

WAR OF THE SCIENTISTS By John Russell Fearn

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by DAVID WRIGHT O'BRIEN

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WAR OF THE SCIENTISTS

By
John Russell Fearn

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Divided into six Zones, Mars became a giant scientific laboratory to advance Earth science. Then without warning furious warfare broke out...

“Hello, there, Eva! Anything wrong?”

Howard Sykes, young, blond, husky Earth ambassador to Mars, looked up from his desk questioningly.

“I’m not sure, Howard. But I’ve got a funny feeling in my bones that things are distinctly not so hot.”

Eva Wayne was a biologist. She was also twenty-five, had yellow blond hair and the most attractive blue eyes Howard Sykes had ever seen. Even more than that, she was possessed of a sense of intuition which was often uncanny.

Sykes made a resigned gesture. “Trouble in paradise! Well, dammit, just what is wrong?”

“Oh, there isn’t anything actually wrong—not yet. But there’s a growing feeling in most of the Zones that their particular Zone must be allowed to dominate all the rest. Each Zone seems to think that its particular function is the most important of the lot!”

“So that’s it!” Howard Sykes slammed his engineer’s fist on his desk. “Might have guessed that something like this would happen. You can’t herd a bunch of geniuses together and expect a harmonious love feast. What more do you know, Eva?”

When the girl was finished with her report, Sykes knocked the dottle out of his pipe, turned to his personal typewriter and began to pound away at an insistent rate.

*Hon. Dudley Baxter, Consultant,
World State Federation,
New York City, America.*

Dear Dr. Baxter:—

It is my unpleasant duty to inform you that after our six months’ experiment on this planet, dissension among the six scientific Zones has definitely broken out.

When I undertook to rehabilitate this wasted red planet, it was with high hopes that as ambassador to Mars, the six-Zone colony that I would establish here would be sufficient unto itself, and that my presence as ambassador would be simply to supervise the administration of the Zones.

Now I am informed that our six Zones of scientific activity—physics, astronomy, cosmic engineering, biology, social welfare, and interplanetary eugenics—have each become jealous of the other. It was the World State’s original plan to gather the world’s greatest men and women scientists, fully equip laboratories here for their use, and set them to work on this isolated planet to develop the fruits of their researches—without infringing on each other’s authority.

Each Zone was to have its own task; no task was to be duplicated. Coöperation between the Zones was to be permitted when necessary. It was thought that in twenty years, the independent researches of the six Zones would be integrated into a new world plan which would forever after insure peace and prosperity for all peoples.

That meanwhile, voluntarily isolated here on Mars, no one scientific branch could dominate the other, with the inevitable result that one branch of science might take up arms against the other and thus precipitate another World War.

Therefore, since this dissension has now broken out, I must ask you to hold yourself in readiness for all possible trouble, and to prepare for any eventualities which may occur. I will report to you again as soon as I have definitely isolated the cause of the controversy.

*Howard Sykes,
Earth Ambassador.*

Finishing, Sykes folded the report in an envelope, summoned a messenger, and gave orders to have his findings space-radioed in secret code to Earth.

He rose to his feet then, perplexed and with an angry frown.

“Dammit, the thing’s fantastic!” he expostulated. “If the chiefs of each Zone start refusing now to get together, we’re worse off than we were before! At least when we started this experiment, nobody was doing any bickering. Come on, Eva! We’re going to get to the bottom of this if I have to lock every overgrown prodigy in a cell!”

As they left his office, Sykes asked the girl:

“Where would you suggest we start?”

Eva Wayne’s forehead puckered. “Well, Dr. Hendriks, chief of our biological department, asked Dr. Brown of cosmic engineering to come over for a discussion on a matter of mutual interest. Brown’s retort was that he had no time for biologists! Thus far, he’s been the most outspoken of the dissenters.”

Sykes face was grim. “Dr. Brown it is, then.”

The girl accompanied him down the long, airy passages leading to the cosmic engineering department. Dr. Brown duly appeared from the army of workers when his presence was requested. For some reason his usually amiable round face was set and determined, his dark eyes filled with a stubborn fire.

“I believe, Doctor, that you refused to coöperate with Dr. Hendriks of biology,” Sykes began, straining to keep his reputation as a diplomat intact.

Brown nodded briefly. “I did, yes. I have reasons for believing that my cosmic engineering research is far more important than Hendriks’ specialty. I have neither the time nor the inclination to obey his wishes—and for that matter, I have little time to waste in talking to you, either. Our science is vitally important: biology is not!”

“That’s ridiculous!” Eva cried hotly, flushing. “One science is as necessary as another in the advancement of a world civilization, and you have no right to say otherwise!”

“Just a minute, please!” Howard Sykes’ voice was firm. The tougher a situation got, the more evenly his steel nerves functioned.

“Dr. Brown, how can you—a self-confessed believer in the pooling of ideas—say that your science is more important than another? What’s the *reason* for it? You surely realize you

are undermining the very thing for which we all came to this planet?"

"Circumstances alter cases, Mr. Sykes," Brown replied ambiguously. "I have my own reasons for thinking that cosmic engineering is more important than biology—and I refuse to cooperate. Now, if you will excuse me—"

He nodded curtly and turned away to his work once more. Sykes stood looking after him for a moment, frowning; then he returned slowly to the main corridor with the puzzled girl at his side. Inwardly he was seething.

"Well, now you know!" Eva said. "Imagine the shock *I* got! And Dr. Hendriks, too!"

"Damned if I can figure it out!" Sykes stood biting his lip. "Brown was one of our best coöperators when we first came here. Seems to have about-faced completely—Hendriks, you say, is still willing to exchange ideas?"

"Absolutely. No change in him at all; he's as loyal as ever."

"Good for him." Sykes rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I'm going to find out myself how the other Zone chiefs are feeling. You'd better get along back to your job, and if you discover anything else that strikes you as out of place, let me know right away."

They parted company, the girl to the Biological Zone, while Howard Sykes boarded the swift-moving tube conveyance by which the planet's various Zones were interlinked. It was a six-hour job for him to check up on all the Zone heads and get their reactions.

The Martian night had arrived by the time he arrived back at his headquarters to ponder results. Eva Wayne, in off-work attire, was waiting for him.

"Anything new?" Sykes asked anxiously, as he caught sight of her in the light from his desk-lamp.

"No—I just thought I might be able to help you with your results. I've nothing else to do right now."

They sat down together, going over six sets of reactions which Howard Sykes had typed out from hastily scribbled notes. By a process of elimination it took only fifteen minutes to reveal a startling fact—that the heads of the Zones controlling cosmic engineering, astronomy, and physics had suddenly become adamant in their belief that their three specialized sciences were the only ones that mattered.

In loyal contradiction, the other three departments controlling biology, eugenics, and social welfare were each unchanged and willing to exchange ideas as before. To three departments, then, something mysterious had happened. Though willing to talk among themselves, they were definitely against their three Zone neighbors.

"Which means that cosmic engineering, astronomy, and physics are ranged in a solid bloc against the sciences of eugenics, biology, and social welfare," Sykes muttered. "It just doesn't make sense! The three obdurate ones are willing to talk among themselves—but not with the other three. What's it all about? *Why?*" He stared at the girl's face anxiously.

Then his fists clenched. "Well, the reason will have to wait. The important thing is, the departments controlling physics, engineering and astronomy are far more able, with their present knowledge and resources, to make an attack than are the other three departments—if matters should arrive at an actual state of war. They have all the forces of destruction ranged on their side. But to what end? Where is the sense in achieving domination?"

"That we don't know—yet." Getting to her feet, Eva joined Sykes at the window. "There's something phony about it all somewhere. Three ordinarily honest and intelligent scientists have gone mulish, and there's a reason for it. It's up to us to find out."

“To me, you mean. I’m the go-between,” Sykes protested.

“We work together,” Eva stated quietly. “We’re on a planet that has an unknown history. We have no means of knowing what really happened to the people who once populated this world. In that might lie the answer to this new complex riddle; the answer may be in the very sand we plowed up and made fertile. Mastering a world for the purposes of colonization and scientific progress was not the whole battle, perhaps. There may be other things.”

“That,” said Howard Sykes grimly, “is what I’m beginning to be afraid of.”

CHAPTER II

Attack on the Zones

It was very clear in the ensuing days that, far from dropping their adamant, obstinate attitude, the respective heads of the physics, astronomy, and cosmic engineering Zones were, if possible, keeping more closely than ever to themselves and observing a curious pre-arranged secrecy. They held private conferences together, despite the fact that it was against the Zone law originally instituted by Dudley Baxter himself.

