

PLANET STORIES



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RETURN of a LEGEND

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN



Mars' fever they called it. Could the wild boy cheat the Red Planet's skeleton deserts and the dogged trailers from Port Laribee?

PORT LARIBEE with its score of Nisson huts, sealed against the lifeless atmosphere, the red dust and the cold, was a shabby piece of Earth dropped onto Mars.

There, Dave Kort was the first wilderness tramp to be remembered. In warm seasons he'd plod into Port Laribee, burdened by a pack that only the two-fifths-of-terrestrial gravity put within the range of

human muscles. He was a great, craggy old man, incredibly grimed and browned, his frostbites bandaged with dry Martian leaves tied on with their own fibre.

His snag-toothed grin was bemused and secret through the scratched plastic of his air-hood. He'd trade carven stones, bits of ancient metal, or oddities of plant and animal life for chewing tobacco, chocolate, heavily lined clothes, mending supplies, and new parts for his battered portable air-compressor.

He'd refuse a bath with disdain. And at last his rusty, monosyllabic speech would wax eloquent—comparatively.

"So long, fellas," he'd say. "See yuh around."

The equinoxial winds, heralding autumn, would moan thinly like the ghosts of the Martians wiped out in war those ages back. Dust would blur the horizon of that huge, arid triangle of sea-bottom called Syrtis Major—still the least sterile land on the Red Planet. At night the dry cold would dip to ninety below zero, Fahrenheit.

The specialists of Port Laribee, who watched the spinning wind-gauges, thermometers and barometers, and devoted monastic years to learning about Mars, said that they'd never see Dave Kort again.

But for three successive summers after he had quit his job as helper among them, he showed up, tattered, filthy, thinned to a scarecrow, but grinning.

Young Joe Dayton, fresh from Earth and full of Mars-wonder, asked him a stock question that third summer. The answer was laconic. "Oh—I know the country. I get along."

But at the fourth winter's end, Dave Kort did not return. No one ever saw him again, nor found among the ruins and the quiet pastel hues of Mars the dried thing that had been Kort. Somewhere drifting dust had buried it. No one had quite understood him in life. If any affection had been aimed at him, it was for a story, not a man. The man died but the story thrived.

Dave Kort had lived off this wilderness, alone and with sketchy artificial aids, for three Martian years—almost six by Earth reckoning. It was quite a feat. For one thing, the open air of Mars has a pressure of only one-ninth of the terrestrial, and

above ground it contains but a trace of oxygen.

How Kort had turned the trick was not completely inconceivable.

In making starch from carbon-dioxide and moisture under the action of sunlight, the green plantlife of Mars produces oxygen just as Earthly vegetation does. But instead of freezing it lavishly to the air, many of those Martian growths, hoarding the essentials of life on a dying world, compress their oxygen into cavities in stem and root and underground capsule, to support later a slow tissue-combustion like that of warm-blooded animals, thus protecting their vitals from cold and death.

Despoiling these stores of oxygen with a pointed metal pipette attached to a greedily sucking compressor, was a known means of emergency survival on Mars. Thus you could laboriously replenish the oxygen flasks for your air-hood. Simple—yes. But tedious, grinding, endless. Dayton could imagine.

Food and shelter were also necessary. But under thickets there is a five-foot depth of fallen vegetation, dry, felty, slow to decay in this climate, accumulating autumn after autumn for Martian centuries. In this carpet are those oxygen-holding capsules and roots, often broken, freeing their contents for the spongy surrounding material to hold. There too grow much green algae—simpler plants of the same function. There are the fruit and seed-pods of the surface growths, sheltered from cold. And there, the remaining animal life has retreated.

Fuzzy, tawny things that twitter; fat, mammal-like excavators that never care to see the sky, and many-jointed creatures that resemble Earthly ants only in their industry and communal skills. Above ground they build their small, transparent air-domes—bubblelike structures formed of hardened secretion from their jaws. There they shelter their special gardens and sun their young.

So, for a man able to borrow methods unlike his human heritage, there were ways to keep alive in the raw Martian wilds.

