

Destination Mars

Hugh Walters



Destination Mars

By Hugh Walters

A Chris Godfrey of U.N.E.X.A. Adventure

Book 6 in the Series

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By the Same Author

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Chapter One

“So it’s come through at last!”

Chris Godfrey and his companions were looking at the piece of paper which Chris had taken from the buff-coloured envelope. It was from the United Nations Exploration Agency in New York. Briefly, the message was that UNEXA had received permission from the General Assembly to carry out the proposed exploration of the planet Mars.

As the probable crewmen, Chris, Morrey, Serge and Tony had been anxiously awaiting this decision. For more than a fortnight the United Nations had been debating the issue. Some members advocated completing the exploration of Venus, but their opponents stressed the near disaster which Earth had suffered not long before. Then spores, brought back by a Venusian probe, had accidentally escaped destruction and had taken root on Earth.

As a result, a grey mould had grown from them which had threatened to blot out civilization by its rapid growth under terrestrial conditions. Only an expedition to Earth’s twin planet by the young men now reading U.N.E.X.A.’s message had saved Mankind. From the home of the creeping grey horror they had brought a means of destroying it. But the terror of those ghastly weeks was still strong in the minds of many, so it had been decided to leave Venus alone for the time being and to concentrate on exploring the Red Planet.

“I wonder when the expedition will leave,” mused Serge Smyslov, the Russian member of the team.

“What I’d like to know is—how can we make sure of being picked for it?” Morrey Kant, the American, asked.

Chris smiled.

“If I can pull strings in certain quarters we’re certain to be chosen,” he promised them.

They all knew that he was referring to Sir George Benson, a very old friend of his, who was director of U.N.E.X.A. Between Benson and the younger scientist there had grown up a strong affection, forged in the fires of peril and adversity. If the choice of crew was left to the Director, then Chris and his friends could count on making the long voyage to Mars. For Benson knew that no crew was more experienced or better fitted to make the hazardous journey than the four young men who so badly wanted to go.

“When shall we know?” asked the youngest member of the quartet, the mechanic Tony Hale.

“Any day now,” answered Chris. “Of course this expedition will be different from some of the others. There’s time to plan every detail carefully.”

His companions knew what he meant. In the past they had been called upon, at short notice, to make emergency voyages. This had meant hurried preparations and a crash programme. Now there wasn’t the desperate urgency of some of their previous trips. Planning could, therefore, be meticulous and unhurried. This was all to the good, for Man’s first venture to a new world demanded the utmost care.

“Are we likely to blast-off from Lunaville or somewhere down here?” asked Morrey.

“Oh, from Lunaville undoubtedly,” Chris declared. He had little doubt that the expedition to Mars would be launched from the great man-made base on the Moon. On our satellite gravity is only one-sixth as strong as on Earth. For long voyages needing vast quantities of fuel, this was a decided advantage. The journey to Mars would be at least forty million miles, the greatest distance any human being had yet travelled.

Unless the expedition was to last many weary months, the rocket would have to build up a fantastic speed so that the time for the journey could be reduced. A tremendous weight of fuel would be used for the outward and return journeys, to

say nothing of a possible landing.

“We must stand a good chance of selection,” ventured Serge. “Otherwise we should not have received this message.”

“Perhaps Sir George has already worked the oracle,” Morrey said hopefully, but Chris shook his head.

“If I know anything of Uncle George,” he declared, “he’ll come himself to tell us if we’ve been chosen.”

“What if we’re not?” asked Tony.

“I think he’ll still come,” Chris said stoutly.

The telegram from Sir George Benson asking Chris to bring his companions along to the Air Ministry in Theobalds Road, London, came two days later. They had been two miserable days, passing terribly slowly. Sometimes the quartet would be filled with confidence that they would be chosen as the crew of the Mars rocket. At other times they became despondent, knowing how many more young men were fishing for the same job.

At times they would all go to Morrey’s rooms. The American’s landlady would produce numerous cups of coffee while they talked endlessly about Mars and the possibility of going there. When they walked round to Serge’s quarters the Russian scientist himself would brew the drink. But always they returned to Chris’s lodgings, which he was sharing with Tony, to see if any news had come. At the end of the two days Tony was almost at the stage of tearing his hair when at last it came.

The telegram was addressed to Chris; it was brief and enigmatic.

“ALL MEET ME TOMORROW NOON AIR MINISTRY. BENSON.”

That was all. Did it mean that Sir George was going to give them the great news that the choice had fallen on them? Or was he going to break it to them as gently as possible that

this time they'd been passed over? The telegram gave no clue. They would have to wait another twenty-four hours before knowing their fate.

Next morning, long before it was necessary, Chris had rounded up his friends and now they were sitting in his car, which was parked in Hyde Park.

“How much longer?” Tony asked.

“Forty-five minutes. You know it isn't any use getting there before time,” Chris pointed out. “Uncle George is very precise.”

“Mustn't be late, either,” Morrey put in. “I remember getting into very serious trouble with him once when I was two minutes late for an appointment.”

“We must arrive at noon precisely,” advised Serge, but Chris argued that they ought to reach the building two minutes to zero to allow time to contact Uncle George. The earnestness with which the quartet discussed this problem was an indication of the tension they all felt about the coming interview. Would they be informed that they had been selected to blaze a trail to an unknown World? Would they soon be making a voyage, the excitement of which was only surpassed by its danger? Or would they be told that some other crew had been chosen to be first to set foot on Mars?

Tony looked at his watch impatiently as the minutes dragged by. The park was crowded with people enjoying the morning sunshine. Was it barely a year since the park had been even more crowded with terrified refugees from the grey mould? The lucky chaps for the Mars trip wouldn't be working with the same fearful urgency that he and his friends had had to contend with on the Venus expedition. Now the World wasn't in danger. No longer did every hour count. So this new venture would be a piece of cake.

“Let's go,” Chris said at last, and he drove his car slowly out of the park and along Oxford Street. Getting through the traffic of this busy thoroughfare took longer than they

thought, so Chris had to put his foot down once they were clear. By the time he'd parked the car they had no time to spare.

"We have an appointment with Sir George Benson," Chris told the uniformed commissionaire.

The man took all their names and they had to sign a book. Then he went into a little office and they could see him telephoning. A few minutes later he came out and informed them that Sir George would see them at once. At the commissionaire's signal a messenger appeared and was instructed to conduct the party to Room 407. Up in a lift and along seemingly endless corridors they went until at last they stopped outside a door bearing the correct number. The messenger tapped on it and then led them inside.

This was evidently an outer office, for its only occupants were two girls busy at typewriters.

"Mr. Godfrey and party for Sir George Benson," the messenger announced.

One of the girls looked up and smiled.

"Would you come this way," she said, leaving her machine and walking towards an inner glass door. A discreet knock, and Chris heard a familiar but muffled voice saying "Come in". The girl led the party through the door into the private office of the famous scientist.

Sir George Benson's tall figure was now getting a little stooped. When Chris first met him, Benson's hair had been black. Now it was quite white—witness not only of the passing years, but also of the tremendous strains and anxieties which his job entailed. Yet his smile was as warm and his grip as firm as ever. It did Chris a power of good to be with Uncle George again.

"Sit down. Sit down all of you," Benson ordered after he'd greeted them all cordially. "One minute late, Chris," he went on with a twinkle in his eye as they settled into their chairs.

"Sorry," apologized the young man. "Traffic in Oxford

Street was worse than I expected.”

“I thought you’d have learned by now to allow for all eventualities,” Sir George chided him good-humouredly, and Chris smiled back ruefully.

“Now come on, Uncle George. Out with it,” he said. “Have we been chosen for the Mars expedition or not?”

It was the foremost question in all their minds—the one they were all burning to ask. Immediately Benson’s manner changed and his face became serious.

“Please be patient, all of you,” he said. “Many things have had to be considered in selecting the personnel for this undertaking.”

With what patience they could muster the quartet listened whilst the famous scientist spoke.

“I’m going to begin by quoting something written by Patrick Moore many years ago. It sets out the situation exactly.”

Sir George pulled from his wallet a piece of paper from which he read.

“ ‘All things considered, Mars is undoubtedly the most fascinating of all the planets. It is basically similar to the Earth; it is tolerably warm, it has atmosphere and water; and it has vegetation, so that even if it has long since passed the prime of life it is still far from being a dead or dying world. Though it is true to say that we have no proof of intelligent life upon it, it is equally true to say that we have no proof that advanced forms of life do not exist.’ ”

The scientist carefully folded up the paper and returned it to his wallet before speaking.

“The main object of this expedition is to resolve the doubt in Patrick Moore’s last sentence—to find out if advanced forms of life exist.”

“I thought that there were only lichens or moss on Mars,” exclaimed Morrey.

“So did I—once,” Benson answered. “Now, however, I’m convinced that a much higher form of vegetable life exists.”

“Why is that, please?” asked Serge.

“Now that we can take photographs and make spectroscopic analyses from observatories in satellites and on the Moon we are no longer hampered by Earth’s atmosphere. Proof has been mounting that a higher form than mosses exists. One of the first proofs of life on this wonderful planet was that the great yellow dust clouds that sometimes cover great areas do not obliterate the greenish regions. It is argued that these regions must consist of something regenerative like vegetation. Otherwise they would have been covered over long ago.

“I believe the argument can be pushed farther. If the vegetation consisted only of lichen and moss, then I think it would have been swamped with dust. To my way of thinking some larger, more active type of vegetation would be required to hold the Martian deserts at bay.

“What about the canals?” asked Tony.

“Ah,” smiled Sir George, “those canals! No, Tony, there aren’t really any canals there. Years ago astronomers thought they detected long straight lines criss-crossing the deserts, and they assumed these were waterways built by the Martians. Better telescopes and satellite photographs have proved that these are not continuous straight lines, but rather a series of disconnected dots and dashes. What they are we still don’t know. Another of the tasks of the Martian expedition will be to find out.”

“Come on, Sir George,” Morrey burst out, unable to contain himself any longer. “Let’s have it. Are we to do the job or not?”

“I’ve been trying to show you,” Benson said seriously, “what an exacting and important job this undertaking will be, and what a tremendous contribution it can make to our knowledge of this mysterious world.”

“So—you don’t think we could do it?” Tony gasped in dismay.

“I didn’t say that,” Sir George declared, his face suddenly breaking into smiles. “On the contrary, my young friends, you’ve been chosen to go!”

“Yippee!”

Chapter Two

It was Tony who gave expression to all their feelings. Though his three companions were all experienced scientists in their late twenties, their reaction to Sir George's announcement was only a shade more restrained than that of the young mechanic. Chris had more than half feared that, having had so many great adventures in the past, the quartet would have to stay behind and watch some other crew undertake this exciting task. That Uncle George had told them they'd been chosen was a tremendous relief and a great joy. No wonder, then, that they were all laughing and talking together.

"When you've calmed down a bit, perhaps I may be permitted to give you some more details," Benson said with a long-suffering sigh. The four were instantly silent.

"Well, now I can get a word in edgeways let me give you a rough outline of the plans," Sir George smiled.

"Briefly—this is to be a well-planned, unhurried exploration of the Martian surface. The planet approaches to within less than thirty-five million miles in July next. Thanks to the Jodrell Bank fellows we can calculate the distance to within an error of plus or minus a thousand miles. This is pretty good considering the tremendous distances involved. But of course it isn't accurate enough for a fully automatic landing to be made. So the space ship will have to be under manual control for the last and most vital part of its journey."

"Is that why we've had such difficulty in landing instruments?" Morrey asked.

"Precisely," the scientist agreed. "We have only twice succeeded in making a soft landing with an automatic probe. That's why we don't know a great deal about surface conditions. It will be your job, as the space ship's crew, to take over the flight for the last ten thousand miles and to put your vessel down on to the planet."

“How long shall we remain on Mars?” Serge wanted to know.

“You can decide that for yourselves,” Benson told him, “or rather Chris, who will be your leader, will have the responsibility of deciding. We expect that your stay will be for between two and four weeks, but if need be you can blast off as soon as you like.”

It was Chris’s turn to ask a question.

“From where do we take off? Lunaville or Cape Canaveral?”

“Neither,” was Benson’s astonishing reply. “You won’t start your journey from the Moon Base, or from any of the rocket stations on Earth. As we’ve more time available than usual, we’re going to try out several new techniques. You will set out in your space ship from Alpha, our new manned satellite. We’ve launched several probes from it, but yours will be the first manned flight.”

“But why from there?” asked Chris, puzzled. “Why not from Lunaville?”

“Ah—now that’s where another new technique comes in. You’re going to use an ion rocket.”

This time all four of Benson’s audience expressed astonishment. Although an ion rocket, using atomic radiation as its means of propulsion, had often been talked about, it had never actually been tried. For one reason, the thrust was very low compared with the latest chemical rockets. But it had the great advantage that it can be applied almost indefinitely. By building up a very high velocity it would be possible to reduce to a minimum the duration of the voyage.

“But we have no experience with ion rockets,” Serge pointed out.

“Neither has anyone else,” was Benson’s reply. “Oh, your space ship will have the conventional chemical drive as well, so you’ll have nothing much to worry about. Briefly, the

flight plan is this. You'll be ferried to Alpha, where your ship is now being assembled. Then you will break orbit with your chemical motor, which will boost up your speed from the orbital one of 18,000 m.p.h. to about 25,000 m.p.h.

"At that point you will switch to the ion motor. As the acceleration from it will only be one-tenth of a 'g', you will be under power for two and a half days. By that time you should be travelling at 500,000 m.p.h. You will then switch off and coast along for two days. After that you will decelerate with the ion motor, making the final part of the journey and the landing with the chemical rocket. Simple, isn't it?" the scientists smiled.

"Makes the old Moon trips look like Saturday afternoon outings," Morrey grinned. "Hope we'll pick up the technique. What happens when we land?"

"You'll have quite a bit to do before you leave the ship— atmospheric sampling, for example. Then you'll explore the immediate area on foot, very much as you did on the Moon. Yes, I'm afraid you'll have to wear your space suits, for as far as we can tell the oxygen content of the Martian atmosphere isn't enough to support our kind of life."

"What will things be like on Mars?" Tony asked.

"The physical conditions won't be too much unlike that of Earth," Benson answered. "Mars is 4,200 miles in diameter, so it is much smaller than our planet. Gravity is roughly one-third of ours, and the temperature is just a little cooler. The atmosphere consists largely of nitrogen, with carbon dioxide and oxygen also present. As I've already told you, we don't think there's enough oxygen to live on for many seconds with out your helmets."

"Is it true that there's no water on the planet?" Morrey enquired.

"Not quite—unless you mean 'free water'. There are certainly no open pools or seas as on Earth. What water there is seems to be concentrated as ice in the two polar caps. Of course there's a narrow strip along the borders of each

where the ice has probably been melted. Even so there doesn't seem to be any open water. We think it must be absorbed by vegetation as the ice melts. Certainly the dark areas advance and recede as the polar caps shrink or grow according to the season. Anyway, that's enough for the moment. I'm not an astronomer, but you'll soon meet one and have plenty of opportunity to get 'genned-up'."

"The usual training?" Chris asked with a twisted smile.

"The usual training," Uncle George agreed pleasantly, and they all knew that this meant an uncomfortable time at the Space-flight Training Centre at Farnborough.

"Thought as much," Morrey groaned, but Sir George hastened to remind them all that training schedules had been very much modified since the early days of space flight. Instead of the many fearsome ordeals that a prospective astronaut then had to face, modern space travellers only had to undergo a general toning up. True, they still had rides in the giant centrifuge, but this was more to condition their internal muscles than to fit them for blast-off.

"Man is a wonderfully adaptable piece of mechanism," Sir George concluded. "Space crews are tolerating conditions never dreamt of ten years ago. Maybe in a generation or so we shall be able to dispense with training altogether. But for the moment, it's Farnborough for you, my lads."

Promising he'd visit them in a day or two down at the Training Centre, Benson said good-bye to his young friends. As soon as they had gone he turned to his desk, for if the expedition to Mars was to be a success he would have a great deal to do in the next few months.

It was not until they were outside the Air Ministry building, standing in the bright winter sunshine, that the four astronauts realized how hungry they were. Nearly two o'clock! Practically two hours with Sir George—and the time had gone like a flash.

"Let's eat," Morrey called to the others, and they made their way with alacrity to a restaurant in Southampton Row.

Thick juicy steaks with mountains of chips, followed by apple pie and cream, made them all feel better.

“Might as well collect our gear and get off down to Farnborough,” Chris suggested as they drank their coffee. The others agreed eagerly, and after the ritual of tossing coins to decide who would pay for the lunch, they piled into Chris’s car and were driven round to their various lodgings. At six o’clock that evening they pulled up outside the gates of the old familiar establishment.

The sergeant in the guard room saluted smartly.

“Back again sir?” He smiled at Chris, who returned his cheery greeting.

“Where are you off to now, Mr. Godfrey?” the sergeant asked. He knew there could be only one reason why Chris and his companions had reported to the Training Establishment.

“Don’t you know better than to ask, sergeant?” Chris laughed back.

“No panic on, is there, sir?” the N.C.O. inquired.

“Not this time. Why, do you think there’s trouble whenever I come here?”

“Only going on past experience, sir. I hope you have a good trip this time, Mr. Godfrey—wherever it is,” the sergeant smiled as he lifted a telephone.

Farnborough, once the centre of British aeronautical research, was now the main training school for astronauts in Great Britain. At any time one could meet scores of young men preparing for the strains and stresses of rocket travel. Here congregated budding space travellers alongside experienced rocketeers. Newly qualified scientists, eager to take up the challenge of the solar system, rubbed shoulders with men from Lunaville or one of the orbiting space stations.

In the lounge or bar of the Mess one could always be sure

to hear some hair-raising story of adventure in space—stories of exciting experiences, of miraculous escapes from danger, and occasionally, of disaster and death. As astronauts-extraordinary, Chris and his companions were welcomed enthusiastically and were soon the centre of a friendly crowd who plied them with innumerable questions about their next venture. Laughingly Chris protested that they had better address their questions to Sir George Benson, who would be there in person next day or the day after.

The spells on the centrifuge, the periods in the hot and cold chambers, the constant medical checks, were all now so much dull routine to Chris, Morrey, Serge and Tony. Even the centrifuge, that huge machine which whirled them round and round at tremendous speeds, no longer had any terrors for them. It was just uncomfortable—and boring.

It was not until they had been at Farnborough for four days that Sir George Benson turned up.

“Sorry I’ve been so long,” he apologized to them in one of the small rooms that had been set aside for briefing. “Since I saw you in town I’ve had to make a quick trip to Cape Canaveral. Seems as if the chaps making the ion motor for your rocket can’t make up their minds how much shielding they’ll want. That is, of course, one of the disadvantages of this type of propulsion. The crew has to be protected from radiation from the motor.”

“Does that create much of a problem?” asked Chris.

“Not too much,” Benson assured him. “We’re having to give you a little extra shielding from cosmic rays in any case, so the additional protection can be incorporated.”

“Any precise dates yet?” Morrey wanted to know.

“Yes. You’ll be ferried out to Alpha on July 15th, and will blast-off on the 21st. All being well, you will touch down on Mars at 1300 hours on July 27th. Your return journey may take a little longer, depending on the length of your stay, because Earth and Mars will be drawing farther apart. In any case, you should be back on Earth by the end of August,” Sir

George told them.

“What are your plans for us until we leave for Alpha?” Serge asked.

“Naturally I want you to keep quite fit,” Benson answered, “so you will come here for a couple of days each week. Apart from that you will spend a great deal of time learning all you can about your destination. Finally you’ll all have to have a great deal of instruction in the operation of the ion motor. This will probably be at Cape Canaveral. I hope the programme will keep you happy.”

“And how!” whistled Morrey.

“Come, come, it won’t be too bad,” chided Sir George. “Now, is that all?”

“Er—is this trip hush-hush?” asked Tony.

“Not particularly. We shall be making an official announcement about it after I get back to America. Perhaps you’d better be a bit discreet till then,” Benson advised.

Soon after Sir George had gone, Chris and his friends were surrounded by a score of astronauts who asked if they could now say where they were going. As spokesman Chris informed them that there was nothing very secret about their voyage, but that Sir George Benson had asked them to keep silent until after the official announcement in a few days’ time. In spite of the grilling to which they were subjected, the quartet managed to keep faith with Uncle George.

It was four days after Benson’s visit to Farnborough that “Smokey” Thompson, one of the men in training, came bursting into Chris’s bedroom shortly after seven o’clock in the morning.

“So you’re going to Mars!” he called out, dragging the clothes off Chris.

“How do you know?” his victim asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Just been on the seven o’clock news,” Smokey told him.

“So the cat’s out of the bag,” Chris sighed, putting a reluctant foot over the side of the bed. “What did it say?”

“Oh, just a brief announcement from the United Nations Exploration Agency that a manned expedition to Mars was scheduled for July. It is you, isn’t it?” Thompson asked excitedly.

“ ‘Fraid so,” admitted Chris, yawning and stretching his arms. “Anyone else know?”

“Not yet, but they soon will,” laughed Smokey as he hurried from the room to spread the news.

Chris had barely finished dressing when there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called.

The door opened and a man in a dressing-gown stepped in. It was Van der Veen, a Dutchman to whom Chris had scarcely spoken before. His face was pale and strained.

“I haf just heard you are going to Mars,” he burst out.

“That’s right,” Chris agreed, puzzled at the man’s obvious emotion. “What’s the matter?”

“For God’s sake, don’t go,” the Dutchman said earnestly. “Tell them to cancel the expedition.”

“But why?” asked Chris, completely mystified.

“I—I cannot tell you,” Van der Veen answered in a hoarse voice. “But I know you will be in terrible danger if you go!”

Chapter Three

“What’s biting him?” Chris murmured. Van der Veen had left abruptly after delivering his strange warning. The young scientist was troubled by this surprising visit. Not because of what the Dutchman had said, but because one didn’t expect anything like that from a member of the carefully selected band of astronauts. Each man had been chosen for mental as well as physical fitness. Yet here was one of them behaving as if he was deranged. Come to think of it, Van der Veen had always seemed a little aloof from the others. He hadn’t the same “hail-fellow-well-met” outlook that was typical of these men who lived so dangerously. At times he’d seemed drawn into himself, as if he was absorbed in secret thoughts that no one else could share. Now, for some reason, he’d come to Chris and given him that astounding warning. Why?

Thoughtfully the young scientist looked into his mirror. He must certainly try to have another talk with Van der Veen. Then he would either find out what the chap was on about, or get confirmation that he was psychologically unfit for space travel. Why—the Dutchman must have come to his room the very minute he’d heard the news from Smokey! Hope he hadn’t been to any of the others, trying to scare them.

When they met for breakfast it was obvious that Van der Veen had confined his warning to Chris. It was also obvious that Smokey Thompson had spent a busy half hour. The quartet was surrounded by many of the other men, who questioned them enviously about the coming venture. Only the eight o’clock news bulletin saved Chris and his friends from the barrage.

The statement from the United Nations was repeated and everyone listened to it intently.

“Sir George Benson,” it said, “Director of the United Nations Exploration Agency, has announced that a landing

on the planet Mars is to be undertaken. The operation is scheduled for late July. The members of the expedition have already been selected and have commenced their training. A news conference will be held at 3 p.m.”

And that was all. Without listening to the rest of the bulletin the other astronauts resumed their questioning, and it was only after a strong protest by Chris that he and the other three were able to get any breakfast.

During the meal Chris's eyes wandered over the various tables. He couldn't see Van der Veen at any of them. The Dutchman didn't seem to be interested in breakfast that morning. Perhaps he'd have time to find out where the man's quarters were and pay him a visit, Chris thought. He was due for a run on the centrifuge, but not for a couple of hours. Plenty of time to go to the office, inquire the number of Van der Veen's room and then call on him.

Excusing himself to his three friends, Chris left the table when breakfast had barely finished. He soon found out that the Dutchman's room was number 34D. Determined to discover what lay behind his early visitor's strange actions, Chris strode along to D block. Outside number 34 he stopped and knocked firmly on the door.

There was no reply. Again Chris knocked, but without result. Tentatively he tried the door. It was unfastened and he pushed it open. There was no one inside, but the room looked very untidy, as if Van der Veen had hurriedly packed his belongings. Drawers and cupboards were open and mostly empty. Where had the Dutchman gone?

Now really concerned, Chris closed the door behind him and walked quickly back to the administrative building. The Commanding Officer hadn't yet come on duty, but the Adjutant saw him at once. Briefly Chris explained about his early morning visitor and how he'd found Van der Veen's room empty. Was he still in the Establishment? Chris asked.

The Adjutant was equally puzzled. As far as he knew the Dutchman should be following his normal routine. He'd

check with the guardroom. Picking up the telephone, he dialed a number and in a few seconds began to speak.

“Sergeant, can you tell me if Mr. Van der Veen has passed through the gates?”

There was a pause during which the sergeant was probably making inquiries.

“Hello, yes,” the Adjutant said suddenly. “He has? How long ago? I see. Er—sergeant, did Mr. Van der Veen seem—well—all right?”

Again the wait.

“Right. Thank you, sergeant. No, that’s all.”

“Well, that’s strange,” the Adjutant exclaimed as he replaced the receiver. “Van der Veen went through the gates ten minutes ago. He was carrying a suitcase and the sergeant says he seemed upset. I think perhaps we’d better get after him.”

“May I come?” Chris asked.

“Certainly. I’ll tell the C.O. and get a car round. He can’t have gone far yet.”

While the officer made his phone calls Chris wandered round the office, completely mystified by the strange actions of the Dutchman. It was strictly against regulations to leave the Establishment without reporting to the C.O. or Adjutant. Besides—what had made Van der Veen pack his kit as if he were not coming back? The fellow was in the middle of a training course! Must have had some sort of mental upheaval, was Chris’s conclusion.

“Ready?” the Adjutant called. A car could be heard outside. Chris nodded and the two men strode out quickly. At the gate the Adjutant stopped to speak to the sergeant who was waiting for them.

“He went that way, sir.” The N.C.O. indicated the direction, and the car shot off along the road.

“Must be making for the railway station,” the Adjutant remarked, but there was no sign of the Dutchman anywhere along the road. They reached the station and Chris and the officer jumped out. A quick word to the ticket collector and they were allowed through on to the platform.