Eva Wayne, in a better position than Howard Sykes to see what was going on, had grave misgivings. The course of her work took her many times to the physics and engineering Zones, and while there she saw things which were anything but reassuring. Instead of getting on with their job of research, the engineers were building significant-looking machinery, the physicists were experimenting with new explosives and rays, and the astronomers were making problematical calculations that seemed to have a definite application to the distant Earth.

"There can be no doubt about it, Howard, that they are preparing for a battle with the three remaining Zones," the girl told him, after a week of careful observation. "Don't ask me why they're doing it—but anybody can see that there's an unbearable tension building up between the three Zones willing to cooperate and the three who are obdurate.

"There'll be trouble at any minute. Against the devices of engineers and physicists we'll stand no chance in the other Zones. I hear also, though it's probably a rumor, that Dr. Brown has borrowed some heavy bombing planes from the city airport for a proposed 'experiment'."

"He has, eh?" Sykes thumped the desk impatiently. "Can't stop him doing it, of course, but I wish I knew why he had to do it. There's no reason—"

The girl shook her head hopelessly. "I didn't find a thing, either. Our only recourse is for you to get Baxter here before things get completely out of hand. Looks to me as though it's only a matter of days before the fireworks start going off."

"I'll tell Baxter right away," Sykes nodded grimly, and turned to the radio apparatus.

But before he reached it, he glanced up sharply at a sudden violent concussion. The vast windows of the office rattled in response, and for a moment livid glare flared through the Martian night.

"It's the Eugenics Zone!" Eva shouted hoarsely. "Look! It's being attacked by somebody—or something—Howard, they've started already!" She wheeled around, her face pale. Without warning—without even a declaration of hostility.

Howard Sykes stood staring out of the window, momentarily at a loss. Of the three great Zones clearly visible with their floods of light, the centermost was in the grip of a devastating fire. Just how the thing had been started was not clear.

Obviously the physics department had thought up some new and diabolical method of flame production, since the solid stone edifice of research was itself ablaze. Fissures were visible, too, from which rolled vast masses of smoke. Figures were already dashing for safety—but they did not dash far.

As they poured into the adjoining Zone, another shattering blast rent the air. Sykes' office windows completely shattered under the impact. Just in time Sykes caught the girl and flung

her flat beside him, as razor-edged pieces tinkled and smashed around them. Immediately after, even as they got to their feet, there came the deep bass roar of airplanes.

With a soul-shattering racket, a squadron of heavy bombers thundered overhead and began to add their complement of destruction to the blazing Zones.

“It’s fiendish—diabolical!” Eva raved. “There’s no sense to a thing like this. Howard, I’ve got to get to the biology building. There are special notes there—years of research information. They mustn’t be destroyed!”

He caught her as she swung to the door. “Don’t be a darned little fool!” he shouted, gripping her arm. “What chance do you think you would stand? You’d be killed in a second. Here, sit down!”

Sykes thrust her into a chair by main force, then swung to the radio. To his dismay the apparatus refused to work.

“Dead,” he breathed, glancing up. “It must be their doing! They’ve cut off communication with Earth—with anywhere, for that matter! Just what the hell—”

He stared bitterly through the windows at the blazing inferno. More bombs were dropping now, deliberately aimed at the armies of scientists and research workers running for safety toward the great areas of distant city where lay their homes and apartments. Through the lurid holocaust of flame and destruction, it was clear that hundreds of them were being ruthlessly slaughtered—the scientists of the Biology, Eugenics, and Social Welfare Zones. The other three Zones were left untouched.

Howard Sykes stood in quivering fury, bitterly aware of his own helplessness. Eva joined him again, just in time to see her own Zone explode and start to spurt flame and death. The three Zones which had been willing to follow out the letter and spirit of Dudley Baxter’s plan had ended in carnage and ruin. Somewhere, something was horribly wrong—

Moments later the various emergency units went into action. The air became hideous with the din of clanging bells, as fire engines and ambulances swept into view from the region of the city far down on the horizon. For one brief moment Sykes feared there was to be an air attack on the city also—but the expectation was not realized.

Evidently satisfied with their hellish handiwork, the bombers droned on their way into the darkness, the roar of their engines growing fainter and fainter. There was only one place they could be going—the colony’s airplane base once more, far to the north.

Suddenly Sykes’ office door burst open. It was Dr. Hendriks, chief of biology, who came in, blood-spattered and ashen-faced.

“Mr. Sykes—got to see you!” He spoke with obvious effort, reeled as he stood. He was clutching something in one hand.

“Here—” Howard Sykes caught him quickly. Between them he and Eva half carried the scientist to the leather armchair and eased him into it. Hendriks gave a weak nod of acknowledgment. The girl turned instantly to the water carafe and filled up a glass.

“Th—thanks,” Hendriks muttered, sipping it slowly. “That’s better—Those infernal devils!” he went on fiercely. “It was a deliberate attack on us for no reason whatsoever. But—but I think I have the reason. You, Miss Wayne, gave me the clue.”

Eva looked surprised. Hendriks held his chest painfully for a moment, then went on.

“You said one day that it might be in the air—but we proved together that it wasn’t—Remember?” He looked at her from hollow eyes.

“Yes. But what else could—”

“When the explosions happened tonight, one of the young men from the physicists’ Zone was caught. He had set the explosive fuses, I think. They—they brought him to our laboratory. He was abnormal—raving with desire for—for destruction. He was injured too—bleeding.

“I took a blood sample and examined it. I found out queer biological reactions; then—then they started exploding our Zone as well, and I had to run for it. Here’s—here’s the slide from the microscope. You—you take care of it—”

Hendriks suddenly stopped talking and his haggard face froze into gray rigidity. Without a word he toppled forward out of his chair, his clenched right hand opening to release a small oblong box.

“Dr. Hendriks!” Eva sobbed, horrified. “Dr. Hendriks!”

Howard Sykes slipped his hand over the scientist’s heart. He withdrew it instantly, stained red. Eying it he gave a shudder.

“The poor fellow must have been hit with shrapnel or something near the heart and just managed to get this far,” he said bitterly. “He’s dead—”

Sykes paused, picked up the box and handed it to the dazed girl.

“Here, you’d better take it. He entrusted it to you.”

Eva took it in nerveless fingers. “Those fiends!” she sobbed. “I’ll never rest until—”

Sykes gripped the girl’s shoulders firmly. “Now listen, Eva,” he said, “nobody around here is half as burned up about this as I am.” The veins stood out angrily on the Earth ambassador’s strained forehead. “But right now, we’ve got to go after these devils coldly, calculatingly. If we lose our heads, they’ll wipe us out to the last man. This is a scientific war, Eva—not a man to man struggle—”

“Mr. Sykes is right, you know, Miss Wayne,” a voice from the doorway observed deliberately.

They wheeled around together, startled to behold the figure of Dr. Brown standing there, a peculiar expression on his round face. It struck Howard Sykes that the cosmic engineer was trying to look vicious and yet did not really want to. His voice, however, was tinged with cold venom.

“I suppose all this butchery and destruction is your doing?” Sykes demanded, moving forward. “Just what’s the idea? How long do you think you can get away with it?”

“I don’t need to ‘get away’ with anything—the work’s finished.” Brown, self-confessed peace lover, made the admission with studied complacency.

“It was necessary to destroy the headquarters of the Eugenics, Biological, and Welfare Zones because they are superfluous. Such sciences will be needless in the New Order. The three dominant sciences of astronomy, cosmic engineering, and physics will now hold the field and dictate future terms.”

“Just what ‘new order’ are you talking about?” Eva shouted. “What fiendish plan are you mapping out now? *You killed Dr. Hendriks, and—*”

“For various reasons, it is necessary that three sciences alone should dominate Mars—and later, the Earth,” Brown replied calmly. “Those scientists who are left from other departments will be under our control from now on—those who escaped death, I mean—as you did,” he said meaningly.

Brown smiled coldly. “The city—in fact, the whole planet—will come under the control of myself, and Doctors Latham and Poste, the heads of the Astronomy and Cosmic Engineering

Zones,” he said. “We plan a Triumvirate, a scientific domination for reasons which will only become apparent as time goes on. We have planned it perfectly and the whole army of research workers, men and women, who have worked with us are entirely in accord with our aims.

“As for you, Miss Wayne, you are a prisoner, of course—or I should say, a worker, under our dictates. You will be transferred from useless biology to cosmic engineering.”

