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Title: A Summons from Mars

Author: Fearn, John Russell (1908-1960)

Date of first publication: June 1938

Edition used as base for this ebook: Amazing Stories, June 1938 [Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company] [first edition]

Date first posted: 11 March 2017

Date last updated: April 18, 2017

Faded Page ebook#20170451

This ebook was produced by Al Haines

Publisher's Note: As part of the conversion of the book to its new digital format, we have made certain minor adjustments in its layout, and have added a table of contents.

A SUMMONS from MARS

BY
JOHN RUSSELL FEARN

In a weird message from Mars, Eric Sanders is told that he has been betrothed to Yana. Torn between his duty to science and tradition, and his love for Sonia Benson, Sanders makes a momentous decision.

Contents

- I. [On Earth, 22 Years Later](#)
- II. [A Message from the Void](#)
- III. [Love or Duty?](#)
- IV. [Eric Decides](#)
- V. [The Coming of Yana](#)

The ochre sand of the Martian desert spouted towards the blue-black sky under the impact of the falling space machine. The vessel slithered a little distance and became still in the long trough it had gouged for itself.

For a long time nothing disturbed the desert's silence. A thin, icy breeze stirred mournfully across it; the small sun moved among the faint stars ... until at last its pale light picked out a group of four radio driven robots moving methodically across the waste on smoothly jointed legs. Flawlessly made, rather hideous, equipped with various strange instruments, they finally gained the vessel, set to work with the pincer hands and tools upon the airlocks.

There were three airlocks in all. The guiding intelligence behind the robots saw to it that no trace of Mars' thin, deadly cold air entered the vessel—that none of the Earthly warmth and air pressure inside escaped....

With a care seeming incongruous for their heavy, metallic bodies the robots lifted the limp figure of an Earth man from the floor, laid him gently on a bunk near the control board. He was good looking after a fashion—still young, strong jawed, but with the fading light of approaching death in his eyes.

He talked thickly, listlessly, between long pauses of hard breathing. The robots' recording mechanisms implanted on mechanical recorders everything he said.

"I—I guess I didn't quite make it. This—this is the first space machine ever made.... *I* made it, but forty million miles was too much for the first hop.... I—I got into difficulties. Rockets wouldn't work...." He stopped for a long time, looked at the unhuman faces around him.

"I—I'm Gerald Sanders, the first Earth man to get here—maybe the last. I'm the only one who knows the fuel formula for these—these rockets. Hope nobody finds it again. Hellish business, space travel! Gets your mind and body ... crushes it. If—if," he went on, with sudden frantic desperation, "you've got any method here that's—that's akin to radio, wireless to my wife on Earth and tell her I got here. Her—her name's Louise Sanders, of San Francisco. She—she couldn't come, thank God. There's a baby...."

He gasped over the completion of his sentence, winced, then with a long, quivering sigh relaxed motionless. The robots stood in silence for a time, then very reverently picked up the dead body between them, bore it outside into the moaning wind.

With steady, unvarying strides they progressed away towards the north of the red planet.... Onwards, hour after hour.

CHAPTER I

On Earth, 22 Years Later

Old Jonathan Dare sighed with heavy regret as he shuffled into the large rear room of the shack, bearing a laden tray in his gnarled hands. He picked his way amongst snaky wires, storage batteries, small turbogenerators driven by a mountain stream, together with fantastically patterned radio antennae and reception aerials.

He sighed even more heavily as he caught the accustomed sight of a black head bent rigidly over a complicated radio reception apparatus—a young figure in flannel shirt and slacks, slender hands hovering over the carefully graded controls.

Jonathan rubbed the back of his untidy gray head, muttered something about lunacy, then planked the tray down on the bench.

"Here y'are, Mister Eric—your supper."

The figure turned from the apparatus. Eric Sanders got up slowly, stroking a chin that was as square and purposeful as his dead father's had been. There was a half abstracted, half puzzled look in his gray eyes as he picked up the coffee percolator and began to pour out its contents.

Jonathan's rheumy eyes surveyed the wilderness of apparatus. "No luck, Mister Eric?" he ventured.

"Nope—nothing!" Eric sighed despondently; then he brightened a little. "Just the same, Jonathan, I still insist that I'll do it one day. Twenty-two years ago my dad went to Mars. He landed there, but was never heard of again. Never returned."

The old man shrugged. He knew that: he'd been Gerald Sanders' servant. Therefore he made the same observation he always made.

"Y' can't be too sure o' that, Mister Eric. Maybe he didn't land. Maybe a thousand things happened to him out there in space."

"No, Jonathan; he landed all right." Eric Sanders was quite sure of that. Coffee cup in hand he roamed to the window of the shack and stared from this lonely point of the Wahsatch Range of the Rockies down onto the arid, moonlit basin of Great Salt Lake.

"Yes, he landed," he repeated softly, half turning. "The new reflector at Mount Wilson followed his ship. Besides, his special short wave radio messages revealed that he'd gotten to within a million miles of Mars. After that, he couldn't help but fall on the planet. The gravitational field alone would see to that."

"But twenty years!" Jonathan protested, stirring his coffee musingly. "Ever since you took me on here five years ago after your mother's death—Heaven rest her—you've been playing around with these newfangled radio gadgets, adding this and taking away that, sitting up at nights—What d'you hope to get out of it?"

"A communication from Mars. Some day."

"But suppose your father's dead? He might be, even if he did reach Mars."

Eric smiled a little, sat down thoughtfully. "Probably he is dead, but that wouldn't stop the Martians from discovering the short wave radio aboard his ship. I hardly think his machine could be so completely smashed up as to destroy every darned thing within it. Mars' pull is far less than Earth's, you know. And, if his radio could communicate to Earth when only a million miles from Mars, it could obviously do so from Mars itself."

"Might not," Jonathan said vaguely. "Atmosphere might stop it."

"Only the ionized upper layers and there aren't any on Mars. The planet's almost airless. Besides, those waves penetrated *our* ionized layer, so nothing could stop them penetrating Mars'. See?"

"Ay, I see that—but you can take it from me, Mister Eric, that since them Martians haven't done anything for twenty years they're not going to. You're just wasting your time. Perhaps there aren't any people on Mars anyway. What then?"

"Oh, but there *is* intelligent life," Eric protested quickly. "Every year there are evidences of changes on the disk and in the *canali*, distinctly visible through the new Mount Wilson telescope. There is intelligent life, all right— Yes, Jonathan, I'm sure that one day I'll get what I'm after. Each receiver I build has some new improvement for the reception of ultra short waves such as dad used. Unfortunately I haven't inherited his genius—or his formulae for short wave efficiency and space travel, so I just have to keep on picking my way. Mars is in my blood, Jonathan. It means something to me. I'd give anything to be able to go there."

"Ay; I know that." The old servant's tired eyes watched Eric as he got up and paced slowly round the instrument littered room.

"That new tube I've incorporated, for instance," he went on. "It passes electrons with more ease and latitude than any known tube in the world today. It amplifies even the faintest signal. With ten of those tubes in cascade and linked to the receiver it provides the groundwork of an interplanetary radio receiver."

"And you get?" Jonathan grunted.

"Nothing—yet," Eric growled. "Not even ordinary police or experimental broadcasts. My stuff's too sensitive to incorporate them. I get

static by the ton, cracklings that are probably accounted for by the Earth's magnetic poles.... But Mars still doesn't bite."

He turned disgustedly away to the window and stared out again. Absently his eyes settled on two spots of light perhaps half a mile distant down the pass on which the lonely shack stood. He watched them with interest, began to frown as they went out and in again as something passed in front of them.

"I'd say it was a car," Jonathan murmured, gazing over Eric's shoulder. "Looks like headlights to me."

"But who on earth—?" Eric began in bewilderment.

