

STARTLING STORIES

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May, 1950

A Complete Novel



WINE OF THE DREAMERS

By **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

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Here is the log of the first Earth to Mars expedition, as recorded in a space cylinder! A Hall of Fame Classic reprinted by popular demand

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SIGNBOARD

CHAPTER I

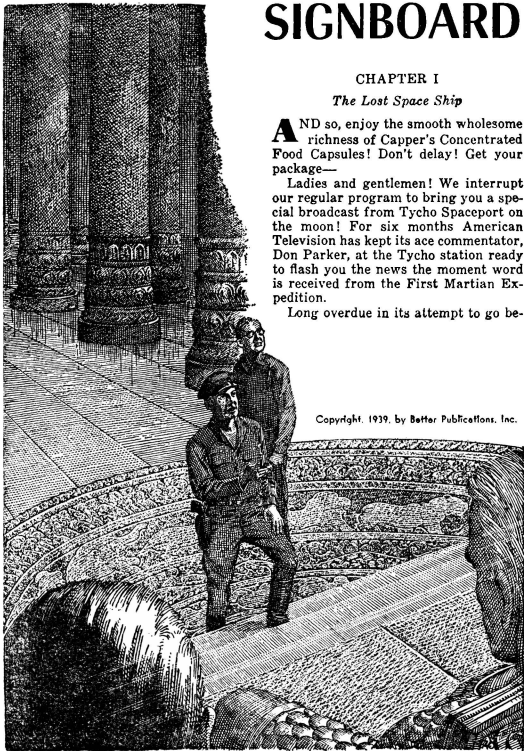
The Lost Space Ship

AND so, enjoy the smooth wholesome richness of Capper's Concentrated Food Capsules! Don't delay! Get your package—

Ladies and gentlemen! We interrupt our regular program to bring you a special broadcast from Tycho Spaceport on the moon! For six months American Television has kept its ace commentator, Don Parker, at the Tycho station ready to flash you the news the moment word is received from the First Martian Expedition.

Long overdue in its attempt to go be-

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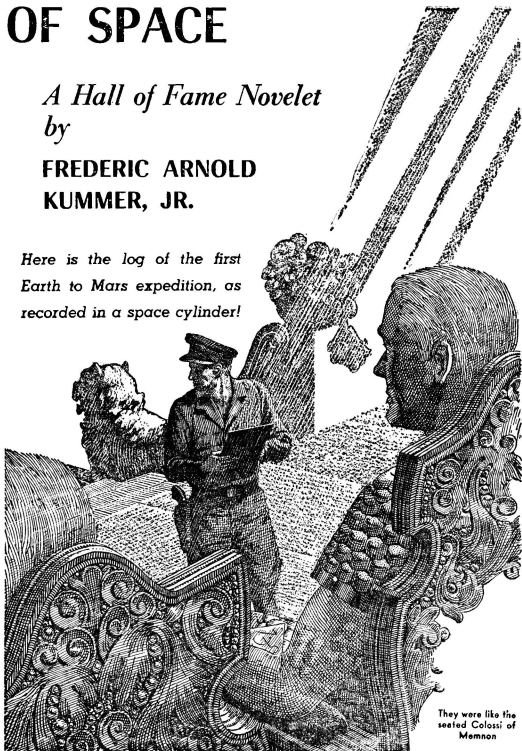


OF SPACE

A Hall of Fame Novelet
by

**FREDERIC ARNOLD
KUMMER, JR.**

*Here is the log of the first
Earth to Mars expedition, as
recorded in a space cylinder!*



They were like the
seated Colossi of
Memnon

yond Luna, to establish contact with our interplanetary neighbor Mars, the spaceship *Primus* has recently been given up for lost. For weeks rescue vessels have been combing space in hopes of sighting the missing ship, while work is being rushed on the cruiser *Martian* which, like the missing *Primus*, will have a cruising range sufficient to reach the red planet and return.

Meanwhile, since we have no ships at present capable of more than the Lunar journey, interest in the First Martian Expedition has waned. Today, however, there comes startling news from Tycho Spaceport, news of vital importance not only to those directly interested in the *Primus'* fate but to the entire world as well. We take you now to the Tycho Spaceport on the moon. Take it away, Don Parker!

* * * * *

Hello, Earth! Don Parker speaking to you from this cold chunk of rock we call the moon. At exactly one fifteen this afternoon our bridge game here in the radio shack was interrupted by a red flare of rockets, lighting up the livid pockmarked terrain outside. A spaceship was settling down over Landing Pit One.

As it slanted in we could see that it was the *New York*, which for the last two weeks had been cruising along the Martian route as far out as her fuel capacity would allow, in the hope of finding some news of the missing *Primus*. And by luck, Providence, what you will, they had succeeded! Aboard the *New York* was a message from the First Martian Expedition!

No doubt on your television screens you can see the tall weather-beaten man beside me. He is—step right up, Captain—Captain R. E. Stryker, master of the *New York*, who will tell you in his own words just how that message was received. Your mike, Captain Stryker!

* * * * *

Uh—thank you, Mr. Parker! Well, I—we were cruising about fifty thousand miles off Luna, heading seventy-two degrees, lunar lineation, in the di-

rection of Mars. I was in the navigation room, checking our gravitational drift, when I got a call from the bridge. Mr. Halkins, my first mate, had sighted a spot of light ahead which seemed to be a new and unknown star. It appeared as a glistening white speck against the blackness of space.

I swung the *New York* in that direction, focused my glasses upon the gleaming light. Instead of a distant star I realized that we were looking at a small highly-polished object, comparatively close and reflecting the sun's rays. Such things are visible incredible distances in the clear vacuum of space.

SLOWLY we edged toward it. The drifting object proved to be a cylindrical oxygen tank about two feet long, such as we knew the *Primus* had carried among her emergency supplies.

Halkins at once volunteered to bring the cylinder aboard. I cannot speak too highly of his courage and perseverance. Space-suited, connected to the ship by only a thin wire cable, he managed after many efforts to grasp the polished cylinder, to drag it through the airlock.

You can imagine our excitement when Halkins stepped from the airlock carrying the cylinder. Particularly when we saw the words "First Martian Expedition" painted upon it. We thought, of course, that it was a bit of wreckage, that the *Primus* had been blown up or hit by a meteor. Closer inspection, however, revealed that the cylinder's escape valve had been removed and its cap clumsily, though securely, welded into place.

At once our curiosity was aroused and I sent for Mr. Gillis, our chief engineer, to open the oxygen tank. Electric torches did the trick and we glanced into the cylinder.