“He says no trains have left for the last ten minutes,” the Adjutant told Chris as they hurried along, looking into all the waiting-rooms. In seven or eight minutes they had assured themselves that Van der Veen was not on the station. A train pulled in and the two men watched carefully but their quarry certainly didn’t get aboard.

“Let’s tour the roads for a bit. Perhaps he’s walking,” suggested Chris, and the officer agreed. The corporal who was driving the car had seen no sign of the missing man while they’d been on the station, so for the next hour they cruised around every road in the vicinity. It was no use. Van der Veen had disappeared into thin air.

“We’d better get back,” the Adjutant observed. “The C.O. will be wanting a report.” As the corporal drove them back to the Training Centre both men were busy with uneasy thoughts. What could Van der Veen mean about the terrible danger of the forthcoming expedition to Mars? How could he know anything about conditions on the planet? Was his warning the outcome of a sick mind? Chris asked himself.

For his part the Adjutant wondered where the Dutchman could possibly have gone. Why had he suddenly crooked up in spite of regular psychological examinations? Why should he want to run away from the Training Centre?”

While the Adjutant reported to the Commanding Officer, Chris went for his spin on the centrifuge. When it was over he found Morrey, Serge and Tony waiting for him impatiently.

“Where have you been all morning?” the American burst out. “We heard you’d scuttled out of the gates with the Adjutant. What’s cooking, Chris?”

Chris gave them a full account of the strange happenings

of the morning, and he was able to confirm that it was only to him that the agitated Van der Veen had spoken.

“Do you think he knows something we don’t?” asked Tony.

“Surely not. The astronomers have more information about Mars than he could possibly have,” Serge pointed out. “We should have been told already if we are likely to meet a particular danger.”

“I’m sure Uncle George would have given us the ‘gen’ on any special hazards,” Chris declared, and the others agreed with him.

No. Van der Veen must have had a mental breakdown. For his own sake he must be found, so that he could receive treatment. Poor chap! He was finished now for space travel. Mental health, as everyone knows, is as vital as physical fitness for the strains of rocket travel.

“Someone’s coming,” Tony called out suddenly. “Probably it’s you he’s after, Chris.”

They all turned and saw an orderly walking rapidly towards them. The man saluted smartly and immediately confirmed Tony’s guess.

“Mr. Godfrey, the C.O. would like to see you right away,” he said.

“Morning, Mr. Godfrey,” the Air Commodore greeted Chris a few moments later. “Take a seat. It’s about this Van der Veen business.”

Chris returned the C.O.’s greeting as he walked towards a vacant chair. There were about half a dozen men in the room, most of them in Air Force uniform. The Adjutant was sitting at the table beside the C.O.

“Well, gentlemen,” the Air Commodore began, “let’s see if we can get a picture of these disturbing events. I understand, Mr. Godfrey, that Van der Veen came to your room early this morning in an agitated condition; that he said something

which you couldn't understand and that he left your room abruptly?"

"Yes, sir, that's precisely what happened," Chris answered, and went on to repeat the Dutchman's strange warning as nearly as he could remember it.

"You think he did this because he'd heard that you are to explore Mars?"

"I believe so, sir. He came to my room a few minutes after Smokey—er Thompson—came in to tell me it had been on the seven o'clock news."

"Is Thompson available?" asked the C.O.

"He's just outside, sir," the Adjutant answered, jumping up. "I'll fetch him."

"Ah—Thompson," the C.O. said as Smokey came in. "Sit down and just tell us what happened this morning."

"Well, sir," Smokey began a trifle nervously, "I usually listen to the seven o'clock news. When the announcement came through about the expedition to Mars, I guessed it was Godfrey and his friends who were going. I rushed along to his room and he confirmed it. Of course I had to let the other chaps know, so I went along to tell a few of them."

"Did you include Van der Veen in your—er—itinerary?"

"Yes, sir. I was calling out to all the chaps on our corridor. Van der Veen's room is the last but one before the stairs," Smokey answered.

"What happened when you told the news to Van der Veen?" the Air Commodore asked.

"He was still asleep when I pushed my head round the door, but he woke up at once. I told him what I'd heard on the seven o'clock news and that we knew now where Godfrey and his crew would be going. Now I come to think back, he did look rather peculiar, but I didn't stop two seconds in his room and never thought any more about it till I was told he'd left the centre."

“Did he speak to you at all?”

“No, I don’t think he did. Not that I gave him much chance. I was in and out of his room very quickly,” Smokey told the C.O.

“Thank you, Thompson. Now is there anything more you can tell us about this affair?” the Air Commodore asked.

Smokey thought for a few seconds.

“No, sir. I don’t think there is anything else,” he said at last and, with permission, he saluted and left.

“What information can you medical chaps give us?” the C.O. asked, turning to two Squadron Leaders.

The first one, Lambert, opened a file of papers he was carrying.

“Physically,” the medical officer said, “Van der Veen was about ninety-eight per cent fit. He’d had a fairly rough time on his last assignment, but he was responding well to his training and would have been a hundred per cent in about two weeks’ time.”

Lambert then went on to give details of the Dutchman’s condition, quoting masses of figures and readings from the many instruments with which Van der Veen had been tested.

“I would say,” Squadron Leader Lambert concluded, “that there’s nothing here that could explain this extraordinary conduct.”

“Now let’s hear from you, Slattery,” the C.O. said, turning to the other officer.

“Well, sir, Van der Veen has been under my care off and on for two years and I’ve made a close study of his mental processes. He’s always been a good subject and psychologically suited in every way to the tasks required of him. However, after his last job—to which Lambert has already referred—I did find him in a very poor state. This might not be altogether surprising, as we well know, sir. But it was with Van der Veen. Normally he was a most

phlegmatic individual, but he was in a state of considerable tension when he came here some weeks ago.

“Had he improved?” the C.O. asked.

“Very considerably. I would say that his mental condition, like his physical, was almost back to normal. I just can’t understand this sudden relapse,” the psychologist sighed.

“Excuse me, sir,” Chris cut in, “just what was Van der Veen’s last mission?”

The Air Commodore turned to the Adjutant for the answer. That officer fumbled among his papers for a few seconds before extracting a typewritten foolscap sheet. He passed it silently to his Chief.

It took the Air Commodore about two minutes to read the page. In turn he handed it over to Chris. Eagerly the young scientist scanned the typewritten lines to try to find a clue to the Dutchman’s behaviour. Before he reached the bottom of the page he let out an exclamation and the others all looked at him keenly.

“He was on a manned space probe, sir,” Chris explained. “He made a solo journey of four and a half weeks, during which time he must have travelled out as far as the Le Prince layer of intense radiation lying between our orbit and that of Mars. He must have had a pretty hefty dose of radiation, sir.”

“He did, but we’d treated him for that,” Squadron Leader Lambert declared. “That wouldn’t make him go off the rails.”

“I agree,” Chris answered, “but something must have happened on that voyage that left a deep impression on his mind. The news of the Martian expedition seems to have triggered off his strange behaviour.”

“But what could it have been?” asked the C.O.

“I’ve no idea, sir. But one thing’s pretty certain. Van der Veen has been nearer to Mars than any other human being. He’s observed the planet from closer range than anyone. I can only guess that with the powerful optical telescope he

had with him in the probe he picked up something that upset him terribly.”

The Air Commodore was just about to say something when the phone bell rang. At once the Adjutant picked up the receiver and spoke briefly into the instrument. He listened for a few seconds and then, with a murmured word of thanks, returned it to its rest.

“That was the civilian police, sir,” he told the C.O. “They have picked up Van der Veen and are bringing him here.”

Chapter Four

“The poor chap is suffering from amnesia,” Chris told his three companions later that day.

“What’s that?” asked Tony.

“Loss of memory,” explained Morrey. “Haven’t they been able to get anything out of him?”

“Not a thing,” Chris answered. “Both the Squadron Leaders have been with him since they brought him back and put him into hospital. He doesn’t know who he is or anything about himself.”

“Where did the police find him?” Serge wanted to know.

“Huddled up in a bus shelter about four miles away,” Chris told him. “They brought him straight here.”

“Do you think there really is some danger on Mars and the Dutchman’s found it out?” asked Tony.

“I don’t know,” Chris admitted. “If he did, why didn’t he report it at once by radio or at least on his return? Maybe the whole thing was just poor old Van der Veen cracking up.”

“But you can’t be sure?” Tony persisted.

“No, we can’t be sure—not until we go there ourselves,” Chris concluded.

“Maybe if you saw him he’d tell you something,” suggested Morrey.

“I don’t think it will be any use,” Chris answered doubtfully, “but I’ll try.”

It wasn’t any use. When the scientist was taken into the ward by Squadron Leader Slattery he found the Dutchman just lying in bed and staring at the ceiling blankly. The patient made no reply when Chris spoke to him and the white-coated orderly who was on duty at the bedside reported that Van der Veen had been silent since admission.

As Chris looked down on those wide, blank eyes he wondered what it could have been that the astronaut had seen on his last fateful voyage.

The training of Chris and his friends went on apace, and as Van der Veen was soon removed to another hospital the incident was forgotten—almost. After another week at Farnborough the four were flown out to Cape Canaveral, the vast American rocket base in Florida. There one of the most exciting parts of their preparations began. It was the introduction to that new development in space travel, the ion motor.

When Chris saw this novel means of propulsion he was amazed at its compact size. The ion motor was scarcely any bigger than a large oil drum; it had been made possible because an Anglo-American research team had discovered an amazing new plastic. This provided complete protection against radiation, a bare quarter-inch being required compared with thicknesses of several inches of lead or two or three feet of concrete. A tremendous saving in the size and weight of the protective shield covering the motor was thus ensured.

In the mock cabin, built to represent the inside of their space vessel, a whole batch of novel instruments and controls was included. These were to operate and control the new motor. It was fascinating work learning to use them all. Tony was interested, for it would be his job as the mechanic to keep his eye on the motor during the voyage.

As soon as they had mastered the intricacies of the ion drive, the quartet had their first trial run. They were sealed inside their cabin and though they never left the ground; they went through all the routine as if they had been in flight. At a radio signal from Sir George Benson in the control room they switched on the ion motor just as they would have to do in their flight.

Because of the low thrust there was no danger of the cabin

being blasted-off from the test bed. Their main duty was to report on the dial readings and to monitor the cabin for any radiation that might be escaping. After six hours the signal came through to switch off the motor, for the test had been satisfactory in every way. As they all stepped out of the cabin Chris found it hard to contain his excitement, for here in this new device was a means of building up the fantastic speeds that would take Man beyond the solar system. Perhaps even to the nearest star.

As their training on Earth was drawing to its close, Chris and his crew became more and more impatient for their adventure to begin. By July 1st, exactly a fortnight before they were due to make the first stage of their journey—to the manned satellite—they felt the waiting becoming intolerable. Once Chris thought seriously of asking Sir George Benson if the date of departure could be brought forward, but a moment's sober thought convinced him that it would be out of the question to disarrange the complicated plans. So the request was never made.

Instead Chris asked his friend what they could do to make the period of waiting bearable. Benson was really too busy to have any time for devising plans to keep the crew occupied. Though he knew the strain this period of waiting could be, he also knew that it was anxiety to get on with the job that was causing their restlessness. In the early days of space travel even the boldest spirit quailed before the uncertainties and dangers of venturing beyond the Earth. Now that such journeys were commonplace, pre-blast-off nerves were no longer caused by the fight against fear.

“Why not take a short holiday back in England?” Sir George suggested to Chris. “You could get back here for the 8th or 10th. That should leave ample time for a final brush up before take-off.”

“We'll do that,” Chris agreed readily. All the crew had many friends back in the old country, and it would be good

to make a round of visits before returning to Cape Canaveral. Of course, number one on the visiting list of all of them was Whiskers Greatrex, their old friend who had been a constant companion in times gone by. Now, to his great disgust, Whiskers had no part in this latest adventure. The quartet knew how badly the ex-fighter pilot must be feeling, for he'd loved nothing better than to be their guide, philosopher and friend whenever they'd been training for important missions in the past.

Next morning Chris and his friends made the flight to London. Before the afternoon was over Chris had collected his car and met the others with bags ready packed.

"Shall we send him a wire?" asked Morrey.

"No, let's surprise him," Tony suggested, so they set out for the Wing Commander's cottage near Aylesbury.

"What does Whiskers do now?" Serge enquired as they drove along.

"Nothing," Chris sighed, "and he's finding it jolly hard work. Oh, I suppose he has his family and his garden to look after, but retirement is tough for a character like Whiskers."

The town of Aylesbury was a busy place that afternoon and once Chris almost overran a traffic signal, so intently was he watching a little knot of pedestrians. About half a mile out of the town he slowed down.

"The cottage is a couple of hundred yards down the first lane on the left," Chris explained to his passengers. "I hope Whiskers is at home."

"Maybe he'll be on vacation somewhere," Morrey said. "Hope we haven't come for nothing."

"If we wish to surprise our good friend Whiskers, that is a chance we have had to take," pointed out Serge.

Chris turned down the lane and drove very slowly along. Round a bend they could see the black and white half-timbered building where the Greatrex family lived. Chris

switched off the engine, and they coasted along silently for the last fifty yards.

“There he is,” Morrey called suddenly, for he’d spotted their old friend through a gap in the hedge. Whiskers, they could see, was staring with disgust at the lawn mower which he’d just finished using. A smell of new-mown grass advertised the Wing Commander’s recent occupation. Now, a little warm from the exercise and with the famous moustache drooping a little disconsolately, he was preparing to clean the mower before putting it away.

Quietly, without closing the car doors because of the noise, the four companions climbed out and stood silently watching their old friend begin his hated task. Then, when they were in danger of betraying themselves, Tony put his fingers to his mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

Instantly Whiskers stopped his job and stood up, looking around. For a few seconds he couldn’t make out where the sound had come from. Then he spotted four grinning faces the other side of the hedge. With a tremendous whoop of joy, the Wing Commander abandoned his task and bellowed to his friends to come right in. Almost falling over himself in his enthusiasm, he rushed forward to greet them.

Sylvia, Greatrex’s long-suffering wife, had emerged from the cottage to see what all the noise was about. When she saw Chris and his companions she joined her husband in making the young men welcome.

“Where are you staying tonight?” Whiskers demanded over their long cool glasses of cider.

“Oh, we’ll get off back to town later,” Chris answered for them all.

“You jolly well won’t,” the indignant Wing Commander protested. “We can squeeze them in somewhere, can’t we, Sylvia?”

Mrs. Greatrex gave a resigned smile. She was quite used to her husband’s gestures of hospitality, which he made without

thinking of the domestic upheaval that might be caused. Besides, she too was very fond of these four young men.

“Yes, I think we can manage it,” she said. “The boys are away at school. You can have their rooms if you don’t mind squeezing two in a bed.”

So it was arranged. After supper they sat talking till far into the night. The Wing Commander listened enviously to the plans of the four young men. He questioned them closely about their expedition to Mars and speculated with them on what they would find. Chris and his companions were full of confidence in the success of their forthcoming venture and they told Whiskers of the meticulous care with which all preparations were being made.

Quite by chance Chris mentioned the incident of poor Van der Veen during their training at Farnborough. Like his guests, Whiskers was puzzled by the affair and said it was a pity that the Dutchman couldn’t give a coherent account of his fears. When Chris mentioned Squadron Leaders Lambert and Slattery, the ex-fighter pilot beamed, for he knew them both well.

“I believe they spend quite a bit of time at Halton,” he said, mentioning the big R.A.F. station a few miles away. Attached to the station was a large hospital which took all kinds of cases from plastic surgery to psychiatric illness. “Maybe I could look them up and find out how the poor chap is.”

“Do that,” Morrey said. “He was a decent fellow, that Dutchman. We were all sorry he cracked up that way.”

Next morning Mrs. Greatrex allowed her guests to sleep on, but insisted on her reluctant husband rising at his usual time to get on with his regular chores.

“Wish I was back in the Service,” Whiskers grumbled silently to himself. “At least I did the ordering about then.”

It was nearly eleven o’clock when all four young men appeared, looking rather sheepish.

“Slept like tops,” Morrey explained on behalf of them all.

“Thought you were never going to get up,” the Wing Commander growled, but Sylvia greeted them with an excellent breakfast.

“Think you’ll be able to come again before you go back to Cape Canaveral?” Whiskers asked wistfully as his friends were taking their leave.

“I don’t know, but we’ll try,” Chris promised. “You see, we’re off to Wolverton now to see Aunt Mary, then we’re going to Birmingham to call on Tony’s parents. Morrey and Serge both want to look up some friends in London, so we’ll be pretty busy in the short time we have left.”

“Do try,” pleaded the Wing Commander. “But if you can’t, Sylvia and I wish you all the very best on the Mars trip. When you’re up there, think of me cutting this confounded lawn.”

After they’d gone, gloom settled on the unhappy Whiskers. For the next few days he was like a bear with a sore head. Even his wife’s threat to give him a good beating failed to restore his good humour. When he heard from Chris that they would be unable to call again before flying back to the Cape his despondency became deeper. Even a chance meeting with his old friend Squadron Leader Lambert in the Bull Hotel at Aylesbury did not cheer him.

“What’s biting you?” the Squadron Leader demanded over their tankards.

“Oh, just fed up with being on the shelf, I suppose,” Whiskers confessed. “Those four young blighters have made me feel more browned-off than ever.”

“Chris Godfrey and his friends? So they’ve been to see you, have they? I might have guessed they wouldn’t have gone on this flip without looking you up. How were they?”

Whiskers told his friend about the quartet’s flying visit and mentioned that Chris had told him about the strange incident with the Dutchman.

“Yes, poor chap,” Lambert said. “He’s here at Halton. I come and see him every week, but he’s not much better. Slattery hasn’t managed to sort anything out either.”

“Does he have any visitors? Has he any people over here?”

“His parents did come and see him a fortnight ago, but they’ve gone back to Amsterdam now. I don’t think anyone else visits him,” answered Lambert.

“Any objection if I call some time?” Whiskers asked. “It would give me an excuse to dodge cutting the lawn.”

“By all means,” the Squadron Leader agreed. “If you’ll let me know when it’s to be I’ll invite you to lunch in the Mess.”

“That’s clinched it,” Whiskers chuckled. “Now let me pay for the next drink on the strength of it.”

“Van der Veen is in Ward 23B,” Squadron Leader Lambert told Greatrex a few days later. Whiskers, feeling miserable, had suddenly remembered his undertaking to visit the Dutchman, and when he phoned the hospital he learned that it was Lambert’s visiting day also. The two men had just finished lunch at the adjoining Mess and Whiskers was now ready to make his call.

“Sorry I can’t be with you,” the Squadron Leader went on. “I’ve some more patients to see, but Sister will take you along.”

Whiskers followed his friend’s directions and made his way to “B” Block. Just inside he was met by the nursing sister.

“This way, sir,” the sister said briskly, and Whiskers followed her along a corridor. She opened a door and he followed her inside.

“A visitor for you, Mr. Van der Veen,” she called to the patient.

Whiskers saw a pale, still figure in the bed. The big dark

eyes were staring up at the ceiling. At first he thought the Dutchman hadn't heard, but gradually, as if with a tremendous effort, Van der Veen lowered his eyes and rested them on the visitor. The few seconds during which they looked at him intensely made the Wing Commander feel vaguely uneasy. Then, without speaking, Van der Veen turned his gaze back to the same spot on the ceiling.

"He hardly ever speaks," explained the sister as she pushed a chair forward. "Don't stay too long, will you?"

Whiskers thanked her and promised not to. Then he sat down and looked at the strange man in the bed. He was alone now with Van der Veen, for the sister had gone, closing the door quietly behind her.

So this was the man who had been farther from Earth than any other human being! This was the astronaut who had made the deep probe in the direction of Mars. Was his present derangement a result of his voyage? The doctors didn't seem certain. Suppose there was a terrible danger awaiting Chris and his companions. How tragic it would be if this sick man knew about it and was unable to pass on the information!

"Hello, old chap," Whiskers said quietly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

The Dutchman gave no sign that he'd heard and continued to stare blankly ahead. His visitor tried again.

"I'm not a doctor," he said. "I'm a very close friend of Chris Godfrey—the fellow who's going to Mars."

Whiskers fancied he detected a quiver on the patient's face, and his fixed gaze faltered for a moment.

"Chris has told me about you," Whiskers went on. "He said you gave him a warning. What was it, old chap?"

This time he was sure the Dutchman had responded. For a moment the dark eyes were switched to the visitor's face before returning to the ceiling overhead.

“You asked him not to go to Mars, to cancel the expedition,” Whiskers continued relentlessly. He had stood up now and was bending over the man in the bed, who was forced to look into his face. “You said he would be in great danger. What is that danger?” Whiskers asked. His words were slow and forceful. With every ounce of his willpower he was trying to capture the patient’s attention and to penetrate the intangible barrier he’d drawn across his mind.

“Chris is my friend,” Whiskers repeated, trying to hold the Dutchman’s eyes. “What—danger—is—he—in?”

A spasm as of pain flashed over Van der Veen’s face. His mouth worked and Whiskers thought he was going to speak. But no words came and he turned his head away in torment. Whiskers altered his position to recapture the patient’s attention. Beads of perspiration were standing on his forehead—so intense was his effort of concentration.

“Chris is my friend. You must tell me about the danger,” he insisted.

Van der Veen’s face was working pitifully.

“D-danger!” he gasped.

Chapter Five

“Yes—danger,” Whiskers repeated. “You must tell me about the danger. Then I will tell Chris.”

“He—he must not go,” the tortured voice gasped. “There is—great danger.”

“Yes, yes. But what is the danger?” Whiskers asked earnestly.

Van der Veen’s face was twisted with anguish. The Wing Commander was deeply sorry for the distress his questions had caused, but for the sake of his friend and the other members of the crew he felt he had to get an answer from the sick man at all costs.

“What is the danger?” he repeated. “If you will tell me I can pass it on to Chris. Maybe it’s not too late to stop the expedition.”

Now the Dutchman’s eyes turned and looked on his visitor like two burning coals.

“You—can—stop—him?” he asked hoarsely.

“Yes. If you can tell me all you know. Not otherwise.”

Again Van der Veen’s features were contorted by his memories, and as the seconds ticked by Whiskers began to doubt whether his efforts had been worthwhile. Then the patient, slowly and painfully, began to speak.

“The voices,” he gasped. “I heard voices.”

Whisker’s first reaction was that Van der Veen’s mind had given way altogether and that he was suffering from a kind of delusion common in mental cases.

“What voices?” he asked patiently.

“On the radio,” the man in the bed replied, his eyes pleading for belief. “I heard voices on the radio.”

“Of course you did,” Whiskers agreed soothingly. “They came from Control.”

“No, no,” the Dutchman cried, “they were voices from space—not human voices.”

“Come, now, old chap. Of course they were human voices. Probably the ground staff giving you instructions.”

Desperately the sick man sat up and grasped his visitor’s lapel.

“They were voices from space, I tell you. I was through the Le Prince layer.”

“What has the Le Prince layer to do with it?” the Wing Commander asked gently.

Van der Veen sank back on to his bed wearily. He closed his eyes but continued to speak.

“Communication with Earth was normal for five million miles,” he said in a voice so low that his visitor had to bend forward to catch the words. “Then the ship entered the Le Prince radiation belt. Radio blotted out both ways. Nothing for many hours. It was—horrible.”

“Go on,” Whiskers urged.

“Then the ship passed beyond the belt. At once I heard them.”

“It must have been Earth again, old chap,” Whiskers said.

“No. The belt cuts off radio completely. No waves can pass through it. They were different voices—horrible voices.”

Whiskers was puzzled. He was inclined to treat the Dutchman’s words as the product of a sick mind, but he felt a growing doubt whether they could be brushed off so lightly.

“Did you report this?” he asked.

“I—I tried to,” Van der Veen answered, “but I was sick and people thought I was mad. When I heard your friend was going to Mars, it all boiled up inside me again. I do not know what happened until I found myself in hospital.”

In spite of himself Whiskers was almost convinced. The patient's words had seemed rational enough—allowing for the terrible memories that accompanied them.

“Could you understand the voices?” he asked. “Did you record them?”

“The voices were speaking, but not in any earthly language. I did record them, but the magnetic force in the Le Prince layer wiped the tapes clean each time I passed through. There is only my word for it,” Van der Veen concluded. He was exhausted now and his voice was barely audible. Whiskers knew he would drag out nothing more that day. Perhaps if he came back tomorrow he'd be able to get more sense out of the poor chap, for he was sure now that to do so was vital.

When was it Chris and his friends were being ferried out to Alpha on the first stage of their journey? Heavens! It was tomorrow, July 15th. Whiskers was very troubled as he drove the few miles from Halton hospital back home. He knew that, somehow, he'd had more information from Van der Veen than the doctors had had. Was it only the Dutchman's rambling?

If it was true, it would certainly be a pretty shattering experience to overhear conversations from other worlds. Even if they couldn't be understood, it would be creepy to hear voices of beings from space. He'd often heard it argued that there couldn't be intelligent life on other worlds, otherwise we should have had messages from them. Or at least we should have been able to pick up some of their radio signals. Now, if Van der Veen was right, the Le Prince layer effectively blanketed all radio waves, and only beyond was it possible to hear the multitudinous voices of space.

When Whiskers reached home he garaged his car thoughtfully.

“What's biting you?” Sylvia asked as she saw the unaccustomed frown on her husband's face. “I know. You wish you were off with Chris and the others.”

The Wing Commander smiled and kissed his wife.

“No, darling. That isn’t what’s nagging at me—though I’d be lying if I said I don’t miss being along with them. No. The trouble is, I just can’t make up my mind whether or not to pay any attention to that Dutchman.”

He told his wife what had happened at the hospital and repeated the strange tale of the patient.

“Well, suppose there is something in what he said. How are strange voices on the radio going to be a danger to Chris?” asked the practical Sylvia.

“It would prove the universe is peopled with intelligent creatures,” Whiskers pointed out, “and they may, or may not, welcome our intrusion. But what I’m chiefly worried about is the shock it will be to our friends if they hear these strange sounds without being warned. Maybe they would have the same effect on them as they did on Van der Veen.”

“Rubbish,” Mrs. Greatrex insisted. “They’re all level-headed young men, and they wouldn’t be scared.”

“Van der Veen was level-headed before he went on his last trip,” Whiskers pointed out. “He wouldn’t have been selected otherwise.”

“Well, he’s a sick man now,” Sylvia insisted, “and I wouldn’t pay any attention to his ramblings.”

