

AUGUST

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SUPER SCIENCE

STORIES 20¢

THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

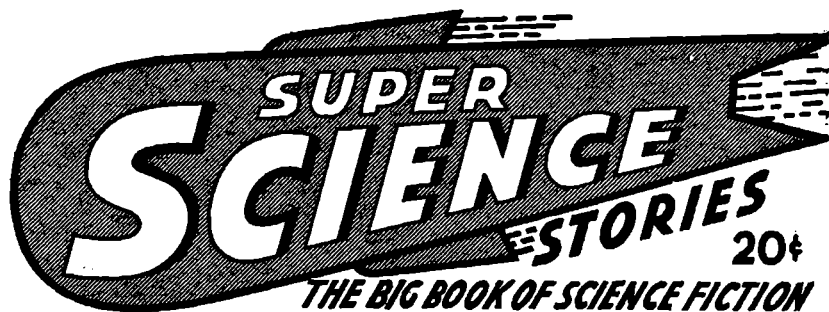
TWO OUTSTANDING NOVELETTES
**WRECKERS OF THE
STAR PATROL**
by MALCOLM JAMESON

RETURN FROM ZERO
by ROSS ROCKLYNNE

**BRACKETT
ASIMOV
HASSE
AND MANY
OTHERS**

**CHAM
OF THE HILLS**
A NOVEL OF LOST WORLDS
*by CHARLES R.
TANNER*





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STORIES** 20¢
THE BIG BOOK OF SCIENCE FICTION

VOL. 4

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NO. 1



A NOVEL OF LOST WORLDS

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Last of their kind were they, the remnants of a world gone mad, the lean-jawed fighting men who followed a strange lost chieftain—Cham of the Hills, who had sworn to set his people free!

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The official voice of the world's fan clubs.

