

Volume
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132 PAGES OF NEW STORIES — NO REPRINTS!

★ ★ *Feature Novel* ★ ★
THREE WORLDS IN SHADOW Joe Gibson 8

James Mitchell takes on the job of protecting Eileen Graham from sinister elements, and finds that three worlds depend upon their uncovering the secret behind the strange failure of the Graham air-purifiers!



An Unusual Novelet

ROGUE PRINCESS L. Sprague de Camp 60
 It's a mad, merry mix-up when Claude Godwin finds he has to play the role of Pretender to the English throne, willingly or unwillingly!

Short Subjects

COMMUNICADO Katherine MacLean 88
 Here is an article on the borderline between fact and fiction.

ORDEAL ON SYRTIS Milton Lesser 97
 His romantic spirit sends O'hara to a suicidal "rescue"...

INTERVENTION Michael Sherman 105
 If it were your decision to make, would you vote to revive this woman?

Special Features

IT SAYS HERE (Letters From All of You, And Editorial Comment) 119

THE RECKONING (A Report to the Readers) 127

AS I WAS SAYING The Editor 128

READERS' PREFERENCE PAGE 130

Cover by Milton Luros, from "Intervention"
 Interior illustrations by Luros and Poulton
ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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It was far from romantic, being stuck in the desert of Syrtis, a hundred miles from his ship, and with only a three-day supply of oxygen. But B. Atwood O'hara couldn't resist the temptation to go to the assistance of this "green-eyed Martian princess", even though his better reason assured him that he'd never live to tell this tale if he tried to do it!

ORDEAL ON SYRTIS

By MILTON LESSER



Setting the little rocketship all aquiver, coughing their staccato defiance to the multiple moonlets of Saturn's outer ring, the jets of the Saturn Streak carried Bat O'hara ever deeper into the jaws of grim peril.

Would Bat fight his way through the great expanse of the rings in time to save his betrothed? Could he do that, alone, without outside help, as no man had ever done before?

Pops McGee lit his pipe specula-

It has been noted that the competent explorer doesn't have "adventures", in the romantic sense, simply because the business of survival in "alien" surroundings rarely allows for them. And if and when Mars is explored, it won't be a "thrilling" affair in the fictional sense of the word....

Yet, the men who go there will probably have just enough of the romantic in them to yearn for the Mars of Burroughs, Kline, and other fantastic-fiction oldtimers. And it isn't unlikely that they may amuse themselves with bang-up stories of derring-do to ease monotony. They'll be exploration and pirate stories, naturally—after all, where are Western stories read most avidly? In the West, of course!

tively, leaned back in obvious comfort against a cushioned bulkhead. Outside, the wind of Mars knifed shrilly through the thin atmosphere, but for the moment no one paid it any heed. Pops McGee chuckled triumphantly. "Get yourself out of *that* jam, Bat m'boy!"

B. Atwood O'hara eased his lanky frame down into a chair. "The trouble with you, Pops," he said, "is that you're a frustrated pulp writer. You oughta be back on Earth writing serials for the magazines, instead of here on Mars with our second expedition."

Everyone laughed, except Pops. Instead, he snorted. "Hah! Excuses, that's what. We got nothing to do till morning, so we decide to tell stories. I start one; you're supposed to finish it. Bat O'hara, you're chicken."

"Ain't that," Bat defended. "I just haven't got an imagination like yours, Pops. Tell you what I'll do, though. Would you settle for something that really happened? Would you settle for a story of our first expedition to Mars, three years ago? Don't forget, there was only Ted and me then—and we didn't have all these comforts, no sir!"

"Well—" McGee began doubtfully.

"Well, nothing! That's what you're gonna hear."

"But who wants to hear about this drab lifeless slab of a planet?"

"What?" Bat demanded. "Drab and lifeless? You got a lot to learn, Pops; maybe you'll see in the morning. Meanwhile, before we get back to your wild-eyed story about the rings of Saturn, I'll relate some history. Like the time, three years ago, I rescued a green-eyed Martian princess from the hordes of evil insect-life trying to kill her..."

Pops McGee coughed on a mouthful of smoke, tamped his pipe out angrily. "Is that so? You say *I* got an imagination. No one's ever been to Saturn, so we can't be sure what we'll find. But you go shooting your mouth off about green-eyed Martian princesses. Bah!"

