

**10c**  
**ASTONISHING**  
**STORIES**  
**10 STORIES 10c**

VOL. 3

SEPTEMBER, 1941

NO. 1

★ ★ NOVELETTES ★ ★

- MARS-TUBE**.....by S. D. Gottesman 10  
 The war which had wiped out the civilization of Mars had been caused by a tragic mistake—but a justified one!
- RADIATION TRAP**.....by Harry Walton 90  
 Toroga, the planet of Sirius, was crude and harsh—but a strong, determined man could make of it what he wished!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ STORIES ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

- FAREWELL TO FUZZIES**.....by Henry Hasse 29  
 The lives of the alien creatures meant more to Wilson than his own!
- SUPER-NEUTRON**.....by Isaac Asimov 36  
 The chief liar of the Ananias Society was a man who told the truth!
- THE TREE OF LIFE**.....by Paul Edmonds 44  
 The Tree was a man-eater—but not an eater of flesh!
- INVENT OR DIE!**.....by R. R. Winterbotham 55  
 Inventors were well rewarded on Venus—with the gift of death!
- PIN THE MEDALS ON POE**.....by Anton Reeds 61  
 A long-dead writer solved the most puzzling crime of the 21st Century.
- FACTORY IN THE SKY**.....by Basil E. Wells 68  
 Tomorrow's wars will be fought with production, not guns—to the death!
- THE PLAGUE FROM TOMORROW**...by Frank Belknap Long 75  
 The malaria was not the ordinary type—it was much farther evolved!
- SOLAR PLEXUS**.....by James Blish 84  
 No one save a helpless prisoner was in the strange ship—yet it flew!

**SPECIAL FEATURES**

- FANTASY REVIEWS**..... 6
- TALES TO COME**..... 67
- EDITORAMBLINGS**..... 83
- VIEWPOINTS**..... 106

ALL STORIES NEW—NEXT ISSUE ON SALE SEPT. 25

Published bi-monthly by Fictionera, Inc., 2250 Grue Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 210 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y. Entered as second class matter January 11, 1940, at the post office at Chicago, Illinois, under the act of March 3, 1879. Copyright 1941 by Fictionera, Inc. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. All rights reserved under Pan American copyright convention. Bi-monthly price per copy 10c; 6 issues, \$6.00. Printed in the U.S.A.

# MARS-TUBE

The dead Martians had made no distinction between fact and fiction in their writings. So naturally, Earth's archaeologists took it for granted that some of the impossible things they mentioned were fictitious. . . .

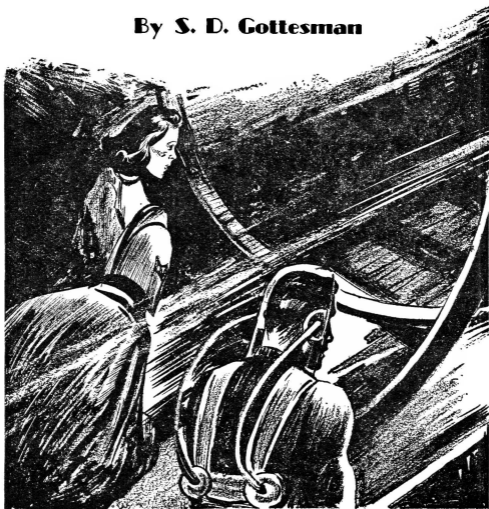
## CHAPTER ONE

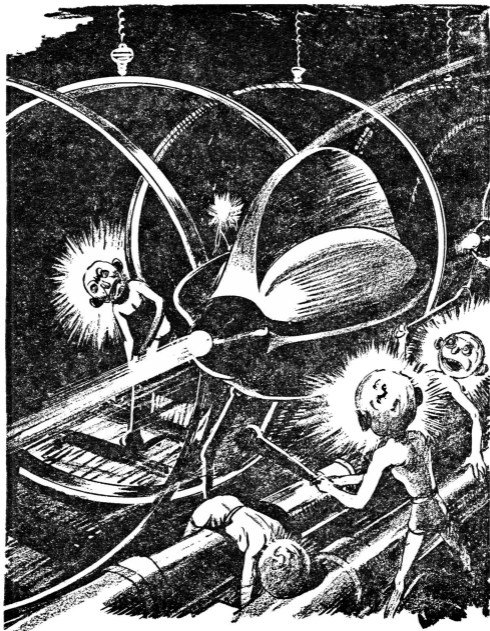
*After Armageddon*

**R**AY STANTON set his jaw as he stared at the molded lead seal on the museum door. Slowly he deciphered its inscription, his tongue stumbling over the unfamiliar sibilants

of the Martian language as he read it aloud before translating. "To the—strangers from the third planet—who have won their—bitter—triumph—we of Mars charge you—not to wantonly destroy—that which you will find—within this door . . . Our codified learning—may serve you—better than we ourselves—might have done."

**By S. D. Gottesman**





Stanton was ashamed of being an Earthman as he read this soft indictment. "Pathetic," he whispered. "Those poor damned people"

His companion, a slight, dark-haired girl who seemed out of place in the first exploratory expedition to visit Mars after the decades-long war that had annihilated its population, nodded in agreement.

"The war was a crying shame," she confirmed. "But mourning the dead won't bring them back. To work, Stanton!"

Stanton shook his head dolefully, but copied the seal's inscription into his voluminous black archaeologist's notebook. Then he tore off the seal and tentatively pushed the door. It swung open easily, and an automatic switch snapped on the

hidden lights as the two people entered.

Both Stanton and Annamarie Hudgins, the girl librarian of the expedition, had seen many marvels in their wanderings over and under the red planet, for every secret place was open to their eyes. But as the lights slowly blossomed over the colossal hall of the library, he staggered back in amazement that so much stately glory could be built into one room.

The synthetic slabs of gem-like rose crystal that the Martians had reserved for their most awesome sanctuaries were here flashing from every wall and article of furnishing, winking with soft ruby lights. One of the typically Martian ramps led up in a gentle curve from their left. The practical Annamarie at once commenced to mount it, heading for the reading-rooms that would be found above. Stanton followed more slowly, pausing to examine the symbolic ornamentation on the walls.

"We must have guessed right, Annamarie," he observed, catching up with her. "This one's the central museum-library for sure. Take a look at the wall-motif."

