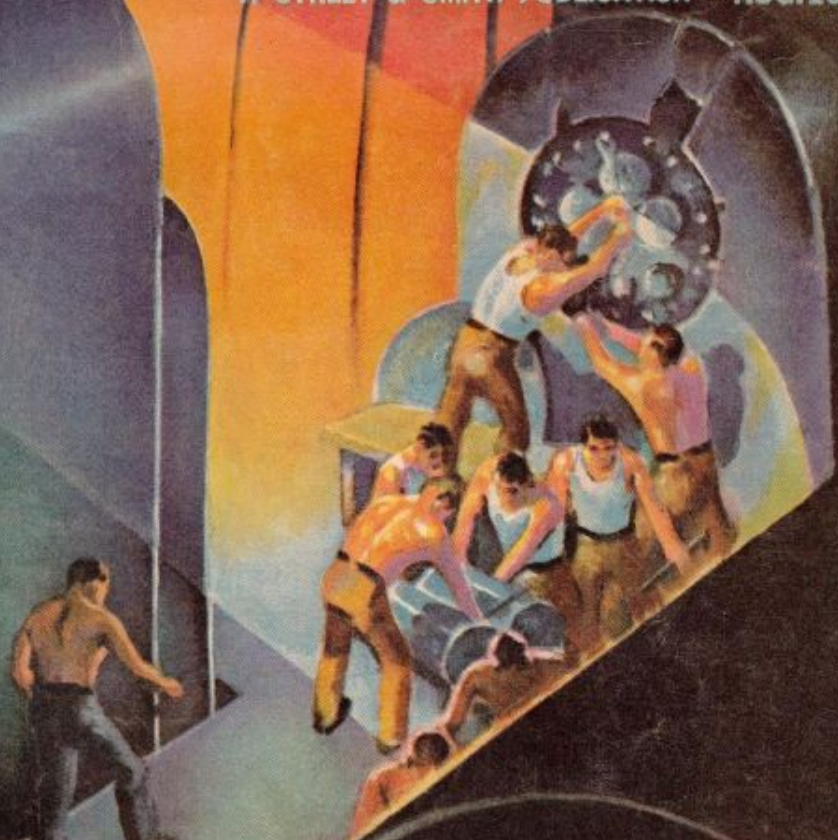


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THE LUCK OF IGNATZ by Lester Del Rey

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# AN ULTIMATUM FROM MARS



By RAY CUMMINGS

# AN ULTIMATUM FROM MARS

By Ray Cummings

Illustrated by Wesso

First published *Astounding Science-Fiction*, August 1939.

*The Martians had Earth by the throat—for lack of a vital resource! But—Earth found the perfect answer!*

Secretary Jamison, Anglo-American minister of interplanetary relations, riffled through his sheaf of papers and tossed them to the polished top of the big mahogany table.

“That, gentlemen,” he said, “represents officially how our correspondence has progressed with the government of the Martian Union from their first tentative demands of more than four years ago up to their ultimatum of yesterday.”

The board room of the interplanetary foreign-relations committee, here in Washington, was silent as the foreign secretary paused and gazed at the assembled committee members who were intently regarding him.

“Ultimatum?” one of the board submembers echoed. “Would you call it that? Not for the newscasters or the public prints, certainly.”

“What else could you call it?” Secretary Jamison retorted. “Martian aggression—disguise it any way you like, it’s still Martian aggression.”

“It’s an unprecedented ultimatum of bare-faced impertinence!” exploded Secretary Carruthers, the minister of war. “Do those damnable Martians think they can back the Earth down into subjection, just by rattling their weapons?”

“Exactly that.” The thin, seamed face of Jamison was grim with a faint, sardonic smile. “That’s what their ultimatum really means, of course.” He picked up one of the papers from the table and turned again to the committee submembers.