At first it appeared to be empty but when Halkins turned it upside down a vivavox roll fell out.

It was the log of the *Primus*! Well, we didn't like to tamper with the roll without proper equipment, so we put about and headed at once for Tycho. We landed here some two hours ago. . . .

All right! Thank you very much Captain Stryker! This is Don Parker again, ladies and gentlemen. You have just heard Captain R. E. Stryker of the rescue ship *New York* tell of finding the message from the *Primus*. Here it is, this battered vivavox roll I hold in my hand.

As you can see the outer portion of the spaceship's log, consisting of the first month and a half's record of the *Primus*' flight, is hopelessly defaced. The heat of the welding operation which sealed the cylinder was unfortunately responsible for that.

As for what remains of the recording—well for me to attempt to describe such an absolutely incredible series of events would be futile. Upon this strip of cellophane is an explanation of the doom of Mars, of the great "canals" which mark its surface, of a stupendous, almost unbelievable effort on the part of an old dying civilization to bridge the gap of space and convey an awful warning to a new dawning world. It tells of the First Martian Expedition's strange fate, of the implacable stone images that drift forever in space, of inspiring courage and heroic sacrifice.

Here beside me you can see a vivavox speaker. I shall place in it what remains of the log-recording and you will hear the commander of the *Primus* tell in his own words the history of the First Martian Expedition. Just a minute please! All right! Ladies and gentlemen, the log of the *Primus*! The next voice to reach your ears will be that of Captain Howard Markland!

* * * * *

April twelfth. Sleep was again difficult last night. Without exercise, without mental stimulation of any sort, rest is scarcely required. Yet of all things we cherish sleep the most, since it is escape from the maddening, nerve-shattering monotony. The silence too is terrifying. We have had a full month of it since we shut off our rockets.

The slightest noises, footfalls, voices, the clatter of dishes, echo loudly in our metal prison, yet that is preferable to



SOME stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time.

Because "Signboard of Space," by Frederic Arnold Kummer, Jr., has stood this test, it has been nominated for SCIENTIFiction's HALL OF FAME

and is reprinted here.

In each issue we will honor one of the most outstanding fantasy classics of all time as selected by our readers.

We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and to perform a real service to the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow.

Nominate your own favorites! Send a letter or postcard to The Editor, STARTLING STORIES, 10 East 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. All suggestions are more than welcome!

the usual utter lack of sound. Up until a few weeks ago we were able to receive music and television shows from Tycho but the distance now is too great for radio reception.

The other three of our crew look like spectres, as indeed I do myself. They have a grayish pallor and their nerves are shot. Keppler has grown a beard and looks like a half-starved Viking. As rocket engineer he managed to keep occupied until several days ago. After the rockets had been shut off he commenced to overhaul the motors, cleaning, polishing, adjusting every piece of mechanism. Now that's finished and he wanders about like a lost soul.

Dr. Varian has been in that state for weeks. As our physicist and chemist he'll have plenty to do when we reach Mars—analyzing everything we touch, eat or breathe. But right now he has the jitters bad.

Little Braybrook bears up surprisingly well. Spends most of his time working at a treatise on the Lunar ice bugs—*grylloblatta campodeiformes*, he calls them—and speculating on the various forms of flora and fauna likely to be encountered on Mars.

As for me I thank heaven that the job of navigator and astronomer keeps one busy. Even so the eternal blackness, dotted by great brilliant stars, fills me with a terrible sense of our insignificance. Earth has faded to merely another point

of light in the heavens and I keep my telescope turned on Mars.

It is like a big red balloon now, twice the size of our own moon when seen from Earth, and its markings are most amazingly clear.

Well, so much for today. Kepler has concocted another of his famous mathematically accurate meals and is calling for us to come and get it. I suspect he puts a bit of benzedrine in them, for I notice that we usually feel cheerful and companionable after eating.

Markland closing this day's entry. Our position at noon, approximately 32 degrees, 14 minutes, 3.4812 seconds, Earth-solar triangulation.

APRIL thirteenth. With Kepler occupied in taking inventory of our supplies and Braybrook busy at his treatise, Dr. Varian and I spent the day in the control room studying Mars through the telescope. It makes a wonderful sight at present. The Schiaparelli canals are amazingly clear and many new ones, invisible from Earth, are evident. Also many more dark dots, the so-called oases.

Today the Lacus Phoenicis was turned toward us, a tangle of geometrically straight lines at the joinings of which were dark spots of varying size. I am impressed by the similarity of certain curiously regular designs, formed by the canals, to other designs which I have previously noticed upon the Fastigium Aryn.

More peculiar than anything else perhaps is the queer—well, you might say pattern—that unfolds as the planet turns before our gaze. Seen from Earth the canals are no more than a meaningless series of lines connecting black dots. Seer from here they are quite different.

The presence of those lines and dots which are invisible from Terra seems to tie the whole complex jumble into a regular pattern, orderly, mathematical, unquestionably the work of intelligent beings.

But what possible use, other than as canals or immense roads, could such a queer many-angled design have? Even

among super-beings such mighty works, sweeping across continents, girdling an entire globe, seem incredible.

Nor does it seem likely that such canals or great roads could have been planned or built all at one time. One would normally suppose that they had been constructed bit by bit, added to as the years passed.

Yet in such a case this queer design would hardly have been followed. Perhaps the silence, the monotony are beginning to get my nerves too—but I cannot drive this old pattern from my mind. Complex, bewildering, yet built according to some preconceived idea. The riddle of these strangely connected figures haunts me. They hold, I am somehow positive, the secret of Mars.

Position 30°17' 4.9206". Very close now. What does the future hold for us?

April Fourteenth. Everything okay. All machinery, air-purifier, lighting units and so on functioning perfectly. No solution to pattern of canals. 28° 2' 31".

April Fifteenth. Everything going like clockwork. Mars below us now. An interesting phenomenon to watch it drop from in front of us to its present position below. Light clouds hinder observation of markings.

Everyone excited over prospect of landing. Plan to switch on forward rockets tomorrow. Little Braybrook created a laugh by inadvertently snagging Kepler while trying out one of his butterfly nets. In another day or two we will know the secret of the canals. 26° 2' .004".

April sixteenth. This has been the most solemn, the saddest day since we left Luna. After little sleep and a hasty breakfast the others crowded up here to the navigation room. Clouds still prevented telescopic observation.

The planet's gravitational pull, however, showed strongly on our instruments. I was afraid my calculations were off—we seemed so near—but at last I realized that gravity had increased our speed tremendously.