Annamarie glanced at a panel just ahead, a bas-relief done in the rose crystal. "Because of the *ultima* symbol, you mean?"

"Yes, and because—well, look." The room in which they found themselves was less noble than the other, but considerably more practical. It was of radial design, corridors converging like the spokes of a wheel on a focal point where they stood. Inset in the floor—they were almost standing on it—was the *ultima* symbol, the quadruple linked circles which indicated pre-eminence. Stanton peered down a corridor lined with racks of wire spools. He picked up a spool and stared at its title-tag.

"Where do you suppose we ought to start?" he asked.

"Anywhere at all," Annamarie replied.

"We've got lots of time, and no way of knowing what to look for. What's the one in your hands?"

"It seems to say, 'The Under-Eaters'—whatever that may mean." Stanton juggled the tiny "book" undecidedly. "That phrase seems familiar somehow. What is it?"

"Couldn't say. Put it in the scanner and we'll find out." Stanton obeyed, pulling a tiny reading-machine from its cubicle. The delicacy with which Stanton threaded the fragile wire into its proper receptacle was something to watch. The party had ruined a hundred spools of records before they'd learned how to adjust the scanners, and Stanton had learned caution.

Stanton and his companion leaned back against the book-racks and watched the fluorescent screen of the scanner. A touch of the lever started its operation. There was a soundless flare of light on the screen as the wire made contact with the scanning apparatus, then the screen filled with the curious wavering peak-and-valley writing of the Martian graphic language.

**B**Y THE end of the third "chapter" the title of the book was still almost as cryptic as ever. A sort of preface had indicated that "Under-Eaters" was a name applied to a race of underground demons who feasted on the flesh of living Martians. Whether these really existed or not Stanton had no way of telling. The Martians had made no literary distinction between fact and fiction, as far as could be learned. It had been their opinion that anything except pure thought-transference was only approximately true, and that it would be useless to distinguish between an intentional and an unintentional falsehood.

But the title had no bearing on the context of the book, which was a kind of pseudo-history with heavily allusive

passages. It treated of the Earth-Mars war; seemingly it had been published only a few months before the abrupt end to hostilities. One rather tragic passage, so Stanton thought, read:

"A special meeting of the tactical council was called on (an untranslatable date) to discuss the so-called new disease on which the attention of the enemy forces has been concentrating. This was argued against by (a high official) who demonstrated conclusively that the Martian intellect was immune to nervous diseases of any foreign order, due to its high development through telepathy as cultivated for (an untranslatable number of) generations. A minority report submitted that this very development itself would render the Martian intellect more liable to succumb to unusual strain. (A medical authority) suggested that certain forms of insanity were contagious by means of telepathy, and that the enemy-spread disease might be of that type."

Stanton cursed softly: "Damn Moriarty and his rocket ship. Damn Sweeney for getting killed and damn and double-damn the World Congress for declaring war on Mars!" He felt like a murderer, though he knew he was no more than a slightly pacifistic young exploring archaeologist. Annamarie nodded sympathetically but pointed at the screen. Stanton looked again and his imprecations were forgotten as he brought his mind to the problem of translating another of the strangely referential passages:

"At this time the Under-Eaters launched a bombing campaign on several of the underground cities. A number of subterranean caves were linked with the surface through explosion craters and many of the sinister creations fumbled their way to the surface. A corps of technologists prepared to re-seal the tunnels of the Revived, which was done with complete success, save only in (an untranslatable place-name) where several

Under-Eaters managed to wreak great havoc before being slain or driven back to their tunnels. The ravages of the Twice-Born, however, were trivial compared to the deaths resulting from the mind diseases fostered by the flying ships of the Under-Eaters, which were at this time. . . ."

The archaeologist frowned. There it was again. Part of the time "Under Eaters" obviously referred to the Earthmen, the rest of the time it equally obviously did not. The text would limp along in styleless, concise prose and then in would break an obscure reference to the "Creations" or "Twice-Born" or "Raging Glows."

"Fairy tales for the kiddies," said Annamarie Hudgins, snapping off the scanner.

Stanton replied indirectly: "Put it in the knapsack. I want to take it back and show it to some of the others. Maybe they can tell me what it means." He swept a handful of other reading-bobbins at random into the knapsack, snapped it shut, and straightened. "Lead on, Mac-Hudgins," he said.

OF THE many wonders of the red planet, the one that the exploration party had come to appreciate most was the colossal system of subways which connected each of the underground cities of Mars.

With absolute precision the web of tunnels and gliding cars still functioned, and would continue to do so until the central controls were found by some Earthman and the vast propulsive mechanisms turned off.

The Mars-tube was electrostatic in principle. The perfectly round tunnels through which the subway sped were studded with hoops of charged metal. The analysis of the metal hoops and the generators for the propulsive force had been beyond Earthly science, at least as rep-

resented by the understaffed exploring party.

Through these hoops sped the single-car trains of the Mars-tube, every four minutes through every hour of the long Martian day. The electrostatic emanations from the hoops held the cars nicely balanced against the pull of gravity; save only when they stopped for the stations, the cars never touched anything more substantial than a puff of air. The average speed of the subway, stops not included, was upwards of five hundred miles an hour. There were no windows in the cars, for there would have been nothing to see through them but the endless tunnel wall slipping smoothly and silently by.

So easy was the completely automatic operation that the men from Earth could scarcely tell when the car was in motion, except by the signal panel that dominated one end of the car with its blinking lights and numerals.

Stanton led Annamarie to a station with ease and assurance. There was only one meaning to the tear-drop-shaped guide signs of a unique orange color that were all over Mars. Follow the point of a sign like that anywhere on Mars and you'd find yourself at a Mars-Tube station—or what passed for one.

Since there was only one door to a car, and that opened automatically whenever the car stopped at a station, there were no platforms. Just a smaller or larger anteroom with a door also opening automatically, meeting the door of the tube-car.

A train eventually slid in, and Stanton ushered Annamarie through the sliding doors. They swung themselves gently on to one of the excessively broad seats and immediately opened their notebooks. Each seat had been built for a single Martian, but accommodated two Terrestrials with room to spare.

At perhaps the third station, Anna-

marie, pondering the implications of a passage in the notebook, looked up for an abstracted second—and froze. "Ray," she whispered in a strangled tone. "When did that come in?"

Stanton darted a glance at the forward section of the car, which they had ignored when entering. Something—something animate—was sitting there, quite stolidly ignoring the Terrestrials. "A Martian" he whispered to himself, his throat dry.

