makes you think he was on the Moon ? Perhaps he is innocent.”

“No!” Davenport was almost violent. “For fifteen years I’ve been trying to collect sufficient evidence against him and I’ve never succeeded. But I can smell a Peyton crime now. I tell you that no one but Peyton, no one on Earth, would have the impudence or, for that matter, the practical business contacts to attempt disposal of smuggled Singing Bells. He is known to be an expert space pilot. He is known to have had contact with the murdered man, though admittedly not for some months. Unfortunately none of that is proof.”

Dr. Urth said, “Wouldn’t it be simple to use the psycho-probe, now that its use has been legalized?”

Davenport scowled, and the scar on his cheek turned livid. “Have you read the Konski-Hiakawa law. Dr. Urth?”

“No.”

“I think no one has. The right to mental privacy, the government says, is fundamental. All right, but what follows? The man who is pyschoprobed and proves innocent of the crime for which he was psychoprobed is entitled to as much compensation as he can persuade the courts to give him. In a recent case a bank cashier was awarded twenty-five thousand dollars for having been psychoprobed on inaccurate suspicion of theft. It seems that the circumstantial evidence which seemed to point to theft actually pointed to a small spot of adultery. His claim that he lost his job, was threatened by the husband in question and put in bodily fear, and finally was held up to ridicule and contumely because a news-strip man had learned the results of the probe held good in court.”

“I can see the man’s point.”

“So can we all. That’s the trouble. One more item to remember: Any man who has been psychoprobed once for any reason can never be psychoprobed again for any reason. No one man, the law says, shall be placed in mental jeopardy twice in his lifetime.”

“Inconvenient.”

“Exactly. In the two years since the psychoprobe has been legitimized, I couldn’t count the number of crooks and chiselers who’ve tried to get themselves psychoprobed for purse-snatching so that they could play the rackets safely afterward. So you see the Department will not allow Peyton to be psychoprobed until they have firm evidence of his guilt. Not legal evidence, maybe, but evidence that is strong enough to convince my boss. The worst of it, Dr. Urth, is that if we come into court without a psychoprobe record, we can’t win. In a case as serious as murder, not to have used the psychoprobe is proof enough to the dumbest juror that the prosecution isn’t sure of its ground.”

“Now what do you want of me ?”

“Proof that he was on the Moon sometime in August. It’s got to be done quickly. I can’t hold him on suspicion much longer. And if news of the murder gets out, the world press will blow up like an asteroid striking Jupiter’s atmosphere. A glamorous crime, you know—first murder on the Moon.”

“Exactly when was the murder committed?” asked Urth, in a sudden transition to brisk cross-examination.

“August twenty-seventh.”

“And the arrest was made when ?”

“Yesterday, August thirtieth.”

“Then if Peyton were the murderer, he would have had time to return to Earth.”

“Barely. Just barely.” Davenport’s lips thinned. “If I had been a day sooner——If I had found his place empty——”

“And how long do you suppose the two, the murdered man and the murderer, were on the Moon altogether?” · ’Judging by the ground covered by the footprints, a number of days. A week, at the minimum.”

“Has the ship they used been located?”

“No, and it probably never will. About ten hours ago, the University of Denver reported a rise in background radioactivity beginning day before yesterday at 6 p.m. and persisting for a number of hours. It’s an easy thing. Dr. Urth, to set a ship’s controls so as to allow it to blast off without crew and blow up, fifty miles high, in a micropile short.”

“If I had been Peyton,” said Dr. Urth thoughtfully, “I would have killed the man on board ship and blown up corpse and ship together.”

“You don’t know Peyton,” said Davenport grimly. “He enjoys his victories over the law. He values them. Leaving the corpse on the Moon is his challenge to us.”

“I see.” Dr. Urth patted his stomach with a rotary motion and said, “Well, there is a chance.”

That you’ll be able to prove he was on the Moon ?”

That I’ll be able to give you my opinion.”

“Now?”

The sooner the better. If, of course, I get a chance to interview Mr. Peyton.”

That can be arranged. I have a non-grav jet waiting. We can be in Washington in twenty minutes.”

But a look of the deepest alarm passed over the plump extraterrologist’s face. He rose to his feet and pattered away from the T.B.I, agent toward the duskiest corner of the cluttered room.

“No!”

“What’s wrong, Dr. Urth ?”

“I won’t use a non-grav jet. I don’t believe in them.”

Davenport stared confusedly at Dr. Urth. He stammered, “Would you prefer a monorail ?”

Dr. Urth snapped, “I mistrust all forms of transportation. I don’t believe in them. Except walking. I don’t mind walking.” He was suddenly eager. “Couldn’t you bring Mr. Peyton to this city, somewhere within walking distance? To City Hall, perhaps? I’ve often walked to City Hall.”

