

# FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

No. 33

35¢

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Editor: ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES DOROTHY B. SEADOR, Asso. Ed.  
COVER BY FREAS Illustrations by Emsh, Freas, and Murphy.

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION, Number 33, Summer, 1957. Published quarterly by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Second-class mail privileges authorized at Holyoke, Mass. Single copies 35¢; yearly subscription \$1.40. Entire contents copyright 1957 by Columbia Publications, Inc. Printed in U. S. A.

# Author, Author!

THEODORE L. THOMAS is an occasional writer, whose stories are usually remembered for many months after their appearance. His most recent appearances have been "The Disappearing Man", in the July *Science Fiction Stories*, and "The Attractive Nuisance" in the August *Science Fiction Quarterly*.

- ★ THOMAS N. SCORTIA is a chemist by profession, who finds himself torn between sanity and the desire to make writing his sole career. His profession forms the basis for a notable short novel, "Genius Loci",
- ★ in the September *Science Fiction Stories*.

ROBERT SILVERBERG seems to be living up to his accolade as the "most promising new writer of 1956", as, in addition to numerous short stories and novelets, all of notable quality, he's now to be found in pocket book novels, as well as in topflight detective and western story magazines.

- ★ A. BERTRAM CHANDLER is a British
- ★ author, well known for unusual and wryly
- ★ humorous tales. His list of credits would fill quite a few pages.

ISAAC ASIMOV needs no introduction; he's just one of the brightest of those science fiction stars that every science fiction editor is constantly seeking.

*A journalist in space may not  
be a very happy man . . .*



## *. . . and a half-dozen of the other . . .*

by A. Bertram Chandler

**T**HE LONG voyage was almost over.

Of the ten men in the rocket, Hemmings was most relieved. Eight months was too long, had been too long. Eight months of free fall, eight months without women, without liquor, without tobacco, with only tasteless, unsatisfying food concentrates to eat. Eight months too, without news—or, at

least, without news of the sort that would appeal to his readers.

At first, with the memory of the gentle blasting off from the Space Station still fresh in his mind, with the tiny, man-made world of the Mars Rocket still novel and interesting, Hemmings had sent daily reports to his editor. But his interest had soon flagged.

In this small, artificial

planetoid there was nothing newsworthy—no dirt, no scandal, no violence. The huge circulation of *The Looking Glass*, Hemmings well knew, demanded just these items. Sunday, in millions of respectable homes, was not Sunday unless lust and murder—described in detail by Hemmings and his fellows—were introduced, by the medium of the printed page, into the prim parlours and the two neat bedrooms. Lust and murder... A blow-by-blow account of the long, leisurely chess match between Boyle, the Astronomer-Captain, and Grimshaw, the Physicist, was no substitute.

**B**OYLE, IN the Control Room, swivelled in his chair to talk to the Pilot.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "that we'd better have that unspeakable clot, Hemmings, up here for the landing."

"As you say, Skipper," replied Weldon, without enthusiasm.

"I wish we didn't have to. He'll... jinx things."

"Superstitious?" Weldon's brows arched high over his faded blue eyes.

"No... It's just that I don't like him. When I think of all the people who could have been sent..."

"You'd've preferred the

Chess Correspondent of *The Observer*... Or *The Times*."

"Frankly, yes. Still—it's the taxpayers who're footing the bill for this expedition. And with room for only one journalist—it's no more than fair, I suppose, that he comes from the rag with the highest circulation figures."

"Not fair on us," said the Pilot. "The man's done nothing but gripe ever since we shoved off. He wants a drink. He wants a smoke. He wants a dirty big steak with onions and French fries. D'ya know what he was saying to me a coupla days ago? That we shoulda had a blonde along. Then by this time he'd've had some nice, juicy scandal—to say nothing of a murder or two—for his paper."

"He's damned lucky that there hasn't been a murder," growled Bales. "Oh, well, he's here to be used. Better let him earn some of the fabulous salary that he's being paid."

**H**EMMINGS, when the call came through on the intercom, was engaged in an argument with Trent, the Biologist, and Grimshaw.

"You're going to be a very disappointed young man," said Trent. "No beautiful, oviparous princesses prancing around

on a state of nature. No *bems*, even. No muck at all for you to stick your sharp little nose into. Just lichens—or something as near to lichens as makes no difference. . . ”

“Just imagine the headlines,” choked Grimshaw. “*Love Life Of The Martian Lichens*. By Our Special Correspondent.”

“But... Lichens...” muttered Hemmings.

“They spend their time lichen each other,” said Grimshaw, reluctant to abandon his joke.

“But the canals,” protested Hemmings.