“I don’t know what to do,” her husband confessed with a sigh. “If only Benny was here I’d let him sort it out.”

“Can’t you call him on the phone, or something?”

“At Cape Canaveral? Some call that would be!” Whiskers moaned.

“If you’re so worried it would be worth it. Oh! Can you get yourself something to eat? I’m due at the Vicarage in five minutes,” Sylvia said.

“You buzz off, old girl. I’ll manage. Yes. I think I’ll put that call through,” the Wing Commander muttered as his wife

closed the door behind her. "It'll be a bit expensive though."

He reached for the phone and spoke to the operator.

"Did Sir George sort it out for you?" Sylvia asked as she hung up her coat.

"How did you know I'd called him?" asked her mystified husband.

"Go on with you, you great baby," Mrs. Greatrex laughed. "I knew you'd be on the phone before I was out of the house. Come on. What did Sir George say?"

"I had a bit of a job to get him," Whiskers confessed, "but in the end I managed it. He was very busy, of course. Chris and company leave for Alpha tomorrow. Anyhow, I told him all Van der Veen had said. He suggested I take a tape of what he lets out when I visit him tomorrow and send it on to him."

"Good. Then you needn't worry any more," Sylvia said briskly.

"Oh, but I am worried," Whiskers complained. "I haven't got a spare tape for my recorder."

"Aren't you just the limit?" Sylvia said with a heavy sigh. "There's a new tape in the top drawer of the sideboard—just where you put it a fortnight ago."

The telephone bell rang at 1.30 a.m. It took several nudges from Sylvia before her husband ceased snoring and returned to consciousness sufficiently to hear the bell. Grumbling and cursing the unknown caller, Whiskers padded along to take the call, while his wife strained her ears to catch what was said.

Mrs. Greatrex heard her husband's querulous voice as he picked up the receiver. The next instant it had changed completely. Whiskers was talking excitedly.

"Hello, Benny," she heard him say. "No, don't apologize.

It's quite all right. Yes, I'm sure I could. I'll fix it with Sylvia now. Be seeing you. 'Bye.'

"What was all that in aid of?" Mrs. Greatrex asked, as a flushed and excited Whiskers returned to the bedroom.

"It was Benny. He thinks there may be something in the Dutchman's ramblings after all. He—he wants me to fly out with that tape tomorrow."

For a few moments Sylvia was silent while her husband watched her face anxiously. Then a slow smile of resignation spread over it.

"Then you'd better get a good night's sleep before the journey, hadn't you?" she said.

First thing in the morning Whiskers was on the phone to the hospital asking how soon he could see Van der Veen. Ten minutes later, complete with tape recorder, he set off with his car.

This time the patient looked at his visitor at once. As soon as they were alone Whiskers spoke, trying to keep his voice as calm and soothing as possible.

"I've news for you, old chap," he said. "I phoned Sir George Benson at Cape Canaveral yesterday evening and told him all you said. He must believe you, because he phoned me back in the early hours and spoilt my beauty sleep. I'm to get you to repeat everything you can remember while I record it on this tape. Then he wants me to fly it to him at once."

The Dutchman's face flushed, and for an awful moment Whiskers thought the man was going to weep, so great was his relief that the famous scientist thought there was something in his story.

"That's good," he said after a while. "Set the machine going and I'll tell you all I can."

Chapter Six

Sir George Benson had been surprised to receive a telephone call from his old friend. Had it been anyone else on the line he would have refused to take the call, for he was desperately busy with the final preparations for the Martian expedition. He couldn't refuse to speak to old Whiskers, however, but the call would have to be a brief one.

When Benson had heard the Wing Commander's account of what Van der Veen had said, he was frankly puzzled. Of course he'd heard all about the incident at Farnborough, and had been sorry to learn that an astronaut had cracked up so badly. But now it seemed that Whiskers was half inclined to take the Dutchman seriously.

For some time after he'd said good-bye to his friend, Sir George Benson turned the strange story over in his mind. He recalled the discovery of this distant belt of radiation by the French scientist Jules-Robert Le Prince. Its presence had first been suspected way back in 1985, when deep space probes registered an unexpected increase in radiation at a distance of some five million miles from the Earth. Even before that, he recalled, a Venus probe launched by the Russians in 1961 had become unaccountably silent when about this distance on its journey. Not only had Jodrell Bank definitely bounced signals back from Venus but also Mariner II, launched in 1962, had radioed back, and—much later—Chris and his friends had communicated from Earth's twin planet.

It was quite evident that the Le Prince layer was not distributed uniformly. Like the well known Van Allen layer, it had certain gaps, if these could be charted. Van der Veen had certainly passed through the thick of it. Then, if there was any substance in the Dutchman's ramblings, space was full of voices which can never reach the Earth.

Benson wished he had time to fly back to Britain and see Van der Veen for himself. He regretted very much that he

hadn't done so before, for he would have liked to form his own opinion on whether there might be any substance in what the sick man was saying. However, he had a great deal of confidence in the plain common sense of Whiskers, and the fact that the Wing Commander had thought it necessary to phone him showed that he thought there might be something in it. But it was out of the question for the scientist to leave his job. In less than twenty hours the ferry rocket would leave, carrying the Martian expedition to Alpha.

Then Sir George had an idea. If he couldn't go to England, why not get Whiskers to come out to the Cape? He smiled to himself as he pictured his old friend's reaction to the suggestion. He'd be as excited as any schoolboy about to make his first trip in a rocket. Bit rough on Sylvia, perhaps, dragging her husband away. But Sylvia was a very understanding woman. She had to be—with Whiskers!

It was eight thirty in the evening when Sir George put through his call. Though he knew it would be 1.30 a.m. in England he had no qualms about rousing the Greatrex household. To hear an account of the Voices in the Dutchman's own words was really important. Only then could he decide what action to take.

Chris and the other members of his crew had spent a quiet day. Their briefing was over, their training complete. Now they had only to wait for the take-off, which was timed for 1000 hours next morning. This was the most difficult time of all. From experience of many rocket journeys, Chris knew that the last few hours were deadly. The clock seemed to crawl and nerves began to fray. It was now that they missed old Whiskers, for he'd always been a great standby during this difficult period.

They hadn't seen Sir George for some hours. Of course, he had his hands full with preparations for the launching, but Chris formed the opinion that his friend was deliberately

keeping away. When at last Benson did pay a visit to the crew's quarters he excused himself and promised to see them all in the morning. As he was going Sir George caught Chris's attention, and an almost imperceptible movement of the head indicated that Chris was to follow him outside.

After an interval of a couple of minutes Chris told his colleagues he was going outside for a breath of air and left them to their game of cards. In the shadows he spotted Sir George and went over to join him.

"Glad you were able to slip away," Benson began in a low voice. "I wanted to have a talk with you."

He told Chris of Whiskers's visit to the Dutchman, of what the patient had said, and of Whiskers's telephone call to him. When he went on to say that he'd asked the Wing Commander to take a recording of Van der Veen's statement and fly over to the Cape with it, Chris knew that the scientist was disturbed.

"So you think there may be something in what Van der Veen says?" he asked.

Benson replied cautiously. "I can't quite decide. The Dutchman's lapse seems inexplicable unless he had some terrible shock on his last voyage. I've checked up on the evidence available. It does seem to confirm that the Le Prince layer is blocking off quite a range of radio waves—certainly those most suitable for communication. When Van der Veen penetrated the layer he'd be flooded with all sorts of radio signals from space."

"And you think he did hear Voices?"

"I wouldn't like to say. But even if it's only remotely possible, it's a chance I'm not prepared to take," Benson said.

"What harm could the Voices do to us?" Chris asked. "They'd only be sounds on the radio."

"Again the answer is 'I don't know'," Benson sighed, "but if they do exist they've had a pretty shocking effect on Van der Veen. We mustn't risk the same thing happening to your

crew.”

“Come off it,” Chris laughed, “you don’t think these sounds on the radio—however weird they are—could send us round the bend, do you?”

“The older I get,” Benson answered, “the more certain I am that Mankind hasn’t yet even dipped its big toe into the vast ocean of knowledge. What effect these Voices would have on humans, I wouldn’t like to guess.”

“But if we’re prepared for them, it won’t be any shock if we hear them,” Chris insisted. “You’re not altering our plans, are you?”

“No,” Sir George replied, “they’re too far advanced to be modified, except for the most vital reason. Besides—the Voices may be pure hallucination.”

“So Whiskers is coming tomorrow, is he? Don’t suppose he’ll arrive till after we’ve blasted-off. No chance of holding up the count-down is there?” asked Chris.

Benson smiled.

“You know the answer to that one, don’t you? No, I’m afraid you’ll miss our mutual friend, but no doubt he’ll be hanging round for a bit, so you can chatter to him on the radio,” he said. “Well, you’d better turn in now. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Er—what will happen when you’ve heard Van der Veen’s tape?” Chris wanted to know before his friend left.

Sir George’s face became serious.

“If I think it necessary I’ll get in touch with you about it on Alpha. Meanwhile don’t alarm the others. There may be nothing in it after all.”

Long after he’d said good-bye to his friend Chris was thinking of their conversation. Long after the crew had turned in to spend their last night for some time in an earthly bed, he lay awake. Suppose—just suppose—Space was filled with those creepy voices that had played such havoc with the

Dutchman. What would their effect be on Tony, on Serge, on Morrey, and even on himself? Were they all of stronger calibre than Van der Veen? If not, the results might be serious. Ah well, Sir George would know what to do, he told himself sleepily as he finally settled down in bed.

Next morning the members of the Martian expedition were roused early. The time for action had now come. Each of them had made many journeys into space before but still they would feel the usual “butterflies” in the stomach until their ship was on the way. The last hours of the count-down had always been a miserable time for astronauts.

When the time came for the space suits to be donned, the last good-byes to old friends, and the final checks of their equipment, Chris began to think that Sir George wouldn't come. But just as the crew was about to climb into the jeep that would carry them to the tall silver space ship, the scientist came hurrying up.

“Nearly missed you,” he apologized, “but I've been arranging for some extra equipment to be stowed into your ship. I'll tell you all about it when you're comfortably settled in Alpha.”

He shook the hands of all four warmly, for he'd seen these young men off on many perilous voyages. Their coolness and courage had won his admiration, and he wished them well on this latest venture. As he shook hands with Chris their eyes met. It was more than friendship between these two, but neither would admit what they felt at this parting.

“I'll let you know,” Benson managed to whisper.

Then the astronauts climbed into the vehicle and were whisked away to the launching site.

“Any idea what the extra payload is?” asked Morrey as they trundled along.

“Not the slightest,” Chris was able to answer truthfully, though he had his suspicions that it had something to do with the Voices. Couldn't be an instrument, he told himself,

for we'd have been briefed on how to work it.

Serge led the way into the lift at the foot of the gantry. One by one they were whisked up through the huge lattice work of metal till they reached the platform against the entrance to their cabin. Then they followed each other through the hatch and began the business of settling on to their contour couches. With some assistance they managed the operation, talking cheerfully to the mechanics who were fastening them down. A final check of the radio and the oxygen supply and the signal was given for the hatch to be closed.

“Everyone all right?” Chris asked with forced gaiety, and they all replied quickly that they were. It was always a tense moment before blast-off, for occasionally things still went wrong among the thousands of complicated parts making up a rocket. Even if no harm was done, it was very nerve-racking to hold up the count-down while repairs were made.

This time all was well, and Control signalled that the last few minutes had arrived. The four friends fell silent as they heard on their radios the calm distant voice call out the passing seconds.

It was a perfect take-off. With just the slightest quiver the rocket rose on its tail of fire and climbed faster and faster into the sky. Sir George Benson, watching the vehicle grow smaller, sighed. His young friends were now on their way. He'd have to be very sure before he cancelled the expedition. So much labour had been expended, so many new techniques were being tested, so much information would be obtained! Even if he believed in the existence of the Voices, would he be justified in wasting the tremendous effort that had gone into preparing the Martian expedition?

Inside the cabin the crew lay silently on their couches. Though they could speak with difficulty it was better not to talk until the tremendous pressure of the acceleration had eased. The two minutes seemed a long time in passing, but at the end of them they all sighed with relief and sat up on their couches. Now they were coasting along in a weightless

condition, and when they released their safety belts they floated grotesquely about the cabin.

Now they had no sense of “up” or “down”. Only reason told them which was the floor of their cabin. They chatted gaily while they affixed their magnetic shoes, which would give them some control over their movements. This done, they clumped along to their posts and began to transmit data to Control. From this computers would calculate the exact manoeuvre required to carry them into the same orbit as the space station Alpha.

“What’s it like?” asked Tony as soon as their immediate tasks were over. The mechanic was the only one of the quartet who had never visited the man-made satellite.

“It’s like a great big wheel,” Morrey told him. “They assembled it piece by piece out in space. Parts were ferried out to the right orbit and put together by a team of chaps specially trained.”

“But why is it shaped like a wheel?” Tony wanted to know.

“Because it is designed to revolve slowly to simulate gravity,” Serge answered. “The rim of the wheel is a huge hollow tube in which the crew live and do much of their work. Centrifugal force is a substitute for gravity, and this helps them to operate inside the station more easily and for longer periods than if they were weightless.”

“There are five passages leading from the rim like hollow spokes,” Chris said, taking up the description. “These end in the central hub which is the nerve centre of the station.”

“Where will our ion rocket be?” the mechanic enquired.

“I expect it’s been assembled near the hub,” Chris told him,

“In open space?”

“Of course. It would be safer there, because of radiation from the fuel. I expect it’s attached to Alpha in some way so that it doesn’t go wandering off into space without us.”

“How many people are there on Alpha?” Tony asked.

“More than a hundred, I believe,” Serge told him. “Of course they are relieved at regular intervals. I have heard that soon the station will be enlarged by adding an outer rim. Then the establishment will be over two hundred men.”

“But what do they all do?” the mechanic enquired.

“Oh, they take masses of observations—astronomic, radiation, magnetic, meteorologic, and many others,” Morrey answered. “They have launched one or two space probes, but never one on the scale of ours.”

“One last question,” Tony said with an apologetic smile. “How will we locate Alpha?”

“Easily,” Chris assured him. “We’re being put into the same orbit. Then a radar beam will lock on to it and guide us towards it. Just as anti-aircraft missiles operated twenty years ago.”

Now their attention was claimed by the voice of Control coming from the loudspeaker.

“You are now in orbit and will lock on to Alpha in thirty-one minutes,” it said. “Contact will be made fourteen minutes later and you will report to Commander Barnwell as soon as you have transferred.”

Tony whistled. In three-quarters of an hour they would be inside this fabulous space station he’d heard so much about. And then the final preparations for their journey to Mars would begin.

Chapter Seven

“Hello, Whiskers!”

“Hello, Benny, old boy!”

The two friends greeted each other warmly as the ex-fighter pilot emerged from the plane that had just touched down on the Cape Canaveral airfield. Whiskers was carefully carrying a package which Sir George rightly guessed contained the all-important tape record. Neither of them spoke about it as they hurried off to Sir George’s quarters, where a meal was waiting for the new arrival.

“How’s the expedition going?” Whiskers asked as they settled down afterwards.

“They should just about be coming up to Alpha,” Benson replied. “The take-off was uneventful, of course, and Chris reports everything fine in the rocket.”

“How is Chris? Are they all fit?”

“Quite fit. Bit disappointed at not seeing you. At least Chris was. The others don’t know anything about this affair yet. Maybe I won’t have to worry them about it after all.”

“I’m afraid you will, Benny,” Whiskers said seriously. “I think when you hear Van der Veen’s story in his own words from this tape, you’ll believe—as I do—that there’s something in his story. When do you want to hear it?”

“Might as well waste no time,” Sir George replied. “I’ve fixed up the machine in my office. Let’s get over there now, shall we?”

Greatrex stood up and the two men walked the few yards to the scientist’s office. A tape machine was ready on the table. Whiskers unwrapped his package and busied himself in putting the reel into position. Benson watched silently. When the job was done, Greatrex turned to his companion and spoke seriously.

“When I visited Van der Veen twelve hours ago, he seemed much improved,” he began. “I think the fact that someone was paying attention to his story has had a great effect on him. Because everyone had thought his mind was wandering, he had begun to believe it himself. This morning I told him you wanted to hear his report for yourself, and I think that did the poor chap more good than all the treatment he’s had since he broke down.”

“Let it run,” Sir George said shortly.

Whiskers switched on the machine and waited.

After a brief silence while the tape was running through, Whiskers’s own voice sounded. He was explaining to Van der Veen that he’d been requested by Sir George Benson, the scientist in charge of the Martian project, to record his story so that he, Benson, could have it first hand. Then it would be decided what action, if any, should be taken in connection with the expedition to Mars.

The Dutchman’s voice came back, a little incoherently at first, but under Whiskers’s repeated encouragement, with increasing confidence and clarity. He told the story of his deep space probe, and repeated facts about it quite lucidly. He described the effect of the Le Prince layer on his instruments and how it had completely blanketed his communications with Earth. It was only when he tried to describe the fearsome Voices that came flooding in as soon as he was beyond the layer that his voice broke again and his report became disjointed.

The recording revealed that Whiskers had tried to draw more information from the patient, but without success. Then, as the Dutchman became calmer, he was able to reveal that all proof of what he’d heard was lost when his rocket returned through the Le Prince layer and his tape was wiped clear by its peculiar electrical conditions. But no magnetic field could wipe away the memory of the Voices, and on his return to Earth Van der Veen had vainly tried to convince someone of their existence. His failure to do so had been a

major factor in his breakdown.

At last the recording ended and Whiskers switched off the machine.

“What do you think, Benny?” he asked his companion.

“I think as you do,” the scientist replied thoughtfully. “The chap seems rational enough until he tries to describe the Voices, and then he goes to pieces completely. If they exist, and I’m inclined to believe they do, these Voices must have a pretty shattering effect on the human mind. According to all reports, Van der Veen was as normal as you or I before his journey.”

“But what about Chris and the others?” Whiskers asked anxiously. “If you accept only the possibility of the Dutchman’s story being correct, won’t you be cancelling the Martian expedition?”

Sir George sighed heavily. Many times before he’d been faced with a terrible decision such as this. Often it had involved risks to the lives of others—including Chris. To him the pursuit of knowledge was of paramount importance; it mattered more than his own life, and even those of his friends. If the Voices of outer space existed, it was one of the most important discoveries of all time. The mind positively boggled at all the implications that would follow. Cost what it might, the question must be settled. The whole future of Mankind might well depend on it.

“It’s the old, old question,” Sir George answered at last. “The safety of the few weighed against the interests of the many. All through the ages Man has been faced with this choice. It is only by choosing the path of danger that he has been able to master the world around him. It is only by a similar choice that he will get to know other worlds. The expedition will go on.”

“But will they be told of the dangers they face?” Whiskers wanted to know.

“Of course,” Benson assured him. “They will even have the

opportunity of refusing to go if they wish. You and I know all four too well to believe they would do that, but nevertheless they could.”

“What can you do to reduce the danger?” asked Whiskers.

“One way is to tell them to shut down the radio, and then the Voices won’t be able to harm them—though that won’t teach us much about these mysterious sounds from space. The other way is to prepare them psychologically as much as possible so that they will be able to listen to, and record, the Voices without suffering the same fate as Van der Veen.”

“How will you do that?”

“It will have to be done over the radio once they are settled in Alpha. I’ll get some specialists to work out a programme right away. We shall have six days in which to do the job.”

“Did you say ‘record the Voices’? I thought the Le Prince layer made that useless,” Whiskers said with a puzzled frown.

“I made a last-minute addition to their payload,” Benson explained. “One item was a special radio set with ultra-fine tuning. The other was a heavy plastic container of the same material as the shield of the ion rocket. The radio set should help them to tune in to a particular Voice, and the container will, I hope, ensure the safe return of the tape record.”

“Seems to me that confirming or disproving the existence of the Voices is more important than the landing on Mars,” the Wing Commander mused.

“You may well be right,” Sir George agreed, “but we shall try to do both.”

“Asking a lot, aren’t you?” Whiskers laughed.

“We must do our best with the tax-payer’s money,” Benson replied modestly.

“Made it!”

It was Tony who let out the exclamation as the space station's electro-magnets seized their rocket firmly and held it fast. After the radar had locked on to Alpha, their rocket had steadily drawn nearer. By firing small auxiliary rockets they had drawn right alongside, and now Alpha was clutching them tightly in its landing bay. Soon they could leave and climb up into the huge space station where they would prepare finally for the great adventure.

As soon as they heard over the radio that the satellite's landing crew were ready for them, Morrey and Serge began to unfasten the hatch of the cabin. Before the final catches were released they all put on their suits as a routine precautionary measure. At a signal from Chris the hatch was swung open and they peered eagerly through it to see the men outside.

His magnetic shoes holding him from floating about, Tony was the first to climb out of the rocket. He found himself in a smallish chamber where several space-suited men were waiting to help him. This was the airlock leading into the hub of the satellite. While the mechanic was exchanging greetings with the landing crew over his helmet radio, his companions joined him. A shutter was closed over the way they had entered, and now they waited to be admitted to Alpha. Tony was agog to explore this marvellous man-made world.

A switch on the wall pressed by one of the landing crew caused the air-lock door to open. Through it they could see a brightly lit passage with several men waiting to assist them from their suits. Chris and his companions stepped through. It would be a pleasant relief to be rid of their space gear for a few days.

"Commander Barnwell is looking forward to meeting you," one of the satellite's crew told them as soon as they had been divested.

"Good," Chris answered. "We'd like to see him as soon as possible."

It was like climbing into a huge submarine. They went

down innumerable steps and along endless corridors before they reached their destination.

The Commander, whom all but Tony had met before, was in supreme command of the space station. He was a man of about thirty-five, and a mathematician in his own right. But, more than that, he had a gift of leadership, and he inspired enthusiasm in all his men. Chris thought himself lucky that the expedition was to be launched during Barnwell's tour of duty, for Commander Hendriks, who relieved him at three-monthly intervals, wasn't nearly such a pleasant chap.

"Welcome to Alpha," Commander Barnwell smiled as he greeted the four newcomers a few moments later. He was a slight man, of medium height. His hair, brushed smoothly back, was prematurely grey, but his face was young for his years. There were lines of humour round his mouth, and when he spoke he gesticulated in an almost Gallic way.

Chris introduced Tony, and the Commander shook hands warmly.

"Good trip?" he asked. He was assured that this was so.

"Your ship is almost ready," he told the quartet. "Only the ion motor to be fuelled now."

For the next half-hour they discussed technicalities, and the Commander promised to show them over their vessel as soon as possible. Tony also said he'd like to see over the space station, and the officer promised that he could.

Because of the artificial gravity caused by the rotation of Alpha, Chris and his companions were able to walk about and eat very much as on Earth. It seemed strange to be using a knife and fork to eat an appetizing meal while hurtling through space.

"What was that?" the mechanic asked Morrey in a whisper after he'd cleared his plate.

"Algae," the American grinned, and went on to explain to the astounded Tony that their meal had consisted of some of the minute plants specially cultivated in the space station.

These tiny plants had the threefold use of absorbing carbon dioxide, restoring oxygen to the atmosphere, and—suitably prepared—providing a useful source of food. They were a supplement to the chemical apparatus used to re-oxygenate the air in a perpetual cycle. Only occasionally was it necessary to transport fresh supplies of the gas from Earth. Tony gave a grimace at hearing what he'd eaten, but had to admit that "it wasn't too bad".

When the meal was over, Morrey—with the Commander's permission—began to conduct Tony over the space station, while Chris and Serge got down to work.

"As you know, Alpha is like a huge wheel with five spokes leading from the rim to the hub," the American explained. "We're halfway down one of them now so we'll climb down the rest of this spoke to the rim and do a tour right round. Then we'll explore each of the spokes and finally visit the hub."

"Lead on," Tony called gaily, and followed his friend down the ladder.

It was like descending into the hold of a ship, the metal rungs projecting from the side wall. When they started, Tony noticed that the artificial gravity was fairly light, but as they drew nearer the rim he began to feel heavier and heavier.

"Alpha is revolving at three times a minute," Morrey explained when Tony commented on the increasing pull. "Naturally the rim is moving faster than any other part. There gravity is about the same as on Earth, for it houses crew quarters and recreation rooms. The hub has the lowest 'g'. I suppose in the centre you might say a person would be weightless."

They had now reached the rim, and Tony could see in front and behind him a lighted corridor, each end of which curved up out of sight. As they walked along as naturally as they would on Earth, they met many of Alpha's crew and exchanged cordial greetings. Several of them invited Tony and his guide into their cabins, and they were able to see the

pleasant rooms in which the men relaxed. A bunk was the most prominent fixture, complete with its safety straps to secure the occupant during the periods when Alpha had to be stilled. There was a fairly large common room in which the men gathered for recreation.

One curious thing Tony noticed. As they walked along the corridor they never seemed to come to the part which sloped upwards. Always it receded in front of them, and he was completely surprised when at last Morrey told him they had made a complete circuit of the outer rim. Then, in turn, they explored each of the five spokes. These consisted of stores, powerhouses and laboratories, Finally came the hub itself in the shape of a circular control room. Here the station commander worked, constantly in touch with all parts of the satellite and with Earth. Because of the low rotational speed, magnetic shoes were an essential for work in the hub. Commander Barnwell, Chris and Serge were wearing them as they moved from one part of the hub to another.

The Commander smiled at Tony and Morrey.

“What do you think about it?” he asked the mechanic.

“Marvellous,” the young man exclaimed. “How was it built?”

Just as the Commander was about to describe how Alpha had been built from prefabricated parts ferried up from Earth, a phone bell rang. He clumped to the wall and unclipped the receiver. A moment later he turned to Chris.

“Sir George Benson has an important message for you,” he said.

Chapter Eight

“Chris speaking,” the young scientist said.

He’d been shown into a private room just off the main hub control by Commander Barnwell. Evidently Sir George wished the message to be for his ears alone, for Chris was the only person in the room.

“Hello, Chris. Benson here,” came back the well-known voice. “Are you alone?”

“Yes,” Chris assured him. “What’s it all about?”

“Those Voices,” Sir George answered. “Whiskers has brought me the recording of Van der Veen’s latest statement and I’m inclined to think the chap may not be as mad as some people thought. Look, Chris, there may be something in what he said about the Voices, so we’d better take no risks.”