At ten a.m. Kepler switched on our forward rockets. The nose of the *Primus* was immediately enveloped in

red flames and the familiar roar of the exhausts broke the silence. We were all speculating on our probable landing time when suddenly Keppler ran down the companionway to the engine room.

When he returned, he was frowning, chewing his lip.

"Rocket Number Two isn't firing," he said slowly. "The ignition system seems to be all right. Must be a stoppage in the firing jet. Impurities in the fuel."

None of us answered him. The *Primus* has four large rocket tubes, two feet in diameter. At the rear of each tube is a firing chamber into which a fuel jet and a spark-gap protrude, not unlike the cylinder of an old-fashioned internal combustion motor. If a bit of waste had clogged the jet it would be an almost impossible task to dislodge it.

I reproached myself bitterly for not having tried our rockets from time to time during the trip. Still, even the shortest test of our landing rockets would have slowed us considerably, costing us precious fuel.

"Any chance of making repairs?" Hansen demanded.

Keppler shook his head. "A two-day job to remove the recoil block behind the firing chamber," he muttered. "And by that time we'll have landed or crashed."

CHAPTER II

Braybrook's Sacrifice

KEPLER'S words killed any joy we might have felt over the prospect of reaching our destination. A landing on three rockets was ninety-percent luck. Even assuming they might overcome the gravitational pull, the repulsion force would be uneven, would tend to make the ship come in at a bad angle.

We would be like an autocar trying to run on three wheels—almost sure to slip off center, to crash. Still there was no turning back. We were already under the influence of Mars' gravity.

Hardly a dozen words were spoken all day. We spent hours in the control room,

eyes glued to the instrument panel. Keppler opened the three remaining rockets wide but even so we were coming in at a rate far in excess of normal landing speed. It became merely a question of how bad the crash would be.

I figured we would hit somewhere near Sabaeus Sinus but the location seemed unimportant now. Keppler estimated tomorrow at noon for the approximate time of our landing. Even benzedrine couldn't cheer us up this evening.

For the first time since leaving Luna I divided the night into watches. We were in too desperate a situation to take chances. Braybrook drew the first, Keppler the second, myself the third, Varian the fourth. I went directly to my bunk, worn out by worry, and fell into a troubled sleep.

Around midnight I was awakened by the sound of an excited voice calling Braybrook's name. I immediately sprang from my bunk, as did Dr. Varian, who slept across the cabin from me. Keppler, his face pale, was shouting for Braybrook.

"What's wrong?" Varian demanded sleepily.

"Can't find him." Keppler tugged nervously at his beard. "I woke up to take my watch, to relieve him—and he's gone!"

"Gone?" I said, a trifle sharply. "Don't be a fool! Where could he go? Must be aboard somewhere!"

"That's what I thought," Keppler muttered. "But—" He shook his head hopelessly.

Dr. Varian and I at once set out to search the ship. It did not take long to discover that Braybrook was missing. Absolutely mystified, we left the engine room, the supply hold, went up to the control room. Keppler was standing there like a run-down robot, his eyes on the instrument panel.

"Look!" he said, without turning.

I peered over his shoulder, gasped. According to the gravitational indicator we were slowly going away from Mars!

"What's it all about?" Varian muttered.

"Don't you see?" Keppler said impa-

tiently. "Lord! The courage of that little man! Listen, Varian, three rockets on full power weren't sufficient to keep us from crashing. But four, on full, have started pushing us back!"

"Four rockets!" Dr. Varian repeated, confused. "Then Number Two has been fixed?"

Keppler nodded sombrely. He was thinking about Braybrook.

"Yes," he whispered. "Fixed. We didn't have time to take out the recoil block, remove the stoppage from the fuel jet. But a man in a space suit could, using a magnetic grapple, go out through an airlock, enter the rocket tubes by the exhaust end. Could clean out the clogged jet—"

"Of course!" Varian nodded, beaming. "Funny we never thought of that before. No trouble landing now. Guess Braybrook'll be back through the lock in a minute."

Keppler did not say anything. Dr. Varian, as chemist, was not familiar with the details of the rocket motors. He did not realize that they were all operated by one switch, like the cylinders of a Twentieth Century airplane. Impossible to shut one off while the others were in operation. And to have shut them all off would have meant a nose-dive to Mars, death to everyone aboard.

Braybrook had gone out there, crawled into the tube, removed the bit of waste from the fuel jet—knowing that the moment he did so the rocket would roar into action! A few charred rags, bits of metal, blown by the burst of flame from the rocket tube, like a shot from an ancient cannon.

"No, Varian," I said slowly. "Braybrook won't be back."

April seventeenth. Two hours ago we landed on Mars—safely, thanks to Braybrook's gallant sacrifice. As luck would have it, we came down toward that part of the planet which was plunged in darkness. At first I had determined to swing over to the day side of the globe, or at least hover until morning.

But both these operations involved an

expenditure of fuel, of which we had used more than our estimates called for, and seemed an unnecessary waste of the precious trioxine. The flare of the rockets lit up the ground fairly well, so after consulting the others, I headed for land—or rather Mars.

WE were all in the control room, so tense, so keyed-up that the gentle bump of our landing seemed an anticlimax.

"Made it!" Keppler said excitedly. "The first men to reach Mars!" And we shook hands solemnly all around.

Impossible to sleep the remainder of this night. In the light that streams from our observation ports only a flat dusty plain is visible. Once I fancied I could see something large, indistinct, bulking against the skyline off to our left. But it might have been my imagination.

Meanwhile Keppler is shaving in case, as he puts it, there are any good-looking women on Mars. Varian has admitted samples of the planet's atmosphere into the airlock, is analyzing it. I hope.

The interruption just now was caused by the appearance of Dr. Varian with good news. The air, though thin, has a high oxygen content. Moreover, he claims, the exceedingly light gravitational pull will reduce our consumption of oxygen.

Every movement, every action, will be practically effortless and as a result less air will be needed, just as a man sleeping requires less than a man engaged in violent physical exercise. If, as Dr. Varian claims, we will not be confined to clumsy space-suits, exploration should be considerably earlier.

I have just seen the faint gray light of dawn through the porthole beside me. Within a few minutes we will have left our metal prison for the first time in nearly two months to find—what? Intelligent life? The secret of the canals? Who can tell?

I must go now to check over the arms and equipment we will take with us. The light grows stronger and the great adventure lies ahead.

April eighteenth. We have just returned from our first inspection of this mysterious planet. The secret of the canals is in a sense solved. Yet on the other hand it is more inexplicable than before. I cannot shake off the feeling that there is something stupendous, unbelievable about them.