Illustrations by Dolgov, Leydenfrost, Musacchia, Wesso and Morey

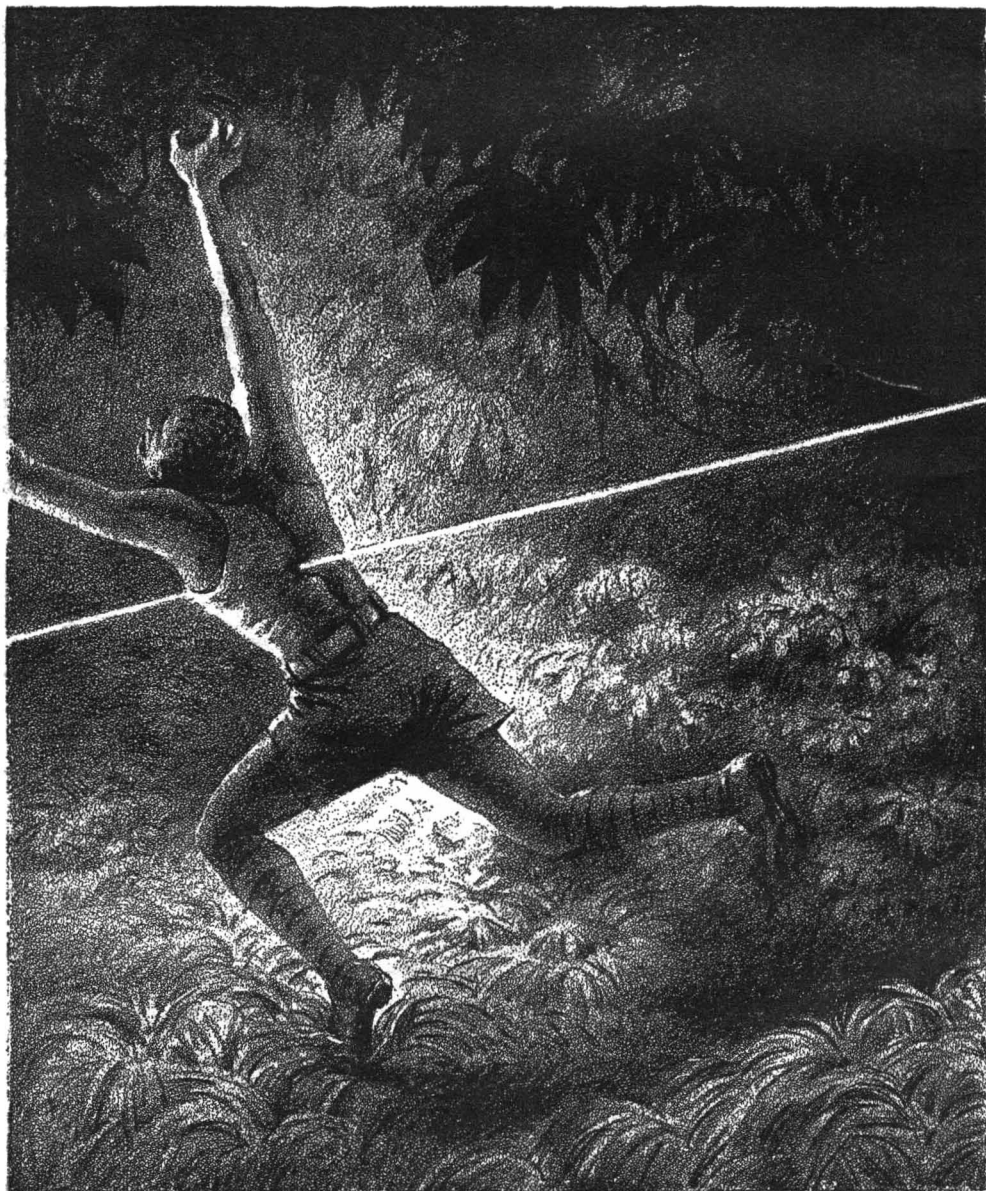
COVER BY HUBERT ROGERS

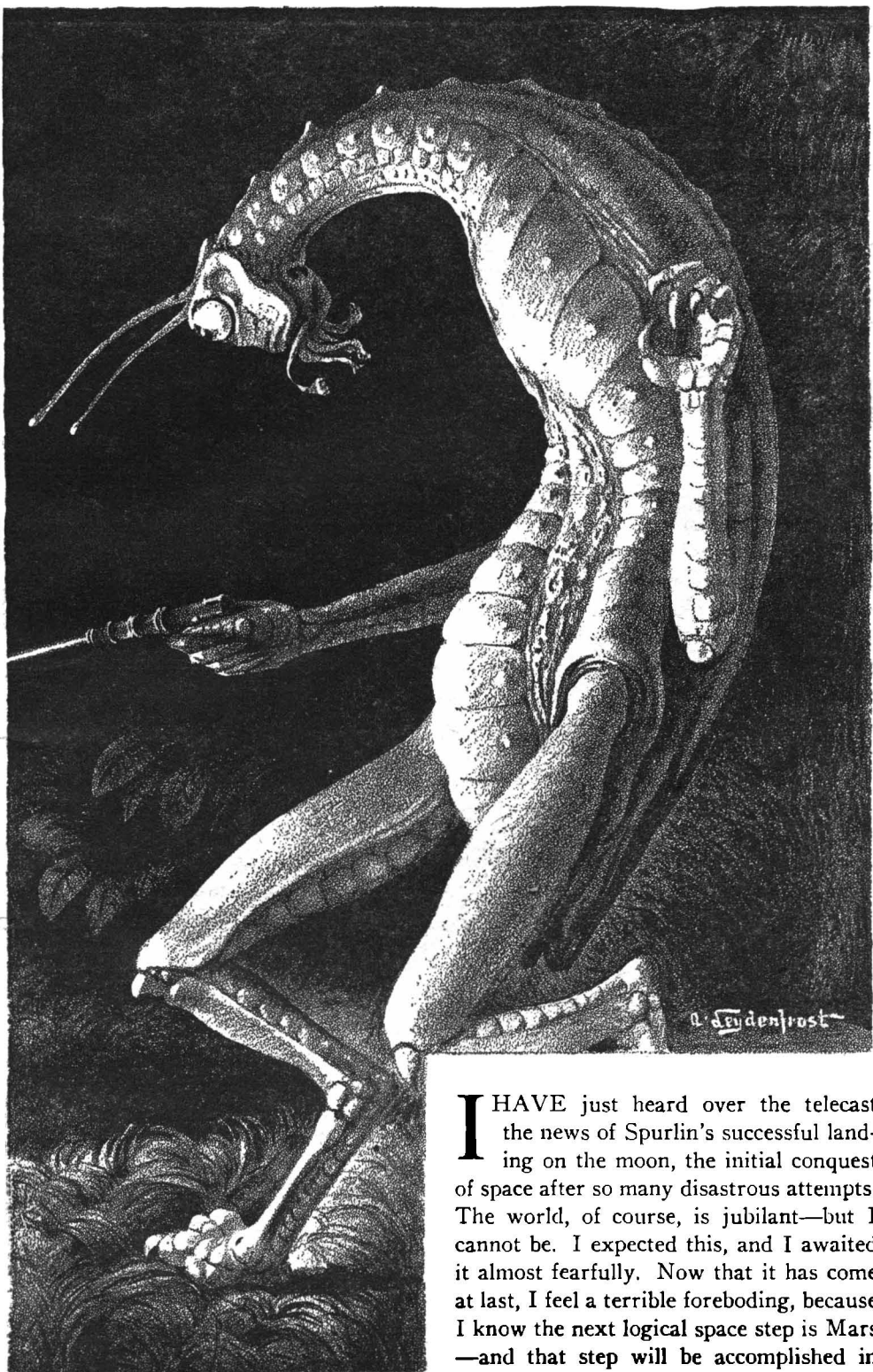
Illustrating a scene from "Mars Warning" by Henry Hasse

MARS WARNING

By HENRY HASSE

What could it mean, that message from hostile Mars, the urgent warning to the human race? One man died because he was brave enough to wonder. But those who were strong enough to follow in his footsteps. . .





I HAVE just heard over the telecast the news of Spurlin's successful landing on the moon, the initial conquest of space after so many disastrous attempts. The world, of course, is jubilant—but I cannot be. I expected this, and I awaited it almost fearfully. Now that it has come at last, I feel a terrible foreboding, because I know the next logical space step is Mars—and that step will be accomplished in

the not too distant future, I fear.

No wonder, then, that my mind flashes back to our discovery in that Venezuelan jungle five years ago. I wrote the story then, intending to publish it, but the others convinced me it would be best to withhold it until the proper time. Now I think the proper time has come, with space travel at last an accomplished fact, and the race already on to see who will be first to set foot upon Mars.