ONCE, Lorryng, the physician, said to Joe Dayton, "Kort must have burrowed, too—like a bear. Is that human? Of course the tip of the Syrtis Major tri-

angle here at Port Larabee is far north. But even if he could have gotten all the way to the tropics, the nights are still bitter. Even so, the big question is not how he lived like he did, but why?"

Yes, this was a point which Dayton had often wondered about, frowning with thick, dark brows, while his wide mouth smiled quizzically above a generous jaw. What had impelled Kort to a solitude far deeper than that of an old-time hermit or desert-rat? Had he been a great child lumbering by instinct through the misfit fogs of his mind to a place where he felt at peace?

Dayton favored another explanation as the main one.

"Why, Doc?" he said to Lorrington, as they played cards in the rec-hall. "The answer is in all of us, here. Or we would never have come to Mars. Where was there ever such a place of history, enigma, weird beauty, fascination to men? You can't be neutral. Hating Mars, you'd never stay. Half loving it, like most of us, you would—for a while. Loving it, you'd want a much closer look than is possible at Port Larabee, from which we sally forth like rubbernecks. Too bad that Mars is too rough for men, in the long run. Too bad that the Martians are extinct. Once there were even machines to maintain a better climate."

Other specialists were within hearing. They laughed, but they knew what Dayton meant. They'd seen the dun deserts, the great graven monoliths, dust scoured, the heaps of rust. Being here had the charm of a quest for ancient treasure, marked by the mood of death.

Parsons, the metallurgist, said: "Funny, but I remember Kort's posture—bent, just like the figures in the bas-reliefs. Though Martian skeletal structure was far different. That sounds as if part of Mars sneaked into Kort's body, doesn't it? Hell, there's no pseudo-science here! Plodding through dust, and at low gravity, you just naturally develop that posture as a habit. Now call me nuts."

"You're nuts, Parsons," Ketrinch, the biologist, obliged.

Not many days later, Frank Terry and his son came to Port Larabee. Bringing a seven-year-old boy—a bright little guy named Will—to unlivable Mars, marked

the elder Terry at once as a screwball.

Was the mother dead or divorced? Was Terry a remittance man, exiled by his family? He seemed to have enjoyed the good things. . . Such curiosity was bad taste. Forget it.

"We like the sound of the place," Frank Terry explained. "We thought we'd take some photographs, really get friendly with the place. . ."

His listeners foresaw the withering of Terry's familiar enthusiasm, and his departure within a week. Except maybe Dayton guessed differently. The intellectual Terry was not much like Dave Kort. Yet perhaps a kinship showed in a certain expression, as if their natures had the same basis.

During the next Martian year, Dayton and the observatory crew saw the sporting-goods-store sheen vanish utterly from these two. They carried less and less equipment with each succeeding sally into the wilderness. Dried lichen, stuffed inside their airtight garments, soon served them as additional insulation against cold.

From their lengthening jaunts they brought back the usual relics—golden ornaments, carvings, bits of apparatus that had not weathered away. And the usual photographs of blue-green thickets, war-melted cities, domes celled like honeycombs, suggesting a larval stage in the life-cycle of the ancients, and of country littered with shattered crystal—much Martian land had once been roofed with clear quartz, against the harshening climate.

Frank Terry became bearded and battered. Will ceased to be a talkative, sociable youngster. Still devoted to his father, he turned shy, sullen, and alert in a new way.

He had a pet like an eight-inch caterpillar, though it was not that at all. It was warm-blooded, golden-furred, intelligent. It had seven beady eyes. It crept over the boy's shoulders, and down inside his garments, chirping eerily. Except for his father it was the only companion the boy wanted.

SO SUMMER ended, and the dark blue sky was marked by angry haze. Vitrac, chief scientist, said, "You're not going out again, are you, Terry?"

The kid gave the real answer, "Let's go,

Dad, I want to. Besides, Digger is home-sick."

The next morning, when the equinoxial storm closed in, the Terrys had vanished.

Joe Dayton led the search party. He found nothing. Mars is small but still vast. Its total surface equals all the land on Earth. Since the first men had come, not one in a thousand of its square miles had been touched by human boots.

