

TALES OF WONDER

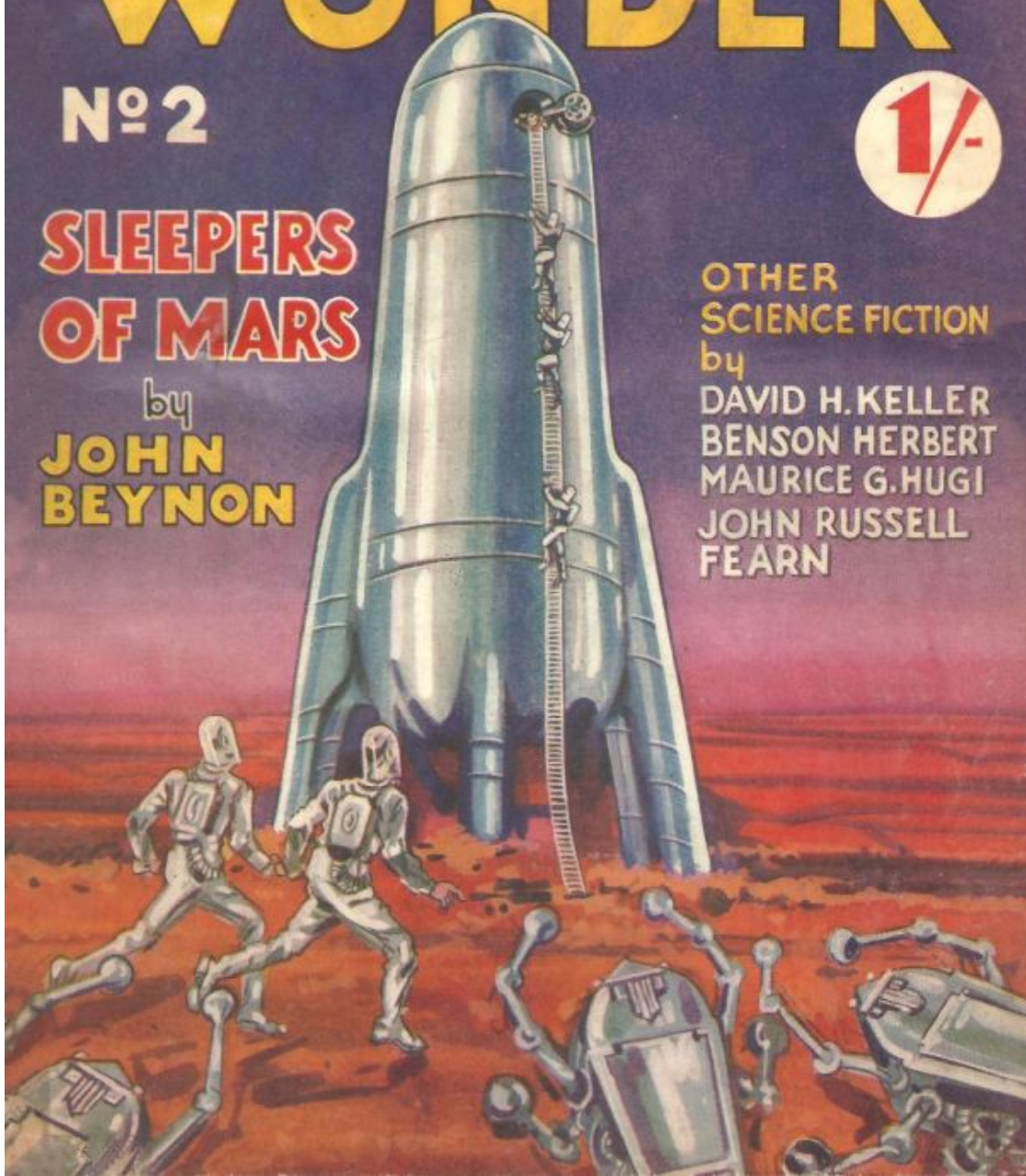
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SLEEPERS OF MARS

by
**JOHN
BEYNON**

OTHER
SCIENCE FICTION
by
DAVID H. KELLER
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MAURICE G. HUGI
JOHN RUSSELL
FEARN



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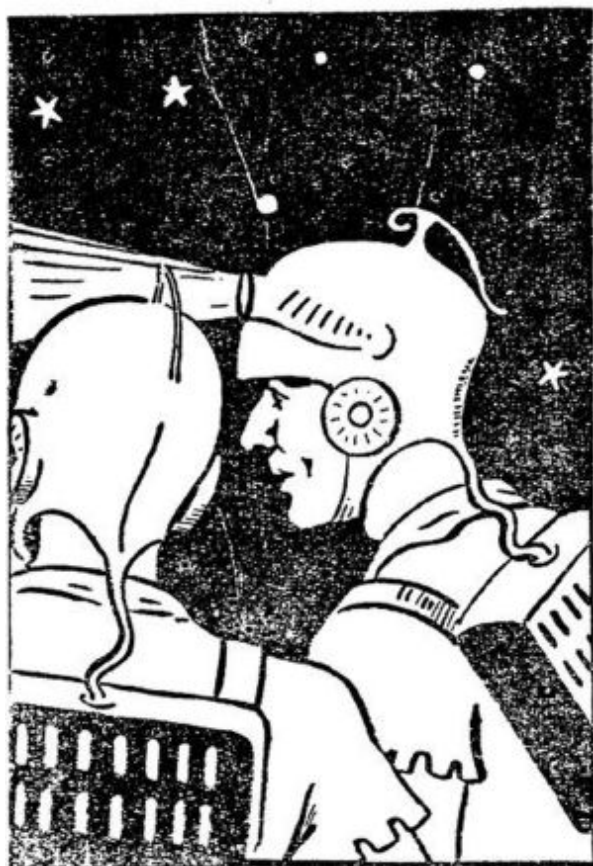
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SLEEPERS OF MARS

*A Sequel to *Stowaway to Mars**

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym *John Beynon*.

Author of *The Secret People*, *The Venus Adventure*, *The Lost Machine*, etc.

First published *Tales of Wonder*, No. 2, March 1938.

*On Their Dried-Up Planet the Martians Slept On, Cheated of a New World that had
Died Long Since . . .*

We are pleased and privileged to be able to present the long-awaited sequel to "Stowaway to Mars," John Beynon's story of the first interplanetary adventure which has delighted thousands since it first appeared in serial form in a well-known periodical nearly two years ago. Later, it was published as a novel with the title, "Planet Plane," and more recently it was serialised in abridged form under the title of "The Space Machine." Readers of the original story will remember how two expeditions, one British and the other Russian, landed on Mars in two rocket-ships and discovered on the dying planet a strange assortment of mechanical monsters, created by the few surviving Martians with the idea that a race of intelligent machines should succeed them. This sequel, for which readers of "Stowaway to Mars" have been clamouring ever since, and which has been specially written for TALES OF WONDER, relates the adventures of the crew of the Russian space-ship, *Tovaritch*, which arrived on Mars soon after the British expedition in the *Gloria Mundi* had started to discover the amazing secrets of the Red Planet. It is, in fact, quite a separate story, and written in that convincing style for which John Beynon has become famous, is certain to prove as popular as its widely-read predecessor.

CHAPTER I

THE MARTIAN MACHINES

The Sun, which has seen many strange things upon his planets, and has stranger yet to see, had risen a few hours into the Martian day at a point where, close to the equator, there was unfamiliar activity. His beams still slanted so that the wastes of reddish sandhills and protruding rocks, which cover the great part of the fourth planet, cast shadows and gave a rugged character to the scene. Before long, when he had risen a little farther, that aspect would have disappeared; the dreary miles of sand would shimmer unshaded, unchanging, barren as they had been for centuries.

All the planets are dying. Some, like Pluto swinging in his remote icy circuit, are dying without having lived. They have passed straight from glowing birth to frozen death, too far from the Sun ever to have nourished life. Not so the inner planets; certainly not so Mars. But there is nothing eternal about a star system. Those members of it which manage to produce life can sustain it only for a short time, while all the conditions are suitable. And the time left to life on Mars was growing short.

It would have been finished there long ago, but for the tenacity with which it always defends itself. Without the supreme effort which had laced the surface of the planet with canals to hold back the creeping deserts, life would have vanished thousands of years before, or would have remained only in lowly forms, close to the poles, waiting until it should be crushed at last between ice-cap and desert.

But the canals, desperate and stupendous effort though they were, could not change the inevitable. They could delay it for centuries, even millenia, as indeed they had; but they could do no more than delay. True, there was some vegetation still along their banks—dry, rusty-looking bushes, whose papery leaves rustled dismally when there was a rare breath of moving air to stir them; but even their years were numbered now. There was still water in the canals to feed their roots, and would be for a long time, but gradually they grew less.

The sky which had once been blue was now purple, growing deeper as the centuries sucked the air into space; and the ebb of the air was the ebb of life. Slowly and relentlessly, the deserts crept ever closer to the edges of the canals. . . .

But, after all, just what is meant by life? It is a pretty piece of vanity for us to assume that it is only something on a carbon basis needing oxygen for its existence. For there were things on the deserts, things in the cities, and things moving in the papery bushes which suffered no inconvenience from the thinning of the air. And in a part of the equatorial belt—a region where man might have been able to live even yet, had he enough atmosphere to keep his lungs working—was a manifestation that the process of decay was as yet by no means complete.

Two tall metal cylinders stood upright, separated by a space of a mile or so, their symmetry oddly alien in the featureless landscape. Both tapered at their tops to blunted noses, suggesting from a distance two colossal fingers pointing into the heavens. There was little difference in their main outlines, save that the one labelled in Russian characters close to its prow, *Tovaritch*, was supported upon four huge flanges which sprang from its base, while the slightly smaller, though more grandiosely named *Gloria Mundi* perched upon three.

About the great fins of both cylinders was a flurry of metal parts flashing in the sunlight. It gave at first a suggestion of ants at work, until a closer view showed that although the workers

had, superficially, something of the form of insects, yet they belonged neither to the insect nor animal kingdoms. The likeness at a distance was an accident of design, for their coffin-shaped body-cases were supported upon three pairs of legs, while two flexible tentacles at one end gave the impression of antennae.

But the impression went little farther, for a closer view showed that the body was a metal box, no less than coffin-sized, and that the supporting legs and active tentacles were also of white metal. At the broader end, where it was natural to expect a head, was something which looked more like the front of a complicated film camera equipped with a lens which swivelled continually as it peered this way and that.

Nevertheless, there remained something insect-like in the way they fussed about the bases of the towering cylinders.

THE RIVAL EXPEDITIONS

These two great rockets from Earth were not wanted on Mars, and their departure was being arranged for them. It was not, however, the callous Martian intention to drive them at random into space. The decision that they must leave held no animosity, and the activity about the flanges showed that care was being taken that both vessels should have the best possible chance of making the return to Earth safely.

It had been necessary not only to raise them from their prone positions to the perpendicular, a matter of sheer force, but there was now in progress the far more ticklish job of jacking them up and adjusting them so that the correct inclination was meticulously attained. And this precise alignment, so that the take-off performed at the exact second of a given minute should set them on the right course for Earth, was proving a matter of more difficulty with the four-flanged Russian rocket than with the tripod-supported English ship.

Nevertheless, the work was proceeding with more dispatch than the rockets' owners could have contrived, since the metallic workers, being themselves machines of precision, could dispense with much of the wearisome calculation which the men from Earth must have found necessary.

The men who had made this leap of over 35,000,000 miles across space had had the opportunity to do little more than scratch a bare acquaintance with the foreign planet. The English rocket, the *Gloria Mundi*, under the command of that spectacular and much-publicised rocket-plane racer, Dale Curtance (remember the song, "Curty, the King of the Clouds"?), had arrived first. After landing at the spot where the rocket now stood, they had set out upon what was intended as a brief preliminary exploration as far as the banks of the near-by canal.

It had turned out to be their only expedition—and not so brief, at that. On their return, as they broke out of the scrawny canal-zone bushes on to the reddish sand, they had found their return barred by a horde of mechanical monstrosities with clearly hostile intentions. In the course of a half-night that they spent beleaguered on a sandhill, it had begun to appear that those hostile intentions would be successful by reason of the men's air or ammunition—or both—giving out.

It was the arrival of the Russian rocket which had raised the siege by scattering the weird machines in flight across the desert. The men from the *Gloria Mundi* had lost no time in taking the chance to regain their own ship.

Later, the Russians had a similar experience. Karaminoff, Comrade-Commander, had set out accompanied by five of his crew. The two others—Gordonov, the engineer, and Zhatkin, the navigating mathematician, a small, dreamy-eyed, oriental-looking man from Kirghiz—he had left in charge of the *Tovaritch*.