“There just aren’t any canals,” Trent told him in a superior voice. “Sorry, old boy, but that’s the way it is. Just an optical illusion.”

“*With Knife And Fork Down The Alimentary Canal!*” shouted Grimshaw. “By Our Special Correspondent.”

“Shut up!” flared Hemmings. “All right, all right. How do you clever bastards know so much? Nobody’s been to Mars—yet. I suppose you remember the flap there was about the Moonflowers—after the scientists had been telling us for years that there was no life on the Moon? Or have you, oh so conveniently, forgotten?”

“Our instruments tell us

what conditions are like on Mars,” said Grimshaw, stuffily.

“Do they? *Do they?* Tell me—has anybody at the Lunar Observatory ever thought of pointing his fancy gadgets at the Earth? What sort of story would they tell us, I wonder? That Earth could not support life as we know it?”

“Don’t be silly,” snapped Grimshaw.

“I’m not being silly. Just answer my question.”

The intercom speaker crackled.

“Mr. Hemmings,” came the voice of Captain Boyle, “report to Control immediately.”

“And they ask *him* to watch the landing,” Trent complained bitterly to Grimshaw before the little journalist was out of earshot.

**H**EMMING’S reception in the Control Room was far from cordial. Weldon grunted a greeting, his eyes intent on his instruments. Hales, saying nothing, waved a hand towards the one vacant chair.

Hemmings shrugged his narrow shoulders, let himself sink into the thick padding of the seat. He was not sorry to sit down. The gravity—a resultant of the rocket’s deceleration—was tiring after the months of free fall, even though it was only a fraction

of Earth's pull. He wished that he had a cigaret. He stared through the ports, looked without much interest at the red-orange desert down to which they were falling. He lifted his camera on its sling, snapped a quick picture of Weldon hunched over his controls.

Boyle glared at him. "Put that thing down, Mr. Hemmings."

"But, sir, this is a historic moment."

"It'll be even more historic if you put Weldon off his stroke and crash us. Trouble is—you won't be around to write it up for your yellow rag."

"Talking of writing up, sir—how long will it be before I can get Mr. Tallent to send off my report of the landing?"

"We've to land first. Then it'll take all of twelve hours to get all the scientific data off."

*Yes, thought Hemmings. You'll make it take all of twelve hours. You... You stuffed shirt!*

There was silence for a while, broken only by the muted, screaming roar of the drive, by the thinner screaming of the tenuous atmosphere through which they were dropping. The journalist stared through the nearest port, hating the Captain and the Pilot, hating the ship, hating the

barren world, utterly devoid of human interest, beneath them, hating himself for being such a fool as to have come on this crazy, pointless expedition.

Suddenly he stiffened. "Sir! Captain Boyle! Would that be a canal? And a city?"

"Rubbish," said Boyle. Hardly bothering to follow Hemmings' pointing finger with his gaze. "Rubbish. A remarkably straight rift. A strange rock formation."

"There's water shining there."

"I believe the little bastard's right, Skipper," said Weldon, trying hard to keep the excitement out of his voice. "That's water, sure enough."

"**V**ERY WELL, then," ordered Boyle. "Set us down by the...the..." He finally spat out the word as though it had an evil taste, "by the canal."

"Near the city!" squeaked Hemmings.

"Near the rock formation," corrected Boyle, coldly.

Weldon at his controls, was sweating profusely. He turned a pale, strained face to his Captain.

"I've had to switch over to manual," he said. "We had her set for typical Martian conditions—but she won't handle.

She's not designed to land in atmosphere this thick."

"*Thick?*" barked Boyle.

"Yeah. Thick. Damn' near Earth normal, I'd say by the feel of her."

"But that's impossible. We..."

"Leave me alone!" yelled the Pilot. "Let me do the job, my way—or we'll not get down in one piece."

The Captain, who had risen from his chair to peer over Weldon's shoulder, sat down hurriedly. Hemmings, remembering his argument with Trent and Grimshaw, permitted himself the luxury of a grin—a grin which faded as the rocket yawed violently. He wondered what sort of obituary the boys back home would give him.

**T**HROUGH the port, in rapid succession he saw flashes of desert, of the dark, straight line that was the canal, of cloudless, dark blue sky. Then there was desert again, red sand and yellow sand and brown, jagged rocks, and it was too close and coming up far too fast. Aft, the Drive bellowed, shaking the ship with a terrifying broken rhythm. Somebody was screaming—looking back on it all afterwards he realized that it must have been himself. He heard Weldon say, in tones of deep

disgust, "Hell! That's mucked it!"

And then the crash came.