"I dunno, Mister Eric, 'less it's somebody trying to get through to Denver. It is a short cut if you've nerve enough—and gas enough—to try it."

Eric wasted no further time talking. Slipping on his hat and coat he went out into the sharp night cold, picked his way along the broad mountain pass, aided by familiarity and moonlight. Half a mile brought him to a stranded, luxuriant La Salle convertible. The slim figure of half a girl was visible, peering at the car's insides.

"Anything I can do?" Eric inquired, as he came up.

The girl emerged at that and gazed at him in complete astonishment in the glare of headlamps. He looked back with interest, judged that save for a smudge of oil her oval shaped face was decidedly pretty. Her figure seemed remarkably slight, elfinlike.

"Where—where on earth did you come from?" she demanded. "It isn't that—that I'm not glad, of course, but—I thought I was alone here."

"Did you want to be?" Eric asked politely.

"Good heavens, no! I was never so thankful to see anybody in my life.... I was heading for 'Frisco..." She broke off and laughed ruefully. "Guess I was a fool to take this way along the pass, only a friend of mine said it was O.K."

"It is," Eric murmured, "if you're familiar with it." He stared at the car. "What seems to be the trouble?"

The girl shrugged helplessly. "That's just it; I don't know."

Without speaking Eric tested the plugs, ignition and carburetor. Then, smiling a little, he glanced at the illumined dashboard.

"It's a good idea to watch your fuel gauge," he remarked dryly. "You're out of gas."

"Gas!" The girl started in dismay. "Oh, Lord, I never thought of that! Where can I get some?" she asked quickly.

"Nowhere tonight, I'm afraid." Eric looked at her keenly. "Where are you from, anyway?"

"Two miles out of Denver. Anything wrong with it?"

"Oh, no, but it seems kind of odd—a lone girl like you making a solo of a good five hundred miles to 'Frisco."

"There's a reason," she murmured demurely. "And, incidentally, it isn't usual to find anybody living up in this neck of the woods. If I seem queer, you're queerer!" She brought out a compact and rubbed her smudged face industriously.

"I'm a radio experimenter," Eric explained. "What I was going to say was, that in the morning I can fix you up. My servant's going into 'Frisco on business and can run you there in my own car. There'll be just enough room for it to get round this car of yours. You can call at the nearest garage and tell them to fill your car up and run it home for you."

"Umm... You've no spare can of gas?"

"Sorry, no. You're welcome to my shack for the night. It'll be O.K. Old Jonathan will be the guardian angel. How about it?"

The girl's face brightened. "Thanks a lot, Mr.— You have a name, I suppose? Or do experimenters just have numbers?"

Eric laughed, took her arm as they returned up the pass.

"If I did have a number, zero would about suit it."

"Zero isn't a number, it's a negation.... And I still haven't your name?"

"Eric Sanders."

"Mine's Sonia Benson. No ties, no parents, and if my friends are to be believed, no sense either.... Say, do you happen to be any relation to the Gerald Sanders who had a shot at Mars some twenty years ago?"

Eric glanced at her sharply. "Why? How do you know what happened twenty years ago? You don't look a day over twenty-three or so now."

"I could have had parents who told me, couldn't I?" she demanded.

"I guess so.... I'm Gerald Sanders' son. Does it mean anything?"

"Well, no—but it's interesting.... Ah, so this is where you experiment?"

CHAPTER II A Message from the Void

Sonia looked about her with obvious interest as they passed through the shack's open doorway into the network of instruments and contrivances. Eric closed the door, stood silently watching the girl as she gazed round.

As she pulled off her hat she released a mass of curls the color of new copper. They framed her quick, youthful face and sharply enhanced the pink and white of her skin, the deep unfathomable violet of her eyes. At least, Eric judged that they were violet; they had an odd knack of changing color as she slowly turned. She was definitely beautiful, but in a manner rather different from the usual.

"You must do an awful lot of clever things in here," she said at last, and her dainty mouth smiled to reveal flawless teeth.

"Take a seat," Eric invited, and hastily dusted one of the rather ancient chairs. "Sorry things are so upset around here. Maybe you'd better come into the drawing room—"

"Oh, no—no," she laughed, settling down. "This is fine...." She looked up questioningly as Jonathan came shuffling in from the kitchen regions. He regarded her with a silence that was almost one of awe until finally Eric spoke.

"Heat up some more coffee, Jonathan—and rustle up some grub from somewhere. Miss Benson must be pretty hungry.... This is my man, Jonathan, by the way."

She smiled at the old man prettily and he nodded awkwardly, went out with the percolator clutched in his hand. Then the girl threw off her heavy coat, revealed the flawless curves of her slight, lissom body.

Eric drew up a chair before her and proffered his cigarette case with a hand that shook oddly. To his surprise the copper curls shook emphatically. "Thanks all the same, no."

"No? I should have thought you were—well, modern in every way," he remarked. Then he frowned a little. "Say, you're not a television actress, are you?"

She laughed musically. "Good heavens, no! I'm just a wandering girl, with more money than sense. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, 'cept that with your looks and—er—figure you'd knock any television producer's ears off."

"Never mind television; what about your experiments?" she asked softly, and her eyes changed from inky black to sapphire blue as she leaned forward eagerly.

"Oh, forget them! I can afford to take a bit of time off to entertain a visitor. And such a—"

"But I'm interested!" she broke in quickly. "Anything scientific does something to me. That's why I asked about your name. I think your father was the most wonderful pioneer in history. He dared the void," she whispered. "The void!"

"And somewhere on Mars." Eric murmured, carried away for the moment, "is somebody, I feel convinced, who will one day communicate with me by radio."

She looked at him strangely. "So that's what you're doing up here like a hermit?"

"Sure." Eric waved proudly to his apparatus, got to his feet and moved to his receiver. He felt doubly proud when the girl got up and stood by his side, profoundly interested in all the things he detailed. Without a hint of boredom she listened, her beautiful face alive and intelligent. Even when Jonathan came shuffling in with the coffee and sandwiches she hardly seemed interested in the subject of supper.

"It's simply marvelous!" she declared at last, fingering the receiver with white hands. "To think that this apparatus could receive messages from a world forty million miles away...."

"But it doesn't!" Eric complained bitterly, handing her a cup of coffee from the tray Jonathan was holding. "Just listen for yourself what happens...." He closed the many switches that controlled the apparatus and they sat listening to the crackling, whining hum from the loudspeaker.

"And that racket is Polar static, I suppose?" Sonia asked presently, daintily munching a sandwich.

Eric looked surprised. "Why, yes. Say, for a girl who says she's no sense you're going places."

"No sense in ordinary things, perhaps, but those interested in science rarely have. Since static is the free movement of electrons and protons, one of the direct results of ionization—and since the greatest display of that is at the magnetic poles, that's the natural answer, isn't it?"

"I guess so." Eric drank his coffee and they sat looking at each other over the cup edges, her profound eyes looking directly into his. Jonathan stood silently waiting.

"Why not try a different wave-length?" the girl asked at last, surveying the graded dials. "Obviously there is nothing in that particular section."

"Can if you like, but it won't be any good. I've done it thousands of times before. What would you suggest? Higher or lower?"

"Oh, I dunno.... Try lower."

Eric reached out and played with the directional finder, moving the pointer along its graded dial towards the shortest possible radio waves. Then suddenly he stopped, froze in mid action, dropped his coffee cup with a crash, as there came in the speaker an incredibly faint murmuring, almost like the cadences of a rising wind.

"Listen!" he whispered hoarsely. "Listen to that! A voice!"

"Probably an experimenter from somewhere," Sonia said, putting her cup down.

