

SUPER-SCIENCE FICTION

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BRIGHT FLOWERS OF MARS

by CURTIS W. CASEWITT

All his life he'd been an explorer, and now he was to be the first man to explore Mars. His whole heart and mind were set on the landing. He would soon be there!

MARS glowed like a copper penny on his magniscreen when something seared the back of his neck and struck his spine. He blacked out, but the next instant, he was awake again, his ears filled with the deafening blast of the meteorites. He didn't panic. He was an explorer, and the unforeseen was his business.

He turned his head and saw the holes behind him. *A big one*, he thought. *Like a fist*, and two pin-sized one. The projectiles had pierced the meteor bumper, roared through the hull, the glass wool, the inner skin, shooting out on the starboard side of the ship.

He was alone in the control cabin, alone in space. He felt no fear, only indignation. Air tore out of his nose and mouth, as if from balloons. His lungs were afire. The pain was hell.

He'd been trained for emergencies, and he knew that the pressurized capsule would keep him alive until he'd plugged the holes. He pushed the button for the capsule. Nothing happened. His contour chair didn't straighten; the overhead cylinder didn't budge. Were the motors out? He tried to see the control panel, but his vision blurred. He could merely make out the green alarm gas streaking toward the holes. The self-

sealer hadn't worked. *Too much force, those mets*, he thought.

The air was hissing out of the ship. He knew that pressure would drop rapidly. He'd have thirty seconds to patch the gaps, one minute at the most.

He had a special gun for this job, like a stapler, shooting suction pads. The gun hung overhead, inside the capsule, its barrel sticking out of the metal. If the capsule had come down as it was supposed to, he could've pushed the gun's trigger from the inside. Now he'd have to get up and jerk it out of the cylinder. He tried to rise. He couldn't. He seemed pinned to the contour chair. His legs wouldn't respond. His breath came in short, tortured gasps.

He had another ten seconds. His hands gripped the armrests and he heaved himself to his feet. But he couldn't stand, and his knees buckled. He crashed to the cabin floor. His spine was agony, and he suddenly knew that he was paralyzed from the waist down. The gun was at a maddening distance above him.

"Powers," said the radio, "What's wrong? We heard the detonation."

"Still in one piece," Powers said. He was astonished that he could speak. *Next time better watch your voice*, he thought. *Make it firmer. None of their business what you're going through.*

He lay on his stomach now air aperture. The pumps were pushing the oxygen-helium pushing the oxygen-helium mixture out of the other compartments into the control cabin. This new supply would give him another minute—or two? If he could suck up enough air, he might pull himself up toward the sealing gun.

He took a deep breath at the air-feed and grabbed the contour chair. But he had no strength at all now. He dropped back.

HE was trained in space medicine and he knew what was in store for him. Death by explosive decompression. Shortly, the ship's compartments would be drained of air. His lungs would then cease functioning. The last

oxygen would leave his arteries, his tissues. Helium was better than nitrogen, of course. Helium delayed and diminished the boiling of blood.

"How are you, Powers?"

"Ready for the kettle."

"What did you say?"

He didn't answer. For an instant, his lips wouldn't work. Hammers pounded into his ears. He saw his red hair, his red beard grotesquely reflected from the chromium. His taut lean face appeared fat, distorted. Sweat was rolling down his cheeks in torrents.

"What's the matter, Powers? Answer us! Are you hurt?"

"Deeply," he said. "My pride—"

Ah, yes, he thought. His pride. It was shot to the devil. No photos of him on Mars. His mouth gulped at the air-feed. Shifting his shoulders, he allowed himself another glimpse at the screen. It bobbed like unhinged blackboard, with Mars the size of a tangerine. Presently, the picture was gone. A grey river swirled in front of his eyes. His lids stung. *If I could only get up*, he thought.

"Powers! Where are you?"

"On my way," he mumbled. "To Mars!"

To Mars! To Mars! He'd dreamed of it since the sixties, after the unmanned rockets had circled the moon. He'd been a kid then, tiptoeing about his parents' farm yard in his pajamas. He'd often stood outside at midnight, his feet bare, his eyes glued to the sky. Their farm was high up in the Rocky Mountains, and the altitude, the thin atmosphere made the stars shine sharply. He'd gotten to know the Milky Way, the North Star, and the planets. By the time he was ten, he'd learned everything about the planets, how hot it was on Mercury, how cold on the moon, and about Jupiter's storm and about Mars'—

"Listen," rasped the radio voice. "Can you hear us?"

He tried to answer. But just then, his lungs were being ripped from his chest. *Last air gone*, he thought. *Compartments all empty. Pumps useless*. He shoved his mouth against the grill of the air-feed, wriggling like a carp in a net. *This is it, Powers, your time is up!*

He was furious at destiny.

Of course he'd explored all of his own planet: the Amazons, the Andes, the last unknown spots of Africa and Australia. He'd hacked his way through the jungles of Cambodia, and climbed Nanga Parbat. He should be satisfied, really. His bearded portrait hung in class rooms; his picture was on walls of the best clubs. David Powers, with a new species of edelweiss from Austria's Grossglockner mountain. David Powers, with Monarch butterfly in Brazil. With coral snake in Panama. In ionosphere, testing a rocket. In Exosphere. *But damn it all, his mind cried. I'm not ready for death. There's still Mars!*

The operator kept babbling into his ear-phones. But he couldn't bear now. He rocked through a painful darkness, all throbs and stabs, with blisters under his skin, with foam in his heart. He was dying.