Wandering explorers found Frank Terry's mummy late that spring, in a deep part of Syrtis Major, with old ocean salt around it. When they brought it to Port Larabee it was not completely dried out. So Terry must have survived through the winter.

The boy must surely be dead, too. But stories drifted back to the Port—of holes found in the felted soil, and of a small, heavily-burdened figure that scampered away at the sight of a man.

The general opinion was that this was pure romancing, to intrigue the tourists who came out that year in their bright, excited crowds, charmed by the Red Planet yet sheltered from it, equipped from shops recommended by the most debonaire of space wanderers—if such existed. Many were eager to stay, girls among them, bright-faced, sure, with the thrill in their eyes and voices. Ah, yes—but how long would they have lasted in this too rich and rough a strangeness?

Joe Dayton shrugged, sad that his opinion had to be so mean. There were soberer arrivals, too. Relatives of Port Larabee staff-members, mostly. Willowby's wife. Doc Lorrington's small daughter, Tillie, sent out for a visit. Among the tourists there were a few additional kids.

There was also the lost Frank Terry's elder brother, Dolph Terry, big, but prim beneath an easy smile. Also there was a Terry girl, Doran by name. She did not seem much like either of her brothers—the mystical wanderer, Frank Terry, nor the slightly stuffed-shirted Dolph. She was much younger than either of them, sun-browned, a bit puzzled at being on another world, not terribly pretty, but quick with good-humored shrugs and friendly chuckles whenever she could put aside her worry about her nephew.

Dayton had some belief in the tales from the wilderness. For he'd known young Will Terry. Besides, beneath the ineptness of kids, he recognized an adaptability beyond that of adults. So his work was cut out for him.

"After all, William was Frank's son," Dolph told Dayton. "Frank was—what he was. But my sister and I are here to see that the boy is located. Perhaps he can still have a normal childhood."

"We'll do what we can," Dayton replied, smiling crookedly to dampen the man's naive and assertive air.

For the last half of the long summer the search went on, many visitors took brief part, ranging well beyond the short tractor lines which encompassed the tourist's usual view of Mars.

Dolph Terry was dogged, but clumsy and irritable. His sister's rugged cheerfulness and interest in her surroundings, pleased Dayton.

Still, at the end—due as much as anything to sheer luck—it was Joe Dayton who captured Will Terry single-handed. It was almost autumn again. Joe flushed the scampering figure from a thicket. The boy's limp was to Dayton's advantage. He made a flying tackle, and the savage, grimy thing that was an eleven-year-old human, was fighting in his grasp.

His crooned words, finding their way through the thin texture of two air-hoods and the tenuous atmosphere between, did not soften the ferocity of those pale eyes. Such eyes can be like a blank mask, anyway—not unintelligent, but expressive of a different thought-plane.

"Easy, Will—easy, fella," Dayton said. "You couldn't last much longer out here. Your compressor must be nearly worn out."

Reassurance failed. "Lemme go!" the boy snarled blurredly, his speech rusted by solitude. Helped by his father, he had learned the tricks of survival, here. His dimmed past was so different from his present life that perhaps it seemed fearfully alien to him. As he bore the struggling boy to the tractor-vehicle, Dayton had the odd idea that a Martian, trapped by a man, might behave like this.

He recalled old yarns of boys raised by wolves or apes. Here was the same simple

loss of human ways—not by soul-migration, but the plain molding of habit by a bizarre environment.

AT THE Port Larabee hospital, Will Terry was at first least disturbed when left alone. But his whimpers at night reminded Dayton of the mewling of a Martian storm.

Dolph Terry cursed the waiting for an Earth-liner and the lack of a psychiatrist on Mars. Doran had no luck either at making friends with Will. Meanwhile the tempests began.

But Doran had an idea. Visitors were still awaiting passage home, among them children.

"Kids are kids, Joe," she told Dayton. "They may be able to reach Will. I talked it over with Doc Lorrington."