To return to our expedition—as soon as it was light we loaded up with cameras, heat-guns, equipment of every sort, and stepped into the airlock. A moment later the outer door swung open and we jumped down to the ground. We were on a level plain, gray-red in the cold cheerless dawn.

The air was crisp, exhilarating, rather like that of some terrestrial mountain-top. Apart from a curious sensation of being eternally out of breath we were not affected by it. The plain upon which we stood was covered with a fine powdery dust, half the grains red, half gray. The movement of our feet kicked it up in choking clouds.

Off to our left the shadowy shapes I had seen the night before were revealed as a line of vegetation, sweeping off to the horizon on either side, straight as a die.

"Look," Keppler exclaimed. "It must be one of the 'canals!'"

We stared at the row of trees, of grass. I'm afraid I felt rather disappointed at sight of it. I had expected something big, something unknown.

Then Dr. Varian spoke; his voice sounded puzzled.

"Funny," he muttered. "This dust"—he stirred up a cloud of it with his foot—"seems to be a mixture of ferric oxide and some strange metallic substance. Impossible to grow anything in it. Worse than the Sahara. I don't see how that strip of green—"

"Let's go have a look at it," Keppler suggested. "Come on!"

I nodded and we set out across the plain. In almost no time we had reached the vegetated strip. So light was the planet's gravity that each step—or more correctly leap—carried us several yards.

Upon approaching the edge of the canal we were impressed by the strange

appearance of the trees and growths. Alien flora, utterly different from that of Earth. Spiny, cactuslike plants, as tall as our highest oaks, curious fungoid shrubs, bushes laden with impossibly beautiful blooms resembling terrestrial orchids and reeking with an odor of decay vile beyond imagining.

Creepers and vines, leprous-white, leafless, twined about the taller growths while long hairlike moss deadened all sound underfoot. There was, I noticed, a considerably quantity of resin oozing from the trees and plants, some of it dried hard as stone.

"Amazing! Darndest looking vegetation I've ever seen!" Keppler leveled his camera. "No signs of animal life, either!"

While he was snapping shots Dr. Varian dropped to his knees and dug up a square of the earth at the base of the trees.

"Rich and black," he announced. "Must have been artificially fertilized. The straightness of the line proves that. Which in turn proves the existence, past or present, of intelligent life on Mars. Queer, isn't it? Why should they have worked in long narrow strips?"

That stopped all of us. If the idea was to make farmland, then squares or even circles would have been more convenient surely than strips hundreds of miles long and only a few miles across. Besides, a civilization that thought nothing of fertilizing beyond agriculture. Now that I knew what the great pattern on Mars' surface was composed of I wanted to find out why it had been made.

We spent the remainder of the day examining the wooded stretch, taking pictures, collecting specimens of vegetation, of soil. Not until nearly sundown did we return to the *Primus*.

Tomorrow, despite our shortage of fuel, I am determined to take the ship up again, to cruise about very low, to examine this strange silent world. Odd that there are no forms of animal life to be found. Not even worms or insects in the woods. Again I have that feeling of some weird and terrible secret—and somehow I am afraid.

CHAPTER III

The Fairy City

APRIL nineteenth. This must necessarily be a lengthy recording. And I must force myself to speak calmly, to record these events in clear logical sequence. Even now, back aboard ship, I cannot shake off the impression that it is all a dream.

We turned out early this morning. The weather was clear as a bell. No change was visible on the interminable red desert, the long strip of green. After a hasty breakfast we started the *Primus* motors, rose to a height of approximately one mile and headed south in the direction of Protei Regio.

Below us Mars presented a strange bewildering picture. Stretch after stretch of red-gray desert, strip after strip of green vegetated area. The strips, we observed, were from fifteen to thirty miles wide, and hundreds, thousands of miles long. Nor were there any waterways evident within them, which destroys the popular conception of irrigation canals. What the purpose of these strips can be we still cannot imagine.

Around eleven o'clock—if our chronometers have not been disturbed by the gravitational changes—Dr. Varian and I were in the control room when we heard a shout from Keppler. We ran at once to join him. He was standing by an observation port, literally sputtering with excitement. Dr. Varian and I peered over his shoulder and gasped. Below us was a city!

I can recall as a child the pictures in the story books I read. And always in such books there was the great castle in which the prince lived or the princess was imprisoned. Dream castles they were, all slender spires, graceful minarets, sweeping towers, things of sheer unreal beauty against the picture-book sky.

So this city was, somehow ethereal, breath-taking. A small fertilized area surrounded it, like green velvet about a

fragile piece of carved ivory. Yet in spite of its beauty there was a bizarre unearthly quality to the city that no terrestrial artist could have conceived. Dr. Varian and I were stunned at sight of it—stunned and awe-struck. Keppler, grinning exultantly, ran toward the control room to nose the *Primus* down.

Very cautiously we circled the strange city. No signs of life greeted us. On the alert for any hostile move we settled the ship on the red plain just beyond the circle of green that surrounded the cluster of tall spires.

"Queer!" Keppler muttered. "Unless it's a trap."

I stared at the gardens before us. Overrun with a riot of vegetation they seemed to have been untended for centuries. Indeed only an occasional bench or crumbling fountain showed them to have been gardens.

"We'll take our guns, of course," I said, "but I don't think we'll need them. 'Let's go!'"

Awed by this white fairy city we hacked our way through the tangled mass of vines and growths, emerging at last upon a circular ramp that swept upward to the streets of an upper level.

Viewed at close range the city was staggering. Buildings of Cyclopean proportions thrust upward on every hand in a bewildering series of terraces, parapets, flying arches. The work of master builders—Titans it seemed—and as silent and empty as a tomb.

Every step we took stirred up clouds of gray dust, yet the white stone of the massive buildings appeared to have defied time. Proud, majestic, implacable, they towered about us, somehow terrifying, awe-inspiring. We felt strangely insignificant, like tiny terrestrial ants desecrating by our very presence some mighty mausoleum. Keppler, toiling up the huge ramp in advance of us, paused panting.

"Creepy," he called back to us. "A place of the dead!"

At once a thousand echoes took up his voice, sent it flying back and forth among the vast piles of masonry. "Dead—dead—dead." The word echoed and re-

echoed like a ghostly dirge through the empty streets, endlessly, until at last it faded away into a vague whisper. Dr. Varian wiped the sweat from his forehead and shuddered. I knew how he felt.

After a few moments' climb we at last reached the top of the ramp, the streets of the upper levels. Here there were doors, windows, cut in the white gleaming walls, through which we could catch glimpses of curious machinery, a glint of burnished metal, splotches of color that must once have been brilliant murals. And everywhere was a feeling of tremendous age of a civilization that was old when Earth was new.