“Consider this carefully, gentlemen,” he added. “Here is the ultimatum. It will go down in history as an important document, and so will our answer to it. I’m going to make them both public at midnight tonight.” He read slowly:

“‘In the interests of interplanetary peace, his imperial majesty’s government at Ferrok-Shahn, in the name of the Martian Union, feels that it is incumbent upon the government of the World Federation of Earth to acquiesce in the formerly discussed plan which his imperial majesty suggested for the establishment of justice in the area previously known as your Central America. In the interests of a permanent interplanetary peace, the government of the Martian Union feels that this is immediately necessary. Therefore, his imperial majesty now must insist upon your affirmative answer within the span of twenty-four Earth-hours in order that peace may be preserved, which now, as always, his imperial majesty fervently desires.’”

“Surrender to us—or we’ll make war!” Secretary Carruthers exploded again. “Two hundred years ago, here in America, we had a phrase for that. A bandit would put a gunpowder bullet projector up to your head and he’d say, ‘Do what I want, or else—’”

“Well, that’s the way it is,” Jamison agreed. “And it must go down in history as just that, and nothing more. Gentlemen, as all of you know, from the time the Martian government put its embargo on our importation of *iridite*, we have been helpless. Don’t look at me like that,

Carruthers. Every man, woman and child that crowd the pedestrian level knows that much. *Iridite*—a catalytic substance without which the atomic engines of our spaceships—our interplanetary ships of war—are inoperative. To say nothing of our economic needs for it, also—an industrial chaos which is already almost upon us. *Iridite*, being radio-active, wears out, you know. Our supply is about gone. We cannot produce it here on Earth; we can no longer secure it from Mars. So, as Set Marrok, the Martian ambassador, was good enough to point out when he called here upon me this morning, we are quite helpless.”

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In the silence as the foreign secretary ceased speaking, the twelve submembers of the board murmured together and stared with a grim numbness.

“Does this mean—surrender?” one of them demanded with blank dismay. “My God, Secretary Jamison, to think that I’d ever live to hear you talk like this—to be summoned here to a conference for Earth’s surrender!”

“Why, all that damned ultimatum means,” another submember ejaculated, “is that we are to be forced into giving the Martians a foothold here on Earth, which they can use as a base to conquer us further. Why, even under that flimsy pretext of making a Martian minority colony self-governing—”

“Governed by Mars, you mean!” the war secretary interjected. “Sure! That’s the ultimatum! And in a few more synodic periods, Mars would think up another pretext ‘in the interests of interplanetary peace,’ and send an invading army to seize all our Western Hemisphere. Well, what are we going to do about it?”

The explosive war secretary’s question was rhetorical. He seemed about to answer it, but Jamison’s raised hand checked him. “Just a moment, Carruthers.”

“All right,” the war secretary agreed vehemently. “Then you go ahead and talk.”

“You might dig again into the history of two hundred years ago, Carruthers,” the foreign secretary retorted caustically. “You recall that saying, ‘Even the walls have ears.’” He lowered his voice as he gazed at the startled group of men. “This room is not insulated against electromagnetic eavesdropping,” he added. “And Martian spies are everywhere.”

“Not in this building,” the personnel manager put in.

“You think not, Douglas? You wouldn’t hire a Martian for your staff here, of course. But Martian sympathizers—Earth people who have been bribed—” Jamison lowered his voice still further as he added:

“I have told the Martian ambassador that we have something of considerable economic importance to show him. Something that should greatly interest his government at Ferrok-Shahn. I asked him to present himself tonight at eight o’clock at the Great New York offices of the Anglo-American Co., by whom Mr. Hallen is employed.”

It made all the men in the room turn to gaze at a young American who was sitting a little back from the big table—a tall, muscular fellow in his early twenties. Gravely silent, he had been listening with alert gaze to the discussion. His name was Jac Hallen—a youthful, but important, member of the company which Jamison had mentioned.

“The Martian ambassador will call upon you at eight o’clock tonight, Mr. Hallen,” the foreign secretary added abruptly. “Will you be ready for him?”

“I’ll be ready for him,” Hallen answered grimly. “Is he coming alone?”