Eric studied the dials quickly. "Can't be that. No experimenter could possibly tune to this short wave—or even if by some fluke he did manage it he'd have to be quite near to this shack. I know that isn't so because there's nothing within two hundred miles of this place. I made sure of it because of possible interference." He slammed his chair round and began to fiddle desperately with gadget after gadget, and the more he fiddled the more the murmuring changed from inaudibility to definite meaning, slowly began to take on the shape of words.

The girl stiffened and leaned forward with red lips parted. Jonathan advanced and stood with his gray head cocked on one side.

"...calling to Earth. Mars calling Earth. Calling to third planet from sun. Fourth planet calling third.... Mars calling Earth...."

"It's English!" Eric yelled, jerking round an amazed face. "Oh, gosh, if only I had a transmitter powerful enough to answer I could perhaps —"

"Listen!" the girl interrupted him, her hand raised—and the faint, whispered communication resumed.

"Calling to man or woman named Sanders, child of Gerald Sanders of San Francisco, Earth.... This message will be repeated without ceasing until my telepathic apparatus reveals that the mind of the child of Gerald Sanders—if there be such a child—is trained directly on Mars. Then I shall know that my message has been received and will communicate in full.... Calling to Earth—"

The message went on again through the same wording, uttered in a voice that was not unpleasing, but so quiet, so suggestive of vast distances, it had almost an eerie quality in the lonely mountain shack.

"I made it!" Eric kept whispering, again and again. "I've tried all these years, and now— They must have learned the English language from father's books and radio-phonograph records, and things. Mars inhabited!" he shouted, leaping up. "Infinitely intelligent people with telepathic apparatus! They'll know when I'm thinking about them! All right!" he yelled, staring at the apparatus in front of him. "I'm concentrating! Do you get it? This is Eric Sanders—!"

"Better take it easy, Mister Eric," Jonathan advised uncomfortably.

"Easy! At a time like this?"

"Anyhow, your thoughts will take about four minutes to cross space," the girl murmured, thinking. "Assuming Mars to be at the mean distance of forty million miles, that is."

"Why should they?" Eric demanded. "Thought is instantaneous."

Sonia's curls shook. "I don't agree. Everything in the universe, by its very structure and the FitzGerald Contraction, must be limited to the speed of light—even thought waves, which are included in the basic order of radiations."

Eric stared at her and her level pools of eyes stared back.

"I—I can't understand you, Miss Benson," he muttered. "For a girl who knows science so well to drive a car until it runs out of gas, and get stuck here of all places— Frankly, it looks far more than coincidence."

She shrugged. "What's my being here got to do with it, anyway? You've far more important things to think about at the moment. I've brought you luck, anyway, and incidentally done myself the good turn of being in on one of the most amazing radio communications in scientific history —"

She broke off and looked at the loudspeaker again—but it was the same message, repeated in the same calm, inscrutable voice. For nearly an hour it went on, then Eric got stiffly to his feet.

"Guess my thoughts aren't strong enough," he growled disconsolately.

"Maybe they take some analyzing," the girl suggested, rising up beside him. "I'm quite sure these Martians must know what they're about. It may take them a long time to sort matters out."

"Maybe...." Eric stood looking at her, then started as she tried ineffectually to stifle a yawn.

"Say, I'm forgetting I'm host!" he cried. "You must be about worn out." He glanced at his watch. "Whew! Two o'clock! I'll show you your room. Not very feminine, I'm afraid, but passing comfortable.... Jonathan, fetch Miss Benson's bags from the car."

"Yes, Mister Eric."

At the doorway of her room the girl turned and looked at Eric seriously. "I suppose this is your room, Mr. Sanders? What are you going to do for the night?"

"Sit by that radio and wait for something to happen. You surely didn't expect me to do anything else?"

She moved to one side as Jonathan came in with the bags.

"Frankly, no. If anything really important happens, outside of that repeated message, don't forget to wake me up."

"I promise," he smiled, and they surveyed each other. Then she began to withdraw into the room.

"Well, good night. And thanks again."

She closed the door gently and Eric turned away, not feeling at all sure of himself. On the one hand he had the excitement of his radio messages; on the other he had the fascination of this strange and lovely girl who had dropped into his life.

"She may be one of them newspaper reporters," Jonathan muttered, when they were back in the experimental room. It was as though he'd read Eric's thoughts.

"No, Jonathan, I don't think that. They don't come that beautiful as newspaper reporters.... Funny. Sort of puts me off experimenting."

"Them experiments is business, Mister Eric," Jonathan observed heavily. "The other is only pleasure...." He hesitated, then asked, "Seeing I've to go to 'Frisco in the morning, I wonder if you'd mind if I went to bed?"

"Eh? Oh, sure—sure. Go right ahead. Good night.."

Eric turned aside to the radio once more, prepared for an all night sitting—but although he sat through seemingly numberless hours nothing was added or deleted from that same steady communication. Then towards the dawn it began to fade. At sun up it stopped entirely. But Eric wasn't aware of that. He was dead asleep....

It was Jonathan who aroused him, and by the time he had dressed and shaved Sonia had arrived, even more freshly beautiful after a night's rest. She looked up from the ham and eggs.

"Anything happen?" she asked quickly, then sighed as Eric shook his head.

"Maybe I'm too dense to register thoughts," he growled. "Anyway, they surely ought to have had time to analyze them by tonight. The moment darkness sets in I'll be on the job again. Lucky that I've nothing else to do. Jonathan does all the running about for provisions, and money, and stuff. That's why he's going into 'Frisco this morning."

"You're independent, then?"

"Sure. Dad was worth a fortune, otherwise he couldn't have built the things he did. When mother died, it all came to me, of course."

The girl was silent for a moment, toying with her breakfast. Then she said, "Funny, isn't it, that we both have plenty of money, are both interested in the same things, and yet came together because I was foolish enough to run out of gas?"

"If that was the reason, yes," Eric agreed.

"Oh, it was—really!" Her eyes were very serious.

"It's a pity there are conventions in the world," he grunted; "otherwise you could stay here with me and we'd experiment together. Your friends would think things, though. So would mine, the few I have.... It wouldn't work out. Even in these days, Platonic friendship is looked at askance."

"You're right," she said in regret. "Besides, I've several things I must attend to in 'Frisco. Just the same I'm coming here every chance I get. If I may?"

Eric grasped the hand she extended over the table. "Nothing would suit me better," he murmured. "Nothing—"

Jonathan came in and interrupted him. "I've got the car ready, Mister Eric, and fixed Miss Benson's bags. It's just nine-thirty."

"The devil it is! Say, you've got to get moving—"

The girl drank up her coffee, hurried into her overcoat. Eric found it an effort to control himself as she took her leave, held out her hand again.

"You've been so kind, Mr. Sanders," she smiled. "And I'll come again at the earliest moment."

"Do!" he said earnestly. "In the meantime, where can I reach you? I've no 'phone here, but there's always the mail."

"Mark Hopkins Hotel, San Francisco. That will be my base for a day or two.... Now, goodbye...."

"Goodbye." Eric stood watching her slim form in the morning sunlight as she walked out to the car, Jonathan beside her. He was still watching when the car made its way round her own stranded bus, then finally passed out of sight on a bend in the pass.

Eric felt as though something had dropped out of his life as he turned back into the room. He reflected it was just his damned luck that his experiments needed his whole attention at this very time. A day earlier, and he'd probably have abandoned them for the pleasure of Sonia Benson's company.

CHAPTER III Love or Duty?

The day passed quietly for Eric. He potted around among his instruments, ate a lonely dinner, and thought of Sonia and Mars by turns. In the afternoon, garage men came and took her car away.

At sundown he settled himself before the radio again—but to his infinite disgust, and dismay, no further messages came through. Only the old static that had neither sense nor meaning. By midnight he gave it up and went to bed to catch up on his previous night's vigil.... The room carried a certain perfumed memory of Sonia and he slept blissfully, dreamed of her and the red planet by turns.