"What builders they were!" Keppler muttered. "The city might have been finished yesterday."

I GLANCED along the dark forbidding canyon between the streets. Directly before us was a large, dome-shaped building, towering high above the others. Silently, for memory of those ghostly echoes somehow discouraged conversation, I pointed toward it. The others nodded, headed for the great domed structure.

Doors fully twenty feet tall and made of curiously carved bronze closed the vast entrance of the building. As we approached them, however, some hidden electric eye sent its message and the portals silently swung open.

For just a moment we hesitated on the threshold. Keppler's scarred weather-beaten face was grim. Varian was breathing heavily. We could feel the terrible oppression of the place, the weight of countless unanswered questions.

Who were the people that had occupied this mighty city? How many years has passed since the hum of voices, the clatter of feet had echoed through its streets? Above all, what had caused them to abandon this magnificent place and where had they gone?

The movement of the big doors, swinging back into place again, broke the spell that had gripped us. Keppler laughed, whistling in the dark.

"Let's go on in and pay a call!" he said. "Come on!"

We followed him through the entrance. A shadowy pillared hall lay before us, its ceiling lost in the gloom far above. A place of huge proportions, like the dwelling of giants, the dull glint of gold here and there, vague spots of color on the walls, showed it to have been richly furnished.

At one end of the dim hall stood a raised dais, ornate, richly carved. And twelve figures—twelve human figures! Venerable bearded men, they were, grave, erect, dignified, yet with a terrible sadness upon their solemn countenances. They were like the seated Colossi of Memnon that stare with such austere melancholy across the sands of the Sahara.

Well above terrestrial proportions were these figures, fully ten feet tall and of muscular build. Their hands rested upon the arms of the straight thronelike chairs in which they sat. Metal tunics hung from their shoulders and their sightless eyes seemed to peer into infinity. The nobility, the majesty of their expressions filled me with a strange desire to bow before them. They were godlike, sublime.

Standing there before the dais I heard Dr. Varian draw a hard breath. Then Keppler ran across the hall, kicking up clouds of the omni-present dust and tore open one of the windows. A beam of sunlight, alive with dancing motes, shot through the gloom, poured over the tall, sombre forms.

"Look!" Dr. Varian exclaimed. "They are transparent!"

I stared at the seated figures, incredulous. Yellow light was playing upon those withered hands, was passing through them! The mighty shapes were vaguely translucent!

"It—they can't be statues!" I muttered. "Figures so perfect, so absolutely clear in every detail! No sculptor could duplicate each wrinkle, each strand of hair! Some form of embalming, perhaps."

"What!" Dr. Varian exclaimed. "You believe them to be mummies? Terrestrial figures ten feet high—and on Mars? How could they be?"

"There's one way to find out what they are!" Keppler said. "Wait a moment!"

He ran up the stairs of the dais, tapped with the butt of his gun upon the lips of one of the figures. The metal clicked sharply upon them, as though striking stone. Perfectly carved, the work, apparently, of some master artist, these twelve statues were of a translucent amberlike substance, hard as granite.

"You see?" Dr. Varian said slowly. "Stone! Is it possible that men, terrestrials, could have come to Mars before us and their statues been set up as gods? If not we can only believe that the builders of the city, of the canals, were of human form! Either assumption is incredible when—"

He broke off abruptly, staring. In the lap of the central figure were several squares of thin metal, covered with queer engraved markings.

"Tablets!" Keppler cried, snatching one up. "A message, perhaps."

He blew the layer of dust from it, held the piece of metal in the light. Curious symbols covered it—symbols strange, yet somehow familiar. Lines, all straight, meeting, crossing, intersecting at round dots—some double, some single—a geometrician's nightmare.

For a moment I stared at them, puzzled. Then all at once the astounding truth flashed through my brain. These symbols were letters similar to those formed by the great fertilized strips, the canals on the surface of Mars! The intricate markings were the written symbols of a lost race! Could the so-called canals be a Gargantuan message for Earth?

APRIL twenty-second. I have been too busy to keep up this log the past three days. By the time we return from the city at night we are ready only for sleep. This is due to some extent to the keen, crisp air which also increases our appetites tremendously. In the ship during the voyage we ate little.

We have gathered so much information during the past few days that I could use up this entire vivavox roll recording it.

The more important features, however, I shall try to enter.

Mars is a still silent tomb—little rain, little wind, little change of temperature. We have yet to find life of any sort other than vegetable. Everywhere we turn we are greeted by an intangible feeling of hoary antiquity, of incalculable changeless centuries.

The city is an enigma. We have discovered in it everything for the support of life. Machines, powered I suspect by some atomic method, are to be found in great numbers for heating, for lighting, for manufacturing, for even the synthetic production of food. Surely, with everything done mechanically, the only problem of the lost race must have been boredom.

In hangarlike buildings we have discovered great planes and surface vehicles of queer design, all utilizing the same atomic power. Keppler spends his days trying to find out what its theory is but so far has had no success. He gave us the surprise of our lives yesterday by rolling up to the *Primus* in one of these three-wheeled globular surface vehicles. It ran perfectly but he still cannot solve the secret of its propulsion.

The city must have been a paradise of beauty and pleasure. At first we wondered why, with so advanced a science, the lost race had made no attempt to reach Earth. But after viewing their home here I begin to realize why they had no desire to go elsewhere.

In spite of all this superficial information, however, the questions which meet us at every turn are still unanswered. The twelve strangely lifelike images, with sad silent eyes fixed on the dim reaches of eternity, are symbolic of the whole city. Even now we find it difficult to believe they are statues.

Dr. Varian, having scraped off a sliver of the hard material of which they are made, pronounces it to be a resinous compound like amber. It must have been a favorite of theirs for artwork since yesterday Keppler picked up a cunningly carved amber beetle, not unlike an Egyptian scarab, which must have fallen from a ring.

The problem of what happened to this mighty race puzzles us. War, degeneration, mass migration—none of these seems plausible. Is it our own sense of the dramatic that leads us to suspect some more terrifying more unbelievable explanation?

Yet while we speculate about these vanished people the solution must lie in our grasp. If Dr. Varian can decipher the markings on these tablets and the other inscriptions we have uncovered here and there about the city the secret will, I am sure, be revealed.

Above all, we want to read the great message that sprawls in thousand-mile-long letters upon the surface of this planet. The vastness of that endeavor still stuns me. An interplanetary communication—for it must be that—written upon a world! Written in belts of living vegetation which renews itself every year by the growth and decay of new plants and trees!