I can only wonder if that race will be quite so feverish after I have told my story.

IT WAS in March of 1949, five years ago, when I ran into Mel Conway quite by chance in New York. This ordinarily would not have been surprising, but on this occasion it was, because I knew at that very moment he was supposed to be down along the Orinoco somewhere. I knew it because he had told me, himself, that he expected to be there at least three months, and I had personally bidden him *bon voyage*. Also I hinted that I hoped he'd bring back another swell story for me to write up for the Sunday magazine supplements. Twice before he had done that, after he had discovered some ancient temple remnants of unknown origin. I wrote the stories sensationally for the Sunday supplements, while Mel presented his data to the more important scientific journals.

Therefore, meeting him so unexpectedly, it's no wonder I exclaimed, "Hey! Is it really you, or have you got a twin brother you never told me about?"

"It's me all right," Mel muttered. "I just got back sooner than I thought I would, that's all." And he tried to get away from me.

"Oh, no you don't," I said, grabbing him. My nose for news was sending me flashes. It was rarely wrong. "You found something down there, didn't you? Are you going back again? What is it, another temple?"

It took me two more hours, plus a bottle of A-1 Scotch, to learn he had found something all right and it wasn't another ancient temple. He wouldn't tell me what, except that it was important enough to bring him hurrying back here for Dr. Anton DeHarries, preeminent in the field of archaeological research and a recognized authority on ancient and unknown languages.

So when they sailed for Para the following week I was along. It was a favor Mel granted me only when I promised not to release the story without his permission. He wouldn't tell DeHarries, either, what his find was; said he preferred to let us see for ourselves, without any advance opinions. DeHarries, tall and athletic despite his advanced years, assumed an air of condescension which I'm sure was only a mask to hide his real curiosity.

At Para we picked up Pete Warren, Mel's partner, who had stayed there to purchase certain supplies we would need. These were already packed and waiting, and I could not see just then what was in the few wooden boxes, except one that was marked very plainly, "Explosives." Pete Warren was a rosy-faced, jovial gnome under an absurdly large white helmet, and he remained as mysterious as Mel had been.

We proceeded by river steamer up the four hundred tide-swept miles of the Amazon, finally reaching Manaos, where we hired a tiny power launch and a very unclean but husky native named Tumba.

From there our real trip began. Everything became, for me at least, an interminable hell of green and brown and blue. I think I shall hate those colors as long as I live. The hideous green of jungle extending unbrokenly on each side, the sluggish mud-brown of the rivers, and the glaring blue strip of sky overhead. For three days or more this river travel continued.

"Last time I came in here," DeHarries reminisced, "was over ten years ago and it hasn't changed a bit. All of this might as well be out of the world. There's enough unexplored territory in here to occupy the white man for the next century."

We passed occasional mud villages where the natives came crowding down to the river edge to stare at us. We never knew whether they were hostile or not because we never stopped long enough to find out.

"I recognize them, too," DeHarries said wryly. "The only difference is that I didn't have a power launch when I came in here."

But we eventually left even the last of the river villages far behind.

IT WAS a little before noon, on the third or fourth day, when Mel cut across the current toward the jungled shore on the right. Then, as we came nearer, I saw it wasn't a shore at all, but another mud-brown stream that moved slowly, sluggishly, into ours.

We headed down it, and I groaned.

"Keep your shirt on; it won't be long now," Mel assured me.

Two hours later Pete Warren, who had been scanning the shore line, let out a whoop and pointed. I stared and saw a clearing in the jungle wall ahead. It looked no different to me than other clearings we had passed, but Mel said, "That's it," and cut the launch sharply in that direction.

It was past noon by the time we had unloaded the boat and pitched camp. We were pretty weary and cramped, but without a word Mel led us along a tangled trail into the jungle. Apparently he and Pete Warren had been along here before. A hundred yards further, this trail opened suddenly into another wide clearing, almost a perfect circle. And there in the exact center rested that which Mel had brought us here to see.

I say rested, but it was buried, or half buried. My first impression was that it was a meteor, and I was overwhelmingly disappointed. But then I saw that no meteor could have been so smooth and delicately curved. I knew then that this was a metal hull, and that I was staring at a spaceship.

I was still a little disappointed. Even at that time, five years ago, the first daring attempts at space travel were being made. Four or five rockets had already left Earth, never to be heard from again, with the exception of one that was known to have crashed in the Pacific. Looking at that half buried ship in the twilight gloom of a jungle clearing, I think all of us must have had the same thought: that we had stumbled upon one of those pioneer rockets which had crashed here in this lonely spot.

It was DeHarries who convinced us otherwise. He strode forward purposefully, scratched at the verdigrised metal hull with his knife. The scratch was sharp and clean enough to show the metal to be of an unusual, dull greenish color. DeHarries didn't need to say a word as he turned to us; the bright glow of excitement in his eyes was enough. I knew Mel had done right in bringing DeHarries down here.

For the rest of that afternoon we worked in a dank heat, worked with shovels in the spongy ground around that alien ship, slowly uncovering it. It was a vaster undertaking than we had thought; we saw that it would take us at least another day to get anywhere. However, by late evening we had uncovered enough to see it was the stern we were working on, and that the ship was buried on a long slant. Indented in the hull we found some queer symbols, which might have been the name, proving indisputably that this was no Earth ship.