She shook her head firmly. “Not if I know it!”

“The alternative,” Brown murmured, his dark eyes gleaming, “is death.”

He turned then to Howard Sykes. “You, Mr. Sykes, are the ambassador from Earth,” Brown went on, ignoring the girl entirely. “You will return to Earth with an ultimatum to Dudley Baxter and the World State Council. The ultimatum is that the World State Council must voluntarily relinquish its present control over the Earth and submit to the dictates of the Triumvirate we shall establish here.

“A scientific leadership will be set up, with me at its head. Those who wish to leave Earth and come to Mars to live under our protection will be given safe passage; those who do not must take the consequences.”

“And the consequences mean a war of supreme scientific horror, eh?” Sykes demanded grimly.

Surprisingly, Brown shook his head. “No—not war. Just—alterations. Just something so unpleasant that even I do not like to think about it.”

“You boys like to play rough, don’t you?” Sykes snapped. He turned imploringly to Eva Wayne.

“Eva, they’ve got us off our guard, and we may as well realize it. Do as you are told; it’s the only way—for the present. As for me—I’ll deliver your ultimatum to Earth, Dr. Brown. And the answer will be—‘go to hell!’”

“That is entirely possible,” Brown purred sneeringly. “Only—it will be an inferno, I am afraid, of our own design!”

Mockingly, Dr. Brown bowed the two of them out of the door, himself bringing up the rear. Eva started when, angrily jamming her hands in her pockets, one of them came into contact with the small oblong box which Dr. Hendriks, dying, had brought into the room. Tight-lipped, the girl betrayed no inkling of the sudden question which tugged at her mind.

CHAPTER III

Death en Masse

By advance radio Howard Sykes warned Dudley Baxter of his coming. The moment he arrived at the Earth spaceport, he was whisked by fast airplane to the city center and thence to the private chambers in the Administration Building where Baxter, chief consultant of the World State Federation and numerous officials were already gathered to meet him.

“Now, Mr. Sykes, what exactly is going on?” Baxter asked anxiously, when the formalities were over. “Most of what has happened we already know from telescopic observations.”

“I’ve been instructed to deliver an ultimatum,” Howard Sykes replied bitterly. “You are asked to put the whole Earth under the control of the Martian Scientific Triumvirate, who will decide what is to be done for the future. You are also asked, in your own interests, to move as much of the world’s population as possible to Mars, if you wish them to escape some sort of horrible disaster.”

“A war?” snapped President Johnston, elective head of the World State.

“Dr. Brown did not say so, sir. He hinted at an ‘alteration’. I’ve no idea what he meant—except that it would be terrible beyond comprehension.”

Baxter tapped the desk impatiently. “And do Dr. Brown and his two associates dare to think that they, scientists, can give such orders to the World Council? I never heard of anything so—so outrageous!”

President Johnston snorted angrily. “You say Dr. Brown demands unconditional surrender? Why, even Hitler used to make offers of negotiation during the Second World War!”

“You forget, Mr. President,” Dudley Baxter said acidly, “that *Herr* Hitler faced the best army and the best navy in the world! Just what have we got up our sleeve? Nothing—the whole world disarmed after the Second World War!”

“Well, what’s this terrible menace that Brown is about to unleash, then?” President Johnston demanded.

Howard Sykes shrugged angrily. “I wish I had even the faintest idea, sir. Brown and two of his otherwise perfectly sane colleagues have suddenly become cold, scheming madmen. I think the best policy to pursue for the time being—”

“Policy be damned!” Dudley Baxter snorted. “I’m refusing Brown’s ultimatum—absolutely! Let him make the first move. We’ll find a way out, somehow. We always have!”

Sykes sighed resignedly. “I told Dr. Brown that would be your answer. Well—I guess the only thing for me to do is to return to Mars and set myself up as a diplomatic observation post. Keep radio communications clear of all interference from now on. If anything breaks, I’ll do everything—murder not excepted!—to get through to you.”

The members of the World Council nodded their heads in agreement, and remained in Baxter’s office discussing ways and means to combat this terror which as yet had not even struck. Himself emotionally exhausted from the ordeal he had been through, Howard Sykes went to his own private apartment in the city and fell asleep the moment his head touched the pillow.

He awoke the next morning feeling satisfyingly relaxed. But five minutes later, when he opened his apartment door and reached for the morning paper, the funereal black headlines tied his stomach up in a knot.

“My God—Baxter must have radioed to Dr. Brown his refusal of the ultimatum!” Sykes groaned. “He couldn’t wait for me to announce it as diplomatically as possible!”

The headlines read:

WORLDWIDE SPACE SHIP BASES RAZED IN MYSTERIOUS BLASTS

Destruction Follows Baxter’s Refusal of Ultimatum from Mars

Violent explosions struck at space ship bases all over the world last night, in a fury of destruction which leveled to the ground not only spaceports and hangars but even manufacturing plants and rocket-fuel works.

The explosions began almost without exception within three hours after Dudley Baxter’s radio message to a so-called Martian Triumvirate, in which Baxter refused pointblank to accede to any of the Triumvirate’s demands conveyed to the World Council earlier in the evening by Ambassador Howard Sykes.

According to carefully checked reports, the destruction was not the result of sabotage. Spaceport managers and manufacturing executives all said that company detective systems failed to reveal the presence of saboteurs.

This newspaper learned early this morning from an unimpeachable source that a committee of three formerly sane scientists seized control of the Martian colony established six months ago by World State Consultant Baxter. Its leader, Dr. Brown, dispatched Ambassador Howard Sykes to his home government, to deliver an ultimatum the terms of which would mean a complete loss of Earth independence.

Further. . . .

Howard Sykes flung the paper down savagely, scrambled into his overcoat and raced out of the building. In ten minutes he was with a worried Baxter in the private chambers of the Administration Building.

“Yes, yes, I know why you’ve come,” Baxter sighed. “They’ve blown up our only means of getting to Mars. They did it right after I told them I’d have nothing to do with their plan.

“I’ve had what few experts we’ve got working on this job, and it’s pretty clear the trick was pulled by etheric vibration. A vibration sent forth from Mars caused a straight-line ripple in the ether between Mars and Earth. When the ripple hit Earth in the predetermined spot, matter—as matter—simply telescoped into itself. Electron hit proton and the outcome was a violent explosion.

“We’ve dreamed of it for years. In fact, we’ve had it right in our hands, only we thought we’d never have to use it. They’ve done it on Mars, with unlimited science and power at their command.”

Sykes muttered something under his breath that would not bear repeating in print. A moment later, both men’s eyes widened as the signal-light on Baxter’s special desk-set radio receiver began to wink violently.

Baxter snapped the switch. “Dudley Baxter speaking. Who calls?”

The voice sounded infinitely far away—a woman’s voice.

“I must speak to Howard Sykes if he’s still there. *I must! Hurry!*”

“It’s Eva Wayne!” Sykes cried hoarsely, flinging himself before the apparatus. “It’s me, Eva!” He grabbed the microphone. “Quick—speak!”

There was a long interval as the message hurtled millions of miles across space. Then Eva spoke again, her voice ethereal with vast distance.

“Listen carefully! I’m taking a big risk, speaking from a mobile radio set. I’ve found something. That slide Hendriks left—”

Sykes’ hand reached for a pad. He took the girl’s words down in shorthand.

“That slide contained a drop of blood from the young physicist. You remember? Well, the drop is teeming with bacilli. What is more, when they are isolated and studied, they prove to be anything but normal bacilli. My private biological experiments lead me to think that they are *intelligent and highly organized!* I’ve had some time in which to make my tests, remember.”

Eva paused a moment.

“My theory is that Mars was not entirely dead when we took it over! It is the accepted law of evolution that the last survivors on any planet will be a race of intelligent bacilli. They are the hardest things to destroy, and must ultimately outlive all humans and insects which will precede them in the scale of life.

“The evaporating air of Mars finally sent these bacilli into a kind of inanimate hibernation. When we brought warmth and air back again—they revived! They are intelligent enough, I believe, to reason and they saw a chance to restore their old heritage of science and domination.

“Upon recovery many of them passed into the bloodstream of the scientists seeming most likely to aid them—the physicists, the cosmic engineers, and the astronomers. The other sciences they destroyed as needless, especially the Biology Zone, since it might reveal their secret and upset their plans.

“These bacilli, as I see it, cannot produce hypnosis in the minds of their human carriers, but they *can* influence certain brain centers. What they have done is to speed up the knowledge of the physicists, astronomers, and engineers, and have also depressed certain brain centers by pressure, which has produced a stubborn refusal to cooperate.