But why? What message could be so important that a planet was made a blackboard? And for whom was it meant? Earth, Venus—even Mercury?

Dr. Varian claims that many of the symbols and letter forms resemble some of Earth's earliest prehistoric ideographs. If he is correct this is a tremendous discovery. Could it be possible that at some early date communication existed between Terra and Mars? Such a theory seems incredible and yet those heroic statues are unquestionably replicas of terrestrials. How otherwise . . . ?

Will continue later. Keppler calling from supply hold. Seems excited.

CHAPTER IV

Written on a World

IT is two hours since I interrupted this recording to answer Keppler's shouts. Once again misfortune has struck at us. Varian, who had been examining the amber scarab, met me as I ran from the control room and together we raced along the companionway toward the sup-

ply hold. It was full of smoke and Keppler, his face gray, was wielding a fire extinguisher.

"Fire!" He flung at us. "Shorted wires!"

We plunged in. Within half an hour the blaze was out but the damage it had done was irreparable. The sputtering wires had touched off our sacks of rice and flour, ruined them. Which leaves us only the canned goods for the trip home.

As soon as we had taken stock of the damage I held a council to determine our course. The loss of the wheat and rice meant half rations all the way back, assuming we left at once. To linger on Mars for even a few more days might bring us close to starvation before we reached Luna.

Of course there were the Martian synthetic food machines but without further knowledge of their artificial products it seemed unwise to depend upon them. And so, reluctantly, we have decided to take off for Luna tomorrow morning. It is with great regret that we leave this mysterious fascinating world with its many problems, yet our safe return will prove that the void can be bridged.

Other wiser men will come here to learn the secrets that we could not. A new era will dawn for Earth when it solves the science of the lost race. We of the *Primus*, forerunners of the great terrestrial fleets that will soon follow, have reason to feel proud.

April twenty-third. As I make this entry Mars is receding beneath us and the deserted city is already all but lost from view. Keppler is below, tinkering with his beloved engines, while Dr. Varian is already at work on the greatest problem of all—the translation of the queer Martian script.

Those tablets, the huge message emblazoned upon the planet, will, I feel sure, reveal the secret of Mars—the secret of the vanished race, the ancient silent city, the sad faraway look on the faces of those twelve amber statues. And that secret I am determined to solve.

At times I feel that some inexorable

will other than my own is driving me on to fathom the dim ancient mystery of the red planet.

The motors of the *Primus* are running like clockwork. Already we have passed Diemos, outermost of Mars' two satellites. Nothing lies before us except long days in the star-specked blackness of space. May our trip home be as successful as our first crossing!

Markland closing this day's entry. Position approximately twenty thousand miles above Mars.

April thirtieth. First entry in six days. Dr. Varian hard at work on tablets but it is a tremendous job. Fortunately he had made considerable progress before leaving the city, being aided by the marking upon hot and cold water taps, the symbols upon the switches of the many machines, the crisscross lettering beneath such pictures as had resisted decay. These have given him an excellent start. Keppler and I have been kept busy cataloguing specimens, etc. Position $36^{\circ} 17' 5.8135''$.

June fifth. Shut off rockets this morning. Half rations are beginning to tell a little. We seem to have developed tremendous appetites since leaving Mars. Dr. Varian claims to be making great progress in deciphering Martian script. Troubled with writer's cramp from my long hours of cataloguing. A few more weeks and we will be in radio communication with Tycho. Position $40^{\circ} 17' 36.0132''$.

June Sixth. Dr. Varian has solved the secret of the Martian script! One problem, that of spacing, the separation of words, has been puzzling him. Suddenly, only an hour ago, he says, the correct answer flashed through his mind. Once that had been discovered, the peculiar lettering was astoundingly easy.

The symbols, Varian claims, are simplicity itself. He feels certain the great message on the planet's surface might have been read long ago, despite the fact that so many of the lines are invisible from Earth, had the staggering conception of visual interplanetary communication been dreamed of by our scientists. So intent has mankind been in its ef-

forts to determine what the canals were that no one thought they might have a meaning.

The use of vegetated strips indicates that Mars wanted its message to remain permanently. But why? Well, we shall soon know. Already Dr. Varian is commencing to translate the tablets we found on the lap of the amber image.

AS I sit here, dictating into this viva-vox receiver, I can see him across the cabin, bent over the navigator's desk. The tablets, of some silvery metallic substance, lie before him and he is working furiously, his grayish hair ruffled, his face drawn into a frown of concentration. Through the open doorway I can hear a splashing sound as Keppler develops some photographs.

More even than the tablets I am interested in the huge markings on the planet's surface. It will take another day or so until we are far enough away from Mars to make them out comprehensibly. And even then it will require an entire day to read them, for Mars revolves in twenty-four hours, forty minutes, nearly the same as a terrestrial day.

I am eager, violently nervous, from anticipation. What will that incredible message reveal? What brought about the downfall of Mars—what great thought did its people wish to convey to the rest of space?

Above all we want to find out what this strange connection is between Earth and Mars. The terrestrial forms of the big statues, the curious similarity between this Martian script and certain prehistoric ideographs—these point to an incredible link between the two planets.

Dr. Varian is making rather slow progress at his translation lately. He, like myself, has been troubled with what I first believed to be writer's cramp. It seems to be a numbness of the fingertips, making one's hands rather clumsy. Fortunately there is no pain. Keppler says his toes also feel numb.

Possibly we are experiencing a touch of arthritis induced by the damp cold of the space ship. This slight ailment,

like everything else, is unimportant. Within a few days the greatest secret of all will be ours. Markland closing this entry. Position 42° 12' 4.0135".

June Seventh. Something—something fantastic, unbelievable, is taking place aboard this ship! I hardly dare believe the thought that keeps hammering so insistently at my brain. Those twelve statues. . . .

Last night I fell asleep early. Toward midnight I awoke with a feeling of cold numbness about my feet. Determined to get another blanket, I threw back my covers, swung my legs over the side of the bunk. A moment later when I stood up, I experienced the curious feeling of walking on air. That is, my bare feet were absolutely without sensation nor could I move my toes.

All feeling ceased at my ankles as though I had been paralyzed.

Frightened, I took a step forward, and as I did so, a curious clanging sound echoed through the cabin. For a moment I was puzzled, stunned. The sound was like rock being pounded upon steel plates. Then, as I took another step, the clanging sound was repeated. All at once the sheer horrifying truth gripped me. The sound was being made by my feet—my bare feet, striking the metal floor.

Stunned, I reached down and with numbed stiff fingers touched my toes. They were cold, cold as stone!