We returned along the path to our camp, tired but excited, certain that on the mor-

row we should uncover some sort of entrance.

Mel thought of something. "We may learn enough from the controls of this ship to aid us tremendously in our own space attempts!"

"You mean," DeHarries said dryly, "if there is anything left of any controls. Think of the impact necessary for a ship to bury itself that far in the earth. And we don't know how many years or hundreds of years it may have been there."

IN THE cool of the next morning we set to work again, Tumba no less eagerly than the rest of us. In fact he did the work of two men, and this rather surprised me, for I had thought natives had certain taboos and superstitions about such things as buried spaceships. At least it always seemed so in stories I had read. Tumba, however, appeared more fascinated than frightened by the situation. As though reading my mind he looked up at me, grinned, and continued to ply his shovel. Maybe he was thinking of buried treasure.

A few hours later we uncovered the first of the doors, or rather it was a circular plate so close fitting that a line was scarcely discernible. There was no lock, no hand-hold of any kind, and it was apparent that we'd have to cut our way in. We went to work with the torches. That metal was the most peculiar stuff I ever encountered, tough and heat resistant to an amazing degree! It was slow work, and we suffered in the heat; but at last the plate fell outward, revealing a dark and malodorous interior.

We entered at last, flashing our lights around, and once again I was disappointed. There was simply nothing there. We played our beams on the interior of the rounded hull, and a smooth metal floor, and a doorway leading down into another compartment toward the prow. We moved cautiously across the slanting floor.

We reached the prow, and there, at least, was something. In a separate little room were the controls Mel had anticipated. But they were useless now, for they had been smashed beyond all recognition or repair. What puzzled us, however, was that this was no result of the spaceship's crash. The nose of the ship was singularly undamaged, which meant that this utter havoc to the controls had been done deliberately—and from the inside!

There was nothing we could learn or do here. We turned to go back. Mel was shaking his head disappointedly, puzzledly. Then DeHarries gave a little cry. He had pointed his light upward, above the control room doorway; and there, in a little alcove, rested something. I didn't see what it was until DeHarries reached up and took it down.

In his hands he held a sort of book, but it was like no book I had ever seen. It was huge, and seemed to be all of metal. Even the leaves, we saw when DeHarries opened it, were of some thin, durable metal foil. Queer angular symbols were stamped in shallow indentations for about the first twenty pages. The rest of the pages were smooth and blank.

DeHarries looked up at the alcove again and spoke calmly. "This book must have been placed there deliberately—after the ship crashed! Perhaps in the hope that someone, some day, would find and decipher it. If there's only some key word or symbol to this language that I can work on—"

We hurried out into the sunlight again, where we examined the book more carefully. And there, on the very first page, was impressed an unmistakable diagram. It was the solar system. The sun and every planet were there, in tiny circles, correct as to size and position. Significantly, a curved dotted line connected the fourth circle to the third.

"They came from Mars!" Mel ex-

claimed unnecessarily. "But—good Lord, if they're not in the ship, what happened to them?"

We couldn't answer that—yet. We went back to work with the shovels, slowly uncovering the rest of the ship, but we worked a little less diligently now. DeHarries sat down in the shade with the metal book open on his knees, pencil and notebook in his hand. He was working harder than any of us. He filled page after page of his notebook with cryptic symbols, only to tear them out angrily, crumple and throw them away. Several times he arose and walked about the clearing.

At last—it must have been hours later—he apparently found the key. He wrote slowly and carefully for several hours more, transcribing those angular symbols into words and meaning. Back in the other clearing, at our camp, DeHarries didn't even take time out for the evening meal. Not until much later did he cease transcribing, from sheer weariness; but he would not yet read to us what he had written down, for there was a great deal more to come.

I, for one, did not get much sleep that night. I lay there in the dark and pondered over that strange manuscript from Mars. The thing, however, that most puzzled me was what had happened to the Martians after they landed on Earth! Of course, there was the question of how long ago all this had happened; but even if it had happened centuries ago, there should still be some trace of the ship's occupants.

I trusted that DeHarries would soon have the book completely deciphered, and that it would tell us the story, which had every indication of having ended in some strange and terrible tragedy.

EARLY next morning we continued with our digging, and I must admit that subconsciously I was expecting to come upon some secret exit from the

spaceship, perhaps an underground tunnel. I was disappointed, however. By early evening we had progressed sufficiently so that the entire length and contour of the strange ship lay exposed in a long, shallow pit. It would have taken much more than our combined efforts to hoist it out of there, but there was no need of that yet.

Only one thing happened. It did not mean much to us at the moment, but it was to have a direct bearing on the sudden, horrible outcome of our adventure.

I have said that Tumba, our native boy, was not superstitious. In fact he exhibited a curious fascination in our activities. Late in the afternoon we heard a peculiar, metallic grinding noise from inside the ship. Mel looked at me, startled; and then, seeing that Tumba had disappeared, we moved around to the entrance we had cut in the hull.

We found Tumba just climbing out. Upon Mel's questioning he explained that he was peering in, had slipped and fallen down the length of the slanting spaceship floor. Mel looked at him dubiously, entered and flashed his light around, but found nothing amiss. He then warned Tumba in no uncertain terms to stay out of the ship. Tumba was abjectly apologetic, but there was a certain guilty look about him, and in his eyes was a light I had never seen before. I thought at first that it was fright, but later I knew better.