Karaminoff's first objective had been a visit to the other rocket. His brief interview there with Curtance was unsatisfactory to all concerned, and the affair ended in a mishap which reduced his party to four. Karaminoff had been in the act of exchanging a red flag with the hammer-and-sickle upon it for the Union Jack which the British had planted, in the ingenuous belief that its erection gave them jurisdiction over the entire planet, when an angry young man without even a respirator broke from the *Gloria Mundi's* air-lock and fired a pistol wildly in his direction.

Luckily, the damage was not serious; the bullet had taken Mikletski, the biologist, in the flesh of his right arm. Comrade Vassiloff, second-in-command of the *Tovaritch*, had turned swiftly, and by a lucky shot disabled the young man before he could do further damage. The latter had fallen back into the air-lock and managed to pull the outer door shut behind him.

It was a misfortune, but little more than that. Real trouble came to the Russians later.

Comrade-Commander Karaminoff, unwilling to be burdened with a partially-disabled man, sent him back in company with the doctor, Platavinov, to have the wound dressed while he himself went on with three companions, Vassiloff, Vinski and Steinoi, to investigate the source of an agitation in the bushes more than a mile away.

What he had expected to find in those dry, crackling thickets he had no very clear idea, but it was certainly not the things which emerged to meet him.

The whole party stopped dead and stared as a string of machines clanked and clattered towards them. The cases which held the mechanisms were of many shapes—cubical, spherical, ovoid, pyramidal, rhomboidal, and forms unnamed. None stood much higher than a man, and some considerably lower. They moved over the sand by means of stilts, skids, jointed or unjointed legs—anything but wheels. Many of the appendages were odd, unmatched, and grotesquely inappropriate to the designs of the machines which drove them.

THE FANTASTIC SIEGE

The four amazed men hesitated, and then began to retreat. But before they had covered a quarter of the distance back to their ship another band of mechanical monstrosities had raced to cut off their retreat, and they found themselves beleaguered as the English party had been before them.

The situation was unpleasant, nor did it improve. Accurate firing at the machines' lenses could put them out of action, but the Russians had only a few dozen rounds between them, and it was not by any means every shot that told. After being repulsed twice with several casualties, the machines settled down to wait as though they had all the time in Mars at their disposal—which, indeed, they seemed to have, and which the men certainly had not.

But for the present it appeared there was little to be done about it: precious ammunition must not be wasted, and it would be futile as well as foolhardy to do anything which would bring them within range of the metal tentacles or the jointed arms of the mechanical travesties.

Vinski broke open the small reflex camera he was carrying, and with the mirror from its interior, heliographed to the *Tovaritch*. The answer blinked back by the searchlight was not encouraging.

Mikletski and Platavinov had also been cut off, but were at present holding out against a small band of the mechanical monsters; the other two were now bottled up in the rocket-ship with a group of similar uncouth machines waiting patiently round the air-lock. Vinski turned his attention to the *Gloria Mundi* and signalled her in English, only to learn that she too was in a state of siege.

The day wore on with only an occasional exchange of messages to relieve the monotony. For six hours the Russians lay in the sunlight which streamed down from the strange, purplish sky, ringed round by the fantastic metal contraptions. They played a waiting game, knowing full well that it was their opponents' strength, but unable to form any practicable plan. At the end of the sixth hour another message winked from the *Gloria Mundi*.

"How long will your air hold out?"

Vinski glanced at the meter on his oxygen tank and made a rapid calculation.

"About eight hours," he flashed back.

It was a grim prospect. Once the tanks were finished, it would be a matter of just a few minutes. No human lungs had the capacity to win the necessary amount of oxygen from the thin Martian air. Unless something was done they would have to choose between a gasping death sometime during the night and a suicidal rush at the guarding machines.

After a pause the signal light from the *Gloria Mundi* began again:

"Are going to make grenades," Vinski read. "Tell your ship——" Then the message ceased, mysteriously.

A few minutes later Vinski's intent gaze was diverted from the rocket. Over the flank of a sandhill, a little to the right of it, poured a stream of the crazy machines. Moving at full speed they looked even more incredible than at rest.

As they lumbered and lurched along the truly imbecilic qualities of their designs were enhanced. But for the fact that his companions were with him, Vinski would have doubted his senses. Abruptly he became aware that the machines closer at hand had also caught this urge to move. As though at a signal their loose joints clattered, and in a moment they were sweeping down upon him.

Vinski, by reason of his position, had a couple of seconds' more warning than the others. With a shout he dropped his rifle and stood up. There was no time to think; he acted instinctively, and in the only way which could save him. He took two steps forward and leaped desperately to clear the rank of oncoming machines.

It was a feat which would have been impossible on Earth, but Mars made his strength superhuman. As if he were the human shell fired from a circus gun, he sailed over the onrushing machines and tumbled to the ground behind them. But his three companions had no time to jump. They went down before the charge of threshing metal arms and feet.

As suddenly as they had started, the machines ceased to flee. Some kind of madness seemed to have overtaken them. They became a tangle of flailing levers and rods, inextricably intertwined, flashing and swirling in the sunlight with giddy brilliance.

Not until then did Vinski realise that there was a new power abroad in the Martian desert. For the first time he had a sight of the coffin-shaped machines, and with them a strange, many-legged tank-like device emitting blue flashes. It was clear that it was in some way responsible for the frenzy and disorganisation which had overtaken the attackers, for the newcomers, though queerly unfamiliar, had at least a reassuring quality of rational and credible design.

If their object had been only to disperse the fantastic attackers, they had been completely successful; but if they had intended rescue, they had not. Of the four in his group, Vinski alone survived. Karaminoff, Vassiloff and Steinoi had lost their lives beneath the stamping feet of the machines.

He found their bodies there, battered almost beyond recognition, and sick at heart he set out to trudge his lonely way back to the *Tovaritch*.

CHAPTER II

ORDERS TO LEAVE

He reached the ship unmolested, for the newcomers had cleared the desert of the rest of the machines. Some had got away, but most, under the influence of the blue flashes, had contrived their own destruction and now lay in masses of tangled, broken parts.

He came from the air-lock into the ship's living-room to find that the two left on board had already been joined by the doctor, Platavinov. Vinski made his report and learned that Mikletski, too, lay dead on the desert. A swinging arm of one of the fleeing machines had crushed in his head as it passed.

Four out of the crew of eight were left. They had left Earth charged to explore and learn the condition of the planet, and if possible, to get into touch with any inhabitants there might be. In a few hours their number had been halved, and two of them had not yet set foot outside the ship.

By common consent they looked to Vinski for immediate guidance. None of the four was a leader by nature, but for the moment the Ukrainian, whose official status was that of recorder and historian of the expedition, appeared to dominate by reason of his physical size.

Zhatkin, the sad-looking Kirghizian, was happiest when he was involved in his complex figuring; when not so engaged, he tended to regard the things about him with a detached studiousness of no practical value, as far as anyone could see.

Platavinov, the doctor, had the scientific mind. He observed, he inquired, he classified; he was interested in a great many things, but he did not initiate.

There remained Gordonov, the engineer. He had started as Gordon when he was christened on Clydeside. His engines and machinery were the joy and pride of his life. Save for that period when a burning sense of injustice and a passionate desire for equality of opportunity—and opportunity on a larger scale than he could find at home—had led him to become a Soviet citizen, he had shown little interest in things outside his profession.

So it came about that the three turned their inquiries upon Vinski—and Vinski had little to offer. It looked to him as if the expedition had come to a finish. It was unlikely that the four of them could contrive to raise their rocket to the perpendicular, and that had to be accomplished before the return journey could be begun. His present forecast was that they would stay where they were until food or air failed them, and the end came.

He wondered how the men in the English rocket saw the situation, and was tempted to send over an offer of mutual assistance in raising their rockets. The memory of the shooting incident which had concluded the previous visit deterred him, however, for the time being.

TENTACLE TALK

During the night, as they lay in their hammocks, came a bewildering sensation that the world about them was turning topsy-turvy. It took the crew of the *Tovaritch* some little time to realise that the machines outside were solving their greatest problem for them, and were raising their ship to the vertical. The darkness outside gave them no chance to see how it was being done, but daylight revealed that both rockets had been treated alike.

The four stood by one of the fused quartz windows. Little over a mile away the shell-like shape of the *Gloria Mundi* gleamed at them.

“At least they’re making no distinctions; that’s some consolation,” Gordonov said.

“A poor sort of consolation,” the doctor thought. “It looks to me like a pretty pointed hint that we’re not welcome.”

“Nothing that has happened to us yet could give any other impression,” said Vinski.

“But surely they can’t mean to get rid of us before we’ve made any contacts? They’ve not even heard what we’ve got to say. Damn it, it’s not every day that visitors turn up from another planet,” Platavinov objected.

Vinski crossed the room. He took his mask and oxygen tank from their locker, and put them on. The doctor, after a momentary hesitation, did the same, and the two men stepped into the air-lock together.

Now that the rocket stood erect, the entrance was raised more than a hundred feet in the air. When the outer door was open it was possible, by leaning well out, to see what was happening around the base flanges in an area which was out of range of the inclined windows.

A metallic chatter accosted them as they peered down. It sounded thin and distorted in the rarefied air, but there was no doubt that it was a mechanically-produced voice of some kind. Looking for its source, Vinski became aware that one of the glittering, coffin-shaped machines was standing apart from the rest: its tentacles were extended, and its lens pointed directly up at them.

The chattering voice seemed to emanate from some part of it. Vinski nudged his companion, and pointed. The two of them gazed at it in silence for some perplexed seconds.

“Well, I suppose it means something,” Platavinov said at last, “but it doesn’t seem to help much. Try it in English. It may have picked some up from our Empire-building friends over there.”

But the machine did not respond. However, it did occur to it, or to its operator, that not much progress was being made. The chatter broke off abruptly. With two great sweeps of the flexible metal arms it smoothed the surface of the sand before it, then with lightning movements of one tentacle it scribbled a row of characters.

“It’s a trier, anyway,” said Vinski, as they watched the queer signs taking form. “Though why it should assume we can understand its writing, when we can’t get a line on its lingo, is more than I can say. As it is, not even being able to tell which way up the stuff is, we don’t look like getting far.”

The machine’s tentacle whipped back and curled itself close to its side. The lens swivelled and trained itself on them. It took no more than a few seconds to appreciate that its second attempt at communication had been no more successful than the first. Undismayed, it swept the sand level again.

This time it started by making a single circular impression in the middle; then, extending a tentacle from its other side, it stood motionless for some seconds, one long arm resting on the mark and the other pointing at the Sun. The upper tentacle suddenly re-curled itself. The other rapidly drew three concentric circles about the original mark. Again the second tentacle uncurled, and pointed directly at them while the first rested on the outermost of the circles.

“That’s easy; and it certainly knows where we came from,” Vinski said, as they watched it draw a fourth circle to represent the orbit of Mars.

Near a point which it had made to represent the actual position of Mars, the silvery arms made a rapid sketch of their rocket-ship, pointed towards the centre of the diagram. It swivelled its lens up once more, to be sure of attention, before it very deliberately drew a line which began at Mars and ended on the Earth’s orbit.

"Which seems to indicate that you were right," Vinski said. "They don't seem to want us here. And if this planet can show no better forms of animation than we've seen already I can't say I'm sorry."

WASTED EFFORT

Platavinov nodded. There was little chance that the machine could be intending to convey anything else. He watched it as it repeated its action in a manner which dispelled all doubt. Then Vinski, assuming an expression of intense inquiry, lifted his arm and pointed towards the other rocket. The machine drew another sketch of a rocket beside the first, and from it another line to Earth's orbit.

Vinski nodded. "So they're to be shoved off, too," he observed.

The machine, assured that its point was taken, became active in another way. It picked up a metal rod, retired with it for some distance, and then stopped to thrust it aslant into the ground. It pointed a tentacle first to the Sun, then drew it along the shadow which the rod cast; and at the end it repeated its rocket-sketching trick in the sand.

"So far, so bad," observed Vinski. "About as clear as dregs. What's it doing now—communing with itself? Or don't machines commune?"

With a switch of its lens, to be sure that they still watched, the machine moved again. It drew another line from the base of the rod at an acute angle to the former. At the end of it, it started sketching once more.

"Getting damned good at drawing rockets, isn't it?" Vinski went on. "What's the point of all this?"

Platavinov frowned, then, sure that the machine had its lens on him, he carried his finger to the right, and then raised both arms suddenly. The machine below imitated exactly with its tentacles, then pointed emphatically once more to the second line.

"What——?" began Vinski, but Platavinov cut him short.

"I gather that the idea is for us to take off exactly when the shadow coincides with the second line. That should be in about three hours, at a guess. We'd better get back and see what Zhatkin has to say about it."

They closed the outer door of the lock and shortly re-emerged into the living-room. Vinski reported briefly to the others on what had taken place.

"The first thing seems to be for Comrade Zhatkin to determine whether some three hours from now would be a possible time for taking off," he added. "Will you get on with that?"

Zhatkin nodded. His eyes lost their dreamy look as he glanced at the chronometer and went to fetch his slide-rule, charts and tables.