“Yes.” Jamison nodded. “I believe so. I have ordered two of the members of our Japanese delegation to be with you.” The foreign secretary smiled faintly. “I have personally selected them from my Washington staff. Both are completely trustworthy. And exceedingly clever, in

typically Oriental fashion. They are Mr. James Sukiyama and Mr. Wan Toy. Do you know them, Hallen?"

"No, sir. I don't believe I do."

"Both are very proud of being Anglicized," the foreign secretary added. "They've lived here in Washington for years. But despite it, they are Oriental to their fingertips. Ideal for our purpose. You understand me, Hallen?"

Young Hallen nodded. "Yes, sir, I do."

"Your interview with the Martian ambassador will be wholly in English."

"Yes, sir, I understand. I'll discuss the thing fully in advance with Mr. Sukiyama and Mr. Toy." And Hallen added grimly, "We'll take care of that Martian."

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The huge group of buildings which housed the Anglo-American Co. lay bathed in the autumn moonlight. To one side, down a ramp hill of terraced levels, beyond the maze of public landing stages, the outskirts of the vast city of Great New York rose in serrated tiers to the south. The glare of its neolights made the cloud banks overhead a giant palette rioting with color—a reflected sheen which dimmed the moonlight on the roofs of the nearby buildings.

To one side of the heterogeneous group of structures—all of them dark and brooding at eight o'clock in the evening—was a single large rectangular building, one story high. It was not dark like the others; its long rows of big glassite windows glowed with the sheen of its interior lights. At a secluded northern corner in the small vaulted office, Jac Hallen sat at his desk, with his shirt sleeves rolled up, baring muscular forearms, and a big black cigar between his teeth.

"You gentlemen get the idea?" he was saying grimly.

"Quite so," said Mr. Sukiyama.

"Indeed yes," Mr. Toy agreed.

If young Hallen desired to make this conference with the shifty, disingenuous Martian ambassador wholly unofficial and informal, the aspect of the little Japanese delegates was hardly in keeping. Both were impeccably garbed in full evening regalia. Like little puppets, identical in dress and manner, they sat stiffly upright, side by side, with their shiny hats and white gloves on their knees.

On Hallen's desk a buzzer sounded. His grid lighted with the tiny image of his assistant, big, red-headed Joe McCarthy, who was in the adjoining office.

"Man named Marrok wants to see you," McCarthy said.

"Send him in," Hallen ordered. He tilted back his chair, a blue cloud of smoke rising as he puffed at his cigar. The little Oriental delegates got silently to their feet, standing stiffly erect, side by side. Hallen's eyes were gleaming, his jaw belligerently set. But the impassive brown faces and the blank dark eyes of Mr. Sukiyama and Mr. Toy yielded nothing.

The door opened and the Martian ambassador came striding in. He was a big fellow, this Set Marrok; by Earth standards, a tremendous brawny giant. Not spindly, like most Martians; for all his seven feet of height he was almost heavy-set. From his massive shoulders a gray Martian traveling cape hung down in voluminous folds. He stripped it off as he swaggered into the office, revealing a plaited leather jerkin and knee pants of decorated leather out of which his lower legs showed as gray, hairy pillars of strength.

Young Hallen was on his feet now, smiling faintly. "Good evening to you, Set Marrok."

“Good evening,” the Martian said. “I am here at your insistence.” He said it with the inference that his visit was a gracious gesture of no importance either to himself or his government. His voice had the heavy, throaty rasp characteristic of all Martians, but his English was perfect, with the clipped Martian accent worn almost away by his many years of residence in Washington.

“I’m glad you came,” Hallen said. “You perhaps have met Mr. Sukiyama and Mr. Toy, our Washington delegates from Japan?”

The Martian nodded briefly.

“Oh, yes,” Mr. Sukiyama said. “Thank you very much.”

“It is always a great honor to meet his distinguished excellency from Mars,” Mr. Toy agreed.

Marrok’s sword ornament clanked against his metallic shoes as he took the chair Hallen offered. “My time is short,” he said.

“We’ll bear that in mind,” Hallen agreed.

“You have something to show me?”

“Yes. It seems of considerable economic importance, Set Marrok. Your government, I’m sure, would be interested.”

