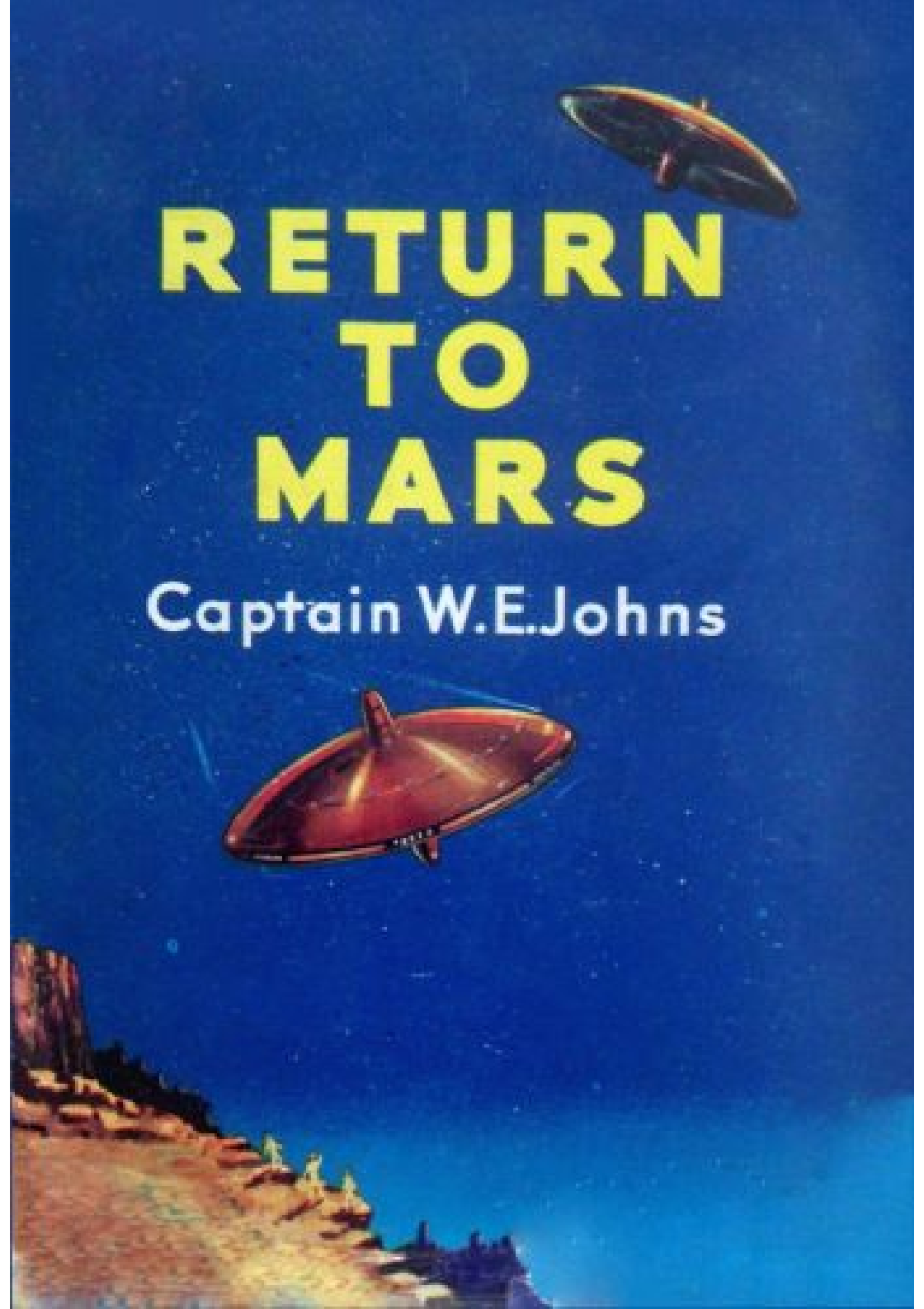
RETURN TO MARS

Captain W.E.Johns



Title: Return to Mars--A Story of Interplanetary Flight (Space #2)
Date of first publication: 1955
Author: Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns (1893-1968)
Illustrator: Leslie Stead (1899-1966)
Date first posted: September 10, 2023
Date last updated: September 10, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20230915

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, akaitharam, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

KINGS OF SPACE

"Captain Johns' first space adventure book is a winner."

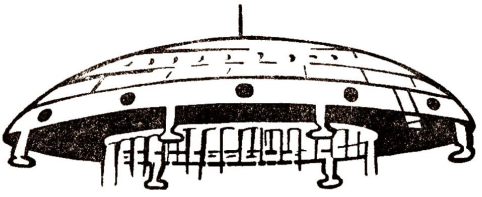
Daily Mirror.

The 'Biggles' Books

BIGGLES GOES TO SCHOOL
BIGGLES LEARNS TO FLY
BIGGLES FLIES EAST
THE RESCUE FLIGHT
BIGGLES HITS THE TRAIL
BIGGLES & CO.
BIGGLES IN AFRICA
BIGGLES, AIR COMMODORE
BIGGLES FLIES WEST
BIGGLES FLIES SOUTH
BIGGLES GOES TO WAR
BIGGLES IN SPAIN
BIGGLES FLIES NORTH
BIGGLES, SECRET AGENT
BIGGLES IN THE SOUTH SEAS
BIGGLES IN THE BALTIC
BIGGLES DEFIES THE SWASTIKA
BIGGLES SEES IT THROUGH
SPITFIRE PARADE
BIGGLES IN THE JUNGLE
BIGGLES SWEEPS THE DESERT
BIGGLES, CHARTER PILOT
BIGGLES IN BORNEO
BIGGLES FAILS TO RETURN
BIGGLES IN THE ORIENT
BIGGLES DELIVERS THE GOODS
SERGEANT BIGGLESWORTH, C.I.D.
BIGGLES' SECOND CASE
BIGGLES HUNTS BIG GAME
BIGGLES TAKES A HOLIDAY
BIGGLES BREAKS THE SILENCE
BIGGLES GETS HIS MEN
ANOTHER JOB FOR BIGGLES
BIGGLES WORKS IT OUT
BIGGLES TAKES THE CASE
BIGGLES FOLLOWS ON
BIGGLES AND THE BLACK RAIDER
BIGGLES IN THE BLUE
BIGGLES IN THE GOBI
BIGGLES CUTS IT FINE
BIGGLES AND THE PIRATE TREASURE
BIGGLES, FOREIGN LEGIONNAIRE
BIGGLES' CHINESE PUZZLE
BIGGLES IN AUSTRALIA

and

COMRADES IN ARMS
THE FIRST BIGGLES OMNIBUS



RETURN TO MARS

A story of Interplanetary Exploration

by

CAPTAIN W. E. JOHNS

A Sequel to Kings of Space

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEAD

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

First Printed 1955

MADE AND PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN FOR HODDER AND STOUGHTON LIMITED, LONDON BY C. TINLING & CO. LTD., LIVERPOOL, LONDON AND PRESCOT

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Moving outwards from the Sun. Figures approximate.

Planets	*Diameter in Miles*	*Length of Year*	*Length of Day*	*No. of Moons*
MERCURY	3,100	88 days	88 days	?
VENUS	7,750	224 days	?	?
EARTH	7,900	365 days	24 hours	1
MARS	4,200	687 days	24½ hours	2
JUPITER	86,700	12 years	10 hours	11
SATURN	71,500	30 years	10 hours	10
URANUS	32,000	84 years	11 hours	5
NEPTUNE	31,000	164 years	16 hours	2
PLUTO	7,500	248 years	?	?

About 2,000 minor planets (planetoids) with orbits mostly between Mars and Jupiter. The largest are Ceres, Pallas, Vesta and Juno, with diameters of between one hundred and five hundred miles. Five hundred have diameters of more than thirty miles.

The increasing lengths of the years is because of the increasing distance from the Sun, resulting in a longer journey which the planet must make round it.

FOREWORD

THIS is the sequel to *Kings of Space*. In that story Group Captain "Tiger" Clinton and his son Rex, on a deer-stalking holiday in the remote Highlands of Scotland and benighted by bad weather, found refuge in a lonely shooting lodge named Glensalich Castle. There they made the acquaintance of Professor Lucius Brane, a wealthy genius who had for years worked on the project of vertical flight, and had in fact just completed an aircraft of the "Flying Saucer" type which he had named the *Spacemaster*.

Knowing Tiger by reputation as one of the "back-room boys" at the Royal Aircraft Experimental Establishment, he had, after confiding in him, asked his advice on some constructional details. This had led to discussions on the new science of Astronautics, and the Astronomy to which it is related.

The upshot of this was Tiger and Rex joined the Professor on his preliminary experimental flights. Next, a landing was made on the moon. Then came a trip to Venus, and finally, a journey to Mars, calling at Phobos (one of the two moons of Mars) on the way. On Mars had been found a few surviving members of a dying race of men much like themselves. At the same time, the "red storms" that can be observed from Earth were explained.

It transpired that at a remote period, the Martians, a cultured people, to conserve a diminishing water supply possibly caused by the deforestation of the planet, had cut canals to bring the melting ice from the Poles; but in this vast water system had developed a malignant mosquito, pink in colour, which, multiplying to countless billions, had (supposedly) by the constant inoculation of poison, practically wiped out the "human" population on which it preyed. The "red clouds" that had for long puzzled astronomers on Earth were in fact devastating swarms of insects of the mosquito family. Admittedly, this was largely assumption, but, from the evidence, what had happened seemed fairly obvious. Unfortunately, before confirmation could be obtained, the visitors had themselves been nearly overwhelmed by the deadly clouds and only with difficulty made their escape.

On returning to Earth the Professor had resolved to design and build a bigger and better spaceship, introducing such modifications as experience with Spacemaster I had indicated, with the object of trying to save the few surviving Martians from the fate that threatened them. His great fear was that they would arrive too late. Aside from the humanitarian angle, he

asserted, this would be a major tragedy, for with the Martians would die, and so be lost for ever, the history of the planet and its people.

Repetition being wearisome, in order to grasp the known facts of the Solar System and the general principles of Astronautics, as related by the Professor to Tiger and Rex, the reader is advised to read *Kings of Space*.

After reading it some of the incidents narrated in the present volume may not appear to be outside the bounds of possibility, for interwoven in the story is a good deal of fact. For example, those who would question the invasion of our Solar System by comets from outer space, to the peril of the planets of which Earth is one, should know that such visitations occur hundreds of times in the course of a century. Sometimes these comets stay with us. Sometimes they retire, to return, or perhaps be seen no more. In the long history of mankind we must have been invaded millions of times.

Was there never a collision? We don't know, although we do know from their orbits that the planetoids Hermes, Apollo and Adonis, must have passed relatively close to Earth many times. It can hardly be coincidence that in the old records of every ancient race there are legends, significantly similar, of visitations causing destruction beyond imagination. Such frightful disasters were of course ascribed to the wrath of the pagan gods, but they appear very much like collisions with the tail of a comet.

How else can we account for the dreadful events described in the Old Testament? Long periods of absolute darkness during which the Earth was bombarded with fire, brimstone and red hot stones: noises beyond description, rains of dust and rocks that slew the people and all the cattle in the fields. The crops and forests were destroyed and the whole land laid waste. Mountains rose up. Seas overran the dry ground. Not even kings could escape. Surely this is precisely what would happen if a comet, or any other body, approached us from space. That these things happened is not to be doubted and may explain why the ancients were terrified of the heavens.

Certainly the Earth has had shakings severe enough to rock it on its axis. How otherwise could we find the remains of tropical life in the Arctic?—coral reefs, fossil palm trees, and the like. Today the great continent of Antarctica, which covers the South Pole, is a frozen waste, without a tree; yet ice breaking off not infrequently carries coal. If there is coal under the ice there must at one time have been forests! Bones, human and animal, have been found hundreds of feet below the present surface of the Earth. How did they get there? Shells and fossil fish found in the sedimentary rock that covers the world's highest mountains tell us that they were once under the sea. What happened?

Such facts may be disconcerting, but they cannot be ignored on that account.

Phobos, one of the two moons of Mars that comes into our story, sets another problem. These moons were only discovered in 1877, after the telescope made it possible to see them. Yet the ancients must have known of them for they gave them names—the names they still hold. Phobos (meaning Terror) and Deimos (Rout). Homer and Virgil talk of them as the two horses of Mars, dragging his chariot. Why horses? Did they have tails? Comets have tails. Whatever they were they were visible to the naked eye, from which we are forced to the conclusion that Mars, the ancient God of War, was at one time nearer to us than it is today.

Now another word of warning. There is a general and natural tendency to suppose that everything in the Universe works the same way as on Earth; that as things happen here so they happen elsewhere; day and night, the months, years and seasons, all following each other in the procession with which everyone is familiar. This is not the case. There is no fixed order of things, every heavenly body being governed by its own peculiar factors. Because on Earth the sun rises in the East doesn't mean that it rises in the East everywhere.

Owing to the angle of Earth's axis in relation to the Sun both our Poles are cold. But the axis of the planet Uranus is so placed that for twenty years one of its Poles is the hottest place on the planet: then the opposite Pole moves round and in turn for twenty years enjoys tropical sunshine. Here our period of a month is governed by the Moon. As we have only one moon our calendar is a simple affair. But how many months has Jupiter, which has eleven moons, some revolving in reverse directions?

These examples will suffice to show the sort of problems that will confront navigators when interplanetary flight becomes as commonplace as air travel is today. To many people Lunar Flight is still fantasy. They should remember that not very long ago talk of any sort of flight was fantasy.

The Planetoids.

The reader should know something about these little worlds that spin about the Solar System. There are quite a lot of them.

The first was discovered in 1801 by an Italian monk named Piazzi. It had a diameter of nearly 500 miles and was named Ceres. A year later a German doctor found another, with a diameter of just over 300 miles which was named Pallas. Two years later another was found, and three years after that, a fourth. These were named Juno and Vesta.

Then the fun started. The eyes of all astronomers were on the skies and fresh discoveries began to pour in. So many were there that names, which had begun as classical female names, began to give out. By 1890 three hundred planetoids had been found. As telescopes became bigger and better still more were added to the list, until today it runs to about two thousand. Names having become exhausted numbers are now used.

A great part of astronomy became the checking of the orbits of these wanderers in space. In some areas they fairly swarm, and have been given group names. Some have come close enough to us to cause alarm; passing between us and Mars, although most of them circle between Mars and Jupiter. That is all we know about them—so far. One day we may know more.

W.E.J.

CHAPTER I

OUTWARD BOUND

THERE was silence in the Spacemaster as it shot through Escape Velocity into space on its estimated eight-day journey to Mars. The five members of the crew, relieved of the strain of the initial acceleration, had relaxed, and were preparing to occupy themselves by such means as had been provided to fill the unchanging hours that lay ahead.

Professor Lucius Brane, the little eccentric scientist-engineer inventor of the spacecraft, sat at the main observation window, hair untidy, spectacles on the end of his nose, notebook on the chart table in front of him, and a bag of caramels, anchored by an elastic band, at his elbow. Judkins, his imperturbable seldom-speaking butler-mechanic, was at the controls—power, gyro and pressure—their relative positions being those of captain and chief engineer of an ocean liner.

Group Captain "Tiger" Clinton, D.S.O., R.A.F. (retired), with his son Rex, were watching the shadow called night sweep across the huge but fast-diminishing globe which once they had called the world, but was now, for purposes of navigation, merely Earth; one of a million units of the Universe within their view. They watched without emotion, for they had seen the spectacle before.

Not so the remaining member of the crew, to whom this was a new and obviously disturbing experience. A doctor had been considered essential to the expedition, and Tiger had found one, a war-time comrade and friend, in Squadron Leader Clarence Paul, M.D., better known in the Service as "Toby". He was a small, chubby little man of early middle age, with a cheerful expression which, with his figure, had no doubt been responsible for his nickname.

A man of tremendous energy, as small men often are, he had had a great deal of experience in the tropics of disorders caused by insects, malaria, sandfly fever, and the like. A feature of his nature was a sense of humour that could make a joke of trouble. He also possessed, often to the Professor's bewilderment, a wonderful vocabulary of R.A.F. slang. When Tiger had put the project before him, asking him if he would attend some patients on Mars, he had, not surprisingly, accused him of being "round the bend". But when Tiger had produced photographs taken on the previous expedition he went to work on preparations to deal with the situation.

Nearly a year had passed since that memorable first journey to Mars, but such had been the activity designing and constructing the new Spacemaster that as far as Rex was concerned the months had flown. Tiger had returned to Farnborough to complete his work there, but had dashed up to Glensalich for as many weekends as he could manage.

Rex, abandoning his apprenticeship, had acted as "runner" between Glensalich and the works where the components of the new ship were being fabricated to the Professor's specifications. This had left the Professor free to concentrate on research, for here there was much to be done.

Toby now knew all that had happened on the early voyages, for once a month there had been a conference at Glensalich Castle attended by everyone; and it is doubtful if ever before at any meetings there had been discussed matters of such consequence. All were aware of this. What effect the knowledge they already possessed would have on the general public should the facts become known was a matter for surmise. It would certainly —as Toby put it—start a flap. Governments apparently thought so, averred the Professor, from the way they had tried to ridicule the reported sightings of so-called Flying Saucers. The adoption of the harmless-sounding name "Saucer" was part of a plan to offset public fears of the unknown. The official American name, UFO, meaning Unidentified Flying Object, was better.

But then, observed the Professor with a sly smile, the American government could hardly deny the existence of space aircraft when it was itself pressing on with that very project, and planned to have a refuelling base between Earth and Moon within five years.[A] The spacesuits of the operators had already been made and tested. This "cosmodrome" would have to be conspicuously marked, he declared, or there would be a danger of collision with it.

[A] Since this was written Russia has announced a similar project.

The Spacemaster II was larger than its prototype and embodied several modifications, notably in the matter of safety devices. Learning a lesson from their collision with a small meteor, the air supply, an improved mixture of oxygen and helium, was no longer contained in a single compartment but in several small ones, indicated by bulges on the skin of the ship. Damage to one would not affect the others. The chemical air-purifying system was more efficacious, and a double skin would, it was hoped, provide better

temperature conditioning. There was more storage space for food, mostly highly concentrated, and the considerable amount of equipment that would be required. An air-lock, in the manner of the escape compartment of a submarine, to make exit possible without losing pressure in the cabin, was a new feature.

The Professor had also been busy in other directions. He had produced an insecticide to deal with the pink mosquitoes. This was not a poison in the accepted sense of the word, for it was out of the question to carry a supply sufficient to spray the entire planet. The Professor's creation was an organic compound calculated to set up a "hunger" phobia in which the insects, by eating each other, would not only gorge themselves to death but pass on the deadly dose. In other words, the Professor had explained with a chuckle, he proposed to exterminate the pest by giving the little beasts a fatal bilious attack.

A piece of good news to Rex was provided by the analysis of the samples of atmosphere taken on Mars, where there had not been time to test it in actual practice. It revealed that once on the planet spacesuits would not be needed after the explorers had become acclimatized. The air was thin, and the pressure consequently less than that to which they were accustomed at sea level on the surface of the earth. It was, the Professor stated, about the same as would be found on Everest at 26,000 feet, which had been reached without oxygen apparatus. This might be uncomfortable but it would be sufficient to support life. After a little while, provided they were not called to any great exertion, the change would be hardly noticeable.

It should be mentioned that the Professor had "improved" his caramels by the inclusion of a substance sometimes issued during the war to troops engaged in special operations likely to call for superhuman endurance. By putting it in a concentrated form of glucose, to form the caramel, a few of these special sweets would keep a body going for some time with no other food.

There had been one incident that struck Rex as amusing although he had thought it prudent to keep his expression under control. The Professor, without saying that he was speaking from experience, had written a paper for a scientific journal on "probable" moon conditions; the probable conditions, of course, being the actual ones. The editor, refusing to publish it, had returned the manuscript with a curt note which implied that the writer was talking nonsense.

"You see?" said the Professor bitterly. "Tell the truth and you become either a liar or a fool."

By an unfortunate chance the same post brought a newspaper clipping, an article that dealt with Lunar Flight. Part of it the Professor read aloud: "*In case of War, atomic guided missiles could be launched from a Lunar base and aimed by radar at any target on earth.*" He flung the paper on the table. "War—war—war," he said sadly. "That's all they think about. Mark my words, as soon as interplanetary flight is achieved the first talk will be of a possible war with Mars. One of these days I'll build a fleet of spaceships and evacuate to another planet the people who in this war-madness see the end of all that is best on Earth. I fear that Earth is heading for such a disaster as defies imagination."

The day was approaching when Rex was to remember this remark.

At the moment, however, as already stated, through one of the now dimmed windows he was watching night roll its curtain across the face of the world he knew. Around, in a sky deep navy blue, gleamed and twinkled the worlds he did not know.

The Professor broke a lengthy silence. "I'm thinking of making a halt on Phobos, that pathetic little satellite of Mars which we visited on our last trip. From there I hope to get a clearer view of those planetoids which, should we go beyond Mars, may cross our path. Some have orbits uncomfortably close to Mars, and to Earth, for that matter, although it is not generally realized. In 1937 Hermes shot past just beyond our moon. A little nearer and it might have knocked it to pieces, or taken it away from us. It might have been such a near miss that dragged away its atmosphere. But perhaps it's better not to think about these things, although, to be sure, such accidents are common enough in the Universe, as astronomers know well." The Professor pushed up his spectacles. "Would anyone like a caramel?"

They all took one.

"How many of these planetoids are there altogether?" asked Rex.

"Nearly two thousand. There may be others, too small to be seen even on the great two hundred inch reflector on Mount Palomar. I'm not worried about the big ones, like Ceres, Pallas, Vesta or Juno. Small ones could be dangerous, like rocks in the sea—the Ocean of Space."

Rex spoke. "Could the Saucers be coming from these planetoids, now that we know they're not coming from Mars?"

"It is possible, but surely improbable. I can't believe people capable of inventing an efficient spacecraft would remain on a tiny world when there must be larger ones within their reach."

"Could it be that they are now looking at Earth with the object of moving to it?"

"That, Rex, is what some people would very much like to know," answered the Professor seriously. "It isn't beyond the bounds of possibility. It would account for the recent activity. One can understand the anxiety these visitations are causing, for it needs only one Saucer to land to throw our civilization into confusion. Well, we may soon know, for I hope to call on some of the larger planetoids. We may learn something of them from a Martian, if we can find one alive, for the orbits of most of them lie between Mars and its giant neighbour, Jupiter; a monster of such size that it would require thirteen hundred Earths to produce an equal mass."

"As it's on fire I imagine we shan't be calling there," put in Tiger, dryly.

"It would be interesting to know of what its mighty cloud belts, constantly changing form and colour, are composed," returned the Professor pensively. "It also has more than its share of moons, you know; no fewer than eleven, for which our astronomers have found romantic names—Ganymede, Callisto, Europa, and so on." The Professor chuckled. "Let us hope they are as romantic by nature."

Tiger looked at Toby, whose face had recovered something of its usual high colour. "Feeling better, old man?"

Toby smiled wanly. "Yes thanks. I must admit that for a bit I thought I was going for six."

"So did I, at first," consoled Tiger. "You'll soon get used to the sensation of being in the middle of nowhere."

"Don't let anything upset you, for you may be running a hospital presently," put in the Professor.

"I'll manage, if you can deal with these fantastic swarms of bugs."

The Professor peered over his spectacles. "Why fantastic?"

"Don't you think they're fantastic?"

"No. Haven't we swarms of microbes on Earth to strike people down with what we call infectious diseases? If you regard the pink mosquitoes as overgrown germs it comes to precisely the same thing. What about the locust hordes that have ravaged areas of Earth since the dawn of history? The wretched people afflicted are able to put up some sort of fight against them because they happen to be by nature vegetarian; but suppose the locusts had developed poison glands and preyed on human blood instead of crops? What then? In spite of all that science can do these swarms persist. In different circumstances they might well have succeeded in depopulating Earth as another species of insect had depopulated Mars."

"In those parts of the world where the swarms occur, perhaps," returned Toby.

“Come—come, Doctor,” chided the Professor gently. “Had the locusts’ food supply in the East given out they would have sought new pastures in the West, for such is the cause of migration. Should the temperature of Earth undergo a change that could happen yet. Ha! That would be a pretty problem for the Ministry of Agriculture, wouldn’t it?”

Nobody answered.

“You see,” continued the Professor, “our imaginations are limited to the things we know and understand. Anything beyond that we call fantasy. A man cannot envisage a higher form of life than himself. He cannot make allowances for things which on Earth do not exist. There, perhaps, lies our greatest danger; for it is almost certain that on this trip we shall see things, and do things, which our common sense will tell us cannot be true. So be prepared.”

The Spacemaster sped on through the great loneliness, its portholes dimmed against the fierce solar rays, its cosmic jets silent now that maximum velocity had been achieved. The only sound was the hum of the gyro.

Rex stared through his window at a gleaming disc still far away. Its name, on Earth, was Mars. Its colour, red—and red on Earth was a danger signal.

Was it a warning?

(*see page 24*)

Its name on earth was Mars. Its colour, red—and red on Earth was a danger signal.

CHAPTER II

LITTLE DEAD WORLD

A WEEK later, the ochre-red globe that was the objective, its ice-capped Poles glistening, was cutting a vast curve across the Spacemaster's field of view. It looked what Rex knew it to be; a place of desolation from which life had almost been liquidated by a single, all-conquering species of insect. The only physical features of any consequence were the weed-choked canals from which the mosquitoes made their daily forays in search of food, giving the planet the appearance of having been caught in a net. A small, dark, round spot, showed where Phobos, one of Mars' two tiny satellites, was rolling along its never-ending orbit.

For the crew of the Spacemaster the only incident to break the monotony of the long flight was the appearance, in close formation, of three small circular spaceships which had kept them company for a while before darting off at a tangent at a speed that took them out of sight in a few seconds.

"They must wonder who we are as much as we wonder where they came from," remarked the Professor. "Did you notice how, when they left us, they moved as one machine?"

"Which means that they were in communication with each other," said Tiger.