I think I must have screamed then for the others came running. And their feet, like mine, clanged upon the floor-plates! The gray terror of their faces in the wan illumination of the astralux lamps is something I can never forget.

There was no more sleep that night. We managed to dress somehow, to force shoes over our "frozen" feet. Every movement is difficult now with our hands so clumsy. Keppler tries to make light of it, claims it is some small disorder that will soon pass away. But beneath his joking exterior I feel certain that he is thinking of the same thing I am—of those twelve big statues, so utterly life-like, of brownish amber.

Is it possible that they—but the very thought frightens me. I must work, now

while I may still hold a pencil, help Dr. Varian decode the huge letters that stretch across the ominous red surface of Mars. Perhaps they may furnish some clue, some aid.

OUR voracious appetites since leaving Mars tend to bear out the theory that keeps returning to my mind. The message—I must keep my thoughts on that! Markland closing this day's entry. Position 50° 18' 18.0034".

June eighth. Keppler has lost use of both arms. They swing heavily from his shoulders, completely helpless. The sound of them as they clash against tables, walls, sickens me. Varian has curious numb hard spots all over his body.

They are dark, brownish, horny. My legs are like stiff artificial ones. I do not feel sorry for Braybrook now.

Dr. Varian works incessantly at the tablets, hoping they may provide some clue as to this disease. It seems hopeless now but we must keep at it. To think of those statues, the deadly thing that creeps through our bodies—that way lies madness.

June ninth. Keppler is dead. This morning when I crawled from my bunk. I called to him but he did not answer. Through the open doorway I could see Varian in the control room, still bent over the desk, hard at work on the tablets.

I dragged myself across the cabin, palsied with dread. As soon as I touched Keppler's body, I knew. It was as hard as stone, vaguely translucent. Hard, brown, stiff. My nails clicked against his skin as I touched it. The expression on his face—

"Varian!" I quavered. "Keppler's turned—to—to stone!"

Like a man awakening from a dream Varian arose, lurched into the cabin. He was a terrifying spectacle, his skin blotched with dark stony spots, his eyes red, blood-shot from long hours of study.

"Quick!" he muttered. "Give him liquor! Alcohol dissolves resin."

But when I stumbled from the gallery with a bottle of brandy, Dr. Varian had

covered Keppler's face.

"Too late for that now," he said and turned once more toward the desk.

"Wait!" I clutched clumsily at his arm. "You said something about resins. Does that mean you know what this thing is?"

"I've deciphered the first tablet," Varian admitted. "There's no hope. We're full of the dust. Breathed it in while on Mars. And there's plenty of it that's blown into this ship while our airlocks were open."

"Dust?" I repeated stupidly. "What's—what do you mean?"

"Don't you see?" Varian exclaimed impatiently. "That gray metallic dust mixed with the red ferric oxide covered all Mars. It's a catalyst. Causes certain organic compounds in the body of small molecular weight to come together, to form large molecules, resins. The reaction is called polymerization—just such a process as causes the saligenin in the bark of trees to turn to resin.

"Resins are mainly carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, all of which, along with certain necessary fatty acids, are present in the human body. United by the catalyst they create a hard translucent variety of resin such as shellac is made from. Hard, tough, strong—like amber, which is also a resinous compound, or bakelite or other plastic compounds."

"Resin," I whispered. "A catalyst! But how did it reach Mars?"

"According to the tablets a small comet, its tail a blaze of fiery gases, passed close to Mars millenniums ago. The gases, composed mainly of iron, of this catalyst metal, were drawn from the comet's tail by Mars' gravity. They fell, cooled into minute particles of iron and this strange metal to blanket the planet's surface. Buried all vegetation."

"Yet the strips—the canals—"

"Canals?" Varian passed a hand over his forehead. "They came later when Mars realized that it was doomed. The whole race working madly against time, using planes, surface vehicles to spread a fertilizing agent over the dust in strips to create the great message on their planet's surface. Vegetation won't grow

on the dusty deserts, so they knew the shrubs, the trees, wouldn't spread and ruin the huge letters. That's as far as I've gotten on the translation."

He lurched toward his desk once more. "Must finish work. Find out what message is. Now, while I can."

CHAPTER V

Children of Earth

HOW I have spent the past few hours I do not know exactly. It is like a terrible dream. Varian sits at his desk working, working, muttering to himself. He will not answer my questions. Perhaps he is mad.

My legs have turned to the queer hard substance as far as my hips. Little chance now. Unless message on red planet's surface—a chance it may save us.

I realize now what the twelve amber-like "statues" were—the last men on Mars! Meeting their death in solemn dignity, seated erect, immovable, awaiting the end. How strange to think that the lost race was of terrestrial mold even though so much larger. Ten feet tall, yet the same as we. Perhaps the lighter gravity accounted for that.

And poor Keppler's scarab—that must have been a real beetle, petrified.

As I glance from the porthole beside me I can see Mars, bulking huge, red, menacing, against the sombre eternal blackness of space. If only Varian can translate the stupendous message that marches across its flat surface! So much to be learned, so little time.

Perhaps if we can remain alive until we are in radio range of Earth we can warn them of this horror. No chance of that. No chance of anything. Must go to bed, try to rest.

June ninth. I know everything now. Understand why Martians made canals. Poor devils! Brave—so very brave. Thought only of life, human life, regardless of planet it was on. I must think as they thought. Keep life in the Solar Sys-

tem. Someday, perhaps when our science is more developed, Mars will regain its glory.

I was sleeping when Varian called me. His voice, hoarse, inhuman, echoing through our metal prison, awoke me. Dragging my stiff, petrified legs behind me, I crept into the control room. Varian was slumped down in his chair. There was scarcely any white showing between the dark spots that covered his face. He seemed able to move only with an effort.

"Markland!" he whispered. "Know all, now. Incredible! Our forefathers—"

His voice trailed off, weakly. I reached out, shook him. Varian stirred, raised himself to one elbow, began to speak.

"Listen!" he muttered. "They—they

habited Terra, they decided. Yet if a true species of man were introduced the lost race thought he must rise, progress in time to heights equal to their own."

I stared at Varian curiously. There was a grayish foam on his lips and his eyes shone like polished ebony. Was he, I wondered, insane?

"The theory of evolution proves—" I muttered.