"Powers! Powers!"

NOW he seemed to be alive again, breathing freely. He had the sealing gun his hand. He didn't know how it got there. His elbows were propped on the floor, and he could feel

the bulge of his biceps.

He was filled with wonder at his recovery. He fired his weapon at the starboard-side of the hull. The patch flapped noisily over the holes, liquid rubber splashing across the rim, hardening. He shifted the gun toward the port-side, and squeezed the trigger. Sealed, too. Sweet odor. The green alarm gas petered out. There seemed to be plenty of air. He took deep, delighted breaths. He was safe.

Oh God, he thought. Thank you. Thank you! So, after all, the journey hadn't been in vain. The months in the ship, the decade of preparations. For ten years, he'd led the life of a monk, studying astro-gation, rocketry, geophysics; he'd dug deeper into his own field: botany. He remembered the tests for the trip: superhuman endurance, claustrophobia, irritability, acceleration, confinement. He'd flown every winged craft until they trusted him with the supersonic F-456's and the rocket.

"Come in, Powers."

"I'm in." He felt numb as though he was just emerging from a knockout. He no long-

er lay on the floor. He was sitting in the contour chair. He couldn't make out the figures on his instruments. He bent close to the panel, but the numbers and the needles danced crazily in front of his pupils.

"Your ship hasn't moved, Powers!"

"Moving," he said. "Speed of sound. Mars orbit straight ahead!"

He was puzzled that he could see the planet distinctly: a large orange with green-blue patches and a network of geometrical lines. The texture was orange-like, too, all gleaming pores. "The surface is spread with butter," he said.

"What was that?"

"Most enjoyable." He leaned forward. Black arrows shot across his retinas. Then his sight cleared again. "There's the *Elysium*," he cried. "*Eden*. *Cydonia*. *Nerigos*."

Exhilaration tugged at him. Now, he thought. The most wonderful part. The landing. Years of preparation for this, too. He circled the planet three times, then shifted into automatic. He knew that the radar altimeter would feed informa-

tion to the electronic computer, thus controlling the motors.

It went smoothly. Soon, the planet tilted in front of his screen. He yanked out the hand-telescope. Oh, how magnificent it all was! How he could see every mile! A lifetime's expectation was melting in his eyes: two polar caps. then *Hellas*, *Tempe*, *Arcaëia*. Now the straight lines. the angles of blue-green. Not canals, just as he had anticipated. But fauna.

"Powers," said the voice in his head-phones. "How are you?"

He didn't answer. He was crying.

"We're sure now. It was a meteor shower. But you must have plugged the holes."

He put down the head-pieces. He was self-sufficient. He didn't have share to joys of exploration. Not yet. Three thousand miles an hour, two, one, five hundred, down, down, rockets blazing, fins descending first.

HE made it like a feather. He pushed the air-lock button and stepped out. The agony in his spine, in his lungs

were gone. He'd never felt better in his life. The new gravity billowed him down the ladder.

"Powers," said the operator.

He couldn't understand how the radio pursued him. He'd left the head-phones in his ship.

"The gun worked? You plugged them, didn't you?"

"Plugged what?"

"The holes."

"There are no holes on Mars," Powers said. "Mars is all flowers."

They stretched in a long, blue line, like corn flowers. He kneeled down to touch the short, blue stems, the tiny, perfectly rounded petals, to smell the soft, discreet scent. The latin name of these beauties flashed through his brain, and for an instant he wanted to tease the operator, speaking in latin. But the beauty of the scene overwhelmed him, and Powers could no longer speak.

Far away, beneath the pink-colored, fleazy clouds he could see the hills rise, the color of apricots. Tongues of light now played on those hills, now on the mossy mounds to the East, now on the unending lines of

flowers in front of him. He found himself running recklessly beside the field. Oh, yes, he must take moving pictures and collect samples. He had a speakaphone in the ship, to dictate his report. And he must fetch his testing equipment, too.

He stopped, his knees weak from the exertion. *Rest a little*, he told himself. The cool Martian wind touched his face. There was dew on the blue petals, and he let the pearls run down his fingers.

Through the field, he noticed the needle-shaped nose of his ship. He listened to its angry contractions. *Cooling*, he thought. He began to shiver, too. He wanted to rise, and for the first time, he was pinned down again. Why the pressure in his ear drums? The vice pinching his temples? And this awful pain in his chest? *Of course*, he decided. *Lungs acting up once more. Should've taken the oxy suit.*

He began to writhe among the flowers, wondering how he could have rushed out of the airlock without protection. This was mad, mad. Once more he was dying.

The ear-phones sputtered on the cabin floor. Strange that he heard the voice at this distance. "We're dispatching the next ship."

"There is no need to," Powers said. "I'm on Mars." Couldn't they be patient? He'd at destination, wasn't he?

recover in a moment. He was

"We'll send the ship."

"Oh, hell," he said, his lungs wracked by a last torture, "Send a fleet!"

"One ship."

It arrived nine months later

to find his rocket floating about the vacuum of space, its engines punctured, its cabin at zero gravity. Powers was stretched out in the contour chair, his spine split open by a meteorite. His head rested in the direction of the magniscreen. The explorer's eyes were shut tight in a smile; his mouth curved upwards, and his blistered hands were open, the sensitive palms down, as if he were still caressing the Martian flowers.

THE END