"They must have been, and I suspect it is the signals of these space-travellers that our big wireless stations are picking up. Operators on Earth have lately reported getting sounds unlike anything that could emanate from Earth. The sounds are said to be a meaningless jumble which might, however, be an unknown language."

"If those ships come from outer space, as you seem to think, Professor, they must be away from their bases for a very long time," said Tiger.

"In our terms of time, yes; but perhaps not in theirs."

"How do you mean?" questioned Tiger. "Time is time."

"It is also a matter of proportion," averred the Professor. "Five years to an earth-dweller would be a big slice out of his normal life-span of three score and ten; but to a man who had a life expectation of five hundred years it would be a mere nibble."

"Five hundred years!" exclaimed Rex.

"Why not? Look how the life-span on earth has increased in recent years. More people live to be nearly a hundred than ever before. If that trend continues the average seventy years might well become ninety, or more. By the time Earth reaches the present age of Mars men might be living for hundreds of years. There are scientists and doctors who predict that."

"A staggering thought," murmured Toby.

"There is likely to be much to stagger us before we return home," rejoined the Professor, dryly.

Every hour saw the details of the objective planet become more clearly defined. Toby stared, fascinated.

"I shall land on Phobos where I landed before," decided the Professor. "You'll need your spacesuits if you get out. It will be an opportunity to test them, and the new high-frequency radio equipment. Be careful how you move or you may hurt yourselves: there's very little gravity to keep you on the ground. By the way, Doctor, you remember us telling you that we found a dead man on Phobos, perfectly preserved? You might be able to form an opinion as to how long he has been dead. Another interesting question is this. Bearing in mind that there are dwellings on Phobos, which means that there must have been an atmosphere of sorts there at one time, did this man die as a result of the atmosphere disappearing or was the body put there after death? There's no atmosphere there now."

"You're sure there was, at one time?"

"People would hardly build houses in a vacuum. Besides, I noted remains of vegetable life, such as petrified wood."

"What could have happened to the atmosphere?"

"Mars, or a planetoid passing close, may have dragged it away. Phobos is only a few thousand miles from Mars."

By this time the Professor was beginning to check the fall preparatory to landing. The cosmic jets roared. The gyro hummed. The dead little moon visibly grew larger.

"Professor!" called Rex suddenly.

"What is it?"

"Somebody's been there since we were there."

"Indeed?"

"There's a much larger mark than the one we made—larger than the one we found there. You can see it distinctly, on the same spot."

"He's right, Professor," confirmed Tiger.

"Well—well! How very interesting," murmured the Professor. "In view of what we know we needn't be surprised; although we might wonder *why* a ship should land there. We may find out."

The Spacemaster continued on towards a surface that was appalling in its stark monotony and utter desolation. Everywhere it was the same, without any change in colour, without outline, devoid of any sort of vegetation and without one outstanding feature to catch the eye. A naked world. It was, thought Rex, worse than any of the great deserts on Earth, because there one knew there was an end to the wilderness. Here there was no end. This was what Earth would be, stripped of its clothing. He shivered.

The fact that Phobos was tiny, compared with Earth or its satellite Moon, did nothing to soften its harsh sterility. Thus it was, and thus, with never a breath of wind, a cloud, or a drop of rain, it would have to remain. That it was not entirely flat, but ridged and corrugated, was one proof that at a period of its life it must have had an atmosphere of some sort. Petrified vegetable matter suggested water at one time, too. Now these things had gone, leaving nothing but dirt and dust and rock to be flayed by the merciless solar rays, day in and day out for ever and ever; held in the unbreakable grip of gravity, doomed to roll on and on round its allotted orbit for all eternity, unless . . .

There was, Rex knew, an "unless". A wandering planet, or planetoid, or even a large meteor, thrown off its course by forces beyond human understanding, might come close enough to attract it, and so rescue it—or shatter it entirely.

Rex made out the ridge-surrounded basin in which a huddle of primitive dwellings had determined the place of their previous landing. Soon the jets were setting the dust swirling. The Spacemaster's legs settled in the sand and the ship came to rest near the marks of other landings, although only one of them was their own.

"Well, here we are," remarked the Professor nonchalantly. "While I am surveying the sky for possible planetoids I suggest that the Doctor is shown the body of which we told him. Don't be long away. An hour or so here should suffice for my purpose and enable Judkins to do a bit of tidying up. Then we'll have a meal and carry on. Test your suits in the air-lock chamber before you step out. And remember, while you will have a little weight it might be only enough to be dangerous. I mention that in case in a moment of forgetfulness you might behave as if you were at home."

The donning of the spacesuits took some time. Tiger, Toby and Rex then entered the air-lock and while the air in the chamber was released, checked

the valves and radio equipment before descending the steps to solid ground.

"Take it easy, Toby," advised Tiger. "You'll find the airy-fairy feeling a bit odd at first, but it's surprising how quickly you get used to it. The thing is to keep your feet on the ground and do nothing in a hurry. With so little gravity we could probably get to the houses in one jump—and maybe knock our brains out when we landed. This way."

At a slightly bouncing gait, rather as if they were trying to walk in deep water, they made their way to the house in which they had found the body of what there was reason to suppose was a man of Mars. It was still there, looking exactly the same although nearly a year had passed since they had last seen it. But it was not that which caused Tiger to pull up with a cry of astonishment. There were now three bodies, lying side by side.

All were of the same pattern; and, indeed, very much alike. Each was tall, thin, with a skin of creamy brown colour and long flaxen hair. Each was dressed in what was apparently a standard garment of coarse material, something in the style of a Roman toga, but caught in at the waist so that in walking it would look like a short tunic and skirt. Footgear was sandals of the same sort of material, but thicker and more closely woven.

For a minute nobody spoke. Rex could only stare, conscious of a dreamlike sensation of unreality. Indeed, he had had dreams that were much more real.

Tiger broke the silence. "The Professor told us not to be surprised at anything, but this, I must say, takes a bit of believing. Here, at this moment, the expression 'out of this world', really means something."

"I think we can now answer one of the Professor's questions," said Toby, in a strange voice. "These men did not die here. They were brought here after death."

"Are you suggesting that somebody is using Phobos as a cemetery?"

"It looks like it. Why not? People deciding to use it for that purpose would suppose it safe from interference. In my opinion these bodies will remain almost as they are now for a long time—one might say for ever. The only change could be shrinkage due to the evaporation of the water in the system. The man on the bed has been dead much longer than the others. He is, in fact, a mummy, as dry as everything else on Phobos. Here is being done by nature what the ancient Egyptians did by artificial means, in much the same way. Do you know what I think?"

"What?" asked Tiger.

"I'd say these men were members of a crew of a spaceship who died while on a long journey. One could believe that the surviving members of

the crew would be reluctant to carry their dead about with them, so they would park them at the first convenient place. At sea, on Earth, a body is put overboard; but one could hardly have bodies floating about in space without them becoming a danger, by risk of collision, for living space travellers. Besides, the idea isn't a very nice one."

"That sounds feasible," agreed Tiger. "This method of burial, if you can call it burial, is as good, if not better, than others one can think of. How long do you think these fellows have been dead?"

"I wouldn't like to say," answered Toby, thoughtfully. "The chap on the bed has been dead longer than the others; you can see that from the degree of shrinkage, which looks like emaciation. From certain indications, notably the texture of their skins, I believe these men were very old when they died. Of course, that isn't conclusive. They might have been born with skins different from ours. I see no signs of disease or injury so I must conclude they died of sheer old age, or from lack of some essential such as food or air."

Rex walked out into the open, for he found the conversation not merely depressing but conducive to morbid thoughts; and as Toby, his professional interest aroused, went on talking, the idea occurred to him to walk to the top of the ridge surrounding the hollow in which they had landed to see what lay beyond. This, without doubt, was country on which no man of Earth had ever set foot, and the urge to explore was irresistible. The ground underfoot looked firm rock and sand, and as the distance was short he could see no possible danger.

It was at the top that the trouble occurred. He was gazing at the awful vista that stretched away to a curving horizon that cut like a saw into the black dome of heaven when he found himself slipping down the far side of the slope. Slipping is perhaps not quite the right word. On the far side of the ridge, as can happen in any desert, the particles of sand had not packed. Under his weight, slight though it was, they were all rolling down the slope, and he, unable to stop, was going with them. In something like a panic he turned and strove to regain the top; but it was like clutching at water, and the movement only increased the speed of his slide. Rather than lose his balance and roll, as he felt he might, he sat. This did nothing to check his progress and he continued on down in that position. Fortunately there was nothing violent, or even rapid about it; but there was a deliberation that was just as alarming.

He was by this time calling to Tiger; and Tiger's voice came back, asking him where he was; from which it was clear that neither he nor Toby had seen him go.

The end came with a sheer drop of some twenty feet into a rocky gulley. Seeing that he was bound to fall, but forgetting that he had practically no weight, he gave himself up for lost, for in such a drop he seemed certain to break bones. Nothing of the sort happened. To say that he floated down like a thistle seed would be an exaggeration, but he landed with a lightness that amazed him. He actually bounced a little. And there he stood, heart pounding from shock, and condensation forming on his perspex eye-piece while the sand flowed down around him in slow-motion.

His great fear now was that Tiger and Toby, in their search for him, would make the same mistake as he had and end up in the gulley; or, worse still, another one, from which it might be difficult to get out. Then, in looking for each other, they might become lost. Lost! Lost on a dead moon! The possibility gave him a sinking feeling in the stomach. There was something particularly horrible about it.

Presently a stumble brought him into collision with a jagged-edged rock, and this gave him an even worse fright; for it reminded him that should his spacesuit be damaged he would be dead within a minute. It was bad enough to be lost on this dreadful place of eternal silence, but to die on it, alone, so utterly alone . . . again the thought nearly threw him into a panic.

His father's voice coming over the radio steadied him. "Where are you?" asked Tiger.

"I'm over the ridge," answered Rex.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Don't attempt to follow me because the sand is soft and you'll slide. Stay where you are and I'll come back to you."

There appeared to be no great difficulty about this, for there were places where the slope was smooth enough; but, as it turned out, it was smooth because it was sand, and the sand, having so little weight, was soft, like fluff, and as unstable as water. All Rex could do was go on, testing the bank, looking for a place where the ground was firm enough to support him. He thought he had found it when he came upon a rock slope; but the rock was as rotten as thawing snow and broke away in his hands. The way it did this, without a sound, was weird, and frightening. The only sounds that reached his ears were those that came over the radio. He could hear Tiger telling the Professor about the new bodies. The heat was terrific.

A bend presented a view that was not to be believed. Before him was a mighty curving section of Mars, almost the colour of an orange and so vast that it filled a third of a sky that was as black as midnight. Cutting into the lower part of the planet was the chaotic skyline of the little satellite on

which he stood. Swaying slightly Rex stared at it, feeling for the first time that the immensity of it all was more than his brain could stand. More than anything he wanted to get away from it, back to the friendly Earth with its green fields and blue sky and the things he understood. He picked up what he took to be a fossilized stick, notched like a malacca cane, to support him.

The end of the gulley produced a nerve-torturing moment, for he realized that if there was no way up here he would have to retrace his steps, and he was fast becoming exhausted; but by traversing a maze of petrified tree trunks lying aslant the slope he managed to top the ridge. His relief when he saw the Spacemaster below him, with the others standing beside it, need not be described.

Feeling rather ashamed of himself for what he now perceived was an act of folly he made his way down, resolved to profit from the experience by refraining from doing any more exploring on his own account. He explained what had happened, making light of his fears now that all was well.

"What's that in your hand?" asked the Professor.

"I thought it was a piece of wood."

The Professor took it. "It's the backbone of a lizard. How truly astonishing. Had anyone told me there had been animal life on this forsaken little ball of rock and sand I would not have believed it. But come along. I have seen as much as I expected to see from here. Through the telescope Jupiter is an incredible spectacle. I have taken some photographs."

"What do we do next," inquired Tiger.

"I plan to land on Mars, keeping well away from any canal in the hope of escaping the plague while we take steps to become acclimatized. We should be able to do that by slowly reducing pressure in the cabin, and therefore on ourselves, even while we sleep. We need some rest."

"I shall be glad to get this suit off," declared Rex.

"My chief trouble is I can't get a caramel into my mouth," said the Professor sadly.

"And I can't have a draw at my pipe," put in Tiger.

The doors were closed and the Spacemaster continued on its way.

CHAPTER III

SHADOWS IN THE NIGHT

THE approach to Mars for the landing could hardly have been more dramatic. As Tiger remarked, it was as if the insect hordes were turning out at full strength to resist the invaders. In fact, the landing was held up while the red swarms, sweeping over the bare earth like sandstorms in a desert, reduced visibility to zero. This was observed from a thousand feet, where the Professor, remembering how the insects had nearly choked the Spacemaster's cosmic jets, held the machine until the creatures returned to the moist areas from which they made their daily forays.

Toby stared aghast at the spectacle. "Heavens above!" he exclaimed. "No man ever saw anything more fantastic than that. It shows what can happen if any particular form of life gets the upper hand."

"Tut-tut, my dear Doctor," returned the Professor cynically. "You're not forgetting that on Earth men have got the upper hand, and not satisfied with hunting to death everything else that walks, swims or flies, are now doing their best to wipe out each other."

There was silence for a moment. Then Toby, wisely perhaps, for he had touched the Professor's sore spot, changed the subject. "I'm burning to see a live Martian—if it's possible that any can be left alive after the onslaught we've just seen."

"That won't be for a day or two," answered the Professor. "I'm taking no chances of being inoculated with an unknown poison by those little pink brutes. You should know better than most people that without any immunity developed in our systems over a period of time such an injection might well prove fatal."

"From the width of these canals it's going to take us all our time to deal with the plague," said Toby doubtfully.

"I doubt if the actual waterways are as wide as the width of the vegetation might lead one to suppose," answered the Professor. "As the canals are choked with weeds and overgrown with bulrushes one can't see the water; but it would be reasonable to suppose it follows the most verdant line that runs down the middle. It's probably from there that the mosquitoes come. The vegetation is a good deal more lush than when we were here before, presumably because it is now high summer. The ice-caps are smaller,

too. But we could have expected that, for such seasonal changes have been noted by astronomers on Earth. Well, as the insects seem to have retired for the night we'll go on down."

To Rex, not the least remarkable feature of the phenomenon was the speed with which the mosquitoes vanished at the conclusion of their sortie. In a matter of minutes visibility was crystal clear.

The Professor took the machine low over the town, on the central square of which they had made their original landing. Not a sign of life could be observed.

"It's hard to believe that the place was ever a Utopia," remarked Toby, looking down on the simple buildings. And from that time on, for want of another name, the town was known as Utopia.

"There was certainly a civilization there even if, by our standards, it was somewhat austere," replied the Professor sharply. "But why should we judge others by our standards? Are they so perfect? Here they may have developed the perfect Welfare State."

For the landing he moved well clear of the canal, and touched down on ground that was as bare as the middle of the Sahara. "If possible, we will make this our base, gentlemen, until we feel our feet," he announced. "I mean that literally," he added, with a chuckle. "I suggest we have something to eat and then proceed with the pressure tests."

"You say, if possible," queried Tiger. "Is there any doubt about it?"

"By day we shall find the place hot, perhaps too hot; and by night it may be uncomfortably cold. On Earth we have an estimated five hundred mile blanket of air to filter the solar rays; here, I would say, it is not more than fifty or sixty miles. But no matter. If it gets too hot we can move nearer to the Polar ice. Indeed, if necessary we could find the ideal mean temperature and move round the globe with it. The Martian day is practically the same as our own—twenty-four hours thirty-seven minutes of our time. That's if our experts are right, and I think they are. The big difference is the Martian year, which is nearly double ours. Six hundred and eighty-seven of our days, to be precise. But the figure most likely to affect us until we get used to it is in the matter of what we call weight. What weighed a hundred pounds on Earth will only weigh thirty-eight pounds here—anyway, that is the theory: we shall soon know if it is correct."

The first reduction in the air content of the cabin—which also, of course, meant a reduction in pressure—was made, and everyone settled down to enjoy a meal in more or less normal conditions; that is to say, free from the uncomfortable feeling of weightlessness. Objects no longer hung in

suspension. Night fell, and Rex's last recollection before he dropped off to sleep was of the Professor studying the heavens through his telescope.

The first streak of dawn found them on the move. For two hours the Spacemaster droned up and down the big canal which, apparently designed to save the population from death by thirst, had only brought disaster in another form. By the end of that time the whole of the green area lay under a thin mist of anti-mosquito mixture, sprayed from a pressure gun similar in design to those used on Earth for aerial crop dusting. How long the stuff would take to operate the Professor admitted frankly that he did not know; or, for that matter, whether it would act at all. For, as he averred, the fact that it had worked on Earth did not necessarily mean that it would act on Mars. Time would show. In the meantime they proceeded with their acclimatization, depressurizing the cabin until it was thought safe to test conditions outside without a spacesuit.

The Professor insisted on making the first test, due precautions being taken against accident. That is to say, Tiger and Toby, in their spacesuits, entered the air-lock chamber with him, ready to snatch him back should he show signs of distress when the outer door was opened.

For some time he leaned against the exit steps breathing deeply, a hand on his heart as if to steady it; then, with a smile, he took a few steps, and presently signalled that all was well. The others soon joined him in the open, some pressure being retained in the cabin, with Judkins at the controls, should anything go wrong. At first Rex had some difficulty in breathing, and his heart thumped uncomfortably; but in a surprisingly short space of time he was able to move about. At least, all except the Professor thought it surprising. He provided as an example of the adaptability of life the case of birds which, normally found at ground level, had been seen by pilots at nearly twenty thousand feet. He pointed out that had there been no atmosphere the mosquitoes would not have been able to fly. By evening they were sitting with the door open.

The sundown flight of the mosquitoes was watched with interest. The Professor thought they were fewer, but Rex, to his disappointment, could see no appreciable difference.

"We must give the stuff time to work," declared the Professor.

The next evening there was no doubt about it. The cloud was definitely less dense. One curious thing happened. Or it struck Rex as curious. A mosquito crashed against his porthole, and it seemed to him that the creatures were larger than they had supposed. This one looked as large as a

wasp. Thinking it might be due to magnification caused by the thick glass—for the window was closed, of course—he said nothing about it.

When darkness fell the Professor declared his intention of making an early morning raid on Utopia, before the mosquitoes were about, in the hope of finding a live Martian. For, as he said, if they were all dead there was not much point in waging war on the mosquitoes. It could be done later, when the planet had been thoroughly explored.

But things were to happen, and Rex was to remember the big mosquito, before anything else was done.

In accordance with acclimatization programme, although the night was as cold as the day had been hot, they were sleeping in the cabin but with the door open. With Rex, the effect of the rarified air was the common one of preventing him from sleeping soundly. From time to time his heart behaved oddly, and he found himself wishing that the Professor had let them have a little oxygen. Phobos was too small to provide much in the way of moonlight, but the sky was ablaze with stars and it was possible to see everything clearly, particularly outside, where the sterile land lay naked under heaven.

He was dozing when on silent wings a shadow flitting across the open doorway brought him to with a start. He watched. Presently the shadow reappeared, and he recognized a moth, a magnificent moth with a wing-span of a foot or more. He lay still. A minute passed and the moth came back. This time, with no more noise than a cloud passing across the face of the moon, it came into the cabin, did an erratic circuit, went out and disappeared. He waited, but it did not return.

More time passed. The thin air became colder as the sand outside gave up its heat, but the others seemed to be sleeping well enough. Their breathing was the only sound in a silence that was profound. A big, glowing orb, that he knew was the planet Earth, moving along its predestined path through space, came level with the open door, to flood the cabin with an eerie light and touch the metalwork with luminous fingers.

Subconsciously at first, but then with a sudden start, Rex became aware of a gentle scraping noise. It was too soft to cause him any concern. He merely wondered what it was, realizing that in the absence of any other sound, any noise, however slight, would have an exaggerated effect. He found it as difficult to locate as the scratching of a mouse in a wainscoting, even though it was constant and became more definite. After some reflection he decided that it was coming from the door, or from that direction. Disinclined to get up, and perhaps disturb the others unnecessarily, he still

paid no more attention to it than to raise himself a little higher on his mattress and turn his eyes that way.

A movement on the edge of the entrance step gave him his first twinge of alarm. Two black objects, looking rather like the claws of a lobster, scraped as with slow deliberation they appeared to seek a hold on the smooth metal. It was now plain that something was trying to get in, and the knowledge brought him bolt upright with a jerk, staring all eyes, as the saying is. He was on the point of waking the others when there appeared over the top of the step a face so horrible, so diabolical in its indescribable ugliness, that it brought him to his feet with a gasp on his lips.

Why he did what he did he could never afterwards explain. The action was instinctive rather than the result of thought. Having no weapon handy it may have been prompted by the obvious fact that if he did not do something quickly the horror would be in the cabin with them, for that was obviously its intention. Whether its purpose was innocent or malicious he did not stop to consider. Leaping across the floor he kicked the thing in the face with a force that sent it hurtling across the sand with a noise like the rattle of castanets. Forgetting his negligible weight he nearly fell out after it, and only saved himself by clutching at the cabin wall, with which he collided with some force.

He recovered just in time to see a great black shadow swoop down on the thing he had kicked, and was now throwing itself about in its efforts to get on its feet. When the shadow rose, to disappear without a sound into the night sky, the thing was no longer there. The cry that broke from his lips brought the others to the door with a rush.

(see page 41)

Leaping across the floor Rex kicked the thing in the face.

"What are you doing?" demanded Tiger irritably. "Why don't you go to sleep?"

For a moment Rex didn't answer. He couldn't. Nearly sick from shock he could only cling to the guard rail, muttering incoherently.

When a light was switched on Toby was the first to realize that something serious must have happened. Glass clinked against glass and he

thrust something into Rex's hand. "Drink that," he ordered peremptorily.

Rex gulped the liquid, the plastic beaker rattling against his teeth.

"Feeling better?" asked Toby.

"Yes, thanks."

"Now tell us. What was it. Were you dreaming?"

"No. It wasn't—a dream." Rex braced himself and described what had happened.

"What did the thing look like—the one that tried to get in?" asked the Professor.

"It looked like an enormous ant. No, it was more like a beetle, or a scorpion. It was the size of a cat, with enormous claws. I heard it first. Then I saw it. Its mouth was opening and shutting—horrible. I kicked it out. I couldn't think of anything else to do."

"What about the creature that pounced on it?"

"It looked like a dragon. It reminded me of something. It had a pointed muzzle, like a fox, with big ears. I've got it. It was a bat. An enormous bat. I think it must have been sitting on top of the ship."

"Are you sure this wasn't all a nightmare?" inquired Tiger, suspiciously.

Rex held out his bare foot. Blood from the kick was oozing from his big toe. "That looks as if the thing was solid enough, doesn't it," he said grimly.

"Why haven't we seen these things in daylight?" questioned the Professor, showing signs of agitation.

"They could be nocturnal," Toby pointed out. "Certainly in the case of the bat."

"This reminds me of something," put in Rex. He was still pale and trembling a little from shock. "Yesterday a mosquito landed on my window. But it was like none of the others I've seen—and I've seen plenty. It was huge. It's body was the size of a wasp. I said nothing about it because I thought somehow the glass must have magnified it. I don't think so now. It was one of the ordinary mosquitoes grown to an enormous size."

"I wonder . . ." breathed the Professor.

"Wonder what?" asked Toby, in a queer voice.

"If my anti-mosquito mixture could be having a peculiar effect on life here."

"That's a startling thought. I suppose it *could* happen."

"I told you anything could happen. The introduction of anything new into a system, even on Earth, can produce astonishing effects. Well, I have

introduced something new to Mars, so really we should not be surprised if it results in after-effects beyond our expectations."

"Giants have been known on Earth," observed Toby thoughtfully. "What causes that we don't know. It might be something quite slight. But one can, after all, with chemical manures, greatly increase the size of all forms of vegetable life. Nitrates will double the size of a blade of grass overnight. It looks as if your mixture may be having that effect on animal life on Mars."

"If so, the damage is done," said the Professor, in a resigned voice.

"Which means that when we leave the ship we had better go armed," put in Tiger. "I'm glad I brought my rifle. But I must say I never expected to use it against bugs, bats and beetles."

"I only hope you don't have to use it against giant Martians, if the Professor's dope has had the same effect on them," murmured Toby. "They seem to have been a tall race anyway."

"I don't think there's any risk of that," said the Professor confidently. "The super-growth, if in fact I am to blame, could only come as a result of eating the stuff, or some creature that has died from eating it. The Martians, supposing there are any able to move about, would hardly be likely to eat dead mosquitoes; which is, I suspect, what some creatures have done. The sequence would be this. A mosquito finds the stuff, eats ravenously, grows enormous and dies. A beetle comes along, makes a meal of dead mosquitoes, thus absorbing the poison, and the same thing happens to him. A bat eats the beetles—and so it goes on."

"Yes, but where does it end?" questioned Toby. "If there's anything here that eats bats we can expect to bump into some monsters."

The Professor took the remark seriously. "Yes, that's true. I didn't think of that. Dear—dear. How easy it is to make a mistake. But as there's nothing more we can do about it tonight we might as well resume our interrupted rest—this time, I think, with the door shut. It will be interesting to see what shocks tomorrow has in store for us."

He spoke casually, little guessing what *was* in store.

CHAPTER IV

ONE THING AFTER ANOTHER

WHATEVER may have been the cause, although no one doubted it was anything but the Professor's "hunger" mixture, it was soon evident the next morning that things were happening, not only beyond expectation but beyond reasonable credulity.

After a plain breakfast of coffee and biscuits the Professor announced his intention of proceeding forthwith to Utopia to ascertain if there were any Martians left alive; for in view of the effect his insecticide seemed to be having there was little hope left for any that had so far managed to survive. The stuff had, he feared, been too successful. But, as he averred, it was impossible to test Martian conditions on Earth. Wherefore, with the door closed, under its rotors only and keeping low, the Spacemaster moved off towards the town, on the central square of which the Professor said he would land. The same place, in fact, on which the Spacemaster I had landed.

But they did not get as far as that without pause. In order to reach the town it was necessary to cross the canal, and there such a spectacle presented itself that the Professor slowed to a stop while they all stared down, for the moment speechless, their expressions revealing their sensations.