She was right. Gradually, then more quickly, the trapped-lynx glare faded from Will's eyes as he accepted the scared but fascinated companionship of the other youngsters in the hospital. He still had Digger. At last he let the others pet the fuzzy creature. The strangeness dimmed on both sides. Kid-brashness returned. Perhaps in the whimsy and fantasy of children, that could accept even the humanizing of beast and beetle, Will and his new friends found a common denominator for his life on Mars. He became a hero. Doran and Joe overheard some of his bragging.

"Sure I can work an air-compressor. Dad showed me. He used to say that Mars was home. I'm going back."

One morning Will was gone from the hospital. It came out that a hospital orderly had been diverted from watchfulness for a minute by other children. Two air-hoods, Mars-costumes, and compressors were gone. Also another boy named Danny Bryant.

The complaint of Lorrington's own tomboy eight-year-old completed the picture, "They didn't want me along!"

That day the savage wind moaned and the dust trains across the sky were tawny. Danny Bryant's folks were near hysteria. In all the foolishness of boys, there seemed nothing to equal this. Dolph Terry seemed to wonder blankly what sort of wily thing his brother had sired and trained. The visitors who had been charmed by Mars were

sullen and tense. The remaining kids were scared and solemn.

Doran's eyes were big with guilt and worry. "My idea caused the trouble, Joe," she told Dayton. "I've got to do something. I've got to follow Will and bring those boys back. I can live out there if Will can."

Dayton eyed her thoughtfully. It did not seem like such a tragedy to him, except of course, for the Bryants. He could understand this love for the wild Martian desert.

"Marry me, Doran, and we'll go together," Joe Dayton said.

So that was how it was. Dolph might think his whole family mad. Vitrac, chief scientist, who performed the ceremony, might think so too.

Joe and Doran ranged far ahead of the other searchers. Sometimes, in the hiss of the tempest, they thought they heard the weeping of a child. So they blundered through dust-drifts and murk, following what always proved a false lead.

The first night fell, a shrieking maelstrom of deathly cold, black as a pocket. An inflatable tent would have been a hardship for chill-stiffened fingers to set up in such a wind. They had no such burden. They burrowed beneath a thicket instead, into the layer of dry vegetation. For this there were no better tools than their heavy gloves. They dug deep, kicking the felty stuff behind them to plug the entrance, shutting out even the wail of the storm.

"The strangest honeymoon, ever!" Doran laughed.

Musty air was trapped around them, high in oxygen-content. To enrich it further they slashed hollow root-capsules with their knives. A little warmth was being generated in those roots. Above was the additional insulation and airseal of drifting dust.

Joe could breathe here without an air-hood, and hold his wife close in savage protection and regret and apology for the soft, man-made luxuries that should be, especially now, and were not. Instead they were in darkness, under Martian soil and dead leaves. A grub's paradise. Ancient beings of the Red Planet might have lived like this when the need arose, but it was an existence far off the beaten track for humans.

"When we get back I'll make it all up to you, Doran," Joe kept insisting.

THERE was a fear in him—of conforming for too long to the demands of this weird environment and of somehow losing a human heritage.

"I'm reading your mind, Joe," Doran laughed. "Don't worry. We both love the smell of coffee and bacon, too much. And music, and nice furniture, and walks in the park. We're not like Frank was, or young Will perhaps still is. No, this will make us want such things more—tie us tighter to Earth."

At dawn they blundered on. During their third night underground they were raided while they slept. Some chocolate bars and other food-concentrates disappeared. And a pencil of Joe's. Their two-way radio would no longer work. The chuckling, chirping inquisitive creatures of the Martian soil had crept into its case and broken it.

Thus the Daytons, out of contact with Port Larabee, did not hear how Danny Bryant staggered back, dazed, frost-bitten, and half smothered, to his parents' arms.

The storm ended after five days. The small sun blazed in the steely sky, which seemed as brittle as frozen air. There was a sharp lifting of mood. Go back to Port Larabee? The Daytons were tempted. But they had not yet found the boys. Besides, they were far afield. And with much of their supplies used up or stolen, the work of mere survival consumed time and energy and slowed travel. So it was almost as well to push on, wasn't it?