It had the enormous chest and hips, the waspish waist and the coarse, bristly hairs of the Martians. But the Martians were all dead—

"It's only a robot" he cried more loudly than was necessary, swallowing as he spoke. "Haven't you seen enough of them to know what they look like by now?"

"What's it doing here?" gulped Annamarie, not over the fright.

As though it were about to answer her question itself, the thing's metallic head turned, and its blinking eyes swept incuriously over the humans. For a long second it stared, then the dull glow within its eye-sockets faded, and the head turned again to the front. The two had not set off any system of reflexes in the creature.

"I never saw one of them in the subway before," said Annamarie, passing a damp hand over her sweating brow.

Stanton was glaring at the signal panel that dominated the front of the car. "I know why, too," he said. "I'm not as good a linguist as I thought I was—not even as good as I ought to be. We're on the wrong train—I read the code-symbol wrong."

Annamarie giggled. "Then what shall we do—see where this takes us or go back?"

"Get out and go back, of course," grumbled Stanton, rising and dragging her to her feet.

The car was slowing again for another station. They could get out, emerge to

the surface, cross over, and take the return train to the library.

Only the robot wouldn't let them.

For as the car was slowing, the robot rose to its feet and stalked over to the door. "What's up?" Stanton whispered in a thin, nervous voice. Annamarie prudently got behind him.

"We're getting out here anyhow," she said. "Maybe it won't follow us."

But they didn't get out. For when the car had stopped, and the door relays clicked, the robot shouldered the humans aside and stepped to the door.

But instead of exiting himself, the robot grasped the edge of the door in his steel tentacles, clutched it with all his metal muscles straining, and held it shut!

"**D**AMNED if I can understand it," said Stanton. "It was the most uncanny thing—it held the door completely and totally shut there, but it let us get out as peaceful as playmates at the next stop. We crossed over to come back, and while we were waiting for a return car I had time to dope out the station number. It was seventh from the end of the line, and the branch was new to me. So we took the return car back to the museum. The same thing happened on the trip back—robot in the car; door held shut."

"Go on," said Ogden Josey, Roentgenologist of the expedition. "What happened then?"

"Oh. We just went back to the library, took a different car, and here we are."

"Interesting," said Josey. "Only I don't believe it a bit."

"No?" Annamarie interrupted, her eyes narrowing. "Want to take a look?"

"Sure."

"How about tomorrow morning?"

"Fine," said Josey. "You can't scare me. Now how about dinner?"

He marched into the mess hall of the expedition base, a huge rotunda-like af-

fair that might have been designed for anything by the Martians, but was given its present capacity by the explorers because it contained tables and chairs enough for a regiment. Stanton and Annamarie lagged behind.

"What do you plan to do tomorrow?" Stanton inquired. "I don't see the point of taking Josey with us when we go to look the situation over again."

"He'll come in handy," Annamarie promised. "He's a good shot."

"A good shot?" squawked Stanton. "What do you expect we'll have to shoot at?"

But Annamarie was already inside the building.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Descent Into Danger

"**H**HEY, sand-man!" hissed Annamarie. "Be right there," sleepily said Stanton. "This is the strangest date I ever had." He appeared a moment later dressed in the roughest kind of exploring kit.

The girl raised her brows. "Expect to go mountain-climbing?" she asked.

"I had a hunch," he said amiably.

"So?" she commented. "I get them too. One of them is that Josey is still asleep. Go rout him out."

Stanton grinned and disappeared into Josey's cubicle, emerging with him a few moments later. "He was sleeping in his clothes," Stanton explained. "Filthy habit."

"Never mind that. Are we all heeled?" Annamarie proudly displayed her own pearl-handled pipsqueak of a mild paralyzer. Josey produced a heat-pistol, while Stanton patted the holster of his five-pound blaster.

"Okay then. We're off."

The Martian subway service was excellent every hour of the day. Despite

the earliness, the trip to the central museum station took no more time than usual—a matter of minutes.

Stanton stared around for a second to get his bearings, then pointed. "The station we want is over there—just beyond the large pink monolith. Let's go."

The first train in was the one they wanted. They stepped into it, Josey leaping over the threshold like a startled fawn. Nervously he explained, "I never know when one of those things is going to snap shut on my—my cape." He yelped shrilly: "What's that?"

"Ah, I see the robots rise early," said Annamarie, seating herself as the train moved off. "Don't look so disturbed, Josey—we told you one would be here, even if you didn't believe us."

"We have just time for a spot of breakfast before things should happen," announced Stanton, drawing canisters from a pouch on his belt. "Here—one for each of us." They were filled with a syrup that the members of the Earth expedition carried on trips such as this—concentrated amino acids, fibrinogen, minerals and vitamins, all in a sugar solution.

Annamarie Hudgins shuddered as she downed the sticky stuff, then lit a cigarette. As the lighter flared the robot turned his head to precisely the angle required to centre and focus its eyes on the flame, then eye-fronted again.

"Attracted by light and motion," Stanton advised scientifically. "Stop trembling, Josey, there's worse to come. Say, is this the station?"

"It is," said Annamarie. Now watch. These robots function smoothly and fast—don't miss anything."

The metal monster, with a minimum of waste motion, was doing just that. It had clumped over to the door; its monstrous appendages were fighting the relays that were to drive the door open, and the robot was winning. The robots were

built to win—powerful, even by Earthly standards.

Stanton rubbed his hands briskly and tackled the robot, shoving hard. The girl laughed sharply. He turned, his face showing injury. "Suppose you help," he suggested with some anger. "I can't move this by myself."

"All right—heave!" gasped the girl, complying.

"Ho!" added Josey unexpectedly, adding his weight.

"No use," said Stanton. "No use at all. We couldn't move this thing in seven million years." He wiped his brow. The train started, then picked up speed. All three were thrown back as the robot carelessly nudged them out of its way as it returned to its seat.

"I think," said Josey abruptly, "we'd better go back by the return car and see about the other side of the station."

"No use," said the girl. "There's a robot on the return too."

"Then let's walk back," urged Josey. By which time the car had stopped at the next station. "Come on," said Josey, stepping through the door with a suspicious glance at the robot.

"No harm in trying," mused Stanton as he followed with the girl. "Can't be more than twenty miles."