“My government is interested only in the fate of our poor, oppressed people here on your Earth,” the big Martian said smoothly. “Disorders have broken out—my people have been killed by your terroristic provincial government. It is a situation, a condition which his imperial majesty of the Martian Union can no longer tolerate. In the interests of interplanetary peace—”

“The honorable Martians desire interplanetary peace so greatly,” Mr. Sukiyama murmured sympathetically.

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Set Marrok flung the little Japanese a darkling glance. “As set forth in our note of yesterday—”

“Your ultimatum,” Hallen stated.

“No such construction of our most reasonable request is permissible,” the Martian disclaimed. “When the peace of the starways is threatened, we must act.”

“Your ultimatum,” Hallen persisted, “requires our answer by midnight tonight. You are familiar with our Earth’s political history, Set Marrok? You have heard of the Monroe Doctrine?”

The big Martian stared. Mr. Sukiyama murmured:

“The honorable Monroe Doctrine was most respected by my illustrious Japanese people for two hundred years.”

“It was a sacred principle of the great American nation which dominated this hemisphere for more than two centuries,” Hallen added. “And when the World Federation was established, it was extended to include the entire Earth.” Hallen’s voice turned crisp. “Do you think now that we want a Martian-ruled colony established on Earth? We could never submit to that, Marrok.”

The Martian stiffened. “Am I to construe this as an indication that your government is going to defy our request?” he demanded. His gray face flushed a little with his rising anger.

“Yes,” Hallen said abruptly.

“So sorry,” said Mr. Toy.

“You’re crazy,” Marrok retorted. “Without *iridite* you’re helpless and you know it.”

“Unfortunately yes,” Mr. Sukiyama murmured.

“So sorry about that,” Mr. Toy said regretfully.

“You’re fools—crazy, damn fools!” Marrok suddenly exploded. “Why, if you dare to—”

“Defy your threats?” Hallen prompted. “We can talk plainly, Marrok. This is an informal visit—not diplomacy, you know. If we dare to defy you—”

“We will smash you with our invasion from pole to pole,” Marrok rasped.

“In the interests of interplanetary peace?” Hallen suggested.

“Which so fervently the honorable Martians desire,” Mr. Sukiyama put in.

The Martian ambassador waved it away. “Don’t be a fool, Hallen.” He clanked his sword ornament with a ringing thump against the metal of his shoes. “If you have any influence with your government, you had better make them realize that the might of Mars cannot be held in check. Our destiny of interplanetary conquest must be fulfilled.”

“And you won’t stop until you own the Earth?” Hallen retorted. “Aren’t you forgetting your little minority in our Central America? That situation so intolerable to you?”

“Don’t be a nitwit.” The Martian grinned. “The Earth is helpless, no matter what we choose to do—that’s the real fact. And still you think you dare defy us?”

“So terribly sorry,” Mr. Toy murmured.

“Regretfully necessary to defy you,” Mr. Sukiyama acknowledged gently. “Unfortunately, yes.”

The big Martian’s irritation suddenly boiled completely over. He jumped to his feet. “You’re just damned fools,” he roared. “This gives us our opportunity. For six of your Earth-years, now, we’ve prepared for it—this chance to conquer you—”

“Exactly.” Hallen’s quiet voice cut through the Martian’s roar. He, too, was on his feet and he was grimly smiling. “The people of Earth are glad to have your version of Martian aggression. The real voice of Mars—with this prating of interplanetary peace discarded.”

Hallen had pressed a button on his desk. The office door opened, with the big, red-headed Joe McCarthy looming there, silhouetted by the blue-green glare of the laboratory behind him. In the silence there was a hissing, throbbing sound, like water escaping from a pipe under tremendous pressure.

“Ready now?” McCarthy said. “Shall I shut off the senders?”

“No, not yet,” Hallen said crisply. “Quite the opposite. I buzzed you to be sure they remained in operation. Our Martian friend, here, at last is talking like a Martian. As Secretary Jamison said, it must go down in history—the real aggression of Mars understood so that future Earth generations can guard against it.”