It seemed that they were always using pointed pipette and compressor to refill oxygen flasks from the hollow parts of vegetation. At dawn they collected hoarfrost crystals wrung from the arid atmosphere by the nocturnal cold, for drinking water. They ate underground fruit and the starchy pulps of certain roots. Wary of poison, they tasted untried things cautiously.

Mars hogs that tunnelled in an eternal blind search for food, were fair game in the darkness beneath the thicket leaf-carpet. Dayton had a tiny ato-stove that served for their meagre cooking.

Weeks passed and a strange life-pattern was set as the Daytons moved south, deeper

into broadening Syrtis Major. Maybe it was a bit warmer. Some paper-dry growths were still blue-green. More were brown from the winter dryness. Necessities were harder to find.

Sometimes, among the pastel-tinted thickets and low hills, there were patches of real Martian desert, red and lifeless.

Night followed exhausting day, and how welcome was the warmth of a burrow where one could nurse the frostbites acquired in the frigid dawn.

Several times footprints, large-booted but short-paced, led the Daytons on, only to be lost in rocky ground and lichen.

Twice Joe and Doran crossed the war-fused wrecks of huge cities. Fallen hothouse roofs littered the ruins. The piles of rust must have been irrigation pumps, spaceship ramps, climate-controlled apparatus.

In tower, storehouse, and avenue were the skeletons, with their odd, vertical ribs to house huge lungs.

Some devices still worked. Joe found a rod, probably of corrosion-resistant platinum. He pressed its stud and for an instant, before it became useless, it flashed fire that melted part of a fanciful wall-carving.

The struggle to survive harshened further. Once it was bitter water, oozing up from some deep irrigation pipe, that staved off death by thirst.

Several times oxygen was obtained only by lying prone over a teeming colony of the chitinous creatures whose instinct was to roof with a protecting airdome of gluten, anything that promised to be food. These Mars ants—ordinarily to be avoided—admitted air to the domes they built from their deepest buried tunnels and chambers.

OFTEN Joe looked at his wife, knowing that they both had changed. They were tattered, and a little like the bas-relief figures. They were Dave Kort, and Frank and Will Terry over again. Doran's teeth were very white in a face browned by sunshine filtered only by the rare Martian air. She was very thin, but there was an oblique charm in her features. Or had his very conceptions of beauty altered subtly, conforming to a now familiar environment?

Thinking back to Port Larabee and Earth

itself was often like recalling substanceless dreams, so different were such memories. And was the fading of revulsion for even the scurrying builders of the airdomes occasion for deeper fear because it represented the loss of another part of one's natural self?

Joe often worried. Others had been drawn to Mars too, eager to search out the mysteries of its past and people—all of this an intriguing fabric—but most Earthmen had the sense to realize in time that it was a graveyard world, unfit for humans. For to live the life of Mars you had to stop being human. Conditioning grimed into you like the red dust.

Nor was the trap just imaginary. The most frightening part was knowing that Doran was with child. Damn the pulse-beats of life that had no regard for circumstances!

Joe could be glad only that she remained human enough to be pettish and optimistic by turns.

"We can't get back, can we, Joe?" she'd say. "But maybe it'll be all right. It's a long time, yet."

Should they try to hole up, somewhere? That wasn't much good, either. Even in spring there wouldn't be enough resources in one place to sustain life for long. They had to keep moving. So when again they saw those boot-tracks, they felt free to follow.

Milder days came. At noon the temperature reached fifty degrees, F. The country brightened in pastel beauty after the vernal storms. There were gorgeous flowerlike growths. The tracks would vanish and appear again, seeming to mark no single trail but a series of excursions from somewhere among the hills to the south.

Once Doran and Joe heard a thin halloo or scream of defiance.

One of their two air-compressors quit beyond repair, making it twice the job to fill their oxygen flasks. This could be fatal, now.

Soon after they entered the hill-gorges there was a rock-fall, too close to be a thing of accident or coincidence. Later there was a swift-dying flicker that turned a spot of dust incandescent.

Later that afternoon, amid blue shadows

from towering monoliths, Joe met an attack as sudden and savage as a bobcat's. The creature sprang down at him from a ledge, clawing, kicking, striking with a knife. Joe had a bad time until his greater strength won.