The canal was alive. Literally alive. Seething. The predominant colour was pink. Mosquitoes. Mosquitoes beyond computation. Mosquitoes in layers.

Just what they were doing was not easy to determine, although if they were able to fly they made no attempt to do so. Equally plain was it that these were not the tiny insects they had seen on their first visit. They had grown beyond recognition. These were the size of hornets. It seemed to Rex, as he gazed down on them with eyes round with wonder, that they were engaged in a war of extermination. The Professor, after looking through his glass, declared they had turned cannibal and were devouring each other. This, he reminded, was what he had planned; but he had not anticipated anything on such a scale.

After another look through the glass, which he handed to Tiger, he informed the others that the mosquitoes were not alone. Taking advantage of this unique opportunity, other creatures, which presumably preyed on the mosquitoes, had hurried to the feast. He identified ants; and larger insects

which he took to be beetles. Under the influence of the drug they had all assumed enormous proportions. The same with lizards which, no doubt normally quite small, by gorging on the inexhaustible food supply were on their way to becoming crocodiles.

The Professor's face was pale. "This is what comes of interfering with nature," he said in an agitated voice. "Fool that I am, I should have foreseen the possibility."

"I don't see why you should," answered Toby. "The stuff didn't have that effect on Earth."

"My dear Doctor, we're not on Earth!" exclaimed the Professor. "The conditions here, the atmosphere, possibly the composition of the water and the very soil itself, may be entirely different. I should have allowed for that eventuality."

"At least you've succeeded in knocking the mosquitoes out," said Rex. "That's the main thing. At least, I hope I'm right. They seem to have lost the use of their wings."

"If they haven't, and decided to take flight, we *should* have something to worry about. I'd rather be a bit farther away from that unholy mess." That was Toby's view of the situation.

"If their wings haven't kept pace with the growth of their bodies they wouldn't be able to get off the ground," asserted Tiger confidently. "They'd be hopelessly overloaded."

"Am I going crazy or can I see the grass and the reeds growing," cried Rex. "Are they feeling the effect, too?"

The Professor dropped the Spacemaster a little lower and stared down through his spyglass. "It isn't only the grass that's growing," he stated, in a startled voice. "There are other forms of plant life breaking through the surface. The seeds must have been dormant in the ground; either that, or insects kept the vegetation down by feeding on it, like rabbits in a cornfield. I can see some disgusting-looking fungi pushing their way up. Dear—dear. What have I done? You see what can happen when a man tries to be too clever and puts his puny wits against nature."

"I don't see that you've any cause to reproach yourself," said Tiger. "If you've started into life things that we thought were dead, surely that's all to the good."

"Provided that by destroying the mosquitoes I haven't destroyed everything else. It may be some time before we know the ultimate result. I wonder what's the best thing to do."

“If you’re asking me,” replied Toby, “I’d suggest we look for a live Martian without further loss of time; because if those beasts in the swamps, mad with hunger, having finished off the mosquitoes decide to invade the town, our chances of finding anyone alive will be pretty remote.”

“I think you’re right,” agreed the Professor. “It occurred to me that by spraying the canals farther away we might cause the pests to move in that direction. It will have to be done sometime. We’ve only treated the minute fraction near the town. But we’d better see what the result is here before we risk doing further mischief. We’ll go on to the town. Forgive me if my head is in a whirl. You must admit that this horrid picture of everything dying and being eaten by something else is disconcerting, to say the least of it.”

“I’d call it disgusting,” murmured Rex, wondering if the water in the canal would ever again be fit to drink.

The Spacemaster moved on, and presently put down its landing legs on the dusty flagstones of the main square. The door was opened, and the Professor, leading the way, made a cautious exit. Rex, Tiger and Toby followed him and then stopped to look about.

To Rex the place looked no different from when they were last there. The buildings on all four sides, plain in design and grey with age, wore the same melancholy, abandoned look. The stone seats were there at intervals, but none was occupied. Dust lay in heaps where it had drifted against the walls. Nothing moved. Not an insect, not a bird. Nothing. Not a speck of colour, not a flower, not even a weed or a blade of grass, caught the eye to relieve the dreary monotony of the scene. Over all hung an awful silence. The silence of death.

“I’m afraid we’ve come too late,” said the Professor sadly. He spoke in a low voice, as at a funeral; but even so the words seemed to be an intrusion. Suddenly, as if making up his mind, he set off at a brisk pace towards the house from which, on their last visit, just before they had been compelled to retreat before the pink blight, they had seen a man emerge.

Tiger was filling his pipe, and Toby was lighting a cigarette, so a few seconds elapsed before they started to follow. But by that time the Professor had stopped, staring down one of the dark, narrow lanes between the houses that gave access to the canal, and so to the water supply. He did not stand still for very long. He started to walk backwards. Then, turning, he ran towards the ship crying: “Back! Back! Go back!”

Actually, the warning was unnecessary, for by this time the cause of the Professor’s behaviour had appeared, moving in short rushes into the open.

It was a spider; or a monstrous creature in the shape of a spider. Before the arrival of the Spacemaster it may have been an ordinary spider. But it had evidently been to the canal, or had encountered and eaten something that had, for it was now a loathsome, hairy-legged beast with a body twice the size of a football. The creature stopped to look around. Then the movement near the Spacemaster caught its eye and it darted forward in a series of zig-zag spurts, making a brittle clicking sound. No one waited for a closer view of it, but dashed into the ship. Toby, the last man in, slammed the door. Which was certainly just as well, for the spider did not stop until it reached the steps. It circled the machine as if looking for a way in. Finding none it took up a position a few yards away, and with light glinting on its multiple eyes stared at portholes. Rex shuddered, for in them, he thought, glowed a frightening expression not only of malevolence but of intelligence.

The Professor, panting, dropped into a chair, and fanning his face with his notebook kept muttering: "This is really frightful."

"Everything seems to have developed a temper in proportion to its size," observed Toby calmly.

"Which, I imagine, is in proportion to the amount of my mixture that it has consumed," answered the Professor. "In destroying the mosquito plague I seem to have set an even more difficult problem."

Tiger appeared with his rifle, slipping cartridges in the magazine.

"What are you going to do?" cried the Professor, with fresh alarm.

"I'm going to shoot the thing," returned Tiger. "It may look abnormal, but I'll wager it behaves normally when a piece of nickel makes a hole through it."

"Is that really necessary?"

"Obviously we can't go out while the brute's there! At least, I'm not going out. Lions and tigers are nice clean beasts, but that horror is something out of a madman's nightmare."

"Yes—yes. I suppose it's the only thing to do," agreed the Professor. "I had hoped to avoid bloodshed of any sort."

"I doubt if it has any blood, in which case none will be shed," put in Toby.

Slowly and quietly Tiger opened the door a few inches—enough to permit him to use the rifle. The spider looked up at him. Its eyes, full of hate, suddenly glowed red. Tiger took aim. The rifle spat. The spider reared up, legs waving, and went over on its back. Tiger gave it another shot. The waving became feeble, then stopped. Under the creature began to form a little yellow pool.

"I see I was wrong about the blood," said Toby, in a strained voice. "It's yellow. That's about the last straw. We have only to meet a rat, or a cat, that's been eating mosquitoes and I shall vote for a move to a more respectable planet—good old Earth for preference."

"Yes, indeed, sir," murmured Judkins.

They looked at each other. All were pale. But Judkins' remark broke the tension and they all smiled.

Toby opened the door wide. "I'm going to find a Martian, alive or dead," he announced purposefully. "With monsters like this on the prowl"—he pointed at the spider—"there soon won't be any. Come on, Tiger. Bring your musket. You like big game shooting so this should be just your cup of tea."

"I'm coming," said the Professor. "We shall soon get used to shocks of this sort."

Rex doubted it—at all events as far as he was concerned. But he followed the others, keeping well clear of the beast still lying where it had fallen.

Judkins stayed in the ship, with orders to keep watch and be ready for a quick take-off should an emergency arise.

Keeping together, with Tiger holding his rifle prepared for instant use, they strode on towards the houses.

The furniture in the first room they entered—there was no door—was as simple as could be imagined. Most of it was of woven basketwork, presumably made from rushes brought from the canal; but a table was of wood and appeared to be of great age; how old, it was impossible to guess. The general keynote of everything was utility, without ornament.

"They must have had timber here at one time," remarked the Professor, pointing at the table, as they passed on into a small anteroom. It turned out to be a bedroom. A man, identical with the men they had seen on Phobos, lay on the couch. He was dead. It took Toby only a second to confirm it.

"No use wasting time here," he said briefly. "Our main purpose is to find a survivor—if there is one. If there isn't—well, we might as well go home . . . unless anyone wants to go bug hunting."

"Let us go on," said the Professor. "One live man, just one, could give us the history of the planet. If there isn't one we shall never know the truth."

"From what we've seen so far I don't think the Martian civilization could have been very far advanced," opined Tiger.

"On the other hand they might have been so far ahead of us that they long ago abandoned the trouble-making devices by which we are pleased to

judge civilization—so-called. One day in the dim future Earth may return to a more simple code of existence; particularly if it has to pass through a period of major disasters, such as must have happened here even before the mosquitoes took control. As I have said, one survivor may be able to tell about these things."

They left the house and went on to the next one.

They visited several, most of them empty but some containing corpses, before they found what they sought. In a room like all those they had seen, a man was sitting in a chair. He looked dreadfully ill. But as they entered his eyes moved.

"Ah! This is better," said Toby softly.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN OF MARS

For the first time Rex was able to make a really close study of a living Martian. In physical appearance he was much like themselves, and dressed differently could have walked down a London street without attracting attention. He was tall by Earthly standards, and of a finer, slighter build. His skin, cream rather than white, looked dry, and had a peculiar metallic sheen; the result, Rex supposed, of a thin atmosphere with practically no humidity. His hair, pale gold and silky as a girl's, reached to his shoulders. A short, curly beard, of the same colour and texture, covered a chin that had obviously never known a razor.

But his most outstanding feature was his eyes, which were large and of a colour not easy to determine. There was a hint of deep red in them. This, and a queer luminous quality, made them seem unnatural and hard to meet. Indeed, Rex found them rather frightening. They were, he felt, looking right into him, as if searching out his thoughts.

In the matter of clothes, those worn by the planetarian were similar in style to those seen on Phobos, comprising an open-necked robe caught in at the waist to form a tunic, with two pockets, and a short skirt, or kilt, leaving the lower half of the legs bare. There was nothing remarkable about this. Rex was reminded vaguely of a picture he had seen of ancient Greeks—or it might have been Romans, or Egyptians. He couldn't remember.

He could not have named the material. It was rather coarse stuff, closely woven, and had a sheen that gave it a hard, glassy finish. Nevertheless, it hung in soft folds. The colour was an indefinite shade of blue. Sandals, with cross-lacing straps of the same material, protected the feet. It was clear that in the entire get-up simple utility had been the factor foremost in design.

It may as well be said here that later on Rex was to learn that these garments were not only standard on the planet but were practically indestructible, so that one outfit would last a lifetime. They could be repaired or reconditioned by simply dipping them in a certain solution, when they came out like new.

Some small sacks, or bags, of this same material, lay in a corner; for what purpose was not apparent.

On the table within reach of the sick man were several pots and jars of a semi-transparent plastic-like substance. One contained meal, or flour; presumably food of some sort; another held tablets—or, more correctly, lozenges. There was also a carafe of water with a beaker beside it. Where, Rex wondered, had the food come from?

It is not to be supposed that he merely stood and regarded the man as he might have looked at a Zulu or an Eskimo; or even a freak at a circus. Far from it. This was altogether different; an event so tremendous, so deeply moving that it awoke in him sensations not to be described in words. For there were no words to fit the case. He felt it was not true. He wanted to tell himself that this simply wasn't true. But he knew it *was* true. And he knew he wasn't dreaming. Here before him was the answer to the age-old question: were the people of Earth alone in the Universe? They were not. What would be the effect of those three simple words on Earth when the people knew what he knew? The limitless fields of speculation opened up made his brain reel.

Toby, naturally, had moved forward with a clinical thermometer in his hand. Then, as if realizing that temperatures here were not to be judged by Earthly standards, he put it away, with an apologetic smile to the Professor, saying, "What am I doing?"

At that precise moment a strange thing happened, something which, for a while, defied explanation.

Rex, speaking in the flat, trance-like tone of a sleepwalker, found himself saying: "Who are you and where have you come from?" He started violently, looking bewildered.

The Professor looked at him. Tiger looked at him. Toby, turning over his shoulder, also looked.

"Who said that?" asked the Professor, sharply.

"Not me," denied Rex, in his normal speaking voice.

"But it was you," asserted the Professor. "I saw your lips move."

"But why would I say it?" protested Rex, trying to make up his mind whether he had, or had not, spoken.

"That's what we were wondering," said Tiger, looking at him suspiciously.

"Who are you and what are you doing here?" said Rex, again in the dreamlike voice.

"What are you talking about?" snapped Tiger.

"I—I didn't say anything," stammered Rex, looking really scared.

There was a short, embarrassing silence. Then said Tiger, speaking sharply. “What’s the idea? This is no time to joke!”

Rex didn’t know what to say. He was convinced that he hadn’t spoken yet he knew his lips had moved. “Something’s happening to me!” he exclaimed, helplessly. “I didn’t want to speak. I must be going queer in the head.”

Tiger looked at the Martian, then at Toby. “Did that chap speak?” he asked, pointing at the sick man.

“He certainly did not,” retorted Toby. “If he had I’d have seen his lips move. In any case,” he went on sarcastically, “it’s hardly likely that he’d speak in English.”

Tiger looked back at Rex. “Are you *sure* it wasn’t you who spoke?”

“No, I’m not sure. I’m not sure of anything any more.” There was now a sort of resignation in Rex’s voice.

Tiger frowned. “But surely to goodness you know whether you’re talking or not?”

“I am very ill,” said Rex, again in the flat voice. “My friends are dead. Go away or you will die, too.”

As the words died on his lips he clapped his hands to his face, for this time he knew he had spoken. But he had not said what he was thinking. The sensation thus produced drained all the colour from his face. It was terrifying. Then, in a flash, inspiration struck him almost like a physical blow. “It’s him speaking,” he cried, pointing at the Martian. “He’s talking through my mouth!”

The others stared.

“I’m hypnotised. He’s making me say what he thinks,” said Rex. “Look at his eyes. They’ve been on me all the time. I can feel them doing something inside my head.”

“The boy’s right,” rapped out the Professor. “That’s the answer. The only possible answer. This poor fellow is conveying his thoughts by telepathy, which is something we are only just beginning to understand. He thinks, and his thoughts are translated into the language of the person to whom they are addressed.”

“What a wonderful gift,” said Tiger admiringly.

“Call it rather an art, a science, or a faculty that may have been ages developing,” contended the Professor. “We may reach that stage in time. In my opinion, for what it is worth, this accomplishment was as common on Mars as is ordinary speech on Earth.”

“If that’s the explanation it’s going to save us a great deal of time and trouble,” put in Toby, warmly. “I was wondering how long it was going to take us to learn his language, or he ours.”

“Unless I am mistaken he will learn our language before we learn his,” said the Professor. “If these people have reached the stage of being able to converse merely by conveying their thoughts then their degree of pure intelligence must have reached a point far beyond ours.”

“I suppose he *can* talk,” said Tiger. “Let’s test him.” Tapping his chest with a forefinger he said, distinctly, “Tiger.”

The Martian’s lips moved. “Tiger,” he echoed, without a trace of accent, but in a thin, precise voice.

Then Rex found himself saying, in the flat, even tone: “Because I am ill and weak I speak through the one who, being young, receives me most easily.”

Now Rex had seen some remarkable things, and had had many incredible experiences, but of them all, this saying what another man was thinking was the most disturbing. Did the man know what *he* was thinking? he wondered.

It was Toby who put an end to this uncanny situation. “I suggest we carry him to the Spacemaster where I can get to work on him. If there was another mosquito attack we might still lose him. I only hope my drugs don’t have any peculiar effect on him, Professor, as yours did on the insect population. I have an idea that the patient has not been so much poisoned by the mosquitoes as weakened to the point of collapse by the constant drain on his blood. And, no doubt, shortage of food. We’ll soon see.”

“The first thing we must ask him is if, as far as he knows, there are any more of his people left alive,” said the Professor.

“Let’s get some strength into him before we overtax what little he has,” answered Toby.

“Why not leave him where he is and bring the ship nearer?” suggested Tiger.

“I’d rather have him in the ship,” answered Toby. “We know he’d be safe then, whatever happened. Otherwise it would mean mounting a permanent guard over him to make sure he wasn’t attacked by one of those overgrown beasts. Besides, we might want to move in a hurry. Give me a hand, Tiger. We’ll carry him just as he is, in the chair.”

With surprising ease, for by Earth standards he could not have weighed more than ten stone in spite of his height, which would be less than 60-lbs. by Martian standards, the sick man was picked up and carried to the

Spacemaster where he was made comfortable on a mattress while Toby set to work on him. He was still in some doubt as to the effects of Earthly medical treatment on a Martian, but there was no alternative. The others stood outside, discussing the situation.

"It's all to the good that the man isn't suffering from a virulent fever like malaria," declared the Professor. "It should be an easier matter than we supposed to get him on his feet. Of course, the insects may not be mosquitoes in the strict sense of the word. We assumed that they were. They are probably a type of insect unknown on Earth. I will examine one at the first opportunity."

One or two overgrown ants were seen in the distance, two of them fighting each other; but none came near the Spacemaster.

The doctor came out wiping his hands on a towel. "He's doing fine," he announced. "I've given him an injection that should clean up his system, and he's managed to get down a little canned milk. He's resting now. What he needs most, I fancy, is nourishment. By the way, his name's Vargo."

"How do you know that?" ejaculated the Professor.

Toby grinned. "He told me. He tried his own language, which of course I didn't understand; then he tried his thought transmission stunt. It worked fairly well; but I could see the effort was taking a lot out of him so I stopped him. After that we tried a spot of signs and signals. I pointed to myself and said Toby; whereupon he pointed to himself and said Vargo. Every word I said afterwards he repeated, and grasped the meaning instantly. That, coupled with the fact that his head is two inches bigger round than the average European head, makes me think that what you said, Professor, about an abnormally high degree of pure intelligence, is correct."

"The first thing we must ask him is if he knows of any other survivors on the planet," insisted the Professor. "We haven't time to make a house to house inspection, although, when we're satisfied that we are in no danger from the beasts in the canal, we might do a tour of the town."

"Talking of the canal, something seems to be happening there," put in Tiger, who was staring down one of the side streets. "It looks different."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Professor, when they had moved their positions for a better view. "Something certainly *is* happening."

And what was happening was plain enough to see. What had been a broad strip of reedy marsh was now a jungle. Even as they watched it was possible to see vegetation growing. Branches, already breaking into leaf, were groping upwards like the tentacles of a school of octopus.

“What an incredible spectacle!” cried the Professor. “What on earth could have caused that!”

“Nothing on Earth,” answered Toby dryly. “Say, rather, what on Mars. It looks, Professor, as if we’ve got to be jolly careful what we spread about here, or we may start more than we bargained for—if we haven’t already done so.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“I was thinking, if that jungle goes on growing and spreading at the rate it is now we’re going to have a job to reach water. We were relying on the canals for water. You said, Professor, that once we had killed the mosquitoes we should have no difficulty in finding water, even if it meant digging a shallow well. What are the prospects now? Our tanks are getting low and we have an extra mouth.”

“I don’t think we need worry about that yet,” answered the Professor. “If necessary we can fly to one of the Poles and melt some ice. Always supposing that it is ice—the sort of ice that will melt down to water that we can drink. We’re not sure of that so it would be as well to confirm it. It might be salt. Indeed, it might be anything, perhaps nothing more than a mere skin of mineral deposit. In any case it will not be anything like the size of our ice-packs at home.”

The subject was not pursued, for at this juncture there occurred something even more startling than the one they had been discussing.

Rex saw them first. Clutching Tiger by the arm he yelled “Look!” and pointed at the sky.

Dropping in dead silence out of the black dome of heaven at fantastic speeds came three spaceships of the Flying Saucer type. They kept perfect formation as, a thousand feet from the ground they checked, tilted at an angle, and then swept down towards the town as if they intended landing on the square. Indeed, the Professor afterwards said he felt sure that was their intention. He also gave it as his opinion, in a flash of understanding, that the great paved square had originally been constructed as a landing ground.

However, whatever their intention may have been the three ships did not land on this occasion. Their speed slowed almost to a stop over the Spacemaster. The Professor, who alone seemed capable of movement, waved. There was no answering signal.

For perhaps a minute the spaceships remained, circling the Spacemaster slowly at a height of not more than a hundred feet, while those on the ground were aware that they were being subjected to a close inspection.

Then, as if controlled by a single switch, the ships sped away at an incredible velocity that took them out of sight in a matter of seconds.

Rex gasped his relief.

The Professor took a different view. The first to recover, brushing back his hair, he simply said: “What a pity they didn’t land.”

“They know we’re here,” said Tiger grimly. “The question is, what will they do next?”

“The answer to that will, I suspect, soon make itself apparent,” replied the Professor. “They will return to their base and report our presence here. If my theory is correct it will not be long before we have more visitors. At least, I hope so. Certainly I see no cause for alarm. As soon as Vargo is well enough we’ll ask him about the spaceships. He must know all about them. Anyway, as we are able to live in *his* atmosphere I hope he’ll be able to live in ours, should we have to leave in a hurry. But it must be noon, so let us have something to eat. After lunch we’ll run up to the Pole and check that water is available. It would be foolish to wait until our tanks are dry before doing that. Would anyone like a caramel?”

CHAPTER VI

DISTURBING DISCOVERIES

As they neared the Pole, following a canal that ran as straight as a railway track to the distant, curved horizon, the clear sunshine gave way to a cold, deep blue twilight, every bit as clear. It was as if plain glass spectacles had been changed for blue ones. Overhead, stars, some of them large, sparkled frostily—not spangled as it were on a dark ceiling but suspended in space; or rather, held there by the mighty forces that control the Universe. Jupiter, unmistakable, fairly blazed with ever-changing colours; an awe-inspiring spectacle.

The Professor, boyishly enthusiastic, rattled off the names of some of the galaxies, and presently stopped the ship to make some observations through his powerful telescope. "I have an idea," he said, "that some of those stars and planets are not as far away as we might imagine. They could well be the planetoids we see from Earth, for the majority move in that direction; and we are now much nearer to them. If I am right then the brightest must be comparatively close."

At that moment, at a remote point, the sky was suddenly lit up with a strange bluish-white glare. For a minute it waxed, then slowly began to wane.

"That," said the Professor, "is what astronomers call a Nova."

"And what," inquired Tiger, "is a Nova?"

"In simple terms, a heavenly body exploding, or suddenly burning out. Actually, we know little about Novae, but they happen constantly. As many as thirty a year have been observed in the Great Nebula in Andromeda. Whether they are caused by two stars in collision, or nuclear fission started by forces unknown to us, nobody knows." The Professor chuckled. "Perhaps some absent-minded scientist working on atomic energy pushed the wrong button."

"Which means that it could happen on Earth," suggested Rex.

"Of course," answered the Professor calmly. He smiled. "But don't let that worry you. If it does you'll know nothing about it."

Rex felt something like a cold hand touch his heart. The idea of Earth and everything on it, the people, the things they had made and the

knowledge that they had acquired, vanishing in a single flash of flame, was not to be contemplated without emotion.

The Spacemaster proceeded on its way.

The Professor did not take a direct course, but often made excursions to look at something of interest. For, as may be supposed, the town which they had fancifully named Utopia was not the only one on the planet, although they saw none larger. Most of those seen were ruins, in desert areas; but there were others, looking less dilapidated—which suggested they were not so old—on the banks of the numerous canals. There appeared to be no connecting links for communication, one with the other. Indeed, the complete absence of roads, or even tracks, was perhaps the most puzzling feature of the landscape. This, naturally, called for some discussion.

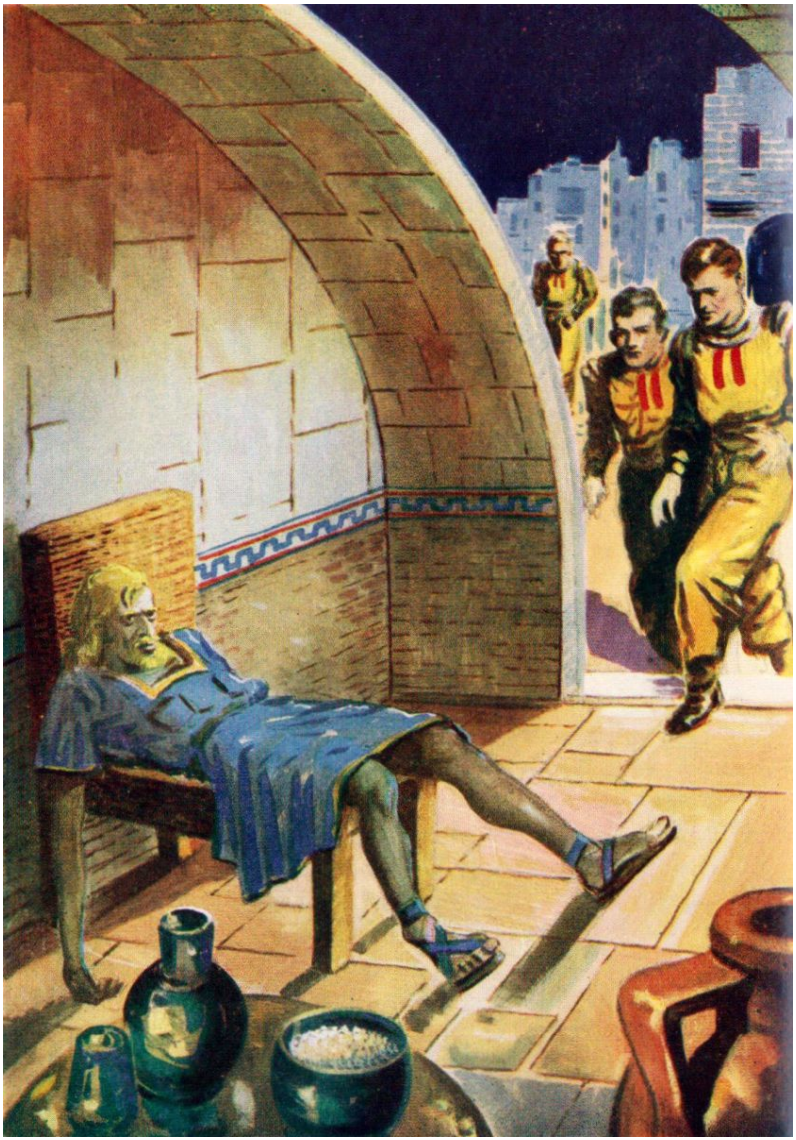
Tiger's surmise was that before disaster overtook the planet aircraft alone had been used for transportation. Toby said he thought the canals, before they became choked with weeds or silted up with sand, might have been highways, as well as providing a water supply. The Professor was inclined to agree with Tiger. There must, he opined, have been roads at one time, in the earliest civilization. Later, these had fallen into disuse, eventually to be buried under wind-blown sand. All the evidence, he said, pointed to two distinct civilizations: one very old; the other much later. Both had been destroyed. What had destroyed the first was a matter for surmise, as was the period of time between that era and the later one, which had been overwhelmed by mosquitoes. He concluded: "It was, I suspect, the disaster that overtook the first civilization that left the survivors defenceless against the insect peril. It was in the first disaster that the people lost most of their water, and their forests; obviously, without a rainfall there could be no regeneration of the vegetation; which is why we see it as it is today."