“What do you mean? The expedition is still on, isn’t it?” Chris asked anxiously.

“That depends on you—and the others, of course. You know what Van der Veen said. You know the effect the Voices had on him. Do you want to run the same risk?”

“I’m game,” said Chris stoutly, “and I’m sure the others will be too. But if there are any Voices, and if they are so terrible, can’t we just leave the radio switched off?”

“You could, of course,” Sir George agreed, “but will you? Even if I ordered you to do so, I doubt whether you could resist finding out if Van der Veen was right. And I must confess my curiosity is equally strong; this may be one of the most significant discoveries of all time.”

“Now there’s a possibility of proving that Intelligences exist elsewhere in the universe—perhaps even of communicating with them—we must go on,” Chris declared. “May I put it to the others yet?”

“By all means,” Benson replied. “Let me know what their answer is. As if I didn’t know it already! But I’d like them to understand what it’s all about.”

Morrey, Serge and Tony were waiting for their friend when he came out of the room.

“What’s up?” demanded Tony.

“I want to talk to you all,” was Chris’s answer, and his serious tone riveted their attention.

He began by reminding them of the incident with Van der Veen back at Farnborough and pointed out that it was the news of their forthcoming expedition that had seemed to upset him. Chris went on to say that after they had wished him good-bye Whiskers had been very fed up, and—for want of something better to do—had visited Van der Veen in nearby Halton hospital.

“Whiskers thought he’d like to talk to the chap and see if he could get anything out of him,” Chris said. “Surprisingly, he succeeded. Van der Veen let out the story that on his last deep probe towards Mars he’d penetrated the Le Prince layer. Once he was through, he told Whiskers, he heard Voices on his radio.”

“Voices?” queried Tony.

“That’s what he said they were,” Chris went on, “and they couldn’t have been voices from Earth, because the Le Prince radiation belt stops radio communication with the home planet.”

There were gasps from his listeners as he spoke.

“He must have been really crazy,” Morrey burst out.

“Sir George doesn’t think so,” Chris answered drily. “He asked Whiskers to record Van der Veen’s words and let him hear them. Whiskers is at the Cape now, and Sir George is almost convinced.”

“But if there are Voices beyond the Le Prince belt, they must come from another solar system,” gasped the usually

placid Serge.

“Precisely,” Chris answered coolly. “If Van der Veen is right, it’s the most exciting thing that’s ever happened. It’s positive proof that the Universe is populated with creatures who can talk and who can transmit messages.”

There was silence for quite a time as the little group struggled to grasp the significance of what they had just heard. The mind boggled at the idea. If it was possible to listen in to messages from other worlds, would it be possible to understand them? What were the Beings who had spoken like? Where did they live? Would they be friendly or hostile to Man? How far had their science progressed? Would it be possible to send messages back?

“Sir George wants us to be prepared,” Chris said, breaking into their thoughts. “Naturally he doesn’t want the same thing to happen to us as to Van der Veen.”

“I don’t see how listening on the radio to someone talking can send you screwy,” declared Tony.

“Neither do I, but we can’t be sure,” said Chris. “Oh, I’d almost forgotten. Sir George asked me to put it to you—would you still like to go on with the expedition?”

The others looked at him without understanding.

“What does he mean—’would we like to go on?’ ” Morrey demanded.

“Oh, just Uncle George’s little way of seeing if anyone had had second thoughts because of the possibility of the Voices,” Chris smiled.

“He didn’t really think we should back out now, did he?” asked Serge.

“Not really,” Chris assured them all. “I think it was just a matter of form. Any of you scared of the Voices?”

The threatening looks which greeted him at this question were a sufficient answer.

“It’s just what I expected,” Sir George Benson’s voice, said from the loudspeaker.

Chris had just informed the Director that his companions were now more determined than ever to carry out the programme, and the news of the Voices from space had excited them immensely.

“Now, of course, there’ll have to be some additions to your programme. I want you all to listen to some talks by one or two specialists. They are experts on such subjects as psychology, hypnotism and so on. We hope this will help you to combat any ill effects when—and if—you hear the Voices. Then I shall want you to record what you hear. Oh, I know what you’re going to say about the Le Prince belt, but I’ve had a special container included in your payload. I believe it will effectively shield the tape.”

“Was that the last minute cargo?” asked Chris.

“Partly,” the reply came back. “There’s also a special radio. If you can, I’d like you to use it to fetch in the Voices, and you may be able to isolate one of them. That would help us to do some research on it. All clear?”

“We’ll get some ‘gen’ on the radio?” Morrey enquired.

“The special radio for the Voices? Of course. But I don’t want you to use it unless you first pick something up on your ordinary radio. Well, I think that’s all. Can you be ready for your first lecture in an hour’s time?” asked Sir George.

A chorus of assent greeted his question, and with a final word to each of the crew the Director concluded the conversation.

There wasn’t time to inspect the ship which would carry them to Mars before their first lecture from Earth, so Chris and his companions had to put off the eagerly awaited sight of the rocket until next day.

“That chap made me feel all creepy,” Tony confided at the end of the first session. They had been listening to a talk by a psychologist who had explained how the mind works and

some of the peculiar tricks it can play. The lecturer had gone into a fair amount of detail, and it was his description of various types of mental abnormalities which had impressed Tony.

“I suppose they think that if we all learn more about how the mind works we’ll be better able to combat any effect of the Voices,” Serge suggested.

They went on discussing what they’d just heard until Commander Barnwell came in to ask if they would now like to inspect their ship. They agreed enthusiastically.

“Then get dressed up and I’ll take you myself,” the Commander smiled.

The four made their way to where all space suits were stored. With the help of the staff they were soon in their own suits and ready for the Commander.

“Don’t forget your belts and lines,” laughed one of the dressers.

“What’s he on about?” Tony asked, turning to Chris.

The man answered for himself.

“Everyone venturing outside the station has to wear them,” he said. “The belt carries a small rocket which you use to propel yourself about. The line is a safety precaution. It is a long one and fastens you to the station so that you don’t wander off into space.”

“Does such a thing happen?” enquired Serge.

“Sometimes,” the man told them. “At least, it did before the safety lines became compulsory. Until you’re proficient with the rocket belts you might give yourself too big a blast and get shot away.”

“I did hear one chap did just that and hasn’t been seen since,” Chris put in with mock seriousness.

“He’s probably fallen into the sun by now,” the dresser agreed, returning Chris’s wink.

“Coo! Me for the ropes, then!” breathed Tony.

The Commander joined the quartet a few moments later.

He wore similar equipment to their own, and when he was satisfied that they understood how to operate the belts he led them to a special airlock near the hub.

“We use this lock when we work outside,” he explained. “The rotation is low. If we used an exit on the rim we should be propelled away from the station before we had time to clip our safety lines to the rails you’ll find outside.”

They put on their helmets, tested their radios, and were ready. The inner door was closed behind them, and now they were waiting for the air to be pumped out. A red light flashed on and the outer doors slid open, revealing the void of space outside.

Tony looked through the opening. All around was a velvet blackness, starred with a myriad points of light. He knew that this was how space looked, but somehow, through the open door of the airlock, it seemed different. Terrible, but beautiful, were the best words he found to describe it.

“Just step outside after me,” he heard Commander Barnwell telling his companions. He saw the Commander stride through the opening. Once Tony had been in a plane which had carried parachutists. He’d seen the men jump out and fall rapidly away. Now he half-expected Commander Barnwell to do the same, but the officer’s grotesquely-garbed figure just floated outside. He watched the Commander snap the clip on the loose end of his safety line to a rail on the outside wall.

“Come on,” they all heard the officer call.

One by one they stepped out into the void, and now Tony could really see the space station. Stretching away were the five spokes, and all around was the rim. The great wheel was turning steadily. He watched, fascinated.

“Would you like to try out your rocket belts?” Commander Barnwell asked. “Just press the switch briefly and direct the

flexible nozzle away from where you want to go.”

Tony did as he was told and found he was shooting away from the satellite, only to be pulled up sharply when his line was fully stretched.

“Now, if you hadn’t been anchored down you’d be sailing away into space,” he heard Morrey say.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked.

“Fired your rocket too much,” Commander Barnwell answered. “We all do it at first. It’s hard to get used to the idea that only the slightest touch of the switch is necessary. Try again.”

After a few tries Tony was able to control his movements fairly efficiently, and they all prepared to visit the ship that was to take them to Mars.

It was on the other side of the hub. Gently propelling themselves between two of the spokes, Chris and his companions followed Commander Barnwell. A fantastic scene met them, for a score of space-suited figures were buzzing over the rocket like wasps round a pot of jam. Curiously they gazed at the vessel which was to take them on their incredible journey.

“Why, it’s like a plane,” they all heard Tony exclaim, and the others had to agree with him, for their vessel had a pair of short, stubby wings.

“There’s an atmosphere on Mars,” Commander Barnwell reminded them. “The wings are to assist your entry. I believe it’s planned for you to glide at least one orbit before touchdown.”

“Where’s the ion motor?” Morrey’s voice asked.

“At the tail end, of course,” the officer replied. “The heating elements are just being filled now.”

The four propelled themselves towards the rear of their vehicle, where a number of men were at work. They could see the technicians hovering over the fuselage or floating about it

like some strange aerial ballet. Jostling with the workmen, Chris and his friends peered closely at this novel rocket motor.

“The principle of the ion motor is this,” the Commander could be heard explaining. “A quantity of the element cesium is used as fuel, for cesium atoms are most easily converted to ions. The vapour of the element is passed over a hot tungsten element, which ionizes it. The resultant beam propels the ship just as the conventional rocket does, but, of course, the thrust is very much less.”

“But it can be kept up much longer,” Tony suggested.

“Very much longer. That’s why you’ll be able to build up a tremendous velocity,” Barnwell agreed.

For more than half an hour its future crew explored the nearly completed rocket. They asked innumerable questions, and the Commander or one of the technicians supplied the answers.

“Better come inside again,” Barnwell suggested at last. “It’s about time for another lecture from Earth.”

Reluctantly they propelled themselves towards the airlock. Floating about in the void had been an exhilarating experience, but more than once Tony had been thankful for his safety line. Not only had it kept him from being swept away into space, but being attached to the satellite, had also given him some sense of security. Regretfully they re-entered Alpha by the airlock.

“Anyway, it won’t be long before we blast-off,” Tony observed more cheerfully as they were removing their space suits. “Only another four days.”

Chapter Nine

The four days had passed, and the Mars rocket was ready. It lay, slung beneath the giant wheel, waiting for its crew before departing on its ever-faster journey to the regions beyond where Man had been before.

As always, Chris, Tony, Morrey and Serge were impatient to blast-off. This cruel period—the last hours when the final meticulous checks were made—was almost unendurable. They had spent a busy time in lectures, discussions, briefings, and visits to their rocket. A score of times they had rehearsed their duties, and each knew his orders off by heart. It was with a vast sigh of relief that the quartet received Commander Barnwell's signal to get into their suits.

“This is it!” Tony declared, and he hoped his voice didn't betray the turmoil he felt.

“Sure is,” agreed Morrey, trying to give him a reassuring grin.

“Hurry up, you two,” Chris urged impatiently. He hated these last moments.

Serge kept silent. No one knew for sure what the phlegmatic Russian was feeling.

At last they were safely packed inside their rocket, waiting for the signal from the Cape that would decide the precise moment of their separation from Alpha. They had all said their farewells to the satellite Commander and his staff and had exchanged greetings and good wishes with their friends on Earth. Sir George Benson and Whiskers had wished them luck. Now they were listening tensely for the signal. It came at last.

“Separation thirty seconds from—now!” an unknown voice from Cape Canaveral said unemotionally. In half a minute the crew inside the space station would have released their connection and from that moment they would be on their

own.

“Twenty seconds.”

Chris and his companions settled easily on to their couches, the leader having his hand on the firing button. They knew that this time they would not have to endure a long period of almost unbearable time to break their orbit with Alpha. After that they would switch to the ion drive for the main part of the voyage.

“Ten seconds.”

The quartet lay silent as the last moments ticked away. They were about to blaze a trail where no man had been before—except Van der Veen. Would they hear those eerie Voices, or would they prove to be a delusion? Chris hardly knew which he would prefer.

“Zero!”

With lips pursed Chris pressed the button and waited.

The usual quivering of a take-off was missing, but they could feel their couches pressing into them with growing force.

“Everyone all right?” Chris asked.

A chorus of replies assured him that his crew was well and not too uncomfortable. In an amazingly short time the Cape came through, warning them to be prepared to switch to the ion drive. At the signal Chris operated the necessary controls, and the pressure disappeared, leaving them lying lightly on their couches.

Tony was the first to sit up. As he slid on to the floor of the cabin he found himself falling lightly just as he had done on the Moon. The weak thrust of the new motor reproduced lunar conditions closely, and the crew soon adapted themselves to it.

By now they were well and truly on their way. Earth, with its natural and man-made satellites, was falling rapidly behind. The rocket was dead on course, so the voice from the

Cape told them. Apart from routine observations and the checking of instruments, there would be little to do for many hours. Morrey and Serge took the first watch, while Chris and Tony relaxed on their couches.

“Do you think we shall hear those Voices?” Tony asked his companion in a low voice. He was tired but not sleepy. He felt he wanted to talk. Somehow this trip was worrying him more than any of the others he’d made. Chris could sense his friend’s disquiet.

“I expect so,” he answered lightly. “At least I’ll be very disappointed if we don’t. I only wish we could tell what they are talking about. If we can make a recording maybe someone back home will learn their language.”

Tony moved uneasily on his couch.

“It’ll be a bit creepy listening to creatures on other worlds,” he said. “Will they be able to hear us?”

“Of course not,” Chris replied. “If we do hear Voices on our radio they’ll be coming from outside our solar system. The next solar system is four and a quarter light years away. So the radio wave must have been at least that length of time reaching us—and our wave would take as long to return.”

“Anything we hear, then, must have been transmitted over four years ago?” Tony asked with some relief.

“At least that,” Chris agreed. “Maybe anything up to a hundred thousand years ago, depending on the distance of the source.”

“So we could never have a conversation with anyone outside our solar system?”

“It doesn’t seem like it,” Chris agreed, “though it’s never quite safe to be absolutely definite. A new means of communication travelling faster than light may be discovered some day.”

After this Tony fell silent, and Chris himself was glad to relax.

“How are we doing?” Chris asked Morrey and Serge a couple of hours later when he and Tony went to take over the watch.

“Everything normal,” Morrey answered. “Control is quite happy about us. Position and speed well within the limits allowed. The ion motor seems to be going like a bird, and the radiation is negligible.”

“Good. Now you two go off for a spell,” Chris ordered. “Tony and I will take over.”

Serge and Morrey did as they were bid, for, unless they collided with a meteorite, there would be little to do for some time. They would not approach the Le Prince layer for another twenty-four hours. Then there'd be no rest for anyone. They would all be keyed up listening for the first sounds from space.

Tony completed his routine check of the hull, tanks, valves and instruments. The fellows on Alpha had done a first-class assembly job. Everything was working perfectly. Cape Canaveral was delighted at the way their ion motor was running. Its thrust hadn't varied by more than i per cent for more than twenty hours, and the steady build-up of velocity had been almost exactly as predicted.

“When shall you try the special radio?” Tony asked after he'd completed his tasks.

“Not until we're beyond the layer,” Chris answered. “Our ordinary set is good enough for communication on this side. No use risking the special till we must.”

“How long will it be now?”

“We'll be approaching the lower boundary of the layer in eighteen or nineteen hours from now,” Chris replied after a quick calculation. “It will take us a couple of hours to get through it, so you can say that in twenty or twenty-one hours' time we shall know whether Van der Veen was off his head or not.”

“Ugh!” shuddered Tony.

“Not scared, are you?” Chris asked.

“Don’t know. I hope we don’t hear anything.”

“Cheer up. We probably shan’t,” Chris said reassuringly.

The crew ate, slept and performed all their tasks exactly as had been planned, while the gentle pressure of the ion motor steadily built up their speed.

“We should be entering the layer in about an hour,” Morrey announced during one of the spells when they were all on duty together. “The radio will begin to fade out as we approach the fringe.”

Tony kept silent. It would be very lonely out there in space when they were cut off from all human contact. Even though the messages from the Cape were terse and businesslike, they came from men like themselves—humans. He prayed inwardly that they would not hear any Voices, for in imagination he shuddered at the thought of the creatures from whom they might come.

“Better get the tape recorder out and checked over,” he heard his leader saying. He turned to attend to the machine, but his thoughts were still troubled by speculation on the strange sounds it might soon be recording.

“Radio has gone dead,” Serge suddenly called out. They could hear only the crackling of the loudspeaker. Had they entered the layer already? Just as they were asking each other this question the voice came from the Cape through again.

“False alarm,” breathed Tony.

“Perhaps an outlying belt of radiation,” Chris suggested.

Whatever it was, the sudden fading of the only means of communication with Earth was a sobering experience—sufficient to alert the quartet to what was about to come.

Messages from Earth now took nearly half a minute to

make their journey. It was strange to think that when they spoke to Control, their words were thirty seconds on the way, so that it was at least one minute between question and answer.

“We have lost your signal,” the voice from the Cape was saying. “Are you receiving us?”

“Yes, we’re getting you now,” Serge answered, but Control only repeated its question.

“Ah, we’ve got you again,” the voice from Earth said at last. “What happened?”

“We must be approaching the fringe of the Le Prince layer,” the Russian replied. “Any time now we shall fade out.”

The seconds sped by as they waited for a reply from Earth. A minute, was it? Or had they already passed beyond human communication? At last a voice sounded. It was that of Sir George Benson.

“This may be the last message,” it said. “I hope you’ll get it. We all wish you good luck and God speed on your journey. Tell Chris—”

But the words faded. The radio was silent. Their last contact with Earth was broken, and now they were on their way speeding towards—who knew what?

Chris hustled his crew round before there was time for reaction to set in. They were well and truly inside the radiation belt and there were many observations to make. They all carried out their duties swiftly and efficiently, but each of them knew they were waiting for the moment when they would break through this blanket of silence.

In a spare moment Morrey set the tape recorder running. Then he took its microphone and began to sing the latest American pop song. His companions looked at him as if he’d gone crazy, but Morrey only laughed.

“He’s after a job on TV,” Tony said to Serge sarcastically.

“The radiation has affected him,” was Serge’s opinion.

“My guess is that he’s in pain,” Chris declared.

“Wrong, all of you,” the aggrieved American snorted. “Here—listen!”

He ran the tape back and then started up the machine once more. It should have played back the excruciating sounds Morrey had poured into it. Instead there was silence.

“Now you see what I was trying to find out,” he retorted triumphantly. “The Le Prince radiation does obliterate any recording as fast as it’s made.”

“So Van der Veen was right on that point,” breathed Tony.

“He certainly was,” Morrey agreed.

“Then he’s probably correct about the Voices,” Tony said uneasily.

The rocket, still accelerating gently, ploughed its way steadily through the belt of radiation. Inside, the crew worked quietly, but the tension was mounting. It was nerve-racking enough to be cut off from the comfort of voices from Earth, but it was worse still to know that in a very short time they would burst through the Le Prince layer.

Tony, particularly, was showing signs of strain, and this worried Chris, for he knew that if they did hear the Voices, the mechanic would be affected most.

“Cheer up, Tony,” he called, breaking into his young friend’s thoughts. “Even if we do hear them they can’t hurt us. We can always switch off, you know.”

Tony did not answer. Chris looked at him anxiously. There were beads of perspiration on Tony’s forehead, and his face looked pale and strained.

“Can’t understand it,” Chris said to himself. “He’s never been scared of anything before.”

“I have the set all ready,” Serge announced. “What wavelength shall we start with?”

“Doesn’t matter,” the leader answered. “Just wander round the dial.”

“But it will take ages with the micro-tuning,” the Russian pointed out.

“So it will. Better see what you can pick up on the ordinary set first. If you do get anything you can pin-point it with the micro set.”

“Shouldn’t be long before we’re through,” Morrey pointed out with forced cheerfulness. “If there’s anything to be heard you may get snatches of it in about ten minutes.”

Chris himself felt an unusual strain as the critical time drew nearer. They were about to find out if radio messages from other worlds did exist or whether they were just the delusions of a sick mind. Then—if the Voices did exist—could they record and take them safely back to Earth? What a stupendous amount of new knowledge Man would get if he could translate these broadcasts from afar.

The young scientist pulled himself together with a jerk. It wouldn’t do to let his mind wander too much. He must be keenly alert to all that was going on around him, not lost in a mist of speculation. His forehead felt moist as he determined to concentrate on the task ahead.

Both Serge and Morrey were now bent over their radio sets, the Russian operating the rocket’s ordinary apparatus, while his companion waited with the micro-tuning set. Both Chris and Tony had now left their jobs and were straining to hear the first sounds from living creatures beyond the Earth.

“Listen!” snapped Tony.

But it was only his imagination. Nerves were taut, stretched almost to breaking point, as the four held their breath.

“Must be through now,” Chris whispered.

And then it happened! From the radio poured a babble of unearthly sound—the Voices!

Chapter Ten

For a moment the crew were too shattered to collect their thoughts. As they struggled to recover from the shock the loudspeaker continued to blare out a jumble of weird and horrible sounds. That they were made by living creatures, and not mechanically, the listeners had little doubt, but that such strange noises were never made by humans they were equally sure.

Tony, his face pale, listened silently. He had never heard such a variety of sounds. Some of the noises coming from the radio were high-pitched like birdsong. Others were rough, low and menacing. There were clicks and squeals; there were whistles and barks; there were shrill sounds and moans. It was like a choir of the damned.

Sweat ran down Tony's face. He swayed as if he were about to faint, so great was the shock of hearing these unearthly Voices. With an effort he looked around the cabin. Chris and the others—he could see—were almost equally affected by the strange noises. No wonder, Tony thought, poor Van der Veen had cracked up under the shock. He had had no warning of what to expect. They had all been anticipating the worst. Nevertheless it was a terrifying experience to listen to sounds made by creatures from other Worlds.

“Try the micro-tuner,” Chris said, and he scarcely recognized his own voice.

Serge read out some figures to Morrey, and the American, visibly affected, worked on the special radio set. The screeches were blood-curdling, but he continued his task of trying to isolate one carrier wave. At last he succeeded, and the background noises died away, leaving just one Voice.

It was alternatively high- and low-pitched, just like a donkey braying. There were pauses and periods in the broadcast, followed by a long silence.

“Did you get that on the tape?” Chris asked in a whisper, but his companions had been too shattered to make the record.

“Let it run in case it comes back,” he said, and Serge obediently put the recorder to work while the crew silently waited.

Though they were expecting it, they were badly startled when the braying started again. Somehow the sound was hostile and threatening. Tony shivered until he forced himself to remember that this Voice had spoken many—perhaps thousands—of years before, and that the creature to which it belonged had been many light-years away from the solar system. The menace in the strange unnatural sound couldn’t be meant for them. Maybe it was the broadcast threats of a dictator in some island universe.

“Try another one,” Chris said, and Morrey worked hard to isolate another transmission. It wasn’t an easy task, with so many sounds pouring from the loudspeaker. It was like trying to pick out the voice of one man in a cheering football crowd. How crude their apparatus must be compared with that of the beings that peopled other worlds! At last the American succeeded and a series of guttural grunts filled the cabin.

“Is that—something—speaking?” Tony asked hoarsely.

Chris nodded silently. It was hard to believe that these were sounds made by intelligent creatures. But it must be so, for their radio communication was much more refined than ours. There was every reason to believe that the Voices came from Beings having a very advanced science. If only someone could understand these strange sounds what a wealth of knowledge man would get!

For the next hour the crew faithfully recorded all manner of Voices, each seeming more horrible than the last. Then Tony cracked. He could stand it no longer.

“Turn it off. Turn it off,” he cried, his voice pitched high with emotion. Scarcely any calmer, Chris reproached himself

for not keeping a close watch on the youngest member of the crew. With a swift movement he stretched across to the radio and switched it off.

In the silence that followed they all realized that their nerves had been stretched taut. Each was shivering in the quiet of the cabin, with Tony making a tremendous effort to recover his composure.

“Sorry, you chaps,” he gasped at last, but the others assured him that they, too, had been equally affected.

“I think we’ve enough on the tape for this journey,” Chris declared, and his companions heartily agreed.

“We’ve other things to do, you know,” the leader reminded them. “We’re supposed to be visiting Mars.”

After the nerve-racking experience of listening to the Voices, Chris and his crew found the journey uneventful. Even though their rocket was carrying them swiftly through the void, there was little they could do to pass away the time. Because communication with Earth wasn’t possible, they were not required to make the usual instrument checks. It would be many hours yet before they would re-start the ion motor to slow down their headlong flight. Meanwhile they coasted along without weight or sense of movement.

“How far are we from Mars?” Tony asked as he floated past the American. He was recovering his composure, though the hideous sounds from the radio still seemed to haunt him.

“We’re well on our way,” Morrey called back cheerfully. All the crew were trying to forget their recent shattering experience.

“Eight point six million miles,” volunteered Serge. “We should be able to pick up the target soon by radar.”

“See if you can get it on the television Tony,” Chris said, anxious to occupy his young friend.

Tony propelled himself over to the apparatus and spent a

busy few minutes working the set.

“Got it,” he called out at last, and his companions floated over towards the screen. Right in the centre was a globe about the size of an orange. There was no doubt that this was the planet they were soon to explore. The white areas at the poles, the pattern of dark lines and patches, all these were familiar from the photographs they had studied so intently.

“No wonder the old astronomers thought the planet was covered with canals,” Morrey murmured as he gazed at Mars. “Those dark lines certainly seem unnatural.”

“There are still some people who believe that if they’re not actual water channels they’re the remains of what was once an intricate system of irrigation,” Serge said.

“That’s one of the things we’re going to find out,” pointed out Chris.

“Do you think we shall find traces of people?” asked Tony. “I mean—well, thing’s speaking like those Voices?”

“Still letting the squeaks and grunts worry you?” laughed Morrey. “Forget them, old chap. They can’t do us any harm. No—Mars is a dead world—almost. There are some people who believe that once it had living creatures on it, but they died out thousands of years ago, as the planet dried up. If they’re right, then we should surely find something to prove it.”

“It’s creepy, not being able to talk to Earth,” Tony mused. “We really are on our own.”

“Let’s have another go at reaching the Cape,” Morrey suggested as he pushed himself towards the radio.