Doran helped hold her nephew down. Will Terry was battered, hardened, scarred—scarcely recognizable with his teeth bared.

But, oddly, Joe knew just what to say to soothe him.

"Will, you can see that we're like you. Maybe we don't want to be, but we are, now. We can't drag you back again to Port Larabee."

The kid relaxed a little. His pale eyes turned puzzled but wary.

"About the other boy, Will—Danny Bryant?" Doran asked.

Will's lip curled. "He was weak and dumb," he said, fumbling with unused words. "I took him back long ago."

"You did fine, Will," Joe said. "Now what have you found here in the hills? You've been camping in one place for a while. Show us."

Joe had to use harsh command against the sullenness still in the boy. He did so bluntly, driven by grim hope and need.

Thus, before sunset, Doran and he found something they needed.

"Dad wanted such a place," the kid said, half-proudly.

IT WAS less than optimism promised—just a small, deep valley, pretty as a painting, but quietly forbidding, too. Joe had seen others almost like it. Martian growths clogged it, sprouting new blue-green leaves. The ruins were far less damaged than in the cities. There were countless little domes of the ant-creatures, indicating some underground water.

Nimble Will led the way downward and across the valley to a stout structure. It was not very unusual, just another relic in a region away from the fiercest path of war. Here might have been a last refuge, after the death of millions, the breakdown of machinery, and the rapid worsening of Martian climatic conditions. Crystal roofs lay shattered around the ornate central massiveness. But one wing with thicker glaze still stood—sealable.

Doran's eyes lighted as she and Joe and her nephew went into the deserted interior through the double doors of an airlock which some last, fleeing Martian had not closed.

Hardy wilderness plants had intruded into this hothouse but there still were troughs of soil, proving that this had been a garden sealed against cold, a place of fruit and flower.

"We might try to use this, Joe," Doran said, her voice thin in the heavy stillness.

He nodded. But his gratitude was tinged with scared and bitter overtones. He hurried to explore the central edifice, which must have been closed before the kid came, for the preservation of things inside was good. There were odd cylindrical cells, niches dark and dusty, cubicles piled with metal boxes. There was even what seemed a kind of machine-shop.

And there was a valve which, from the footprints in the dust, Will had tried to turn. Joe accomplished this now with a levering metal bar. Out in the dry hothouse pool a spout jetted rusty water.

"The underground storage cisterns are intact," Joe was soon explaining. "I prayed there'd be some."

Joe Dayton was grateful, yet not happy.

Grimly he began again the bitter toil of survival, the others helping. Like bizarre harvesters they tore up great bundles of roots and stalks and piled them inside the hothouse. Briefly the blue sunset shadows were long, over that weird, beautiful valley. Then the dusk came, and the faint frost haze of the always frigid nights.

"We'd better hurry before we freeze," Joe growled irritably. "When we get a lot of this stuff inside we'll tramp on it to break the oxygen-capsules. By morning there should be breathable atmosphere under this roof. Later, vegetation planted inside will keep it fresh."

Joe Dayton's mood now had a taint of despair. Forced to try to settle in this place, he felt more than ever trapped. More than ever he felt as if the souls of those eon-dead beings depicted on carven walls that Phobos, the nearer moon, now illuminated, had been crowding into his human flesh and brain to push his own ego out. No, it was not witchcraft—it was simpler. Mars had

shaped its ancient inhabitants. Now it was working on Earthly material with the same, subtle, ruthless fingers.

When the task in the hothouse was finished, Joe went with his wife and nephew to burrow again away from the cold, and to eat and to sleep all in the manner which Mars compelled.

Joe wanted Doran and his child to keep their human ways. His child. That was his worst thought, now.

His mind pictured Will—tattered, wild, strange in thought and feeling. He had lived his first years on Earth. So how would it be with a child born on Mars? Joe cursed into his burry beard—curse the distance to Port Larabee which might as well not be there at all, so out of reach was it, so ineffectual, and so soon probably to be left deserted. Though bone weary, Joe did not sleep well that quiet night.