Davenport looked helplessly about the room. He looked at the myriad volumes of lore about the light-years. He could see through the open door into the room beyond, with its tokens of the worlds beyond the sky. And he looked at Dr. Urth, pale at the thought of non-grav jet, and shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ll bring Peyton here. Right to this room. Will that satisfy you?”

Dr. Urth puffed out his breath in a deep sigh. “Quite.”

“I hope you can deliver, Dr. Urth.”

“I will do my best, Mr. Davenport.”

Louis Peyton stared with distaste at his surroundings and with contempt at the fat man who bobbed his head in greeting. He glanced at the seat offered him and brushed it with his hand before sitting down. Davenport took a seat next to him, with his blaster holster in clear view.

The fat man was smiling as he sat down and patted his round abdomen as though he had just finished a good meal and were intent on letting the world know about it.

He said, “Good evening, Mr. Peyton. I am Dr. Wendell Urth, extraterrologist.”

Peyton looked at him again, “And what do you want with me?”

“I want to know if you were on the Moon at any time in the month of August.”

“I was not.”

“Yet no man saw you on Earth between the days of August first and August thirtieth.”

“I lived my normal life in August. I am never seen during that month. Let him tell you.” And he jerked his head in the direction of Davenport.

Dr. Urth chuckled. “How nice if we could test this matter. If there were only some physical manner in which we could differentiate Moon from Earth. If, for instance, we could analyze the dust in your hair and say, "Aha, Moon rock." Unfortunately we can’t. Moon rock is much the same as Earth rock. Even if it weren’t, there wouldn’t be any in your hair unless you stepped onto the lunar surface without a spacesuit, which is unlikely.”

Peyton remained impassive.

Dr. Urth went on, smiling benevolently, and lifting a hand to steady the glasses perched precariously on the bulb of his nose. “A man traveling in space or on the Moon breathes Earth air, eats Earth food. He carries Earth environment next to his skin whether he’s in his ship or in his spacesuit. We are looking for a man who spent two days in space going to the Moon, at least a week on the Moon, and two days coming back from the Moon. In all that time he carried Earth next to his skin, which makes it difficult.”

“I’d suggest,” said Peyton, “that you can make it less difficult by releasing me and looking for the real murderer.”

“It may come to that,” said Dr. Urth. “Have you ever seen anything like this?” His hand pushed its pudgy way to the ground beside his chair and came up with a gray sphere that sent back subdued highlights.

Peyton smiled. “It looks like a Singing Bell to me.”

“It is a Singing Bell. The murder was committed for the sake of Singing Bells. What do you think of this one?”

“I think it is badly flawed.”

“Ah, but inspect it,” said Dr. Urth, and with a quick motion of his hand, he tossed it through six feet of air to Peyton.

Davenport cried out and half-rose from his chair. Peyton brought up his arms with an effort, but so quickly that he managed to catch the Bell.

Peyton said, “You damned fool. Don’t throw it around that way.”

“You respect Singing Bells, do you ?”

“Too much to break one. That’s no crime, at least.” Peyton stroked the Bell gently, then lifted it to his ear and shook it slowly, listening to the soft clicks of the Lunoliths, those small pumice particles, as they rattled in vacuum.

Then, holding the Bell up by the length of steel wire still attached to it, he ran a thumbnail over its surface with an expert, curving motion. It twanged! The note was very mellow, very flutelike, holding with a slight vibrato that faded lingeringly and conjured up pictures of a summer twilight.

For a short moment, all three men were lost in the sound.

And then Dr. Urth said. Throw it back, Mr. Peyton. Toss it here!” and held out his hand in peremptory gesture.

Automatically Louis Peyton tossed the Bell. It traveled its short arc one-third of the way to Dr. Urth’s waiting hand, curved downward and shattered with a heartbroken, sighing discord on the floor.

Davenport and Peyton stared at the grey slivers with equal wordlessness and Dr. Urth’s calm voice went almost unheard as he said, “When the criminal’s cache of crude Bells is located, I’ll ask that a flawless one, properly polished, be given to me, as replacement and fee.”

“A fee? For what?” demanded Davenport irritably.

“Surely the matter is now obvious. Despite my little speech of a moment ago, there is one piece of Earth’s environment that no space traveler carries with him and that is Earth’s surface gravity. The fact that Mr. Peyton could so egregiously misjudge the toss of an object he obviously valued so highly could mean only that his muscles are not yet readjusted to the pull of Earthly gravity. It is my professional opinion, Mr. Davenport, that your prisoner has, in the last few days, been away from Earth. He had either been in space or on some planetary object considerably smaller in size than the Earth—as, for example, the Moon.”

Davenport rose triumphantly to his feet. “Let me have your opinion in writing,” he said, hand on blaster, “and that will be good enough to get me permission to use a psycho-probe.”

Louis Peyton, dazed and unresisting, had only the numb realization that any testament he could now leave would have to include the fact of ultimate failure.