Platavinov demurred:

"Isn't the first thing to decide whether we are going to take any notice of this—this order to leave?" He looked thoughtfully at Vinski and Gordonov. "So far we have learned almost nothing of Mars save that an intelligence of some kind certainly exists here. Are we justified in wasting the labour and expense which our comrades put into the ship by going back practically empty-handed?"

"We were to establish relations with any inhabitants of the planet. Are we to go back now and admit that we don't even know whether there are any, save these absurd machines? We know nothing of the flora, fauna or minerals; we have seen nothing but a very small corner of a desert. Oughtn't we to stay on and try to come to some understanding with the machines

themselves, even if we cannot make contact with their masters? We could start by convincing them that we come with only peaceful intentions.”

“I doubt whether that would interest them—particularly as we have already destroyed a number of machines,” Vinski replied. “In any case, why should they bother to negotiate with us, and what sort of an agreement can one make with a machine?”

“There’s another point,” Gordonov put in. “I’ll tell you straight, I’m not for taking off in a few hours’ time. And it’s not for Platavinov’s reason, either. It’s because I’ve had no chance to look over the ship and test her. How am I to know that after all she’s done she is in a fit condition to turn straight round and spend another three months in space?”

“Is anything likely to be wrong?”

“Not that I know of, but there might be.”

STAKING A CLAIM

Vinski glanced towards one of the windows. From where he sat he could see the British rocket. He considered it thoughtfully for a while.

“The English,” he remarked at length, “have a saying that possession is nine points of the law. It is just the kind of sentiment one would expect to find in a capitalist country. Now, neither we nor they can truthfully say that Mars has been possessed—far from it; nevertheless, the first thing those men in the *Gloria Mundi* did was to set up their flag and formally annex the planet to the British Empire.

“Yes, in one way it is a matter for smiling, but in another it is not. For when they get back they will announce their claim to it at once. In a case like this, it is the first claim to be published that will carry the weight; that is where their proverb comes in. And if they are wise enough to give other capitalist countries a title to parts of this planet, the rest of the world will support their claim. If we make a later claim it will appear merely that we are trying to dispossess them.

“But if we make a public announcement first that Mars is the eighth and latest republic to be attached to the Soviet Union, the position is reversed. There will be trouble and disputes, of course, but it will be registered in the minds of the world that ours was the first claim. They will say, of course, that they landed here first, and therefore have the right but at least there will be a confusion of claims.

“You may not think this matters a great deal, but one day it will. Sometime there will be a better method of space travel than these cumbersome rocket-ships, and the ownership of Mars will become a practical question. When that day comes, we do not wish to see it already labelled in the public mind as just another British colony—assuming that the British Empire is still in existence, of course.”

“Certainly not,” Platavinov agreed. “And therefore you suggest——?”

“That we shall do a great deal more for Russia by arriving first on Earth to announce our claim than by stalling here on the thin chance that we may be allowed to do a little exploring.”

“But can we arrive before they do?”

“There’s no doubt of that. The *Gloria Mundi* is a smaller ship. She carries less reserve of fuel. There is also the fact that she was intended to carry five, and actually left with six on board.”

“Was that true, then, about the girl stowaway?” Zhatkin asked, looking up from his calculations.

“I believe so.”

“There wasn’t any sign of her when we went there,” the doctor put in.

“They may have thrown her out,” Gordonov suggested.

Vinski thought not. “But whether they did or not,” he went on, “the harm was done. The rocket had to expend the extra power required to lift her weight, which means that they have even less fuel margin than they intended.

“Now, we have a much higher proportionate reserve, as Gordonov can tell you. Even if Karaminoff and the others were still with us, we could probably accelerate to a velocity of .5 of a mile per second more than they would dare. Whereas, with four less to lift . . .” He left the obvious conclusion of the sentence to them.

“Dare?” inquired Platavinov.

“Yes, she must retain enough fuel to break her fall back to Earth. If she uses even one pound too much in an effort to accelerate, she’ll crash when she lands, and nothing can save her. Gordonov will back me up.”

“I will that,” the engineer agreed, “There’s not a doubt about it. But you don’t want .5 of a mile more. Man, that’s an awful lot. I’d say that .1 or even .01 will give us all the lead we’ll need over that distance. Zhatkin’ll be able to say exactly what it works out at.”

“All right,” Platavinov admitted. “It seems a waste that we should have come so far and found out so little; but your point about getting in first is sound. Certainly the second arrival will find his thunder stolen.”

“And it’ll do that Curtance good to come off second best for once,” Vinski added. “There’ll be quite a lot of satisfaction in that. Then, if the *Gloria Mundi* takes off, we do?”

Only Gordonov dissented. He still held that there ought to be some inspection of the rocket before they trusted her to take them through space again. Vinski shrugged his shoulders.

“I know it would ease your careful mind, but if we are to be kept bottled up, you’ll have no chance of doing it however long we stay.”

“Let’s hope we’re lucky,” Gordonov grunted.

CHAPTER III

MAROONED ON MARS

Inside the *Tovaritch* there was a silence of expectation. The four men lay ready in sprung and padded hammocks. Gordonov lay gazing intently at a small circular mirror above his head; the starting and throttle control at the end of its flexible cable lay ready in his hands. The fear which had attended the outward journey, that the circular, fused quartz windows might not stand the strain, no longer troubled them. Accordingly, it had been thought safe to leave one of them unshuttered with its heavy cover screwed back to the wall, and the mirror had been so fixed that it gave him a view of the other rocket.

Zhatkin had emerged from his calculations with a figure which gave the take-off time as being identical (as far as it was possible to judge), with that indicated by the Martian machine. Every loose object had been stowed or fastened down, and the ship made ready for the journey. The men had fastened themselves into their hammocks reluctantly, facing the prospect of eleven or twelve weeks more of close imprisonment in the flying rocket with gloomy resignation.

The machines, which had persistently hung about the base flanges during the last few hours, had now withdrawn to a respectful distance. Evidently they knew what to expect from a rocket blast. And now, as far as the *Tovaritch* was concerned, everything depended on whether the *Gloria Mundi* was going to obey the instructions to leave. If so, the *Tovaritch* would also take off and race her back to Earth; if not, she would stay to see what happened, confident that her extra reserve of power gave her the advantage over her rival in all ways.

Gordonov's gaze never shifted for an instant from the small mirror. At any moment now she might start. There was the possibility of a few seconds', perhaps as much as a minute's discrepancy between Zhatkin's calculations and theirs. His fingers were on the starting knob, ready to twist it at the sight of the first flush of flame from the other rocket.

The rest waited anxiously, watching his right hand. The seconds crawled. Then came the moment.

Fire poured in a sudden flash between the other's flanges; it streaked upwards into the purplish Martian day. The *Gloria Mundi* had gone like a meteor.

On the instant Gordonov turned the knob. The *Tovaritch* trembled and leapt. Weight fell on each man inside like a physical blow, sudden, breathtaking, and then was gone. The sky outside the window wheeled giddily. Eight hammocks swung across as one. There was a shock which set each bobbing and swinging on its springs. Alternately the men were crushed upon them, or held to them only by their straps.

Outside, sand and sky churned round in a whirl as the rocket swung and rolled. It was all over in the few nightmare seconds before Gordonov had the presence of mind to switch off.

The explosive bucking ceased at once. For a moment or two the rocket swayed, then slowly and quite deliberately the living-room began to go round and round. Only the eight hammocks on their universal swingings remained steady as lockers and panels and walls fled round them. Then, with a final, jolting lurch, the *Tovaritch* came to rest.

Gordonov lay sweating and rocking gently in his hammock.

"It's a pity," he said, with remarkable restraint, "that I couldn't have a look at those firing tubes."

“We must have shot about the desert like a Chinese cracker. What happened?” asked Vinski.

Gordonov shrugged. “At a guess I’d say that the stern tubes on one side fired, and the bunch on the other side didn’t—or only half of ’em did. Only a guess, though.”

“Well, we’re lucky,” put in Zhatkin. “At least we didn’t blow up.”

“If you call it luck to be faced with spending the remainder of our lives—and not a very long remainder, at that—on Mars. I’m not sure that blowing up wouldn’t have been more satisfactory and less uncomfortable in the long run.”

Vinski released himself from his hammock-straps and made his way to the unshuttered window.

“Here come those damned machines again. Hundreds of ’em,” he said.

THE MAN IN THE SCREEN

“What’s it doing?” asked Gordonov.

“Signalling,” said Vinski, at the window. “It looks as if it wants to come in. It’s holding some kind of tin box.”

“Well, let’s have it in,” Zhatkin advised. “If it can fit itself into the air-lock, that is. We can’t stay here for ever. If the things mean to get us, they’ll do it sooner or later; and if they don’t, it’s about time we got on speaking terms with them.”

The others nodded.

It was twenty-four hours since the mishap to the *Tovaritch*. The knowledge that it was now impossible for them to get away had given a very different aspect to their imprisonment. Before, it had been only a matter of disappointment in that it prevented them from learning more of Mars; but now they knew that, unless some outside power should help them, they were faced with living just as long as the food, air and water in the ship could sustain them—no longer.

Vinski agreed. Through the window he signed to the machine to go to the air-lock, and crossed the room to pull the lever which released the bolts on the outer door. Half a minute later the machine entered with a clatter of its metal feet on the side of the rocket.

The *Tovaritch*’s crew inspected it with nervous apprehension. It was the first time that they had been able to examine one of the mechanical monsters at close quarters, but they learned little new. The hard, silvery metal might have been any one of many alloys, and externally there was no clue to the nature of the machinery contained in the coffin-shaped body-case. Whatever it was, it was so efficient that at a yard’s distance it was impossible to distinguish any hum or sound of transmission.

The machine, however, had come neither to exhibit itself nor to indulge in an exchange of courtesies. Without waste of time, it advanced to the table and set down there the box it was carrying. Five sides of the cube were of metal, but that which faced the men was of pearly, smoky-grey glass. While one tentacle did something at the back of the box, the other reached towards a folding stool and placed it in front of the table. Then both tentacles curled back to rest by their owner’s sides.

An exclamation from Vinski drew the attention of the rest from the machine to the box on the table. The grey screen had cleared, and on it appeared the life-sized head of a man, depicted with the utmost reality of which two dimensions are capable.

The face was old, but its age was indeterminate. The head bore sparse remnants of dark hair. The features were finely shaped and regular; only the ears were disproportionate, for though they were well modelled and lay close, they were abnormally large. But it was the eyes which dominated. At first sight one saw only the eyes—wide apart and dark, perhaps a little tired, more than a little sad, but for all that, alive and strong.

Vinski felt a light touch on his arm. The machine urged him in front of the box with outstretched feeler. He obeyed, and for some seconds he and the man on the glass screen stared into each other's eyes. He had a feeling that he was being searched through.

One by one the men stood before the box and endured the scrutiny. When all had taken their turns there was a pause. Each was subdued by the sense that he had been examined and considered by a mind more powerful than his own. Only Gordonov spoke: a line of English in a quiet, ruminative tone:

“‘An eye like Mars to threaten and command.’ ”

A voice came from the box on the table. At once the machine uncurled its tentacle and tapped Platavinov. He stepped forward with his eyes fixed on those of the man in the screen. Slowly, almost as if he was unaware of it, he sank on to the stool and set his arms on the table before him.

He sat there staring, unmoving and unblinking, into the other's eyes; so still that he appeared scarcely to breathe. The rest watched uneasily, aware that something novel was afoot, but puzzled as to what it might mean. It was Zhatkin who broke the spell.

“Platavinov!” he said sharply.

No statue could have remained more unmoved than the doctor.

HYPNOTISED

“I don't like this,” Vinski said, taking a step forward.

A tentacle whisked through the air to bar his way. Slowly, and quite gently, it pressed him back. Gordonov leaned forward to get a better view of the doctor.

“He's a good subject. Went under at once. Don't do anything. It's usually dangerous to disturb a hypnotic trance.”

“But what's he being hypnotised for?” Vinski asked.

“We shall have to wait, but we shall undoubtedly see,” Gordonov said resignedly.

It was a full four hours before the doctor moved, and it was a simple action when it occurred. His eyes closed and his head drooped forward on his arms. The face of the stranger vanished, but the screen still remained luminous.

“He's asleep,” said Gordonov. “Better give him half an hour at least before we wake him.”

At the end of that tantalising wait he stepped past the machine, which made no effort to stop him, and laid his hand on the sleeper's shoulder. Platavinov stirred, rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“What happened?” inquired Zhatkin.

The doctor turned to meet their intent common gaze.

“What's wrong? Why are you all looking at me like that?”

Gordonov interrupted to give him a drink. He took it gratefully.

“How do you feel?” the engineer asked, as the cup was set down.

“Pretty tired, but——”

A sudden chatter from the diaphragm in the front of the watching machine cut him short. Platavinov replied to it without a moment's hesitation. An astounded silence fell on the living-room.