Jonathan arrived back by tea time the following afternoon, loaded with fresh provisions. He patiently answered all Eric's eager questions about the girl. Yes, he had dropped her at the Mark Hopkins Hotel; he hadn't seen her after that. She had been very grateful.

"She's a grand girl, Jonathan," Eric murmured, wagging his head. "I begin to think I've fallen for her.... Pity is I have to divide my attention over two things. I got no results last night from Mars; maybe I'll be luckier tonight. Fix up some tea when you're through and we'll get busy."

"Right, Mister Eric...."

And by seven o'clock they were both before the radio. Eric tensed himself as the static began to disappear as it had two nights before, vanished under the gentle power of an incredibly distant communication. Taut and rigid, he listened; head crouched towards the speaker.

"... I know that Eric Sanders, son of Gerald Sanders, lives on Earth. My machines received the impact of his concentrations. I speak to you, Eric Sanders, because I know you hear me. I am the last of my race, the last of what you call Martians. I have everything, yet I have nothing. I have a mighty empire beneath the desert sands, yet when I die it will cease. Robots work for me, machinery acts for me, but my mind alone controls it all. You understand that, Eric Sanders?"

Eric nodded absently, foolishly enough, and went on listening. He frowned irritably as Jonathan tried to plug up his pipe.

"I am forgetting," the communication suddenly resumed, "that you evidently have not the apparatus to answer me. Very well, then—listen. I, the sole remaining survivor of the Martians, have the name of Yana. I am female.... Twenty-six of your years ago I was born, but when I was six years old, your father came to our world and died here from his injuries.

"It happened, however, that he brought with him many instruments and records of which we took possession. But several of those instrument cases had within them germs, brought from Earth, harmless on your world but fatal to our particular constitutions. In a week vicious disease was abroad among our peoples. Men and women fell before the Plague of unknown bacteria, with which our medical science was powerless to cope because it had no conception of the basic nature of the trouble. It belonged to the chemistry of another world....

"At the time of this disease entering the heart of our main city I was under long period anaesthetic undergoing surgery. Every young Martian of both sexes undergoes operation at the age of six for the removal of unwanted evolutionary organs which only show themselves at that age. From the records of your father there is a similar case with the human appendix, an evolutionary throwback. You wait until it gives trouble. We remove all possible cause of trouble when a similar organ is ripe....

"It must have been when the operation had just been completed that the disease struck down the surgeons and other occupants of the hospital. Being in a state of suspended animation, the equivalent of your anaesthesia, the disease passed me by. I awoke to a hospital of the dead, hours after the normal time for revival since there was no normal restorative used upon me. The more I wandered round the more I realized the ghastly thing that had happened. What few had been left from the disease's ravages were now dead! My parents, my friends, the people of this particular sector of the city, were wiped out. I was alone....

"The disease seemed to have spent itself. There were no more living carriers for it. I was alive in a dead world—a world of machines, of colossal possibilities, on the very verge of starting a new empire under the deserts whither we had been driven by lack of surface air. Water there was—and is—in plenty. Atmosphere we manufacture artificially. Year by year the surface canal system passes the water down into the underworld.... Eric Sanders, your father unwittingly destroyed an entire race on the very edge of its newest achievements!"

The communication stopped for a while. Eric sat immovable, his face evidencing some of the horror he felt; nausea at the knowledge of the mass-murderer his dead father had unwittingly been.

"I thought once of destroying myself," the voice resumed steadily, "when I discovered I was the only living being in a dead world. Then I thought better of it. At six years of age a Martian is as fully developed in reasoning as a young Earth adult. Robots fed me: I would come to no harm. For years I just grew in knowledge and physical size, absorbing the information left by my dead people, and particularly that of the man who had come from another world. I solved the riddle of the diseases he had brought with him: I rid myself of all chances of disaster from decaying bodies by raying them out of existence....

"I mastered the language of this Earthman from his talking machine, studied all about his planet, found diary notes to the effect that back on his world his mate, your mother, was expecting an offspring. It was more than possible that, some day, that offspring would try and reach Mars. But though I waited for twenty Earth years nobody came. Then I hit on the idea of radio communication. I patterned a machine similar to the one in your father's machine and communicated.... Your thoughts impacting on my telepathic machines revealed that you had heard me...."

Again there was a long interval. Eric sat in brooding silence, chin on hand, and when the words were resumed they were full of subtle meaning, had a certain grimness.

"Eric Sanders, I believe you love Mars. I believe you love it because of the mighty thing your sire accomplished in crossing space to reach it. More than that, I believe you owe Mars a debt of honor! A race has perished through no fault of its own: a race can only be born again through your willingness.... I am not threatening you, Eric Sanders, but I *am* reminding you of your duty. If on Earth you unwittingly did a wrong to a neighbor, you would deem it necessary to put matters right insofar as you could. You have a similar chance now.

"As fortune has it you are fundamentally male: I am female. Biological research on my part has revealed that union between us can be just as perfectly accomplished as between different races of Earth. I have tried, ineffectually, to create synthetic life, but the secret still eludes me. Between us, by the intermarriage of offsprings, a race can be born anew. Mars acknowledges no sects or creeds in the creation of a new generation—not when the very life of the planet depends upon it.

"You owe it to Mars, Eric Sanders—in the name of your father ... I shall not expect your answer yet. I will not communicate until two more Earthly nights have passed, by which time I shall expect your decision. It will, as before, be rendered telepathically by your concentrations. If you agree I will tell you what you have to do. If you do not—I will deal with that later. For the time being, Eric Sanders—farewell!"

The voice faded out, was succeeded by a terrific burst of static. Eric sat heedless, staring blankly before him, soaking in the terrific import of the proposition hurled at him over forty million miles. Then as the speaker row became deafening he slammed off the receiver switches and got unsteadily to his feet.

"It's—it's incredible!" he whispered at last, rubbing his forehead. "I must have dreamed it—"

"That you didn't, Mister Eric," Jonathan interrupted him shaking his gray head. "I heard them words myself, and mighty queer they was, too! I got the idea that that woman—if woman she be—is sort of proposing to you! She wants to marry you.... Leastways, that's how I saw it."

"Then I didn't dream it," Eric breathed, smiling bitterly. "This is the sort of reward I get after years of struggle— A request, almost a command, that I sacrifice everything on Earth in order to be the procreator of another race on another world! The—the Granddaddy of the red planet! A Summons from Mars! Why it's ludicrous!" he cried.

"Ay, it is," Jonathan agreed sagely, smoking steadily. "But have you reckoned what might happen if you refuse?"

"If I refuse! I *shall* refuse! What do you take me for?"

"I takes you for an intelligent man like your father, Mister Eric, if you'll forgive the liberty—intelligent enough leastways to know what might happen if you don't do what this Martian woman asks. She might start a war! War between worlds might become a fact!"

"But she distinctly said she wasn't threatening me."

Jonathan spat eloquently at the coke heater. "Huh! Don't they all?" he demanded sourly. "Even invaders on Earth don't threaten anybody these days—they apologize while they blow the damned ground from under your feet. An' she'll do the same! Maybe she's a sort of lone wolf, but if she's got robots and machines like she says, she can be the controller of a mighty tough army. She must have some way of crossing space, too, else she wouldn't have suggested you coming to Mars. Probably she's gotten the secret from your dad's own ship."

"Yeah—probably she has." Eric lighted a cigarette and sat down again, pondering. Then he said slowly, "You know, Jonathan, that war angle hadn't occurred to me. She *might*, at that! If she can't get me she'll take Earthmen, or an Earthman, by force. Maybe women too. Faced with such a desperate situation she might do anything. This is evidently a sort of preliminary negotiation...."