The brown and grey surface of the planet, without a tree, without a stream, certainly presented a melancholy picture, thought Rex. The only remaining signs of industry were quarries, or workings, where metal had been mined. Heaps of rubble alone showed where the workers had lived. It seemed remarkable that stone buildings could ever fall into such a state, and he said so.

"Nothing remarkable about that," answered the Professor. "Where, in Iraq, are the great cities of Biblical days—Babylon, Nimrod, Nineveh, and the rest? Some have disappeared so utterly that we cannot find them. No trace remains. At Nineveh all you will see are a few pieces of rock sticking out of the sand. Yet so great a city was it, we are told, that it took an army three days to march round it. So wide was its wall that six chariots could gallop round it abreast. If that is what a few thousand years can do it need

not surprise us if the same thing happened here, perhaps over a longer period."

Rex was silent.



(see page 52)

He looked dreadfully ill. But as they entered his eyes moved.

Passing over some workings larger than usual the Professor announced his intention of going down to discover, if possible, the metal that had been

mined—assuming it was a metal. Landing near what looked like an enormous bomb crater he got out and pottered about amongst the detritus, loose rock and shale. It seemed that he soon found what he wanted, for holding something aloft he came rushing back to the ship in a state of high excitement.

Said Toby, "He must have found a lump of gold."

"That wouldn't excite him," disputed Rex.

"Diamonds, then."

"Nor diamonds. We found some on Venus. He threw them away."

They might have gone on guessing for a long time without getting the right answer.

"Here's something to make you open your eyes!" exclaimed the Professor, as he bustled up. "Do you know what this it?"

The object, small but heavy, was passed round.

None of them knew what it was. To Rex it looked like a piece of metal in every respect except one, and that was its colour—red.

"Orichalcum," cried the Professor. "It can't be anything else. What a find! Isn't that wonderful?"

"What's Orichalcum?" inquired Tiger, not impressed.

The Professor looked pained at this confession of ignorance. "Surely you've heard of the lost metal of Atlantis! Certain so-called experts have doubted its existence. Yet here it is. It was always rare, even in the one place where it was found—the lost continent of Atlantis that sank in the Atlantic Ocean. Herodotus mentions it. So does Plato, who said it ranked higher than gold and was used by the Atlantes only to decorate their temples. Plato, you remember, says the story was told to an ancestor of his who died about two hundred years before his time. Well—well. What shall we find next, I wonder. Would anyone like a caramel?"

The only other call they made, keeping a watchful eye on a nearby canal, was at a town of some size. But it was clear at a glance from the quantities of dust and the general dilapidation that life had long ago departed. The only point of interest was wooden doors to some of the houses, which, said the Professor, placed the town in the pre-disaster period. For, he believed, there were no trees after that. The wood had been scored by sand and dust, but in the dry atmosphere it showed no sign of rot. They could not identify the timber.

They were soon on their way again, leaving the cloud of dust stirred up by the Spacemaster still hanging in the air.

Rex was in a sombre mood. The thought had occurred to him, and he could not shake it off, that Earth might be like this some day. If it could happen to one planet, why not another? It struck him that if people on Earth could see Mars they would have a higher appreciation of their good fortune.

As the Spacemaster approached the flat, glistening top of the planet, interest was aroused by a broad fringe, sometimes brown and sometimes green, that bordered the ice cap. This of course, was nothing like the size of its equivalent on Earth, for one thing Mars was so much smaller, and another, there was little water available to form either ice or snow.

There had been some discussion as to what was under the white mantle. Was it land, as occurs under much of the South Polar ice on Earth, or water, as at the North Pole? But now the answer was exposed—at any rate, at their point of approach. It was land. The fringe could only be moist soil left by the receding ice. Different shades of green, if not metallic oxide, could only be vegetation.

"Impossible though it may sound, that looks to me very much like cultivation," declared the Professor, handing Tiger his glass. "Some of those green areas have straight boundaries, and nature hates straight lines. But against that, who would do the cultivating? I see no signs of life anywhere. What a truly astonishing thing."

"If those are not cultivated plots of land then the vegetation here must have decided to grow in straight lines," declared Tiger.

"Preposterous," snorted the Professor.

Toby stepped in. "There is this about it. It's hardly likely that we shall find mosquitoes here. It must be much too cold. In fact, it's perishing."

"I agree," said the Professor. "Mosquitoes or not, we haven't answered my question. Who has been at work here? Someone has, recently."

"What about the people in the spaceships we saw?" suggested Rex. "Since obviously they don't live here they must come from another planet; and if they're short of room for agriculture they may have some market gardens here. The space crews might have allotments, so to speak. You said yourself, Professor, that Earth will have to do that one day, if the people are not to starve."

This raised a smile, but the Professor took the suggestion seriously. "That may be the answer, Rex. Indeed, I can see no other possible solution."

As the Spacemaster dropped towards it, it could be seen that for the most part the fringe of the ice cap was moss and a growth something like heather, in the manner of a Scottish moor; and it was on an area of this that the Professor landed, close to some patches of cultivation. There was no longer

any doubt about this. There were squares of tilled soil and crops planted in straight drills.

"Watch for mosquitoes," cautioned the Professor, as he stepped out.

It turned out to be an unnecessary warning for there was none, although later, far away in the evening light, they saw the ominous red clouds darkening the sun. What concerned them more at the moment was the intense cold.

The Professor, striding up to the nearest cultivated patch, pulled out of the ground a vegetable that looked like an enormous purple radish. He did not sample it, but walked on to a tangle of green stuff that carried a pod like a pea. Some flat pods lying about on the ground suggested that the crop had recently been picked, a supposition that was supported by footmarks. "It rather looks as if Rex was right when he called this a market garden," said the Professor. "No doubt Vargo will be able to tell us the facts when he is well enough to talk."

"He's recovering at a rate that I would have thought impossible," said Toby. "His constitution must be near perfect."

Vargo was, in fact, sitting in the doorway of the Spacemaster, watching them.

"I think we ought to examine the ice with a view to replenishing our water supply," said the Professor, and made his way over to the nearest point of it.

Rex, who had picked one or two pea pods, ate the contents as he walked. He found them somewhat bitter, and they left a hot taste in his mouth; but they were not unpalatable.

An examination of the ice revealed that it was, in fact, snow, and only a few inches thick. Under it was damp, mossy ground.

"It's going to take us some time to melt down enough of this stuff to fill our tanks," observed Tiger.

"It will have to be put through a rough analysis before we mix it with what water we have," asserted the Professor. "It may look like our snow, but that is not to say it is. It may consist of frozen particles of hydrogen, carbon dioxide, or some other gas."

A quantity was collected in the form of a ball and carried to the Spacemaster, where the Professor set to work on it. While they were waiting for his report Toby tried to get some information from Vargo, pointing out that the Martian clearly saw nothing remarkable in finding himself in a spaceship; from which it could be supposed that he was accustomed to such vehicles.

How right Toby was in this was later to be demonstrated.

He opened a silent conversation with Vargo by pointing at the vegetables, then at the sky, at the same time assuming a questioning expression.

Vargo got the idea at once. Pointing to a glowing disc overhead he spoke through Rex, who found himself saying: “The people who once were here now live on other worlds, much smaller. They come back here sometimes, when it is safe, for food.”

“So that’s the answer,” murmured Toby. “I thought as much. Now we know why the spaceships we saw were interested. They must have thought we were going to pinch their peas. It would be interesting to know why, if most people have gone, Vargo and some others remained here.”

“It will be even more interesting to know what sort of men are in these spaceships—good or bad,” put in Tiger. “If they didn’t like the look of us they might bump us off, and that would be that.”

Here the Professor interposed to say, in a worried voice, that he did not think the water obtained from the snow was safe to drink. It was not H_2O but D_2O. That was to say, he explained, it contained deuterium and practically no hydrogen. Such water occurred on Earth, where, used in atomic research, it was known as Heavy Water. There were also traces of carbon dioxide. What the effect of this would be on the human system he admitted frankly that he did not know; and he preferred not to put the matter to test unless it became vitally necessary. It was a serious matter, because, if the water in the canals turned out to be the same, as was to be expected, they would soon have to start for home. It might be possible to make the water safe but that would take time.

Toby stepped in. “Vargo says these vegetables outside are grown by the people who once lived here.”

“Which suggests that they are no great distance away,” said the Professor. “They can hardly be on Jupiter, so we must conclude that they now occupy one of the larger planetoids—probably Ceres . . . or even several. For if they can reach one they can obviously reach all. But this intense cold is most unpleasant, so let us get back to Utopia where the climate is more salubrious.”

The Spacemaster skimmed back to its base in a matter of minutes: but even from a distance it was clear that a startling change had taken place. No one was prepared for the sight that met their eyes.

Where, on their arrival, a reedy marsh had been, a tangle of jungle now marked the course of the canal. The tallest trees, perhaps twenty feet high,

were in the middle. From there they diminished in size to the outer fringes where, reaching the dry ground, they became dwarfed to mere scrub that finally petered out altogether.

"Your insecticide, Professor, seems to be an even better fertilizer," observed Tiger sombrely. "It's going to be a nice job digging for water in that mess."

"We'll talk about it in the morning," decided the Professor, putting the ship down in its usual place. "We've had a long day, and a profitable one, so let us not harass ourselves with problems that will keep till tomorrow. After some food, and a good night's rest, we shall be in better shape to tackle them."

CHAPTER VII

NIGHTMARE JUNGLE

WHEN REX awoke the next morning the first thing he noticed was that the improvement in Vargo's condition had been sustained, for he was now able to move about without assistance. He was obviously still very weak, but his face had lost its deathly pallor and was beginning to fill out. His manner was more alert, and his disconcerting eyes brighter, as if a veil had been lifted from them. The eyes worried Rex. Every time his own met them he was conscious of a queer sensation, a sort of weakness, as if he had encountered a superior being. It was not that the eyes were noticeably unlike his own. It was something behind them, something that came from the brain.

More surprising than this was the number of English words the man had already picked up. He had only to hear a word once, and gather its meaning, and it was in his fast-growing vocabulary. Which supported the Professor's belief that, supposing Vargo to be a normal Martian, the degree of intelligence attained by the people of Mars was abnormally high. He knew all their names, saying them without a trace of accent but in a curious, thin, precise voice, that was, they were later to learn, the ordinary Martian way of speaking.

His rapid physical progress puzzled Toby because it was made on a quantity of food so small that on Earth it would not have kept a child alive. He had no appetite, but seemed unaware of it; or, to put it another way, he protested at the portions of food put before him as if they were too large. He regarded their own meals with astonishment, and some slight amusement. The only solid food he would touch was bread, or biscuit, as if he was by nature vegetarian.

Over breakfast the Professor said he was tempted to begin his questioning in order to satisfy their curiosity on some essential points; as, for example, was Vargo the only man left alive on Mars? Or if, as might be, the planet had been evacuated, why was he still there? However, the most pressing problem was water, for if none was found that day they would have to consider starting for home, which would not only be a disappointing end to a promising beginning but would also raise the problem of what to do with Vargo. For many reasons the Professor would not hear of taking him to Earth. Even if he survived the sudden change of atmosphere and pressure, he

would, it was argued, promptly die of the first infectious disease he encountered. Yet to leave him as they had found him would be equally fatal.

The upshot of this was a decision to start looking for water immediately, the exploring party to consist of the Professor, Tiger, Rex and Judkins. Toby would stay with his patient, teaching him more English, holding the ship ready for any emergency.

So the explorers set off for the canal—or rather, the riot of vegetation that now marked its course—Tiger with his rifle under his arm, the Professor with field glasses and his camera, and Judkins, somewhat incongruously, carrying a spade and bucket. Not knowing what to expect, but aware that it might be anything, they advanced with the caution of soldiers reconnoitring an enemy position.

"This sudden growth of herbage, which will be seen through the big telescopes on Earth, will cause quite a flutter in the observatories," said the Professor with a chuckle. "A lot of guesses will be made about it but not one will be right."

The first things Rex remarked as they drew near were spots of colour against the lush green background. These, it was agreed, could only be flowers. Some trees were entirely yellow. On Earth this would have been natural and to be expected; but here, in a world in which definite colours seemed to have vanished, the effect was almost magical, particularly as the colours were of exceptional brilliance. Or so, in a colourless world, they seemed to be. A blue vine was conspicuous. Some masses of scarlet and yellow near the ground were not so easily explained, but after a spy through his glasses the Professor said they were huge fungi.

"I can hardly believe," said he, "that my insecticide alone could be responsible for such a rapid rate of growth. It might well be that free from pests the vegetable growth on Mars is normally faster than on Earth."

At a distance of perhaps thirty yards from the nearest fringe of vegetation, consisting mostly of tall, coarse-looking grass, moss and reeds, he stopped. "Where is everything?" he exclaimed. "I expected to find the ground thick with corpses—certainly dead insects. I can't see one."

"Everything must have eaten everything else," suggested Tiger lightly.

"What about the last one? What ate that?" inquired the Professor tartly. "No—no. That won't do. There must be something here, dead or alive."

After advancing a little they stopped again, eyeing the fringe of jungle with misgivings. The absence of danger in any shape or form seemed too good to be true. A sweet aromatic perfume reached Rex's nostrils. Blended with the fragrance was a strange, musty smell. So overpowering was it at

times that his head swam slightly—or he fancied it did. However, he did not comment on it. There seemed no reason to, flowers and perfume usually being found together.

"Water shouldn't be far away," said the Professor briskly, and walking to a patch of soft moss drove in the heel of his shoe, hard, several times. A little water seeped into the cavity he had made. "Here you are, Judkins," he said, "a small hole should yield enough water to fill your bucket, ample for a test. If it turns out to be sweet we'll bring the ship over and filter enough to fill the tanks." As Judkins drove in his spade the Professor looked around, and pushing up his glasses, went on: "This really is most astonishing. What can have become of everything?"

Tiger answered. "Is it astonishing? What has happened here, I imagine, is what happens in wild places on Earth. In nature anything that dies promptly becomes a meal for something else. Scavengers are always watching for a free meal—vultures, hyenas, jackals, and so on. Here, don't forget, you have deliberately provoked appetites with your patent insecticide."

"Yes, my friend; but vultures pick the bones. They don't eat them. Millions of mosquitoes must have died here but I see no bones."

"Do mosquitoes have bones?"

"Tut—tut. You score a point there, Group Captain. I don't know. But if my mixture is as efficacious as this we should soon be able to rid Mars of its beastly plague."

Now while this conversation was going on Rex had walked, or rather, strolled, on a little way towards the thicker jungle. He had no particular purpose in this. For some reason, although he could not have said why, it attracted him. Even when he met quite a wave of the musty smell he had noticed, he did not stop. As from a long way off he heard his father call, asking him where he was going; but he paid no heed. He did not answer or even look round. The scene had taken on an atmosphere of unreality in which he had no part, but was merely a spectator. More waves of the musty aroma greeted him, and in a vague way he knew he was looking for the source of it. He didn't want to, but he felt he had to, although he was beginning to be afraid. He knew he was afraid; but still he couldn't stop. His fears grew. He would have given anything to be able to turn and run, but he seemed to have lost control of his limbs. Something was drawing him on, irresistibly. Again he heard Tiger's voice. Again he ignored it.

Staring ahead he walked on, thrusting aside bushes that impeded him. In front now was a little glade. In the middle of it lay a heap, a mound, of what

looked like brightly coloured material arranged in folds. On the top of the pile was a long flat lump. Set in the lump were two jewels that he knew were eyes, fixed unwinkingly on him. They filled him with terror, but he could not tear his own eyes away from them.

The head in which the eyes were set began slowly to lift, at the same time swaying with the regular action of a pendulum. Moving with the calm deliberation of a sleepwalker Rex walked towards it. He was no longer afraid. He was not conscious of any sensation at all. It was as if his body no longer belonged to him. His hands, he saw, were held out in front of him.

The head was coming towards him when the world seemed to explode in a clap of thunder. The heap leapt high, uncoiling like a spring, twisting and writhing, lashing and crashing as it flung itself about in mighty convulsions. He began to scream, but a hand closed on his arm like a vice and dragged him away. Then, as if a spell had been broken—as in fact it had—he tore himself free, and crying incoherently ran for his life.

Where he would have stopped had not Tiger overtaken him is a matter for conjecture. His father took him by the shoulders and shook him, saying: "Be quiet. It's all right."

It was a minute before Rex could speak. "What was it?" he panted.

"Couldn't you see what it was?" returned Tiger, angrily.

"Yes," answered Rex, in a dazed voice. "It was a snake. But who could have imagined a snake that size?"

"Why in heavens name did you go so close to it? You must have seen it."

"Yes, I saw it," blurted Rex. "I couldn't stop."

"Mesmerism," broke in the Professor, coming up. "A plain case of mesmerism. Why not? All a matter of proportion. If a small snake can mesmerise a bird why shouldn't a monster attract a human being? There have been cases of that on Earth."

Feeling weak Rex sat down on a heap of moss. He could still hear the snake crashing about in the jungle.

"Don't worry," Tiger reassured him. "It's dead—or as good as. I shattered its head. Lucky for you I saw you going off. I thought you were behaving strangely."

"I think the smell had something to do with it in the first place," said Rex, trying to steady his trembling hands.

"I suggest that while we are on Mars we should make it a rule never to be out of sight of each other," said the Professor, seriously. "I was prepared for strange events, and they are certainly happening."

Judkins, prosaic as ever, broke in. “Shall I take the water back to the ship, sir?”

“Yes, if you please. I’ll follow you,” replied the Professor. “I must go and look at this supersnake before something eats it.”

The death throes of the great reptile were becoming less violent as they all made their way to the scene of Rex’s adventure. There was no difficulty in finding it for in its wild contortions it had lain flat half an acre of jungle. There it was, a creature fifty feet long with a girth the size of a man’s body, still moving, its rippling muscles causing the colour pattern of its skin to shimmer like shot silk. At least, that was what Rex took the ripple to be until the Professor, after a closer look, declared it was the result of thousands of tiny insects swarming over it.

“Now we know why there are no corpses lying about,” observed Tiger. “There’s always something looking for a meal.”

“Yes, but why haven’t those insects on the snake become enlarged like everything else?” cried the Professor.

“Perhaps they have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Before they stuffed themselves with your special tonic those insects may have been microscopic—germs, microbes, or something of that nature.”

“Quite right,” agreed the Professor. “That could be the answer. What a horrid thought. Dear me. What shall we discover next. Just look at these magnificent fellows.” He strode over to a growth of fungi, orange with purple spots, hideous, yet in a way, beautiful.

While they stood looking at them Rex saw a trickle of yellow powder fall from above and settle on the Professor’s shoulder. He paid little attention to it except that it made him glance up. At the same moment he discovered that he was having difficulty in breathing. He also perceived that they were standing under one of the bright yellow trees he had observed from the open ground. This effect, he now saw, was caused by flowers, hanging in chains in the manner of laburnum. Not only were the flowers yellow, but the air itself was yellow, the result of a steady rain of pollen which the blossoms were beginning to discharge.

By this time he was super-sensitive to danger so he waited for no more, but uttered a cry of warning. “Look out!” he shouted shrilly. “The pollen! It’s coming down on us!”

In the ordinary way this might have sounded silly, but the Professor and Tiger were also having trouble with their breathing, coughing and sneezing, and wiping tears from their eyes which were beginning to stream. Rex’s

shout was enough to send them all blundering and groping their way to the open air. Even there it was some time before they were fully recovered. Some time was spent shaking their jackets and otherwise removing the yellow dust from their persons.

"Don't tell me that even the trees are carnivorous," muttered Tiger.

"It looks very much like it," replied the Professor, wiping his eyes. "Either they intended to destroy us or were protecting themselves against possible interference. Why not? In our own tropics the Upas tree has a reputation for being lethal. The vibration caused by our voices may have set the pollen in motion. Very unpleasant, anyway. We'll keep clear of those trees in future. Before we get into further trouble we'd better get back to the ship to examine the water."

But the morning's chapter of adventure was not yet complete.

The Professor had set off at a good pace, with the others following slowly, when a shadow sweeping over the ground made Rex look up. One glance and he yelled in a voice that cracked with incredulity, "Look at that!" There was no fear in his voice, only amazement.

From out of the trees had appeared a butterfly, or moth, adorned with the most exquisite colours of its kind. The body was dove grey banded with yellow. The wings were peacock blue, laced with scarlet and tipped with black. But it was not the colours that held Tiger and Rex spellbound. Apparently, like all other living creatures in the vicinity, it was suffering from overgrowth, for its wing-span was not less than twenty feet. Its weaving antennae, ten feet long, had green, bulbous tips. Altogether it was a thing of beauty, and at first, thinking in terms of butterflies, neither Rex nor his father regarded it with anything but admiration.

However, this began to give way to apprehension as the insect swerved in its erratic flight and with wings extended dived at the Professor who, hearing cries, had turned, and now saw the reason. He ran. Tiger raced after him. Rex followed.

The butterfly swooped like a hawk. The Professor flung himself flat. The creature missed its strike and zoomed, legs dangling. The Professor rose and dashed on, zig-zag. Again the butterfly dived on him. He jumped aside and struck at a wing that just missed his head. His fist went right through it, knocking out a piece about a foot square. The wing, being in its upward movement lifted him off his feet. His weight threw the insect off its balance so that it collided with the ground.

By this time Tiger had reached the spot. He fired three shots, but they had no effect. As he said afterwards, the thing was more wing than body.

The insect rose again, wheeled, and came straight at him, head first. Tiger, standing as if facing a charging lion, held his fire until the last moment and at point blank range put a bullet into the face—which was not as beautiful as the body. The shot must have raked the insect from head to tail. At all events, it fell dead, quivering, one wing cocked like a gaudy sail.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," said Tiger apologetically. "It seemed a shame to destroy such a glorious creature but I was afraid it was going to do some mischief."

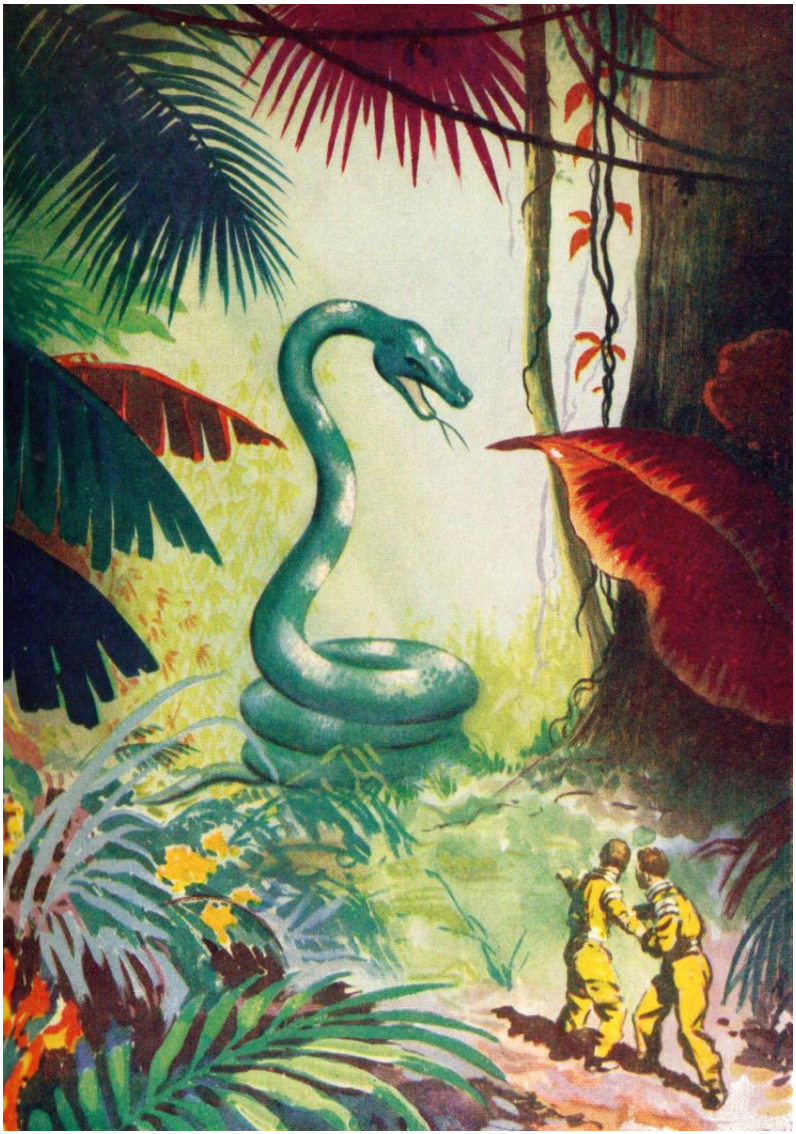
"I agree," replied the Professor. "You had no alternative." As they walked up to the insect he went on: "What a sensation this would cause on Earth. We'll take a section of the wing home with us for a souvenir. I must have a photograph. Then we'll get on, or the others will be wondering what the shooting was about."