“A tumor can produce the same effect, remember. Pressure of certain amounts of bacilli—harmless from the disease point of view—has had a similar influence to that of a tumor. On the one hand unreasonableness; on the other, amazing genius.”

The signals stopped. Heart beating, Sykes said:

“Message received. What is implied by all this?”

After the customary pause the reply came back.

“Those bacilli inside the scientists will undoubtedly remain there to continue their hellish work. The others, spawning in the resurrected soil of Mars, will possibly seek Earth as their new habitat. That is the reason why their comrades inside the scientists have inspired Dr. Brown and the others to make demands on the Earthly government.

“An invasion of the world by intelligent Martian bacilli is not improbable—but that would presuppose conditions on Earth equal to those on Mars in its heyday: a lighter air and lesser gravity. The scientific engines controlled by Brown, his brain controlled in turn by the bacilli, may possibly find a means to produce such conditions on the Earth.

“But the biggest danger lies in the fact that once the bacilli land on Earth, they will be able to evolve *naturally* apart from a bloodstream, as they would have evolved had Mars not died. That means bacilli of giant size in a very short time, for their metabolism is amazingly fast.

“I cannot tell you more now. There is danger—”

The red pilot light expired. Baxter stood erect, his face astounded.

“This is the damndest thing I ever heard of! Well, I’ll call an emergency session of the World Council this afternoon, to consult on ways and means of beating this invasion.”

There was a harsh brooding light in Howard Sykes’ eyes.

“You can kill armies of men,” he said slowly. “You can bomb cities, sabotage munitions plants, sink navies. But—you can’t fight billions and billions of germs which so far haven’t even been classified!”

CHAPTER IV

World Chaos

The World State Council met that afternoon and deliberated for five hours, as councils have a way of doing. Desperate expedients were discussed at white heat; whole campaigns for warfare outlined, set down on paper, and then torn up.

After all, what could the good council fathers do against the most minute and yet most deadly enemy of them all—a minuscule, microscopic jot of bacteria which in the aggregate comprised a guerrilla army of incomprehensible destruction?

Howard Sykes, however, obtained permission from World President Johnston himself for the construction of a personal space ship to carry him to Mars. For a week and more he was kept busy at a secret space machine factory. It was a week of intense activity in all parts of the world as the World Council marshalled its forces and issued orders for an impending struggle. Then at the end of the week the Triumvirate struck with all their diabolical power.

The first signs of disaster began in the curious calm which descended on every part of the world. From pole to pole a dense mass of cloud formed over the planet Earth. Airmen sent up to make observations reported a cloud density hundreds of miles thick, reaching right up into the stratosphere, while their instruments recorded the presence of vast amounts of potential electricity. *Something had gone wrong with the atmosphere!*

Down on Earth the remaining scientific experts worked ceaselessly to explain away the heavy, charged pall that had descended on the world. It persisted for three days, blotting out the sun, giving a twilight glow to the daylight. Its effects made people jumpy and nervous; dogs barked incessantly. There was a curious, crushing calm in which not a tree moved. Not a breath of wind was on the land. The oceans of the world subsided to a dead calm.

On the third day the experts integrated their findings and presented their conclusions promptly to the World Council. Howard Sykes was present when they arrived in a body.

“The Triumvirate are building up a vast potential electrical field in the atmosphere,” World State Consultant Dudley Baxter said grimly, glancing up from the report. “This has been accomplished apparently by the training of cosmic forces upon our electrically constituted atmosphere—a natural condition. When a certain point is reached, there will be an atmospheric fusion—a thunderstorm on a titanic scale racing round and round the globe!

“When this storm has expended its fury, there will be a perceptible lessening of the air pressure. There will be a blasting of molecules, a weakening of the upper electrical layer which will keep our atmosphere at an even pressure.”

Baxter paused, added bitterly, “The intention, obviously, is to bring the atmosphere down to the level which a Martian bacilli can endure in comfort—but which will probably choke most of us to death!”

“And there’s nothing we can do to combat it!” Sykes muttered helplessly, pacing slowly up and down. He stopped at the big window and gazed out over the twilight mass of illumined New York. It was hard to believe it was only mid-afternoon. Overhead that pall loomed. . . .

Abruptly, almost as though by evil prearrangement, the room suddenly crackled with a blaze of violet flame. Sykes felt his hair actually stand up under the force of sudden electric discharge. The whole group glanced up, startled, and at the identical moment there was a sound overhead like the tearing of linen, followed by the most appalling thunderclap.

Windows rattled in their frames, pens and ink bottles on the desk jarred with the vibration. In the heavens outside, the terrific report shattered to the four corners of the horizon.

“It’s come!” Howard Sykes shouted, getting a grip on himself again. “The storm’s here! They’ve started changing the atmosphere! We’ve got to get the people into basements wherever we can. This storm will make more hideous anything in the history of the elements before it’s finished. Better give the orders, sir!”

Baxter jumped to the radio and switched on the emergency band. As he gave his commands to the controllers of the population, with instructions to relay the information to other cities and countries, the storm roared in ear-shattering concussions.

Appalled, Howard Sykes stood by the window. Before his gaze lightning slashed the sky in zigzagging bolts of blue fire. Monstrous “trees” of electricity hurtled down the now totally black sky toward the city buildings. Here and there pieces of masonry flashed and exploded into dust under the violent onslaught.

“Radio’s gone dead!” Baxter announced suddenly, glancing up. “Must have struck the power house—”

He headed for the door, then glanced up in alarm at a sudden vast concussion from above. Sykes glanced up, too, in time to see the white enameled ceiling suddenly part across its entire length. Plaster and bricks came raining down through the gap. A beam splintered further along.

Sykes had scarce a moment in which to make up his mind. Self-preservation sent him hurtling through the open doorway like a stone from a catapult. Even as he scrambled through it a deluge of masonry, steel bracing and upper structure came thundering down.

Countless tons of debris dropped cruelly on the members of the World Council and the well-nigh frantic Baxter, wiped them out in a second of time!

Sick with horror, Howard Sykes blundered down the passage, his way lighted by the blinding flashes of lightning. He was joined by scurrying men and women, most of them from the other departments represented in the vast Administration Building. In a shouting, hysterical mob they rushed down the broad staircase or crammed into the elevators, only to find the powder was off. Sykes headed for the basement.

The thunder, the tortured rupturing of the air by electric discharges, was something beyond imagining. The whole building responded to the cannonade. Windows cracked and shattered, instruments in fragile cases crumpled up, electroliers in the ceilings started swaying as the building maintained a steady trembling.

In a sudden onslaught rain came splashing down—a hammering deluge which descended in hissing torrents on the steps outside the building and sent little rivers rolling into the broad entrance hall. Howard Sykes stopped long enough to assist the hall porter to close the doors.

Outside, the air seemed suffused with purple. Chain lightning was leaping in devastating streaks up and down the midnight dark of the heavens and from building to building. Not a soul was in the rain-lashed streets: everybody had taken to shelter. Only abandoned cars and buses were visible, clear targets for the fury of the onslaught.

Once the street doors were closed the horror was shut out. Shaken, Howard Sykes went below into the basement, took his place among the mass of white-faced men and women. To most of them, unaware of the scientific nature of the storm, it looked as though the end of the world had come.

Far from letting up in the space of a few hours, the storm seemed to increase its hellish fury until it was noticeable even down in the bowels of the earth. Through the vast walls of concrete the onslaught of lightning crept ominously. There were visible flashes of purple fire at intervals, stupendous concussions that could only mean the collapse of buildings in the neighborhood.

Howard Sykes was the first man in the Administration Building to notice that the air in the cellar was getting curiously thin. It was becoming harder to take a deep breath, and his heart was pumping far more rapidly than usual. A sense of odd lightness came to him presently, as though something was buoying him up.

The men around him tore open their collars and mopped at sweat-streaming faces. Women began to gasp painfully, dropped helplessly to the floor in a dead faint.

“Say, something’s wrong here!” The man next to Howard Sykes turned a lean, perspiring face. “Air’s giving out. Vents to the surface must be choked.”

“You’re right there, brother,” Sykes said, and gasped with the effort.

Then his eyes widened. This man was Steve Walters, one of Earth’s best-known zoologists. For his part, Walters’ recognition was mutual.

“Why, Ambassador Sykes! This is one devil of a fix, isn’t it?”