"It's the truth," Bat insisted, winking broadly at the other three crew members. "Three years ago, Ted and I set our ship down on one of the dried-out sea-bottoms. Let me tell you, we got goose-pimples all over. First men on Mars! Anyway, you know what those sea-bottoms are like—great big tundras of salt and minerals, sort of a dark, slate-gray color. Ted and I, we knew we wouldn't find much there, so when morning came I took the scout ship up and headed out for Syrtis Major, about a hundred miles from the sea-bottom. Syrtis Major, that's one of those dark areas which gets bigger in summer, smaller in winter. From Earth it looked like life, and I wanted to find out.

"Now, between the sea-bottom and

Syrtis there's a narrow strip of rust desert, and that sort of gets the geography straight. I headed straight out for Syrtis, and everything went fine till I had some engine trouble. *Kabunk!* I was lucky to get out of the crash alive. The scoutship was a mess and the radio was broken, and there I was, down in the middle of Syrtis, a hundred miles from the ship and Ted. It looked bad..."

"I don't hear nothing about green-eyed princesses," Pops McGee challenged.

"Just let me finish. Like I said, it looked bad—"



O'HARA LISTED the items carefully. Three canteens of water, five pounds of dried meat, food-concentrate tablets. A gun? Well, he didn't know what he'd need it for, but he tucked the pistol in his belt. And the walkie-talkie, of course. He'd go crazy if he didn't have Ted to talk to.

Now he heard Ted's voice, faintly, over the radio. "Bat? Bat, can you hear me? I still say I ought to rocket up after you."

O'hara cut the walkie-talkie over to sending, said: "No! The answer is still 'no'. Look: we have just enough fuel to get back to Earth when we're ready to leave; you come after me, and we'll never make it."

"Well, I won't go back home without you."

"I'll make it," O'hara laughed. "Hell, a little exercise never did anyone harm. See you in a few days, Ted, after I get to know the Martian geography a little better."

His voice, O'hara hoped, sounded cheerful. There was no sense in worrying Ted, but O'hara was anything but cheerful. He strapped a couple of oxygen cylinders to his back, but even in the light gravity he could feel their oppressive weight. He secured the mask snugly over his head, checked the fuel lines, buttoned his macknaw.

Noon on Mars, here in the south temperate zone. And summer. If it had been winter, he knew his chances would have been zero; even now, a cold wind cut in through his macknaw. He didn't want to think of what would happen after the sun set. He carried a heater with him, a little portable stove which might be of some help. He hoped he could make it from Syrtis to the sea-bottom in three days. He did not think he could, and fear toyed with the edges of his brain, for his two oxygen-cylinders would last exactly that long.

Grimly, he stalked away from the scoutship. Once he looked back, saw the twisted ruin resting on its side, saw behind it the furrow he'd plowed through the rusty sand coming down. A feeling of resentment welled up from deep inside of him. It wasn't fair; it was as far from fair as anything could get. You come forty-million miles through space and no one's ever done that before. You bring your ship down on the dead-sea bottom and you feel a little like a god and a little like a usurper. Then you eat a good breakfast, look out at the cold dry winds of Mars, and take the scout-rocket up.

But Fate laughs at you—or the ghosts of long-dead Martians, if there ever were any long-dead Martians. A clogged fuel-line, a transitor twisted out of place, something like that. What's the difference? Result—a forced landing, a wrecked ship, and all Mars for your casket in three days. *If* you lasted that long.

Suddenly he heard the walkie-talkie click over, heard Ted's voice. "Hey, cut that out!"

Huh? Cut it out? Cut what out? Then O'hara smiled; he must have been thinking out loud. Not ten minutes after he started out across Syrtis, and already he was talking to himself.

"Listen," Ted's voice merged with the static, "if you want to talk, all right, okay. But nothing like that, or you'll go off your rocker before the

sun sets. Why don't you tell me what you see?"

O'hara said, "It's flat, Ted. I've never seen anything so flat. Oh, maybe driving through eastern Georgia back home, but it doesn't give the same impression. Here it's flat to the horizon in all directions, and you can tell it will be flat beyond the horizon, too. The sky is very bright, and pale blue; you can hardly look at the sun. And—I'll be damned! Ted! Ted—"

"What is it?"