"You—you answered it!" Vinski managed, at last.

"I—why, so I did." The doctor turned his bewildered face from the men to the machine, and back. "What's happened?"

"That's what we want to know," three voices told him together.

The machine touched a switch at the back of the box. Again the face of the stranger appeared on the screen. This time he spoke at once. Platavinov replied as though he were talking his mother tongue.

The conversation which followed, conducted in a language which abounded in odd diphthongs and unfamiliar linguals, seemed to the listeners to be of intolerable length, though in reality little more than forty minutes passed before the face again faded from the screen.

"Well?" said Vinski. "Now let's have it."

Platavinov gave them a brief résumé.

The man whose head they had seen was called Soantin. He had introduced himself as the governor of Hanno, the chief of the seven inhabited cities of Mars, which the doctor understood to mean in effect the ruler of Mars, in so far as ruling was necessary. He had made an explanation and part apology for hypnotising Platavinov without his consent, on the ground that it was desirable that a means of communication should be found as soon and as easily as possible.

He appreciated that the crew of the rocket could not stay where they were indefinitely, and he had learned from the machines that the *Tovaritch* was in no condition to leave without extensive repairs. Some of the blast-tubes were badly scored and would need replacement, and it would appear that the firing element in two or more of the mixing-chambers had burned away. There were also several minor defects; in fact, in his opinion, the ship had had a very lucky escape from complete destruction.

"Kind of him," muttered Gordonov, "considering that it was his idea, or the machines', not to give us the chance of looking over her."

EXILE

This Soantin, Platavinov went on, wished them no harm; but he refused, both for himself and for his people, to have any contact with them. Already, he said, there had been contact between one of his men and a member of the *Gloria Mundi's* crew, and as a result this man had picked up Earthly bacteria against which he had little resistance. It was hoped to prevent the resultant complaint from spreading, but it was extremely doubtful whether the man himself would survive the experience.

It was thus impossible that the crew of the *Tovaritch* should be offered the hospitality of Hanno or of any of the other six living cities. He had, therefore, after consultation with the machines, decided to offer them accommodation in Ailiko. This city lay at no great distance to the north of them. It was in good condition, having been in occupation until quite recent times; it had, in fact, only been abandoned some 500 Martian years—a little under 1,000 Earth years—ago.

Orders had already been given to make the most recent of the community buildings there habitable once more, and the work of aëration, water and food supply was already going

forward. This accommodation he offered them freely while their ship underwent repairs.

He could not say how long these repairs would take; not only was the full extent of the necessary work unknown yet, but it might entail some research into heat-resisting alloys, for Mars had been exploited until certain metals were almost unobtainable. This, unfortunately but unavoidably, would detain them for some time, and he appreciated that each day's delay would mean for them a longer journey home; but this, he assured them, need cause them misgiving only at the prospect of a longer and therefore more tedious voyage.

The ship would be restocked for them with both food and fuel. Their new quarters would be ready by the next day, and the removal of the *Tovaritch* to Ailiko would begin in the morning.

It was an offer without alternative, but at least it was generous. There was no reason save common humanity to prevent the Martians leaving them out there on the desert to starve. "I thanked him on behalf of all of us, and told him that we would be ready," Platavinov ended.

Vinski nodded. "We're in his hands," he agreed. "And there's one good thing; we look like learning a lot more about the place than the English did."

"What did he mean by 'after consultation with the machines?' " Zhatkin wanted to know. "How can one 'consult' with a machine?"

"I don't know, but that's how he put it," the doctor said.

"Did he mean that they share power with the machines, or that the machines are just machines and nothing more?" Zhatkin persisted.

Platavinov looked at him wearily. "Do you think I learnt the whole state and history of the planet in a few minutes' talk? I've told you what he told me. Now, for Lenin's sake, let me get some sleep."

CHAPTER IV

THE ABANDONED CITY

The white walls of Ailiko rose sheer from the desert sand. There was no degeneration or spread of minor buildings. Like a cliff, but with a face perforated by thousands of windows, the city reared unashamed, a frank product of civilisation defying the wastes about it.

The machines which had dragged the *Tovaritch* across the desert stopped half a mile short of the buildings and let her lie at the end of the great furrow she had ploughed across leagues of sand. A single machine approached one of the windows and beckoned with a tentacle.

The men inside climbed from their hammocks, thankful that the jolting journey was over. Each collected his breathing-mask and a small bundle of personal belongings; each also, in view of their earlier experiences, took care to arm himself with a rifle and a good supply of ammunition. Vinski and Platavinov were further encumbered, the former by cameras and cases of films, the latter by the television-box which kept him in touch with Soantin at Hanno.

Once the four were out of the air-lock the waiting machine wasted no time; it led the way, with its odd scuttering motion, towards a break between the buildings. The men followed with a clumsy, high-stepping walk, the result of the low Martian gravity.

"I wish," said Gordonov, half to himself, as he watched the machine ahead, "I wish I knew what that thing is. It's made of metal, and therefore it should be a machine. But is it? Isn't it possible that there is a creature of some kind inside the box, working it—like one of those deep-sea diving-suits, only made for use on land?"

"It doesn't look that way to me," said Vinski. "I've been wondering whether it might possibly be something quite strange to us, say part animal and part machine."

The engineer considered. "I don't see how that could be."

"Nor I. But is that any good reason why it should not be?"

They walked on in silence. The entry to the city lay like a canyon between two masses of artificial stone. The road was gritty for a few yards from the entrance, but then gave way to smooth, hard concrete. The thin winds of Mars had been unable to drift the sand far.

It soon became clear that the block of buildings on the right was their destination. They were led round a corner, and the machine signed them to enter a large doorway which faced inward to the city across an open, paved square. When the last member of the party had crossed the threshold, the machine followed. It touched a lever on the wall, and the great door closed silently behind them.

After a minute or less, a similar door at the other end of the room swung open. The machine chattered abruptly. Platavinov put his free hand to the buckles of his mask and slipped it off.

"It's all right. Plenty of air here," he told the rest.

They emerged from the big air-lock into what, for a first astonished moment, they took to be the open. The size of the place and the buildings which surrounded it gave that impression, until one looked up to see the glass or glass-like roof three hundred feet above.

They stood for some minutes staring up at the huge buildings and at the balconies, interconnected by stairs and lifts, which ran along the façades. The ground space was covered with dry earth, unpaved. It appeared less like the well of a single building than like a section of the

city roofed in. Platavinov turned to the machine with a question; he translated its answer for the rest.

"It says that when the city was in use this was a garden. All the buildings had gardens in the middle."

"But for that," said Vinski, "they might have left it only yesterday. Abandoned a thousand years ago, and shows no sign of it! They must have been wonderful builders. It looks as if time meant very little here."

"I should say that that is literally true," the doctor agreed. "Time without change means nothing, and there can have been little change here; there are no growing things any more, and there can be little weather as we know it. Just a light wind sometimes—very rarely. When you come to think of it, it is probably a good many thousand years since it even rained on Mars."

"Yes, I suppose it is. I hadn't thought of that."

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

Zhatkin took in the scene with his sad, dreamy eyes.

"I don't like this place. It's too full of ghosts. They used to live here. They used to throng those long balconies and lean over to watch their children playing in the garden down here. And they would know what the end must be; what lay in store for their children, if not for themselves. They must, I think, have been a very unhappy people. A thousand years is nothing; something of them is still here."

Vinski grunted. "Well, if that's how it takes you, it'd be better if you kept it to yourself. We've got to live here."

Nevertheless, it was not only Zhatkin who felt that sad, discouraged past which clung about the buildings.

The machine led them to the top balcony by way of a lift, and down a long corridor. By the time it reached a large, sparsely furnished room, they had lost their sense of direction. Vinski went at once to the window which filled most of one side. He found himself looking to a straight horizon across a monotony of barren sandhills.

To the left one could just manage an oblique view of some of the rusty-looking bushes which were, as far as he knew, Mars' only form of vegetation. Beyond them was a faint gleam of water; a part, he guessed, of the canal which must have been Ailiko's life-line in its latter days. To the right he could see a part of the furrow the *Tovaritch* had ploughed, but the ship herself was out of sight.

He turned back and surveyed the room, while the machine's metallic voice chattered at a closely attentive Platavinov. The furnishing was extremely simple. A few box-like stools with padded tops, a low divan against one wall, and a solid cube doing duty as a table, comprised most of the portable pieces. But in the walls were a great number of panels set flush, which he assumed to cover cupboards, and also a number of separate instrument boards of some kind.

The colour of both walls and furniture was a near-white, relieved by an occasional and skilfully placed coloured line or motif. The most noticeable feature of the room was a panel of pearl-grey glass, some six feet square, set on the inner wall.

At last the machine's chatter stopped, and it took itself off the way they had come. Platavinov turned to them.

"Well, it may be a Martian custom to keep visitors at considerably more than arm's length, but I don't think we shall be able to accuse them of inhospitality. According to the machine,

there's not much we shall lack—if I can remember the right levers to push.”

They had, it seemed, been given the complete freedom of Ailiko. The room they were in and those close by had been put into full working order, as far as heating and services were concerned. The whole enclosed block had been given an atmosphere of close upon fifteen pounds to the square inch, and though other parts of the city had only the attenuated natural air of the planet, they were at liberty to go where they would and see what they liked.

“As long as our oxygen-tanks lasts,” put in Vinski.

But Platavinov was able to assure them that there was not this limitation. In each building there were stores of space-suits which had been held partly for regular use, but more against any chance failure of the atmosphere system. They could take their pick of thousands of these ready for use, and requiring only the simple charging of the air-tanks.

Food need cause them no worry. It was chemically produced and they had yet to find out how it tasted, but he had been told that it existed in great quantities for them to take as they wished. They could get it at any time from one of the machines stationed in the basement of the building.

“But why should they leave all this stuff here to rot?” Vinski wanted to know. “They obviously didn’t desert the place in a sudden emergency.”

“But why not leave it?” Platavinov countered. “They had a dwindling population. They were moved from here to fill up another city where there was already more than the inhabitants needed. It would be pointless for them to take more than just their personal belongings when they left here. Presumably everybody could have as much as he wanted of everything and the rest would be useless surplus, so it was just left behind. If necessary it could be fetched, I suppose, but as the birthrate clearly continued to fall, it never was necessary.”

THE TELEVISOR

Vinski nodded slowly. “Yes, I see. That would be so. In a rapidly shrinking community all values would be different, of course. It’s a bit difficult at first to see it from their angle when one has always thought in terms of expansion. The viewpoint——”

“Would you mind leaving the viewpoint for a bit,” Gordonov suggested. “Platavinov mentioned food. How do we get it?”

Platavinov crossed to a row of switches on the wall and studied the curious characters over each. He selected one, pressed it, and spoke at the diaphragm above.

They waited perhaps half a minute. There was a click, and a rectangular panel in the wall fell open. In the cavity behind was a row of bowls with steam rising from them.

“That’s service,” said Gordonov admiringly. “I think I’m going to like this place.”

The meal was a success. The flavours of all the dishes were strange, but for the most part, not too strange. It was evident that the chemists responsible had kept well in mind the fact that a man who eats with zest is better fed than one who is bored by dull food. It remained to be seen if they were as good at sustaining appetite as they were at inducing it; if so, there would be little to complain at in their keep.

They followed the meal by an inspection of their rooms. Very little they could have wished for was lacking, though many of the appliances struck them as odd in design and obscure in their manner of operation until one got the trick of them; and quite a number of small devices

left them baffled—much, they felt, as a man who had never seen a tin-can would be at a loss to understand the use of a simple tin-opener.

The greatest unfamiliarity lay in the bareness and austerity of the rooms. The Martian custom of building in everything which could be built in and leaving no more furniture than stools, table and divan in the open, gave at first a suggestion of chilly institutionalism.

On their return to the main room, Platavinov looked thoughtfully at the grey glass panel on the inner wall.

“What is it?” Vinski asked.

“Some kind of television instrument, I gather. The machine spoke about it, but I didn’t follow entirely. However, it’s worth having a shot at it.”

He found a small switchboard with a complicated array of controls. At the pressing of an obvious main switch the panel began to glow, but the further manipulation of the machine proved no easy matter. It was half an hour before he managed to get a steady, undistorted picture on the screen—and that was no more than a vertical view of a stretch of desert.

He turned a knob cautiously, and the ground appeared to slide swiftly to one side. He tried another; the scene blurred and vanished in a swirl.

“How does it work?” asked Gordonov curiously.

“As far as I gathered, it is quite different from the thing we use to talk to Soantin in that it needs no transmitter. The idea is that first you decide the place to be viewed, next the viewpoint—your own position, as it were—then you focus two beams, kind of negative and positive carriers, on to the subject and there you are.

“The first difficulty seems to be to know which knob does what. Anyway, according to the machine, it will show you anything which is going on in this hemisphere, providing that it is out of doors; the buildings are screened against it.”