“You’re telling me! Say, you’re Steve Walters, aren’t you? Well, let’s put our heads together. Maybe we can figure some kind of an out.”

Walters nodded vigorously. Both men pricked up their ears then; there was an almost imperceptible lull in the onslaught outside, but even as they listened the storm seemed to subside. Half the inmates of the basement now were stretched out on the floor, gasping for breath. The others looked ashen-faced, exhausted.

“Well, let’s take a crack at it,” Sykes said grimly. “No use dying like rats in a trap.”

Sykes got to his feet, stumbled as the peculiar lightness of the atmosphere caught at his lungs. Walters came staggering to his side with an alarmed expression on his face.

“What the hell—”

“The Triumvirate boys don’t miss a trick,” Sykes growled. “First they thin the air, then they distort gravity to the equal of that on Mars. All right—give me a hand here.”

Together they unbolted the basement door. The minute it swung open, a deluge of water came tumbling in to make more miserable the prostrate people. They got up from the floor hastily, only to stagger about and gape at what had gone wrong with their weight.

Slowly, Sykes and Walters climbed the steps to the external exit of the basement. A cool, fresh wind blew in their faces; twilight darkness was all about them. Evidently it was normal night now for a moon was shining through ragged, dispersing clouds. Something was wrong—very much wrong.

“My God!” was all Walters could say, when they came to looking at the city. “Oh, my God!”

Howard Sykes stood motionless, taking in the scene. Behind him feet were shifting on the steps as people came shuffling up. They gathered in a baffled, panting little group and stared open-mouthed at what had been a mighty city a few hours before. Now it was a desolate shambles. The familiar skyline had disappeared. In their stead were blackened skeletons gaunt against the darker night, debris-glutted rivers where broad streets and magnificent highways had graced a progressive city, ugly tattered facades lined in ghostly parade against the moon.

“Destroyed!” Steve Walters whispered. “New York wiped out in a few short hours. I—I wonder what happened to London, Paris, Moscow—”

“Probably the same catastrophe that struck at New York,” Sykes said unhappily.

He turned then to face the silent, unnerved group of people that had emerged from the basement behind them.

“My friends,” Howard Sykes began in tones of assurance he didn’t feel, “we are the victims of a vicious plot organized and carried out, as you now probably know, by a group of three Earth scientists on Mars—the so-called Triumvirate.

“The Triumvirate has committed unpardonable acts of aggression against the innocent people of Earth! Up to now, we have had no weapons with which to strike back. But be of courage! As Dudley Baxter and World President Johnston would say, were they happily alive, all of us must now stand together to present a united front against the enemy.

“With God and justice on our side, we shall yet find a way to turn back the enemy at our very gates and destroy them to the last man. It is as inevitable as the future history of mankind. Progress, not wholesale death, is our stated destiny!

“Since I am the last remaining official on Earth, I will undertake to organize the peoples of Earth in an invincible army which will wipe out the evil forces of enslavement and death!”

For a moment after he finished speaking, there was a hushed silence. Then a great roar of approval seemed to surge upward from the very souls of the people about him.

Howard Sykes had thrown down the gauntlet in the teeth of diabolical genius. Could the people of the world mobilize for effective resistance before that brave challenge was taken up?

CHAPTER V

Invasion!

It was only as the days passed, as some sign of order was restored out of the dreadful chaos and communications were slowly reestablished, that the full story of the frightful catastrophe could be pieced together. It became clear that in six hours of elemental horror, the scientific machinery ruled by the Triumvirate—at the behest of the Martian bacilli—had accomplished a dual purpose.

Electric forces, begotten of the cosmos itself, if the force of the onslaught was any guide, had simultaneously reduced the atmospheric pressure to that compatible with Mars in its heyday, while those same electric energies had evidently penetrated right through the earth to displace and shift the electronic structure of matter itself.^[1]

[1] The earthquake and violent electric effects at the height of the storm had obviously been the outward sign of this. In that time energies had been shifted and rebalanced. Matter itself had undergone a change. Mass had given off energy and lessened its molecular constitution, thereby cutting down its former attractive force to that of Mars itself.—Ed.

By degrees small representative governments sprang up again in the ruins of the world's cities. What few men there were left with either political or scientific gifts did their best to marshal some sense of order, set about the slow and painful rebuilding of what they had lost.

Howard Sykes, the only surviving representative of the World Council, along with a few remaining scientists and experts, made himself a leader and established new headquarters in the ruins of New York. With builders and technicians he did his best to try and get things on a decent footing again, worked ceaselessly to alleviate the sufferings of the people. In most of this he had the unstinted aid of the unimaginative but willing Steve Walters.

The first thing Sykes did was to re-establish the inter-spatial radio station, in order that he might receive any further messages from Eva Wayne. To contact the girl herself was impossible, might indeed put her in worse danger. For another thing, his own trip to Mars was for the moment out of the question. The storm had racked his personal space ship to little splinters.

Then on a calm, clear day in late March the expected invasion arrived.

Radio reports began to pour in from ocean and land alike of the presence of a thin and irritating mist of sporelike objects. Starting in the equatorial regions, the news spread rapidly to all parts of the globe and within six hours the actual mist arrived over New York.

The evening sun was blotted out by a brown curtain, as myriads of tiny objects dropped to the ground and were whisked by the wind to pile up like snow against ledges and sidewalks.

"It isn't possible that they're bacilli themselves," Howard Sykes said to the gathered men in his headquarters. "Bacilli are only visible under the microscope. So these Martian bacilli are probably encased in these ball-like containers, which will either melt or break up later on to release their cargoes of death."

"That settles it!" Steve Walters exclaimed. "At last we've got something tangible to attack!"

“Right! We’ve concentrated in the past few months on the building of endless numbers of flame-throwers, and they alone are likely to get rid of the stuff. I’ll give the order to get the counter-attack under way immediately!”

But though Howard Sykes’ command was given and promptly carried out; though fleets of land tractors and airplanes newly built and fitted with long-range flame guns went at once into action, it was obvious that the counter-attack was doomed to failure.

The Triumvirate had planned their invasion too well for an early defeat to be possible. For the Earth forces to cover every part of the world with flame guns was utterly out of the question, yet no method short of this could insure the absolute destruction of the myriads of spores.

As Howard Sykes had expected, the shell-like containers burst open after an hour or so. What happened then was not visible, since the bacilli were outside visual range. Only when vast numbers of them congregated together in a black swarming mass was it possible to detect them and attack.

Under the sublime Martian conditions produced on Earth, however, the growth of the menace was staggering in its speed. Though millions of the things were destroyed by every known means in every country, tens of thousands arose to take their place, harmless enough to life from the point of view of disease but deadly when it came to intelligence.

They grew almost under one’s eyes, following the usual form of bacilli by expanding into rods, spheres, and all manner of diverse shapes.

Their method of feeding seemed to consist of consuming nitrates from the ground, and there was much to suggest that they were able also to utilize parts of the atmospheric gases for their sustenance. Watching their progress anxiously, Sykes and his colleagues could gradually piece together the nature of the things.

They conversed by telepathy, that was evident. Their intelligence was of a high order too, and was obviously maturing as they grew in size. That they would ultimately come to dominate mankind was more than a grim possibility. . . .

By the end of April, millions of the things had become full grown, though their exact intentions were still wrapped in mystery. They could be seen floating through the air over city and countryside. Some seemed to drift with apparent aimlessness. Others would sometimes depart in hordes into the sky and be lost to sight. Some weeks later they would reappear and begin to drift.

Several times Howard Sykes watched this queer migration, until gradually the truth began to filter in upon him.

“Is it possible that the damnable things can fly through space?” he asked Steve Walters one day. “It is well known that bacilli spores—even the tiny normal ones—can resist the temperature of absolute zero. These things possibly fly to Mars and back through some process of their own.”

Walters shrugged, his thin face long and gloomy.

“So what? All that concerns me is the fact that we can’t defeat the damned things!”

“Yeah. But somehow their ability to fly through space—if that is what it is—gives me an idea.”

Sykes scratched his chin pensively, deep in thought. Then he looked up in surprise as the door burst open to admit Roy Granville, the young chief radio engineer.

“Mr. Sykes—Mars is contacting us! Quick!” And he dashed out again at top speed.

Howard Sykes flashed one glance at Walters, then tore out of the room like a whirlwind, down the passage and into the radio transmission-reception department on the lower floor. It was the far-away voice of Eva Wayne!

"I must speak to Howard Sykes if he is still alive. If not, somebody in full authority. Hello! Calling Earth! Urgent—

"Okay, Eva, go ahead! It's me!" Sykes sat down at the transmitter.