Meanwhile DeHarries had progressed feverishly with his translation, and around the campfire this second night—the last night for us there, as it turned out—he said, "I have deciphered most of it now. I'll read it to you, but you must understand there are certain words here that have no parallel in our language, so I've had to use a bit of guess work. But I think this is a fairly accurate and literal translation of the book."

Eagerly we leaned forward to listen, as there in the flickering firelight DeHar-

ries began that strange story from Mars, the story that was to come to such a sudden and unexpected climax.

"IT ALL seems so strange," DeHarries began, "not because we are the first in the solar system to achieve space travel, as we probably are—but rather because of the sudden circumstances under which we were forced to leave V'Rai. We were not adequately prepared for space flight and would not have been for another year or two, Djhal tells me. Yet we now find ourselves, a party of six, here in the vast reaches of space with our tiny planet dropping gradually away behind us. I dare not look back at it too often, for it reminds me now of a bright drop of blood in the blackness, and a surge of horror floods my brain at the memory of what we left back there. Recording it here in the book is different; it seems more detached that way, it seems ages ago instead of two days.

"As the Princess Fai Elyn, last in the long line of beneficent rulers of V'Rai, I am not supposed to be afraid. And I am not so much afraid as I am apprehensive when I peer ahead at the tiny blue dot of Eraht. The color seems menacing. I suppose Djhal would call my reasoning silly. He says we should find on Eraht the same sort of beings as ourselves, though probably of a lower state of intelligence.

"Poor Djhal. He has had to work so hard, and there is so much yet to come—still he finds time to console me and be with me. It was Djhal who suggested I record the story of our escape from V'Rai, in order to pass the time, for it will be yet seven days or more before we reach Eraht and no one knows what will happen then.

"I am aware what Djhal is planning, even before we have reached Eraht. He only awaits the day when he may return to his own planet and exact his vengeance upon Atoh Kaamoj for the terrible thing

he has caused. This may not be, however—I do not delude myself—for many years to come, and perhaps never.

"Atoh Kaamoj I do not remember well, except for one thing—the way he used to look at me. I cannot forget that, although it was a number of years ago, when I was only fourteen. It was a coveting sort of look, half leer and half smile. He was an old man and he frightened me.

"I remember, too, hearing my father say—at first proudly but in later years sadly—what a brilliant scientific mind Atoh Kaamoj possessed, especially in the field of biology.

"But most of all I remember the day when Thuron, my father, became more furious than I have ever seen him; and Atoh Kaamoj left the palace, hurling terrible threats behind him, threats that did not then seem serious because he, too, was so angry.

"Not until a year or two later did father tell me what had happened: Atoh Kaamoj had asked for my hand in marriage.

"We did not see Atoh Kaamoj again nor did we know where he had gone. There came a few stories—from caravans returning from the red desert beyond the mountains—of a person fitting Atoh Kaamoj's description, who lived on the edge of the desert and fled to the mountain caves at the sight of others of his kind. Soon even these few stories ceased, and we supposed Atoh Kaamoj had died. No one could live long in that arid desert where only sparse bits of vegetation and fierce hordes of the Ghurii existed. "

HERE DeHarries paused for a moment in his reading, looked up at us and said: "This word Ghurii, which is plural, occurs through the rest of the narrative. It's one of those words that has no parallel in our language. But as far as I can make out—and as you will see later—these Ghurii seem to be another form of life on Mars."

DeHarries cleared his throat, and went on abruptly with the narrative.

"A few years ago it would have been laughable if anyone had said the Ghurii, those tiny creatures scarcely a foot in length, were a threat to us. True, there were such hordes of them in the desert that they might have been a menace—were it not for the fact that they seemed unable or unwilling to come through the long, barren mountain passes. A few of them did drift through from time to time, but only in sufficient numbers to be annoying.

"I remember, for example, the time some of them nearly ruined my garden. For a week or more I could not account for it, and I was moved to action only after my pet Kuoptis plants were completely denuded and dying. Then I made a diligent search and uncovered a nest of the horrid Ghurii creatures. Most people were accustomed to stamping on them or smashing them to death whenever they were encountered, but despite my anger I could not bring myself to do that. I remember going to father's laboratory and procuring deadly poison gas pellets, which I threw among them and shriveled the pests in a few seconds. I kept some of the poison handy, and had to use it only a few more times. Soon my garden, which they had seemed to love, was flourishing again.

"The Ghurii were peculiar creatures in more ways than one, and there was much written and debated about them. My father and Atoh Kaamoj, for example, were at variance on the subject, although the two of them were friends at the time. Atoh Kaamoj had studied the creatures at close range. He maintained that they had a definite though crude social order, and might some day, through natural evolution or otherwise, become the dominant race on the planet.

"Father scoffed at this. He admitted that our present race was slowly dying

and would some day disappear, but that would not be for some thousands of years. He doubted that we would be replaced by the Ghurii, because they, too, were dying over there in the desert. If they had any sort of social order of intelligence, why had they not come through the mountains in some kind of concerted attack? But even if they did that, their very tininess would defeat them. With the sciences at our command a few of us could wipe them out methodically.

"Atoh Kaamoj would admit this grudgingly, then descend into deep thought; and father would laugh.