"Life! They were right back on Earth; they said we'd find life here in Syrtis. There's a lot of sand around, rusty stuff, and the wind picks it up and blows it in little eddies. But there's rock, too, buried in the sand. And small green things, clusters of them clinging to the rock. Tiny flowers, too. Ted, did you ever see green flowers? Wait a minute, that's odd! They're all facing in one direction. Not facing the sun, but all looking east someplace. Ted—I see something!"

Hardly aware of it, he was running now. Idly, he stopped to pick up handfuls of the scrubby green stuff. It had a vaguely fleshy feel, like seaweed. But there was something off in the distance, and that something was not flat. Tall and graceful, it stood silhouetted against the sky, waving back and forth in the wind like an inverted pendulum.

"SO WHAT?" said Pops McGee. I still don't hear nothing about no princess."

O'hara grinned. "I'm coming to that. Anyway, how would you like to be stuck out on the Syrtis, a hundred miles from your ship, with oxygen for only three days?"

"Well, I'll tell you this, son; I'd hightail it back to the sea-bottom just as fast as my legs could take me."

"I didn't. Like I told you, there was this green-eyed Martian princess

I had to rescue. And it paid off, Pops; because later on she saved my life out of gratitude..."



It could be nothing but a flower, O'hara knew. Atop a slender ten-foot stem, it was whipped back and forth by the Martian winds. Broad yellow petals formed a perfect circle, but the pulpy center was green, green deep and bright as the sea. A lot like a Blackeyed Susan, O'hara thought, although much larger. And the eye was green; the scrubby plant-life clinging to the rocks stared up solemnly at that green eye, watching, waiting.

"What do you mean, stared up?" Ted's voice was puzzled.

"Well, that's the impression I get. Oh, I don't mean they're *looking*, not consciously looking. But every little flower is facing that one big flower, like they're all waiting for something to happen. You'd have to see it to understand, Ted; it's eerie."

"Fine. That's real interesting. But instead of gawking at it like that, why don't you start coming back here? Your oxygen won't last forever—"

"I will. I will! I just want to see—wait a minute!"

"What's happening?"

But O'hara did not bother to answer. Overhead, something had happened to the big yellow flower. Not to the flower itself, but to the pulpy center, to the eye. It pulsed, once and then once again—flashing a brighter green. The stem twisted, slowly at first and then faster, giving the eye a full three hundred and sixty degree sweep as it swung back and forth. And all the while it waxed and waned, setting the air aglow with a bright green radiance.

O'hara heard something, soft and far away. So soft that it could have been the wind or his imagination—a keening wail. Shriller than the wind?

It grew louder, a plaintive crying

sound. It rang in his ears, subduing everything else. He wanted to run and hide from it, or perhaps he wanted to stoop down and bury his head in the sand. He did neither; fascinated, he watched.

The scubby green flowers clinging to the rock responded to that sound!

Their tiny petals folded in upon themselves. Nothing but the pulpy undersides remained exposed, and somehow O'hara got the impression of a turtle withdrawing into its shell. Of a thousand-thousand turtles.

IT TOOK him a while to realize that the sound came from the tall green-eyed flower. It was swaying and pulsing—and wailing. A loud wail, loud enough to be carried for miles on the wind. Loud enough to make every little rock-flower bury its head in a fleshy covering. But that was impossible, and even as the thought came, O'hara dismissed it. Things followed each other—cause and effect; that was the way the world worked, and what else could he assume? The tall flower wailed, and the others, the smaller rockbound plants, heard. Hearing, they obeyed, withdrew, turned themselves inside out almost.

Why?

Something stirred behind him; something scraped and clattered across the surface of the rock.

O'hara whirled around to face the new sound—and got the surprise of his life. Mars had native flora; he'd seen that already. But Mars harbored animal life, too. Animal? Well, the things moved, dragging themselves ponderously across the rock for all their small size.