“No. No!” Tony cried out. “You’ll only get those horrible sounds again. Don’t switch on. Please!”

His companions looked at him strangely. The Voices had certainly had him worried. Morrey glanced towards Chris, and the leader silently shook his head. There wasn’t much chance of finding a gap in the Le Prince layer, and he didn’t

want to distress Tony without good cause. They would have to wait until they were almost home again before they heard other human voices.

Because of the expected radio black-out, Chris had received detailed flight instructions. The time was coming when the rocket must be turned so that the ion motor, when started, would push against their momentum and gradually slow them down. To bring their vehicle round tail-first, small lateral rockets would be fired. It would be a tricky business to get the right alignment.

“I think that’s about it,” the leader observed as he turned away from the instrument panel and the bank of firing switches. He glanced up at the chronometer and made a swift calculation.

“We start the motor in nineteen minutes,” he announced.

So they were coming to the end of the period of free fall! For nearly two and a half earthly days they had been in that strange condition when neither they nor any of the loose articles in the cabin appeared to have any weight. Though they had all experienced it many times before it never failed to fascinate and amuse them. Tony performed his last acrobatics before the gentle thrust of the ion motor should give them once more a semblance of weight.

“Here goes!” Chris called, his eyes fixed intently on the seconds finger of the chronometer. With a quick movement he pressed a switch, and a second later the quartet were in a jumbled heap on the floor. Laughingly they sorted themselves out and then went about their duties.

It was Chris who had the most responsible job from now on.

It was he who would have to calculate the precise moment when to switch over to the chemical motor. There would be no computer down on Earth to do the work for him. He’d have to rely on his instruments and the small computer

provided for them. Still—it wouldn't be for many hours yet.

By common consent no further effort was made to take another recording of the Voices. Morrey removed the tape from the machine and sealed it inside the special container which, it was hoped, would protect it from the Le Prince radiation on the way back to Earth. Not until he'd seen the record packed away was Tony his old cheerful self. Then, in contrast to his former tension, he was relaxed and gay.

Attention was now concentrated on the planet they were about to visit. On the screen Mars had grown in size and its markings were becoming clearer. Serge compared the view with photographs from the Palomar telescope and from the base on the Moon. He was able to point out the various features to his companions.

“See that dark patch with a spike sticking out? That's called the Mare Acidalium. This light circular area is called Hellas, and this long dark area is called the Mare Serpentis, from its twisting shape. Of course, none of the features are as well defined as those on the Moon. The Moon was mapped accurately even before we reached it, whereas the geography of Mars is still mainly guesswork.”

“So they call the dark areas ‘mares’—sorry, ‘*maria*’—or seas, just as they did on the Moon. Yet you say they are not seas at all,” Tony pointed out.

“That's right,” Serge agreed. “There are no open stretches of water on Mars. The names were given by the old astronomers and have remained ever since.”

“Where shall we land?” asked Tony.

“We must choose our own spot,” Chris answered. “No one could give us any advice or help. Perhaps we'll orbit for a while until we see a likely place.”

They all turned to look at the image on the screen. Somewhere on that strangely-marked planet their rocket would touch down. Would they discover traces of an ancient civilization that had long since died away? Or would moss

and lichens turn out to be the only life form that Mars had known?

Instrument checks were now of the utmost importance. Because Earth could not help them the crew must work out their own flight plan. While Morrey and Serge bent intently over the rows of dials, Chris noted the readings they called out. Then for nearly half an hour the leader concentrated on his calculations. Finally he announced the result.

“When these readings were taken we were 12.7 million miles from the planet. Our velocity was 410,000 miles per hour, and our direction three degrees out of a direct line,” he said.

“Will you correct the trajectory?” asked Serge.

“Not yet. Mars is travelling on its own orbit and that will mean another calculation for me. We can afford to get much closer before we correct our course.”

Routine duties helped to pass away the hours. Tony was busy testing valves, watching fuel supplies and checking their equipment ready for the landing. Morrey and Serge concentrated on their instruments with only short periods of rest. Chris continued his everlasting calculations until the others insisted that he had a break.

So the time crept slowly on. At last came the moment when Chris decided to correct the rocket’s course.

“We’ll give No. 17 a five and a half seconds burst,” he declared.

He was referring to one of the small lateral rockets that were spaced out all round the cabin. The direction of the flight could only be changed by the thrust of one of these, and it was a delicate operation, to say the least. Secretly Chris was wishing desperately for the services of the giant computer at the Cape. There were so many forces at work—the velocity of their rocket, the orbital speed of Mars, the gravitational pull of the Sun and other celestial bodies, the pressure of solar radiation, to name some of them.

The rocket was fired and they all felt the slight kick it gave to their vehicle. They wouldn't know for some time whether they were now on the right trajectory, or whether a further correction would have to be made. Meanwhile their speed and distance from Mars had to be carefully measured.

Lines of strain were showing on the face of the young scientist who was responsible for the intricate calculations, and he made a mental resolve to report that a larger computer would be essential on all future flights beyond the Le Prince layer.

Tony, having completed his list of checks, was again finding time hanging heavily on his hands. He wished he could help the others. At least it would take his mind off those awful sounds that had poured from the radio. His eyes flicked across, half fearfully, to the special container housing the tape record. He hoped he wasn't present when it was played back.

The other two scientists kept feeding to their leader data obtained from their instruments. Morrey was able to say that they would soon be within a million miles of their objective, while Serge announced that their speed had fallen to 97,000 miles an hour. Chris heard these figures with relief. They were well within the safety limits he'd worked out. He bent over a table to record them on a graph he'd been plotting when suddenly a strangled cry rang out.

"The Voices! They're back again. I can hear them!" Tony gasped, and he fell to the floor in a faint.

Chapter Eleven

Whiskers Greatrex and Sir George Benson had drunk their third cup of black coffee before either of them spoke about what was uppermost in their minds.

“Is there no way of communicating with them?” the Wing Commander asked, though he knew the answer.

Benson waved his hand wearily.

“I’ve told you we’ve tried everything,” he said. “We’ve had the most powerful transmitters in the world trying to get through that confounded blanket, but we haven’t picked up so much as a squeak from them, and I expect our beams haven’t penetrated it either.”

“It seems awful not being able to warn them,” Greatrex muttered. “Of course it’s bad enough being unable to follow their flight, but to know they’re in danger and not to get word to them is a thousand times worse.”

“There’s just nothing we can do,” Sir George said quietly, “except hope—and pray.”

“Wasn’t there any way of predicting the eruption of this sunspot?” Whiskers persisted.

“None. Sunspots follow an eleven-year cycle. There is a period of intense activity when many large eruptions appear, followed by a gradual quietening down until there is practically no activity. This slowly builds up to a maximum again, all in a regular eleven-year period,” Sir George explained. “We plan our major space research during a quiet period such as this should have been now. Unfortunately, for some unknown reason, a giant sunspot has occurred right in the middle of the minimum activity period.”

“Why is it so dangerous to Chris and the others?” the Wing Commander asked.

“Because sunspots are accompanied by intense solar

radiation. Streams of fast-moving particles—travelling at incredible speeds—are ejected from the spots. This radiation is very harmful to human tissue. On Earth we are, of course, protected from injury by the atmosphere. Out in space, rocket crews are exposed to the full effect of this dangerous bombardment. That's why we avoid deep space probes during great sunspot activity."

"But you've never entirely suspended space exploration," Whiskers pointed out.

"No, that's true. However, during dangerous periods the crews are prepared and well protected. There is special shielding on the ship, and they wear a different type of suit. It is only when an unexpected spot like this one occurs that we're caught on one leg," Benson sighed.

"Won't they find the spot out for themselves?"

"I doubt it. They will be concentrating on Mars and not on the Sun. I don't see how they can detect the particles until it's too late," Sir George answered.

"And we're completely helpless," Whiskers said savagely.

Sir George Benson nodded glumly.

Tony lay on the floor of the cabin, his eyes closed and perspiration standing out on his pale face. It took his companions some minutes to revive him. He came to with a shudder and a groan. Then he opened his eyes and looked around wildly.

"It's all right, Tony," Chris assured him. "There are no more Voices. Don't worry about them, old chap. They are quite harmless."

"But—I heard them again," Tony gasped as he struggled to sit up.

"No, you didn't. You only imagined it. None of us heard them. Besides—you know quite well they can only come over the radio. And you also know that the radio was 'off' when

you said you heard them,” the leader pointed out.

“I—don’t know,” Tony muttered wearily. “I’m sure I heard the Voices ringing in my ears.”

“In your memory, old chap,” Chris insisted, and Morrey and Serge joined in the effort to convince their young friend that he’d been the victim of his own imagination.

“You know, Tony, we’ve got to see that you conquer this fear of yours before we land on Mars,” Morrey declared. “Do you know why?”

The mechanic could only look miserably at his three friends.

“Because we’ve got to use radio to talk to each other,” the American went on. “We’ll have to wear our suits on Mars; there isn’t enough oxygen in the atmosphere to keep us alive for very long.”

“That’s true,” agreed Serge, “and you think the Voices will come in over our helmet radios?”

“Probably. So you see, Tony, you’ve just got to get used to them—otherwise we can’t operate outside the cabin,” Morrey concluded.

“All right,” Tony said in a cracked voice. His friends knew what courage it had taken for him to agree to listen to those dreaded sounds once more.

Because he believed in acting at once, Morrey went over to the radio and switched it on. Chris anxiously watched Tony tense himself for the expected result.

There was nothing! Try as he could, Morrey couldn’t bring in any Voices. Only an earsplitting crackle came out of the loudspeaker. Chris and Serge went over to investigate. Tony followed, secretly relieved that his ordeal was postponed.

“Set’s all right,” Morrey muttered after a rapid examination of the apparatus. Serge and Chris, too, were puzzled, and they tried in turn to tune in to those messages from space.

“It’s no use,” Chris said at last, “we must have entered another radiation belt. Unless—”

“Unless what?” the others asked in a chorus.

“Unless there’s been a solar storm,” he said slowly.

They all knew what that meant. It meant that even as they spoke their bodies were being bombarded by a stream of unseen particles and that tiny blood-cells were being destroyed without their knowledge. Just a few hours of such exposure would be sufficient to cause fatal damage.

“Into your suits at once,” Chris ordered sharply, and the four swiftly donned their protective equipment. Not until their helmets were in place could they feel safe. But for how long had they been subject to this deadly solar radiation? Without Earth to warn them they might easily have taken a critical dose already.

Though they were all within an arm’s length of each other, communication by their helmet radios was difficult. Interference caused by the sunspot made conversation erratic, though at last Chris did assure himself that all was well. By means of a special solar telescope they were able to confirm by direct observation that there was indeed a giant eruption on the Sun. From its position on the photosphere Chris estimated that it was of recent origin and that they hadn’t suffered too much damage. It was indeed fortunate that they had tried to tune in to the Voices at that moment, for then their danger had been revealed to them. A little later and they would have all been afflicted with leukaemia, which could have had only one end.

“How long will it last?” Tony’s distorted voice asked.

“It may go on for a few days,” Chris answered. “A rotten nuisance, but one we’ll have to put up with. All right, you chaps. What are the readings now?”

In spite of the encumbrance of their suits, the crew resumed their duties and the rocket drew ever nearer to the planet. The ion motor was still decelerating steadily, but the

chemical motor would have to be used to kill all but the last few hundred miles of velocity. Excitement in the cabin began to mount as Mars loomed closer. The telescope revealed a network of strange markings and peculiar shapes on the surface. In turn the crew peered through the instrument, each wondering what this new world would have in store for them.

The time came when Chris insisted that they should all eat and rest, for they were now very close to their destination. Soon they would be far too busy for relaxation. Once the landing manoeuvre had begun they would all be fully occupied until their ship was safely on the surface of Mars.

“Starting the chemical motor—now,” his companions heard Chris say when they were safely on their couches. Immediately they felt pressure as the rocket burst into life. The young scientist had calculated that this stage of the landing would take four and a half minutes, and he’d set the rocket’s timing switch accordingly. It had seemed a very long time passing, and Chris had just begun to get alarmed when the motor cut out, and they all felt themselves falling freely towards the red planet.

Floating over to the instrument panel, Serge and Morrey checked their speed and distance from the surface. Chris compared the figures with his chart and seemed quite satisfied, while Tony measured their fuel supply. As soon as he could the leader went over to the telescope and gazed intently through the eyepiece.

Mars filled the field of view. Eagerly he looked at the bright and dark areas. He could see the blinding whiteness of the south polar cap, but that of the north one was out of view. What were these markings? Chris asked himself a dozen times as he recalled the many speculations about them. Most observers believed that the bright areas were either sand deserts or vast fields of igneous rock. But even here there was room for much argument.

Ah! That dark shape must be the famous Syrtis Major.

That blindingly bright area next to it was Aeria, of course. He searched for the famous canals, and certainly there were some dark lines that had deceived the early observers. Nowhere could he see a sheet of water or patches of cloud. That haziness he could see was not water vapour. He knew it was probably a sand-storm. But where would he land his ship? He decided that he would touch down in one of the dark areas, the nature of which was more uncertain than the bright, barren patches.

What were these dark areas? Chris knew that the weight of opinion was in favour of their being areas of vegetation, though only in some very simple form. Indeed, here was possibly the only form of life in the solar system outside Earth. Soon, within a few hours, they would be the first humans to know for sure.

“I am going to put the ship into orbit,” Chris informed the others over their helmet radios. “It will be an elliptic one, approaching possibly within a hundred miles of the surface. Ready?”

In spite of the continued interference from the sunspot, his companions were able to assure their leader that they were prepared for this critical operation. An error either way could spell disaster. They might blast off into space, with a waste of vital fuel, or they might crash on to the surface if their orbital speed was too low. The manoeuvre required a burst from the lateral rockets to turn the vehicle into the correct position, followed by the ignition of the main chemical motor to build up orbital velocity. While Chris made the final calculations the others waited tensely by the controls.

A few seconds before the vital order was given, the interference on their radios increased to such an extent that communication was impossible. Instantly, regardless of the menace from the unseen bombardment, each whipped off his helmet so that they could hear the others' voices.

“Now!” snapped Chris, and Serge pressed a button. At a

second command it was Tony's turn. Finally Morrey got the order to start up the motor. Then came the need to observe and check the orbit. A spate of figures from Morrey and Serge, and Chris was calculating furiously. The other three eyed him anxiously. What would be his verdict? Had they worked their ship along a safe path, or had they failed hopelessly in this crucial task? Tony felt himself trembling with the suspense. Serge and Morrey waited silently as their leader worked on.

“Done it!”

They were all startled by Chris's shout. Yes, he confirmed, their orbit was a good one. He'd like some more figures a little later, but preliminary calculations put their apogee at twelve hundred miles, and perigee at just less than a hundred.

“So we'll be able to use the wings!” Morrey declared.

Tony had almost forgotten the short, stumpy wings with which their unusual rocket was fitted. But surely the planet's atmosphere didn't reach so high! It was Serge who explained.

“Earth's gravity is much stronger than that of Mars,” the Russian said. “Therefore it hugs its atmosphere to it more tightly. At the surface there is ten times more on Earth than on Mars. At a height of about twenty-five miles they are about equal. After that the Martian atmosphere is much denser, height for height, than at home. And it extends farther, too. Yes, there will be something for the wings to do at our nearest point.”

“Heavens! We'd better put on our helmets at once,” Chris called. In the excitement of the last half-hour they'd forgotten the unseen danger. Quickly they donned their equipment and fortunately found the radio much quieter.

“We'd be able to leave these darned things off if Old Sol would quieten down,” Morrey's voice drawled.

Further observations confirmed the accuracy of Chris's prediction, and the crew waited eagerly as the orbit took

them ever closer to this mysterious planet. Of course, the subject that filled their minds more than anything else was whether or not they would discover traces of life—past or present—in a higher form than the lowly plants they expected to find. If intelligent life had ever existed on this ageing planet, even though it had died away thousands of years ago, it would have left some signs behind.

In turn the quartet peered through the telescope at the surface below them, and when perigee—their nearest approach—was reached, their interest was redoubled. But the speed of their flight was too great for them to pick out any details. It was certain, though, that Mars had no large ruined cities as a reminder of its past history.

When he was not scanning the Martian surface, Chris was watching some instruments they hadn't used before. These were the indicators of the condition of the wings, now being brought into use for the first time. Definite traces of atmosphere were recorded even at their height, and the temperature of the wings' surface rose by a few degrees. Before they realized it, the rocket was drawing away from the planet once more on its huge ellipse.

"Why don't we just use the motor to kill our speed and land right away?" asked Tony.

"By dipping deeper into the atmosphere on each orbit we are using the drag on the wings to slow us down," Chris answered. "This saves a good deal of fuel, and at the same time it provides valuable information about the upper atmosphere as well as giving us the chance of examining the surface."

The next time the rocket drew near to Mars it was some dozen miles closer than on the first orbit. Already they were closing in for the final stage of the flight. Fifty miles. Thirty. Twenty! The wings were really doing their work now. Serge had gone to a set of controls that would alter the pitch of the wings.

"We're making an aerodynamic approach," explained

Chris.

Still they had seen no definite traces of intelligent life, but Syrtis Major had been selected for their landing. Though the atmosphere had greatly reduced the rocket's speed, it would still be necessary to fire a retro-rocket in the ship's nose for its touch-down. As they made their last circuit and the dark expanse of Syrtis stretched beneath them, Chris pressed the last button, which would set them in a steady glide.

The crew were silent now. Within a few minutes their rocket would land on this strange planet. They would be the first humans to set foot on Mars; to find at least some of the answers to the innumerable questions Man had asked about this mysterious world.

"Any time now," Chris whispered, and even as he spoke the rocket touched something solid and shuddered to a stop.

Chapter Twelve

They had landed on Mars!

During the aerodynamic path the rocket had travelled almost horizontally and now it was resting on its side. This was the first time any member of the crew had touched down in such a manner, but Benson and his team had designed the vehicle to take full advantage of the Martian atmosphere. The layout of the cabin was such that the couches could be swung into a more comfortable position, and the instruments and hatch were well away from the side, which now had to act as the floor.

The moment had come for the travellers to step out on to Mars. Outside, the atmospheric pressure was roughly—as assumed from terrestrial observation—one-tenth that of Earth. The small percentage of oxygen was insufficient to support human life. Gravity was two-fifths of that back home. Temperature was slightly above freezing point.

All these facts were confirmed from instrument readings inside the cabin. Any further information would have to be obtained by actual experience—by opening that hatch and stepping out on to the Martian surface. Seeing that all their equipment was in order, Chris switched on the pump that would take out and store the precious oxygen in their cabin, and at the same time reduce the pressure until it was equal to that outside. When the barograph showed the correct reading he turned to his companions.

“Ready?” he asked over his radio.

“Ready,” came back the three replies.

Chris extended his gloved hand to the catch securing the hatch. With a quick movement he pulled it and then swung the door open wide.

None of the crew moved. All four stood gazing out through the aperture, taking their first look at this strange world.

The first thing they all noticed was that the light was far less bright than that on Earth—which was not surprising, considering that Mars is some forty million miles more distant from the Sun. Yet the light was bright enough to show them that the rocket was resting on a flat surface, and that it lay on a carpet of bluey-green.

As Chris was their leader, the rest of the crew stood back for him to go through the hatch first. With a hand raised in acknowledgement, he stepped forward and jumped the yard or so to the ground. Because of the low gravity, he landed lightly on the soft, springy carpet, and at once bent down, eager to solve one of the mysteries that had been puzzling generations of astronomers.

There was no doubt about it. The bluey-green colour came from a thick growth of some kind of vegetation. It seemed like moss, but he could push his hand down into it for six inches before he felt the solid ground. No wonder it was like treading on some luxurious carpet! He remembered, many years before, walking across the stubble of a newly-cut cornfield. It was springy to the tread. This was the same, but the growth was longer, denser, and even more springy.

Chris stood up again as, one by one, the others leapt down beside him.

“Gosh!” he heard Tony exclaim, “so there is something alive on the planet after all!”

Yes, there was something alive. They could see it and touch it, and of course they must take a sample with them back to Earth. But that could come later. The most urgent thing now was to explore their immediate neighbourhood.

Under Chris’s guidance the crew first examined the lie of their rocket. A long straight scar marked the path where it had slid along this natural carpet. The wings were slightly tilted, but they could jack their vehicle into the take-off position later. Tony clambered over the ship and reported no damage—apart from the usual abrasion by interplanetary dust—to the casing. Neither was there any fuel leak or escape

of radiation from the ion motor.

Now the quartet could begin to look around and explore the area near the rocket. Chris and Tony went in one direction, Serge and Morrey in the opposite one. As they walked they soon became accustomed to the low gravity. On the Moon it was more practical to progress by kangaroo leaps, but here long strides seemed more natural.

To Chris—the thick, resilient carpet always underfoot—it seemed as if they were moving across a moorland covered with incredibly thick heather. The ground was not flat, but in small, rolling hillocks. Sometimes they would be on top and able to see for miles. Then they would look back towards the rocket to reassure themselves of their position relative to their link with Earth. At other times they would be in a shallow depression with only the Martian growth to see. Often they spoke to Morrey and Serge, and it was strange to hear their voices sounding in their helmets.

“Back to the rocket,” Chris ordered. “We’ll compare notes there.”

“Righto! But we haven’t much to report,” Morrey’s voice said. “Still—I feel hungry, so we can talk and eat.”

Half an hour later all four were safely inside the cabin, their first short exploration of the planet was over. Reduction in radio interference prompted Serge to take a measurement of the solar radiation, and even Chris cheered when he was told that it was safe to remove his helmet.

“Phew! That’s better,” Tony declared with relief as he breathed the free air of the cabin. “Hope there isn’t another sunspot while we’re here.”

“Oh, that one hasn’t died away yet,” Chris warned him —“It’s just that its emission has now fallen below danger level—it may flare up again—or it may disappear altogether.”

While Tony prepared their food, the others dictated to the tape recorder a careful account of their observations. Morrey and Serge had seen nothing more than Chris and Tony—only

endless expanse of Martian moss.

“I wish we could speak direct to Earth,” Morrey said peevishly as he completed his account. Suddenly Tony spoke.

“Know something?” he said. “We’ve lost the Voices.”

There was, for a moment, an astounded silence.

“Jumping cats! You’re right!” exclaimed Morrey. “I can’t remember hearing them since we landed.”

Serge and Chris agreed. In the excitement of the touchdown they’d forgotten all about those terrifying sounds from space. Contrary to expectation, their helmet radios had not been flooded out with the weird words from other worlds.

“I wonder why that is,” Chris said thoughtfully to the other two scientists, but Tony was only too happy to be free from the sounds that had upset him so much. He was content to leave discussion of the strange phenomenon to his three companions.

“When are we going outside again?” he asked at last. He’d listened patiently while Chris, Morrey and Serge had argued and theorized about the disappearance of the Voices, until at last he could stand it no longer. “We did come here to explore Mars, you know,” he reminded the others pointedly.

“All right, Tony,” Chris smiled. “But this silence is rather strange, isn’t it? Now, before we go off exploring again, I’d like to collect samples of the moss and also of the ground beneath. Feel like boring a hole, Tony?”

“Anything’s better than sitting here listening to you three,” the mechanic retorted. “I’ll get the boring machine rigged up while you collect the moss.”

Once more the crew went through the routine of fastening their helmets and then pumping the air from the cabin. With Serge helping him, Tony carried out the compact little piece of apparatus that could bore a hole two inches in diameter to a depth of fifty feet. Some ten yards from the rocket they set

it up on its tripod, and then Tony connected up the cable from the rocket's batteries. While the Russian went to join the other two in collecting moss samples, Tony switched on the borer.

He was completely absorbed in his work. Each time the boring bit was withdrawn he put the sample in a container and carefully labelled it with the depth. For some eighteen inches beneath the moss there was a layer of peaty substance, gradually changing into soft, black soil. At a depth of twelve feet the bit met an obstruction, and it was some time before a hole was bored through. This time the sample brought up was like sandstone rock, but much harder than any Tony had seen on Earth.

Meanwhile the three scientists had been collecting moss and examining it under a microscope back in the cabin. Though none of them were botanists, they were sure that here was something completely new, for this vegetation was growing almost without oxygen, with very little moisture and at low temperatures. Long white roots seemed to extend well into the ground and were very strong. Samples were packed and labelled. Then they went over to see how the borehole was progressing.

"These should interest the geologists back home," Morrey observed as he looked over Tony's samples. "How deep are you, old chap?"

"Fifteen feet," the mechanic answered over his radio. "Had a bit of a hold up with that rock. Sandstone, isn't it?"

They all bent down to look, and as he went on with his job, Tony could hear his friends speculating about the reddish-brown stone that had caused the trouble.

"Jumping crickets! Look at that!"

Morrey's voice had just broken in, wild with excitement.

"Look at what?" Serge's more restrained voice asked.

"Those marks on the top of the sandstone," gasped the American. "Am I crazy—or are those artificial?"

Tony saw all three bending intently over his borings. As excited as the others, he switched off the machine and went over to see the cause of the commotion. Morrey held the cylinder of hard rock that had delayed the boring. His gloved finger was pointing unsteadily to the top face, and the mechanic saw some strange marks cut into the rock.

“Looks like part of an inscription,” the American declared hoarsely. “So there has been life on Mars!”

“Steady,” cautioned Chris. “We can’t be sure. What do you think, Serge?”

The Russian examined the sample carefully before he replied.

“I say Tony should make another hole to see if he can find another piece like this,” he said.

With the help of the other, the mechanic soon moved his boring machine and they watched tensely as the bit did its work.

“Never realized it was such a slow job,” Morrey grumbled impatiently. “How much deeper to the rock?”

“Three feet,” Tony answered shortly. He, too, was keyed up. Maybe they would soon be confirming a stupendous discovery—or shattering their hopes.

Two feet! One foot! Now the bit had reached the hard rock, and its progress was visibly slower. Tony could hear the sharp intake of breath of his friends as he withdrew the boring bit to collect the sample. There it was, just like its predecessor, a reddish brown. Chris quickly took it and his glove wiped the black soil from the top. He held it up close to his helmet and examined it for a full minute before speaking.

“There’s no doubt about it,” he said in a voice brittle with emotion. “That stone has been carved!”