“A nice tactful thought,” said Gordonov. “Well, you might try to get us a close-up of the *Tovaritch*. I’d like to see what’s going on there.”

“What about taking a look at this place Hanno, or whatever it’s called, and seeing how the Martians really live?” Zhatkin suggested.

“Seems to me that the first thing to do is to get a general idea of the layout of the country and the canals,” said Vinski.

“But even before that we’ve got to learn how to work the damn thing,” the doctor protested, as he applied himself to the controls again.



CHAPTER V

THE FATE OF THE MARTIANS

Vinski drifted into the room. Gordonov glanced at him, and then turned his eyes back to the visi-screen on the wall to attend to the details of the method by which the machines were busy re-lining the *Tovaritch's* stern tubes. Vinski set down the glass-like helmet which he had been carrying under one arm, unfastened the oxygen pack from his shoulders, opened the silvery overall suit which covered him and let it slip to the floor.

Crossing to the wall, he flipped over a lever, spoke the one Martian word he had acquired into the diaphragm, and waited. A bowl of liquid made its appearance in the delivery cupboard. He took it out and crossed over to sit beside the engineer on the divan.

"How are they getting on?"

"Pretty well," Gordonov told him. "They've been filling up with stores and doing something or other in the living-room. Once they've got the firing tubes fixed I imagine they'll be able to begin refuelling. Not more than a day or two's work now, I should think."

"Thank Lenin for that," said Vinski, his eyes on the visi-screen. "The sooner we're out of this morgue the better I'll like it."

Gordonov nodded. He, too, had found that existence in Ailiko was getting on his nerves. It was, he reckoned, the sense of futility which seemed to fill the deserted city. In the first few days they had been too busy exploring it, and discovering new devices, for it to have any appreciable effect on their spirits. The new adventure had warded off the feeling of desolation.

But as familiarity grew and the things about them ceased to be intriguing novelties, that defence was lowered. That was one of the reasons why he spent so much time at the visi-screen watching the machines at work: that was practical, constructive and hopeful work. While he could keep his attention on it he could forget the decay going on around him.

They had been in Ailiko now a mere seventeen days, but to each of them it had seemed a long slice of existence. The place continually provoked unwelcome speculations: a dead city upon a dying planet which was the home of a dwindling race.

Soantin had told Platavinov that the many millions of a few thousand years ago were now reduced to a mere handful, working out their existences in seven cities far too big for their needs, in the face of the knowledge that a few more generations must see the end. They had no hope that conditions would change or that any natural upheaval could give them a new lease of life. They foresaw their children's end as clearly as if it had been their own.

Yet they did not commit wholesale suicide. They knew what was bound to happen—and yet they went on to meet it. That, to Gordonov—and to the rest—was one of the most deadening realisations. The people of Mars had made effort after stupendous effort to prolong their life; had irrigated the planet, had built these cities, had by these means and others pushed their survival far beyond its natural term. And yet the end would be the same as if they had made none of these efforts.

But they could not let go of life even now. There was an aspect of their state which reduced them to little more than ingenious mechanical creatures, driven on by some external power. It was, they thought, their own will that they should survive. But was it? Here they were, still struggling on in the face of the fact that they knew they could not survive.

It suggested uncomfortably that man was the driven and not the driver. And the comparison between the end of Mars and the end of Earth was inescapable. It was in that that the real pang of depression lay for the *Tovaritch's* crew. After the first few days they had found themselves subconsciously asking: What's the use?

THE SECRET OF THE MACHINES

Indeed, what was the use? Why civilise? Why build? Why try to live by a code? Why try to cross space? Why do anything if this was to be the end of it all?

They were faced with the realisation of what must come to Earth one day, as it had already come to Mars. If that were all, the logical thing would be to end it here and now. But they did not. Even more urgently than the Martians, they were driven to working out their existences. Why? And the realisation, for the first time driven home, that they had not the slightest idea why, was knocking a lot of the conceit out of four specimens of the lords of creation.

The longer they were forced to stay on this desiccated, shrivelling planet, the more powerful became the sense of their own impotence and futility. The Martians, who knew so much more than they, had been able to do nothing but stave off extinction for a few millenia—what more could Earth hope to achieve?

And that was supposing there would still be men on Earth when she should reach this stage. Soantin thought that even that would be unlikely.

"Yours is a larger planet, with a longer life," he had said once. "Evolution will have more time to work." And he went on to suggest that there would probably be several successors to man, as different from him, perhaps, as he had been from the dinosaurs. It was a theory which was scarcely kinder to the vanity of his listeners than was the prospect of their race dying with their planet.

Nothing seemed worth while any longer. The Martians had attempted a way out by constructing the machines. These, they said, would be their successors, the heirs to their knowledge. Life, of a sort, created by their intelligence, would go on on Mars long after man was gone—for the machines, Soantin assured them, were alive. They were rational beings, though simple as yet. They were built of metal, because that had been the easiest and most durable material in which to work; nevertheless, they were alive, and would develop in time.

They had been made independent of their surroundings to a greater extent than any naturally evolved organism. There was something animal, but more vegetable, in the basis of their existence. Temperature and lack of air did not affect them. As long as they had water and sunlight they could, by processes of photo-synthesis, go on.

But how much did that mean? Gordonov had asked himself. The humanity of man was lost, even though his productions should survive him—and even that was just another procrastination. When the water gave out, when the sun should grow cold, the end would come just the same. . . . Why bother about them? That summed up the feeling that the place had engendered in him: why bother? But the devil of it was that one did bother, and went on bothering.

Vinski had spoken for them all when he said the sooner they got away the better. It would not solve anything, but once they were out of the place the inevitable end would seem less near and less real.

THROUGH AILIKO

"Where have the others gone?" Vinski asked.

"I don't know," Gordonov told him, without moving his eyes from the screen. "The hospital, I expect. The place seems to have an unholy fascination for Platavinov."

"Scarcely surprising, considering he's a doctor. You spent several days in the engineering shops yourself."

"I certainly did. And nearly went mad as a result. If these people had been content to use only simple things like steam, oil and electricity, I might have picked up some useful hints, but this weird form of power they used for all the big jobs just leaves me guessing."

"It must be quite easily comprehensible really," Vinski said. "After all, our present use of electricity would be pretty bewildering to an engineer of two centuries ago."

"A lot of help that is. Of course, it's comprehensible if you've got somebody to explain the basic principles; but I haven't, and I can't find anywhere to begin. If I'd kept on at it any longer, I'd have had a brain-storm. Since then I've kept away from the damned stuff as much as possible. Unless that hospital's a lot simpler than the workshops we shall be having to tie Platavinov down before long."

"You needn't worry about him. The place has less effect on him than on any of us. Zhatkin go with him?"

"Sure; he gets bored in here, but he can't stand wandering round on his own. Says every corner of Ailiko's crammed full of ghosts, so he trailed along with the doctor for company."

The two made a meal of synthetic foods. After it, Gordonov went back to his occupation of watching the repair work through the visi-screen. Vinski, too, watched for a time, but soon became tired of it. He picked up the silvery suit from the floor and pulled it on again.

"I think I'll just go along and see what they're up to," he said. "It's better than hanging about here."

He took up his helmet and went out. Gordonov nodded, but did not trouble to reply.

There were two ways of getting about Ailiko. Either one passed through the building's main air-lock into the open street, or one went down to the underground passages which connected the various buildings. In the days of occupation the passages had, it was obvious, been filled with air, making it possible for the inhabitants to go about all over the city without using space suits; now there was little to choose, for the passages had no more air than the outer surface.

Nevertheless, Vinski elected to go below ground, for it offered a more direct route to the hospital. He left the lift at its lowest level, fastened the transparent, domed helmet over his head and adjusted the air supply. Then he stepped into the lock which prevented the air from the building from leaking out into the empty passages.

It was a lonely walk under the dim roof lights. He scarcely blamed Zhatkin for his nervousness and talk of ghosts. Many a time in these passages, and in the deserted rooms, halls and galleries of Ailiko, he had himself had to fight down a sudden attack of panic. Even out in the streets, under the purple sky, one was not free from these rushes of alarm.

It came, he supposed, partly from the readiness of the city to spring to life again. With nothing dismantled, nothing destroyed, and everything capable of being put into use again, it was hard to realise that it had indeed been abandoned for ever.

There was no difficulty about finding his way. He had been to look at the empty hospital before, and he carried a card upon which Platavinov had written out translations of the notices occurring in the passages. One had only to identify the lettering over the various locks and refer to the card to see which building had been reached.

But it did not prove necessary for him to go all the way to the hospital to find the others. Half a mile before he reached it he saw them coming towards him down the long corridor. The light was playing in subdued reflections upon their helmets and silver suits, and upon something which they carried between them.

He met and greeted them. It was necessary to speak loudly when wearing the helmets, for though the transmitting diaphragms set in them were sensitive, the air was thin to carry the sound.

“Beginning to get worried about you. Thought you might have had an accident,” he said. “What the devil have you got there?”

They laid their burden on the ground. It was a long, glass-like container having both ends rounded, but one smaller than the other; a streamline shape, but for the bluntness of the narrow end.

“A Martian,” Platavinov said. “I want to have a good look at him,” he explained.

Vinski bent over the container and peered down at it. It seemed to be filled with a slightly clouded, green liquid. Through it he could make out the form of a man, still swaying slightly from the movement. The body was entirely naked, and seen through the green fluid it seemed to him an even more unpleasant sight than the ordinary hospital cadaver in its tank. The cloudiness made it difficult to distinguish details, but he could see enough to judge that the proportions of the man differed from those of terrestrial types.

“A nice ghoulish occupation you’ve found for yourselves. I should have thought this place was bad enough already, without taking up body-snatching as a pastime. Where did you get it?”

“I’ll show you,” Platavinov offered.

“I don’t know that I’m keen. In fact, I’m not. What I need just now is cheering up, and a demonstration of how the Martians disposed of their dead isn’t my idea of hilarious entertainment.”

Platavinov grinned.

“Nevertheless, I think you’ll be interested in this.”

Vinski gave in, reluctant but curious. They left the container where it was, and went back to the hospital entrance. Beyond the air-lock, Platavinov pulled the switches which put the building on to the lighting mains. To Vinski’s surprise, he led the way past the first obvious lift to another at the end of a corridor. Vinski’s second surprise was that in it they travelled down instead of up.

A dozen feet or more lower they stopped, and emerged into a small bare room. Platavinov went to a ponderous door on the farther side and swung it open. He groped for a lever inside, and the darkness beyond was relieved by long rows of dim lights.

CHAPTER VI IN THE VAULT

Vinski exclaimed aloud as he stepped over the threshold. He was facing down an aisle which seemed to extend to infinity, until the row of lights ceased to be dots and became a thin, luminous line. To his left and his right the wall stretched out of sight.

The whole of the vast floor space, save that given up to aisles and supporting pillars, was taken up with just such glassy containers as the doctor and Zhatkin had been carrying. They rested there in their thousands—perhaps their hundred thousands—lying horizontal in five-tiered racks. In the closer ones it was possible to make out the pale forms, glimmering ghastly in their green covering.

But it was not entirely, nor even mainly, the great size of the place which had caused Vinski's exclamation. His gaze had fallen upon a body which lay asprawl in the aisle on his left. Close by were two vacant spaces in one of the racks.

The body was that of a woman, still quite young. Close by were the fragments of a container which had obviously held her. The preservation was miraculous; there had been no wasting, no distortion of any kind. Vinski would have been prepared, in other circumstances, to believe that she had died no more than a few hours before. Even yet it appeared almost that she might stir and speak.

He looked questioningly at Platavinov. The doctor shook his head.

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm responsible for that. When we opened the container I had no idea of the state of affairs here, and the poor woman died. It was most unfortunate."

"She—what?" asked Vinski stupidly.

"She died—there on the floor."

Vinski stared at him. Slowly he turned his eyes away and let them wander over the vast hall with its acres of glass tubes. His gaze came back to the doctor.

"Are you serious, Platavinov? Are you trying to tell me that all these are not—not dead?"

Platavinov nodded in a matter-of-fact way. "That is so. They are not dead; but neither are they alive.

"Zhatkin and I found this place by accident; this and five more floors like it below. We thought at first that it was a burial-place, and that they had used some form of mummification. After all, many men on Earth have the vanity to believe in another life, so why not here? Here, we thought, were the Martian myriads waiting for the last trump. And as it seems to me extremely unlikely that there will be a last trump or a judgment day, I thought I'd have a look at one, just to see how like or unlike us they were.

"Well, we broke open the casing, and the poor woman died there on the floor as I told you—died of suffocation before she could come to life again. It was most unfortunate."

"It was horrible," Zhatkin said, with a shudder.

Vinski still stared at them incredulously. "Are you really telling me the truth? I can't believe it."

"I don't blame you for that. I would certainly not believe it if I had not seen it myself."