Twenty of them, he counted, each about a foot across. More like crabs than anything else he could think of on Earth, with bright red armor-plate, half a dozen armor-sheathed legs, three-jointed, and three big claws out front. On each claw, he saw the merest suggestion of a slitted eye, protected from the wind-driven sands

by ridges of armor. The claws were not used for locomotion, no; they probed about over the rock, grasping again when nothing happened.

O'hara felt his allegiance drawn compulsively to the tiny plants. They seemed helpless, so utterly helpless. And yet, as he observed more carefully, nothing happened. Turned inside out, the plants seemed immune from attack. The pint-sized monsters could probe at them and squeeze, but they failed to penetrate. Had the guardian plant's signal been for that?

Evidently, the red-armored things thought so, for they crawled away aimlessly for a time, then came back and surrounded the tall stem, reaching up with their claws and snipping at it. One of the strictest rules of the expedition, of course, said that the men were not to touch any native life, particularly fauna if any be found. It made good sense, too: the human body would offer absolutely no resistance to an even mildly virulent alien poison.

Still, O'hara knew he couldn't stand there and watch the armored monsters slowly tear down their enemy. He could not explain the feeling and he didn't try. Dimly in the back of his mind was the thought that, had he not stopped, he might be a mile or more away from this spot and hence that much closer to safety.

HE HEARD Ted over the walkie-talkie, realized that the voice had been droning in his ears for several minutes. "Calling—calling—damn it, Bat, what happened? Where are you?"

And his answer, certainly a ridiculous one: "Keep your shirt on! I can't leave until I do something. Won't take a minute—I hope..."

The armored things had pulled the stem half way to the ground, and grouped about it, heaped one atop the other, they continued tugging. Above them, the yellow flower began to shake itself.

It shook and shook—and something tumbled out. O'hara didn't know what, but it might have been a spore. Another followed, and another. The spores settled to the ground slowly, some of them falling on the red armored domes.

The crab-like things began to scurry away! Some of them did not make it, rolling over, their legs beating feebly at the thin atmosphere for a time. And then they succumbed. But others came, and the plant could not drop its spores fast enough.

O'hara took out his revolver and fired at the mass of red armor. His bullet shattered one of the creatures, maybe two. But the shot roared flatly in the thin atmosphere, and when it stopped, so did the wailing. The gun's roar had destroyed whatever mechanism produced the sound, and O'hara saw the effects at once.

Slowly, the rock-bound flowers opened, exposed themselves. Red domes were everywhere, little legs scurrying beneath them. The crabs began to feed. The tall flower shook itself furiously now, scattering spores in all directions. But none of them reached far enough, and the crabs continued their feast.

"What a prize fool I am!" O'hara mumbled. "I try to help those plants and I bring on their downfall instead—"

"I still don't get it," Pops McGee persisted. "All this stuff about plants and crabs and little spores, what's it got to do with a green-eyed Martian Princess and how you rescued her? Not to mention how she saved your life. Though why any green-eyed Martian Princess would save *your* life beats hell out of me!"

"Well, why don't you let me finish? You know, people always talk about born explorers; they seem to have an instinct for it. They kind of know exactly what they have to do, and at the right time. Sometimes it looks

like a mighty stupid thing, but they do it anyway, and it pays off. Me, I hadn't done so good along those lines. I fired a shot to help that big plant, and it looked like I'd done the reverse. But then, well, then I had one of those explorer's impulses they talk about. No, I won't try to explain it..."

O'hara ran forward, shook the tall stem. Spores tumbled down all about him, clinging to his mackinaw. Briefly, he tried to brush them away, found that they had imbedded themselves so firmly in the fabric that he couldn't get them out. He shrugged, picked up a handful and ran back to where the crabs were making their feast. Somehow, he realized the spores did not stick to the smooth leather of his gloves, but only to the coarse wool of the mackinaw.

He came among the red creatures, sprinkled them with the tiny spores. It didn't take long; it hardly took any time at all. One by one the crabs perished. Some of them tried to get away, but O'hara could take great bounding leaps in the light gravity, and he pursued them with his handful of spores until not a one was left alive.

A score of spores still clinging to his mackinaw, he turned and stalked away. For a moment he stopped to look at the tall plant which seemed to regard him intently out of its solemn green eye. The eye pulsed, flashed brighter.