"He should not have laughed, for Atoh Kaamoj's theories were to come true very soon, and in a most horrible way. If only we could have guessed what was brewing in the biologist's evil mind that day he stalked angrily out of the palace. If only we could have foreseen what was to happen in time to prepare adequately for it! But we were a happy and peaceful people; there had been no wars among us for hundreds of years, so we had not enough weapons to stem the tide when it came.

"THE first inkling we had was when our radio picked up a few frantic and garbled messages from the more remote towns, saying that literally thousands of the Ghurii were pouring through the mountains into the valley! Our valley, of course, slashed across half the planet, and it was thought to be impregnable to the creatures, who until now had seemed unable to withstand the cold of the mountain passes.

"Before we could quite realize what was happening, even more terrible messages came—horribly fantastic accounts which we at first disbelieved. These were to the effect that the attacking Ghurii were enormous, in fact were many times their normal size! They were sweeping forward in concerted waves as if they had been

drilled when and where to attack; as if they had been waiting a long time for just this supreme moment. Even as we in the capitol city listened, hesitant and indecisive, many of these in-pouring messages ceased with suggestive suddenness.

"We did not remain indecisive long. Already Djhal and a few of his fellow scientists had hurried to the laboratories in the huge building behind the palace. There, a year ago, the initial space experiments had been developed almost to their logical conclusions. There the test spaceship rested, which had not yet been tried out because of the terrible handicap in landing on a planet out of the emptiness of space. That problem alone remained to be solved before space travel became an actuality, and for a year Djhal had been working on it.

"Now he must have guessed that we were doomed. He must have realized that the only thing that might save us would be to take the supreme chance of a flight into space. While the others erected a few available weapons in a barricade below the palace, Djhal swept the essential contents of the laboratory into the spaceship. I helped him, unquestioningly, by stocking the ship with what food supplies I could carry from the palace.

"We were but barely in time. Less than an hour later the first surging horde of the Ghurii was sighted.

"I have said that our weapons were few, and were erected hurriedly, but they were formidable. They consisted mainly of a dozen or so of the early type electro-cannon with a lethal range of several hundred yards, and a number of hand weapons of the same type. My father directed the strategical placements of the cannon, and ordered the gunners to await his command. Strangely, I was not afraid any more, and I remember that the thing that most impressed me in those moments was the sudden, ludicrous silence that descended over everything.

"The Ghurii tide swept nearer and nearer, and still father did not give the order to fire. They had to ascend a long gentle slope leading up to the palace, and they were necessarily slowed somewhat. The first of them came within fifty yards before father lowered his hand in the signal.

LIKE livid, living things the electrical beams leaped out in a crackling blue semicircle. The first result was horrible. Those Ghurii who were caught in the direct line of fire vanished in sudden puffs of flame. Others, more distant, sank to the ground, writhing and horribly burned, before they lay still. A few drifted through untouched, but our hand weapons quickly dispatched them. A sudden sickening stench arose, so that I had to lean on Dajhl, who was there at my side, and he hurried me away from the scene. A cheer arose from the entire populace who had gathered there behind the palace.

"Yes, for a while we had the fantastic notion that with a few electro-cannon we were going to stem the tide, wipe out the Ghurii, drive the remnants of them back into the desert. How futile a thought! We had far underestimated their numbers and their fierce tenacity. A second and yet a third time they came surging up to the palace. Each time they were repulsed they left a charred havoc of their own dead over which the others came. Our electric charges were becoming weaker, and we knew we could not withstand many more assaults. Then I remembered the poison gas I had previously used upon them with such effectiveness.

"I whispered it to Djhal. He hurried back to the laboratory, dragging me with him and calling to several of his assistants. There we found the necessary chemicals for the gas, and we worked furiously for the next hour mixing them into crude bombs—but there were disappointingly

few of them. Meanwhile the battle continued outside. We could hear the soft hissing of the electro-cannon, and vague cries from our people which did not sound quite like cheers now.

"My father appeared suddenly in the doorway. I moved quickly to him, but he would not allow me to look out. We did not need his words to tell us what had happened. In the last charge the Ghurii had gained the palace. Half the city's massed populace had been wiped out, mostly in hand to hand fighting with the tenacious creatures. Father seemed to have aged years in the past few hours, and I realized then what he realized—that this was the ultimate struggle for domination of the planet. The fury of this scene was being duplicated in other cities of our little kingdom, if the Ghurii had not already overwhelmed them.

" 'This is Atoh Kaamoj's work,' father gasped. 'The awful size of these creatures can mean nothing else. I remember his theories, his hints as to certain glands that might . . . They'll be attacking in another minute, and we cannot—'

"Father was near despair and exhaustion, but the sight of the gas bombs we had prepared gave him new hope. He knew, too, that Djhal had prepared the spaceship for a quick flight if that were necessary. Now he approached Djhal and spoke to him as a son. 'You have done well, Djhal, and now I command you to

test your work. Go to Eraht as planned, and there—'

"Over Djhal's protests he spoke hurriedly, urgently, for there was little time. 'It is best! You must go now, at once! Is it not enough that I send with you my daughter, whom I know you love? If necessary, our race shall continue on Eraht! But I know you will find the means to return, Djhal, and when you do, you will find that we have conquered here!'