"I know wimmin, Earthly, Martian, or anything else," Jonathan growled. "They're all the same."

"Oh, but the thing's so fantastic!" Eric cried. "It just isn't reason! Married to a Martian! Some ghastly monstrosity or other ... It's hideous! Monstrous she'll have to be. No life on two planets can evolve on the same lines. For one thing, Mars' lesser gravity will produce physical differences. I can imagine a mighty-lunged creature, heavily muscled, broad backed and— Oh, what's the use?" he finished irritably glaring at the apparatus. "I've a damn good mind to scrap all that stuff right now—set fire to the shack—return to 'Frisco and live in peace."

"But you won't," Jonathan said, staring moodily at the heater.

"How do you know?"

"Because if you do you'll have a little voice remindin' you all the time that you shouldn't have done it—that you've perhaps brought a threat of wholesale destruction down on the world—that every death that might happen from a Martian invasion will be your fault.... No; you won't do that, Mister Eric."

"Then what the hell am I to do?" he shouted helplessly. "Don't sit there with your philosophies! Give me a line of action."

Jonathan shrugged. "There ain't no line, Mister Eric—but I'll remind you of one or two things. That woman was right when she said you had a duty to your father's memory: she was right, too, when she said that it's up to you to pay off for the damage he caused."

"In that case I'd take just the same troubles with me as he did," Eric cried eagerly. "Say, Jonathan, that's a get-out! An excuse—"

"No, it ain't." Jonathan's head shook stubbornly. "I figured she said she solved the diseases your dad took with him. That's no way out..." He got to his feet and laid his veined hand on Eric's shoulder. "Talking to you as man to man, Mister Eric—as a man nearly thirty years older than you are, I'm reminding you of your duty—your duty to your father's great achievement, to his memory and your mother's. Remember that she died with the wish you should do all you could to further the ideals of your dad."

Eric sighed. "Maybe, but this contingency hardly came into it. To give up everything! No—no, Jonathan; I love Earth too much."

Jonathan regarded him in silence for a moment. "You didn't love it so much until Miss Benson dropped in," he commented. "I can remember you saying you'd devote your life to the study of Mars. You even said you'd give anything to be there!"

"Well, maybe Sonia—I mean, Miss Benson, has something to do with it," Eric admitted, rubbing his head. "Can you blame me? I'm still young, unattached, and she's beautiful and clever—"

"Ay, but men have faced similar problems and overcome them through sense of duty. Force of character."

Eric sprang up. "But a man has a right to choose between his natural life and his duty!" he snapped. "And I'm choosing right now! I'm not throwing away my life on a hell fired planet forty million miles from Earth ... I want something out of life on this globe first."

"You want Sonia Benson," Jonathan said, with unerring logic.

"Oh— Oh, go to hell!" Eric roared, and swinging on his heel he stalked out of the room to his bedroom and slammed the door. Jonathan knocked the ashes out of his pipe, spat languidly.

"Well, I guess he might do worse than sleep on it," he muttered.

Eric slept badly, tortured by fantastic dreams in which he saw his Martian communicator as a pot-bellied, big-headed monstrosity moving through endless halls of bewildering machinery. He saw a face of no human parallel hovering superimposed on the midst of vast armies of soulless, marching robots. He saw hellish war descend on Earth, saw the complete collapse of civilization....

He saw tears in the beautiful eyes of Sonia Benson, saw himself clasping her slim, delicate body in his arms—then old Jonathan came in from nowhere and laconically reminded him of his duty.

He woke up wet with perspiration to find the dawn had arrived. Warily he shaved and dressed, refused his breakfast at first; then thinking further, decided to have it after all.

"Any decision, Mister Eric?" Jonathan ventured, chewing slowly.

"Yeah! I'm not going through with it!" he retorted.

"But, Mister Eric, your—"

"I know—my duty! Well, to hell with it! I'm going into 'Frisco this morning to see Sonia. I'm going to ask her to marry me."

"So soon?"

"Well, no harm in trying, is there? I'll be back tomorrow night. You stay here and keep a watch on things while I'm gone. The Martian won't communicate tonight in any case...."

Jonathan shook his head sadly, lighted his reeking pipe. He watched in silence as Eric flung a few things in a valise, scrambled into his hat and coat, and stalked round to the garage. He was in a brittle, touchy mood....

In ten minutes he was on his way, but night had fallen again before he reached the Mark Hopkins Hotel on one of the hills of 'Frisco.

The girl seemed lovelier than ever as he entered her room on the fifth floor. She greeted him with warm gentleness, motioned to a settee and sat down beside him. Quietly she proffered a drink.

"Something happened?" she asked presently. "You look worried."

"Do you mind," Eric asked slowly, "if I call you Sonia?"

She laughed. "Why, of course not! It's much more informal. Besides, we're the best of friends, aren't we? We have common interests."

"I'd rather hoped we could be more than friends," he said broodingly, studying his empty glass. "That's what I came about. You see, I—I'm in love with you, Sonia...."

She said nothing. Her multicolored eyes were upon him as he looked up sharply. "Does it surprise you?" he asked quickly.

She was slow to respond. "Well, no, Eric, it doesn't surprise me—but I am inclined to doubt your very sudden avowal of the fact. A young man in love doesn't usually work so—so fast, unless he's driven by something. An impelling urge—probably fear. You're driven by fear, aren't you?" she asked seriously.

"How ridiculous!" He seized her white hand. "Why on earth should fear drive me to you?"

"The fear of losing me," she answered steadily. "There's something mighty real about a love like that, Eric: there aren't any words to express how I appreciate it.... But it's forced!" she went on, her face puzzled. "You didn't travel all this way to tell me you love me so much unless it was imperative you do it quickly. *I'm* not going to run away, therefore the urge is on your side. Come on, what is it? I've a right to know."

"There's nothing, really," he insisted. "If there is any fear at all it's only because some other guy might muscle in and take you from me. I couldn't bear that. I want you to marry me—and quickly."

"Without knowing hardly a thing about me?"

"Oh, why be so old fashioned!" he protested. "If a guy loves a girl he does what he wants—marries her; if she's willing, of course. Long engagements, family inquiries—they're things of the past. Isn't it enough that I want you? I've money enough...."

"If we were married; what then?" she asked slowly.

"Why, we'd go round the world—see everything there is to see. We'd even—"

"And your experiments?" she broke in quickly.

He shrugged, a little bitterly. "I'm giving them up. They're a waste of time, anyway.... Come on, Sonia, what do you say?"

"Eric, I say this: something must have happened since I saw you last to make you act like this—something you heard over that Martian radio." Her voice was very decisive. "You'd never drop the experiments otherwise and try to snatch at happiness with me. If happiness it would prove...."

"But, Sonia—"

"I'm sorry, Eric, but I won't marry you yet, not until I know what is behind all this business. It doesn't convince me. I'll help you with your experiments in a couple of days or so. To make the thing decent we can even be engaged to be married, but not until I have every detail will I give my consent."

He shrugged reluctantly. "O.K., then, if that's how you want it...." He sat for a moment in moody silence, then brightened a little. "Well, what are we waiting for?" he cried. "Now I'm in 'Frisco I intend to have some fun. Come on out, before the jewelers shut up shop. Tomorrow I'm returning to the shack, but until then—"

He broke into a laugh, and the girl smiled—then she turned and withdrew to her dressing room.

CHAPTER IV

Eric Decides

Eric was conscious of an increasing bitterness of heart as he set off on the return journey from 'Frisco next morning. He had left Sonia with a solitaire ring on her finger and the promise that she would join him within a day or two. With that he had had to be satisfied.