"And that's easier than twenty Earth miles," cried Annamarie. "Let's go"

"I don't know what good it will do, though," remarked Stanton, ever the pessimist. "These Martians were thorough. There's probably a robot at every entrance to the station, blocking the way. If they haven't sealed up the entrances entirely."

**T**HERE was no robot at the station, they discovered several hours and about eight miles later. But the entrance to the station that was so thoroughly and mysteriously guarded was—no more. Each entrance was sealed; only the glow-



ing teardrop pointers remained to show where the entrance had been.

"Well, what do we do now?" groaned Josey, rubbing an aching thigh.

Stanton did not answer directly. "Will you look at that," he marvelled, indicating the surrounding terrain. The paved ground beneath them was seamed with cracks. The infinitely tough construction concrete of the Martians was billowed and rippled, stuck through with jagged ends of metal reinforcing I-beams. The whole scene gave the appearance of total devastation—as though a natural catastrophe had come along and wrecked the city first; then the survivors of the disaster, petulantly, had turned their most potent forces on what was left in sheer disheartenment.

"Must have been bombs," suggested the girl.

"Must have been," agreed the archaeologist. "Bombs and guns and force beams and Earth—Marsquakes, too."

"You didn't answer his question, Ray," reminded Annamarie. "He said: 'What do we do now?'"

"I was just thinking about it," he said, eyeing one of the monolithic buildings speculatively. "Is your Martian as good as mine? See if you can make out what that says."

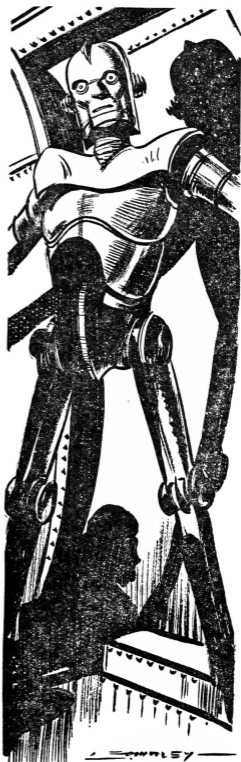
"That" was a code-symbol over the sole door to the huge edifice. "I give up," said Annamarie with irritation. "What does it say."

"Powerhouse, I think."

"Powerhouse? Powerhouse for what? All the energy for lighting and heating the city comes from the sun, through the mirrors up on the surface. The only thing they need power for down here—the only thing—Say!"

"That's right," grinned Stanton. "It must be for the Mars-Tube. Do you suppose we could find a way of getting from that building into the station?"

"There's only one way to find out,"



Annamarie parroted, looking for Josey for confirmation. But Josey was no longer around. He was at the door to the building, showing it open. The others hastened after him.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Pursuit

"DON'T wiggle, Annamarie," whispered Josey plaintively. "You'll fall on me."

"Shut up," she answered tersely; "shut up and get out of my way." She swung herself down the Martian-sized manhole with space to spare. Dropping three feet or so from her hand-hold on the lip of the pit, she alighted easily. "Did I make much noise?" she asked.

"Oh, I think Krakatoa has been louder when it went off," Stanton replied bitterly. "But those things seem to be deaf."

The three stood perfectly still for a second, listening tensely for sounds of pursuit. They had stumbled into a nest of robots in the powerhouse, apparently left there by the thoughtful Martian race to prevent entrance to the mysteriously guarded subway station via this route. What was in that station that required so much privacy? Stanton wondered. Something so deadly dangerous that the advanced science of the Martians could not cope with it, but was forced to resort to quarantining the spot where it showed itself? Stanton didn't know the answers, but he was very quiet as a hidden upsurge of memory strove to assert itself. Something that had been in the bobbin-books . . . "The Under-Eaters". That was it. Had they anything to do with this robot *cordon sanitaire*?

The robots had not noticed them, for which all three were duly grateful. Ogden nudged the nearest to him—it happened to be Annamarie—and thrust out a bony

finger. "Is *that* what the Mars-Tube looks like from inside?" he hissed piercingly.

As their eyes became acclimated to the gloom—they dared use no lights—the others made out the lines of a series of hoops stretching out into blackness on either side ahead of them. No lights anywhere along the chain of rings; no sound coming from it.

"Maybe it's a deserted switch line, one that was abandoned. That's the way the Tube ought to look, all right, only with cars going along it," Stanton muttered.

"Hush!" it was Annamarie. "Would that be a car coming—from the left, way down?"

Nothing was visible, but there was the faintest of sighing sounds. As though an elevator car, cut loose from its cable, were dropping down its shaft far off there in the distance. "It sounds like a car," Stanton conceded. "What do you think, Og—Hey! Where's Josey?"

"He brushed me, going toward the Tube. Yes—there he is! See him? Bending over between those hoops!"

"We've got to get him out of there! Josey!" Stanton cried, forgetting about the robots in the light of this new danger. "Josey! Get out of the Tube! There's a train coming!"

The dimly visible figure of the Roentgenologist straightened and turned toward the others querulously. Then as the significance of that rapidly mounting *hiss-s-s-s* became clear to him, he leaped out of the tube, with a vast alacrity. A split second later the hiss had deepened to a high drone, and the bulk of a car shot past them, traveling eerily without visible support, clinging to and being pushed by the intangible fields of force that emanated from the metal hoops of the Tube.

Stanton reached Josey's form in a single bound. "What were you trying to do, imbecile?" he grated. "Make an early widow of your prospective fiancée?"

Josey shook off Stanton's grasp with

dignity. "I was merely trying to establish that that string of hoops was the Mars-Tube, by seeing if the power-leads were connected with the rings. It—uh, it was the Tube; that much is proven," he ended somewhat lamely.

"Brilliant man!" Stanton started to snarl, but Annamarie's voice halted him. It was a very small voice.

"You loud-mouths have been very successful in attracting the attention of those animated pile-drivers," she whispered with the very faintest of breaths. "If you will keep your lips zipped for the next little while maybe the robot that's staring at us over the rim of the pit will think we're turbo-generators or something and go away. Maybe!"

Josey swiveled his head up and gasped. "It's there—it's coming down!" he cried. "Let's leave here!"

THE three backed away toward the tube, slowly, watching the efforts of the machine-thing to descend the precipitous wall. It was having difficulties, and the three were beginning to feel a bit better, when—

Annamarie, turning her head to watch where she was going, saw and heard the cavalcade that was bearing down on them at the same time and screamed shrilly. "Good Lord—the cavalry!" she yelled. "Get out your guns!"