A wink? O'hara snorted, cut out across the sparse vegetation of Syrtis and toward the waiting strip of rust desert and the dry sea-bottom beyond it.

"Don't tell me that's the end of your story?"

"Nope. More like the beginning, I guess. I still had to get from Syrtis

to the sea, but as I walked I did a lot of figuring. On Earth there's nothing like that big plant. Maybe it's something like radar, but whatever it is, the flower can somehow learn when those crabs are coming. It beams out this warning and all the little plants hide away safely. And those spores were its own protection, only then I didn't know just what the spores could do.

"Anyway, like I said, I had to get from Syrtis to the sea, and I only had three days. Then—no more oxygen. Oh, there's oxygen here in the atmosphere of Mars, but it's so thin that it doesn't do any good. It was a pretty grim thought as I walked along, let me tell you. That first day, I made it to the edge of Syrtis. As you'll see after we're here a while, there's not much twilight on Mars. I stopped just when the sun was going down, and by the time I had my stove going, it was dark. There's one thing about night on Mars, Pops; you should see the stars. Because the atmosphere's thin, they don't look much like the stars of Earth. And the Milky Way—man! The Milky Way looked like a shining bridge of snow flakes.

"But I didn't have much time to admire it. I could only try to keep out the numbling cold..."



He arched his frozen body around the tiny stove, curling up, he realized with a smile, almost in the fetal position. For a while it helped, but he found that the heat did not penetrate to his back. He ate two strips of the dried meat, hammered a chunk of ice out of his canteen and let it thaw in his mouth. Soon he was beating his frozen hands together, but they were as stiff as twin slabs of wood, and they hurt.

"Ted!" he called into the radio, hardly able to control his chattering teeth as he spoke. "Ted, I don't know what to do. The stove doesn't

help much, and I've got to use oxygen from one of the tanks to keep it going. If I shut it off, I'll freeze—"

"How do you feel?"

"That's a good question! Lousy."

"No, I don't mean that. Maybe if you kept right on walking, maybe if you went without sleep altogether, you'd get here... No, the hell with that! I'm going up to get you."

O'hara shook his head savagely, called back: "No! That's out! You'd lose take-off fuel if you did that."

"I can't let you die—"

"Let me see what I can do about that. Not you! If someone doesn't come back alive from this expedition, it might be a long time before the government sends another one. But I'll see if I can do what you said. I'll keep right on going—"

IT WAS a mistake. Numb and stiff, he got to his feet. He picked up the stove, tried to unscrew the oxygen feed-line with his frozen fingers. Half through it, he dropped the stove and the cylinder of oxygen came loose of its own accord. It fell to the sand and he jumped down after it, fumbling with the feed-line. He couldn't close it!

He was all thumbs—frozen thumbs. He heard the oxygen hissing out, and he saw something ludicrous in his futile attempts to shut the valve. He began to laugh. He chuckled softly at first, but soon the laughter welled up from his throat in great choking sobs.

I'm dead, he thought. I'm as good as dead because I have about half an oxygen tank left. I wonder what it's like to suffocate slowly...

He sat down in the sand and let the dry, powdery stuff run through his gloved fingers. It should have been frozen solid, but with hardly any moisture on Mars, things didn't freeze that way. At first, he thought he'd sit there without moving and let the cold get him first. That would be quicker, less painful, a cleaner way to die. But he clambered to hands and

knees, stumbled, somehow got to his feet. The dry cold winds whipped against the exposed parts of his face, and he could feel his parched, frozen skin beginning to crack and flake off. He wouldn't make a pretty corpse, he decided.

The wind alone seemed his ally. The wind was behind him, and it prodded him on with quick frozen gusts. Aside from that, Mars was an enemy. Cold, implacable—and for that he was afraid. Nothing physical confronted him. Nothing told him to stand up and fight, for there was nothing with which to battle. No, he could merely plod forward, and before long he would die.

“That does it!” Pops McGee chortled.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, for a time I thought all this really happened, just like you was telling it. But you're here now, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you only had half an oxygen tank left, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“With about seventy miles to go, huh? Bah—that's the wildest story of them all! You'd a smothered less than half way!”