But he found himself wondering what decision he was going to give this night when the Martian tuned in. Sonia would never marry him until she knew the truth; and once she did know it and realized he had thrown over duty for love of her she would probably cut him dead anyway. On the other hand, if he agreed to the Martian proposition he automatically finished his Earthly associations....

Small wonder his mood was one of black despair by the time he reached the shack in the evening shadows. Jonathan was waiting for him with a hot meal out on the table. He said but little; he could see Eric's mood was still anything but pleasant....

For a long time Eric ate in moody silence, until at last Jonathan ventured to speak.

"Did you see Miss Benson, Mister Eric?"

"More than that; I became engaged to her. I'm going to marry her."

"Then the Martian—?"

"I've been thinking about that, too." Eric tossed down his knife and fork, looked keenly across the table. "I've decided it boils down to a matter of self-defense, of playing bluff with bluff. How do I know this Martian speaks the truth, anyway? How does *she* know I'll keep my word even if I accept her damnable proposition? There's not the slightest reason why the mistake of a father should be visited on the child. In plain words, Jonathan, I'm not taking the rap for something my father did.... I'm fed up with the whole damned Martian business. I intend to enjoy life. I'll give this Martian my assent—sure I will; I might even carry out the experiments she'll suggest, but just suppose I met with some accident on my way into space? Suppose I was killed? How could she ever find out?"

"I dunno, Mister Eric—but she seems to have some mighty tricky instruments."

"Maybe she has, but I'll wager she wouldn't find out anything if she saw a space ship leave Earth and then vanish in space, never to land on Mars. She'd think I'd started out and got lost. Truth would be I'd never begun to go. But it would stop that idea of war. She'd think I'd shown willingness anyhow."

Jonathan pondered through an interval. "It might," he agreed, rather doubtfully. Then seriously, "I'm rather regrettin' that Miss Benson ever happened in on you like she did, Mister Eric. You've not been the same man since—"

"Now don't start preaching!" Eric snapped, getting to his feet. "I'll handle this in my own way. I'm going to concentrate on Mars now and give my assent."

"And suppose the things you've just planned have also registered way up there?"

"Not very likely. They were ordinary thoughts with no direct concentration on any given objective.... Now shut up and let me concentrate."

Eric closed his eyes and sat in silence for a good ten minutes, then he looked up. "Guess that ought to fix it, anyway. We'll see what comes through."

He moved to the receiver and switched it on, was rewarded with the usual static.... For nearly two hours he wandered moodily round the little room, smoking incessantly, waiting for a communication to come—and at last he was rewarded. That far distant voice began to speak.

"Your concentration message has been received, Eric Sanders. You will not regret your decision. You will begin to prepare yourself. Now listen carefully and record or write down what I shall tell you. I will wait awhile for you to gather your instruments together...."

Smiling rather grimly Eric threaded steel tape from spool to spool of the recorder, started it in motion as the voice resumed again.

"Air on this planet was once practically identical in pressure to that of Earth, therefore within this underground city it is but little different from your own, even though our surface air is unbreathable—cold, and almost dehydrated. Air adaptation may therefore be discounted. The physical changes in your body will be those of adaptation to a gravity 2/5ths of Earth normal, and the development of your brain to the extent of reading thoughts within a range of five hundred Earthly yards. Martians are naturally highly telepathic; we have advanced further than you. You have the same root possibilities in your brain, but they can only be brought into force by the application of certain electrical frequencies. First, however, we will deal with the matter of gravity.

"Gravity is still as much a mystery to Martian science as it is to yours. We do not know whether it is basically magnetic, a pucker in space-time, or some type of force—but we do know its effect on the body. As was proved in the case of your sire, change to a lesser gravity creates death for one very good reason. The blood of an Earthling is held in its circulatory tract by gravity fixed at Earth-norm; but when that pull is considerably lessened it produces an excess flow to the brain—arteries and veins no longer perform their correct function under the decreased pull. In consequence, there is an effect which I might call slow apoplexy.

"Further than that, assuming for a moment that this did not occur, the muscles are entirely out of coordination, and the conception of pleasant lightness and jumping about on a lesser gravitated world is so much myth. One must be prepared, have every muscle trained, have the blood stream diluted so that the removal of gravitative pull creates no harm. Even as you on Earth have invented chemicals for enriching the blood, usually with a basis of iron and phosphates, so Martian science has found one which renders the quality of Earthly blood inferior, yet enables it to maintain bodily health because the substitute is so perfectly matched to feed the brain and nerves.... Here is the formula, which from a study of Earth materials I understand can be easily made...."

Eric listened, watched the recording tape. His interest was oddly stirred anew by the long string of chemicals uttered by the passionless, steady voice. For the moment the scientist in him was absorbed again by the eerie fascination of this strange communication between worlds.

"You will have that formula made up, different chemists supplying different ingredients so no particular one can possibly make the whole. You will inject it into a vein with a hypodermic three times a day for an Earthly week. At the end of that time your blood stream will be fitted for Martian conditions. While you remain on Earth the effect will be one of slight light-headedness, but not sufficient to upset your general health....

"Now for your muscles. On Mars your muscles will propel you with a power far stronger than is prudent for your body. In time you would become a mass of strained tendons and ligatures through overuse. Therefore the muscular strength must be weakened to a given degree.

"You will accomplish this by using an electrical radiation which will slightly loosen the molecular build up of your muscles and flesh until they become normal for Mars. On Earth you will feel extremely frail, but here on Mars you will be normal. For the electrical radiation you can use an ordinary generator, but equip it with a projector to the following design...."

The tape recorded every word of the designing that followed. It was not particularly intricate, but highly unusual. Within it was to be a wire coil, its number of turns round a copper drum giving the exact radiation required to produce the molecular loosening.

"For a week you will adopt these measures," the voice concluded. "A week from the time you have made up the formula and built the radiation projector. I will communicate at intervals while you progress. Once you have accomplished these two things the final work will take place—that of rendering your brain Martian-normal, able to receive and transmit thoughts over a five hundred yard range. Also you will discover how to prevent the carriage of Earthly germs to Mars. It will consist of a formula for a liquid which you will spray over every article you bring from your world.... You will not regret this, Eric Sanders. An empire awaits your coming. For the time being, farewell...."

Eric sat in silence for a long time after the communication ceased, until at last Jonathan's dry voice aroused him.

"Well, Mister Eric, what are you going to do about it? It seems kind of obvious to me that that Martian woman trusts you. She's looking to you to do the right thing, on your honor as a man of Earth."

"Yeah.... I guess that's right." Eric frowned, stirred uneasily. "You know, I got the funniest impression while she was talking. A sort of feeling that science is the only thing that matters in the long run, and yet— Oh, hell. *I don't know!*"

"It's in your hands, Mister Eric, and when it comes to a matter of an empire's fate— Well, it's duty as ought to count."

"But, Jonathan, there's Sonia—"

"She's only one woman, lad. I'm not doubting you'd find pleasure with her, but it won't get you no place. At heart you're a scientist and

idealist like your dad. It'll take more'n a beautiful girl to turn you aside.... Leastways, I'm hoping so."

"Two hours ago I'd have told you to soak your head in a bucket," Eric muttered. "Now I begin to think you're right. I have a duty, tough going though it's going to be.... O.K.! I'll keep my word to this Martian. I'll explain to Sonia—somehow—when she comes," he finished gloomily.

Jonathan rose up with sudden eagerness, fixed the spools so that they read back the messages that had been received.

"Now you're talking, boy!" he cried eagerly. "I'm backing you to the end...."

In the days that followed Eric followed out the Martian's orders with an enthusiasm that amounted almost to frenzy. It was a spurious energy, and most certainly didn't deceive the all-embracing eyes of old Jonathan. It was not so much the love of science that was driving Eric this way, but the almost fanatical desire to convince himself that he didn't care a damn about Earth, Sonia, or anything else. He smothered himself in hard work to drown out all other natural calls of his being—and to a partial extent he succeeded.