A string of a dozen huge, spider-shaped robots of a totally new design were charging down at them, running swiftly along the sides of the rings of the Tube, through the tunnel. They carried no weapons, but the three soon saw why,—from the ugly snouts of the egg-shaped bodies of the creatures protruded a black cone. A blinding flash came from the cone of the first of the new arrivals; the aim was bad, for overhead a section of the cement roof flared ghastly white and commenced to drip.

Annamarie had her useless paralyzer

out and firing before she realized its uselessness against metal beings with no nervous systems to paralyze. She hurled it at the nearest of the new robots in a highly futile gesture of rage.

But the two men had their more potent weapons out and firing, and were taking a toll of the spider-like monstrosities. Three or four of them were down, partially blocking the path of the oncoming others; another was missing all its metal legs along one side of its body, and two of the remainder showed evidence of the accuracy of the Earthmen's fire.

But the odds were still extreme, and the built-in blasters of the robots were coming uncomfortably close.

Stanton saw that, and shifted his tactics. Holstering his heavy blaster, he grabbed Annamarie and shoved her into the Mars-Tube, crying to Josey to follow. Josey came slowly after them, turning to fire again and again at the robots, but with little effect. A quick look at the charge-dial on the butt of his heat-gun showed why; the power was almost exhausted.

He shouted as much to Stanton. "I figured that would be happening—now we run!" Stanton cried back, and the three sped along the Mars-Tube, leaping the hoops as they came to them.

"What a time for a hurdle race!" gasped Annamarie, bounding over the rings, which were raised about a foot from the ground. "You'd think we would have known better than to investigate things that're supposed to be private."

"Save your breath for running," panted Josey. "Are they following us in here?"

Stanton swiveled his head to look, and a startled cry escaped him. "They're following us—but look!"

The other two slowed, then stopped running altogether and stared in wonder. One of the robots had charged into the Mars-Tube—and had been levitated! He

was swinging gently in the air, the long metal legs squirming fiercely, but not touching anything.

"How—?"

"They're metal!" Annamarie cried. "Don't you see—they're metal, and the hoops are charged. They must have some of the same metal as the Tube cars are made of in their construction—the force of the hoops acts on them too!"

That seemed to be the explanation. . . . "Then we're safe!" gasped Josey, staggering about, looking for a place to sit.

"Not by a long shot! Get moving again!" And Stanton set the example.

"You mean because they can still shoot at us?" Josey cried, following Stanton's dog-trot nonetheless. "But the can't aim the guns—they seem to be built in, only capable of shooting directly forward."

"Very true," gritted Stanton. "But have you forgotten that this subway is in use? According to my calculations, there should be another car along in about thirty seconds or less—and please notice, there isn't any by-path anymore. It stopped back a couple of hundred feet. If we get caught here by a car, we get mashed. So—unless you want to go back and sign an armistice with the robots? I thought not—so we better keep going. Fast!"

**T**HE three were lucky—very lucky. For just when it seemed certain that they would have to run on and on until the bullet-fast car overtook them, or go back and face the potent weapons of the guard robots, a narrow crevice appeared in the side of the tunnel-wall. The three bolted into it and slumped to the ground.

*CRASH!*

"What was that?" cried Annamarie.

"That," said Josey slowly, "was what happens to a robot when the fast express comes by. Just thank God it wasn't us."

Stanton poked his head gingerly into

the Mars-Tube and stared down. "Say," he muttered wonderingly, "when we wreck something we do it good. We've ripped out a whole section of the hoops—by proxy, of course. When the car hit the robot they were both smashed to atoms, and the pieces knocked out half a dozen of the suspension rings. I would say, off-hand, that this line has run its last train."

"Where do you suppose this crevice leads?" asked Annamarie, forgetting the damage that couldn't be undone.

"I don't know. The station ought to be around here somewhere—we were running toward it. Maybe this will lead us into the station if we follow it. If it doesn't, maybe we can drill a tunnel from here to the station with my blaster."

Drilling wasn't necessary. A few feet in, the scarcely passable crevice widened into a broad fissure, through which a faint light was visible. Exploration revealed that the faint light came from a wall-chart showing the positions and destinations of the trains. The chart was displaying the symbol of a Zeta train—the train that would never arrive.

"Very practical people, we are," Annamarie remarked with irony. "We didn't think to bring lights."

"We never needed them anywhere else on the planet—we can't be blamed too much. Anyway, the code-panel gives us a little light."

By the steady, dim red glow cast by the code-panel, the three could see the anteroom fairly clearly. It was disappointing. For all they could tell, there was no difference between this and any other station on the whole planet. But why all the secrecy? The dead Martians surely had a reason for leaving the guard-robots so thick and furious. But what was it?

Stanton pressed an ear to the wall of the anteroom. "Listen!" he snapped. "Do you hear—?"

"Yes," said the girl at length. "Scuffling noises—a sort of gurgling too, like

running water passing through pipes."

"Look there!" wailed Josey.

"Where?" asked the archaeologist naturally. The dark was impenetrable. Or was it? There was a faint glimmer of light, not a reflection from the code-panel, that shone through a continuation of the fissure. It came, not from a single source of light, but from several, eight or ten at least. The lights were bobbing up and down. "I'd swear they were walking!" marvelled Ray.

"Ray" shrieked the girl faintly. As the lights grew nearer, she could see what they were—pulsing domes of a purplish glow that ebbed and flowed in tides of dull light. The light seemed to shine from behind a sort of membrane, and the outer surfaces of the membrane were marked off with faces—terrible, savage faces, with carnivorous teeth projecting from mouths that were like ragged slashes edged in writhing red.

"Ray!" Annamarie cried again.

"Those lights—they're the luminous heads of living creatures!"

"God help us—you're right!" Stanton whispered. The patterns of what he had read in the bobbin-books began to form a whole in his mind. It all blended in—"Under-Eaters," "Fiends from Below," "Raging Glows." Those weirdly cryptic terms could mean nothing else but these creatures that were now approaching. And—"Good Lord!" Stanton ejaculated, feeling squeamishly sick. "Look at them—they look like human beings!"

**I**T WAS true. The resemblance was not great, but the oncoming creatures did have such typically Terrestrial features as hairless bodies, protruding noses, small ears, and so forth, and did not have the unmistakable hour-glass silhouette of the true Martians.