"But his tone was false, and even as Djhal and I tumbled into the ship, with four of his selected men as a crew, my father committed the final gesture which conveyed to us his realization of the ultimate defeat here on V'Rai. He dragged to us, through the laboratory door, one of the dead Ghurii creatures. I shrank from it with a gesture of loathing, but father thrust it into the ship after us, with the words:

" 'You must take it with you as a warning, either to yourselves or to the people of Eraht! A warning never to let the terrible thing happen there that has happened here! I shall remain here with my people to the end.'

"Those were his final words. Then our door closed upon him, and our spaceship moved slowly out of the building upon its smooth launching platform. A few more seconds in which Djhal made the necessary calculations—and then we

blasted up and away in a long tangent into space.

“**T**HAT was seven days ago. Eraht is very near now. Its very nearness and its strange blue color seem more menacing to me than ever before. I have not been able to get over the feeling that we should never have left V'Rai, that we should have stayed there and died with my father and the others. But perhaps they did not die! The deadly gas they had would be a formidable weapon indeed, and the Ghurii, as I remember, were peculiarly susceptible to it. So perhaps—

“I shall not think about it any longer. That is the horrible part, just thinking about it, and wondering, and never knowing—

“There are more immediate and drastic things to think of now. Our landing, for example. I know that Djhal has become more and more worried. Over three-quarters of our fuel was used in the take-off, and the forward braking tubes are quite empty. In the past few days Djhal and the others have been working desperately to transfer the remaining fuel into the forward tubes. I think they are succeeding, but it is pitifully little.

“Djhal has just told me that we may have to make a crash landing. That is bad, as Eraht's gravity is more than that of V'Rai. Djhal says he may have to use all of our braking power to slow us down when entering the atmosphere, but after that he will try to negotiate at least one complete circuit of the planet and bring us down as easy as he can. The specially built crash room at the end of the ship may help to save our lives.

“Eraht is looming up terrifyingly large now, and Djhal says we may be entering the atmosphere at any minute. He insists that I, and the four others, stay in the crash room until the landing is over. He alone will be at the controls. He has

wrapped and padded himself as much as possible, for his own safety. I must cease now. Recording this little history has been a great comfort to me, and has kept me from thinking too much of what may have happened back on V'Rai. But now—who knows if I will ever record another word here?

“**W**E HAVE landed upon Eraht. As we entered the atmosphere I felt an unbearable heat, which continued a few minutes during our circuit of the planet. Then came the sudden plunge downward—and oblivion.

“I struggled up through a thick darkness with the dull thought hammering at my brain that Djhal surely had been killed. I and the four others, Djhal's assistants, were safe. But if Djhal was dead, I no longer wished to live either.

“Then Djhal came to me. He was horribly bruised and shaken, but not seriously hurt. He told us what had happened. We had entered the atmosphere much too fast, despite his application of our full braking power. He had managed the circuit of the planet, still at tremendous speed, and then had come the fatal plunge. He had only time to urge the ship a little forward, toward a vast green expanse which he thought was foliage, and which might serve to cushion our fall. He mentioned, too, that he had had a fleeting glimpse of at least one large city, which proved that an intelligent race inhabited Eraht.

“Just now, however, we are faced with an appalling problem. We are in almost total darkness, we cannot move the spaceship, and all efforts to open the door are to no avail. The vast green expanse toward which Djhal headed must have been jungle, and we plunged down through it and into a spongy sort of ground. At least that is what Djhal thinks, and there is no telling how far beneath Eraht's surface we may now be. It is horrible to

contemplate being buried here alive, but we still have one hope. Djhal and the others are now scraping the tubes, gathering every precious caked grain of tynyte that may be left. It cannot be much, but it may be sufficient to blast us out of here if used in the forward tubes. . .

"It was to no avail. The ship shuddered with the effort, but did not move an inch. We are buried here irrevocably. What an ironic ending! We are the first to have crossed space to another planet; we thought to bring our science and our culture to the people of Eraht, and now they may never know.

"Unless we can remain alive here until they find us! Djhal has thought of one final plan, which in a way is an escape, or at least a chance for life—suspended animation! He thinks that out of the chemicals we brought along, he can devise a gas that will place all of us under suspended animation indefinitely! That is one of the things he was working on just before we left V'Rai, and it was virtually completed. The thought is frightening; it may mean many years before we are found; but to us though we remain here for months or years it will seem but a second. I remember, too, father's urgency that our race continue, even though it be on far away Eraht. And this is our final chance!

"There are eight large lockers in the crash room at the extreme rear of the ship. They are airtight and will be ideal for the purpose. Djhal is ready now. He intends that each of us shall enter first, and he will see that we are safely encased. He will enter last. He has devised an automatic cut-off that will supply the correct amount of gas to his own locker—and no more. I almost said tomb, but I will not use that word nor even think of it! I trust Djhal, and I am no longer afraid, knowing that he will be here beside me.

"That horrible Ghurii thing, which we brought along as an example and a warn-

ing, will be left in here, too. Djhal has further devised that the instant the crash room door is opened, he will be released first, so that he may converse with the men of Eraht—after which he will release us. He also thinks it would be wise to smash the controls of the ship, as he can easily duplicate them later. And he will leave this book that I have recorded in a prominent place, so that those who enter will be sure to find it.

"Greetings, men of Eraht! We hope you may come soon!"

THAT was the end of the translation. DeHarries closed his notebook with a little smile, and looked across the dying fire at us.