So hard did he work he had the radiation projector fixed inside a week, personally traveled to San Francisco and lodged the order for the special coil winding with an electrical firm. In two days—days in which he studiously avoided visiting the Mark Hopkins Hotel or sending any messages—the coil was finished and he returned to his shack. That part of the work was done.

The chemical formula was more difficult. He had to contact some fifteen different experts in chemistry in leading cities before he was finally assured of success. Another fortnight was swallowed up, and during the time he received no further messages from Mars, nor any word or visit from Sonia. He began to hope she had forgotten him, or that she was a worthless flirt—anything rather than the attractive, delightful girl she appeared to be. It would make it easier to turn her down when the time came...

True to instructions he injected the pale yellow chemical fluid into his arm three times a day, found it interfered but little with his health. There was only a trace of sickness the first day, then the effect began to wear off and was replaced by the predicted sensation of light-headedness. Unpleasant, undoubtedly, but not enough to interfere with his work. The stuff had an odd effect on his skin too—changed it from its normal healthy bronze to dead white. It struck him as distinctly effeminate. He found also, through an accidental cut whilst shaving, that his blood had become infinitely paler than normal. Any doctor would have pronounced him as a sufferer from pernicious anemia.

At the end of a week of injections he got busy with the projector, bathed himself at intervals for seven days in its emanations. At each application of its strange frequency he could feel his muscles and physical framework undergoing subtle, unexplained differences. The iron strength of his young muscles and sinews was softened incredibly. It disgusted him to find his natural strength cut to a ghost of its former power at the end of seven days. He felt oddly ineffectual and almost revoltingly girlish.

On the night his experiments ended, the communication from Mars resumed after sundown. Eric presumed that his thoughts had more effect on those unknown telepathic machines than he had anticipated. Possibly, even, his earlier decision to throw the whole thing up at the last moment had registered. Not that it mattered now. He was forced by very virtue of his physical change to go through with the thing.

"You have done well, Eric Sanders," the calm voice told him. "Your thoughts have revealed your decision to do what is your duty: you will not regret it. The final change in your physical makeup now takes place. Your brain must be made capable of thought-reception and transmission. It is entirely a matter of exercises of concentration—the will to receive and transmit thoughts. The actual brain change to make this feat possible has already taken place. The chemical you used to alter the quality of your bloodstream produced that effect.

"A brain's efficiency relies on the quality of blood feeding it: the substance you have injected into your bloodstream will have a higher ratio of efficiency for your brain, will make you able, by following out a series of exercises which I shall detail to you, of transmitting thoughts and receiving them. Understand, though, that no Earthling will be able to receive your thoughts—no Earthly brain is capable of it. But you will be able to read theirs within a range of five hundred yards....

"Once you reach this planet you will have a perfect telepathic partner in myself. I shall now detail the step-up mental exercises. In another week you will be proficient. Then I will tell you how you will reach Mars.... Prepare for details...."

Eric switched on the spool recorder and at the same time listened intently. The stated exercises consisted of greater and greater spells of concentration on given objects, together with a system of memory retention and conception. It was not a difficult process, but he had his doubts as to being able to accomplish it....

"Looks like I'm going to be something of a superman before I'm through," he observed to Jonathan, as the communication ended. "I wish my body was as good. This lily-white effect makes me sore."

"One sacrifices plenty in the course o' duty," Jonathan said sagely, studying the recording tape. "I guess you ought to feel glad at the thing you're doing.... Your father would have been mighty proud of you."

Eric didn't answer. At that moment he was thinking about Sonia, wondering why she had not kept her word to come and visit him....

CHAPTER V

The Coming of Yana

Sonia did keep her promise. On the sixth day of Eric's concentration exercises she arrived, just before sundown, as slender and lovely as ever, full of excuses for her absence. Business had kept her an unusually long time; now it was over, she wanted to help with the experiments.... Then in mid-sentence she stopped and studied Eric closely, surprise, even concern, in her violet eyes.

"Eric, you're not ill?" she asked, startled, seizing his arm.

He looked at her steadily, shook his head. He was wishing bitterly that she hadn't come. Now she was near him again, so intelligent, so affectionate, he began to realize how far he'd travelled on a scientific road away from her.

"Not ill—just preparing for something," he answered quietly. "I'll tell you about it while we have tea. Sit down, won't you?"

She settled herself on the chair Jonathan held for her, began to drink her tea and watched Eric over the cup.

"Sonia," he said at last, speaking with obvious difficulty, "I guess I've been a first class heel.... I can't marry you, nor had I ever the right to expect it."

He waited for the girl to be angered by the slight she had received, but it didn't come. Instead she smiled faintly and lowered her gaze. "After all, I knew there *was* something," she murmured. "You can tell me, Eric.... Go on."

In halting sentences he told the full story little by little. A variety of expressions passed over her lovely face as she listened. When at last he finished there was a long silence. The cups of tea were cold, the meal uneaten. Jonathan sat to one side smoking solemnly, his eyes alternating between the girl and tensely earnest young man.

"And yet," the girl said at last, "knowing what this Martian business must mean you are willing to take it on, go through to the bitter end, and sacrifice me? Everything on Earth?"

"That's what makes me a first class heel," he growled, studying the tablecloth.

"No, it doesn't," she said quietly. "It makes you the possessor of a most enviable quality of nobility. A man has got to be noble to give up everything he loves because his duty demands it. Your father obviously had it; it isn't lacking in the son."

"Then—then you're not furious with me for the advantage I took of you?"

Eric looked up quickly and seized her hand.

"No, my dear." She smiled a little regretfully. "You only took a very human advantage. You kicked over the traces—made a great show of what you wanted to do, but all the time you didn't really believe it.... I said I'd help you, and I will. I wouldn't be any sort of a woman if I didn't."

Eric said bitterly, "Your decency makes it all the worse for me—makes me realize so keenly what I'm losing. If you'd only blow up, or something!" He shrugged. "Sorry! Guess I don't know properly what I am doing.... Say, the tea's cold! We'll have to start again. Come on, Jonathan, do your stuff."

"So you're on the last lot of physical changes?" the girl asked thoughtfully, as tea proceeded. "What's the effect?"

"Rather queer—but it's right enough. I'm finding ways of getting remarkably adept at concentration. I get some good ideas, too. In another day—by tomorrow night, I'll be through. Then I'll be able to read anybody's thought within five hundred yards. Yours included," he smiled.

"I hope you'll find them interesting," she laughed. "Tell me, what kind of a woman do you imagine this Martian, Yana, will be?"

"Hideous, naturally. Life can't be the same on two worlds."

"I'm none too sure." Sonia mused for a moment, then said, "I think in the case of Mars and Earth parallel evolution might conceivably happen—not identical, mind you, but similar. Yana says her planet had an atmosphere the same as Earth's once—still has, in artificial form, under the deserts. That would produce oxygen breathing creatures like us. Since air pressure is the same there as here, or almost, it does away with the big chested, large lunged conception. Then again, a small planet will demand comparatively small people. A large person would have too much strength—be top-heavy. That cuts out the giant theory.... She mightn't be so grotesque as you imagine."

"Good of you to cheer me up," Eric said moodily.

"No; I mean it. The pointers are there—and life itself can't be so very much different. All the basic chemicals of life came originally from the same source—the Sun. Given similar evolutionary background, save in the matter of gravity, of course, I don't see why there should be such widely differing species. On Venus, yes—or on Jupiter or Saturn, where climatic conditions would produce weird changes, but not between Mars and Earth. Save for the matter of size they're twin worlds...."