"It was horrible," Zhatkin repeated.

“But just what has been done to these people?” Vinski demanded.

“That’s what I wanted to know. So after that we went up to the hospital library to try to find out. I can’t tell you why, but it didn’t take long to discover how. The stuff in the containers isn’t liquid; it’s a heavy gas. It has the property of arresting all organic processes in anything which is immersed in it. I can’t find an exact translation for the Martian name of the state it induces, because that state is unknown to us—catalepsy, suspended animation, hibernation, none of them quite meets the case.”

“And for an indefinite length of time?”

“So it appears. There’s no mention of any time limit.”

“But when was it done, and why?”

“I can’t answer either of those. But I can tell you that it was done on a tremendous scale, from the records up in the hospital proper.”

“And all these,” Vinski swept an arm to take in the entire vast vault; “all these can be revived?”

“So it would seem—barring a few inevitable accidents, I suppose.”

“And one who will never be revived,” added Zhatkin, looking down at the body at their feet.

“I can’t believe it.”

“Nor can I, hardly,” Platavinov agreed, “but I’m going to test it. However, as there is only the natural air here, we were taking that one along to our own building. We’d better be getting back to it now, hadn’t we?”

Vinski followed him out bemusedly. He envied Platavinov his matter-of-fact outlook. Of the four of them, the doctor had been least affected by his surroundings. He was making a number of interesting discoveries in a deserted city, and that, for him, seemed to be the long and the short of it—almost. At any rate, this sense of desolation and haunting despair which filled the place for the rest scarcely seemed to touch him.

Vinski was irritated at his own feelings. He had been brought up to think in terms of materialism, and to explain all phenomena on that basis, keeping emotional reactions in what he considered their rightful and secondary place. It disconcerted him to find them swamping him and distorting his judgment. Yet he felt that they were doing so. He felt almost ashamed of himself as he spoke again to the doctor, but he felt that he had to speak.

“Do you think it’s wise to meddle with this?”

Platavinov looked at him curiously.

“What do you mean, ‘wise’? How could it be unwise?”

“I don’t know, but it seems to me unlikely that those people were left in their trance—or whatever it is—by accident. It must have been done on purpose; that is to say, someone has decided that they are not to wake. Do we know enough of this planet to interfere with that purpose? We don’t; and, candidly, I have a feeling that the whole thing would be better left alone.”

The doctor grunted contemptuously.

“You’re getting superstitious, like Zhatkin. I am a man of science. I am interested in knowing how this thing has been done, and whether it has been successfully done. I do not intend to behave like an ignorant yokel. Furthermore, these people are going to be left in their ‘trance,’ except for this one man whom I intend to examine.”

“And the woman we killed,” put in Zhatkin.

“You seem to have got her on your mind. I assure you that she died without knowing anything about it. It was an unfortunate accident, that’s all.”

They came back to the main underground passage. The container still lay where they had left it. Vinski, more than half ashamed now of his illogical scruples, helped to carry it. To his earthly muscles it felt strangely light to contain a man’s body.

THE AWAKENING

“All ready?” asked Platavinov.

The rest nodded, but not enthusiastically. It should have been a moment when active interest swamped all other feelings, but instead it found them rather fearful for reasons which none of them could explain.

Platavinov raised his hammer and brought it down on the glass casing. The container swayed on the table; the green contents swirled, the immersed body rocked gently, but the covering did not fracture.

It was twelve hours since they had brought it to their living-room. The doctor had insisted that it remain untouched for that long to enable the temperature to rise from the below zero of the vault to that of the surrounding air.

He struck again, slightly harder, but still without effect. The third blow was successful. The container split from end to end and the two halves fell apart. The heavy green gas flowed across the table-top and began to pour over the edge with an odd deliberation, like water seen on a slow-motion film. Gordonov stepped forward and filled an empty flask with it as it dripped down.

Platavinov dropped his hammer. He sprang forward. He and Vinski seized the body between them and held it upside down. The green gas streamed out of its mouth and nostrils. They carried it over to the divan and laid it there face downwards. The doctor began to work on it as if giving artificial respiration. Under the rhythmic pressure of his hands, more of the gas was expelled to drift in a thin stream to the floor.

Without pausing in his work, he instructed Zhatkin to hand him a ready-charged syringe. Swiftly he injected its contents, and then went on with his kneading.

Half an hour passed before he relaxed his efforts. The man was now breathing deeply and regularly, but consciousness had not returned. The doctor made another injection, and wrapped the body in a warm rug; then there was nothing to do but wait. The four sat round watching the man’s face for the first signs of consciousness.

“He ought to be all right,” Platavinov said. “I gather that they have a quicker method of revival, but I didn’t want to risk a strange technique, and this seems to have been quite effective.”

More than an hour passed before the man’s eyes opened. All four saw the lids flicker a little before they rose. No one spoke. For some seconds the eyes remained blank and unintelligent, staring at the ceiling, then with a motion made as if in spite of great weariness, the head turned to one side and the eyes met their own.

Surprise and bewilderment crept into them. The man made an effort to move. Platavinov put out a hand gently to quieten him, and said a few words which the others did not understand. The man relaxed obediently, but his eyes were still puzzled.

After a time he revived enough to speak. Platavinov understood him; the intonation was only slightly different from that he had learned from Soantin. He translated for the benefit of

the rest.

“Who are you?” the Martian asked weakly.

“Friends,” the doctor told him. “We will explain later.”

“What year is this? How long have I slept?” the man wanted to know.

Platavinov could not tell him that. He had no idea of the basis of the Martian calendar. He replied:

“A very long time. I don’t know how long.”

“Three centuries?” suggested the other. “They said it might be for three centuries.”

The doctor could only shake his head, a gesture which seemed to puzzle the other. There was a pause, then:

“The canals? They’ve built the canals?” the man asked. The doctor took it as a cue.

“Oh yes. They’ve built the canals,” he assured him.

“That is good. Then it has been worth it,” said the Martian. Seemingly satisfied, he let his eyes close. In a few minutes he was in a natural sleep.

Platavinov looked at the others with an expression of awe and amazement.

“Before the canals were built!” he whispered. “How many thousands of years ago was that, I wonder?”

CHAPTER VII

THE SLEEPER'S STORY

"Come," said Platavinov. "It's time you had some food."

The Martian turned obediently back from the window. He came across the room as though he were not even yet fully awake.

"This *cannot* be Ailiko," he repeated dazedly.

"It is," the doctor assured him patiently for the third or fourth time.

"But that desert out there; it seems to go on for ever. There was no desert at Ailiko. Where does it end?"

"I don't know. I don't think it does. I think it is all desert except for little strips beside the canals."

"The canals; yes, the canals. But they were to be built to save the land. Why, then, is there all this desert?" He paused, and looked at the four Earthmen. "And who are you? You are different: your arms and legs are thicker, your ears are small, your chests are smaller. Why?"

Platavinov explained what he could to him while he ate. Gordonov switched on the visiscreen to show the *Tovaritch* and the machines busy about her base.

"From Earth?" The Martian believed reluctantly. "But why have you come from Earth to revive me? Why not my own people?"

It was a question which Platavinov himself would have liked to have answered. He turned it by one of his own.

"Tell me about yourself. We know practically nothing of this planet. What happened? Why were you in the state we found you?"

The Martian's story was disjointed and needed much parenthetical explanation, but later Platavinov sorted it out for the rest and translated the man's words as closely as possible.

"It happened," said the young man, whose name, as nearly as it could be rendered, was Yauadin, "because Mars is over-populated—was over-populated, I suppose I mean, though it seems only yesterday that we went to the hospital. All our people existed only on a narrow margin. There was no doubt that the planet had begun to wear out.

"The fertility was growing less. It was as much as we could do, by the most intensive cultivation, to produce enough food for ourselves. Then there came a year of bad harvests; our reserves soon went, and all over Mars people died of famine. The next year chanced to be better, but that was followed by another bad season, and then another.

"A great committee of investigation was called. They announced that though the three bad years were probably exceptionally severe, there could be no doubt that the productivity of the land everywhere, save close to the rivers and seas, was rapidly declining; and, further, that the rivers and seas were themselves shrinking, so that the state of affairs must inevitably become worse. In short, that Mars, in her present state, could not hope to grow enough to feed her people.

"It was a crisis too big and too easily capable of proof to be glossed over. Unless something could be done, we were facing a future of continual short rations for some, and actual starvation for the rest.

"There was a war, a bloody war of extermination in which millions were killed in order that others might live. It was a futile war, for it destroyed much of the land it was intended to

preserve, and the state after it was worse than before. The fighting died away as people found that it brought them less instead of more. It became clear that nothing short of world-wide co-operation would help, and out of a great conference came the idea of the canals—the project of irrigating the whole planet from the Poles.

“At first the scheme seemed too vast to be put into practice. It was thought that such a work could never be completed, but after a time which brought forth nothing practicable save minor regional remedies, the canal idea began to be taken more seriously.

“It was accepted by many responsible people as feasible and likely to provide a solution; but it would take a very long time—centuries, perhaps—before even the main system of great canals was complete. And meanwhile the population was starving. . . .

THE VOLUNTEERS

“We were faced with a choice, Either we must go on as best we could, with our race gradually deteriorating from undernourishment while the scheme was in hand, or else we must reduce our population in some way, so that those who remained could be properly fed. The former was scarcely feasible; the latter, at first sight, presented two possible solutions. Voluntary euthanasia for a large number of us, or, by a slower method, the deliberate limitation of births, by decree.

“It was clear that there would be few candidates for suicide in the interests of the race. But the proposal of supervised limitation aroused such passionate prejudice on all sides that it was doubtful whether the decree could ever be passed, or enforced if made law.

“It was in the middle of the inflamed arguments that the physicians put forward a new suggestion. Why not, they asked, put a large part of the race into a temporary state of suspended animation? There was almost no risk. The reduced active population, freed from the fear of hunger, could then construct the necessary machines to go forward with the canal scheme. When the system was complete and the land revived, those who had been entranced could be awakened to take up their lives again.

“Here, at last, was a plan to which in the face of our danger there could be very few objections. It was well known from many experiments that the state of suspended animation produced no harmful after-effects. In the crisis, we approved of it, and many of us actively welcomed it. To me and to my wife, Karlet, it came as the solution we had prayed for.

“We were both still young and had no wish to die of starvation, nor any other way. On the contrary, we wished very much to live and to have children of our own. But to bring them into the world to face famine, or perhaps ‘limitation’—which, put plainly, meant murder—at the hands of the state, was a thing we could not face.

“But here we had a gift full of new hope. We had only to submit to having our lives suspended and we would wake in a regenerated world—a world of plenty, fit for our children to grow up in. We talked it over and decided to volunteer; many, many thousands like us did the same. The response was overwhelming.

“They took us as fast as the factories could turn out the containers and produce the gas. We were not the first. We had to watch many of our friends go before us, and we envied them, for every day we were forced to wait meant a day less for us in that world of plenty. But our turn came at last. I can hardly believe that it was not just a few hours ago that Karlet and I walked together to the hospital.

"And now what is there here for us? Are we to bring children into a world of deserts? Where is that world they promised us?"

He went to the window and looked out again.

"They didn't die, did they? They built the canals; that must have made the world fertile again. Why didn't they let us live in it as they had promised? Why have they cheated us and only given us deserts where you say there is not air enough to breathe?"

"They gave you nothing," Platavinov said. "This is a deserted city, as I told you."

"Deserted! But there are still men on Mars?"

"Oh yes. There are some. A few thousands, I believe."

"And they let us lie there. . . . Left us, meaning that we should never awake. We who volunteered to sleep so that their ancestors might live!"

He stood motionless for a long time, staring out over the waste of red sand. Platavinov watched him carefully, alert for a passionate, perhaps a dangerous reaction. But there was no sign of violence; instead, the man kept a deadening control over himself. There was fury in his eyes, but it was cold; his face grew hard and drawn. When he spoke again there was a harsh edge of bitterness on his voice.

"Tell me all you know about this place," he demanded. "It seems that I am a stranger in my own city—and in my own world."

"THEY NEED NEVER KNOW . . ."

"It is easy enough to see what happened," Platavinov told the others later. The Martian, Yauadin, was asleep in another room. He was still in need of physical rest, though the doctor had had to give him a mild sedative to calm his mind. "Yes," said Platavinov, "that's clear enough."

"Is it?" said Gordonov. "Perhaps it is to you, but it isn't to me. What did happen?"

"Well, it looks as if this wholesale voluntary suspension of life was arranged just as he said, with perfectly honest and honourable intentions on both sides. Those who remained alive to construct the machinery to build the canals were acting in perfectly good faith, otherwise they might as well have killed these volunteers out of hand.

"But it is the old story of new generations refusing to be bound by the promises of their forefathers. As time and the irrigation work went on, life must have become easier, and with plenty for all, the population would increase. When the vast work of the canals was finished, what happened? Why, they found that the land was again supporting as many as it could; there may even have been the problem of over-population again.