We all sat there for a moment, stunned. Mel spoke first, and it was explosively. "Then they're still alive! Good Lord, they're waiting there in the spaceship for us to release them! But—but why didn't we find them? I thought we examined that ship from stem to stern!"

"It must be," DeHarries said, "a secret compartment, one we overlooked. We didn't examine the inside of that ship too carefully, you know."

Pete Warren arose and threw some fuel on the fire, so that it leaped and shattered the surrounding darkness. "You know," Pete said, "I've been wondering. How long've those Martians been here, anyway? They sure picked a God-forsaken part of the world to land in! But it must have been in fairly recent years, because the Djhal fella said he glimpsed a city of large size. That must have been New York City."

I shook my head stubbornly. "How do you know? Maybe it was a city of ancient Atlantis he saw!"

DeHarries nodded agreement. "That's right, we've no way of knowing how long ago this happened. Perhaps so long ago that even their suspended animation has failed, and we may find them as crumbling

skeletons. At least we shan't know until tomorrow, when we look for that secret compartment."

But in that, DeHarries was wrong. We were to know much sooner.

We sat around the comforting fire discussing excitedly the history we had just heard—and especially that part transpiring on Mars. We knew before very many years we would, ourselves, achieve space travel, and our first goal would be Mars. What would we find there?

I arose to throw more wood on the fire.

And then, just as the fire leaped high, we heard the sound again; that grating, metallic noise we had heard that afternoon. It came from the direction of the other clearing, from the spaceship. Mel and I looked at each other, and we simultaneously realized that Tumba was not here. We had not missed him. We realized, too, what must have happened. Tumba, that afternoon, in prowling about the ship, must have come upon the secret compartment. He must have decided to return later and investigate. And now—

Mel said the single word, "Tumba!" and we went leaping across the clearing toward the path leading to the spaceship. We had hardly moved, however, when something brought us to a halt, and we stood frozen to the spot. It was a scream of terror such as I'd never heard or hope to hear again—and I knew it came from Tumba's throat.

Seconds later we saw him fleeing toward us down the path. A vague, towering shape came swiftly behind him. Tumba looked back, tried to scream once again, but it was only a gurgling sort of moan. Then a brilliant, pencil-thin beam of blue light stabbed toward him from behind. Tumba stumbled to his knees like a collapsed scarecrow, and I shall never forget the awful look on his face as he ploughed forward and lay still. He was dead—but it was as much from terror as from the

little blackened hole that had passed through him.

It all happened so suddenly that we could only stand in stupefied silence. Then something emerged from the jungle path and stopped abruptly, facing us, at the very edge of our little clearing.

THE thing revealed to us in the leaping firelight was fully seven feet tall. It stood erect on one pair of limbs, and from the middle of its body two other pairs of limbs stretched out toward us. Its body was definitely ant-like, rounded and segmented. Its head was small. Two antennae arched inquisitively toward us, and the eyes were huge and bulbous, as though it were staring.

It was staring, all right. In the few seconds that we faced each other, alien as the creature was, I could see that it was every bit as startled as we were. But it moved first. It took a single step forward, and I saw a positive glow of hate in its bulbous eyes. From somewhere came a buzzing, grating sound of speech, amidst which I could distinguish a single puzzled word: "Ghurii!" With that word, the thing raised one claw-like limb in a lightning movement; and I noticed for the first time that it held something metallic.

But we were quicker. With me, at least, the action was purely reflex, as my automatic seemed to leap into my hand. Mel and I fired simultaneously, fired until our clips were empty; and behind us we heard the fusillade of shots as Pete Warren and DeHarries emptied their weapons. The alien creature didn't have a chance. It used its weapon once, but even as the thin beam of blue streaked harmlessly over our heads, it was sinking slowly to the ground.

DeHarries, I think, was the first to comprehend the situation and the terrible mistake we had made. He hurried back to the spaceship, with the rest of us on his heels. There, in the light of our torches, we

found what we expected. Tumba had discovered the tiny secret compartment and had opened it.

What lay beyond was simply the row of airtight metal cases, as described in the narrative. They were over seven feet high, and the nearest of them was open. Well we knew what had emerged from it! We made quite sure that the same sort of creatures reposed in the other five containers; then we dispatched them quickly and thoroughly, using the creature's own beam-pistol for the purpose. After that we placed enough explosive under the spaceship to quite annihilate it, thus writing a complete *finis* to the story.

If to some readers this seems unnecessarily thorough and drastic, I want to remind them that we were laboring under a shock of horror at the time. Even De-Harries' usual complacency was shaken. His mistake, of course, had been in taking the words of the narrative at their

face value, and attributing purely human qualities to the Martians.

But even greater had been the mistake of the Martians themselves and of Djhal, mainly, in assuming that evolution had taken the same trend on both the planets. But perhaps Djhal was not far wrong at that. It all depends, of course, on whether the Ghurii did win the ultimate victory on Mars. For I have not yet told of the final discovery we made in that secret compartment.

It is the crowning, ironic touch. We found the single Ghurii they had brought along as a warning to the people of Earth. It was quite dead, but well preserved in one of the cases. An erect, four-limbed creature, hardly four feet tall; hairy, undeniably barbaric, but unmistakably *homo sapiens*. An ugly little creature which would, nevertheless, in the further course of evolution, become an intelligent human being.