Eric shrugged. "Well, there's no harm in hoping for the best..." He pushed the remains of his tea to one side and glanced at his watch. "I've got to get busy with my exercises. You can either watch me or prowl around.... Either way I'm darn glad to have you here."

The girl relaxed, sat in silence and studied him as he seated himself a little apart and closed his eyes. His brows knitted in the effort of marshalling his thoughts.

Neither the girl nor Jonathan moved, though they glanced at each other occasionally. Jonathan watched the girl without her noticing it, studied the calm, serene beauty of her face, the steady, interested look in her varicolored eyes.

A full hour had passed before Eric suddenly opened his eyes. His face was tense with excitement.

"Say, I'm beginning to manage it!" he cried. "I can feel it little by little, the inflow of thoughts—for the first time, breaking through like ... like sunlight through clouds. Gosh, I never thought I was so dense before!"

Sonia and Jonathan leaned forward eagerly. "What do you see?" the girl asked tensely. "Can you read *our* thoughts?"

Eric winced with the effort of trying. "I'm just beginning to; I'm getting yours more quickly than Jonathan's.... According to the Martian I'll be fully proficient tomorrow night, but even as it is— Yes, I begin to see things! Your thoughts, Sonia! You're thinking about me."

"Of course," she admitted gently. "Always."

"Something else too," he went on slowly, eyes closed. "I can see deserts ... Martian deserts! Blue-black sky! An underworld of machines ... Automatic controls ... Something else! A space machine! From photographs and records I'd say it's my father's space ship... That's odd; it's moving through the void...."

"Through the void!" echoed Jonathan blankly.

"Yes." Eric seemed almost in a dreamlike state. He talked with mechanical effort. "Strange ... It comes towards Earth, not away from it. It falls— No, it's skillfully controlled. It drops gently to Earth ... There's something I can't quite make out. A radio apparatus, I think. Something is moving dimly before it ... Now it's gone!"

Eric opened his eyes suddenly, found the girl and Jonathan gazing at him steadily.

"That all?" Jonathan demanded, disappointed.

"Afraid so," Eric muttered. "I think— No, wait a minute!" He concentrated for a moment, then shrugged. "No, I guess I'm just getting memory thoughts from Sonia. She's coming up the pass in that car of hers just as she did the other night, and—" He stopped dead, staring at her fixedly. "Sonia! You never told me you deliberately emptied your gas tank! I read from your mind that that is exactly what you did. You came here on purpose."

"Yes." She nodded slowly. "I shouldn't have let you know of that, should I? Frankly, I wanted to meet you. I couldn't think of a better way."

"But why?" Eric demanded. "Why did you—? Just a minute! I see something else.... A figure, so far away I can't distinguish it properly, is sitting studying Earth through an amazingly powerful telescope, making notes on the atmosphere, gravity, and all things related to it.... Now it's gone again—but there's something else. A lurking figure round this very shack! It's moving away..."

He stopped, rubbed his forehead. "Oh, I can't make head or tail of it," he said wearily. "Besides, these thought receptions are all wrong somewhere. It's impossible to receive thoughts beyond a range of five hundred yards, so Yana told me—and yet I'm getting things from a mind that can only be forty million miles away! Unless—unless that space ship brought the Martian to *Earth*!" he finished with a cry, leaping up. "In that case she's within five hundred yards of me! Somewhere—"

He broke off, speechless, staring into the girl's steady eyes.

"*You!*" he screamed. "*You* are the Martian woman, Yana!"

The girl's eyes were mystical in that moment, filled with strange fires. Eric felt himself reeling, clutched futilely at the bench, then his weakened strength failed him and he crashed headlong to the floor...

Eric awoke to find the girl bending over him, smiling gently, her soft, delicate hands caressing his face.

"Eric, my dear, forgive me," she murmured. "I had to do it. I should have realized that you were not strong enough in your present Martian condition to stand such a shock—"

"But how—what—?" he asked in bewilderment.

"I gave you the hint that Mars and Earth life might not be so far apart," she said quietly, holding his hand. "Now that you have become Martian in development we are identical. I am Yana, yes ... I analyzed the deposits of fuel left in your father's space machine rocket tubes, duplicated the fuel. I came to Earth to find his child. I hoped against hope it would be a man ... I knew too, from a study of the records of your father, that there is nothing to choose, biologically, between an Earthly male and a Martian female. There would be no difficulty about matchood...."

"I studied Earth, decided it was possible for me to stand its rigors without undue harm, provided I evolved the right counteractive for disease. In the twenty years that have passed since my race died I have had plenty of time to evolve one.... So, I came. I have felt as you have felt since you began experimenting—frail, lightheaded.... Otherwise, perfectly well."

She stopped, her red lips parted in that same slow smile.

"Go on," Eric muttered.

"Originally the space ship landed in a Siberian desert. I became, to all intents and purposes, a wealthy Earth woman by the name of Sonia Benson. I've studied this world for years, knew all about its customs, its monetary values.... It took me a long time to locate you, but when I did finally succeed I moved the ship to a high peak of these very mountains, no more than ten miles from here but three hundred feet higher up. In the ship I have a radio patterned after your father's design.... On the first occasion when I was with you, you will remember that the message was repeated over and over again. It was simply a perpetual tape with the same wording, timed to cease at sun-up. Then again, it was I who suggested what wavelength you should try on your set. Remember?"

Eric nodded slowly. "And the other times it was you I suppose?"

"My voice, yes. Now you know why I took so long in coming here to see you. That other time, when Jonathan dropped me in 'Frisco, I returned here immediately by plane, landed at the bottom of the range. I had to keep on sending you communications. As to your exact reactions, all your intentions—I knew those by standing outside this very shack and receiving your thoughts. That was why I was comfortably installed in 'Frisco when you came to see me. You gave me ample warning of your intentions by thinking of them long before you acted.... It was all so simple. The low-powered voice to give the impression of distance, my own reading of your every thought—"

"*But why?*" Eric demanded, sitting up with a jerk. "You knew all the time I loved you. Why did you have to—"

"You thought I was a woman of Earth, Eric. I behaved as such on purpose, to see which was the stronger power inside you—love of an Earth woman, or love of duty. I had to test you, my dear. Had you decided to marry me as an Earth girl, I would have returned alone to my own world. As it was you showed me you were the right man to be my partner in the formation of a new and mighty empire...."

Eric swallowed something, rose on his elbow and gripped the girl's hands. She was still smiling at him.

"Sonia..." he breathed. "Oh, Sonia, thank God I decided to do my duty. An' I mightn't have done, but for Jonathan."

"We depart tomorrow, Eric," she murmured. "My life on Earth is finished. I closed my Earthly associations before I came here to rejoin you. We can soon reach the space ship from here. You have only to spray all your belongings with the antidote I'll give you, and then..."

"Tomorrow," Eric whispered. "A new world—a new Empire—*you*..."

Only old Jonathan watched them leave the shack the following evening. Eric's experiments were complete. He was a master of thought reception and transmission between himself and the girl. They were in truth the mother and father of a new race on the red planet...

But old Jonathan saw nothing of their embracing in the space ship: he only saw, towards midnight, a burst of flame sparks from higher up the range—sparks that crept into the starry sky until they were swallowed up.

Moodily he turned back into the experimental room, stood looking at the short-wave apparatus. Then he picked up the stove poker.

"Since I've been made the legal possessor of all this stuff I've the right to do as I want with it," he said aloud—then brought the poker down savagely on the delicate instruments.

He surveyed the shattered remains, chuckled dryly.

"Well, that's two young folks that have grabbed some peace," he muttered, "and I'll darned well see that no folks on this blasted planet goes upsetting 'em by trying to wireless.... Interfering busy bodies!"

He spat eloquently at the heater, tugged out his pipe and began to light it vehemently....

[End of *A Summons from Mars*, by John Russell Fearn]