"Maybe that's why the Martians feared and distrusted the first Earthmen they saw. They thought we were related to

these—things!" Stanton said thoughtfully.

"Mooning over it won't help us now," snapped Annamarie. "What do we do to get away from them? They make me nervous!"

"We don't do anything to get away. What could we do? There's no place to go. We'll have to fight—get out your guns!"

"Guns!" sneered Josey. "What guns? Mine's practically empty, and Annamarie threw hers away!"

Stanton didn't answer, but looked as though a cannon-shell had struck him amidships. Grimly he drew out his blaster. "Then this one will have to do all of us," was all he said. "If only these accursed blasters weren't so unmanageable—there's at least an even chance that a bad shot will bring the roof down on us. Oh, well—I forgot to mention," he added casually, "that, according to the records, the reason that the true Martians didn't like these things was that they had the habit of *eating* their victims. Bearing that in mind, I trust you will not mind my chancing a sudden and unanimous burial for us all." He drew the blaster and carefully aimed it at the first of the oncoming group. He was already squeezing the trigger when Josey grabbed his arm. "Hold on, Ray!" Josey whispered. "Look what's coming."

The light-headed ones had stopped their inexorable trek toward the Terrestrials. They were bunched fearfully a few yards within the fissure, staring beyond the three humans, into the Mars-Tube.

Three of the spider-robots, the Tubetenders, were there. Evidently the destruction of one of their number, and the consequent demolition of several of the hoops, had short-circuited this section of the track so that they could enter it and walk along without fear.

There was a deadly silence that lasted for a matter of seconds. The three from

Earth cowered as silently as possible where they were, desirous of attracting absolutely no attention from either side. Then—Armageddon!

The three robots charged in, abruptly, lancing straight for the luminous-topped bipeds in the crevasse. Their metal legs stamped death at the relatively impotent organic creatures, trampling their bodies until they died. But the cave-dwellers had their methods of fighting too; each of them carried some sort of instrument, hard and heavy-ended, with which they wreaked havoc on the more delicate parts of the robots.

More and more "Raging Glows" appeared from the crevasse, and it seemed that the three robots, heavily outnumbered, would go down to a hard-fought but inevitable "death"—if that word could be applied to a thing whose only life was electromagnetic. Already there were better than a score of the strange bipeds in the cavern, and destruction of the metal creatures seemed imminent.

"Why don't the idiotic things use their guns?" Annamarie shuddered.

"Same reason I didn't—the whole roof might come down. Don't worry—they're doing all right. Here come some more of them."

True enough. From the Mars-Tube emerged a running bunch of the robots—ten or more of them. The slaughter was horrible—a carnage made even more unpleasant by the fact that the dimness of the cavern concealed most of the details. The fight was in comparative silence, broken only by the faint metallic clattering of the workings of the robots, and an occasional thin squeal from a crushed biped. The cave-dwellers seemed to have no vocal organs.

The robots were doing well enough even without guns. Their method was simply to trample and bash the internal organs of their opponents until the opponent had died. Then they would kick

the pulped corpse out of the way and proceed to the next.

The "Hot-Heads" had had enough. They broke and ran back down the tunnel from which they had come. The metal feet of the robots clattered on the rubble of the tunnel-floor as they pursued them at maximum speed. It took only seconds for the whole of the ghastly running fight to have traveled so far from the humans as to be out of sight and hearing. The only remnants to show it had ever existed were the mangled corpses of the cave-dwellers, and one or two wrecked robots.

Stanton peered after the battle to make sure it was gone. Then, mopping his brow, he slumped to a sitting position and emitted a vast "Whew!" of relief. "I have seldom been so sure I was about to become dead," he said pensively. "Divide and rule is what I always say—let your enemies fight it out among themselves. Well, what do we do now? My curiosity is sated—let's go back."

"That," said the girl sternly, "is the thing we are most not going to do. If we've come this far we can go a little farther. Let's go on down this tunnel and see what's there. It seems to branch off down farther: we can take the other route from that of the robots."

Josey sighed. "Oh, well," he murmured resignedly. "Always game, that's me. Let's travel."

"IT'S darker than I ever thought darkness could be, Ray," Annamarie said tautly. "And I just thought of something. How do we know *which* is the other route—the one the robots didn't take?"

"A typical question," snarled Stanton. "So you get a typical answer: I don't know. Or, to phrase it differently, we just have to put ourselves in the robots' place. If you were a robot, where would you go?"

"Home," Ogden answered immediate-

ly. "Home and to bed. But these robots took the tunnel we're in. So let's turn back and take the other one."

"How do you know?"

"Observation and deduction. I observed that I am standing in something warm and squishy, and I deduced that it is the corpse of a recent light-head."

"No point in taking the other tunnel, though," Annamarie's voice floated back. She had advanced a few steps and was hugging the tunnel wall. "There's an entrance to another tunnel here, and it slopes back the way we came. I'd say, off-hand, that the other tunnel is just an alternate route."

"Noise," said Stanton. "Listen."

There was a scrabbling, chittering, quite indescribable sound, and then another one. Suddenly terrific squalling noises broke the underground silence and the three ducked as they sensed something swooping down on them and gliding over their heads along the tunnel.

"What was that?" yelped Josey.

"A cat-fight, I think," said Stanton. "I could hear two distinct sets of vocables, and there were sounds of battle. Those things could fly, glide or jump—probably jump. I think they were a specialized form of tunnel life adapted to living, breeding, and fighting in a universe that was long, dark, and narrow. Highly specialized."

Annamarie giggled hysterically. Like the bread-and-butterfly that lived on weak tea with cream in it."

"Something like," Stanton agreed.

Hand in hand, they groped their way on through the utter blackness. Suddenly there was a grunt from Josey, on the extreme right. "Hold it!" he cried, withdrawing his hand to finger his damaged nose. "The tunnel seems to end here."

"Not end," said Annamarie. "Just turns to the left. And take a look at what's there!"

The men swerved and stared. For a

second no one spoke; the sudden new vista was too compelling for speech.

"RAY!" finally gasped the girl. "It's incredible! It's *incredible!*"

There wasn't a sound from the two men at her sides. They had rounded the final bend in the long tunnel and come out into the flood of light they had seen. The momentary brilliance staggered them and swung glowing spots before their eyes.