**"I WAS *The First Man*** *On Mars,*" the voice was saying. "By Our Special Correspondent." It was his own voice. He heard somebody else laughing unkindly, *at* him, and opened his eyes with a jerk. He had been brought down, he realized, into the rocket's general room, was lying in an untidy huddle on the curved surface of the inner shell. The ship, he saw after a few moments' confusion, was on its side.

"We were lucky," Boyle was saying. "How's Trent, Doc?"

Paynton, the expedition's Medico, replied. "Not so good, Captain. A nasty compound fracture. And that bang on his head's not helping any."

"Any danger?"

"No. He'll pull through, all right. Just have to be watched for a while, that's all."

"H'm. Well, Taylor, what's your report?"

"We'll not need helmets, sir," said the Chemist. "Just warm clothing. Temperature's ten degrees Centigrade. Air pressure and oxygen content almost Earth normal."

"No bugs?" His face clouded. "That's Trent's pigeon. Could *you* run a test, Doc?"

"I could—but I'd not guarantee results."

"All right, then: Full protective armour, everybody. A pity—but I'm taking no risks. You'll be staying with Trent, Doctor. Put out a call on our suit frequency if you want us back in a hurry."

"I'll stay with you," volunteered Hemmings. He thought, *It's a story of sorts. Fight For Life In Wrecked Mars Rocket.*

"You'll come with us, Hemmings," ordered the Captain. "We may be needing your camera."

OUTSIDE, Hemmings knew why. The official photographs had to be taken—Boyle, surrounded by his gallant crew, standing beside their broken ship in attitudes absurdly reminiscent of big game hunters with some hapless pachyderm unfortunate enough to get in the sights of their rifles. The reflection of the light from the faceplates of the helmets, Hemmings hoped, would make it impossible for anybody to identify the wearers. Then there was the planting of the flag—of which ceremony Hemmings was also the official photographer—and then, at last, the eight spacemen walked, slowly and carefully in the light gravity—to the canal.

*I was right, thought the journalist. It's artificial. Look at that stone parapet. And those trees—if they are trees—spaced at neat, regular intervals... Which way is the city? Which way is Captain Know-All Boyle's strange rock formation?*

The city was all of ten miles distant. Its buildings blended with the landscape, were red and orange and brown, lifting high yet without ostentation, curves and straight lines and angles all seeming to have grown rather than to have been built.

"So there *was* intelligent life here," whispered Boyle, his voice barely audible in the helmet phones of the others. "So there were canal builders..."

Hanging over the towers of the city, suddenly, was a ship. It gleamed brightly in the rays of the sun, its apparent size rapidly increasing.

"Hemmings, quick! Your camera!" shouted Boyle.

THE JOURNALIST had not needed to be told. Sighting with practised ease he pointed the whirring machine at the approaching aircraft, thinking in headlines—*Mystery Of The Flying Saucers Solved By Our Special Correspondent!*

"We should have brought



weapons," Boyle was saying.

Thirty feet from the men, the saucer grounded. It was big, all of a hundred feet in diameter. It was of lenticulate construction, with a maximum thickness of fifteen feet. The metal of its hull shone with a strange, iridescent lustre.

A door opened at its rim, plates sliding up and to one side, a ramp inched down to the sand. A great glee suffused Hemmings' being—*this* was what he had come for. The six beings stepping slowly and deliberately from the machine were human in shape, and so far as he could see, were naked. His camera whirled. He thought happily—*The Nudists Of Mars*, By Our Special Correspondent. Then, as the Martians approached, his face fell. Without exception, well-formed as their bodies were, each one was sexless as an egg.

**T**HE LEADING Martian lifted an instrument to his lips. His voice—pleasant, well modulated, with the barest touch of accent—sounded through the helmet phones of the Earthman. "Welcome," he said, "to our planet."

*A shift of vowels, thought Hemmings. Well—there's plenty of that back home. Brooklyn. Poils come from ersters. But how...?*

"For many years we have

observed you," said the Martian. "We have listened to your broadcasts, learned your languages. We know that you have seen our ships, our flying saucers, and that you have decided, long since, that they have been the product either of optical illusion or of imagination.

"But I am failing in my duties as host. Our air, I assure you, is breathable."

"Micro-organisms?" asked Boyle.

"No harmful ones, I assure you..."

"Hemmings, you fool! Keep that helmet on!"

"Too late, Captain."

The journalist stood bare-headed, breathing the fresh air in great gulps. He saw that others of the party had followed his example. Boyle himself, although he was the last to do so, removed his own helmet.

"You will come with us to the city," said the Martian.

"There is an injured man aboard the rocket," said Boyle.

"We will send our doctors to assist yours. But come."