"It proves that Mars was right!" Varian cried. "Has anyone ever discovered the so-called missing link? The first true man? Ape-men—then true homo sapiens. As different, as distinct, as humming birds and dragonflies. Moreover there is evidence that true man and the ape-man existed simultaneously, were



NEXT ISSUE'S HALL OF FAME CLASSIC

ROBOT NEMESIS

A Novelet by DR. EDWARD E. SMITH

—in the year fifty thousand, one hundred and twenty-six of their era the comet struck, showering Mars with the catalyst. In their food, in their water, in the air—every living thing absorbed some of the particles and was therefore doomed to the stony death. But the men of Mars, by use of drugs, diet, rays, managed to check the reaction, retard its spread throughout their bodies for ten years. An entire race, slowly petrifying, with ten years to live!"

"But couldn't they have—" I began. Varian brushed my objections aside.

"There was no escape. Even to build space ships, to flee to other planets was hopeless. The dust was within their lungs and they had to die. They, the only intelligent life in the Solar System!" Varian's brown-mottled hand touched the gleaming tablets.

"Their observations proved that. Venus, no oxygen. Mercury, too hot. Outer planets, too cold. Earth alone was suitable to bear human life, yet they had seen no forests cleared, no canals built, no evidence of human life.

"Lower animals, ape-men, alone in-

emies. Is that possible if man evolved from the ape-man?"

Varian's eyes swung to the window, to the great planet beyond—a ruby set in the dark onyx of space.

"Two mighty works the Marsmen planned," he mumbled, "when they learned they were doomed. Two breath-taking works to be accomplished within ten years! Works not for themselves but for the future of life in the Solar System!

"The first of these was a spaceship, embodying all of their great science—a spaceship kept free of the deadly catalyst dust. Two children, a male and a female, kept under glass from the moment of birth, were allowed to reach the age of eight, shielded from the dust which was already within the bodies of their elders, slowly turning them to stony amber.

"When the ship had been completed the children were sealed within it. Think of the labor to create such a ship, Markland! Everything automatic for the children, shut off from all contact since birth, had not even learned speech. It

was a ship operated by robots, by strange machinery. It was built to go very slowly, so that the children might attain maturity by the time they reached Earth."

"Earth!" I gasped. "Then those children—"

"Their names according to the tablets," Varian whispered, "were Admi and Ehv! You see? The Bible says, 'There were giants in those days.' Giants! Taller because of the lesser gravity on Mars! Like those twelve bodies we found."

A RATTLING cough shook Varian's frame and his stony fingers clattered noisily upon the floor.

"Ship landed automatically," he wheezed. "Young man and woman, first true Homo Sapiens, stepped out into a new world! Hardly less savage than the ape-men, since they had been cut off from all contact on Mars, had spent years in the void. Can't you visualize it, Markland?"

"At first remaining near ship, retreating within it in time of danger. Then, as the race multiplied, became strong, they began to spread, push out, and the spaceship rusted away. Very primitive to begin with, the true man, mentally far superior to the lower terrestrial forms of life, rose to—to what they are today?"

"Good Lord!" I stared bewildered at the metal tablets. The vastness of the concept stunned me. "Then it explains so much! So many of man's dim atavistic dreams! Why he imagines a paradise, a heaven in the sky! His amazingly swift progress, his desire to advance scientifically! A thousand longings, instincts, at last explainable!"

Once again my eyes turned to the porthole, to the brilliant red planet. "What of the 'canals', the great message written upon Mars' surface? Were they—"

"The 'canals' were the second great work the Martians undertook in that ten years of grace." Varian's voice was faint now, barely audible. He seemed near death.

"A fertilizing agent, manufactured by atomic machines, sprayed in immense strips from planes, surface vehicles. Seeds planted. Herculean labor. Never quite finished. Some 'canals' were never widened sufficiently to be seen from Earth. But they hoped, with powerful enough telescopes, we of Earth might read message.

"They knew man, transplanted to Earth, must some day rise, build spaceships. Figured these strange markings on the planet, unknown on any other heavenly body, must draw our attention until constant study solved the symbols. Man—read message—learn. . ."

Dr. Varian groaned, toppled from his chair to the floor, stiff, almost completely transformed into the hard brown resinous compound. The *Primus* was silent as some great coffin. Laboriously I dragged myself over to Varian, raised his head.

"The markings!" I cried. "Varian! What does the message mean?"

For a moment he did not reply. Then feebly, his stony lips parted and a faint whisper echoed through the cabin.

"Warning!" he muttered. "Afraid man might come to Mars, bring catalyst back to Earth. Wanted symbols that would remain forever, keep terrestrial civilization from the fate of Mars! Wanted life to go on!"

Varian's voice rose to a shrill, gasping scream and he fell back, inert, lifeless. As he did so his hand relaxed and a slip of paper fell to the floor. On it were the strange crisscross markings of Mars and beneath them these words, written in Varian's crabbed script. It read:

People of Earth! Avoid the red planet! Be warned by our fate! Mars is death!

That is the message formed by the canals of Mars as Varian translated it. Standing here at the porthole of the *Primus* I can see the red planet behind us, its rusty surface cross-hatched with innumerable lines—the Titanic work of a race who, dying, gave their last years that their descendants on Earth might be spared the stony death!

There are no words to describe the courage of our mighty ancestors, whose only thought was that life must go on in the Solar System! Such a valiant effort to save their Earth-born children—and such a magnificent failure! For whether or not the *Primus* returns other terrestrial ships will head for Mars.

I, who like all men of Earth have the blood of this race in my veins, must carry on their brave traditions! I alone, now that the others are dead, must see that this ship, with the dust that has drifted into its cracks and crannies, does not reach Earth! Must see that this log, this warning, is read by the men of Terra. Must, to prevent other vessels from going to Mars.

From the waist down my body is hard, like amber. Perhaps God has directed the full force of the reaction to my lower limbs, thus sparing my hands except for the slight numbness first noticeable. Without the use of my hands I would be helpless to act.

I must work quickly. This vivavox roll to be sealed in an empty oxygen tank—

a tank free of the smallest grain of the deadly dust. I can drop the container through the airlock and by swinging the *Primus* about, blast it with the backlash of our rockets toward Earth. Maybe, falling into the terrestrial gravitational field, it may be discovered.

The *Primus* I shall point toward outer space, its rockets on full. I will amuse myself during my last hours in speculating as to what strange beings, centuries from now, will open this bit of metal, stare in bewilderment at the three stony amber-hard images within.

I must stop now, get ready the oxygen tank that is to contain this vivavox roll. Soon the petrification will creep up, reach my lungs, my heart—and I will be like Keppler, like Varian, like those twelve seated figures who were the last men on Mars. I shall have to hurry.

So ends the First Martian Expedition on its eighty-third day. Markland closing this entry and the log. Position 57° 44' 43.0163". On behalf of Braybrook, Keppler, Varian and myself, let me say—goodbye, Earth! Hail and farewell!