"In the circumstances, how much attention would the Martians of that day be likely to pay to the promises of their great-great-grandfathers? Precious little, I'd say. To all intents and purposes, our friend Yauadin and the rest were dead. Let them stay dead, would be the verdict.

"And so, for one reason and another, it has gone on. Perhaps there has never since that day been so much surplus that it could feed several million mouths. Or perhaps by the time the surplus existed the sleepers were forgotten. Or perhaps there was no surplus until the planet began to become barren again, and then they dare not let them out.

"In any case, they were never awakened; no one ever made room for them, and now they never will. They will stay there, sealed in their containers, while the planet freezes and the Sun grows cold. It is perhaps the best thing that could happen now. They went to sleep happy,

and hopeful of a new world. There will never be that new world now, but they need never know it.”

“Except Yauadin, poor chap,” said Vinski.

“He seemed to take it all pretty calmly, I thought,” Gordonov said.

“Calmly!” said Zhatkin. “Can you see anything beyond your nose? You say he is calm—because he did not rage and swear, perhaps. You are a fool!”

Gordonov got up angrily. “Damn you, slit-eyes! I’ll teach you to call me a fool, you little —!”

Vinski swung his big bulk in between them. “Shut up, Gordonov! And, Zhatkin, watch your tongue better.”

Zhatkin shrugged. “No one but a fool would say that a man who seethes inside like a volcano is calm. He is not only angry; he is the most deeply angry man I have ever seen. If I were you, Vinski, I would kill him.”

GOOD NEWS

All three stared at the little Kirghizian.

“What do you mean?” Vinski said.

“What I say. You should go and kill him now, while he is asleep. For two reasons. One, because it is kinder. It was cruel to bring him back to life to suffer so; it will be more cruel to let him go on suffering. And the other because he is a very, very dangerous man.”

“How, dangerous?” Platavinov wanted to know.

“I cannot say. I only know that when I see a man so tormented and cheated, and with such a look in his eyes, he is dangerous.”

“Suppose,” said Vinski, slowly. “Suppose you go and kill him yourself.”

“I can’t.”

“And nor can I.”

Zhatkin turned his dark eyes on the doctor.

“But you could, Platavinov. It is you who should give him back that peace you have taken from him. Just a matter of a little injection, and it will all be over.”

Platavinov looked hard at him. “I don’t think you know what you are suggesting, Zhatkin. It’s murder, here or on Earth.”

“To rob him of his peace was a greater crime.”

“Nonsense, you’re being fanciful again. I admit it has been a shock to him, a far bigger shock than I foresaw. But even so, like anyone else, he’d sooner be alive than dead. As for his being dangerous, well, I just don’t understand what you mean. He’s not armed; he’s upset, of course, but he’s no more mad than we are.”

“All right,” said Zhatkin. “Then if you won’t kill him, what do you propose to do with him—take him back to Earth with us? For I don’t suppose there’ll be much of a welcome for him in Hanno. Or leave him here by himself when we go?”

“We’ll deal with that later. His own wishes will have to be considered.”

“I think they will.”

“I wish you wouldn’t keep on hinting. What do you——?” Platavinov broke off suddenly as a bell tinkled inside the television box.

He leaned over and switched it on. The glass front glowed, and presently Soantin’s face looked out at them. The doctor greeted him. The other three listened impatiently to the

ensuing conversation.

“It’s good news,” Platavinov told them, after he had switched off. “The tube re-lining is almost finished. The provisioning is complete. To-morrow they start filling the fuel tanks, and we are to be ready to leave about noon on the following day. He will tell us the exact time later.”

“Thank Lenin for that,” said Gordonov piously. “I thought they must be pretty nearly finished—and none too early for me, either.”

“You’ve said it,” Vinski agreed. “The sooner we’re shooting out into space, the happier I’ll feel.”

“Pity we can’t have a whisky to celebrate it. I might even put up with a vodka if we had it,” Gordonov lamented.

CHAPTER VIII

THE REVOLT OF THE SLEEPERS

Externally, there was nothing to distinguish the next morning from its predecessors. The Sun rose as it had risen for centuries into a featureless, cloudless sky, and shone down upon the unshaded sands. But to the Earthmen, high in their rooms in Ailiko, it had a character of its own, for it was the last day of their exile. True that it would take twelve weeks or more to cross the space which lay between them and home, but the homeward journey, once fairly begun, could no longer be considered exile. They would spend only one more night in the deserted city.

Gordonov was first into the living-room. He switched on the visi-screen, which he had left trained to the position of the *Tovaritch*, and as it cleared the sight raised his spirits still higher and banished the last trace of the doubts which had troubled him in the night.

The great rocket had already been raised to the vertical and poised on her four stabilising fins. A metal scaffolding was being erected beside it to enable the machines to reach the refuelling ports. From the open air-lock leading to the living-quarters a rope ladder hung down the shining side to the ground, 120 feet below.

Gordonov called the others in. Their eyes lit up at the sight. A delighted grin spread over Vinski's face.

"Now, at last, I can really believe that we're going to get away," he said.

"You'd begun to doubt it?" said the doctor.

"Hadn't we all? This place seemed to take away my hope and faith in anything. The sight of the old rocket up on end again makes me feel a new man. What's wrong with you?" he added, catching sight of Zhatkin. "Cheer up, you gloomy Tartar, we're as good as on our way now."

"Are we? I don't feel that we are. I'm still afraid of this place."

"Oh, all right, go on! Be a skeleton at the feast if you must, only don't rattle your bones."

But Zhatkin's misgivings did not damp the cheerfulness of the meal with which they began the day. The sense of the deserted city outside no longer depressed their spirits, and they were full of plans. Platavinov to collect specimen instruments, a few books and pieces of minor apparatus from the hospital; Vinski to shoot off the remainder of his films; Gordonov to make a last desperate attempt at understanding some of the machines.

Only Zhatkin put forward no plan for the day. He sat, indifferent, scarcely listening to them. At the end of the meal he asked:

"What about Yauadin? Where's he?"

"Still sleeping, I suppose," said Platavinov. But the Kirghizian shook his head.

"He's not. I looked."

Vinski slipped from the room. He returned in a moment.

"Zhatkin's right. He's gone! And his rug's quite cold. He must have been gone some hours."

"Why didn't you say so before?" the doctor demanded.

Zhatkin shrugged his shoulders. "I forgot; but it wouldn't have made any difference."

Platavinov grunted. It was true that it would have made no difference if he had heard of it half an hour earlier, but he was irritated that Zhatkin and not himself had been the one to make

the discovery.

"Anyway, he can't have gone far. He'll probably turn up for some food soon."

Zhatkin seemed determined to make himself unpopular.

"It's perfectly obvious where he's gone," he said, with irritating certainty.

"And where's that?"

"Why, back to where he came from. To the vaults under the hospital, of course."

Gordonov got up and went to the cupboard where they kept the space-suits. There were only three there; the one he himself had been using had gone.

Vinski rose. "We'd better go after him. The poor devil will go crazy alone in that place. After all, we owe him something for what we've done to him. We might even take him back to Earth, if there's no other way of dealing with him. Get another suit out of the stores and come along to the hospital, Gordonov."

All four made their way through the underground passage together. At the hospital lock, Platavinov pushed over the opening lever, but the door remained closed.

"That's odd," he said. "It's never failed before." He tried again, but the door still refused to move.

"Better try the ground-level entrance," Vinski suggested.

ZHATKIN MUSES

They went back a little and gained the surface by way of the nearest empty building. The main entrance-lock of the hospital faced them as they emerged. Again Platavinov pulled over a lever which should have admitted them, but like the other, the door failed to respond.

"He's jiggered the works somehow," said Gordonov. "Seems as if he didn't want us."

Vinski agreed. "And I don't see that there's much we can do about it," he added.

"That's all very well," protested Platavinov, looking round from a further assault on the door. "But if I can't get in, I can't get hold of those instruments and specimens. There must be other ways into the place."

"One perhaps, but certainly not many," Vinski said. "The less entrances, the less loss of their precious air."

"I've got to get in somehow," muttered Platavinov, grimly.

The other three helped for a time in the search for another entrance, but as the Sun rose higher they left him to find it for himself. Vinski was unwilling to waste his last chances of taking photographs, and Gordonov was anxious to make his last bid for understanding the machines in the workshops. It would be hard luck for Platavinov if he could not collect the specimens to take back to Earth, but it was not sense for them all to waste time on the one job.

Zhatkin, with a characteristic shrug, drifted off too. He made his way back to their living-room and settled down at the control panel of the visi-screen. He tuned it first to show the busy streets of Hanno—streets which were thronged with moving crowds, not of men, but of shining machines. Only rarely did he catch a glimpse of a helmeted human figure in its space-suit.

The machines interested him deeply. He found it easier than his companions to believe that they were sentient, and he wanted very much to know the degree of self-control to which they had attained. Still more he wanted to know how they were built. It irked him extremely that whenever he set the focus for the inside of one of the factories, the screen went blank, just as it did when he tried to look inside any of the other buildings.

The best that he could do was to adjust his view-point so that it was just outside the factory doors, but that was unsatisfactory, too; the view was limited, and half the time it was obliterated by machines passing in and out.

One thing his observations of Hanno had told him was that whatever the relationship between the men and the machines, the former certainly did not exercise direct control, and that if the city contained a human population of only some 3,000, as Soantin had said, the machines must outnumber them a good many to one.

When he tired of that, he tried to explore another interest. Raising his view-point to some thousand feet above ground level, he set out to follow the great canal which led southward from Hanno. One day he had seen something ploughing slowly through its waters. Whether it had been creature or machine he did not know, for in the effort to get a closer view he had muddled his controls and lost it altogether.

He would have liked to know for certain whether animal life on such a scale had managed to survive in the Martian waters, or if he had chanced to get a glimpse of a commercial vessel still plying between the few surviving cities. But miles of the canal moved in a broad ribbon across the screen, and left him unrewarded.

The day wore on. No one came to disturb Zhatkin as he sat flitting the visi-screen hither and thither across the half-planet which was its range. Doubtless the others had come back to the building in the course of the day to exchange their depleted oxygen packs for fully-charged ones, but they had not come upstairs. He was glad of that. He had no wish to talk to them. He was quite content to sit and, a little sadly, watch the scenes pass before him.

A sense which he did not attempt to analyse told him that he could do nothing useful. It was something of the same feeling which had come upon him when he suggested that Yauadin should be killed. . . .

GORDONOV'S CAPTURE

The Sun was only an hour or two off setting when a sound of feet in the passage brought him out of his contemplations. He turned to see Gordonov enter—Gordonov, and a stranger, both in space-suits. One of the engineer's hands was firmly clamped on his companion's arm.

"Platavinov here?" he asked. "I want to hear what this chap has to say."

He thrust the other man into the room and, taking up a tactical position near the door, removed his helmet.

Zhatkin looked curiously at the newcomer. He was undoubtedly a Martian, and his features were set similarly to Yauadin's. The man seated himself on the divan, with an air of great weariness, and, seeing that it was safe to do so, unfastened his helmet and dropped it to the floor. He sat for some seconds with his face in his hands. As he looked up again, his eyes met Zhatkin's and he said something in his own language.

Zhatkin could not understand the words, but he had seen a worn out, exhausted man before. He led him over to the switchboard and pressed a lever. The Martian understood what was expected of him. He spoke a few words into the diaphragm, and a few minutes later he was making a meal with the intensity of a desperately hungry man.

"Where did you come across him?" Zhatkin asked Gordonov.

"Spotted him slinking around in one of the engineering shops. Thought it was that fellow Yauadin at first, but it isn't."

"So I see. But who is it?"

“That’s what I want to know. I brought him along for Platavinov to find out. He came quietly enough. Not much strength in these chaps, anyway, by the skinny look of ’em; and this one seems pretty well all in. What I don’t understand——”

He broke off as Vinski entered hurriedly.

“There’s something queer happening! I swear I saw a couple of men in one of the streets just now. It—— Who’s that?” he asked abruptly, as he caught sight of the stranger. “Where did he come from? What’s going on?”

“I don’t think it’s too difficult to guess,” said Zhatkin, thoughtfully.

Platavinov arrived a few minutes later in a state of great agitation.

“He’s done it! By Lenin, you were right, Zhatkin! We should never have let him go. He’s waking them. There are lights in the hospital; people moving inside. What do you think they’ll do?”

“Better ask this one,” Gordonov advised, bringing forward his capture.

Platavinov, swinging round at the Martian, fired a series of rapid questions at him. The other did not answer at once. The food had done him good, giving him new strength, but it had not taken the lines from his face. He stood looking steadily into the doctor’s eyes. Then he began to speak slowly, distinctly, and with a malevolence which no one could misunderstand.

REVENGE!