O'hara smiled. “That's what I thought, too. But I couldn't just cash in my chips without a fight, I guess, so I kept on walking. I walked all through that night, and when morning came I was pretty surprised, for I hadn't frozen to death. Only trouble was, the oxygen tank registered almost empty. Let me tell you, Pops, that's one lousy feeling! The sun came up fast; the sun warmed me; I sat down and I ate something and I almost felt good. But I knew that by noon I wouldn't have any air left.

“After a little while I found myself playing with the revolver. Squeeze the trigger once, quick, and it would all be over... I must have

felt disgusted with myself; I hurled that revolver away, as far as I could throw it, and on Mars that can be a pretty long way. Then I started to walk...”

HE LOST all track of time. Later in the morning, he took a slow sip from his second canteen, as if he still had to measure out his water carefully. Things began to warm up fast: it might have been close to fifty degrees Fahrenheit by noon.

And then the oxygen tank hissed on emptiness.

He felt it deep down in his lungs first—a sick, empty feeling which spread. He felt it there and hoped it would stay there, but soon it left his chest and traveled out to his throat and to all the muscles of his body. Yes, he thought vaguely, he'd make quite a corpse, flat on his back on the Martian sands, the bright plaid mackinaw shining in the sun, the strange plant spores dotting it with green...

The lack of air brought hysteria. Not knowing why, he began to unbutton his mackinaw. He soon thought better of it, closed the coat tightly around him. He toyed with the oxygen mask, with the useless mask which hid his face from the sun. He tore the mask from his face, hurled it away, breathed deeply of the thin Martian atmosphere which did not harbor sufficient oxygen to keep him alive.

McGee was breathless now. “I'll admit it, Bat; you tell a good story. The whole thing's impossible, of course—but what happened then?”

“Well, it was tough going, because the day was dry and the night was cold. But I got back to the ship early the following morning, and—”

“Damn it, I knew you'd wind up with something like that! You got

[TURN TO PAGE 124]

ORDEAL ON SYRTIS

[Continued From Page 104]

back without air, huh? Of all the impossible—"

"Let me finish, Pops. You see, I had all the air I wanted. I told you the green-eyed Princess saved my life."

"What? I didn't even see no green-eyed Princess in that story!"

"No?" That big plant was the Princess! You know, the one with the green eye? The plant which ruled all the other smaller plants and told them when the crab-things came."

"Okay, okay!" Pops snorted. "So that's your princess. But how did she save your life?"

"Like I said, she was grateful. After all, hadn't I saved her? Seriously, it was nothing like that. Everything worked by instinct. I thought it was something like radar, but whatever it was, she knew when the crabs were coming. She beamed out this warning, and all the little plants hid inside their fleshy parts.

"Also, the princess plant had her own weapon, don't forget; she had those little spores which could kill the

ORDEAL ON BYRTIS

crabs. And remember how some of those spores stuck to my mackinaw? Well, I was in for quite a surprise when I took off my useless oxygen mask. I kept right on breathing!"

"You what?"

"I kept right on breathing. Those spores were poison for the crabs, but you know the old saying about one man's poison. Those spores are going to be pretty valuable one fine day, after we establish a permanent colony on Mars."

"Why? So what if they poison the crabs? They didn't look like they could hurt you much, not from what you said."

"Oh, I'm not talking about that. You know what killed the crabs?"

"Oxygen?"

"Yeah, oxygen. Those spores attract oxygen just like a candle flame attracts moths. Don't forget, there's oxygen in the Martian air, only it's not concentrated enough to do any good. Well, those spores concentrate it. All the oxygen in the neighborhood comes around those spores, and it's a pretty pleasant way to breathe, no mask, no bulky tanks. It's a good weapon for my green-eyed princess, for oxygen kills the crabs. But it was a life-saver for me."



Everyone knew that Pops would have to settle for that. It was the truth, of course, and O'hara could show them when they stepped out on the Martian tundra for the first time in the morning. Meanwhile, there were some tales to be told.

"Okay," Pops decided after a time, "you win. But you still haven't done anything about that Saturn story. Remember, I had you going into the rings after your gal-friend, and—"

Bat O'hara picked it up from there. Before long he was doing a pretty good job, and although it seemed an impossible situation, McGee had a hunch B. Atwood O'hara would be able to talk his way out of it.