The next day, bathed and smiling, Doran still did not look quite Earthly to him. She was browned by Martian sun but the real difference that had come into her strong beauty was a thing of multiple detail, like the mark of persons used to the sea contrasted with those born to the plains—but deeper.

Scrubbed fairly clean, Will remained an urchin of Mars. Also scrubbed, and shaved, Joe felt more comfortable. Yet he knew that basically this restored nothing.

A DAY later he was wandering around outside the hothouse, trying to plan needed agricultural projects, when a faint scrape of pebbles made him wheel warily.

"People! Rescue!" were his first eager thoughts. But then he saw that the three figures, two large and one small, were creatures attuned to Mars in the same way as himself, and as helpless.

Yet when old friends were recognized, in spite of the deep changes, Joe Dayton felt a joyous lift.

"Doc Lorrington!" he shouted. "Kettrich. And Tillie. Hey! Hey, Doran! Will! Come here!"

Doctor Lorrington's tomboy daughter, a bit younger than Will, showed a grinning dirty face through a battered air-hood and said "Hi."

"We were trying to follow you most of

the time, Dayton," Lorrying stammered. "We hoped to find you and Doran, and maybe the Terry boy. But our tractor broke down, and we had to live off the land. While we still had the vehicle there didn't seem much reason why Tillie shouldn't come along. We'd begun to give up hope of finding any of you alive."

Minutes were spent questioning and explaining. They all went into the sealed hot-house. Kettrich, the biologist, had even saved a little coffee.

"For a celebration, if we ever located any of you missing ones," he said to Joe and Doran.

Kettrich sighed and went on, "Chief Vitrac, Lorson, and a dozen others are the only old timers left at the Port. The others have all gone, with Dolph Terry and the tourists. Humans are about done with Mars though I suppose a few will trickle out here from time to time."

With contemplative relish Doran sipped coffee brewed with crudely filtered water on an ato-stove. She smiled like any woman who has her man, and has found a place and a purpose.

"Not for humans," she mused. "That's one way of putting it. Still, it doesn't necessarily mean us. Let's face facts," she continued. "A natural selection was going on all the time. Thousands of people left, disgusted. A very few stayed grimly, or got trapped. On Earth I never thought much about Mars, but now I've been here so long. We're different, perhaps proudly so. Oh, we still like the things that Earth-people like, maybe more than ever. But the Old Ones here also had their comforts. We have Earth flesh and bone, we'll never be like them that way, and I'm glad. You can either say that Terrans are supremely adaptable, or that we are no longer quite human, and that there are Martians again. Because one *has* to be that to really live here, doesn't he? Mars won't be left wasted and sad.

We're some of its first new people. Among the explorers there must be others. More and more will come. Gradually, through the centuries, we'll build Mars back toward what it was.

Dayton stared at his wife, then down at the ancient flagging, then at the others. Tillie tittered. She was as brown as Will Terry and almost as attached to the Red Planet. Around her mended glove a fuzzy creature twined, chirping. Will and Tillie were children of Mars.

DORAN'S assessment of a situation in plain talk took away its dread for Joe, giving his Mars-love a chance. He began to feel at home. "Is my wife talking sense?" he asked puzzledly.

Kettrich and Lorrying had both been fascinated by this world, too—willing to devote years to it.

"Well, we can't radio Port Larabee," Lorrying chuckled. "But in any case we're stuck here for a long time. Meanwhile, there's food growing wild around us. There's water. There are tools, machines, and supplies to puzzle out. And a valley to reclaim as a start. Beyond that, the job gets bigger and more interesting."

Before sunset that day, Joe and Doran Dayton walked alone in the valley. The Earth-star was already silvery in the dark blue west. The hills were dun-hued and peaceful. The domes of the Mars-ants gleamed. Fantastic spring flowers wavered in the wind. Small dust-whirls stirred among the ruins.

Joe Dayton looked forward, gladly now, to the birth of his child on the Red Planet.

"I hope that the Neo-Martians won't become so separate that they'll forget to be friends with Terrans," Doran mused.

Joe nodded as his arm crept around her waist. To him legendary history and present fact had merged. The wind's rustle was no longer the whisper of the dead past.