CHAPTER VIII

VARGO TELLS HIS TALE

THE next two days passed without an incident of a serious nature. The sample of water turned out to be slightly saline which made it somewhat bitter to the taste, but to everyone's satisfaction the Professor pronounced it safe to drink in small quantities. It had, he said, changed its character during the long journey from the Pole where it had its source, collecting mineral salts from the land through which it passed. The hole from which it had been obtained was enlarged; the Space master was moved over to it, and while Tiger mounted guard with his rifle the tanks were filled. As the water had to be filtered this took some time.

No spaceships were seen. The only living thing that attempted to interfere with them was an ugly beast like an overgrown scorpion, which Tiger shot. They did not risk the unknown perils of the still-spreading jungle, having no reason to. It may be that this absence of danger encouraged a certain amount of complacency which was later to end in tragedy.



(see page 75)

. . . uncoiling like a spring.

The tanks filled, the next step was a reconnaissance of the town for other possible survivors. None was found, although several bodies were seen, preserved in the manner of mummies. Some were quite shrivelled up and obviously of great age. They also came across signs of burning, also very old. This absence of more living men—or to put it the other way round, the fact that only one had survived—was, the Professor declared, the most

extraordinary thing so far encountered. For, as he averred, it seemed incredible that they had arrived just in time to save the last Martian. Actually, this was not the case, as was soon to be revealed.

The next operation was an extension of the anti-mosquito scheme. That the insects still swarmed from other canals they knew, for they sometimes saw them in the distance. This, of course, was only to be expected. So every canal within a hundred miles of the town was treated, the Professor persisting while his stock of insecticide lasted. This, it was thought, would at least make the region in which they had settled comparatively safe. Later, should it be decided to rid the planet entirely of its pest, more insecticide could be fetched from Earth—possibly an improved mixture, said the Professor, who was not altogether happy about the one they were using, as the ultimate effects of it were still not known.

During this period the physical condition of Vargo had improved beyond recognition. Not only was he able to walk about like the rest of them but it was no longer necessary for him to employ thought transference, for he was able to speak English with a fluency which, had he not been witness to it, said the Professor, he would not have believed possible. In the matter of high intelligence it was clear that the people of Earth still had a long way to go.

Already there had been a certain amount of conversation. Vargo knew their names. He also knew where they had come from, for they were able to point to Earth, shining like a small moon in the sky—a planet twice the size of Mars seen from Earth. The belt of atmosphere round Mars was so thin that Earth could be seen even in daylight, as also could Jupiter and Saturn. Indeed, Vargo knew all the heavenly bodies, and had his own names for them. From the casual way he spoke of them, and the fact that the arrival of the Spacemaster had caused him no surprise, it was evident that he came from a race of men to whom space travel was commonplace.

And so it came about that on the third day, after the evening meal, Vargo was invited to explain the mystery of his sole survival—indeed, to tell his story; which he did, speaking in the thin, concise voice, to which they had become accustomed. Little guessing what they were about to learn the others gave him their attention.

To narrate the story as Vargo told it, in halting phrases and with a vocabulary that was still limited, would make long laborious reading. Interruptions for explanations were frequent, for the facts did not emerge in chronological order. Part of the tale was obviously legendary, sometimes vague, and of an antiquity which, at first, the listeners, with a history of a

mere seven thousand years on their own planet, found difficult to grasp. On the other hand some parts were modern, and, indeed, right up to date.

The summary of it all, put in correct sequence, was something like this. His full name, he announced, was Vargo Lentos, the second name being the name of the planet on which he had been born. He continued.

Long, long ago, how long ago he himself did not know, Mars had reached a state of what was thought to be perfect happiness and prosperity. It might have been a hundred thousand sun cycles ago, or even two hundred thousand. (By sun cycles he obviously meant years. Martian years of six hundred and eighty-seven Earthly days.) The actual time was unimportant. It was in the dim past. This was the age of machines, of mechanical inventions and discoveries. It had lasted for a long time, and had produced, among other things, the first spaceships. Food was plentiful, and illness, long ago conquered, was unknown. In their spaceships the people had visited other worlds, some even more advanced than their own. The worlds were then closer together, and the Solar System had near neighbours. By the interchange of information progress became even faster. Every day the scientists produced new wonders, until the people no longer wondered at anything. Life was perfect. Everyone was happy.

Here Vargo pointed to Jupiter, saying that of all worlds it was the most beautiful, although at that time it was smaller, and had no moons. Near it was another world called Kraka, which was no longer there. Mars, too, was beautiful, with forests and fields and rivers populated by animals, birds and fish, all very tame, for they were allowed to live in peace. The people no longer ate flesh; only fruit and vegetables and corn, which grew everywhere and was public property.

Here the Professor interposed to ask if Earth was visited at this time, and if so, what were the conditions there.

Vargo replied that according to legend it was the worst of all the worlds, being almost entirely covered with ice; and what was not ice was water, from which projected great mountains of rock. The planet was enveloped in clouds that seldom broke, as was the case with Venus even now, although Venus was nearer to the sun. Earth, at that time, was farther from the sun. There were people there, and huge beasts; but the people were little better than animals, for which reason no travellers ever went there.

“Now we know the answer to the great Ice Ages,” murmured the Professor.

This era of happiness, of genius, of pure thought and reasoning, ended in a day, Vargo explained. It was a day of universal calamity, the cause of

which was not known. It began at Kraka, the home of great scientists. That was certain, because Martian ships, and others in outer space, had seen the flash of the explosion that had destroyed it utterly, breaking it into fragments, some of which they could see. Vargo turned his eyes to the planetoids.

"So our theory was correct," murmured the Professor.

There were some, continued Vargo, who believed that the cause of the disaster was a collision with a great meteor that came from outer space, where such things were not uncommon. Others disputed this, saying that the approach of such a visitor would have been noted and a warning given. They believed that the catastrophe was caused by an ill-advised experiment on Kraka that had cracked the hard crust of the planet so that its molten heart had burst it asunder. However it may have been the result was beyond imagination or description.

The entire system of worlds round the sun was affected. Much was destroyed. Everything was changed, although this was not known at the time, for all was darkness that lasted for no one knew how long. The sun was put out. All life was destroyed. The only survivors, from whose descendants these things were known, were those in ships in outer space. There they stayed, landing on a remote planet where they ended their days, for there could be no return. The Solar System was a black patch in the universe, filled with fire and meteors and dust. Thus perished the first civilizations. Such was the story that had been handed down from father to son through the ages.

How long the era of darkness lasted no one knew; but when, slowly, the dust settled on the worlds that were left, and the light returned, it could be seen that everything was changed. The planets were in different orbits. Some were larger, some smaller. Kraka had disappeared. Jupiter, its nearest neighbour, was on fire, and still burned, as they could see. (Vargo was pointing.) Around Saturn the dust still swirled in a great band, which could also be seen. Earth was nearer to the sun. A new planet (he pointed to Venus) had appeared.

"This world which you call Mars," went on Vargo sadly, "was as you see it now, except for the canals. Everything had gone, scorched or torn away by blast—hills, trees, water and most of the air. Small new worlds were everywhere, moons and planets, fragments of the broken Kraka. Earth was a world of water, for the ice had melted and poured into the holes torn in it by comets and great meteors. A small new world, your Moon of Earth, had taken an orbit near it. There is much more that I could tell you, but it would take much time. Did you not know of these things?"

"No," answered the Professor, soberly. "We knew nothing of this."

"The reason would be because the people of Earth, being no better than animals, had no ships; so none could escape."

He continued his story.

With the return of light, he stated, began another era, quite different from the first, for everything was changed. He went on to describe how the Martians who had escaped settled on their new world, having much of the knowledge that had been acquired on the old one. They still had their ships, but they could not make new ones. Those now in use they obtained from other worlds much farther away. They never forgot their old home, so when the dust had settled and travel within the Solar System once more became possible they returned to see what had happened. It was then that they discovered the changes that had taken place. Mars was hardly habitable but they resolved to make it so. Fortunately there were now a large number of small planets comparatively near. These, on account of their size, had been the first to cool down and settle in regular orbits. It was on these that the old Martians had established themselves while engaged in the tremendous project of restoring their original home. Vargo pointed to the sky, naming some of the planetoids which could be seen.

Water was the first consideration and it was now that the canals were dug; for the only water that remained on Mars was at the Poles, and as there was not a great quantity even there it was necessary to conserve it. But before this task was finished there had come another disaster, one which had proved fatal to their hopes. In the canals had appeared a weed, and from the weed had come insects in countless numbers, bringing death to so many that the last survivors had fled back to their temporary homes on the planetoids. There they remained, numbering only a few, but increasing in numbers so rapidly that they were faced with a food shortage. Already everything had been sacrificed to food. Every inch of land was cultivated. The trees had gone. So had the animals, which they could no longer feed. Only a type of bird, one that could not fly, was kept for its eggs. Recently an attempt had been made to produce food on Mars, near the Poles, where there were no mosquitoes.

"Have you given up all hope of coming back to Mars?" asked the Professor.

Vargo surprised them with his answer, which explained why he was there. The scientists among them were trying to find an anti-mosquito specific that would enable men to live on Mars regardless of the plague, long enough to destroy the insects without resorting to fire, which might

destroy the last remaining water. Every so often, therefore, a few men, volunteers, had been landed on Mars with this object in view. They had been inoculated, provided with food and medicines, and had even had their skins varnished. So far all had failed. He, Vargo, was the sole survivor of the last party to face death for the community. It was a point of honour to remain to the end, for otherwise it could not be known for certain that the remedy had failed.

Asked why so little remained on Mars of the first and greatest civilization Vargo said that over a long period of time everything worth saving, not destroyed in the holocaust, had been transported to the new small planets on which his people had settled. Occasional visits were still made by spaceships at times when the mosquitoes were dormant. Ships on long voyages called at the Poles to collect water and fresh vegetables. They were able to drink the water without ill effects.

Rex blinked at the idea of a removal on such a scale, but from the calm way Vargo had made the statement he obviously meant what he said. But then Vargo was always calm, even to the point of monotony. If he was capable of emotion, pondered Rex, he kept it under perfect control.

That, in brief, was Vargo's story of what had happened in the past, and its effect on those who heard it can be imagined. However, they were not allowed to dwell on it, for when he moved on to the present he delivered a bombshell that left his hearers stunned. In his thin unemotional voice he announced that Earth had recently been surveyed by Martian spaceships with a view to its occupation in lieu of their own ruined land. This scheme, however, had been abandoned.

The Professor, naturally, asked why.

For once a flicker of surprise showed in Vargo's queer eyes. "For the same reason that you Earthmen are looking for a new home."

"But we're not looking for a new home," asserted the Professor.

"There is so much activity now in the atmosphere around Earth that we thought you were," said Vargo simply.

"But why should we?"

"Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

Vargo pointed to a pinpoint of light in the deep blue sky. "That," said he, "is a tiny planet which, first seen by our Interstellar Watch Squadron, has broken free from its constellation in outer space and has been named by our Space Department, Vontor. It is travelling on an orbit which in ninety days will take it so near Earth that your atmosphere will be dragged away and the

seas torn from their beds: and such will be the heat by friction that everything will be scorched to a cinder. We thought you must know that."

CHAPTER IX

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

It was a full minute before anyone spoke. Then the Professor said, in a strange, heavy voice: "We did not know. Are you sure of this?"

"Our old men are wise," answered Vargo. "Some have lived for as long as three hundred sun cycles, and they do not make mistakes; for knowing what terrible things have happened in the past they watch the stars always."

Although Vargo had spoken plainly enough it took Rex a little while to grasp the enormity of what he had predicted. The end of the world. As an expression at home this was often used lightly, but spoken seriously—and Vargo was obviously serious—it produced a picture too awful to be easily comprehended. Yet that such a thing could happen was proved by the state of Mars, which was there, at their feet, to be seen. And Jupiter, still burning. Saturn, still girdled with meteoric dust. The Novae, which the Professor had described. This, then, was to be the fate of Earth.

Vargo did not appear to be in the least upset by the prospect. To him, apparently, the end of a planet was not the end of everything. But then, it was not his planet.

"How big is this star, Vontor, which you say will collide with Earth?" asked the Professor.

Vargo could not of course describe the actual size in Earthly measurements; but he made it plain that the invader was quite small—not that size really mattered.

"Is it on fire?" queried the Professor.

Vargo said no. It was cold, dead. The spaceship crews knew that because they had been to look at it; and, he thought, had actually landed on it, to test its substance. But it would, of course, become incandescent with heat, by friction, like a meteor, the moment it plunged into the Earth's atmosphere.

"We must go home. People will have to be warned," declared Tiger.

"To what purpose?" inquired the Professor. "If they were told they would not believe it."

Tiger frowned. "I'm not so sure of that. People think more about these things than they used to. Governments, fearing a panic, may have made light of Flying Saucers and tried to account for them in all sorts of ridiculous

ways. But nowadays the public are not so easily fooled, and a lot of people believe in them."

The Professor shrugged. "Does it matter? If people knew definitely that doom was on the way they could not escape. We alone could get away because we have the Spacemaster."

"We might build more ships."

The Professor shook his head. "In so little time it would be impossible to build enough ships for a mass evacuation, even if such a project was feasible."

"The Martians, friends of Vargo, could save a few in their ships, if they would co-operate," suggested Toby.

"Who would select those to be saved," asked the Professor, with a tinge of sarcasm. "In such a panic as would occur when the truth became known law and order would disappear, and nothing would be possible."

"In that case we might as well stay here," said Tiger grimly.

"A most depressing prospect even if we knew we were safe; and we do not know; the repercussions of such a collision as we are asked to visualize might be felt even here."

"What, then, are you going to do about it," asked Tiger. "I don't feel like sitting here waiting for doomsday."

"I shall have to think about it," returned the Professor. "Naturally, one's first reaction is to rush home and warn the government. But common sense counsels prudence."

"Is there any alternative?"

"Yes. First of all, I think, we might have a closer look at this unwelcome visitor, with the object of confirming what Vargo has told us."

"As, clearly, he's telling the truth, wouldn't that be a waste of time?" said Tiger.

"Time is of no importance now. Ninety days or forty days, if doom is inevitable, what is the difference? We shall, moreover, have to consider our gallant guest, who was prepared to sacrifice his life for others. He should have some say in the matter, particularly as we owe this disturbing information to him. I suggest we go to bed and give the matter the thought it demands. In the morning I will give you my final decision."

This decision, whatever it may have been, was never to be given; for dawn was to bring such tragedy that even the impending fate of Earth was temporarily forgotten.

It came about like this, as suddenly as it was unexpected.

Rex had passed a restless night. He thought the others had, too, for he could hear them moving in their beds. With the imminent destruction of Earth on their minds this was no matter for wonder. Strange thoughts occurred to him. That the world would end like this, he recalled, had often been prophesied. Now the prophets were about to be proved right. Not that they were likely to get any credit or satisfaction from this, for they would perish with the rest. Of what would happen in the great cities when the truth was known, for known it would be when the invader approached, he dare not think. Aside from these uneasy speculations, although by this time he was acclimatized, the air seemed colder than usual. It was, therefore, with relief, that he saw the first pink glimmer of dawn come creeping through the portholes.

It was for this, apparently, that Tiger had been waiting, for moving quietly—for the others were now asleep—he got up, took his towel and toilet things, and told Rex softly in passing that he was going to have a sponge down in the hole dug for the purpose.

This hole was a little farther on than the one from which they drew their drinking water. The idea was to conserve the water in the tanks, and at the same time, for washing purposes only, use water that did not need filtering. Taking his rifle, for he never went near the jungle without it, Tiger went down the steps to the ground and disappeared from sight.

Rex decided that he would do the same; but after his bad night he was drowsy and therefore did not hurry. It was about a quarter of an hour later, by which time the Professor had got up and was writing in his notebook, that he took his towel and soap, and telling the Professor what he intended to do, set off. The Professor said he would follow shortly. Judkins got up and started to prepare breakfast.

The washing hole could not be seen from the ship. Being on the main square some buildings intervened. As a matter of detail Rex had to walk about fifty yards to bring the washing place into view.

It should be said here that no form of life had ever been seen at this hour, due possibly to the fact that the temperature was below freezing point. It soon warmed up when the sun appeared, for so far they had not seen a cloud to temper its direct rays, which, with so thin an atmosphere, could be fierce.

When Rex turned the corner which brought the washing hole into view, a trifle more than a hundred yards distant, Tiger was just finishing dressing. He threw his towel over a shoulder and was picking up the holdall that held his kit when something made him look up.

Rex, glancing up to see what he was looking at, was somewhat excited but not in the least surprised to see a spaceship dropping like a stone towards the spot where Tiger was standing. It did not occur to him that it was going to land, possibly because of the speed it was travelling. He assumed that the crew had seen Tiger and were coming in for a closer look. They may have thought he was one of their own people. But that is surmise.

What actually happened was, the machine suddenly slowed and touched down as lightly as a piece of fluff. It landed quite close to Tiger—a matter of not more than twenty paces. For a second or two Tiger stood watching. Then, rifle in hand, he started walking slowly towards it. But when a door opened and three men, looking from where Rex stood very much like Vargo, jumped out, he stopped again. If words or signals were exchanged Rex did not hear or see them. Tiger started walking away, backwards, as if something had alarmed him. Then he turned as if to run, only to stumble and fall. The spacemen ran to him, helped him up, and without any show of force walked him to the machine, which they then all entered.

By this time Rex was running as hard as he could to the spot, impelled more by curiosity than fear. It is true he was conscious of a twinge of alarm, but nothing more than that. It may seem curious, but he still had no suspicion of what was going to happen. It was not until the door was closed that the dreadful possibility struck him; and then it struck him all of a heap, as the saying is.

He stopped dead. The ship began to rise, slowly at first, but with swiftly increasing speed. In ten seconds it was rocketing. In twenty it was a speck in the sky. In twenty-five it had disappeared from sight.

How long Rex stood there staring at the empty sky he did not know. Time had ceased to exist. In the face of the awful thing that had happened he was incapable of thought or movement. He was stunned. His brain refused to function, or his legs to act. All he could do was stare.

When at last he did realize what had happened a cry broke from his lips. He clapped his hands over his face, and thus, while a few more seconds ticked by, he remained. Then, with another cry that was something like a sob, he tore back to the Spacemaster.

The Professor and Toby, with towels over their arms, were just leaving it. Vargo was behind them. When they saw him coming they stopped, aware from his manner that something had happened.

They had some difficulty in finding out what it was, for all Rex could do, when he rushed up, was to babble incoherently over and over again: “He’s gone—he’s gone—he’s gone.”

“Calm yourself, boy,” ordered the Professor sternly. “Who’s gone?”

“Tiger.”

“Gone where?”

Rex pointed to the sky. “A spaceship landed and captured him. They’ve taken him away with them,” he choked, and slumping on the bottom step of the ship buried his face in his hands, trying to stifle his sobs.

It was some time before the others could get from him an exact account of all that had happened, Vargo listening intently to the questions and answers.

“Didn’t Tiger make any attempt to defend himself?” asked Toby.

“No. That’s what I don’t understand,” answered Rex miserably.

“He had his rifle?”

“Yes.”

“But he didn’t use it?”

“No. He started to run and then fell down. When they picked him up he seemed to go willingly.”

“They willed him to go. He could not refuse,” put in Vargo.

“Do you mean they mesmerised him?” questioned Toby. He had to explain what mesmerism was.

“Yes,” said Vargo. “We do much by the power of thought, which we learned long ago was more powerful than weapons.”

“But Tiger was a strong man,” protested Toby. “He, too, had a will power.”

“It would not be strong enough if all those in the ship were willing against him,” explained Vargo.

“You mean several wills are stronger than that of one man?”

“It must be so,” returned Vargo, simply.

“They’ve taken him away,” cried Rex desperately. “What does it matter now how they took him?”

“Perhaps they’ll bring him back,” said Toby comfortingly.

“What if they don’t?”

“We shall have to try to find him.”

Rex laughed hysterically. “With a million worlds to search?”

“Vargo may be able to help us,” said the Professor gently. “Give the boy a bromide, doctor, to steady him. He’s had a bad shake-up. So have we all.”

Toby complied.

Vargo then asked Rex to describe the ship.

Rex did so to the best of his ability. “It was flatter than ours,” he said, “and of a different colour. The metal was like bronze, but more red. It had a band of blue stars painted round the middle.”

“And the crew—the men you saw?”

“They looked very much like you. They all wore white helmets, like skull caps, except one who stood in the doorway, and his was blue. He also had blue things on his shoulders, I remember. They seemed to shine. He had a beard darker than yours; brown, I think, and pointed.”

“I thought it might be so,” said Vargo. “I know this man. It is the sort of thing he would do without asking permission. His name is Rolto Mino, and he is the captain of the Remote Survey Fleet, now mapping the nearer outer-space bodies. He is a clever man, and important; but ambitious, often disputing with the High Council. He has followers, too, among the young men. He has often looked closely at your Earth.”

“So now we know the explanation of the Flying Saucers,” said Toby, softly.

“Before Vontor appeared in the sky he wanted to take possession of Earth,” announced Vargo, calmly.

“Why?”

“Because, he states, it is the best of the worlds left in our System. A new world must be found, now it is known that we cannot come back here on account of the insects that cause death.”

“But why don’t your people stay where they are, if there are so few of them? You could cultivate more food on Mars.”

“Food is not all,” answered Vargo. “Slowly the air is leaving the small worlds, attracted by the larger ones when they pass close in their orbits. Here, on what you call Mars, always there is a little more air, captured from space, or from small planetoids. It has captured the air from its own little moons, which you call Phobos and Deimos. This we know, so we must seek a new home, for always on planetoids we live in danger of losing our atmosphere, which would mean death for everyone. Rolto would go to Earth, but the High Council will not allow it.”

“Because the Earth is going to be destroyed?” queried the Professor.

“This was before Vontor appeared. Now Rolto would take all the food from Earth, before it is destroyed. Thus he argues, for he is a war-like man.”

“But how could he do that?” asked Toby, cynically. “The people would fight. He would have to kill them.”

“That would be easy,” returned Vargo, casually. “From your moon, by reflecting the sun, he could kill everyone with heat. Or he could put down bad air that is found on some dead worlds.”

Everyone stared, aghast.

“Why do you think he captured Tiger?” Rex asked the question.

“To learn from him things about Earth. Your ship would tell him where you came from. He has wished to land and bring home a prisoner, but it was not allowed, for the High Council are men of peace. Now he has what he wanted.”

“This is all very well, but what’s the drill?” broke in Toby impatiently. “Do we try to rescue Tiger or do we try to save Earth from being vaporized?”

“We may be able to do both,” stated the Professor. He looked at Vargo over his glasses. “Where do you think this man Rolto will have taken Tiger?”

Vargo lifted his eyes and pointed to a tiny spark to one side of the fiery orb of Jupiter. “There,” said he. “That is Mino, the home of the High Council, and to it all ships must return. Rolto lives there.”

“Very well,” said the Professor shortly. “Then let us go to Mino. Will you stay here, Vargo, or will you come with us?”

“I will go with you,” decided Vargo. “I will tell the Council that you can destroy the mosquitoes.”

“Then let us prepare,” ordered the Professor.

CHAPTER X

INTERCEPTED

By the time the Spacemaster was ready for flight Rex had resigned himself to the loss of his father. According to Vargo there was hope for his recovery; but although Rex had now reached the stage of believing anything, however preposterous, he found that hard to accept. The project in which they were about to engage just about touched the limits even of fantasy, and he said so.

Toby, ever cheerful, did not agree. If they could get to Mars, he contended, there was no reason why they shouldn't get to Mino, or any other planet within measurable distance in terms of time. Provided they could find food and water there seemed to be no reason why the Spacemaster shouldn't waffle round the Universe indefinitely. And as for fantasy, what they were doing was no more fantastic than the voyages of the early mariners, who set sail without a clue as to what lay beyond the horizon. "We do at least know where we're going," he argued. "In fact, we can see the blooming place."

Actually, in his heart Rex was convinced that none of them would ever set foot on Earth again. But such was his state of depression that he didn't worry about that. As well end his days on a distant star as return to Earth and be blown to atoms, he reflected morosely.

Vargo, having no comparative standards of measurement in such things as time or distance, was unable to tell them how long the journey to Mino would take. He didn't know the velocity of the Spacemaster, which he obviously regarded as an obsolete type of vehicle, but in a Martian—or rather, Minoan—ship the time would be short. Their ships, he said casually, were operated by a power drawn from light, which was the fastest thing known.

So it was in conditions that were more than a little vague that the Spacemaster took off. Vargo said he knew the way. As the objective could be seen this remark appeared pointless; but before long they were to realize what he meant.

With time on their hands Vargo was able to tell them more about Minoan conditions generally. The mechanical age through which Earth was passing was with them a thing almost forgotten. It had been a dreadful era. The people had become slaves to machines, for ever toiling to feed them. Since the great disaster the pendulum had swung the other way, and life was now lived as simply as possible. Men were able to develop their natural faculties

instead of making machines to think for them. Spaceships they had to have as the only means of transportation between the colonies on the planetoids, several of which were occupied.

It was plain that Vargo thought space travel so commonplace that it called for no particular comment. He tried to explain the motive power employed, but failed to make the Professor understand how what they called Energy could be derived from light. Cosmic, solar, ultra violet, infra red and other rays were used for different purposes. On the other hand, the Professor's camera was just as marvellous to Vargo, who had never seen such an instrument, as were the Minoan wonders to his listeners.

In the matter of explanations they were often at a loss, for there were things for which there was no equivalent word in one language or the other. A case in point was memory. Vargo had no word for it; for, as he eventually made them understand, his people had minds that never forgot anything. Memory, therefore, did not arise. It was a natural sense, like sight. To have to memorise a thing in order to retain it in the brain was something which Vargo seemed unable to grasp. He said he couldn't understand how life could go on like that. It was worse than having no sense of hearing, of smell, or touch.