Platavinov was clearly taken aback by the venom in his voice, but in a few seconds his expression of amazement gave place to one of understanding. He interjected a swift sentence, and the Martian’s manner, too, underwent a change. Vinski and the others were obliged to wait impatiently through a considerable conversation until Platavinov turned to give them the gist of it. He looked worried as he did so.

“He thought at first that we were Martians,” he explained. “He calmed off a bit when I told him who we really are, but it seems to me as if there is going to be trouble.

“It was Yauadin who brought this off, all right. He left here sometime during the night, and went straight to the hospital. There he found the machinery for aëration and set it going. He guessed that we might follow him, and put all the entrances to the place out of action. The moment there was sufficient pressure of air, he set about opening the containers and bringing his friends back to life.

“As soon as the first had recovered enough, they joined in and helped him. They’ve been at it fourteen hours now, and there are hundreds of them out already. They’ve been able to bring them round quicker than I could; all the necessary stuff is to hand in the hospital. They’re still at it now, as hard as they can go!”

“What are they going to do?” Vinski asked.

“First, they are going to put this city in full working order again; this chap and some others have been looking round with an eye to getting things going. Then they’re going all out to revenge themselves on the existing cities. They mean to wipe out any Martians who still exist.

“You heard that fellow’s tone when he thought we were Martians. That’s how they feel about them. It’s going to be no half-hearted business once they get going!”

“But can they do it? Make the city work again, I mean? And will it be possible for them to make enough synthetic food to keep going? They’ll need raw materials of some kind for that,” said Gordonov.

“I can’t say. I don’t suppose they can yet, either. In any case, they probably wouldn’t care. Why should they? It gives them a chance to live for a while, at any rate; nothing else does. Above everything else, they’re mad with the idea of revenge—of wiping out the people who failed them and left them to lie there. That’s what matters most to them now. It’s a kind of holy war to them. To-morrow they’re going to send men out to start opening the containers in other cities.”

“But how many are there? There must be millions altogether. The place can’t possibly support them.”

“I know; but they’re desperate, don’t you understand? Besides, Yauadin has told them about us. He has said that if it is possible for us to cross space, it is possible for them. They will build rockets as soon as they can, and colonise on Earth or Venus. Somehow or other, they intend to have the life that was promised them.

“But before everything else they intend that their own people shall pay the price for cheating them. And they’ll make sure that it’s paid, too! We’ve seen how two men feel about it. Imagine a thousand—a hundred thousand—in the same frame of mind. . . .”

CHAPTER IX

JOURNEY'S END

Vinski nodded. If all the men and women released were capable of such cold, bitter fury as those two, there would be no quarter for the inhabitants of Hanno and the other cities.

"We'd better warn Soantin," he said. "We can't just stand by and let these people get ready to wipe him and his lot out."

Gordonov agreed. "He could send the machines against them and make sure that no more of the containers are opened. Perhaps they'll be able to support those who are free already."

"That's no good." Platavinov shook his head. "I told this man that they would find thousands of the machines to deal with in Hanno. It didn't worry him. They know how the machines work. They can paralyse them, he said. I don't see that there's anything to be done."

"Well, at least we can warn Soantin," Vinski repeated. "We must. We owe our lives to him; the least we can do is to let him know what is happening. After all, we're responsible for it happening at all."

"That's just it," said Platavinov. "We are responsible—at least, I am. And how is he going to feel about that?"

"It was unintentional. We could not foresee what would follow when you had revived the man. We had not even been warned. He can't blame us overmuch; but in any case it is our duty to warn him before things go any farther." Vinski's opinion was quite definite. Gordonov backed him up.

"It may still be possible for him to take steps now which he could not take later," he said.

"And you, Zhatkin?" the doctor asked.

Zhatkin raised his musing eyes. "Yes, that would be best, I think. Though I doubt its use; I fancy the damage is done now."

Platavinov thought for a moment before he directed Gordonov to take the Martian away and lock him up in one of the other rooms.

By the time the engineer returned, Soantin's face was visible on the screen of the television-box. Platavinov was leaning forward, speaking rapidly and intensely in the Martian tongue. Soantin's expression became more serious. He asked several questions which the doctor answered without hesitation. There was a look of decision upon his face as the conversation came to an end and the picture faded.

"Well?" asked Vinski.

"I don't think it is quite as serious as we feared. He is going to send the machines against them and stop the opening of further containers until it has been decided what is to be done with the already revived. He says that they are mistaken about the machines, for the method of powering them was not discovered until centuries after the containers were sealed.

"He does not blame us, for he understands that we acted in ignorance, but he thinks it will be best to get us out of the way as soon as possible. The *Tovaritch* refuelling is almost finished now, and he is giving orders for the inclination to be altered so that we can take off six hours earlier; he can't make it sooner than that."

"That will make it soon after dawn," said Gordonov. "Why shouldn't we go aboard now and sleep there?"

"Partly because the refuelling is not yet quite complete, and partly because there is not at present any air in the living-room. They have to finish connecting up the fresh oxygen tanks."

"And he is sure he can look after the other business?" Vinski asked.

"He hasn't any doubt about it. A few hundred of the machines can easily handle the situation, he says. So we don't seem to have done so much damage as we feared after all," Platavinov said with satisfaction.

"Now as to to-morrow——" he went on, but Zhatkin's voice cut him short.

"Platavinov," he said, slowly and distinctly, "why are you lying?"

The doctor swung round, fists clenched, and glared down upon the smaller man. Zhatkin, without moving from his seat on the divan, looked calmly into the other's angry face.

"What do you mean?" Platavinov shouted. "You little rat of a Tartar, I'll——!"

Vinski intervened, pushing the doctor aside. To Zhatkin he said:

"What's all this about? Why did you say he was a liar?"

Zhatkin shrugged. "Because he is a liar. He never mentioned the containers, or the people in them, to Soantin just now."

Platavinov's jaw dropped. One glance at him was enough to show that the thrust had gone home. He recovered himself, but too late.

"You don't know what I said or did not say. You can't understand a word of their language."

"No?" said Zhatkin, softly.

Platavinov looked away. "Well, what if I didn't tell him? If there's going to be trouble here, isn't it better for all of us to get away as soon as we can before it starts? It's not our affair, and there's no reason why we should be mixed up in it. The sooner we get out, the better; that's why I got him to advance the starting time."

"Oh, then that part's true?" said Gordonov.

"Of course it is! But if you're still fools enough to want Soantin to know about the rest before he must, you'd better get Zhatkin to tell him—for I won't."

Zhatkin shook his head. "Unfortunately, I can't. I didn't need to; you told the lies in our own language."

"In that case," said Platavinov, "it seems that Soantin is going to remain uninformed."

YAUADIN RETURNS

They rose next morning by the first light. Platavinov spoke into the microphone, ordering the last food they would eat on Mars. Gordonov switched on the visi-screen and focused it once more on the *Tovaritch*. It cleared, and showed the rocket ready for the take-off, with the morning sun reflecting brightly from her polished hull. The effect of the doctor's talk with Soantin was noticeable at once, for the whole ship was now tilted several degrees to the left, and the rope ladder which had laid against the side now hung free for the greater part of its length.

All four turned to look at it. It seemed too long expected to be true that they were ready to go at last. In less than an hour now, they would be back in the familiar living-room, making themselves comfortable on their couches for the start. In just over an hour they would be out in space, well started on their three months' fall from planet to planet.

Vinski, to save wasting time later on, was already pulling on his silvery space-suit ready for the walk to the rocket. The others followed his example.

The last meal finished, they set about gathering together their belongings and such specimens as they had decided to take back to Earth. Vinski was decorating himself with his film cameras and pulling out of a cupboard the rifles which had proved a needless precaution. Platavinov was packing together the objects he had acquired before the closing of the hospital, including the flask of green gas taken from Yauadin's container.

Gordonov had a small motor which would, he hoped, be the means of supplying the world with an entirely new form of power once he could find anybody able to make head or tail of it. He was improvising a cord sling which would enable him to take it up the rope ladder. Only Zhatkin, it seemed, had nothing to take from Mars but what he had brought. He sat unexcitedly watching the others.

Vinski straightened himself and looked round the room. "Is there anything——?" he had begun, when a sound of running footsteps outside made him break off.

Yauadin, wearing a space-suit, but helmetless like themselves, appeared in the doorway. For a moment he looked at them. Then he singled Platavinov out from the rest. There was a look of vivid fury on his face; the self-control he had shown before had gone, the hatred in his eyes was limitless. Platavinov stepped back involuntarily.

A flood of words broke from the Martian. Harsh, bitter-toned phrases, delivered as if they were blows. The doctor stepped back again, raising his hand as though to ward the other off. But the Martian came no nearer. Platavinov seemed utterly confounded. Once he started to expostulate in a fumbling way, but the other talked him down.

The climax came too suddenly for the rest to suspect it. Yauadin raised his right arm and pointed it at the man before him. Vinski, with immense presence of mind, flung himself upon him. But he was too late. The instant before he reached him there was a searing, soundless flash, and as the two men crashed over together, Platavinov slithered down against the wall, a hole burnt through his head.

The silence that followed lasted only a few seconds. It was broken by a shout from Gordonov.

"Look! Vinski, look!"

He was pointing to the visi-screen. Three figures in silver space-suits were climbing the swaying ladder up the *Tovaritch's* side. One stood in the open doorway above, four more on the ground at the foot of the ladder.

Vinski took in the scene at a glance. With a bound he was across the room and had snatched up his helmet.

"Come on," he shouted to the others, as he made for the doorway. Gordonov, helmet also in hand, was only a few steps behind him.

THE RACE FOR THE ROCKET

Zhatkin did not move.

He remained sitting on the edge of the divan, looking at the bodies of the two men. They were both beyond help. There was a hole right through Platavinov's head; Yauadin's head had cracked on the floor as he went down under Vinski's weight.

He needed no explanation of what had occurred. More than once among the Martian's invective he had caught the word "Karlet." Karlet, Platavinov had told them, was the name of

Yauadin's wife, with whom he had gone so hopefully to the hospital on that day so many centuries ago.

What could be more natural than that husband and wife should have laid in their containers side by side? And after that unfortunate opening of the first container—that “accident,” as Platavinov had called it—they had taken the next one to it to bring back here. It was Karlet who had died in that vault, and her body had been there for Yauadin to find. . . .

Zhatkin looked across at the broken body. Well, at least the unhappy, twice-embittered Yauadin had peace now.

He looked back once more to the visi-screen. The last of the space-suited figures was nearing the top of the ladder now. A movement in the lower right-hand corner of the scene caught his eye. Two human figures accompanied by several scuttering machines, were racing towards the rocket-ship.

Suddenly, a moment after he had noticed them, the machines came to a dead stop and froze motionless. But the two human beings kept on. Though they were too small for him to distinguish details, he knew that they were Vinski and Gordonov by the superhuman strides in which their Earthly muscles carried them over the sand.

One running figure reached the dangling ladder a little ahead of the other. He leapt at it, and began to climb like a monkey. The other was only a yard or two behind him.

The last of the earlier climbers was in the air-lock now. Zhatkin saw him lean out and look down at the two Earthmen. Already the leader was halfway up the ladder. Then the man in the air-lock bent down. Another moment, and ladder and climbers fell together to the ground. The outer door of the air-lock closed.

Of the climbers, one—it was impossible to say which—lay where he had fallen among the loops of the ladder. The other jumped to his feet and gazed up at the towering rocket, shaking both his fists at it in impotent frenzy. It was some minutes before he noticed his companion's plight. When he did, he went over and lifted the other man's head.

Even at the size they were on the screen, it was clear that the helmet was smashed. Asphyxiation, if not the fall, had finished the journey for him. Slowly the survivor straightened up. Once more he looked long and steadily up the shining side of the rocket. Then he picked up his fallen companion and began to plod with a slow, weary step back towards the city.

There came a sudden burst of flame, fierce as a part of the Sun itself, between the flanges of the rocket. Zhatkin drew back with his hand over his smarting eyes. When he was able to look again the *Tovaritch* had gone. Where she had stood was a pit of fused and blackened sand. Of the man who had been carrying the other back there was no sign. . . .

Zhatkin sat awhile without moving. Then he sighed. His sad eyes searched slowly round the room, loitered for a space on the rifles which Vinski had dropped as he sprang at the Martian, passed on to Platavinov's body, and then to Yauadin's.

What would happen? he wondered. Would the *Tovaritch* make the journey back to Earth with her Martian crew? Or to Venus, perhaps? Or would she be lost for ever in the depths of space? He would never know.

He found himself staring at an object which lay close beside Yauadin. It looked something like an electric torch, save that it was open at the end where the glass should be. He walked slowly across and picked it up. A simple-looking little weapon, but effective, as Yauadin had shown. Apparently one operated it by pressing a neat little knob on the side.

Zhatkin looked round the room once more. He sighed again. Then he put the tube against his head and pressed the little knob.

[The end of *Sleepers of Mars* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon)]