If only they could have radioed the news of this amazing discovery back to Earth! But the invisible blanket was as impenetrable as ever. Sir George and his colleagues would

have to wait until the crew was nearly home before they could be told the staggering news—that intelligent creatures had lived on Mars at some time in the past.

“Let’s get back to the cabin,” Chris said shortly after they had all examined the rock.

Silently the quartet returned to their quarters, taking the two cylinders of rock with them. They could scarcely wait to seal the hatch and pump oxygen back into the cabin before they removed their helmets. Excitedly they studied the strange markings on the hard red rock.

“You see they follow a definite pattern,” Chris pointed out, “and a number of them are repeated exactly.”

“Then they are either some form of decoration or, perhaps, of writing,” Serge said.

“But what brings them so far underground?” asked Tony.

Chris straightened up. His face was flushed with the emotion of their discovery. It was with an effort that he stilled his racing thoughts about the implication of those two pieces of stone. He moistened his dry lips and then carefully chose his words.

“My guess is that Mars is a much older planet than Earth—that is, it is at a much later stage in its life. They may have been formed at the same time, but Life developed on Mars much sooner than on our planet. Intelligent life had probably evolved here before life of any kind appeared on Earth. And now, with the escape of its atmosphere and the evaporation of nearly all moisture, Mars is a dying world, inhabited only by the mosses we’ve already seen. All traces of a higher form of life have been overgrown and are buried deep by the passing of a million years.”

“You—think these marks are a million years old?” gasped Tony.

Chris smiled back.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “That was just a phrase.”

“One of the arguments used many years ago to support the ‘Life on Mars’ theory was that only something growing would keep from being covered by dust-storms,” Morrey observed. “I guess that would account for these traces of civilization—if they are such—being buried so deeply.”

“You mean that as each layer of dust was deposited, the moss would grow through it?” asked Tony.

“That’s it,” agreed Chris, “and these inscriptions would be covered up and protected before they could weather away.”

“So we may be on top of a buried city,” Serge concluded. “How can we find out?”

“Only by digging down to it,” the American laughed. “Feel like a spot of hard work?”

“I’m afraid we haven’t the tools and it would take us too long,” sighed Chris. “But I confess I’d dearly like to do it.”

“Oh well, I suppose we must leave it to the fellows on the next expedition,” Morrey said despondently. “Imagine what wonders may be buried below us!”

“Wait a minute,” Tony said suddenly. “I’ve an idea. Couldn’t we use the blast from the motor to clear away most of the covering?”

His companions looked at the mechanic with admiration.

“By Jove, you’ve got something there,” burst out Chris. “I wonder if it can be done.”

“Of course it can,” Morrey said enthusiastically. “Let’s work out how.”

“What about fuel?” asked the cautious Serge. “Have we enough to spare?”

“Won’t we have to tilt the ship nose up, tail down?” Tony demanded.

“Pipe down, everyone,” laughed Chris. “This will take a lot of calculations and planning. What about some refreshment? Then maybe we’ll be able to assess the job calmly.”

So the crew took their meal as they discussed the possibility of using Tony's idea. When they had finished Chris set them all to work. While Tony carefully checked the fuel tanks, Serge calculated the exact weight of the rocket and Morrey worked on thrust and angles. Chris made the final computation and the others awaited his decision.

"On paper—we can do it," he told them. "First we must raise the ship to an angle of thirty degrees. Then we can run the motor for fifteen seconds at one-seventh of its normal thrust. Greater power would cause us to blast-off under this low gravity. We can spare the fuel if, on the journey back, we cut down on the chemical motor and use the ion motor more. This will lengthen our flight by over half a day, so we must watch our oxygen supply. What do you say—shall we have a go?"

The answer was prompt and unanimous. They were all burning to find out if there really were traces of a long-dead civilization some twelve feet below the surface.

"I think we should go carefully," the ever-cautious Serge advised. "We don't know the effect of the blast on the topsoil, and we should clear the last foot or so by hand to avoid damaging whatever may lie below."

"Yes, that's sound enough," Chris agreed. "We'll see the effect of a five-second burst first."

"Can we start now?" asked the eager Tony.

"I suppose there'll be no peace if we don't," the leader sighed in mock resignation.

Almost before Chris had finished speaking his companions were putting on their helmets, but he wasn't far behind. Outside they set to work to jack up their ship. Then they fixed it in position with the retractable legs that had been provided to hold it ready for the take-off back to Earth. Serge checked the angle, called for a slight alteration, and then declared it satisfactory.

"Move well away. I'll go inside and run the motor. We'll

wait for the smoke to settle,” said Chris, “and then we’ll come and see what’s happened.”

Chapter Thirteen

Watching from a distance of five hundred yards, Tony, Morrey and Serge saw a huge cloud of white smoke issue from the rocket's tail. Soon all the ship was obscured. Then, suddenly, it began to die away.

"One five-second burst," they heard Chris's voice announce in their helmets. "I'll join you outside in five minutes. That should give the ground time to cool off."

As they watched, the cloud was drifting slowly away. They made their way back to the rocket and just before they reached it the hatch opened and Chris appeared. Almost together they reached the tail end of the vehicle and saw the huge black scar that had been torn in the mossy carpet. Smoke and steam were still rising as they looked down into the hole blasted out by the rocket's motor.

"About six feet deep," Morrey estimated. "So we're half way there."

The hole was certainly about that depth at its maximum, but it tapered off sharply to the rocket tail and gradually away from it. Scattered around, mainly to the rear, was soil mixed with charred patches of moss which had been flung up by the vicious blast. Impetuously Tony leapt lightly into the crater. A cloud of dust almost obliterated him.

"Better come out. It will still be pretty hot down there," Chris called, and Tony walked up the gentler of the two slopes.

"Now we'd better check that the ship hasn't moved," the leader said. "Then we'll give it another blast."

The rocket still stood firmly on its legs. Chris was satisfied that all was well and climbed aboard. Retiring as before, the other three waited for the clouds to billow out.

"I'm giving it a four-second burst this time," Chris's voice said. "Better not get too close to whatever lies below."

This time the trio outside could scarcely wait for the hole to cool before they rushed forward to look at the result of this second burst. Through the smoke and steam they could see that more debris had been thrown up. Peering into the crater, they could also see how much deeper it was, but still the reddish rock remained covered.

“I think we’d better leave it at that,” Chris’s voice said, and they saw he’d joined them. For some time they poked about at the bottom of the pit, which was now about ten feet deep.

“How many shovels have we?” Morrey asked, keen to make an immediate start.

“Only one,” Tony told them.

“Perhaps it’s as well,” observed Chris. “Important as this is, there’s other exploring to do. We’ll split into two pairs. Tony and Serge can have first spell with the shovel, while Morrey and I go for a hike. We’ll be back for a bite in three hours, and then we can change over. Agreed?”

“It is agreed,” replied Serge. “We will call each other on the radio if either party finds anything?”

“Of course. Now I suppose you’re anxious for some exercise. We’ll get new oxygen bottles and then push off, Morrey.”

Tony was for digging furiously down to the red rock, but Serge was more cautious and practical.

“We had better trim up our trench,” he told the mechanic, “otherwise we may have the sides fall in on us.”

Reluctantly Tony had to agree, and the first hour’s work was so occupied. When Serge declared the walls were safe the mechanic seized the shovel and began to dig away at the bottom of the hole.

“Take it steady,” the Russian advised. “You’ll damage either your suit or the relics below the soil. Let me have a go.”

Tony handed over the implement and Serge carried on

with deliberation. Steadily the hole grew deeper and Tony was almost dancing with excitement as the twelve-foot level was approached. Now Serge dug very cautiously, occasionally bending down to brush away loose soil. If they could unearth the stone with more inscriptions, then the secret of Mars would be revealed beyond doubt.

Suddenly the Russian felt the shovel touch something more solid. Seeing him pause, Tony jumped down the excavation and began tearing at the soil with his gloved hands.

“We’ve reached it! We’ve reached it,” he called nervously over his radio.

“Will you come away?” Serge said sharply. “Control yourself if you can.”

Tony flushed hotly at this rebuke. Fortunately his helmet concealed his embarrassment.

“Sorry, Serge,” he replied meekly, and moved away while his companion continued his work. But the Russian himself was scarcely less excited as he gradually cleared a piece of the red stone. At last he threw his shovel aside and both he and Tony bent down to see what had been uncovered.

The area exposed was about a foot square—sufficient to reveal that, in spite of some black soil still clinging to it, it was highly polished. On this piece there were no scratches or inscriptions—just a perfectly flat shiny surface.

“Artificial,” breathed Serge, for surely no natural piece of rock could be so flat and polished as this one.

“Shall we call Chris?” asked Tony excitedly.

“No, let’s get a bit more cleared first,” answered the Russian. So the two of them worked on unremittingly.

At last several yards of the smooth stone were cleared. Only in one part was the surface broken. Here a groove like the letter “V” ran across it in a perfectly straight line.

“That clinches it,” Tony declared. “We’ll tell the others.”

This time Serge agreed and the mechanic switched his helmet radio to a longer range and gave Chris and Morrey the news.

“That’s great!” Chris’s voice declared. “We’ll come back at once. But we’ve found something too. Tell you about it later.”

While they were waiting for their two companions Serge and Tony worked on in the excavation. It would be impossible to expose much more of the red stone because of the sloping sides and depth of the hole. To reveal a greater area would require a tremendous amount of work and involve shoring up the sides and carting away the soil. However, enough had been uncovered to leave no doubt that this dying world had once been the home of beings able to build and work in stone.

“We’re here,” Morrey’s voice suddenly said in their helmets. Tony and Serge looked up to see the other two peering down at them from the top of the hole. Carefully they made their way down, the newcomers examining with interest what their friends had found.

“That groove, that polish! There’s no shadow of doubt,” Chris said. “They can only have been made by—Martians!”

For some time they remained in the hole, closely scrutinizing their discovery. On Chris’s instructions Morrey went to their cabin and returned with a camera. More than a score of exposures were made so that a visual record could be carried back to Earth. At last, somewhat weary but excited, they climbed from the hole and went to relax in the cabin.

“What did you chaps find?” asked Tony as he lay stretched on his couch.

“Wondered when you were going to ask,” Morrey grinned. “You tell him, Chris.”

“Nothing so dramatic as your discovery,” the leader said, “but pretty interesting. We came across a number of hummocks or small mounds about six feet high. They were

covered with moss, of course, but the remarkable thing is—they were in a dead straight line and exactly the same distance apart.”

“How many were there?” asked Serge.

“Twenty-one,” Chris told him, “stretching over half a mile.”

“Must have been made by the Martians,” was Tony’s opinion, and they all agreed.

“What’s the drill now, Chris?” the American asked.

“Nothing more for today. The Martian day is almost the same as Earth’s, so it will be dark pretty soon. We’d all better try and get a good night’s rest, ready for tomorrow.”

“Had we better keep a watch?” Tony asked.

“No need to,” laughed Morrey, “those Martians have all been dead a long time.”

How long he’d been asleep Tony didn’t know. Nor could he tell what had wakened him. The dim light of a small electric bulb illuminated the cabin so that he could see the recumbent forms of his three companions. They seemed to be sleeping very soundly indeed. It was some seconds before he remembered that he and the other members of the crew were spending their first night on Mars. Mars—the dead planet that had once been the home of intelligent beings!

As he lay there in the subdued light, Tony began to wonder what these beings, these Martians, had been like. That they had been skilled was already proved by that day’s discoveries. But what were they like in themselves? Were they like humans, or had they developed into some entirely different shape? Perhaps he and the others might be able to uncover some picture or statue that would reveal the Martian’s appearance. Perhaps they could unearth some books or records that would tell people back on Earth something about the history of this dead world.

Try as he might, Tony couldn't sleep again. He was thinking continually of the planet's former inhabitants. Surely nothing could be more important in the whole undertaking than to find out all they could about the Martians. He would try to persuade Chris to devote all the efforts of the expedition to this task.

He turned over restlessly on his couch. He shut his eyes and tried to picture what the Martians might have been like. For a long time he lay still and allowed his thoughts to wander. Somehow he couldn't picture what the Martians might have been like. All the impression he got was of a glow, a ball of gentle light. One of these glows seemed to have entered the cabin and wanted to talk to him. He kept his eyes shut tightly and wondered what the ball of light wanted to say. It was fantastic, of course, and tomorrow he'd tell the others of his dream.

“I am a Martian.”

It was more a thought that had drifted into his mind than words he'd heard—even dream words. He wasn't surprised, for somehow he'd known the glowing ball belonged to this strange planet. A Martian! Tony wasn't even surprised that this patch of light was a living thing. Nor did it seem strange that it could communicate with him and that he could understand its language. He wasn't at all scared, but lay quietly wondering what the Martian would say. After all, this was only a dream, wasn't it?

“Will you please arouse your companions,” the Martian communicated. “I want to enter their thoughts also.”

For the first time Tony began to feel uneasy. This was a queer request. If he was to rouse Chris and the others he'd have to wake up to do it, and then the dream would be over and the Martian wouldn't exist. If he told the other three about it, they would laugh at him and tease him. They would say he'd been having a nightmare.

“You are not dreaming,” the Martian insisted. “You are awake and lying with your eyes closed. Open your eyes and

you will see I am not a dream.”

This was getting a bit too much, Tony decided. He'd wake up and then this ball of light would be banished and he'd forget all about it. Like a terrier emerging from a swim, he shook his head violently and opened his eyes. He was awake now all right, for he could see the electric bulb and his companions on their couches.

“That's right,” the thought came, “now rouse them up. I want to speak to them.”

Tony gave an involuntary gasp. He was awake now and these thoughts should no longer be coming into his head. He turned to assure himself that there was no such thing as this ball of light; that this Martian was only something that had appeared to him while asleep. But—there was a ball of light, not three feet away from him. How he held back a cry he didn't know.

“Keep calm,” the Martian told him. “There is no need to fear. All I wish is to speak to you. Rouse your friends.”

“Are you—really a Martian?” Tony gasped. “You're not—”

“No, I'm not a dream. I am really an inhabitant of this world. There are many of us. We no longer have bodies and voices like you. But come—I am waiting.”

The young man licked his dry lips. He reached over and, in turn, shook his sleeping friends. Mumbles and groans were the response. Hesitantly he turned towards the Martian, for his friends had been very tired. But again the command came. As he shook Chris he wondered why he should be meekly obeying the Martian's orders. Then he told himself it was because he wanted to find out whether it was he, himself, who was having an hallucination.

“Wake up, Chris,” he called urgently. He'd decided to rouse the leader first because he'd be the one least likely to laugh at him if the whole thing was just imagination.

“What is it?” Chris said sleepily.

“Wake up. I think we’ve got a—visitor.”

“Something wrong?” Chris asked, almost instantly awake.

“Can you see anything over here?” Tony’s question sounded foolish, but on the answer depended confidence in his own sanity. The leader rubbed his eyes and looked. Then he rubbed his eyes again. He swung off his couch and stared hard ahead. With some relief Tony saw that his friend was looking towards the luminescent patch in the dim cabin.

“What’s happened?” Chris asked. “Is that some form of electrical discharge?”

The words came washing into Tony’s brain. “I am a Martian!”

He saw Chris jerk as if he’d been shot.

“What did you say, Tony?” the leader asked.

“I didn’t speak, Chris,” the young man answered, “it was—the Martian. He doesn’t speak in words, he puts thoughts in your mind.”

Chris stared at the ball of pale light that floated steadily, and through which he could see the dials of some of the rocket’s instruments. He felt the perspiration spring out on his forehead, but, overcoming an inexplicable reluctance, he spoke to the visitor.

“If you are a Martian,” he asked, “what do you want?”

Chapter Fourteen

Chris Godfrey had always prided himself that he was master of his own thoughts. If he was concentrating on a problem he could exclude everything else from his mind. If he found himself worrying too much about something, he could switch his thoughts to other things. When he wanted to relax he could empty his mind and keep it blank.

The message from the Martian, forcing itself into his consciousness, intruded brutally amidst his thoughts. It was as if a stranger had elbowed his way into a gathering of old friends. It was something which he couldn't control.

"Do not fear," the message in Chris's mind said. "I mean you no harm."

The scientist and the mechanic looked at each other.

"Did you get that, Tony?" Chris asked.

"That there was nothing to fear and he meant us no harm? Yes. I got that as well. He must be able to get into both our minds at the same time," Tony answered.

"Certainly. It is the only method by which I can communicate with you," the Martian seemed to say. "You can reply by your voices or by thoughts alone, but as you cannot speak to each other mentally, it would be better if you used the spoken word."

"He wanted me to wake you all," Tony told Chris. "I woke you first because I thought—well, I thought you'd understand."

"Quite right," Chris said, "but now Morrey and Serge must come in on this. We'll all hear what the Martian has to say."

It took some little time to wake the others and then to convince them that there was an inhabitant of this strange world present in their cabin.

“But I thought Mars was a dead or dying planet,” protested Morrey when he’d overcome the first shock. “How can there be living people here?”

“Listen, Earthmen, and I will explain,” came the Martian’s words into all their heads.

Before Serge and Morrey could appreciate what was happening, the Martian continued.

“This planet, which you call Mars, is several million years older than your own. Life developed here just as it has since done on Earth. Once creatures like yourselves lived in this world, evolved from the first speck of life that came from who knows where.”

This mental communication was uncanny, but gradually the crew became accustomed to it, or at least forgot its strangeness in their growing absorption in the Martian’s story.

“Our people continued to evolve, just as yours will do. We invented machines that saved the labour of our bodies just as you have done. But in the passage of countless centuries we came to use our bodies less and less, and our brains more and more. At last our bodies were no longer necessary, so they withered and died away.”

“Do you mean that, in the distant future we, too, will be like that?” gasped Serge.

“It is inevitable,” the Martian’s reply came into their minds. “Already you have moved in that direction. Your teeth and hair are disappearing. Your muscles are less strong. At the same time your brain is growing larger and more powerful. Yes, you will follow along the same path as we did, as did those before us, and as will those after you.”

“There is an older planet than Mars?” Chris asked.

“There was. Now it has broken up into small pieces and its remains are what you call the asteroids. We followed this lost planet, you follow us, and the world you call Venus will follow you.”

“So, in a million years or so people on Earth will have no bodies—only minds,” breathed Morrey.

“That is so. By that time there will be creatures on Venus that will look as you do now. When their space ships land they will find only intelligences inhabiting your planet,” the Martian told them. “Your Earth will have shrunk and dried up as ours has. Your oxygen will almost have disappeared, but you will no longer need food or water, or air to breathe. You will no longer have a physical existence.”

Tony was now feeling a little calmer. There were some questions he wanted to put to the Martian.

“How is it you can speak our language?” he asked.

“I am communicating with you by thought and not by speech,” answered their visitor. “Language is not necessary.”

“That’s why I couldn’t decide whether you were speaking—I mean communicating—in Russian or English,” Serge interjected.

“How is it I could see you with my eyes shut?” Tony continued with his questions.

“For the same reason that I could enter your cabin—we of this planet now have no physical bonds. We can pass through the walls of your rocket as easily as the lids of your eyes,” answered the Martian.

“But how is it only you have visited us? Are there many of you? Have you a name?” Tony’s questions came rapidly, and the Martian seemed willing to supply the answers.

“We have no names,” he told them. “You would not understand if I told you how we differentiate between each other, for there are many thousands of us. I was chosen to speak to you first.”

“Can you tell us what is buried beneath this moss? We have uncovered some stonework that looks like a building,” Serge said.

“You are indeed above the remains of one of our great

cities. When we lost our bodies our dwellings fell into ruin and our towns became overgrown. As water and oxygen escaped from our planet, vegetation died away and only moss survives,” answered the Martian.

“Well, where do you live and how do you move about?” Morrey wanted to know.

“We do not live in any particular place, for we neither eat nor sleep as you do,” came the reply. “As for movement, we can travel instantly to any part of our world.”

“Can you travel across space?” Tony asked breathlessly.

In that instant all four humans experienced a strange sensation. It was as if the Martian had suddenly become cold and hostile—that the question had somehow upset him. None of the crew could explain this queer feeling, but when Chris was going to speak again they saw that the glow was no longer there. The Martian had gone.

“Are you still here?” asked Chris, but there was no response.

“That’s rum,” commented Morrey, “and just when we were getting used to him. Your question must have riled him, Tony.”

“What will you do now, Chris?” asked Serge.

“I think the first thing to do is to make notes of all that has happened,” the leader said. “Will you each write your own account of our visit from the Martian.”

For the next hour the crew were busy filling their notebooks. Sir George Benson would be able to compare their four accounts of this stupendous event when they returned to Earth. Because the Martian’s part in the encounter had been silent, it would have been impossible to record the interview fully. Each made his story as detailed as possible, so between them nothing was missed out.

“The thing to do now,” Chris said as they concluded their task, “is to make all the observations we can—magnetic, geological, meteorological, and so on—then to return to

Earth and tell what we know. I don't think we need waste time on further excavations, for we know only too well that Mars is inhabited. At least I suppose it is."

"If you can call our friend the Martian an inhabitant," smiled Serge. "How long before we can take-off, Chris?"

"A day and a half to two days. We should complete our observations in that time," the leader answered.

"I wonder if the Martian, or one of his friends, will visit us again," mused Tony. "Good job they have no bodies. Even if they didn't like us, they couldn't do us any harm."

But Chris wasn't so sure. However, another visit would be most interesting, and they'd have to plan what questions to ask. Funny, though, that the Martian had left them so abruptly.

It had been a long day for all of them. Of course there was no sleep for anyone after the strange events of the night. As soon as it was daylight all four set out to operate a carefully devised series of observations. They had to learn as much as possible about the physical conditions on Mars, in spite of their shattering experience. Though none of them admitted it openly to the others, they were all anxious to cut their stay as short as possible.

When the Martian night had fallen swiftly, the travellers from Earth were resting and eating in their rocket cabin. Outside it was inky black and cold. Stars shone brilliantly from a velvet sky. One outshone the rest—Earth. It was as if their home planet were keeping a watchful eye on its four sons. The weary explorers sank on to their couches, tired in mind and body. Some time during the next day, they would complete their task. Then they would feel free to blast-off for home.

"Chris, are you awake?"

It was Tony who had whispered the question. Chris had been dozing, but only lightly. His mind had been too

preoccupied for sound sleep. The whisper was sufficient to rouse him, and he raised himself on one elbow to reply.

“What’s the matter, Tony?” he asked. “Can’t you relax?”

“I feel uneasy and restless, Chris. I keep thinking about the Martian. Not that I’m scared, of course,” Tony added a little too hastily, “but I’ve a queer feeling we’re in for another visit.”

“Don’t worry, we shan’t be here much longer,” the scientist assured his friend. “Now try and sleep, there’s a good chap.”

“Sorry, Chris, if I’ve been keeping you awake,” Tony apologized. “I know I’m a fool.”

“Forget it,” Chris grinned, “and go to sleep.”

But that was easier said than done, Tony found, after he’d been trying vainly for nearly an hour.

Perhaps he had gone to sleep after all. Perhaps the Martian was so much on his mind it was inevitable that the strange creature should speak to him again. But, surely, this time he was dreaming. Maybe the whole fantastic expedition was a dream—and he’d never left Earth!

“I have returned!” the insistent thought-message of the Martian said. “I would speak again with you all.”

Tony was shivering. He couldn’t tell whether this was a dream or reality. It wasn’t fair. Why was the Martian troubling them again? Why did he come to him first? Not quite sure whether he was really awake, he once more roused his companions.

There was no need for Tony to explain. As soon as the three scientists were awake, the Martian announced himself.

“I have returned, Earthmen,” flashed their visitor’s message into their minds.

The crew awaited developments with mixed feelings—
anxiety, surprise, curiosity, annoyance. What was the

purpose of this visit? What did this Martian want of them? Could his uncanny power do them any harm? Was he friend or enemy? It was Chris who voiced their protest and question.

“We are very tired,” he said. “Why do you want to wake us? What is it you want?”

The glowing ball seemed to grow brighter as the Martian projected his reply.

“When you are roused from sleep your minds are most receptive,” he told them. “The one you call Tony is the most receptive of all.”

“So that explains it!” Tony thought.

“Yes, that explains it,” the Martian flashed back. His friends looked at Tony curiously, for they had no idea what had prompted the reply which they, too, had received.

“I—I wondered why he always came to me first,” Tony explained lamely. He was still shaken by the knowledge that their visitor could read his most private thoughts.

“We’re waiting to hear what you want,” Chris reminded the Martian.

“You are the first visitors from your planet,” he replied in his thought-language. “We have been awaiting you.”

“Do you mean you knew we were coming?” Morrey asked in surprise.

“It was inevitable. Just as we crossed the void to the planet that is no more, we knew Earthmen would one day visit us. We have been awaiting you for thousands of years.”

“But you didn’t know we were on our way? You haven’t anything like our radar?” the American persisted.

“No. What you call ‘radar’ belongs to our very distant past. We had all your devices—and many you cannot yet imagine—while we still had our bodies,” the Martian replied.

“So because you now have no bodies with which to operate

them, you no longer have scientific apparatus,” suggested Serge.

The Martian’s reply indicated assent, but again the crew members felt a wave of resentment, as if their visitor were very “touchy” on the subject.

“So that’s why we’ve never had any messages from you?” Tony asked.

“We had discarded our bodies and all primitive means of communication long before your species had evolved,” the Martian told them with some asperity. “But do not imagine that we have not the means of forcing you to comply with our request. We have powers of which you have never even dreamt.”

“What request is that? You haven’t made one as far as I remember,” Chris pointed out.

The Martian’s reply came flooding into their minds.

“You have a natural barrier against radiations from space,” he told them. “We had to create one. This barrier now confines us to the dying planet. Before it disintegrates and becomes another belt of asteroids, we intend to leave it. You must take us with you back to Earth!”

Chapter Fifteen

At first Chris doubted whether he'd received and understood the Martian's request correctly. Before he had time to speak Morrey had broken the stunned silence.

"You—want us to take you back to Earth?" the American gasped.

Again the Martian glowed brightly and his affirmation came crashing into all their minds.

"But we can't do that," Chris answered briskly. "We should have to get permission from our Control, and we're not able to contact them. Even if we could, Control would want to know more about you and the possible effect you'd have on us before they agreed."

"It is imperative that we enter your ship and return with you to your own planet," the Martian's message snapped. "You have no choice."