Another word was industry. They had no industries. Everything they required was derived from Energy, which was everywhere. Disease being unknown they had no word for that, either. Unless people died by accident they could live for three hundred sun cycles. They had trained themselves to manage with very little food. Spaceship crews lived almost entirely on tablets, such as they had seen when they had found him. One was sufficient to maintain a man's strength for several days.

Asked about the bodies on Phobos, Vargo said they were old men who had died. They did not bury their dead, but put them on unoccupied moons or planetoids.

On the subject of administration Vargo said his people were ruled by a High Council of seven men of great age and experience. But there were no laws, no money, and therefore no crime. Work was voluntary, mostly for personal reasons. For instance, people made their own clothes, which had to be of the same pattern although colours could be different. Only the High Council could wear red.

"What material is this?" asked the Professor, feeling Vargo's skirt.

Vargo said it had been invented long ago. The scientists made it. It never wore out. When it became thin it was dipped in a liquid from which it came

out like new. The material and liquid were supplied to all by the House of Science. Had not the scientists of Earth produced such a material?

"They have, quite recently," informed the Professor, "or something much like it. We call it Nylon."

Vargo went on to say that science and astronomy were hereditary professions. These men came next in importance to the Council. The scientists still carried out experiments, but remembering Kraka, anything touching upon the basic elements of the Universe was forbidden. The astronomers kept constant watch. They knew all the movements of the stars and planets. These were taught to the children.

Their houses, went on Vargo, were built of a substance made by fusing certain sands with concentrated solar rays. He demonstrated what appeared to be large bricks. Gravity being slight one man could carry many. A substitute for wood was made the same way. They had no wood on Mino. With so little land every tree had to bear fruit, and these were not cut down. There were, however, places where wood could be obtained for the few things for which it was considered necessary.

"It was natural that they should discover plastics before us," put in the Professor.

They had no animals, said Vargo; but one bird, which could not fly, was kept for its eggs.

"Sounds a pretty dull spot to me," murmured Toby.

The Professor asked if they ever had wars.

Vargo said no. Who was there to fight? The people on the planetoids were all of the same race, speaking the same language, because they all came originally from Mars. They visited each other often. They had no weapons. But the scientists could destroy a planet if they wanted to.

Rex, thinking of having to wear his space suit, asked about the atmospheric conditions on Mino.

Vargo answered that on the larger planetoids there was more air than on Mars, although it was gradually getting less. On some of the very small ones there was no air at all. On others, which were known, the air was lethal. Some planets were sterile, others fertile.

One, reported by the Outer Survey Patrol, was a ball of glass, he averred, touching the lens of the Professor's telescope to illustrate his point. Such had been its heat, either at the time of the explosion or from having passed too close to the sun in its orbit, that the rock and sand had melted to make glass of many colours, wonderful to see. On others lived strange creatures. There was a world of mud which produced from its slime multitudes of creatures

that no words could describe. Without heads, arms, legs or eyes, they were just bodies, flat shapes so soft that they lived by absorbing each other. When one of these monsters reached a certain size it broke into a number of small pieces and the process began all over again.

When he went on to say that there was a world on which the trees fought each other Rex understood why Vargo had shown no surprise at what had happened on Mars. The form of life on every planet, declared Vargo, depended on the conditions in which it had been created—the soil, the liquids and the atmosphere.

"What's more important is what sort of reception are we likely to get when we land in your home town?" put in Toby.

Vargo assured him that they had nothing to fear. The Council would be glad to meet men from Earth because then there could be an exchange of information.

"Then why have you never called on us?" inquired the Professor.

"It was often considered," returned Vargo, "but every time our ships went near the crews could see explosions as weapons were turned on them."

"The weapons," put in the Professor drily, "were being turned by the people on each other."

"Why?"

"They don't know. But if one man says they must kill each other they must do it. It is caused by an infectious disease called ambition."

"I think Rolto could be like that," said Vargo pensively. "There is something in him, some relic of the ancient times, that makes him want to take things that belong to other people."

By this time the Spacemaster was farther from Earth than it had ever been, and while Mars was still a big, gleaming orb, Earth, a mere pinpoint of light, looked so terribly far away that Rex felt a twinge of the fear that had gripped him on his first flight into space. But for the presence of his companions the awful feeling of remoteness would, he suspected, have been too much for him. Had it not been for the tragedy of his father he would have wished to turn back.

Mino, their destination, was now appreciably nearer. So were Jupiter and Saturn. With the naked eye he could see the weaving clouds of ever-changing colours on Jupiter, and the girdle, which Vargo had said was meteoric dust, round Saturn, shining whitely. It was this dust, mixed with hydrogen crystals, said Vargo, that made Saturn uninhabitable. Without it the planet might become the best world of all within the Solar System. There was a plan for getting rid of the dust.

“How would you do that?” inquired the Professor.

“By setting fire to the hydrogen by an explosion and burning it,” explained Vargo. But it was held to be too dangerous, for should nuclear fission occur the planet would either be shattered to fragments, like Kraka, or become another sun, with results just as fatal.

“Your learned men seem to have more sense than ours,” remarked the Professor lugubriously, raising his spyglass and taking a sight of their destination. “I think your Mino must be the planetoid which we have named Ceres,” he went on. “It was the first to be spotted, in 1801 of our time, by Professor Piazzi. A year later Olbers discovered another, which we call Vesta. And so it has gone on until so many have been found that names have given out and the new ones are known by numbers. I believe there are now about two thousand, but from here I can see even that falls short of the total. The very small ones would not be seen from Earth, of course. Dear—dear. So many are there that we seem to be approaching what might well be called the Great Barrier Reef of the Solar Sea.”

Rex paid little attention to this remark at the time, but when he awoke the next morning and drew himself carefully to where the others were standing at the navigation window, he understood. He also realized what Vargo had meant by “finding the way”. For the Spacemaster, with Vargo at the control table, was passing through a cloud of spherical islands in space. It was not possible to judge their respective sizes without knowing how far away they were, but some of the nearer ones were obviously very small indeed. One, as smooth as a tennis ball and apparently, comparatively speaking, only a few miles distant, had a diameter of not more than half a mile. Its colour was pale green.

Rex realized that he was looking at the fragments of the lost planet Kraka.

He also perceived why Vargo had taken control to see them through this dangerous region. His eyes had a longer range than theirs, and good eyesight was necessary if collision was to be avoided, bearing in mind the velocity of the ship. For in such a swarm of bodies, lighted only by the sun, it was inevitable that some should be in partial, or even total, eclipse, as their shadows fell upon each other. Thus, not all appeared as a full globe, but as crescents, wide or narrow. The small ones, in full eclipse, against a background of indigo space, were not easy to see from such a distance as would permit a change of course.

Rex was glad Vargo was in charge. Otherwise, apart from the risk of collision, they might well have become lost, particularly as Earth could no

longer be picked out from the cloud of planetoids through which they had already passed. The horrible thought struck him that if anything happened to Vargo they might never find their way back. For Earth to be a distant spark of light was bad enough, but to have it out of sight brought a chill to the heart. He had no desire to spend the rest of his life on Ceres, or any other miniature world.

Jupiter was now immense, an awe-inspiring spectacle.

"I'd like to have a closer look at that big fellow," said the Professor enthusiastically.

"Not I, in this ship," answered Vargo.

"Why?"

"Because once within the influence of its mighty gravity it might not be powerful enough to escape. It would drag you into its undying flames. Our Remote Exploration Fleet once lost a ship like that. Another was battered to pieces when Saturn sucked it into its ring of dust and meteors."

"Oh," said the Professor.

Vargo, who had seen all these things before, was slightly amused by the excitement in the ship. He told them there were now fewer very small planetoids than there had been long ago; for by the law of attraction the small ones were being absorbed by the big ones; although fortunately this was a slow process. It happened more often in systems in outer space, where sometimes the planetoids were beyond count. The result of such collisions could be dangerous but only local in effect. They did not represent a danger to the spaceships because they could be forecast long in advance. By this process, although it would take many millions of sun cycles, the planetoids would eventually merge to reform the lost planet Kraka.

The Professor wanted to land on a tiny planetoid no great distance away, but Vargo said no. It would be too dangerous. Gravity was so slight that the slightest movement would cause a man, practically weightless, to bounce about and break his bones. They would at first find it difficult to walk on the larger ones.

Rex, remembering the sensation of walking on Phobos, knew exactly what he meant.

He was watching the curious effects of light and shade on the islands floating in a space around them when across one, in full sunlight, he saw a shadow flash. Looking between it and the sun he saw a spaceship hurtling towards them. It became larger every instant. Then, as it crossed their front, a cry broke from his lips when he saw the band of blue stars that identified it as the one that had taken Tiger.

Vargo had seen it. “It is Rolto’s craft,” he stated without emotion. “I know it because it is the one that landed me on Mars. But what I do not understand is what it is doing here. It should be home by now. It does not travel towards Mino. Can it be on another voyage already?”

Rex’s heart sank.

Vargo’s question was answered when the blue-starred ship swung round and took up station beside them.

“What does the fool mean by buzzing us like that,” muttered Toby. “He might have touched us—and then what?”

“He is telling us to go back,” said Vargo.

“Telling us! How?”

“He is willing it. All the crew are willing it.”

“*Willing* it?” cried the Professor. “By what sort of instrument?”

“No machine is required for that. The brain is more powerful. I feel them willing it.”

“Do you mean they are throwing their thoughts like a beam?” cried Toby incredulously.

“Yes. When so close together, their thoughts are strong. I must obey.”

“You must be more receptive than I am, for I feel nothing,” asserted the Professor.

“Nor I,” said Toby.

“I shall not obey,” said the Professor tersely. “He cannot give me orders. Stand aside, Vargo. I will take charge.”

“What’s his object in telling us to go back, anyway,” queried Toby. “I thought you people were friendly.”

“Perhaps he has some plan for Tiger,” answered Vargo. “We must obey.”

“Why?”

“Because his ship is much more powerful than this one.”

“You mean he can damage us?”

“If he destroys your energy you are lost.”

“Can he do that?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“His own energy will overwhelm it. Then he can take us where he wills.”

“Where’s that likely to be?”

“I don’t know. We shall see. He is saying, go back, or I will destroy you.”

“Very well,” muttered the Professor stubbornly. “As you say, we shall see.”

“We see already,” said Vargo, imperturbably. “You are following him. He will take you where he wills as if you were fastened to him.”

The Professor moved the controls several times. Then, looking bewildered, he said: “You are right, Vargo. I cannot break away. Where he goes, we must go.”

There was silence for a little while. Then Toby said, “Where do you suppose he is taking us?”

“His plan is now plain,” answered Vargo. He pointed. “Look! He is taking you within the gravity of Jupiter. There he will leave you, to go on, helpless, into the fires that will burn your ship to a grain of dust.”

“But if he does that he’ll be destroyed at the same time,” said Toby.

“No,” returned Vargo. “His ship is more powerful than yours. He will go only to a point from which he can escape, but you, having less energy, will not.”

“I cannot believe that he could take us to Jupiter,” said the Professor firmly. “It is much too far away. I know it looks close, but that is on account of its size. By the reckoning of our astronomers its diameter is ten times greater than Earth.”

“The distance is short when you travel at the speed of light,” replied Vargo. “That is Rolto’s velocity, and as you are now in his power that is also yours. Nor will it be necessary for him to approach near to Jupiter to put you within its influence. It may be that you underestimate the range of effective gravity of the Master Planet of our system. Already this monster has swallowed every smaller body near it, for which reason it grows ever larger. Look, and you will see its latest victims being drawn into the inferno. The process is slow: but what is time to a planet? Those other little worlds are lost, as presently we shall be.”

“I understand,” said the Professor heavily. “In that case we had better obey his orders.”

“It is too late,” averred Vargo. “For Rolto knows that if, after this, what he has done was reported to the High Council, he would be relieved of his command, in disgrace.”

Rex turned his eyes to the great planet, and what he saw drained the colour from his face. He had not realized they were so close to it, for he had

been unaware of the velocity of the Martian ship, which must have been tremendous, even by space travel standards. But they were now close enough to see the fate that awaited them.

CHAPTER XI

WORLD OF FIRE

STRANGE though it may seem, staring at the gigantic globe that now filled more than half the space before his porthole, Rex lost all sense of fear. He knew he was lost. Nothing could be done. This was the end.

The truth of the matter may have been that the thing was too big for his reeling faculties to grasp. The very magnitude of it all did something to his brain. If he felt anything at all it was that he was no longer in the world of reality but an infinitesimal speck in a scheme too vast for mortal understanding. He was no longer of the world. As a body he no longer existed. He was, as it were, seeing things from afar without being personally involved.

In this state of detachment he saw, without emotion, the blue-starred ship abandon them, as a liner might cast off a dinghy, and rocket away into the navy-blue emptiness that was space: that eternity of absolute nothingness that went on and on for ever and ever. It was of course impossible to imagine that. The human brain is capable of much, but it has its limitations. Faced with infinity it fails.

Jupiter, although still an astronomical distance away, now filled Rex's window with its stupendous mass; and as, inexorably, the Spacemaster was drawn towards it at mounting velocity the details began to emerge, as on Earth a landscape will materialize from a dawn-mist cleared by the sun.

To say that it presented a dreadful spectacle would be to say little. Clearly, now, it could be seen that the colossal planet was literally on fire; not so much blazing as smouldering; and a burning world is not a thing to be imagined by puny mortals.

From gaping cracks and craters, like bleeding wounds, poured streams of molten rock and metal to form pools which, undermining the tottering crags around, brought them down into the cauldron with a splash that for a moment hid the scene in a blaze of light that hurt the eyes. In a flash a million tons of rock became a cinder, to vanish in a wisp of gas.

Everywhere rolled clouds of smoke on which were reflected the lurid colours of the fury beneath. Tongues of flame licked high, to die, writhing, and reappear elsewhere. Comets, born in the elemental holocaust, were fired into space by forces beyond human comprehension; some to mark their

course with a blinding wake of meteors or incandescent nebulosity. One such horror passed within a few miles of the Spacemaster, causing it to spin and rock and filling the cabin with such heat that faces streamed perspiration which, condensing, fogged the windows.

Outside the circumference of the great planet, held in the invisible but unbreakable embrace of gravity, swung its satellite moons, which Vargo had said were being slowly sucked into the relentless vortex. Not only those that had been seen from observatories on Earth but scores of smaller ones. Those nearest were already glowing red with heat. The outer ones were smoking, leaving trails to mark their shrinking orbits.

This, reflected Rex distantly, was what the Earth had been and soon might be again. Its heart was still a furnace, as its safety valves, the volcanoes, proved. Only the crust had cooled. And on that precarious foothold were men who in their madness strove to break it by exploding the atoms of which it was composed. He marvelled at the folly of it. But perhaps it didn't matter now that the fate they were inviting was on its way.

The Professor spoke in a voice that was as steady as ever. "I am sorry, my friends, to have brought you to this dismal pass. I am even more sorry that it should have been brought about by one from whom we might have expected better things. According to Vargo it was our misfortune to encounter the one man of his people who is actuated by those evil designs that have done so much mischief on Earth. But thus it was ordained, and nothing remains for us but to compose ourselves and with dignity await the end of our adventure."

"Well spoken, sir; but no apology is called for," said Toby quietly. "I for one have no regrets."

"Nor I, except that I would have liked to see Tiger again." Rex tried to speak in a normal voice.

They settled down to await the doom that all knew must be inevitable. That is, all except the Professor, who, with a caramel in his mouth continued working on the controls which were still operating although apparently without sufficient power to overcome the gravitational pull of the giant planet. "With just a little more I believe we could pull clear," he said bitterly, and abandoned the controls in despair. But when, a minute later, the Spacemaster bounced slightly, as a ship might ride a wave, he spun round to the others. "Did you feel that?" he cried. "If we have movement we must be in an atmosphere, probably a super-heated one flung off by the monster below. If we have atmosphere the rotors will have something to bite on.

Why didn't I think of it before! But who could have imagined an atmosphere at this distance from a planet. Give us the rotors, Judkins. Quickly!"

The double circle of interwoven blades, normally used only for landing and taking off—for they were of course useless in a vacuum—came on with their vibrant drone. Their effect was felt immediately. Rex found his feet pressing hard against the floor, as in the acceleration of a take-off. It meant that he had weight; and that, in turn, could only mean that the rotors were in an atmosphere. The mounting temperature in the cabin confirmed that it was a hot one—but that didn't matter.

Hope returned; only to receive another shock when the Professor, after an incredulous stare at his instrument panel, announced that they were in air, or gas, of a density many times greater than that at sea level on Earth. "Maximum pressure, Judkins," he ordered, "or we may spring a leak from the weight on the outside walls."

The pressure pumps hummed. The valves hissed. Rex gasped as the weight on his body began to feel more like water than air. The heat was appalling. Perspiration ran in trickles down his body. He wiped his window clear with a handkerchief already soaking wet and stared through a filmy haze at the diabolical scene below. Seeing no difference he thought they were still falling. But this, after some minutes had passed, the Professor denied. And when, a little later, he announced that they were making headway, hopes soared.

"That rascal Rolto shall yet rue the day he tried to kill us," he declared.

Vargo said nothing. Through it all he had sat like a graven image, complete master of his emotions, as a superman should be. Rex didn't know whether to admire him, or pity him for having such unnatural self-control.

"I'm afraid we're going to have a long struggle," opined the Professor.

"The farther away from Jupiter we get the less should be its pull," said Rex.

"Yes, my boy," answered the Professor. "But against that, the farther away we get the thinner becomes the atmosphere for the rotors to grip; and the cosmic jets, alone, I fear, are still not powerful enough to thrust us clear."

"Here's Rolto coming back," Toby shook them by saying.

Looking out Rex saw two spaceships coming towards them like projectiles. "It isn't Rolto," he cried. "The ships have yellow stars, not blue."

The ships did a circuit round the Spacemaster and then made off again.

"They're leaving us," observed Toby.

"They're saving us," said Vargo.

“How,” inquired the Professor. “How is that possible?”

“As Rolto brought us here so they are taking us away. They have us in tow.”

“How do you know that?”

“They told me so,” stated Vargo. “I spoke to them by thought, and they answered, saying they would draw us clear.”

Rex sank limply in his chair. These things, he felt, were getting beyond him.

It was soon evident that Vargo had spoken the truth, for the temperature in the ship was cooling, and the details of the inferno below were becoming blurred.

“You can switch off the rotors, Judkins,” said the Professor. “Apparently we don’t need them now. They saved us, I think, by giving us that little extra power at the crucial moment.”

Vargo said he thought so, too, for the Minoan ships would not have dared to approach Jupiter nearer than they had.

In another half-hour the Spacemaster was free of its deadly embrace and operating under its own cosmic ray power units. Vargo took over the controls again, saying he would set a course for Mino. The Minoan ships were going there, too. They had told him so.

Rex, looking at him, saw that his eyes were glowing oddly. The red glint deep in them had become more pronounced. “Does it hurt you to communicate by thought transference?” he asked.

“It becomes a strain if prolonged, particularly over a distance.” Distance, and receptive ability, he explained, were important. Some people were stronger than others, as with all the senses.

“We talk about a sixth sense on Earth, but few people have it,” said Rex.

“Here we all have it, because we understood these things while your people still lived like animals,” said Vargo, evenly.

“But some animals have it, too,” offered Toby.

“Then as you became civilized you lost it, perhaps because you thought you could do without it.”

“Now we have recovered it, in a way, by artificial means. We call it radio, or radar,” claimed Toby.

“That isn’t the same,” argued Rex. “For that you have to have electricity, and the Martians don’t use it.”

“You haven’t forgotten that radio rays occur in space,” put in the Professor.

“Meaning that the Martians pick them up, and, unconsciously perhaps, turn themselves into human batteries,” suggested Toby.

“I don’t see why not,” rejoined the Professor. “Any object not connected with Earth picks up static electricity. The air is full of it. The Spacemaster, as you know, becomes charged, and we have to discharge it before we dare step out. If a camel can develop a hump for the storage of water I don’t see why a Martian shouldn’t develop a receptacle for the storage of enough electricity to operate a signal beam.”

“Every man his own accumulator, so to speak,” joked Toby.

“Exactly,” said the Professor, seriously. “We all carry a certain amount of electricity in our bodies but haven’t yet learned how to utilize it.”

Vargo handed over the controls to the Professor, saying: “Now we are safe, and you can see Mino. Presently you will see houses in the form of a big square. Land in the middle of it.”

Had it not been for the details that presently began to appear on the surface of the planetoid Rex would have thought they were farther away from it than they were. He was now able to appreciate how tiny was the Martian world compared with his own. It didn’t surprise him that with a growing population the people were looking for a bigger, better, more permanent home. His nerves tingled, not so much from curiosity as a new-born hope that he might find Tiger waiting for him.

The escorting spaceships now left them, shooting on ahead. Others could be seen in the distance. Some were large, some small.

“The High Council will be informed of our coming,” announced Vargo.

Looking down Rex saw the houses built in long straight rows in the form of a square, as Vargo had said. He also noticed that except for the landing area every yard of the ground appeared to be cultivated in a wonderful, but not very pleasing, geometrical pattern, marked by straight lines of small trees. He couldn’t see a hedge, a river, a hill, or any of those things that go to make up a landscape. The result was a flat monotony.

“Earth, if it lasts long enough, will be like that one day,” said the Professor, at his elbow. “It will have to be if it is to support its growing population.”

“Thank goodness we shan’t be alive to see it,” was all Rex could say.

Ships were landing on the square from several directions. Others were taking off. A group of people, some clad in red, stood at one side as if waiting. Rex looked hard, hoping to see Tiger; but he wasn’t among them.

The rotors came on. The Spacemaster, which for the last few minutes had been in free fall, steadied its pace. The landing legs touched and the ship came to rest.

"Well, here we are," said the Professor cheerfully, putting on his spectacles. "What wonders await us here?"

A quick test in the air-lock gave, as Vargo had promised, an even better reaction than on Mars. Rex gulped in air that was sweet, fresh, and cool.

They stepped down, the Professor leading the way. "Be careful," he warned. "One has more weight than on Phobos, but still so little that one feels rather like a feather."

"With travel one becomes used to changes of gravity," said Vargo nonchalantly. "It is different on every planetoid that we occupy. To adjust oneself becomes second nature. It isn't difficult."

Rex hoped he was right.

CHAPTER XII

ON TO LENTOS

REX's first impression, as with the others he stepped down cautiously to meet the members of the High Council who were waiting for them, was that the Minoans did not seem in the least surprised to receive visitors from another planet; the reason being, he could only suppose, that spaceship travel was as common as aviation on Earth. At all events, the reception committee showed less excitement than spectators at a dock watching passengers disembark. He noticed that they all looked remarkably alike, and very much like Vargo.

"Please ask them if my father is here," pleaded Rex urgently, for although there were several "Saucers" on the landing ground the blue-starred ship was not among them.

The salutation offered by the Minoans as the two parties met was a slight bow, which was returned. There was no warmth in the greeting; but then, there was no warmth in Vargo. If this, thought Rex, was self-control, the product of higher intelligence, it was likely to become tiresome to those who made no attempt to hide their feelings. With these unchanging expressions one might as well live in a world of waxworks. Life on the planetoids, he suspected, was dull by Earthly standards. However, the Minoans could speak, for without introductions or any other formality a greybeard in a red robe spoke directly to Vargo. The words, spoken in a voice thin and concise like Vargo's, were short, sounded clipped, brittle. They gave an effect of hardness; but a very few seemed to convey a great deal.

Vargo answered in the same language, obviously explaining something. The conversation lasted for some time, with Rex, who was desperately anxious for news of his father, containing his impatience with difficulty. The only word he recognised was Rolto, which occurred several times on both sides.

At last Vargo translated. "I have told of your visit to Mars, and the purpose of it," said he. "I am asked to thank you. The Council will speak to you of this later. Nothing is known of Tiger. He has not been here. There has been trouble between Rolto and the Council. He tried to will them to his wishes, which is not allowed."

"What did the rascal want?" asked the Professor.

“He wants to take everything from Earth, as I told you. Now he has defied the Council, saying he will go in any case. He has not returned here.”

Rex’s heart sank. “Where is Rolto now, for I imagine he still has my father with him?”

“He has landed on Lentos, knowing that if he came here his ship would be taken from him. This is known from the crews of the ships that have returned here.”

“And now he will go to Earth?”

“Yes.”

The Professor frowned, pushing up his spectacles which had slipped to the end of his nose. “Can the Council not stop him?”

“He is beyond the reach of messages by thought.”

“Can’t they use force? They seem to have plenty of ships here.”

“That was being considered when we landed.”

“Do you know the way to Lentos?”

“Yes. Lentos is my home.”

“How long is the journey?”

Vargo pointed to a planet in partial eclipse. He could not give them the time, but he made them understand that it was not far in a Minoan ship.

“Then let us go there,” said the Professor. “Tell the Council we must find our friend. Why does Rolto need him?”

“For a guide, when he goes to Earth, which must be before Vontor arrives and destroys it.”

“What have the Council decided to do about this impending collision?”

Vargo put the question. “They will do nothing,” he informed them.

“But don’t they realize that such a collision may cause such a disaster as you say happened here long ago?”

“They do not think so. Earth is far away and Vontor is very small.”

“But what of the people of Earth? Have they no consideration for them?”

More questions and answers between Vargo and the Council. “They say it is not their business,” he translated. “It is for the people of Earth to defend themselves.”

“Very well,” returned the Professor, grimly. “Now tell them this. The people of Earth have great skill with explosives. They have the means to destroy Vontor. They can break its atoms one by one. But they will not wait for it to come near them. When the astronomers see it far off they will act, so the effect may be worse for you than for them.”

"Our scientists can also make explosions," said Vargo.

"Then let us work together and vaporize this peril in a safe place," suggested the Professor. "If your intelligence is as pure as you claim they will see the wisdom of that."

There was another, longish conversation. Then Vargo reported: "The Council will think of it."