He fretted and fumed at the delay in transmission and reception across the spatial gulf. Then the girl's voice came in again, eager and excited.

"Hello, Howard! Oh, thank God you're safe! I know what these Martian fiends did to Earth. Dr. Brown and the others *had* to do it—they couldn't help themselves! Listen, I've found out what they are trying to do.

"The principal controlling Martian bacilli are those in the bloodstreams of Dr. Brown and his two main colleagues, as well as in the systems of several of the scientists in lesser rôles. It is through Brown, the dominant mentality, that these bacilli have gained control over Mars.

"The bacilli projected to Earth are intelligent enough, but they will only act under orders from their masters plotting inside Brown and the others. You understand? Brown, as the involuntary mouthpiece, will give orders to them. The things can fly through space from Earth once they have matured. They come to Mars to receive their orders, then return to Earth.

"Now, the idea, as far as I can make out, is to retain all the scientists on Mars, make them serfs to follow out Martian orders of scientific progress, while the Earth will become a spawning ground for the new Martian bacillary race. That means that Earthmen will be eliminated as a useless, primitive form of life. That may come at any time!"

Despite himself, Sykes could not help but shudder at the diabolic scheme.

"The giant bacilli will destroy the human race by various means. For one thing, their mentalities are strong enough to cause less mentally equipped Earthmen to lose their reason. In physique they are somewhat hampered by their queer shape, but they can do an awful lot of burrowing and snipping.

"Look closely, and you'll find that the rodlike ones—those able to fly through space—have pincer mandibles. With those pincers they can—and will!—cut all lines of communication, eat through buildings, slowly but surely bring down mankind's every structure. It may take years, but it will succeed, and finally everything on Earth will be destroyed.

"All that will remain finally will be our planet, so altered atmospherically and gravitationally as to be another Mars. On Earth they can then pursue their aims, which were cut short when Mars' air supply gave out. On Mars will remain the controlling faction—bacilli-dominated Earthmen with the necessary physical attributes to make instruments, weapons and so on."

Eva's voice, millions of miles distant, trembled audibly.

"Because of their eternal numbers, nothing can stop these bacilli from over-running Earth! Howard, only one thing can possibly block them. Somehow, the master bacilli impregnating Dr. Brown and the others must be destroyed! I cannot do anything—I'm too well known as a possible revolutionary. I risk my life every time I radio to you.

"Howard, you must get to Mars *somehow*! As an outsider, and therefore not included in the general census of workers which has been made on this planet, you might be able to do something. Now I must go—"

The communication halted abruptly. Evidently something on that far-away world had startled the girl, and she had switched off. Howard Sykes got up slowly from his chair, brows knitted.

Then his eyes brightened with excitement. “But perhaps I can!” he breathed. “Perhaps I *can*! I’ve got an idea. Come with me, Steve! The ol’ brain shows sudden signs of returning to life!”

CHAPTER VI

Journey Extraordinary

Walters' bewilderment was obvious when he and Howard Sykes entered a huge disused foundry, designated as the incinerator for the Martian bacilli which had not escaped the desperate attacks of armed forces in New York. Here squads of men hurled the carcasses into raging furnaces, both dead and partly dead beings suffering the same treatment.

Howard Sykes went through a systematic search and finally discovered one of the rod-shaped objects, bullets imbedded in its brain. He dragged it clear of the others and looked it over quickly.

"Guess this'll do," he said briefly. "Intact, except for the shattered brain case— Now look Walters—you once mentioned something about stuffing animals. You're a taxidermist, aren't you?"

"Sure. Part of my former job as zoology chief."

"Anything to stop you from examining this thing, probing its entrails, to enable you to find out what makes it able to fly through space?"

"I guess I could do it, but— Good Lord, man, what are you driving at? You're not suggesting that—"

"I'm suggesting that a bacillus is the only thing that can get to Mars undetected. Find out what makes that bacillus tick; then, if you get that far, we'll see what else we can do. Dammit, we're going to beat these babies at their own game!"

"Right! Give me a hand to carry the thing. I'll need instruments, too."

Between them they lugged the heavy carcass out of the place, carried it to Walters' newly equipped laboratory immediately under the headquarters office. Walters, tackling a job right up his own alley, went to work immediately, while Sykes returned to his office in another part of the building.

Three hours later Walters came in through a private entrance, wiping his hands.

"First time I ever had to analyze a creature with the help of physicists," he observed. "The innards of that darned thing are like an electric battery or something in the way it works. As a glow worm can produce cold light by chemicalization, as a spider produces endless webs, so do these Martian bacilli utilize cosmic radiation—or so the physicists tell me."

"In what way?" Howard Sykes demanded earnestly. "Be explicit, man!"

"Here it is." Walters tugged a sheaf of notes from his pocket and started to read from them. "There are radiations in the ether which we can only guess at—the ones which we understand as such are gravitation, light, cosmic waves, and so on. But there is also an accepted range of hundreds of radiations of which we know nothing.

"As a bird can float on the air, as a fish can swim the sea, so can this bacillus utilize one fixed radiation forever in space in order to propel itself along. It is a radiation of force, as near as I can describe it. The force passes through the complex entrails of the thing and is there turned into a useful quantity by semi-electrical processes.

"It can, so to speak, absorb the radiation at one end, change it in the middle by reason of its organisms, then discharge it at the tail for propulsion and guidance. Believe me, these Martian bacilli—the rod ones, anyway—are masterful creations of nature."

“We’ve got it!” Howard Sykes breathed, his eyes gleaming. “We’ve got it, man! *I can get to Mars!*”

“Huh? Now, listen—”

“No, you listen to me! Is it possible to make enough room in one of those damned things—the one you’ve examined, for instance—for me to lie out flat? Can you remove enough of the needless entrails without disturbing the vital natural organism it possesses?”

Walters frowned. “I can try. But you’re not thinking of traveling yourself to Mars in the carcass of that thing?”

“Why not? You know enough about the curing of pelts and the stuffing of animals to make the inside as near normal as need be. I’ll use a space suit to protect me during the voyage. If the weight of the superfluous entrails about equals my own weight, the thing will only carry the load it carried in its lifetime. See?”

Walters’ mild eyes went wide as he caught onto the idea. “Yes, I see! It’s not only crazy—it’s tremendous!”

Howard Sykes himself was rather inclined to doubt the practicality of his astonishing plan as the days went by, until he saw the combined work of the physicists and Steve Walters. Between them they cleared out the weird and useless entrails of the object and left only the vital natural organs which utilized radiation. The heart was taken out and a chrome steel substitute operated by batteries put in its place.

The valvular system formerly needed to promote a sluggish circulation was now dispensed with, in that its function was radically altered to operate the numberless organs connected with the natural “transformer” system. When the time for the initial test arrived, Sykes got into his strange new spacecraft and propelled the almost uncanny conveyance at a steep upward angle for nearly two thousand feet, then planed it slowly back to Earth with never a hitch.

Now only a favorable opportunity was needed. It came abruptly one morning, as Howard Sykes awoke from a restless night. He was just in time to see a flock of the rod-shaped bacilli creatures hurtling toward the skies, for all the world like a fleet of distant space machines. The crucial moment had arrived!

It took the Earth official no more than five minutes to scramble into his space suit, fix the helmet, and ease himself inside the narrow interior of his conveyance. The end of the carcass closed over his leaded boots as he lay at full length. His helmeted face was pressed close against the spot where the thing’s head had been. Two tiny holes enabled him to see in front of him.

Sykes shifted one of the organisms with his gloved hand. Instantly the carcass lifted, curved in a long arc and swept with effortless ease into the clouds. Sykes swept on through the mist, following close in the wake of the spaceward bacilli horde. At last he caught up with the vanguard and kept within reach. No attention was paid to him. It was clear—the creatures considered him one of themselves.

It was beyond doubt the most ghastly trip Howard Sykes had ever known, one that called for every ounce of his endurance and courage. The only thing in his favor was that the bacilli objects did not move at a speed too crushing for him to keep up with them. Even so, it was a journey which brought him close to collapse on several occasions. Hardly able to move,

stretched out as he was in his cramped position, with naught but all the void around him, he had to resort to restorative pills on several occasions.

He gave up imagining how long he lay there, sometimes half-conscious, at other times torpidly aware that the bulk of Mars was growing ever larger. And then they had arrived—the horde of bacilli was sweeping downward to the familiar landscape of Mars, its surface dotted with the six scientific Zones. In the interval of his absence, Sykes noticed, the destroyed Zones had been rebuilt and repopulated. He turned his own craft downward, thankful beyond measure that his term of self-inflicted anguish was nearly at an end.