The four Earthmen felt their anger rising. Resentment had for the moment overcome their fear of any strange powers that the Martian might possess. It was unthinkable that they should convey this strange being and his fellows back to Earth. More—much more—must be known about them before such a venture would be possible. To introduce Martians among human society might well be more disastrous than the deadly fungus that had come from Venus some time before. Then it had taken superhuman efforts to cleanse the Earth of that alien scourge. To get rid of Martians—should they prove dangerous—would be even more difficult, for they were immaterial creatures and had uncanny powers.

"We will not take you with us," Chris said firmly, speaking for them all.

They felt the venom in the message the Martian flashed back—

“Think again—for you will never return to Earth alone!”

“But how could we get many of you in our ship?” demanded Chris, playing for time.

“Because we are no longer physical beings, we do not occupy what you call space,” the Martian answered. “Your ship, with its shielding, could carry millions of us through the radiation belts to our new home on your planet.”

“What would you do on Earth?” asked Serge.

“And if you are not physical beings, why do you want a physical world to live on?” Morrey wanted to know.

“Because of the way we have evolved we must be associated with a physical environment,” their visitor told them. “You would not understand if I tried to explain this, but we shall cease to exist when this planet is destroyed unless we come with you to Earth. There we shall teach your people many things, but because we are a higher species than Man, we shall control him.”

“But suppose we don’t want you to control us—” began Tony.

“We shall bring you untold benefits. We shall improve your technology beyond your imagination. We shall change the face of your planet.”

“And, in return, we shall be your slaves,” Morrey thought to himself.

But the Martian had picked it up.

“Earthmen will do our bidding,” he snapped into their thoughts—and then he was gone.

“Whew!” whistled Morrey, “that Martian’s asking for the Earth—literally, I mean.”

“Steady,” Tony whispered, “he knows what we are saying and thinking. What can we do if the Martians can even read our thoughts?”

“Ugh! That’s creepy,” the American admitted, “but can’t

we write messages to each other?”

“We have to form thoughts to write down,” Serge pointed out. “The Martians would know what was in our minds even before we’d written it down.”

“So there’s no hope of blasting-off without their knowing, I guess,” Morrey said gloomily. “They probably know all we’re saying and thinking now.”

“I’m not so sure,” Chris told his companions. “Why isn’t the Martian threatening us now? We’re all thinking of escaping, yet I’m not getting anything from him. Are any of you?”

They all agreed they were not, and they discussed this phenomenon for some time.

“My theory is that they can only read our thoughts and communicate with us when they are within a certain range,” Chris ventured.

“But wouldn’t that be awkward when they want to speak to each other?” asked Tony.

“Oh, I expect they can get across to each other over any distance,” the leader said. “It’s just that they have to be fairly close to us humans to communicate. I suppose our thoughts are like very weak radios—only able to transmit and receive over short distances.”

“You may be right,” the Russian agreed. “Each time the Martian spoke to us he was here inside the cabin. We haven’t had any messages from outside.”

“So maybe these spooks don’t know what we are on about,” Morrey suggested more cheerfully.

“That’s my impression,” declared Chris. “I’m certain the Martian or one of his friends would be here glowing at us if they knew.” “Yippee!” yelled Tony. “It’s nice to know no one’s reading our thoughts.”

The others agreed with him. They had all had enough of what Morrey had christened the “Spooks”.

“But we must expect the Martian back at any time,” Chris warned them seriously, and this possibility damped their rising spirits.

“Can’t we blast-off now while we’re free of them?” demanded the mechanic.

“You know we can’t, Tony,” answered Chris. “It will take at least twelve hours before we can be ready.”

“And in the meantime the Martian and his friends will be back to block our plans,” Morrey mumbled despondently. “If only we could keep a secret from the blighters—”

“We have only one chance,” the leader began, and at once his three companions turned to him eagerly.

“It seems to me,” Chris went on, speaking thoughtfully, “that this visitor of ours comes only when we are asleep—that is when our minds are not occupied by external stimuli. He gets hold of Tony first because he finds that easiest. Then he captures us when we are newly roused, before our brains are really awake. Once he’s in communication with us it stays that way until he leaves us.”

“So all we have to do is not go to sleep,” Morrey observed bitterly. “How are we going to manage that? We’re all dead tired now.”

“Do you think the Martians could control us physically?” asked Serge, but Chris had to confess he didn’t know.

“It’s a chance we must take,” he sighed wearily.

“What are we going to do, Chris?” asked Tony, yawning.

“Well, I think we’re all agreed that we must get back to Earth without any of these spooks aboard,” the scientist said with forced briskness, and the others nodded their agreement.

“Then we must start work right away to get ready for blastoff. At all costs we must avoid sleep. We must force our brains into full activity all the time so that the Martians can’t get a foothold,” Chris went on. “We must watch each other to

see that none of us wearies enough to give these weirdies a hold over us—for if ever they do goodness knows what frightful things might happen.”

Tony nodded silently. He knew that he would have the most difficult job of all in resisting the Martians. No doubt, having found him the most receptive, they would concentrate their efforts on him. He must, at all costs, resist. He couldn't let the others down.

“Let's plan our campaign before they come back,” Chris said to the others crisply, and in spite of their fatigue they listened eagerly.

“We'll blast-off the very minute we can,” the leader went on. “First job is to jack up the ship to an angle of at least sixty degrees for launching. Seventy would be better, but sixty will do. We'll all concentrate on that job first before we get too tired physically. Then the tanks must be checked as well as every valve, pump, instrument and electric circuit. Tony, you'll take the tanks, pumps and valves; Morrey will do the circuit testing, and Serge the instrument checks. I'll look over the oxygen system and then concentrate on working out our flight path.

“Now this is vitally important. We must keep in constant touch with each other—directly if we're in the cabin, and over the radios if we're working outside. Each one of us must, in addition to the job he's doing, be alert for any flagging in any of the other three. We must help each other to keep awake and active so that these spooks can't creep into us.”

“Suppose the Martian comes back before we're ready?” asked Tony doubtfully.

“He must find us active and occupied,” snapped Chris. “None of us must flag for a second.”

“Come on then,” Morrey urged, “the sooner we start the sooner we leave this grisly planet.”

Each of the crew members knew precisely what he had to do. With space suits on and with full oxygen bottles, they

climbed out of the rocket into the cold Martian night. It was inky black outside, with a profusion of brilliant jewel-like stars scattered over a black velvet sky. Each of the astronauts looked to see if he could spot Earth, but their home planet was still below the horizon.

With their excavation tools Morrey and Serge flattened the ground to take the base of the ship. Chris and Tony began the process of jacking up the rocket from its position, and soon all four were engaged on this vital task. Slowly the vehicle raised its nose as the jacks began their work. Inch by inch the rocket reared up as one jack after another took the strain. It was tense work, for if the rocket slipped and fell back there would almost certainly be serious damage to the casing.

As they worked the crew kept up a ceaseless chatter over their radios. Instructions and questions about the job in hand were only part of the conversation. The rest was a frantic attempt to keep each other alert and able to resist any unwelcome visitor.

“Come on, you chaps,” urged Chris. “I think we can get it almost vertical. How’s your jack doing, Tony?”

“O.K.,” the mechanic answered from the other side of the ship. “When will she settle over?”

“Better get your jack under the base,” Chris called to Morrey. “You can steady it down when we’ve raised it a little higher. Mustn’t leave anything to chance.”

After an exhausting two hours’ work Chris expressed himself satisfied with the position of the rocket. It wasn’t quite upright, but well within the limits of the safety angle. Only for a moment did the crew pause to look at their faithful ship, now pointing to the sky and waiting to take them home.

“Can’t we have a breather? I’m dead beat,” Tony gasped over his radio, but Chris’s reply was merciless.

“No rest for you or anyone else until we’ve got her off the ground,” he snapped.

With an effort the crew climbed into the cabin and began the next stage of their preparations.

So far there had been no sign of the Martian, and Chris wasn't altogether easy about it. He and his fellows must know what was happening even though they hadn't yet attempted to read the minds of the Earthmen since they had resolved to escape. Maybe the Martians were awaiting an opportune time, when the Earthmen were even more tired, to make their assault. Chris guessed that perhaps, even now, their would-be passengers were all around them watching for one of the crew to relax. He must drive his fellows on relentlessly, for he felt that this was the only way to keep the weird creatures at bay.

It was Tony who saw the Martian first. The mechanic had clambered up through a narrow opening between the fuel tanks to make sure that all was in order. He'd examined the valves and found them all satisfactory. It was tiring work, for in the confined space he had to get into some uncomfortable positions to reach them all. With the last one checked he gave a sigh of relief as he wriggled into the more roomy compartment housing the pumps.

How good it was to be able to stretch his cramped limbs for a moment and relax. It would be better still when they were on their way home and he could sleep and sleep—and sleep.

He lifted his head with a jerk. Something had called him. He looked up and saw the glowing ball he was coming to hate and fear. The Martian!

Tony heard the visitor's command echoing in his brain. Desperately he tried to resist its insistent call and to think of other things. If he succumbed to the Martian's spell he knew that he and all the others would be lost. Even if this alien creature failed to establish control over the rest of the crew through him, he knew that he'd probably be compelled to perform acts that could jeopardize the flight. With all his willpower he tried to seal his mind, but all he could do was to

gasp out the word "Chris!"

Within the rocket the crew were not, of course, using their radios. The sound of Tony's desperate cry failed to reach the leader, who was absorbed in his calculations. A bulkhead divided the cabin from the fuel compartment and this effectively masked the mechanic's frantic call for help.

Chris concentrated mainly on his own task. Occasionally he would glance up to see how Morrey and Serge were progressing. Tony, he knew, was up in the fuel compartment, squeezing in among the tangle of valves and pipes. But why was he so long? Chris glanced at his watch. The mechanic had taken far longer than he ought. The scientist stirred uneasily. Perhaps it had been wrong to let Tony—the most susceptible among them—go alone. In sudden alarm he made towards the hatch leading to the huge tanks.

With a few quick bounds he reached the opening and sprang up the aluminium ladder leading through the hatch.

"Tony!" he called as he clambered between a maze of pipes. There was no answer, and Chris's misgivings increased. He reached the open space around the pumps and valves. Then he stopped in horror. The tell-tale glow of the Martian told him of the return of this creature of a dying world. But it was to his friend that the leader's attention was drawn.

Tony half-crouched, half-leaned, against a row of valves. His eyes were glazed, his face expressionless. With a feeling of dread Chris saw that he was completely under the influence of the invader. Drawing a deep breath, the scientist, ignoring the baleful glow, lunged across the space and seized Tony's shoulder. He knew he had only seconds to spare before he, too, felt the Martian's power, perhaps to fall under his hypnotic influence just as Tony had.

Desperately he shook the young man's shoulder and slapped his face. Tony showed no response, and already Chris could feel the Martian's commands thudding into his brain. Without hesitation he leapt back to the hatch and

scrambled through.

“Serge! Morrey!” he called. He felt that only the three of them together had a chance of resisting the dreadful spell. There was an instant response from the Russian and the American, who, from their leader’s tone, guessed what was wrong. In a second they were up the ladder and all three turned to face the frightful enemy.

Chapter Sixteen

The Martian had gone; the glow had vanished. But Tony still crouched against the valves. Between them they carried him back down into the cabin and laid him gently on his couch. In spite of all their efforts they were unable to rouse him from the stupor into which he seemed to have fallen. Finally, in despair, they left him alone to resume the preparations for blast-off.

“Whatever happens, we mustn’t separate,” declared Chris. “On his own Tony was unable to resist the Martian. Maybe we shan’t, either. But at least we’ll stand a better chance. How are you doing, you two?”

Morrey and Serge reported on the progress of their tasks. There was still some hours’ work before they could possibly escape from this hateful planet, so all three pressed on grimly with their jobs.

At frequent intervals one or other would visit Tony on his couch, but there was no change in the condition of their friend. There was nothing more they could do except to leave this dying world behind as speedily as they could. Chris constantly watched his companions, and all three kept up a continuous report to each other on progress. This was to make sure that they all kept alert rather than for any technical reason.

By now a deadly weariness was creeping over them all. First one and then the other would seem to falter in his task, only to be encouraged by the other two. What will happen if all three of us crack up together, wondered Chris anxiously. Far beyond reach of a friendly word from Earth, the crew had only themselves to keep them going.

During one of their very brief rest periods Morrey confessed that something was puzzling him. Even while they were not at work the remaining crewmen dared not relax but had to keep talking feverishly together. Now the American

asked why the Martians were trying to subdue them. Why couldn't they all just crowd into the rocket as stowaways? If they did, there was just nothing the humans could do to rid themselves of these intangible beings.

"How do we know that they won't invade the cabin just as we're blasting?" Morrey asked.

Neither of the others could supply the answer, and soon Chris was urging them back to their jobs. With a quick look at the mechanic, the leader resumed his calculations.

All three were too busy to notice when it was that Tony first sat up on his couch. The first they knew of their companion's recovery was when they saw him making his way towards the fuel compartment.

"Hello," Morrey called out in surprise. "Are you all right now?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm going to finish my job," Tony answered stiffly. Chris looked at his young friend sharply. Perhaps it was only his imagination, for neither Morrey nor Serge seemed to have noticed anything strange in the mechanic's tone. Yet, somehow-

Uneasily Chris stood up to follow Tony.

"We must all keep together," he murmured to the other two; but it was as much to test his impression as to maintain contact that he climbed up after the mechanic. Tony was continuing his job with complete efficiency, and Chris could see that he'd soon be free to assist the others. It was surprising, in view of his fatigue, that he was working so well. His encounter with the Martian hadn't affected him. Or had it?

"Come and give us a hand in the cabin, Tony," the leader called as the mechanic concluded his tasks. Without a word the young man climbed down briskly to join the others. It was just as if he'd never known what it was to be tired. Morrey and Serge were grateful for his help, and Chris was able to return to his computations.

“Didn’t know you were familiar with that gadget,” the leader heard Morrey say to the mechanic. He looked up and was surprised to see that Tony had serviced a complicated piece of apparatus that measured cosmic radiation. Before, only Serge had been able to master its intricacies, for the number of instruments in their ship was so great that each scientist had to specialize in one batch of them. Now Tony had done the job that was the Russian’s, and he’d done it with uncanny efficiency.

“Here, you can give me a lift over here,” called Morrey, and Tony went over to assist the American.

“He’s been foxing us,” Morrey called to Chris a little later. “He knows as much about the job as I do.”

Tony’s reply was inaudible, but Chris didn’t like his strange smile. Had the young man really recovered from his encounter with the Martian? Perhaps the spooky creature hadn’t used any of his powers on his young friend. Anyhow—the mechanic was working as well, perhaps better, than ever.

In another hour they could blast-off! All the crew except Tony were almost dropping with fatigue. The mechanic seemed tireless, and he did much of the work his companions should have done. Serge and Morrey were surprised and grateful for the help, but Chris didn’t like it a bit. However, he kept his misgivings to himself.

Half an hour to go—and still the Martians hadn’t appeared. Chris couldn’t help feeling that the eerie inhabitants of the planet must be congregated all round the rocket. Perhaps they were waiting—just waiting till the moment before blast-off so that they could then come crowding into the cabin ready for the journey to Earth.

What would he do if the Martians came aboard? Chris didn’t know. He could see no means of preventing them, and no means of getting rid of them. Or would they just manage to slip away before the Martians knew it? The odds were heavily against this possibility, and as every second passed the tension mounted. Only Tony seemed calm and

undisturbed.

“I—I can’t go on,” cried Serge suddenly. He staggered over to a couch, half fainting. Chris couldn’t blame him, for both Morrey and he, too, were at breaking point. Thank God they were almost ready.

“Take it easy, Serge. We’ll manage,” the leader said hoarsely. But could they? Even as he spoke, Morrey staggered and slid to the floor.

“‘Fraid I’ve had it,” the American croaked apologetically.

“Get on your couch if you can,” Chris ordered in despair. Only the strongest will-power kept him from doing the same. Now he must concentrate on Tony, for the mechanic was his only hope of getting the rocket off the ground. He went across and watched him work.

It was incredible and frightening to see Tony, with uncanny efficiency, checking and servicing instruments, examining switches and testing cables. Chris had little doubt that, if necessary, he’d help with the computations too. The scientist was scared. He had no doubt now that it was the Martian who was responsible for Tony’s incredible ability. It was as if he’d entered the mechanic’s body and taken possession of his mind. No doubt, to the Martian, their instruments were unbelievably crude. Acting through Tony, this creature from an ancient world would have no difficulty in understanding all the apparatus in the cabin. Involuntarily Chris shrank away from the mechanic. He must warn the other two of his suspicions.

As he turned to the couches on which Morrey and Serge were resting Chris gasped with horror. Even as he looked he could see the sinister glow of a Martian just fading. But it was the vacant stare in the faces of his two friends that turned the scientist’s heart to water. The devilish Thing from this accursed planet had got Morrey and Serge, too. What could he, Chris, do now to prevent the Martians riding back to Earth?

Even as he turned over the problem in his mind, Chris

watched his American and Russian friends get up from the couches and resume their tasks with silent efficiency. Like Tony, they seemed more like automata than creatures of flesh and blood. Like him, they showed no further signs of strain. Preparations for the blast-off were proceeding swiftly and smoothly—far more easily than the crew could have managed alone, Chris told himself bitterly. Would to God something would go wrong, some mistake be made, so that they would never leave this dreadful place!

As this thought entered his mind a sudden resolve struck Chris. Better that all should perish on this dying world than that they should carry the Martians back to Earth! He would deliberately destroy the rocket, or its crew!

Swiftly Chris forced himself to think of other things. He mustn't let his thoughts dwell on his plan or the Martians would read his mind and learn what he meant to do. Feverishly he finished his calculations and then went over to his three companions to watch what they were doing. He must act and think as if there was nothing wrong; as if this slick efficiency was nothing unusual.

Ten minutes to "Go". Chris steeled himself for action. He would simply open the air lock and let their precious oxygen escape into the empty world outside. Within a few seconds all four humans would be dead. And then the Martians would have no one to launch the rocket or to obey their commands. The leader knew that his action would kill his friends and end his own life. Was he justified?

It was an agonizing decision for him to make. Tony, Morrey and Serge had been his close friends for a long time. They had faced incredible dangers together. Time and time again they had saved each other's lives on the dangerous missions they'd all undertaken. When he looked at the three silent figures engrossed in last-minute jobs he wondered if they really were the friends he knew. It was horrible to see them enslaved by the Martians. That was how everyone on Earth would be unless he prevented their return.

Slowly, cautiously, Chris edged his way towards the air lock. His decision had been taken. He would kill his best friends and himself to save the World! Now he was only three feet from the air lock switch. He was trying hard to keep his thoughts away from what he was about to do, but how does one think of one thing while planning to do another? With a sharp intake of breath—it would probably be his last—Chris lunged towards the switch.

Whether he touched it or not he didn't know. His world dissolved in a display of flashing lights as he fell to the cabin floor. A blow had struck him unconscious. Tony? Morrey? Serge?

Slowly Chris Godfrey opened his eyes. For a few seconds he tried to collect his thoughts. A pain from the back of his head helped him, and the memory of events came flooding back. Instinctively he tried to sit up but couldn't. He could tell he was on his contour couch. And the rocket was in flight!

He struggled to turn his head. It was difficult because of the powerful acceleration, but he managed to see that the other couches were occupied. Serge, Morrey and Tony lay motionless. So, under the influence of the Martians, his companions had launched the ship on its homeward journey! One of them had struck him senseless just as he was about to open the air lock. But Chris felt no resentment against whoever it might be, for he had been acting under the compulsion of the creatures of Mars.

This thought made Chris struggle yet again to turn his head in the other direction. Had the Martians entered the ship? Were they carrying to Earth its new masters? Or had they escaped without the stowaways? What he saw made Chris's heart sink. Myriads of little points of light seemed to fill the cabin. Instinctively he knew that countless numbers of Martians were there—an army on its way to conquer a new world.

Pinned down by the thrust of the motor, Chris could only

think, and his brain raced madly. No need now for caution. The enemy had won. They had subdued his companions and had literally taken control of the ship. What could he do to stop the flight? Every thought he had or plan he might make would be known to them. They could, through the other three humans, frustrate his every move. No appeals to Tony, Serge or Morrey would be of avail, for they were completely under the invaders' influence.

The rocket motor cut out. It had boosted the ship up to the required velocity. Soon the ion motor would take over—to build up a great speed under its gentle, but persistent, urge. Now Chris was free to move from his couch—or should be. When he tried to sit up he had a horrible feeling. He was secured, somehow, to the couch and was unable to move. During the short time of his blackout his companions had fastened him down so that he couldn't interfere with the navigation of the rocket. Bitterly Chris realized he was useless. Quite useless. He couldn't see what was holding him, but he soon found that his bonds were too strong to permit any hope of bursting them. There was nothing he could do but subside on to the couch and watch his enslaved companions carrying out the orders of their masters.

Chapter Seventeen

To Chris's experienced eye the take-off had been perfect. Under the thrust of the chemical motor they had built up escape velocity. Now they would be switching to the ion motor, which would steadily increase the speed to half a million miles an hour. Whether or not their flight path was correct he had no means of knowing. But there was little chance of the Martians making such a simple error, he thought bitterly. He must lie there impatiently while disaster winged its way to Earth.

It seemed to him that he'd been secured to the couch for some time when Morrey came towards him. The American's face was expressionless. His eyes were still dull and without life. He carried tubes of food and drink to the prisoner, and Chris realized that he was certainly thirsty if not hungry.

"I can't hold the tubes like this," the leader said. "Can't you release me?" He wondered how Morrey would react.

"I will hold the tubes for you," the reply came. It was Morrey's voice that spoke, but the monotonous tone was unlike the lively American's.

"But you can't keep me fastened here till we get back to Earth. Aren't you going to release me, Morrey?" Chris asked, trying to hold his friend's gaze.

The American hesitated visibly, but then turned away without replying. Would Chris have better luck with either of the others?

"Tony! Serge!" he called. "Aren't you going to let me up?"

Tony ignored his leader's cry, but Serge took several steps towards the couch. Then he, too, hesitated as if commanded from within to leave his leader alone. He turned and continued his tasks.

Wearily Chris sank back. The Martians had full control of

his friends. Even his own close affinity to them seemed useless against the invaders' power. Though they had faced death together a score of times, though these four were closer than brothers, the bond had been broken by the uncanny influence of the ghastly refugees from the dying world.

But why hadn't the Martians enslaved him too? As he lay there Chris pondered the problem. He doubted very much that his own powers of resistance were greater than those of Morrey or Serge. Tony, he could understand, might well succumb first. How was it that their enemies hadn't robbed him of his will just as they had the others?

A thought struck Chris. Was it that the Martians weren't quite sure of their power over the human mind? Were they taking this opportunity of putting their control to the test during the voyage? If Chris couldn't free his close friends from the hypnotic influence of the stowaways then neither could the Martians' victims on Earth be rescued. Therefore he must try his utmost to wrest his friends from the hateful power of those myriad spots of light.

"Serge," the leader called again earnestly, "come over here."

The Russian paused in what he was doing, half-turned, and Chris saw a glimmer in his face. The next moment it was gone and Serge returned to his job. It was almost the same with Morrey, but Tony gave no response whatsoever.

"They aren't too deeply hypnotized," Chris muttered to himself as he sank back on to his couch. "If only I could free myself maybe I could do better."

He began to turn his attention for the first time to his bonds. They consisted, he saw at once, of electric cable—taken, no doubt, from the spare stock which Tony kept for repairs. The cable would be much too strong to break, so he must try to find where it was fastened and endeavour to undo it. As far as he could he moved his hands, letting his fingers slide along the cable. Only in the extreme position

could he find a place where two ends had been twisted together.

Relaxing for a few moments Chris felt the soreness where the cable had bitten into him. To reach the joint in his bonds he must strain painfully. It would be a long job to free himself, but he was confident he could do it. Trying not to call attention to himself, he began the tedious task.

Not only were the ends of the cable tightly twisted, they were also fairly thick and stiff. Chris could only maintain his efforts for a few minutes at a time, for his arms rapidly became numbed, because the bite of the cable restricted his circulation. For the first few spells he achieved practically nothing. The sweat was standing out on his face with the strain and each time his struggles seemed to give him more pain. He was almost in despair when he felt one end of the cable give slightly.

Encouraged, Chris worked on. It was agony to try for long, and his fingers were soon bleeding too. What did his circulation or his bleeding fingers matter, Chris told himself, if only he could free himself and perhaps release his friends from their less tangible bonds? After what seemed an endless period he managed to get one end of the wire free.

Quietly, carefully, the leader worked on. The other members of the crew were too busy to see him, but why the Martians hadn't warned them he couldn't imagine. One arm was free and then the other. For a few dreadful moments Chris thought he'd been seen, for Tony had suddenly turned round and stared straight at him. But the mechanic had turned back to his valves and gauges, and Chris had heaved a sigh of relief.

While the circulation was returning to his arms, Chris planned his campaign. His companions had tied him down while he'd been unconscious from the blow one of them had given him. Could they bring themselves to fasten him up again by force? Would they all attack him after he was free? Or would the bond between them be strong enough to

withstand the Martians' power?

Now came the difficult part of the operation. He must untie his legs secretly so that his freedom would surprise his friends. Perhaps the shock would help to jolt them back to their own senses. At least if he was completely free before they knew it, it would bring matters to a head. Would his best friends use force to tie him up again? The next few minutes would see that question answered.

With a sudden bound Chris sprang up from his couch.

“Serge! Morrey! Tony!” he called. “Shake off these Martians. Don’t let us take them back to Earth.”

At the sound of their leader’s voice the other three members of the crew had spun round from whatever they were doing and stood facing him.

“Don’t you see,” Chris cried hoarsely, “these devils have got you in their power. Pull yourselves together.”

He looked anxiously at his companions’ faces, trying to fix on the eyes of each in turn. Even in Tony there was hesitation, but in the other two Chris saw real concern. Then, in a flash, it was gone. All three, faces now set like stone, bore down on him at their masters’ command.

Quick as a flash Chris dodged under their outstretched arms. He knew, now, that it was useless to appeal to them—that he’d lost the battle for their minds. With a sinking feeling he realized that his friends would obey the Martians, and his capture could only be a matter of seconds. Seconds? Then perhaps that would be long enough to send the rocket off course so that it could miss Earth and lose itself and its crew in the depths of space. He lunged towards the switches controlling the lateral rockets. There wasn’t time to decide which switch to press. It really didn’t matter. All he wanted to do was to destroy their planned flight path, even if it cost his own life and those of his friends.