"Hang all this talk of explosions," broke in Rex. "What about Tiger?"

"We will start for Lentos forthwith," promised the Professor.

"Do you intend to go in your own ship?" questioned Vargo.

"Of course. Why not?"

"It has done much work. It has been subject to great heat and great cold. That is not good. Besides, it is so slow."

"What is the alternative?"

"It would be better if you went in one of our ships—the one that is going to order Rolto to return here. That has now been decided."

"He may refuse to come."

"Then there will be a battle of wills, which we should win, for the Council will send their strongest men."

"Then ask if we may go with them."

Vargo put the question. "Yes, but not all," he told them. "Rex may go because Tiger is his father; and one other. It is a matter of air supply."

"You will go with him, Doctor," requested the Professor. "I would rather stay with the Spacemaster. Also, I would like to see more of this place, and perhaps learn some secrets."

So it was settled. "When do we start?" asked Rex.

Vargo pointed at a ship beside which several men were standing. "Now," he answered. "The ship is waiting."

"What about food?" queried Toby practically.

"The crew will give you the tablets of which I told you," returned Vargo.

They all walked over to the ship that had been detailed to fetch Rolto. The crew, ten men in blue, regarded them with the stony lack of interest that Rex was beginning to find disconcerting. Vargo must have realised this, for he said: "With us it is considered uncivil to show curiosity with strangers," he explained.

The Professor made no bones about his interest in the ship. He bustled around it, inside and out, muttering: "Amazing! Amazing! Simply amazing. Dear—dear. And all so simple. Why didn't I think of that?"

Vargo cut short the inspection by saying: “If there is any more delay we may arrive too late.”

“Are you coming with us?” asked Rex.

“Yes, for you may need an interpreter,” said Vargo.

So Rex and Toby went with him into the ship, which was a good deal larger than the Spacemaster but with less exposed equipment. They were shown their seats, into which they strapped themselves. Outer double doors slid together and the air-lock closed without human agency. The crew stood to their posts. With expressions blank they looked like wooden soldiers. With such people, thought Rex, life would be very dreary. It wasn’t their fault. Having developed in conditions different from those on Earth it was only to be expected that they would differ in their mental and physical make-up. If anything was strange it was that the difference was so slight.

The ship took off.

Rex had so far lost his faculty for surprise that he saw nothing remarkable in finding himself in what had become known on Earth as a Flying Saucer. His common sense told him it was not possible; but he had been doing impossibilities for so long that he now accepted them as a matter of course. But he was not beyond being puzzled. Knowing the ship’s velocity he was prepared for discomfort during the initial acceleration. To his relief the pressure was only slight. He worked it out, rightly or wrongly, that this was due, at least in part, to the low gravity of Mino. Another thing that puzzled him was the rapid approach of the objective, as it appeared. He could almost see it grow. But then, if they had understood Vargo correctly their motive power was derived from light, so something incredible in the way of speed was only to be expected.

As they shot past a tiny planetoid—tiny in a comparative sense for it had a diameter of about five miles, as near as could be judged—an idea occurred to him. Turning to Vargo, sitting next to him, he inquired: “Apart from Rolto, are those ships we saw on Mino the only ones you have?”

Vargo said they had many more ships. Most were engaged on one duty or another, checking orbits and exploring the fringe of outer space, in which matters there was much to be done.

Rex’s next question was a natural one. “Have you ever found people like us on planets outside the Solar System?”

Vargo answered yes, many. All people were the same in general form. Some were large, some were small, but physical stature was not related to the size of the brain, which was the thing on which development depended. On every planet of any size where there was an atmosphere of any sort there

was life of one form or another. It varied from small insects to enormous reptiles. There were planets composed entirely of water. Others had no water at all. The planets that were far from any sun were dead. The only other planet in their own system that could support men like themselves was Venus. He had never been there himself but he knew men who had, and they said it was a bad place. This Rex was able to confirm, for he also had been there.[B]

[B] See *Kings of Space*.

Vargo went on to say that ships of the Interstellar Exploration Squadron were sometimes away for a whole sun cycle. That was why the concentrated food tablets had been developed in the first place.

Rex was aghast. “A year! Cooped up in a spaceship?”

“What’s funny about that?” interposed Toby, who was listening. “Our own early mariners were sometimes away from home for three years or more.”

“But they had places where they could land.”

“So have our ships,” said Vargo. “Our captains know the good and bad places.”

Rex and Toby gathered that the art of spacemanship was to know where planets safe to land on would be at any particular time. For unlike islands in a sea, which were always in the same place, they moved along their orbits so that their positions had to be plotted constantly.

“In regular space flight operations, navigation is going to be something,” murmured Toby.

Rex said no more, for they were now nearing Lentos, and his thoughts returned to the object of their voyage.

It was a strange sensation to approach an occupied world so small that even from a close view it appeared round—as, of course, it was. With a diameter of about three hundred miles it was only one seventh the size of the Moon, so even from ground level it was bound to be a world of curving horizons. But to people born in such conditions, reflected Rex, they would seem no more unusual than did straight horizons to those born on Earth. The surface was marked in the same geometrical patterns as Mino. As they dropped in to land it struck him that the situation might be likened to men from a palace calling at a cottage. But the great thing was, was Tiger there?

He could see three ships standing on the landing square, one of them displaying a blue star on its flat top. That, he thought, would be Rolto. There was activity about his ship. Had he seen them coming? What was he contemplating?

Looking round into the cabin Rex saw what he presently realized was war being fought the Minoan way, without weapons. Every man in the ship was standing at the same window, making a compact group. Every face was turned down to the landing area, wearing an expression of intense concentration. All eyes were fixed on it, unwinkingly. No one spoke. It looked as if the "willing" process had been turned on in force. He glanced at Toby. "Looks like the battle of wits is on," he said softly.

"That's the sort of battle for me," answered Toby. "The ammunition they use doesn't tear a man to pieces."

The ship landed near the one with the blue stars. The crew, in a group, still staring, got out and walked slowly towards it. The man whom Rex took to be Rolto appeared in the doorway. With movements unnaturally deliberate he stepped down and moved towards the group, still slowly advancing.

"I fancy they've got him where they want him," murmured Toby. "Look at his eyes. They might be made of glass. And his expression: and the sweat running down his face. If ever I saw a man under a great mental strain, he's the one."

"Never mind him. What about Tiger."

As if he had heard, Tiger appeared at the door of the ship. Seeing them he waved, got down and hurried in giant strides towards them. He still carried his rifle.

Rex held himself in hand, unwilling to make an exhibition of his relief and joy in front of the wooden-faced spaceshipmen. "Thank goodness!" he said huskily. "Are you all right, guv'nor?"

"Right as rain," answered Tiger cheerfully. "I was a bit shaken when they first grabbed me, as you can imagine. I thought I'd had it. But since then I've had nothing to complain about. And I stopped worrying when Rolto, the chap in charge, promised to leave me on Earth when he went there, if I'd co-operate with him. At least, that's how I understood him."

"Do you know what he wanted you for?"

"He needed a guide. He indicated that if I didn't want to stay on Earth, as it was due to be bumped off, I could either remain with him or he'd give me a planet of my own."

"That would have been fun," observed Toby sarcastically.

“They let you keep your rifle,” said Rex.

“They haven’t a clue as to what it is or what it’s for. They’ve nothing like it. What’s the drill now?”

“We must go back to the ship,” said Vargo. “We are returning to Mino, taking Rolto with us. He has made trouble with the High Council.”

“We came here from Mino,” explained Rex. “I’ll tell you about it on the way back.”

“I understood from Rolto that he wasn’t going back to his headquarters,” said Tiger, watching the proceedings with a puzzled expression.

“He doesn’t want to, but he can’t help himself,” returned Rex.

It was now clear that Rolto’s game was about to be played out. Yet, curiously enough—or so it seemed to Rex—the crew of the rescue ship did not take him with them. They did not lay hands on him. Nor did Rolto put up any physical resistance. If he resisted mentally, it was in vain. When the Minoans went back into their ship and prepared to take off he was still standing on the landing ground.

“I thought they were going to take him prisoner,” cried Rex, looking at Vargo in astonishment.

“He is a prisoner,” replied Vargo casually. “When we go he will follow. He must. That is the thought in his head and he cannot put it out. The High Council sent men with strong heads, which are stronger than arms.”

Tiger looked at Rex and smiled. “There are still moments when I wonder when I’m going to stop dreaming and wake up.”

The rest was as Vargo had said it would be. When the relief ship took off for the return journey Rolto’s squadron followed as obediently as sheep following their shepherd.

CHAPTER XIII

VONTOR

THE rescue party returned to Mino to find the Professor in one of his busiest moods. He was of course delighted to see Tiger, but no sooner were greetings and congratulations over than he seized upon Vargo to confirm that certain arguments he had with difficulty put before the High Council were properly understood. He paid no attention to Rolto, saying that if the man had misbehaved himself it was not for them, but the Council, to take disciplinary action. If they were wise they would banish him to a distant planet, for such men were dangerous. There were too many of them on Earth. But more important at the moment was the greater peril now threatening the existence of their own planet. Something would have to be done without delay.

He explained that he had tried to convince the Council that it was in their own interest that Earth should be saved; but the project had been received without enthusiasm by some, and indifference by others. It was up to Earth to take care of itself, they argued. The Professor's reply had been that they should know better than anyone that a major disaster within the Solar System could hardly fail to affect every planet in it. This the Council would not accept, contending that while the collision would be calamitous for the people on Earth the shock would be insufficient to move the planet from its orbit. Even if it did move, it was bound to return to its own gravitational field. The body approaching it was only a miniature planetoid. It might have started as an asteroid, or a comet, flung off by a bursting star; but its fires had cooled and it was now dead.

"But just a minute," put in Tiger. "Is it any use talking like this until we know whether or not it's possible to cope with the confounded thing?"

"It can be vaporized," answered the Professor. "The Council have admitted that. But, say the scientists, there are risks. At present Vontor cannot harm them; but an explosion might result in a shower of meteors, some of which might come this way and do a lot of mischief. Mino, Lentos, and the rest of these little worlds, are so small that they wouldn't stand much knocking about."

"In other words, by busting Vontor they stand to gain nothing but might lose plenty."

"Exactly. But I haven't finished with them yet," went on the Professor. "I've been waiting for Vargo to come back because without an interpreter I was at a disadvantage. Vargo, I want you to go to the Council and tell them that if they will destroy Vontor, or help me to do it, I will assist them in the restoration of their old home, Mars. You have failed to eliminate the mosquitoes. I can do that. I could also bring machinery to re-open the canals, and tap the sub-surface water by boring artesian wells. I could bring seeds to replace the trees and vegetation you have lost. With my help Mars can be a habitable world again."

"That would be wonderful," said Vargo, and went off on his mission.

"Why argue with them?" asked Tiger. "What's wrong with going home and bringing back an atom bomb to drop on Vontor? That should do the trick."

"And where, pray, will you get an atom bomb?" inquired the Professor, sarcastically.

"The government would let us have one when we told them what was on the way."

The Professor pushed up his spectacles and regarded Tiger sadly. "Really, my dear Group Captain. For a man of your rank you sometimes make the most ingenuous remarks. Do you seriously suppose that the government—any government—would believe our story? A story so preposterous that we should qualify for admission into the nearest lunatic asylum."

"You say the Council could, if they so decided, produce the means to do the job," interposed Toby.

"Yes."

"What would they use?"

"I didn't ask: but if we, on Earth, tens of thousands of years behind them in knowledge, have discovered the principles of nuclear fission, we can be sure they know even more about it. They haven't forgotten what happened to Kraka, where, I suspect, a nuclear experiment went wrong. I imagine the medium they would employ to destroy Vontor would depend on the composition of that body."

"That can only be determined by inspection."

"True. For that reason I intend to look at it myself."

"You mean, you're going to land on the thing?"

"Certainly." The Professor chuckled. "Had our credulity not already been strained to breaking point, the notion of flying through space on a dead

comet would have done it. How Jules Verne would have loved all this."

Tiger stepped in again. "He had the sense to die before his predictions came true. Seriously, you're thinking of taking the Spacemaster to Vontor?"

"Unless the Council will lend us one of their ships, which seems unlikely. It might be better to go in the Spacemaster because if we failed to reach agreement we could go straight on home. If Vontor is not too big I might myself produce an explosive mixture of sufficient power to fracture it, or throw it off its present course."

Toby shook his head. "This idea of sailing about the sky cracking loose planets as if they were nuts sounds pretty crazy to me."

"Of course it's crazy," cried the Professor. "Everything's crazy. But I am at least trying to put a little sanity into the proceedings."

"If this is sanity, it would be interesting to see what insanity is like," said Tiger, in a resigned voice. "All right, Professor. It's your ship. Whatever you decide is okay with me."

"And me," murmured Toby. "We have this consolation. We can't get any further round the bend."

At this juncture Vargo returned. "It is settled," he reported. "A ship will go to Vontor, taking two members of the Council and two scientists. If it is practicable Vontor will be destroyed."

"What about us," asked the Professor.

"Go if you will, but in your own ship. The Council will not be responsible."

"But your ships are faster than mine. We shall be left behind."

"They will take you by attraction, as did Rolto. I shall go with you to tell you of their decision. There can be no air on Vontor so if you wish to go out you must wear suits."

"Your people have suits?" questioned Rex.

"Of course. All our spacemen carry suits to wear when there is no air."

"When do we start?" asked the Professor.

"At once. If anyone is tired he can sleep, for the journey is long."

"Good!" exclaimed the Professor. "I'm ready when you are."

For a minute or two they watched some equipment that looked as though it ought to be heavy, but was not, being put into the Minoan ship. Then, at a signal from Vargo, doors were closed and the two spacecraft were on their way.

To Rex, not the least awkward factor of space travel was the way day and night, otherwise light and darkness, either merged or cut suddenly into each other. To anyone accustomed to the absolute certainty of day following night at times known to the minute, this jumping from one to the other resulted in irregular sleeping hours. Sleep had to be snatched as opportunity offered. Day and night, as they occur on Earth, could only occur on another planet having the same conditions, such as the speed of rotation, relative to the sun. In a host of planetoids of different sizes, each revolving at its own speed along its own orbit, the effect of movement from one to the other was to jump from day into night, or vice versa, in a manner that was disconcerting, to say the least. Actually, some of the smaller planetoids did not revolve at all, always having the same face held by gravity to a larger neighbour, as the same face of the Moon is for ever turned to Earth.

As normally one sleeps through the hours of darkness, any irregularity of this is bound to result in irregular repose. Wherefore, on the journey to the intruding planetoid Rex slept most of the way, making up for the rest he had lost since leaving home.

He was awakened by Tiger shaking his shoulder, saying they were nearly there, and if he wanted to land with the others he had better be getting into his spacesuit.

Rising and looking through his porthole Rex saw the objective in full sunlight, for the Spacemaster was approaching it from the sun side. It appeared to be a perfectly round, pale grey ball, with a diameter, as far as it was possible to judge, of not more than half a mile. Actually, it turned out to be even smaller, for they were closer to it than he had imagined. Just ahead of them was the escorting Minoan “Saucer”. Keeping its lead it went on, and after circling and hovering made its landfall on what turned out to be a flat but rough surface.

The Professor put down the Spacemaster beside it; or rather, allowed it to settle as lightly as a thistle seed in the almost complete absence of gravity.

It did not take him long to confirm that the wandering planetoid carried no atmosphere of any description so there was a short delay while spacesuits were adjusted. The Minoans, to whom the wearing of equipment for this sort of occasion must have been ordinary routine, were out first. As was to be expected they had over a long period of time perfected a simple, transparent form of overall, unencumbered with radio since they were able to converse by thought transference.

However, in due course those in the Spacemaster followed, moving with the caution the conditions of weightlessness demanded. It was demonstrated

by the Professor who, taking a rung of the landing steps in one hand, lifted that side of the spacecraft off the ground as if it might have been made of paper instead of steel.

Rex found himself standing on a ball of lava; a mass of material which looked like the stuff commonly called pumice-stone. From its sponge-like appearance it had obviously once been in a fluid state; molten rock which, on its journey through space had hardened to a grey, brittle-looking substance. There were plenty of potholes from which imprisoned gases had once escaped, but there were no loose pieces of the stuff. It was hot, but this, the Professor thought, was due to the absorption of solar rays. Actually he was wrong in this, or only partly right, as was soon to be revealed. The sun, certainly, was reflected in a glare that was almost painful.

As a picture of utter sterility it was worse than Phobos. Where it had started from and how it had entered the Solar System were problems on which Rex wasted no thought. Had he been asked to describe his sensations he would have had to grope for words, and probably failed to find them. All he knew was, he was standing, very uncomfortably, on a ball of igneous rock rushing through space at a speed of several miles a second without imparting the slightest feeling of movement. Without air there could be no wind. The silence was absolute.

A short distance away the Minoans were standing together apparently discussing the thing; although what there was to discuss was not easy to see. All that the globe had to show could be seen at a glance. Even the Professor had only one observation to make, and that was, the inner core of the thing might still be soft, so that it would only be necessary to break the crust to achieve their object. Even if it didn't vaporize the shock of a severe explosion on a body so small might be enough to alter its course.

"From the formation of this outer layer," said Tiger, pointing, "I'd say the inside was not only soft, but boiling, fairly recently. Not only that, but as the crust cooled, and shrank as it solidified, the inside of the pudding boiled over. The ripple effect round some of the larger potholes is proof of that, I think."

"As long as it doesn't boil over while we're on it I don't care what the gravy inside is like," joked Toby.

While this conversation had been going on the Minoan scientists had unloaded and arranged the equipment they had put on board. The two members of the Council, conspicuous in their red clothes, had taken a short walk. One of them carried a rod with which from time to time he prodded the ground.

“I fancy they must be going to try the explosion,” observed the Professor. “The two gentlemen in red seem to be testing the strength of the material to be destroyed.”

It was then that it happened, and as Rex was watching he saw exactly what did happen. The man with the rod struck it into a pothole. It went in for a foot or more. There it appeared to stick, for he began thrusting it to and fro in his efforts to withdraw it. In this he was successful. Too successful; for the rod shot into the air like an arrow, and the reason was immediately apparent. Through the hole made by the rod came a squirt of smoking liquid that rose ever higher.

The men responsible did not stay to watch the geyser. Turning, taking strides of normally impossible length they fled to their ship. Quick as they were they were only just in time, for from the hole, swiftly becoming larger under the pressure from within, poured a turgid tide of lava, glowing and smoking as it spread over the thin, sloping skin of the ball that had contained it.

At the Spacemaster for a moment confusion reigned. No orders were given. None was needed. Everyone was actuated by the same idea, which was to board the ship and get clear of the monstrous horror on which they had been calmly standing. Tiger’s joke about the gravy was now hideous fact.

By the time they had all passed through the air-lock the geyser was hurling up liquid rock in regular pulsations, as from a pump, and the lava, flowing like hot oil, had nearly reached the legs of the ship. The Professor, who had gone in first, was at the controls, and the moment the double doors were closed he had the ship in maximum safe velocity.

Through his porthole Rex caught a glimpse of the Minoan ship rocketing. He looked at the others. Every face was ashen. As he started to remove his suit he heard Toby mutter: “That’s what comes of monkeying with things you don’t understand.”

As soon as he was clear of his suit he looked back and saw the planetoid trailing a plume of smoke, and realized that it had become a comet.

“We certainly started something,” said Tiger.

(*see page 134*)

"That's what comes of monkeying with things you don't understand."

"I'm afraid our efforts have been in vain," remarked the Professor sadly. "That beastly thing is still on its course, and, alas, it is now unapproachable. What a pity those silly fellows had to poke about with that rod. But we can't blame them. Quite obviously they didn't know what was just under their feet."

“Here they come now,” observed Rex, as the Minoan ship closed in on them.

They were all watching it when what appeared to be a flash of lightning passed between it and the now distant comet. Almost simultaneously a great sheet of white light filled the section of space that held the intruder. Slowly it died, leaving in its centre a ragged cloud from which sprang a thousand sparks.

“It’s gone,” cried the Professor in a shaky voice. “They’ve done it. They’ve blown it up. Those sparks are meteors, all that remains of it.” He turned to Vargo. “How did they do it?”

Vargo explained, or tried to explain, that an atomic bomb had been exploded by heat reflected from the sun.

“That must have been the equipment we saw,” said Tiger.

“If that’s a sample of what they can do I shall do my best to keep friendly with them,” asserted Toby.

“Vargo warned us that they could scorch the surface off the Earth,” reminded Rex.

The Professor smiled wanly. “After that awful fright I think we can congratulate ourselves on a good day’s work.”

“Just imagine if that thing had hit London,” muttered Rex.

“It’s better not to imagine it,” returned the Professor, with a wry smile. “Well, we may have saved our charming planet but I doubt if we shall get any thanks for it.”

“Isn’t it time we were thinking of going back to it,” said Tiger.

The Professor agreed, but pointed out that there were one or two things to settle with their new-found friends.

The Minoan ship sped through space on its homeward journey and the Spacemaster went with it.

CHAPTER XIV

FUN ON WINGS

THREE days were spent on Mino, most of the time discussing the future of Earth and Mars, absurd though it may sound. With Vargo acting as interpreter, the Councillors, with their faultless memories, soon had a working knowledge of English, and the Professor was in his element, exchanging scientific information and planning the restoration of Mars. More than once Rex found himself wondering how the people at home would behave should they learn they were at the mercy of an older civilization, and that their future was being arranged and safeguarded by an unknown, untidy little man, with eccentric habits but a fine brain.

It was fortunate, the Professor told the others, that their hosts had no particular interest in Earth, and certainly no ideas of conquest, for this made it easy for him to persuade them to keep away for fear they alarmed the people, who had enough troubles on their own planet. The only man against a pacific policy was Rolto, and from him, now, stated the Council, they had nothing to fear. If he persisted in his behaviour he would be marooned on one of the outer planetoids, for that was how they dealt with disturbers of the peace.

In return for the promise not to interfere with Earth, the Professor said he had entered into certain obligations regarding Mars, which was now to be made habitable; for the Minoans, with a growing population and an atmosphere that was becoming thinner, could not stay on a cluster of planetoids the future of which was uncertain. The danger lay in their small size. Even a near miss from collision might upset the whole constellation. Yet they did not want to leave the Solar System that was their original home. The only major planet on which life would be bearable was Mars. The others were either too hot or too cold.

There was no reason why Mars should not be repopulated now it had been shown that the mosquitoes could be brought under control, the Professor had declared. He would help in its re-establishment.

The trouble with the Minoans had been they had no insecticide. It was so long since they had needed such a remedy that the old formulae, if they had ever existed, had been forgotten. The Professor, therefore, was going to supply what was necessary. Fertilizers and seeds would also be provided. There was nothing wrong with the soil of Mars. All it needed to make it

fertile was water, and this could be done by irrigation. The fact that the planet was slowly improving its atmosphere by attracting to itself more oxygen, which occurred in frozen particles in space, was all to its advantage. The scientists, once established, might help in this by producing air from elements in the ground.

There was some talk of Vargo going with them to Earth, but this was held to be too dangerous, for several reasons. The high pressure and humidity to which he was unaccustomed might give him pneumonia; or he would probably die from one of the common ailments against which his blood had no inherited immunity. He would be more use on Mars, it was decided, where he would be available when the Spacemaster returned. He would be taken in the Minoan ship which was to accompany the Spacemaster at least as far as Mars, to hasten the journey.

During this period of waiting for the Professor to conclude his negotiations, in which the others took little part, Rex had two adventures that he was unlikely ever to forget. The first taught him that the Minoans could laugh. It came about like this.

He was standing near the Spacemaster with Toby. As a matter of detail they were wondering why the dubious expressions on the faces of two scientists who had just examined the ship, tapping the sheet-steel walls with critical fingers. The Professor, with Tiger, and Vargo acting as interpreter, were some little way off in conversation with two members of the High Council.

A movement on a high building on the far side of the square caught Rex's eye, and he clutched Toby's arm when he saw a youth of about his own size poised precariously, arms to sides, on the edge of the flat roof. "Look!" he said tersely. "He's going to commit suicide! Oh!" His voice rose to a cry of horror as the youth launched himself into space. Then the cry died on his lips as the "suicide" threw out a pair of wings in a beautiful swallow dive and soared gracefully towards them.

"No," said Rex firmly. "No. It isn't true."

"It is, you know," returned Toby. He was smiling.

"I still don't believe it," declared Rex. "These people may fly Saucers but they're not angels."

"Those wings are artificial."

"So what?"

"Why not? Don't forget the size of the thing you're standing on. Your weight, for a guess, is about ten pounds. There's plenty of atmosphere, so you wouldn't need much in the way of wing surface to make you airborne.

You could do that on Earth if you had arms strong enough to support a pair of aircraft wings."

The human glider did a pretty circuit of the square, wings outspread, and then deliberately zoomed them. Rex caught a glimpse of a cream-coloured face with laughing blue eyes framed in flowing golden hair. "Good Lor!" he ejaculated. "It's a girl."

"And a very nice piece of homework too, as the R.A.F. boys would say," answered Toby approvingly. "She's just about your cup of tea. Go and have a word with her."

By this time the girl had made a perfect two-point landing near some companions who, with wings folded, were standing a short distance away.

"Not me," replied Rex emphatically. "All the same, I'd like to see how those wings are attached to a human fuselage. That game must be fun."

"I'll call her over." Toby beckoned.

The girl took a short run, jumped, opened her wings and floated over.

"I will ask her to lend you her wings," said Vargo, coming up. Which he did.

Bubbling with merriment the girl slipped her arms out of the wings and laughing in Rex's face helped him to put them on. Somewhat red in the cheeks, for the girl was certainly pretty, Rex flapped his wings to test them.

"What do you think you are—a cockerel?" chaffed Toby.

"No," answered Rex. "I'm a skylark. Watch me." So saying he sprinted a few yards, raised his wings and jumped.

In a flash the smile on his face had given way to alarm as he found himself skimming at terrifying speed across the square, straight toward the Professor's group, still in earnest conversation. "Look out!" he yelled. "I can't stop."