Most of the bacilli headed toward the city as the landscape rose up to meet them. Sykes turned swiftly northward and headed for the specially created pastureland to the rear of the former Biology Zone. Once there, he landed his strange conveyance in the safety of a newly sprouted wood. Here, prying eyes were unlikely to detect him.

Emerging from his craft was like waking up in winter with a stiff neck. The least movement was filled with intolerable pain. His legs were numb, his back and shoulders scoured and taut. By degrees, setting his teeth, he did the thing he had planned.

Pulling out his knife, he gradually slit the carcass wide open, dragged himself out of it little by little. Pins and needles surged through his entire body, set him wincing and gasping; then very slowly he began to recover, eased himself up, sat breathing hard as he tugged off his helmet.

At last he was rid of his suit. Sykes stood up and breathed the first lungfuls of Earthlike air he had known in months.

CHAPTER VII

A Matter of Organism

As Howard Sykes had anticipated, work for the day had ceased when he arrived in the Zone formerly relegated to biology. From the look of the new buildings, it appeared that engineering work was going ahead. Biological research had obviously been suppressed by the Martian Triumvirate.

Sykes went quickly along the sidewalk, and no particular attention was directed to him by the similarly attired men and women homeward bound. The one thing he did notice, however, was that most of them had changed a lot in the interval. There was a sullen look on their formerly eager faces, a light of rebellion in their eyes.

Possessing no Martian currency as yet, Sykes walked the distance along the pedestrian ways to the city itself, hoping against hope that Dr. Brown had kept his word and allowed Eva Wayne to retain her former apartment. As he strode along he cast occasional glances at the night sky.

Mingled with aircraft were occasional mighty bacilli forms floating against the nearer moon as it scurried on its eternal journey across the heavens. But in the city, things were the same as ever. Lights were on; the workers were following out their usual forms of entertainment. Evidently the Martian Triumvirate had not excluded popular amusement.

The large block of apartment dwellings wherein Eva Wayne resided was apparently unchanged. With a fast-racing heart Howard Sykes entered the building, paused as the armed guard in the entrance hall barred his way.

“Number, name, Zone, and purpose of visit?” the guard asked mechanically.

Sykes thought fast. This was a new angle. Certainly it had not been in force before.

“Forty twenty-two,” he replied at random. “Name, Robert Carfax. Zone of Astronomy. Urgent message for Worker Eva Wayne.”

The man seemed to hesitate momentarily, then said briefly,

“Pass. Worker Wayne’s room is on sixth floor—Number One Twenty-one.”

With a sigh of inward relief Sykes raced to the giant staircase and pelted up the stairs three at a time. His frantic tapping on the door panels of Room 121 brought Eva Wayne herself to open it. She stared at him with a most extraordinary look. Fear, relief and delight seemed to fight for the mastery of her features.

“Howard!” she whispered thankfully. “Oh, Howard—”

He shut and locked the door behind him, caught her in his arms. For a moment or two they were silent in each other’s embrace. Then he held the girl gently at arm’s length.

“All okay?” he asked anxiously. “Nobody’s harmed you?”

Eva shook her blond head earnestly. “No—no, nobody suspects. I risked a lot sending those messages, but so far nobody is the wiser. I’m a worker in the Engineering Zone now. Dr. Brown kept his word. No liberties have been curtailed, as long as I don’t do anything ‘foolish.’”

She smiled a little twistedly. “Hardest part of the lot was sneaking a mobile radio truck with which to send my messages to you. But I made it—Howard, how on earth did you get here without being detected?”

He drew her down beside him in the wide armchair and went through the account of his experiences.

“And what are you going to do now?” the girl asked anxiously.

He shrugged. “No fixed idea. I thought maybe you could give me a lead. If we’ve got to destroy the bacilli in control of Brown and the Triumvirate, how do we start?”

“That’ll take plenty of pondering,” Eva said worriedly. “The only thing I can suggest is that you disguise yourself somewhat to avoid detection and become one of the workers. Incidentally”—she looked at him in startled surprise—“how did you manage to get past the sentry in the hall?”

“By a fluke, I guess. I told him my number was forty twenty-two and that I was from the Astronomy Zone. This outfit I’m wearing is okay, and so—”

“Forty twenty-two!” Eva cried in dismay. “But—but Howard, there isn’t such a number any more! They changed all the numbers of the workers when the Triumvirate came in—and *three hundred* is the highest number! I’m only Number Twenty-two myself. In the Zone of Astronomy, I believe there are even less workers.”

Howard Sykes’ lips tightened. “Hell, that’s bad! Puts us both on the spot. I was caught quite unawares and—”

He broke off startled at a thunderous hammering on the door. Eva looked around in helpless anxiety for some quick hiding place for him, but there was no time. A flame gun slashed the lock and the portal swung wide. Armed officials entered, led by Dr. Brown in his normal civilian attire. He turned slowly to look at Howard Sykes.

“So the sentry was right!” he commented. “I wondered what method you would adopt to get back here, Mr. Sykes. I still don’t know how you did it, but since you are here it doesn’t matter. Fortunately, the sentry was puzzled by your passwords and general behavior. He passed the information on to headquarters and—”

Brown smiled thinly. “You were not very sensible coming straight to this apartment, Mr. Sykes.”

“But wait a minute, Doctor!” Eva broke in hoarsely. “Howard—I mean Mr. Sykes—hasn’t done anything wrong. All he did was come here to assure himself that I was safe. After all, we are engaged to be married.”

“I’m afraid romance does not reconcile the situation,” Brown said coldly. “Such an excuse is a ridiculous distortion of fact. Do you think that we of the Triumvirate do not know that Sykes here would give anything to be able to destroy us? Why else do you think we endeavored to stop him from getting back here?”

“No, Mr. Sykes, there is only one end to this escapade—and that’s the lethal chamber! The same applies to you, Miss Wayne. You were warned at the outset what would happen if you dared to enter into any conspiracy against the Triumvirate.”

“Not death for *her!*” Howard Sykes shouted hoarsely. “Good God, man, it’s insane! She had nothing to do with my coming here! Besides—”

“Out with them!” Brown snapped, his jaws snapping shut. “Take them to the lethal chamber before they do any more damage. I’ll come afterward and view the results. That is all.”

Both Sykes and the girl put up a desperate struggle as they were seized by the guards, but within five minutes they were rendered helpless. Half carried, half dragged, they were forced down the long corridor to the ominous steel door of the lethal chamber. Still fighting, they

were forced inside, literally hurled into the narrow confines of the enclosed chamber wherein the death sentence would be carried out.

The door slammed; only its tiny grille of glass was visible. Overhead was the yellow bulb, casting a pale glimmer on the two prisoners' haggard, sweat-dewed faces.

"I—I guess this is all my fault," Howard Sykes panted. "That seems to be the appropriate thing to say. My God, Eva, if I'd ever even thought—"

Eva, about to reply, broke off and stared in horrified fascination at wisps of pale blue gas surging in increasing density from the grille under her feet. Below the floor, obviously, the devilish poison gas machine was already at work!

Sykes tried to speak again, but the words stuck in his throat. The vast certainty of death paralyzed his nerves. Eva stood motionless in the haze, striving to keep her courage to the bitter end.

Moments passed and the cloud of deadly gas continued to rise—but the incredible thing was that neither of them felt any different! It was like standing in the midst of cool steam or an ordinary winter fog. At last Sykes turned, groped through the dark, and caught Eva's arm. Very faintly he could distinguish her face in the nearly obscured yellow light.

"Say, what's wrong?" he exclaimed. "I don't even feel giddy yet. How long does this damned gas take to become effective?"

"No idea," she replied quickly. "It's a new sort of gas which the Triumvirate have invented for the rapid killing of traitors to the cause. So far, we are the first who've dared to challenge them; therefore I suppose we are the first to get the gas.

"But—" Eva stopped. "It certainly is not having any effect," she admitted in a baffled voice.

That fact was clear enough a moment or two later. For the flow of gas began to cease; gradually the mist began to disperse through vents in the roof which had suddenly been opened. The gas, then, was assumed to have done its deadly work.

Howard Sykes said abruptly, "Wait! I've got something! This is the *first* trial of this gas, you say?"

"Yes. Why?"