Then, as the effects of persistence of vision faded, they saw what the vista actually was. It was a great cavern, the hugest they'd ever seen on either planet—and by tremendous odds the most magnificent.

The walls were not of rock, it seemed, but of slabs of liquid fire—liquid fire which, their stunned eyes soon saw, was a natural inlay of incredible winking gems.

Opulence was the rule of this drusy cave. Not even so base a metal as silver could be seen here; gold was the basest available. Platinum, iridium, little pools of shimmering mercury dotted the jewel-studded floor of the place. Stalactites and stalagmites were purest rock-crystal.

Flames seemed to glow from behind the walls colored by the emerald, ruby, diamond, and topaz. "How can such a formation occur in nature?" Annamarie whispered. No one answered.

"There are more things in heaven and under it—" raptly misquoted Josey. Then, with a start, "What act's that from?"

It seemed to bring the others to. "Dunno," chorused the archeologist and the girl. Then, the glaze slowly vanishing from their eyes, they looked at each other.

"Well," breathed the girl.

In an abstracted voice, as though the vision of the jewels had never been seen, the girl asked, "How do you suppose the place is lighted?"

"Radioactivity," said Josey tersely. There seemed to be a tacit agreement—if one did not mention the gems neither would the others. "Radioactive minerals and maybe plants. All this is natural formation. Weird, of course, but here it is."

There was a feeble, piping sound in the cavern.

"Can this place harbor life?" asked Stanton in academic tones.

"Of course," said Josey, "any place can." The thin, shrill piping was a little louder, strangely distorted by echoes.

"Listen," said the girl urgently. "Do you hear what I hear?"

"Of course not" cried Stanton worriedly. "It's just my—I mean our imagination. I can't be hearing what I think I'm hearing."

Josey had pricked his ears up. "Calm down, both of you," he whispered. "If you two are crazy—so am I. That noise is something—somebody—singing Gilbert and Sullivan. 'A Wand'ring Minstrel, I, I believe the tune is.'"

"Yes," said Annamarie hysterically. "I always liked that number." Then she reeled back into Stanton's arms, sobbing hysterically.

"Slap her," said Josey, and Stanton did, her head rolling loosely under the blows. She looked up at him.

"I'm sorry," she said, the tears still on her cheeks.

"I'm sorry too," echoed a voice, thin, reedy, and old; "and I suppose you're sorry. Put down your guns. Drop them. Put up your hands. Raise them. I really am sorry. After all, I don't *want* to kill you."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Marshall Ellenbogen

THEY turned and dropped their guns almost immediate, Stanton shrugging off the heavy power-pack harness of his



blaster as Josey cast down his useless heat-pistol. The creature before them was what one would expect as a natural complement to this cavern. He was weird, pixyish, dressed in fantastic points and tatters, stooped, wrinkled, whiskered, and palely luminous. *Induced radioactivity*, Stanton thought.

"Hee," he giggled. "Things!"

"We're men," said Josey soberly.

"Men like—like you." He shuddered.

"Lord," marveled the pixy to himself, his gun not swerving an inch. "What won't they think of next! Now, now, you efts—you're addressing no puling creature of the deep. I'm a man and proud of it. Don't palter with me. You shall die and be reborn again—eventually, no doubt. I'm no agnostic, efts. Here in this cavern I have seen—oh the things I have seen." His face was rapturous with holy bliss.

"Who are you?" asked Annamarie.

The pixy started at her, then turned to Josey with a questioning look. "Is your friend all right?" the pixy whispered confidentially. "Seems rather effeminate to me."

"Never mind," the girl said hastily. "What's your name?"

"Marshall Ellenbogan," said the pixy surprisingly. Second lieutenant in the United States Navy. But, he snickered, "I suspect my commission's expired."

"If you're Ellenbogan," said Stanton, "then you must be a survivor from the first Mars expedition. The one that started the war."

"Exactly," said the creature. He straightened himself with a sort of somber dignity. "You can't know," he groaned, "you never could know what we went through. Landed in a desert. Then we trekked for civilization—all of us, except three kids that we left in the ship. I've often wondered what happened to them." He laughed. "Civilization! Cold-blooded killers who tracked us down like vermin.

Killed Kelly. Keogh. Moley. Jumped on us and killed us—like that!" He made a futile attempt to snap his fingers. "But not me—not Ellenbogan—I ducked behind a rock and they fired on the rock and rock and me both fell into a cavern. I've wandered—Lord! how I've wandered. How long ago was it, efts?"

The lucid interval heartened the explorers. "Fifty years, Ellenbogan," said Josey. "What did you live on all that time?"

"Moss—fruits from the big white trees. Meat now and then, eft, when I could shoot one of your light-headed brothers." He leered. "But I won't eat you. I haven't tasted meat for so long now . . . Fifty years. That makes me seventy years old. You efts never live for more than three or four years, you don't know how long seventy years can be."

"We aren't efts," snapped Stanton. "We're human beings same as you. I swear we are! And we want to take you back to Earth where you can get rid of that poison you've been soaking into your system! Nobody can live in a radium-impregnated cave for fifty years and still be healthy. Ellenbogan, for God's sake be reasonable!"

The gun did not fall nor waver. The ancient creature regarded them shrewdly, his head cocked to one side. "Tell me what happened," he said at length.

"THERE was a war," said the girl. "It was about you and the rest of the expedition that had been killed. When yours didn't come back, the Earth governments sent another expedition—armed this time, because the kids you left in the ship managed to raise Earth for a short time when they were attacked, and they told the whole story. The second expedition landed, and—well, it's not very clear. We only have the ship's log to go by, but it seems to have been about the same with them. Then the Earth governments

raised a whole fleet of rocketships, with everything in the way of guns and ray-projectors they could hold installed. And the Martians broke down the atomic-power process from one of the Earth ships they'd captured, and they built a fleet. And there was a war, the first interplanetary war in history, and maybe the fiercest war in history, too, for neither side ever took prisoners. There's some evidence that the Martians realized they'd made a mistake at the beginning after the war had been going only about three years, but by that time it was too late to stop. And it went on for fifty years, with rocket-ships getting bigger and faster and better, and new weapons being developed . . . Until finally we developed a mind-disease that wiped out the entire Martian race in half a year. They were telepathic, you know, and that helped spread the disease."