As his fingers pressed one switch after another, Chris felt his companions seize him. He hated doing it, but he turned

and lashed out at the first face he saw. It was Morrey—and yet it wasn't Morrey, Chris told himself as he sent the American sprawling. But now Tony had grasped him round the knees and Serge had seized his arms. Struggle as he might, Chris was only able to resist for a few seconds. Then, with Morrey returning to the attack, he was borne down beneath his struggling friends. He continued the fight, for every second he could prevent them cutting out the lateral rockets gave his desperate plan more chance of success.

Even as these thoughts passed through his mind Chris knew that he'd given himself away and that the Martians would know his intention as plainly as if he'd told them in words. As if to confirm this, Serge tore himself away from the struggle and began work on the switches. Chris didn't think he'd be able to correct their trajectory, for nothing short of a computer could work out the manoeuvre. Yet the Russian methodically pressed certain switches as if he was being instructed by someone who had already solved the problem.

"The Martians know all the answers," the leader told himself bitterly as he allowed himself to be forced back on to his couch.

With Tony's assistance Morrey had soon restored their friend's bonds, for Chris no longer had the heart to resist. It was equally useless, he felt, trying again to awaken his companions. The only thing left for him to do was to lie there while his closest friends obeyed their masters' commands. He was powerless, it seemed, to prevent the Martians from colonizing the Earth!

There was no doubt that his effort to divert the rocket had failed. Serge had reached the lateral rocket controls too quickly for their ship to have travelled far off its course. The Russian had made the required adjustment with confidence and speed—another tribute to the ability of the Martians, Chris thought.

How long was it since they had blasted-off from Mars? From where he was, the scientist was unable to see the

chronometer which would have started automatically on launching. He'd been unconscious for some time. For how long he didn't know. Now all he could do was to lie there, a prisoner, while the ion motor steadily accelerated the vessel on its journey home.

Poor Chris writhed in mental anguish. If only he could warn the people on Earth! Perhaps they would be able to destroy the rocket before it came too close. They would be able to launch an anti-missile missile which would seek it far out in space and blast it to pieces. Without a vehicle to carry them, the intangible Martians would be unable to complete their voyage of conquest. But of course he couldn't warn his friends on Earth. There was that wretched Le Prince layer that effectively prevented communication, even if he could free himself long enough to work the radio.

The young leader subsided on to his couch in despair. Everything was against him. The uncanny power of their enemy, the complete subjugation of his friends, his very effective bonds, even the radiation belts in space, all conspired to frustrate anything he could do. Inside the cabin his three friends acting like automata and obeying the wishes of those innumerable specks of light. Outside the rocket just cosmic radiation and those hideous Voices of Space!

Suddenly Chris's mind stopped its worried wondering. His body, for a moment, became rigid with excitement. A plan had flashed into his brain.

Had there been an unseen observer in the cabin of that Earth-bound rocket, he could not have told that things were amiss. The quiet, efficient work of three of the crew members could have been the result of long training together and an absolute mastery of the job they were doing. The lack of conversation between them could have been due to sheer concentration on the tasks in hand. The fourth astronaut, lying quietly on his couch, could have been inactive because it was his rest spell. Even the innumerable specks of light might possibly be caused by some electrical condition. All seemed serene in that small compartment; all seemed a

picture of quiet efficiency. The observer could not have guessed that here the fate of Earth was being decided—that the freedom of the human race hung in the balance.

Morrey, Tony and Serge, completely under the Martians' control, carried out the physical tasks involved in turning the ship on its correct flight path. At intervals they would break off to take refreshment, but never to rest. All three seemed tireless, and this made Chris wonder—until he realized that the brains of his companions were already asleep. Because of his friends' ceaseless activity, Chris found the operation of his plan most difficult. First he must free himself again without the others knowing. So that they would have no need to approach his couch, he preferred not to ask for food and drink even though, with the passage of time, he badly needed them.

The electric flex which secured him was fastened very tightly.

Even if he lay still, the wire bonds restricted his circulation. When he moved or strained to free himself, the pain became excruciating, and he had to desist quickly. Hour after hour he lay, with short, painful efforts to loosen the wire. All the time he kept his eyes on the other three, and each time one of them seemed about to glance in his direction, Chris became motionless.

If his scheme was to be successful, he had to free himself within the next few hours. How long he had available he'd no means of telling, for the passage of time is difficult to measure without mechanical means. In the cabin there was no night or day, no set meal times, and the clock was out of sight. Had he been a prisoner for twelve hours? A day? Or longer? Desperately, wincing with pain, he forced his lacerated fingers to continue their seemingly hopeless task.

After one great effort Chris rested. Suddenly he opened his eyes and realized he'd either fallen asleep or had fainted. This added to the uncertainty of the time he had left, and increased his anxiety. Again and again he forced his bleeding fingers to wrestle with the cable. Only because he knew what

was at stake was he able to carry on.

Ah! Surely the wire had loosened a fraction! Or was it his imagination? No, it was definitely slacker, and renewed hope came flooding over Chris. He worked away at his bonds, but now he redoubled his care not to let the others see him. He also tried hard to dissociate his thoughts from what his hands were doing, for fear the Martians would read them and learn of his intentions. Every moment he expected the other crew members to turn round upon him—warned by their masters even if they'd noticed nothing themselves. Miraculously nothing happened, and as the ship sped across the black void, the scientist worked painfully on.

One hand was now free. It was as much as Chris could do to ignore the discomfort of returning circulation while he worked away at the other. He was glad now that he'd refrained from asking for refreshment. Unless they were warned or observed something themselves, there was no cause for Serge and the others to approach his couch. It would be tragic if, so near, his escape was detected. His eyes followed the movements of his friends and captors carefully. While his fingers worked on the last knots he tried to analyse the operations the others were performing.

With startling suddenness he realized that his companions were preparing to shut down the ion motor. This meant that they had been in space for more than two and a half days and that, having reached the required velocity, the rocket would now coast along on the main part of its journey. It also meant that very shortly Tony, Morrey and Serge would have completed their immediate duties and would have time on their hands to observe him more closely. He must carry out his plan within the next few minutes. Otherwise its chance of success would be very much less.

Both hands were now free. As he lay there Chris pondered over the problem of releasing his legs. To do this without attracting attention would be much more difficult—almost impossible, in fact. He dared not risk failure at this point. With his eyes he measured the distance from his couch to the

various instruments and pieces of equipment. Could he do it with his legs still secured? It was his only chance.

With a silent prayer for success, Chris steeled himself. Then in a flash, before the other three could even turn round, he'd flung himself from the couch and lunged towards the radio. Even as he saw, through the corner of his eye, his companions straighten up from their tasks, his hands were on the controls of the set and he was feverishly switching it on.

Time seemed to stand still. As the others bore down on him Chris waited. The loudspeaker, silent for so long, blared out. And the hideous noises it made could only be the Voices of Space! Horrible as they had been before, they were now a thousand times more frightening. Though their sounds had been just bearable when he last heard them, Chris felt his senses going. He turned round and could see that the effect on the other humans was equally devastating. Morrey and Serge were reeling like drunken men and Tony—already senseless—was slumped on the floor. But as his own consciousness deserted him Chris saw something even more remarkable.

The Martians, those countless specks of light, were whirling about madly in a dance of death!

Serge was the first to recover. Wonderingly he opened his eyes and glanced round the cabin. His gaze fell on his unconscious companions, but still the full impact of the situation didn't strike him. What had happened to Chris and Morrey and Tony? Were they still on Mars? Why were his friends unconscious? What—what had happened to the Martian?

With questions chasing each other through his bewildered mind, the Russian struggled to his feet. He felt strangely weak, as if he were recovering from a long illness. Staggering a little, he made his way to Chris, and as he did so he could tell from the low gravity that their ship was no longer on the

dying planet, but under the gentle thrust of the ion motor.

As he bent over the still figure of his friend Serge tried desperately to recall the events leading up to the present situation. The last thing he remembered clearly was the frantic effort they were all making to prepare their ship for the blastoff back to Earth. After that everything seemed hazy until he returned to his senses a few moments before. Still struggling to collect his scattered wits, Serge nodded with a shock that his leader's legs were tied together with wire cable. Further examination revealed that there were deep weals on his wrists and his fingers were lacerated. What's happened? Serge asked himself frantically. What's come over us all?

Chris seemed deeply unconscious, so the Russian turned his attention to the others. Morrey was already stirring, and a few slaps caused him to open his eyes. He stared blankly at Serge.

"What's the matter?" he asked weakly. "Have I been ill?"

"I think we have all been ill," Serge answered. "I don't know what has happened. It was only a few moments ago that I came round. Chris and Tony are still unconscious. We've taken off and we are under ion drive."

At this startling news Morrey sat up. He, too, was unable to recall previous events, and hadn't the slightest recollection of their actual launching. Like Serge, Morrey, too, was puzzled and alarmed at Chris's condition. With the aid of wire-cutters they removed the bonds on their friend's legs, and while Morrey massaged their leader, Serge did the same for the mechanic. Soon Tony responded, but Chris remained as deeply unconscious as ever.

"He couldn't have tied himself up like that," muttered Morrey as all three crewmen turned their attention to Chris. Like the others, Tony was unable to contribute any explanation.

"Then it must have been one of us!" Serge burst out in horror. "No one else could have done it."

Chapter Eighteen

The three friends looked at each other in dismay. How could they have served their leader like this? To have lost their memories, to find they were somewhere in space, and now to discover that Chris had been so treated by them, was almost more than they could stand. It required a tremendous effort of will for them all to pull themselves together.

“Anyway—we must have escaped without the Martians,” declared Morrey in an attempt to cheer up his companions. “That’s surely the most important fact.”

“I wonder if we did,” mused Serge.

“What do you mean?” Tony and Morrey asked together.

“Well, so many strange things have happened. I wonder if the Martians are responsible,” answered the Russian. “You see, none of us can remember the blast-off, and none of us can remember tying up Chris. Yet we must have launched the ship, and we must have tied him up. I feel the Martians are responsible.”

“But how is it they’re not with us now?” demanded Morrey, but no one was able to supply the answer. In spite of themselves the three astronauts glanced nervously round the cabin.

“We’d better check the ship,” Morrey said with forced briskness. “Serge, will you see what you can do with Chris while Tony and I go over the gadgets?”

The Russian nodded and continued his attentions to their unconscious leader while the other two checked the instruments and apparatus all round the cabin.

“Gosh!” Tony called out a few moments later. “Look at this!”

He was pointing to the dial indicating the rocket’s velocity. Morrey joined him and stared for a few seconds at the

instrument unbelievably.

“Jumping polecats!” he gasped out, “we’re doing seven hundred and twenty thousand miles an hour!”

Serge left Chris for a moment to gape at the dial before he, too, was convinced of their fantastic velocity.

“The ion motor must have been running for too long,” was his explanation.

“Perhaps the velocity meter is faulty,” Tony suggested hopefully.

“Not a chance,” Morrey answered grimly. “It works on the Doppler principle—that’s the squeezing in or stretching out of light waves according to whether you’re moving towards or away from the source—and you can’t monkey about with the speed of light!”

“So we really are travelling faster than anyone’s ever travelled before,” breathed Tony.

“We must shut down the ion motor, turn the ship round, and then start it again to slow her down,” Serge told the others.

This was the obvious thing to do, so while the two senior members of the crew were working on this manoeuvre, Tony continued his inspection. Once they had the rocket travelling at the correct speed they could decide on the next step.

Again it was the mechanic who noticed something unusual. The radio, though silent, was switched on! Puzzled, Tony started to examine the apparatus more carefully. Why had the thing been switched on when the only sound they could pick up were those frightening Voices? And why weren’t they getting the Voices now? Surely they couldn’t have passed through the Le Prince layer yet. If they had, the speed at which they were moving would be disastrous. No, he couldn’t think they’d all been unconscious for that long.

Ah! It was the loudspeaker that was faulty. The rest of the set seemed all right. He’d have to get the loudspeaker

repaired or they'd have to use headphones. Must have picked up something very powerful to have knocked out the speaker. Tony switched off while he began his repairs. He didn't care to risk having those fiendish Voices suddenly blaring out at him.

Screwdriver poised, Tony suddenly stopped. If the radio had been on the Voices must have been coming through. Could they have been responsible for all that had happened? But who had switched on? His thoughts were interrupted by a new and welcome sound. It came from Chris, and in a few moments the leader opened his eyes.

"All right, you chaps," Chris was saying a few moments later, "you couldn't help it."

He'd barely recovered consciousness before his three friends were expressing concern at his condition. He described to them the happenings up to the time he felt his own sense slipping because of the awful sounds from the radio.

"I tried to send the rocket off course," Chris told his listeners, "but the Martians turned you on to me before it could go very far. You soon set it right again."

Morrey, Serge and Tony looked at each other in bewilderment, for none of them had the slightest recollection of the events their friend was describing. When he said that the cabin had been filled with innumerable Martians they could scarcely believe it.

"Then why aren't they here now?" enquired Tony, for that was the question they all wanted to ask.

"It was something that came to me while I was tied up," Chris told his audience. "It was only a million to one chance—but better than nothing. You remember when the first Martian visited us? He was fairly chatty and told us a great deal about his planet. One thing he let drop was about the belt of radiation which they had to put round Mars themselves. We have a natural one round Earth but the Martians had to make their own protection. Protection from

what? I guessed it was from the Voices.”

“So you thought the Voices might affect them as well as us?” queried Serge.

“I thought—maybe more so. Anyway it was the only thing I could try. But I had a job to undo those wretched knots of yours,” Chris concluded ruefully.

“But you did manage to switch on the radio?”

“Just about. I remember the Voices—more hideous than ever—coming through. Then I passed out.”

“Well, it seems to have worked. There isn’t a trace of a Martian, and we’ve come back to our senses,” Morrey admitted. “Good job the loudspeaker broke down. We’d never have recovered if those horrible noises had still been pouring out. How are you feeling now?”

“Fine,” Chris assured him. “Now let’s see how the ship’s doing.”

What a relief it was for them to be back to their old jobs, all working as a team to bring their vessel back home. That they could now do it, Chris hadn’t a doubt. The fact that the ion motor with its almost inexhaustible supply of fuel, had been left running too long wasn’t disastrous, as it would have been had it been the chemical rocket.

For the next hour, while the others observed readings of the numerous instruments, Chris pored over a mass of figures. With the aid of the miniature computer he was trying to work out a new flight programme based on the longer use of the ion rocket. Knowing its thrust and acceleration, he was able to work out how long it had been running and how far they had travelled, basing his calculations on the velocity of seven hundred and twenty thousand miles per hour that Tony had recorded.

“Here’s a rough programme,” Chris called out to his friends at the end of an hour’s hard work. “Of course I shall have to check it with more data, but I estimate that we shall be entering the Le Prince layer in sixty-nine hours. We can

switch to the chemical motor in seventy-two hours, and then—subject to instructions from the Cape—we can be eating steak and chips seventy minutes later.”

It was almost a sacred ritual that Chris and his crew, after all their many voyages, ate a hearty meal as soon as possible after touch-down. The information that their favourite repast was within measuring distance removed the crew’s last traces of anxiety. Their relief expressed itself in the jokes and uncomplimentary remarks they exchanged with each other. They roared with laughter at the slightest excuse. After the strains and tensions of the past few days a holiday atmosphere prevailed. The quartet discussed enthusiastically all the wonderful things they would do during their coming spell of leave.

Gradually they calmed down a little, for there was much work to be done. Chris made refined calculations of their flight programme, Morrey and Serge were busy with observations, while Tony was occupied in preparations for the final switching to the chemical rocket ready for landing.

During their spells of rest there were many fascinating things to discuss. The expedition had established—only too well—that life had existed on Mars, and they spent much time in speculating on the course of evolution which allowed physical bodies to become unnecessary. What must it be like, they wondered, to be just intelligences without the need to eat or sleep, able to ignore physical obstacles and distance?

“I’d like to know more about their technical achievements,” Serge said. “They must have been fantastic.”

“Absolutely unimaginable,” agreed Morrey. “Pity we couldn’t have brought some of them back to Earth.”

“Maybe the next expedition will,” suggested Tony. “I wonder if there are any more Martians left, or whether we’ve got rid of them all?”

“I’m interested in what we learned about other planets,” Chris said. “It’s a new conception of their history. What the Martian told us, in effect, was that the planets were thrown

out by the Sun in their present order of distance. In other words, Pluto is the oldest planet and Mercury the youngest. Maybe, some day, the Sun will throw off another.”

“Well, the information we take back will certainly cause a stir,” laughed Morrey. Then he added more soberly, “I wonder if our people will be able to find out where the Voices were coming from and what they were saying.”

“Ugh! I never want to hear them again,” declared Tony.

“Don’t forget they saved us from the Martians,” Serge pointed out.

In between spells of duty, rest and refreshment, the crew chatted on happily. Their rocket was speeding to Earth. They had survived great physical and mental dangers, and they had saved their fellow humans from domination by an alien race. The information they were taking back to Earth would keep scientists busy for years, and would be of help to future expeditions.

“How long before we’re through the Le Prince layer, Chris?”

Tony seemed the most impatient of them all to re-establish contact with other humans. Perhaps this was understandable, for he’d been the one most upset by the Voices and the Martians.

“Not much more than twenty-four hours,” Chris was able to reply. “Now don’t get impatient. There’s plenty of work to do.”

There was, of course, but in spite of this Tony found himself longing to be back among his own kind. The Martians had made a deep impression on him and were never far from his thoughts. When his rest spell came he was still thinking about the experiences they’d had and he found it difficult to relax, let alone to sleep.

What if Chris hadn’t had that inspiration about tuning in the Voices? Would he and the others have been permanently enslaved? Suppose Chris had put up more of a struggle.

What injury might not his friends have done to him on the orders of the Martians? Would these strange creatures really have enslaved the Earth? Sometimes the whole thing seemed like a ghastly nightmare.

Tony tossed and turned on his couch. Of course he could have asked Chris for a sleeping pill, but he didn't like to, for that would only have called attention to his disturbed state of mind. Sometimes he would be about to doze when he'd fancy he could see the Martian, and wake up with a start.

This really wouldn't do. He mustn't even think such terrifying things. He settled down again full of determination that this time he would will himself to sleep. He closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind completely. For a few moments he succeeded—and then thoughts of the Martian came crowding in more strongly than ever. In desperation Tony opened his eyes and sat up.

There, right at the foot of his couch, was a small patch of light. He barely stifled a scream. The Martian had returned!

Somehow Tony must have let out a cry or gasp. Chris, Morrey and Serge turned towards his couch and to their utter consternation they, too, saw the glow of their visitor.

“Will you please listen to me.”

The words came into their brains and they knew the Martian was speaking. Yet this time there was a subtle difference. Gone was the arrogant tone of command. Instead the quartet got the impression of supplication, of an urgent request.

“What do you want?” Chris asked on behalf of them all. Somehow their apprehension was evaporating. They felt they no longer had anything to fear.

“Our enemies from space, with your help, have destroyed all my fellows. I am the sole survivor, and even I, had I a body like yours, am badly hurt. Will you carry me back with you to your planet?”

“No,” snapped Chris. “We will not allow you to dominate our people. We've had a taste of what you can do.”

“I’ll say we have,” piped up Tony, feeling bolder than at any time since the first encounter with the Martians.

“There is no longer any question of assuming control of your race,” their visitor’s answer came back. “I have that power no longer.”

“Then why do you wish to go to Earth?” Serge asked.

“It is the only place where I can continue to exist. I am the sole survivor from my planet.”

“If we could really be sure you’re harmless—” began the leader.

The reply came crashing back with some asperity. “That you will have to believe. You have no means of knowing.”

“We can’t risk it, Chris,” Morrey said urgently. “This may be just to deceive us. Think what happened to us three. We bashed you about because of the Martians.”

“You have the choice,” the visitor’s message came, “either to take me with you, or to lose for ever the benefits I can bring.”

It was a horrible dilemma. Should they take this alien creature, with all his strange powers, back with them to an unsuspecting Earth? Or should they drive him away by calling in the Voices?

As leader of the expedition, Chris knew that the responsibility for a decision was his. Whatever he chose, he was sure that his friends would back him up. Even though Morrey had spoken against the Martian, Chris knew that he’d have the American’s loyal support for his actions. He could feel their eyes on him—waiting. The Martian was waiting too.

A surge of resentment arose within him. Why should he have to decide such a vital question? However, it quickly subsided, for he knew that he couldn’t evade his responsibility. Moreover, the rocket was rushing headlong on its flight. Within a very few hours it would be passing

through the Le Prince layer, which would then effectively shield them from the Voices and so from the means of driving the Martian away. If the decision was not to take their passenger with them, it would have to be taken now. Otherwise it would be too late.

The seconds ticked by as the leader considered the problem. If only he could be sure that the Martian's powers were gone and the world was in no danger! What a wonderful source of information their passenger could be! But could he risk it? Perspiration was running down Chris's face in the agony of his mental conflict.

"I can pass on to you the technical achievements of a million years," the Martian's words sounded in his head. The tone was now urgent, pleading even. What a tremendous thing it would be to tap the knowledge of this ancient race. His mind reeled at the prospect. The technical progress of a million years would be theirs if they took the Martian home with them. Chris buried his face in his hands, so great was his anguish.

Quite suddenly all was settled. There was a vivid flash of light in the cabin and a horrible choking smell. An alarm sounded that warned the astronauts of the rapid fall in their atmospheric pressure. The hull of their ship had been pierced by a meteor, and oxygen was being sucked into the void outside.

The value of their emergency training was now obvious. Even as they began to gasp for lack of air, the crew had donned their helmets and were seeking out the damaged wall. It was Tony who spotted the discoloration that betrayed where the meteor had burnt its way in. He lunged forward, colliding with the radio in his anxiety to affix the special patch which would seal the hole and save their precious oxygen from being drained away.

While the rest of the crew assured themselves that this was the only damage, Chris checked that the patch was fixed correctly. Satisfied, he signalled to Tony to open the oxygen

valve. As they were not using their radios, the mechanic didn't understand at first, but as Chris repeated the sign he went over and did as he was bid.

The leader went over to the dial which registered the pressure in the cabin and watched the needle move slowly. At last he knew it would be safe to remove his helmet and with a quick movement he released it and whipped it off his head.

There was instant pandemonium. The cabin was filled with the most horrible noise. It was the Voices. Someone, probably Tony, had caught the radio switch in the scramble to locate the meteor hole. Accidentally it had been turned on, and the menacing sounds from space filled the compartment.

His senses already beginning to reel, Chris lunged towards the radio and threw off the switch. The silence that followed was uncanny. Gasping, and with perspiration moistening his forehead, Chris signalled the others to unmask.

"What's happened?" asked Morrey, for they'd seen their leader's sudden activity and his exhausted state.

"Someone must have switched on the Voices," Chris explained weakly. "I got them off again just in time."

For the next few minutes the crew talked excitedly together, speculating on the size of the meteor and their narrow escape. It was Tony who suddenly interrupted.

"The Martian," he cried. "What's happened to the Martian?"

The creature from the dying world had gone for ever! Chris and his friends were silent for a long time.

"Don't any of you want to speak to the Cape?" Chris asked, breaking into the thoughtful mood of his companions.

The atmosphere in the cabin changed at once. Again excitement swept through all of them. Soon, within minutes perhaps, they would hear a human voice. Never before had

they longed so much to hear greetings from their own land. After their horrible experiences with the Martians and the Voices it would be bliss indeed to hear a fellow creature speak.

All four astronauts crowded round the set eagerly. Morrey worked the controls, but only the loud crackling noises of the Le Prince radiation came through. Even this was music to their ears after the spine-chilling sounds of the Voices. Their ears were strained to catch the first sounds from Earth.

The American worked away at the controls. He had the radio tuned into a long-wave station, for they knew that this could penetrate the layer farthest. Suddenly, between loud crackles, they caught a snatch of music. It was a male voice singing a pop song, and was gone again in a couple of seconds. Though Chris and Serge had never been too keen on this type of entertainment, like the others they thought it was the most wonderful sound they'd ever heard.

They almost held their breath, as they waited. There it was again. The voice of the singer came through clearly with a well-known song, and even Chris found himself joining in from sheer joy. But it was soon gone again, and they had to wait some time before the crackling ceased.

All had been gaiety in the rocket cabin, but now serious work must begin. Soon the chemical motor would be switched on to provide the heavy deceleration needed. Contact with Control must come first. As the others went to their own posts Chris took over the radio. As leader it fell to him to make the first report to the Cape. Repressing his excitement, he adjusted the set to the Canaveral wave-length. He could imagine that someone at the other end would be waiting just as eagerly.

Here it was. The voice from Control came through loud and clear, and for a moment the studied calmness of both speakers cracked as the first greetings were exchanged between the Martian expedition and the waiting scientists back on Earth. As soon as he could Chris recovered his

composure and reported their speed and other data in level tones. Details of the expedition would have to wait until after the landing. Meanwhile the Cape would assume responsibility for bringing them in.

The crisp commands from Earth were welcome indeed, and as the final phase of their ordeal drew nearer, each of the crew felt shaky from reaction. Only then, with the end of the journey in sight, did they appreciate how much the adventure had taken out of them. As they fastened themselves to their couches in preparation for deceleration, they listened to gay talk from Control, and a few moments later the familiar voice of Sir George Benson came through.

After inquiring anxiously about their condition and congratulating them on their safe return, the head of UNEXA said that he was content to hear details of the expedition after they had landed. All of them, particularly Chris, were very glad to hear the voice of their old friend again.

“Now here’s someone else who’s dying to have a word with you,” the voice of Sir George chuckled. “Don’t let him keep you talking too long, or you’ll muff-up the landing.”

“Hello, you chaps!” the loudspeaker said.

Whiskers! How good it was to hear him. All four called out joyful greetings to the ex-pilot and for a time the usual banter was exchanged.

“Well—what kind of trip have you had?” Wing Commander Greatrex enquired at last.

“So so,” Chris answered noncommittally. How could he describe their experiences?

“Ah well, if you’ve had a dull time we’ve had plenty of excitement here,” Whiskers told them. “You’ll never guess. At Wembley Stadium last night it was the Big Fight. For the first time in living memory Great Britain holds the heavyweight boxing championship of the World!”

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