"All right," said Boyle. He talked into his own helmet phone, appraising the ship's Doctor of the situation. He motioned his men towards the flying saucer. One by one they entered the shining ma-

chine—chemist, physicist, Communications Expert, Engineer, Archaeologist, Rocket Pilot, Journalist, and last of all, Boyle, the Astronomer-Captain. *All*, thought Hemmings, *experts in their fields. All but me.*

IT WAS surprisingly roomy inside the saucer. There was a deep, comfortable settee, following the curvature of the shell. In the centre of the machine was a sphere of some transparent material, inside which sat the pilot. His long fingers—*his?* wondered Hemmings, *his—or its* flickered over a bank of controls. With a barely perceptible motion the saucer rose, tilting slightly as it flew. Through big ports in its bottom the Earthmen could see the canal, the stunted, olive green vegetation, the red and orange and brown desert. Then there were streets and buildings and, at last, a wide square whose paved surface rose rapidly to meet them. The saucer grounded as silently as it had taken off, as silently as it had flown.

The door opened, the ramp slid out, grated slightly on the flagstones. Preceded by the Martians the Earthmen stepped out into the square, looked around them at the towering buildings, at the crowds of nude, apparently

sexless natives who stared back at them. There were children among them, if size were any criterion, children and adolescents.

"Come," said the Martian who had first greeted them. "The Grand Council of Scientists awaits you."

IT HAD been decided Hemmings, one of the most boring afternoons of his journalistic career. The Martian scientists were old and stodgy, in spite of the hairlessness of their heads and faces contriving to convey the impression of long grey beards. It was as boring as Boyle's chess games had been. It had been, in fact, remarkably like a chess game, expert pitted against expert, specialist against specialist, each avid for the other's knowledge but neither anxious to divulge too much of what he himself knew.

The Martian's acquaintance-ship with Terran affairs was—patchy. Through their monitoring of Earthly broadcasts they had learned a considerable amount, but there were surprising gaps in their knowledge. There was, too, considerable distortion.

"We have," explained Boyle, "a class of person whose function it is to gather and to disseminate news. Unluckily these journalists, as we call them,

are apt to place sensation before accuracy. . . "

"We left it to *you*," said Hemmings, "to tell the world that Mars had no intelligent life."

The astronomer ignored him, was soon deep in a discussion concerning the trans-Plutonian planet which, it was divulged, had been visited once by a Martian ship.

*This*, thought Hemmings, *is news, I suppose*. He made a few dejected squiggles in his notebook.

WELDON, sitting next to Hemmings on the long settee, fidgetted. He said, "I've had a basinful of this. Astronomy. Physics, Chemistry. Social Structure—all I want is a chance to pilot one of their flying saucers. Don't suppose you've got much joy out of it, have you?"

"No," said Hemmings.

"And this damned accent of theirs. It annoys me. Worse than Brooklyn." He contrived to squeak, in a falsetto whisper. "Me little pit hin lays penk iggs. . ."

Hemmings giggled, then noticed that two of the Martians were looking curiously in his direction. He decided to change the subject, stared at the device on the opposite wall. "Wonder if that thing's a clock. . . That horizontal

bar has moved way down the scale since we've been here."

"Funny that they should have a twenty four day same as us," said the Pilot. "But theirs is logical. Twelve toes, twelve fingers. . ."

"Never mind the days," said Hemmings. "How do they spend their nights?"

The two men were suddenly aware of the silence. They looked up, saw that Boyle was glaring at them, that the other Earth scientists were looking at them disapprovingly, that the Martians were regarding them with what may have been a flicker of sympathy.

"I would suggest," said the Captain icily, "that you gentlemen defer your private conference to some later date. Perhaps," and his voice dripped sarcasm, "our Mr. Hemmings has a question that *he* would like to ask our host."

HEMMINGS got to his feet. "Perhaps I have!" he shouted.

He strode to the most grave, the most senior, by his appearance, of the Martians. He stood with his notebook in his hand, his pencil ready. He was furious—with Boyle, with himself, with these absurdly neuter otherworldlings.

"Tell me," he demanded, speaking loudly and clearly.

"tell me—what do you people do about sex?"

He heard Boyle gasp, sensed the embarrassment that he had caused the Martians. The one whom he had questioned flushed and looked away from the journalist, stared at the wall.

"You must think that we are very poor hosts," said the scientist at last, in his almost faultless, faintly accented English. His face, as he turned to

Hemmings, seemed troubled.

"And you can tell that to your lettle, pit, penk hin..." whispered Weldon audibly.

"*Weldon!*" snapped Boyle..

"You must think that we are very poor hosts," said the Martian again, glancing at the wall as he spoke.

"Well, what *do* you do about sex?"

"That," said the native, "is when we usually have supper."