“You . . . you would dare to quote me?” Marrok’s big jaw dropped. “Why, you damned—”

“So sorry to displease,” Mr. Toy murmured.

“Quote you?” Hallen echoed. “This is an informal visit—not diplomacy, just man-to-man talk. Quote you? Why, we’ve been on the air ever since you entered here! All over the Earth millions upon millions of our people, right now, are hanging upon your words. Martian aggression—they understand it now.”

“Regretfully to annoy you,” Mr. Sukiyama apologized.

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For a moment the big, swaggering Martian was stricken with angry astonishment. Then he recovered himself. “All right,” he roared, “then you can broadcast this and be damned to you. At the end of the next synodic period—in thirty of your Earth-days—Mars will be within sixty millions miles of here. The Martian armada is mobilized and ready. From well beyond your



stratosphere we'll bombard you. Millions of your women and children will be killed. That's Martian aggression! You damned fools—you can't get any *iridite* for your atomic guns. You won't be able to fire a shot in defense. You can't get any *iridite* here on Earth and—”

“Quite correct,” Hallen agreed.

“And you can't get it from Mars—and still you are idiotic enough to think you can defy us?”

“Regretfully true,” Mr. Sukiyama agreed.

The big Martian's face was darkly red with his anger, but his eyes gleamed with triumph. “Then here's another message for your people, and there need be no secret about it: My imperial leader will never stop now until this planet is drenched crimson with your blood and you are all his slaves.”

“On your way out,” Hallen said, “take a look into the laboratory a moment. I want to show you that discovery of great economic importance, as I promised.”

At the interior doorway, the big Martian stood gazing. In a blue-green electronic glare the big room, humming with a bustling activity, was only a dazzling blur in which goggled workmen swiftly moved, intent upon their tasks.

“Put on these goggles,” Hallen said. “You'll see better, Set Marrok. Surely your aggressive government will be interested in this.”

With the goggles the scene steadied and clarified so that the swaggering Martian could see much better. It was an astonishing scene indeed. From empty space in the center of the big room, where a convergence of electronic beams made a patch of riotous color, a jet of metal was extruding. Out of nothingness, it shot forward, molded by its passage through a steel jacket to be a gleaming rod. Like water under pressure from a pipe, it shot over long steel rollers to where, a hundred feet away, a series of steel knives smoothly slid up and down, cutting it into ten-foot lengths. And other machinery was lifting the ten-foot bars, stacking them into great, gleaming piles.

“*Iridite!*” the Martian gasped. “Good God!”

“*Iridite*, just so,” Hallen said. “More *iridite* than there is, or ever was, or ever will be, on Mars. We had none to be found here on Earth. Quite true, Marrok. But if your scientists haven't investigated the realms of the fourth dimension—well, we have. And it seems that the realm coexistent with the space of this laboratory is very rich indeed in pure *iridite*. Once we were able to release it—well, it extrudes with an amazing profligacy, as you observe. And it has another great advantage, Marrok.

“We bring it out already molded into the shapes we need,” Hallen was saying. “For our industrial engines—but just now, as a matter of fact, we're concentrating on spaceships—vessels of interplanetary war—and their long-range guns. Defense guns, yes. But most of all—just between you and me, Marrok—our government is interested in the super-range guns of aggression.”

The big Martian ambassador had seen enough. With an oath he tossed away the amber glassite goggles. At the laboratory's outer doorway, Hallen said:

“Good night, Set Marrok. It might be a good idea for you to take a flight back to Ferrok-Shahn and tell your government just what you've seen here. Now that our people have heard you broadcast, they know what Martian aggression really means. That was our purpose in bringing you here. Public opinion, now, will be solidly with us if we start some aggression of our own. So that's our answer to your ultimatum, Set Marrok.”

As the speechless Martian ambassador strode down the metal incline from the laboratory doorway two little voices floated after him, suave with apology.

“Unfortunate to disappoint you,” said Mr. Sukiya.

“So sorry,” Mr. Toy agreed.

[The end of *An Ultimatum From Mars* by Ray Cummings]