"Good for them," snarled the elder. "Good for the treacherous, devilish, double-dealing rats . . . And what are you people doing here now?"

"We're an exploring party, sent by the new all-Earth confederation to examine the ruins and salvage what we can of their knowledge. We came on you here quite by accident. We haven't got any evil intentions. We just want to take you back to your own world. You'll be a hero there. Thousands will cheer you—millions. Ellenbogan, put down your gun. Look—we put ours down!"

"Hah!" snarled the pixy, retreating a pace. "You had me going for a minute. But not any more!" With a loud click, the pixy thumbed the safety catch of his decades-old blast. He reached back to the power pack he wore across his back, which supplied energy for the weapon, and spun the wheel to maximum output. The power-pack was studded with rubies which, evidently, he had hacked with diamonds into something resembling finished, faceted stones.

"WAIT a minute, Ellenbogan," Stanton said desperately. "You're the king of these parts, aren't you? Don't you want to keep us for subjects?"

"Monarch of all I survey, eft. Alone and undisputed." His brow wrinkled. "Yes, eft," he sighed, "you are right. You efts are growing cleverer and cleverer—you begin almost to understand how I feel. Sometimes a king is lonely—sometimes I long for companionship—on a properly deferential plane, of course. Even you efts I would accept as my friends if I did not know that you wanted no more than my blood. I can never be the friend of an eft. Prepare to die."

Josey snapped: "Are you going to kill the girl, too?"

"Girl?" cried the pixy in amazement. "What girl?" His eyes drifted to Annamarie Hudgins. "Bless me" he cried, his eyes bulging, "why, so he is! I mean, she is! That would explain it, of course, wouldn't it?"

"Of course," said Stanton. "But you're not going to kill her, are you?"

"If she were an eft," mused the pixy, "I certainly would. But I'm beginning to doubt that she is. In fact, you're probably all almost as human as I am. However—" He mistily surveyed her.

"Girl," he asked dreamily, "do you want to be a queen?"

"Yes, sir," said Annamarie, preventing a shudder. "Nothing would give me more pleasure."

"So be it," said the ancient, with great decision. "So be it. The ceremony of coronation can wait till later, but you are now ex officio my consort."

"That is splendid," cried Annamarie, "simply splendid." She essayed a chuckle of pleasure, but which turned out to be a dismal choking sound. "You've—you've made me positively the happiest woman under Mars."

She walked stiffly over to the walking monument commemorating what had once

been a man, and kissed him gingerly on the forehead. The pixy's seamed face glowed for more reasons than the induced radioactivity as Stanton stared in horror.

"The first lesson of a queen is obedience," said the pixy fondly, "so please sit there and do not address a word to these unfortunate former friends of yours. They are about to die."

"Oh" pouted Annamarie. "You are cruel, Ellenbogán."

He turned anxiously, though keeping the hair-trigger weapon full on the two men. "What troubles you, sweet?" he demanded. "You have but to ask and it shall be granted. We are lenient to our consort."

The royal "we" already thought Stanton. He wondered if the ancient would be in the market for a coat of arms. Three years of freehand drawing in his high school in Cleveland had struck Stanton as a dead waste up till now; suddenly it seemed that it might save his life.

"How," Annamarie was complaining, "can I be a *real* queen without any subjects?"

The pixy was immediately suspicious, but the girl looked at him so blandly that his ruffles setted down. He scratched his head with the hand that did not hold the blaster. "True," he admitted. "I hadn't thought of that. Very well, you may have a subject. One subject."

"I think two would be much nicer,"

Annamarie said a bit worriedly, though she retained the smile.

"One!"

"Please—two?"

"One! One is enough. Which of these two shall I kill?"

Now was the time to start the sales-talk about the coat-of-arms, thought Stanton. But he was halted in mid-thought, the words unformed, by Annamarie's astonishing actions. Puckering her brow so very daintily, she stepped over to the pixy and slipped an arm about his waist. "It's hard to decide," she remarked languidly, staring from one to the other, still with her arm about the pixy. "But I think—"

"Yes. I think—kill *that* one." And she pointed at Stanton.

STANTON didn't stop to think about what a blaster could do to a promising career as artist by appointment to Mars' only monarch. He jumped—lancing straight as a string in the weak Martian gravity, directly at the figure of the ancient. He struck and bowled him over. Josey, acting a second later, landed on top of him, the two piled onto the pixy's slight figure. Annamarie, wearing a twisted smile, stepped aside and watched quite calmly.

Oddly enough, the pixy had not fired the blaster.

After a second, Stanton's voice came smotheredly from the wriggling trio. He

was addressing Josey. "Get up, you oaf," he said. "I think the old guy is dead."

Josey clambered to his feet, then knelt again to examine Ellenbogan. "Heart-failure, I guess," he said briefly. "He was pretty old."

Stanton was gently prodding a swelling eye. "Your fault, idiot," he glared at Josey. "I doubt that one of your round-house swings touched Ellenbogan. And as for you, friend," he sneered, turning to Annamarie, "you have my most heartfelt sympathies. Not for worlds would I have made you a widow so soon. I apologize," and he bowed low, recovering himself with some difficulty.

"Did it ever occur to you," Annamarie said tautly—Stanton was astounded as he noticed she was trembling with a nervous reaction,—"did it ever occur to you that maybe you owe me something? Because if I hadn't disconnected his blaster from the power-pack, you would be—"

Stanton gaped as she turned aside to hide a flood of sudden tears, which prevented her from completing the sentence. He dropped to one knee and ungently

turned over the old man's body. Right enough—the lead between power-pack and gun was dangling loose, jerked from its socket. He rose again and, staring at her shaking figure, stepped unsteadily toward her.

Josey, watching them with scientific impersonality, up-curved a lip in the beginnings of a sneer. Then suddenly the sneer died in birth, and was replaced by a broad smile. "I've seen it coming for some time," more loudly than was necessary, "and I want to be the first to congratulate you. I hope you'll be very happy," he said. . . .

A few hours later, they stared back at the heap of Earth under which was the body of the late Second Lieutenant Ellenbogan, U.S.N., and quietly made their way toward the walls of the cavern. Choosing a different tunnel-mouth for the attempt, they began the long trek to the surface. Though at first Stanton and Annamarie walked hand-in-hand, it was soon arm-in-arm, then with arms around each other's waists, while Josey trailed sardonically behind.

**THE END**