The group scattered just in time. He went through them like a bullet, spinning the Professor like a top as his toe just touched his shoulder. This altered his course, and he found himself heading, literally, for a wall. His knowledge of aviation came to his rescue. Down went his left wing; but he overdid it, and the result was a beautiful climbing turn at the top of which he nearly stalled. Blanching when he saw how far he was from the ground he lifted his legs. This produced the dive intended; but it also resulted in a speed beyond his expectations. He fairly flashed across the square. The girl, he saw, was rocking with laughter. "How do I get down?" he yelled.

If anyone answered he did not hear. In the end he worked it out; but he came in much too fast. In desperation he used his feet as a tailskid, but even

that didn't stop him. Toby, objecting to being used as a buffer, leapt aside. So did the girl. But she was too late. With a cry of despair Rex caught her fair and square. Instinctively he grabbed her in his wings to save her from falling and half lifted her off her feet. But weight told, and they finished in a heap near the Spacemaster.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, as he helped her up. She was still laughing. The children on the far side of the square yelled with delight. Everyone laughed. Toby wiped tears from his eyes. The girl spoke.

"She says what's your name," translated Vargo.

"Rex. What's yours?"

"Morino."

"Tell her," Rex told Vargo, "that I'm sorry I've bent her wings."

Morino took him by the hand, and having straightened the wings, showed him how it should be done. The upshot of it was, he spent the next hour in a way he could not have imagined—being given dual flying instruction by a girl. They became good friends; such good friends that Rex was almost sorry when the time came to say good-bye.

CHAPTER XV

FOREST OF FEAR

REX's second adventure was more truly in the nature of one. It started when Vargo came over to him to say that a ship was about to leave for the planetoid where the vegetable world ruled supreme; the one of which he had spoken, where the trees fought each other. A small quantity of special wood was needed by the House of Scientists for some purpose. It was no great distance away. Would he like to go?

As the Professor was to attend another conference Rex said he would, very much, like to see this strange place. What exactly did Vargo mean by trees fighting each other?

Certain trees, explained Vargo, were engaged in a war of extermination to decide which of them should survive. At least, that was how it appeared. It was possible, he announced, to see the trees moving.

"But how could they fight?" persisted Rex.

"They wind about each other and strive to throw each other down," answered Vargo casually. "In the struggle the branches can be heard crying and groaning," he added.

This was too much for Rex. "What nonsense!" he exclaimed. "Impossible!"

The Professor, who was listening to this conversation, interposed. "I think," said he, looking at Rex over his spectacles, "that the time has come for us to discard the word impossible, for surely it has been demonstrated to us that in the Universe nothing is impossible. Things that may appear impossible on Earth might well be commonplace elsewhere. On the other hand, I have no doubt that many things which occur daily on Earth would appear impossible to our new friends here. We must accept it as an axiom that once we have broken through the barrier of incredulity to the world of fantasy then anything and everything becomes possible. You may recall that at the outset of this voyage I predicted that we might see things that would overwhelm our faculties for surprise. That has come to pass. If Vargo says there is a place where the trees fight each other I accept the statement without hesitation. After all, trees are living things; and as it seems to be the nature of all living things to fight, why shouldn't trees, following the example of animals—and men—engage in conflict for their survival?"

"No reason, sir, now you put it like that," answered Rex, meekly.

"You will see," resumed Vargo, "that when the wood is cut we must wait for it to die."

Rex stared. But he said no more.

Tiger and Toby, having nothing to do, said they would join the party.

"How do you land on this place?" Toby asked Vargo. "Do you drop into the middle of the battle?"

Vargo said no. There was a landing ground, a place where nothing could grow, for the ground was a solid mass of metal. The metals had been fused in the heat of the original explosion and run together, as they had seen it happening on Jupiter. Presently they would see the same thing after the metal had become cold.

"Does anything else live on this planet?" asked Tiger, as they walked towards the ship that had been detailed to fetch the wood.

"Nothing," answered Vargo. The trees were masters and nothing else was allowed to live. Only men were stronger because they had weapons of metal.

"What about spacesuits," inquired Rex.

Vargo said they would not be needed. There was, if anything, too much atmosphere, for the trees made it and renewed it constantly. It was strong air, as they would see, so strong that it was possible to stay on the place only for a short time without becoming ill.

As he stepped into the ship Rex saw the tools that were too much for the trees. On the floor lay several axes with blades of the queer red-looking metal commonly used by the Minoans.

The journey took only two hours, at the end of which time Rex found himself gazing with no small curiosity on the world towards which the ship was dropping. He observed that irrespective of the angle from which a planetoid was approached, at the end there was always a sensation of falling. It was the same on Earth with a parachutist, he pondered; he always fell *down*, regardless of from where he made his jump.

The objective was a larger globe than he had imagined it would be, having a diameter of perhaps fifty or sixty miles. Nor was its colour, as he had supposed, unrelieved green—the green of the leaves of the trees that made war on each other. It now appeared that these were of many colours, presenting a sort of glorified camouflage.

An even more remarkable feature was the spot on which the ship landed. It seemed to Rex that they were going to crash into the tops of the trees;

instead of which he found himself on a place devoid of vegetation, although the colour effect was similar. The reason became apparent when, following the others, he stepped out. The ground underfoot was, as Vargo had said, metal. Not one metal but many, judging from the different colours produced by oxidization. The red rust of iron, and the green of copper, predominated.

The air felt hot, thick, clammy, and was heavy with the stench of rotting vegetation.

Toby sniffed. “There’s carbon dioxide here,” he murmured.

From the nearby trees came a confused medley of sounds, grunts, groans and squeals, as if a herd of swine was foraging. Indeed, until he remembered what Vargo had said, Rex assumed that was what it was. He had little time for further observation for those members of the ship’s crew who were to fetch the wood were proceeding with their task forthwith. With axes in their hands they strode towards the nearest trees.

As he followed them Rex was conscious of a slight feeling of disappointment. From Vargo’s description, without giving the matter serious thought, he had expected to see the trees fighting literally, visibly. This was not so. But as he drew near, and at Vargo’s invitation watched closely, he could just make out a general movement, slow but deliberate. Two branches, always of a different species of tree, would press on each other, producing a grinding sound, as can happen in any forest in a high wind. But here, the one unable to take the strain would bend, and finally snap, and fall either to earth or be caught up in lower branches. The movement of these broken branches, Rex noticed, became more conspicuous. They would bend, or curl, and their leaves, collapsing, would hang limp.

It was not easy to see exactly what was happening, for vines, or lianas, swarmed up the trees, to coil like snakes as they groped for fresh supports. Vargo warned them to watch these vines, and if they saw any coming towards them, move clear, for some were armed with ferocious thorns, which could inflict a nasty wound.

Rex didn’t take this very seriously. In fact, he smiled at the idea of being pursued by a vegetable.

“You know,” said Toby pensively, “what we see here is exactly what goes on in a tropical forest; the only difference is, here it has been speeded up a hundred times.”

Standing together they now watched a spectacle which in spite of all that had been said about accepting impossibilities without surprise, caused their eyes to saucer in astonishment not unmixed with horror, and even loathing.

A Minoan, who had obviously done this work before, advanced purposefully towards a tree. There were two such trees, standing close together. They were not big trees, as trees go, being perhaps forty feet high. The trunks were smooth and vividly green, in contrast to the leaves, which were red. The branches, which intermingled, and also bore bright yellow fruits, were long and slender, having a diameter of no more than three or four inches where they joined the trunk.

It struck Rex that as the Minoan advanced he kept a wary eye on the jungle, and the reason soon became apparent. From out of the undergrowth wormed a thick tendril, like the questing tentacle of an octopus. More followed. But the man stood his ground. As the first tendril reached him he sidestepped, and with a deft stroke severed it. At the blow, to Rex's unspeakable horror, the loose end leapt high, and falling back rolled away twisting and curling like a worm cut in halves by a gardener's spade.

More men stepped forward, and for a little while the performance was repeated until the ground was alive with severed tendrils, coiling and writhing as if they were alive—as, in fact, as Rex realized, they were. But they died quickly, whereupon the workmen, with their axes tossing them aside without ceremony, made a path to the tree with the green trunk that had obviously been selected as victim.

(see page 146)

. . . like the questing tentacle of an octopus.

What followed belittled what had gone before. The leading man swung his axe. The blade went deep. The entire tree seemed to shudder. As the blade was withdrawn purple sap gushed from the wound. And so it went on, the men not employed in felling the tree lopping off tendrils that continued to advance from the forest. As the gash in the trunk became deeper more and more sap oozed from it. The effect could be seen above. The branches began

to droop and the leaves to wilt, turning from red to white as they did so. To Rex the whole thing looked unpleasantly like murder.

At last the stricken tree fell. Rex had a feeling that it was already dead; but that this was not so was revealed when the men began to lop off the branches, which arched and bent several times, the movement becoming more and more feeble as they bled to death.

Vargo picked up a length and showed it to them. It would, he demonstrated, bend easily, like rubber. In that condition, he said, it could be cut or moulded to any shape. But once it had hardened, as it did very soon, it was as hard as iron. The workmen would cut the timber into convenient lengths for transport home.

This conversation did not take place in the sort of silence that might be imagined on the fringe of a forest. It seemed to Rex that the noise made by the trees was greater than it had been, and he remarked on it.

"It is the trees talking," answered Vargo calmly.

Rex also observed that the men were working at furious speed and asked why they should so exhaust themselves.

"Look," said Vargo, pointing.

Following the outstretched finger Rex saw more and more tendrils advancing, an army of them, with a slow sinuous movement. "How do they do that?" he cried. "Aren't they rooted to the ground?"

Vargo said yes, but when attacked they broke off at their roots and were free to move.

"But then they must die!"

Vargo explained that when they stopped they could put down new roots anywhere.

"I don't like trees that walk," muttered Rex.

The workmen were carrying the logs to the ship when it happened, and even they appeared to be taken by surprise.

Suddenly there was a tearing sound that was almost like a snarl. Hard on it came shouts of warning which made Rex jump without looking for the danger. A few steps would have taken him clear, but he was just too late. The next instant he was struggling for his life. What had happened he did not know, but in a dim sort of way he realized that the second tree had fallen and the branches had him in their grip, coiling about him like steel springs and crushing the life out of him. As fast as he tore them off they sprang back, so that he would have needed a dozen pairs of hands to deal with them.

Panic took possession of him and he yelled for help, although he could see Tiger and Toby in the same trap. Above the moaning of the trees came the crisp thud of axes on wood as the workmen rushed to the rescue. At each blow one or more of the encircling thongs went limp, until at last, with a shuddering gasp, he was able to tear himself free. Or so he thought, not knowing that he was still held by the ankles, so that when he started to run he went flat on his face. There was more chopping, and a workman dragged him into the open, where he sat panting with fright and exertion, by no means convinced that he was not in the throes of a nightmare.

Tiger and Toby, with white faces, joined him; and there they sat, recovering from shock, while the workmen completed their task. Some of the logs, Rex saw with disgust, were still moving. When Vargo told him the men were ready to go, unthinkingly, as he rose, he picked up a stick to steady himself; but the thing twisted like an eel in his hand and he dropped it with a gasp.

"Let's get out of this," he said desperately. "It's beastly."

Together they walked to the ship, and a few minutes later were on their way home. The logs, in four foot lengths, lay on the floor. Rex eyed them suspiciously. Some of them were still moving. But by the time the ship was back on Mino they lay still and silent in death.

There was one other incident just before they left Mino which was to be remembered later, although at the time it passed almost without comment.

Some scientists had come over and talked among themselves about the Spacemaster; not so much its design as the metal employed. This was done with such earnestness that the Professor asked them if anything was wrong. It transpired that steel was unknown to them; but they did not like it, saying it was too hard, too brittle, for the abnormal conditions imposed by space travel. It would, they said, quickly become subject to fatigue. Such a ship would have a short life. They themselves employed a softer alloy, embodying orichalcum. It was this that gave their ships the red-coppery tint. Steel, subject to certain rays that occurred in space, might change its atomic structure.

Rex, of course, remembered what the scientists had said about this earlier. However, curiously perhaps, the Professor did not take the warning seriously. He was more interested in the peculiar properties of orichalcum, and said he would like to take a sample of it with him when he went home. So the subject was not pursued.

With everything arranged preparations were made for departure. A Minoan ship would accompany the Spacemaster to give it extra velocity.

There would be two hops; the first to Mars, where the state of the mosquitoes was to be ascertained. It was finally decided that Vargo, who had become one of the Professor's party, should travel in the Spacemaster, anyhow as far as Mars. All being well the Minoan ship might give the Spacemaster a tow all the way to Earth, in order that Vargo could see the exact location of Glensalich Castle, should it in an emergency be necessary for a Minoan ship to seek the Professor at his base.

Little dreaming that upon this arrangement, made almost casually, their lives were to depend, the two ships took off, much to the distress of Morino, who bade Rex a tearful farewell. Rex, a trifle huskily, said he would be coming back one day, although in his heart he doubted it. They had become close friends.

His last glimpse of her was a forlorn figure standing on the landing square, gazing upwards.

CHAPTER XVI

THE END OF THE SPACEMASTER

THE journey to Mars was made without incident beyond one or two noisy collisions with patches of meteoric dust or gas particles which, opined Vargo, were the residue of the exploded Vontor. He would not say the same of a long-tailed comet. He had seen it before, he averred. Like Vontor, it had come in from outer space, and its orbit was not yet constant; wherefore it was watched by the astronomers with some anxiety.

The effect of this sort of thing on Rex was to make him uncomfortably aware that life even on the best planets was not as secure as some people imagined. If only they would remember that they were living on an unexploded bomb that might go off at any moment, in a universe of misguided missiles, they might stop making guided ones, and worry less about trivialities.

Even before they landed he could see that the vegetation on Mars was still spreading; no one could say why; but Vargo was sure it was all to the good. Both machines touched down on the square. Evening came, and produced none of the dreaded red clouds, much to the Professor's satisfaction, for it went far to prove that his "chain reaction" method of dealing with the mosquitoes had been successful. As for the other creatures of the jungle, nothing was seen of them, although as no one felt like looking for trouble no attempt was made to disturb them. Tiger, having shown Vargo how to use the rifle, made him a present of it, in case a weapon became necessary.

The crew of the Minoan ship had of course been warned, through Vargo, to be on the look-out for these creatures. According to the Council there was no record of them in ancient Martian legend; but that did not necessarily mean that they, or a smaller form of the same beasts, had not been there in olden times. The Professor, while admitting that his insecticide may have been responsible for bringing them into the open, denied liability for their creation. They must have been there in some form all the time. The tall rushes would have provided them with ample cover. Anyway, there was no need to worry. If the beasts did not devour each other they would soon die from the disorder that had killed the mosquitoes.

What little there was to do and talk about on Mars was soon done, and dawn the following day saw the Spacemaster making ready to leave on the

last hop of its journey home. Vargo said that as they were so slow the captain of the Minoan ship, Gator Faro, would take them in tow. With his superior velocity, this would cut the eight-day journey to two. At first the Professor demurred, for he was anxious that no more "Saucers" should be seen near Glensalich—anyway, until he was ready to fulfil his obligations with the things he had promised.

It should be said here that he intended to build a new ship, but in case of delay, or should anything go wrong, the following arrangement for maintaining contact had been made. Vargo was to come over once a month, on the night of the full moon. If he saw a signal of green lights it would mean that it was safe for him to land. If there were no lights the ship was not to land, for it would mean either that it was dangerous, or the equipment the Professor had promised was not ready.

It was now pointed out that if the Minoan ship was to come close enough to Earth for Vargo, or Gator the captain, to pinpoint Glensalich, they might as well accept the offer of a tow. This was agreed. It was also agreed that Vargo should travel in the Spacemaster, so that the landmarks for locating Glensalich could be pointed out to him, although this would mean that the Minoan ship would have to land on Earth at the end of the voyage to pick him up.

Little guessing that had it not been for this arrangement they would never have reached home the passengers took their places and the two ships set off, Rex feeling more comfortable now that the shining star that was Earth, easily recognizable by its Moon, was once more in sight. He watched it becoming brighter as a mariner, homeward bound, might watch the guiding light of his home port.

It was some hours later, with Earth and Moon together forming a magnificent double star, when disaster of a kind never contemplated struck the Spacemaster. The Professor, who had been using his telescope, in putting it down brought the heavy end in sharp contact with the wall. From what happened the wall might have been made of thin glass. A small piece of metal broke clean away, leaving a hole.

For a second he stared at it incredulously, uncomprehendingly. So did everyone. In dumb fascination Rex watched the edges of the hole crumbling, as if it might have been biscuit, under the force of the escaping pressure, and realized that the steel walls were rotten. And if the walls were rotten the whole ship must be rotten.

The Professor was the first to recover, shouting for a meteor plug. Tiger grabbed one and clapped it over the hole, where it remained firm, held in

place by the pressure within.

"Into suits, everybody," ordered the Professor crisply. "I don't understand what has happened; but if the metal is as rotten as that the whole ship may disintegrate at any moment."

"The scientists warned you that your metal was dangerous," reminded Vargo calmly, as everyone with feverish haste began getting into his suit. What use the suits would be if the ship went to pieces Rex could not imagine.

"Be careful not to knock the walls," cried the Professor.

They were still not in their suits when the plug blew out, leaving a larger hole. Tiger applied a larger one, but already so much pressure had been lost that he had difficulty in making it stick.

"Don't push too hard or the whole wall may break down," said the Professor grimly. "Give her all the air you have, Judkins."

Rex looked at Earth. Before the accident it had looked so close. Now it looked so far away. He knew they would never get home.

Vargo confirmed his fears. "We shall have to abandon the ship," he said, still imperturbable. "It would be better to do that than wait for her to go to pieces and have to be picked up afterwards."

What he meant by being picked up Rex could not imagine.

Even the Professor was slow to grasp what Vargo meant. "How can we abandon ship?"

"We must go over to Gator."

"You mean—we must go from this ship to his?"

"Of course. It is simple. With our ships it is done all the time. The captain of a fleet must go from one ship to another. You will see."

"What happens if you fall," asked Rex, although even as he spoke he guessed the answer.

"Fall?" echoed Vargo. "How can you fall? Without weight it is impossible. If I jump out I must come back to the ship, drawn by its gravity. Nearer to Earth or Mars it would be dangerous, but here it is safe. Have you never stepped out of your ship in space?"

"Never," answered Rex, warmly. "And I hope I never have to."

"Vargo is right," asserted the Professor. "The people on Earth who propose to build a platform in space as the first step to the Moon are working on that principle. I fear I am getting dull-witted."

There the conversation ended as spacesuits were closed, which was just as well, for at this juncture the plug flew out, leaving such a gaping hole that

Rex knew the ship must be airless. The thought gave him butterflies in the stomach.

Vargo went into the air-lock leaving both doors open, for with the ship airless there was no point in closing them. They could see him making signals to their consort. The bigger ship closed in on them, slowly, until they were only three or four yards apart, with the two airlocks in line. The outer door of the Minoan ship opened. From it to the door of the Spacemaster slid a thin rod, bridging the gap.

Rex, watching spellbound, now saw a sight that made him doubt both his eyes and his sanity. It was Vargo, pulling himself across the gap by his hands, apparently without the slightest effort. From the far side he turned and signalled that they were to follow, one by one, the same way. Then the air-lock closed. A moment later it opened again. Vargo was no longer there. His face appeared at a window.

"I'll play pathfinder if you like," offered Toby, moving towards the door.

"As captain of the ship I shall go last," decided the Professor. "Even in space we must maintain the old traditions."

With his heart in his mouth, as the saying is, Rex watched Toby swing himself across the awful gap. Clearly he thought nothing of it, for from the far air-lock he turned and grinned. The process of closing and re-opening the air-lock was repeated, and Toby was inside.

"You go next, Rex," ordered Tiger.

To say that Rex was not scared as he crossed the bridge in silent space would not be true: but it was much less fearful than he expected. There was no sense of height to induce vertigo, as would have been the case had such a bridge spanned two high buildings on Earth. Nor was there any movement. The two ships might have been stationary. The only outside object he saw as he made the crossing was the Moon, large and shining. He realized why Vargo had made light of the operation; but still, his heart thumped, and he was more than a little relieved to find himself safely inside the Minoan ship.

From a window he watched Tiger cross. Then the Professor appeared in the doorway of the Spacemaster's air-lock; and such a ludicrous spectacle did he present with his books and instruments slung around him that Rex started to laugh; but humour vanished as his eyes beheld, and photographed on his brain for ever, a thing so frightful that he forgot to breathe. Right round the Spacemaster ran a crack; an open crack. With horror unspeakable he saw that the ship was in fact in two pieces. Every instant he expected to see the two halves fly apart. But nothing of the sort happened. As the ship

was not under power the two parts just went on together, as presently Rex realized, they were bound to.

The Professor made the crossing and in another minute he was inside.

Suits no longer needed, were removed. The Spacemaster was still beside them, so the Professor's first question to Vargo was: "What are you going to do with my ship. It mustn't be allowed to fall on Earth, as it will, if you take it close."

Vargo spoke to Gator in his own language. Turning back to the Professor he said: "It cannot be left in space where it would be a danger to ships. Gator says he will cast it off here, where it will remain until he comes back, when he will collect it and let it drop on Phobos, where you will find it should you have left in it anything you would like to save."

"Capital," agreed the Professor. "Now my friends, would you be so kind as to take us home?"

Not without emotion Rex saw the ship that had served them so well, although it had become a death trap, abandoned in space.

"You will show me where you want us to land you," requested Vargo.

"It will have to be on the heather near the house, for I fear your ship is too big to get down on my small concrete apron," answered the Professor.

"If somebody spots us landing it's going to start something," observed Toby.

For a while Rex entertained himself by pondering this remark. What *would* happen if they were seen landing? Could they say they had been to Mars, lost their ship, and had been brought home in a Martian "Saucer"? They might say it, but no one would believe a story so utterly fantastic. Yet what other explanation would fit the case? How else could they explain their landing from one of the oft-reported Flying Saucers? It would, he decided, save a lot of trouble if they were not seen. Fortunately, nobody was likely to be on the hill at that hour.

With the ship in free fall Earth was beginning to look more like a world. Soon he was able to make out the continent of America, always unmistakable. Western Europe and the British Isles were in darkness and almost free from cloud, although there were masses of it over the Atlantic.

The Professor stood by Vargo giving directions which were passed on to Gator, who was in control of the ship.

Lights began to show. The first to appear were the airport beacons. Rex pointed them out to Vargo, who was mildly curious, for his people did not

practise this form of flying, and apparently never had. They had gone direct to vertical flight which, on a small world, was of more practical use.

Still falling the ship dropped towards Great Britain, to Scotland, and the lonely valley that had been the Spacemaster's base. The outlines of the physical features swiftly became more clearly marked. Suddenly a moving light caught Rex's eye, and he let out a cry of warning as he made out the navigation lights of a big aircraft standing towards them. The two ships passed with a comfortable margin but Rex knew that the pilot had seen them from the way he turned sharply. It was a service machine, and he could imagine the crew staring from cockpit, cabin and tail turret.

"Poor fellows," said Professor sadly. "Imagine the ridicule they'll have to face when they return home and report that they've seen a Flying Saucer. Thank goodness a machine designed for horizontal flight can't follow one that can drop like a stone."

With no more noise than a cloud passing across the face of the moon, checking its fall as it neared the ground, under the Professor's guidance the ship came to rest on a flat area of heather a few hundred yards from the glen.

They were home. To Rex this was almost as amazing as anything he had seen on the voyage. Once more time was time and weight was weight.

Delay being held dangerous no time was lost unloading their belongings, spacesuits, the Professor's instruments and an ingot of orichalcum. A few last words with Vargo, smiles and bows of farewell, and the travellers stood on the solid-feeling soil of their own planet.

"Give my love to Morino," whispered Rex to Vargo, as they clasped hands.

At a distance of a hundred yards or so they stopped, turned, and watched their transport vanish like a wraith into the night sky. Then, each busy with his own thoughts, they made their way towards the house.

They had nearly reached it when a shadow loomed, hurrying, out of the gloom. "Did you see that Flying Saucer?" cried a voice, stiff with excitement.

"Did we see *what*?" questioned the Professor.

"That Saucer. You must have seen it. I would almost swear that I saw you get out of it."

"Who are you," inquired the Professor, coldly. "And what, may I ask, are you doing, trespassing on my land at this hour of night?"

"My name's Lake, sir. I'm a reporter from the *Daily Mirror*. There have been rumours of a UFO having been seen about here more than once, so I

came up to watch for it in the hope of getting the biggest story ever. I've been sleeping rough on the hill for a week."

"If you're prepared to watch for Flying Saucers you must believe in them."

"Of course I do."

"Very well. For being an intelligent fellow you deserve to be told the truth," stated the Professor. "We have just landed from one. But it's no use telling your readers that, young man, for they won't believe you."

"Will you tell me about it, sir?"

"Provided you refrain from frivolous remarks. But let us not stand here. We have come a long way. Yes, indeed, quite a long way. Come along to the house. When we have rested and had some refreshment you may be able to persuade Rex to tell you all about it."

But as soon as they were in the house and the lights were on the reporter had a surprise to spring.

"Do you know anything about this?" he asked, spreading on the table several newspapers.

The space voyagers fell silent, staring, as their eyes ran over screaming banner headlines. All told the same story. It was doom. The approach of Vontor had been noted by the big observatories and its near-collision with Earth predicted in terms of panic or sombre resignation.

A wan smile spread over the Professor's face as he scanned the reports. Then, pushing up his spectacles he turned to the newspaper man. "Yes," he said, "we know *all* about it. Go home, young man, and tell your readers that all is well. The danger has passed. Also tell them this. Politicians wonder what has gone wrong with civilization when the answer is staring them in the face. The world is sick with fear. It lost its peace of mind when it became possible for one man to destroy it by pressing a button. This they understand. What they do not realize is that the world could always have been destroyed in an instant of time by a wandering meteor. That is beyond their understanding."

"But . . . but what proof can I give that the danger has gone?" cried the reporter.

"You can say," answered the Professor slyly, "that you have had a Message from Mars."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *Return to Mars—A Story of Interplanetary Exploration* by Capt. W. E. (William Earl) Johns]