"And it's an invention of the Triumvirate—in other words, the Martian bacilli working through Doctors Brown, Latham and Poste. The bacilli invented this gas as a destroyer of life—but they've slipped up! They've judged life from *their* standards, not ours! You know, like a horse can eat grass and we can't. All a matter of organisms. This gas evidently kills bacilli but doesn't kill us—"

The girl's breathing came faster. "I get what you mean! But what can we do about it? The sentries and Dr. Brown will come in here after a while, find we're alive, and devise other means to kill us!"

"They won't be here for a while yet, anyway," Sykes said quickly. He dropped to his knees and pulled at the grating in the floor. "Nobody is likely to be below here, either, because of the effects of the gas. There may be a regular arsenal stored below here." Within ten minutes he had smashed and broken one of the gratings and begun to ease himself through the hole into the basement below. Reaching up, he helped the girl down after him.

The light of his small torch revealed the remote-controlled gas apparatus and also the immense underground fortress loaded with all manner of munition supplies, each graded and marked in sections.

“Look!” Eva pointed excitedly. “Gas bombs!”

Howard Sykes stared at the vast rack wherein were loaded tens of thousands of pineapplelike objects, each one as large as a duck egg. For a moment or two he eyed them thoughtfully.

“Nice going—if they are composed of *this* gas,” he muttered. “I’m going to find out. With me, Eva?”

The girl nodded quickly. Sykes snatched one up, pulled out the pin and hurled the bomb to the far end of the great place. It burst a second later and emitted a cloud of white steamlike fumes. But as the fumes drifted nearer they caused no ill effects, were obviously of the same composition as the poison gas machine had been emitting.

“So in their cleverness they have out-smarted themselves!” Sykes gave a twisted smile. “If they dropped ten tons of these on Earth people, it would have no bad effect—but it *would* destroy every damned bacillus within range! Now it’s our turn! Here, stuff up every pocket you’ve got with these things!”

Eva swung around to the bomb rack and began loading the gas grenades onto her person. Howard Sykes did likewise. Then they both glanced up at a sudden commotion from above. First there was the clang of the lethal chamber’s door as it swung open, followed by heavy feet. Startled cries followed, and above them raged the voice of Dr. Brown.

“You damned, infernal blunderers! You let them get away! Look at this smashed grating!” Brown broke off suddenly as Sykes and Eva Wayne stood watching. Brown’s face appeared in the hole of the smashed grating and was illumined by Sykes’ torch beam.

“They’re down here!” Brown yelled.

“Get hold of his hair!” Sykes cried. “Leave the rest to me!”

Eva Wayne grinned a fighting grin and, reaching upward out of the dark, caught Dr. Brown’s mop of gray hair in her hands. Brown shouted at the sudden pain, but to shift his head out of the grating hole was impossible now.

Then Howard Sykes acted. He smashed a gas bomb immediately below Brown’s red, startled face. White vapor surged up around the man’s nostrils.

From his frantic struggles to dislodge the girl, it was clear that Brown fully expected death. For three minutes, as the gas billowed about him, he fought and struggled. The guards had deserted him at the bursting of the bomb.

Then very gradually the gas began to disperse. The girl released her hold and lowered her hands, stood by watching. Sykes kept his flashlight on, keenly studying the variety of expressions passing over Brown’s face. He was obviously baffled and confused. Gasping, he tugged himself free of the opening, sat on the grating floor and shook himself stupidly.

“Well, Dr. Brown, how goes it?” Howard Sykes asked curtly. “Feel any different?”

Brown looked back into the torchlight glare.

“That’s you, Sykes, isn’t it?” His voice had the quiet calm of the once great scientist. “What happened just now? I thought— Seems to me that everything’s confused. I have a recollection of doing the most extraordinary, horrible things— For God’s sake, switch off that torch and come up here!” he finished in exasperation.

Sykes nodded quietly to Eva Wayne and helped her up. In another minute or so they were assisting the baffled, disheveled scientist to his feet. He looked at them in bemused wonder in the yellow light, particularly at their clothes bulging under the bomb load.

“Sykes,” he said slowly, “did I dream it, or did I actually condemn you and Miss Wayne here to this lethal chamber?”

“You did just that,” Sykes stated quietly. “Only it wasn’t you—it was the Martian bacilli in your system that gave the order; that in fact have ordered everything that has transpired ever since this horrible business began. Just now I gassed you, but the gas didn’t hurt you any. It was absorbed in your bloodstream, however, and destroyed all the bacilli that have been controlling your actions. Understand?”

“So that’s it! Just the same, I don’t quite see how—”

“Then I’ll dope out the whole thing,” Sykes said briefly, and promptly launched into a complete explanation. At the end of it Brown’s eyes were gleaming.

“Now I understand!” he shouted, gripping Sykes’ arm. “I have been only partly aware of my actions these past few months—like a man working in a dream to an indefinite end. But now—”

Brown took a deep breath. “Sykes, we can turn the tables on these bacilli fiends! We’ll gas every one of the Earthmen ruled by bacilli—we’ll even gas the whole population, in order to make sure. Root the germs out like the plague they are!”

Howard Sykes nodded vigorously.

“I still remember all I was taught during my period of mental control,” Brown went on tensely. “We have been shown vast engineering feats—making the Earth into a Martian spawning ground, for instance. The effect can be reversed; slowly too, so as to cause little damage. We can make Earth normal again—we will destroy every bacillus on Mars and Earth!”

“You’ve hit the nail right on the head!” Howard Sykes exclaimed. “But listen—these bacilli controllers inside Latham and Poste mustn’t suspect what has happened right away. We must marshal our forces for the right moment.

“Therefore, you must remain the Dr. Brown ruled by bacilli. You will give orders for a supposed invasion of Earth. Space ships will be manned and loaded—but before we set off for Earth, we will attack Mars here. Right?”

“Right!” Brown said enthusiastically.

Dr. Brown played his part perfectly in the days which followed. Howard Sykes and the girl, safe under his authority, returned under a convenient pretext to the workshops. While they were there, they did not continue with their ordinary work: they supervised the marshalling of armed forces under Brown’s direction. Ship after ship was loaded and prepared.

The inevitable hitch came when the bacilli in control of Doctors Latham and Poste began to suspect something and started to raise querulous objections. For answer, the two scientists were promptly gassed, became normal again and explanations followed. The Triumvirate of Mars had ceased to be!

When at last Dr. Brown gave the order for the gathered armada to be launched, some five hundred space machines loaded to capacity with gas bombs rained their vapors on Mars from pole to pole. There was never a question of disobedience. Was not Dr. Brown the acknowledged leader?

At first the teeming workers of the six Zones were panic-stricken and thought some new war had descended upon them, until they found that no damage had been done and that they were not in the least hurt. Realization came only to those who had been semi-controlled by the

Martian bacilli, and who had now regained their normal health and individuality. By radio, Dr. Brown explained their regeneration clearly and concisely.

The colony realized in a short time that the former system of six Martian Zones would be reconstituted—but on the lines originally planned by the late Dudley Baxter. Dr. Brown nominated six trusted men to control matters in his absence. Then, in company with Doctors Latham and Poste, Howard Sykes and Eva Wayne, he pointed his flagship toward the Earth.

Once the fleet arrived in the vicinity of Earth, the people of the planet feared that the devastating onslaught from the red planet Mars had finally descended. Gradually mass hysteria was dissipated when the people found themselves unhurt, beheld the teeming bacilli in the throes of destruction.

The streets, the fields, the skies above were saturated with steamlike vapor in which the horrible germs strangled and died. First in hundreds, then in thousands, then in tens of thousands and finally in millions.

At the end of fifty-six hours of continued gas bombing, Earth was saturated in drifting vapors from pole to pole. But when the gas finally cleared away, there was no longer a drifting multitude of strange rods and spheres aiming at the elimination of mankind.

Their work done, the fleet from Mars descended to New York. The first person Dr. Brown, Howard Sykes and the rest met on the steps of Earth headquarters was Steve Walters, his long face a study in dazed amazement.

“Howard, what happened?” he demanded. “What did you do? You destroyed every bacillus—but how?”

Howard Sykes smiled as he gazed at the carcass-littered streets.

“Gas,” he said calmly. “It’s the end of the bacilli, the return of the Zones, and the gradual restoration of Earth to its former state. Now it may be said that man has definitely and absolutely conquered the last menace he is likely to encounter. Eh, Dr. Brown?”

The scientist shrugged. “Maybe,” he said. “It’s a big universe—”

[The end of *War of the Scientists* by John Russell Fearn]