

# **WORLDS OF TOMORROW**®

**OCTOBER 1963**

**Vol. 1 No. 4**

**ALL NEW STORIES**

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WORLDS OF TOMORROW is published bi-monthly by GALAXY PUBLISHING CORP. Main Offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N.Y. 50c per copy. Subscription: (6 copies) \$2.50 per year in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere \$3.50. Application for second class entry pending at New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Copyright, New York 1963, by Galaxy Publishing Corp. Robert M. Guinn, President. All rights, including translations reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A. By The Guinn Co., Inc., N.Y. Title Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

# THE HERMIT OF MARS

BY STEPHEN BARTHOLOMEW

**He was the oldest  
man on Mars . . . in  
fact, the only one!**

**W**hen Martin Devere was 23 and still working on his Master's, he was hurt by a woman. It was then that he decided that the only things that were worthwhile in life were pure art and pure science. That, of course, is another story, but it may explain why he choose to become an archeologist in the first place.

Now he was the oldest human being on Mars. He was 91. For many years, in fact, he had been the *only* human being on Mars. Up until today.

He looked through the transparent wall of his pressurized igloo at the puff of dust in the desert where the second rocket had come down. Earth and Mars were just past conjunction, and the regular automatic supply rocket had landed two days

ago. As usual, Martin Devere, taking his own good time about it, had unloaded the supplies, keeping the things he really needed and throwing away the useless stuff like the latest microfilmed newspapers and magazines, the taped TV shows and concerts. As payment for his groceries he had then reloaded the rocket with the written reports he had accumulated since the last conjunction, plus a few artifacts.

Then he had pushed a button and sent the rocket on its way again, back to Earth. He didn't mind writing the reports. Most of them were rubbish anyway, but they seemed to keep the people back at the Institute happy. He did mind the artifacts. It seemed wrong to remove them, though he sent only the less valuable ones back. But per-

haps it couldn't be helped. One time, the supply rocket had failed to return when he pushed its red button—the thing was still sitting out there in the desert, slowly rusting. Martin Devere had happily unloaded the artifacts and put them back where they belonged. It wasn't his fault.

The puff of dust on the horizon was beginning to settle. This second rocket had descended with a shrill scream through the thin air, its voice more highly pitched than it would have been in denser atmosphere. Martin Devere had looked up from his work in time to see its braking jets vanish behind the low Martian hills a few kilometers distant.

It was much too large to be an automatic supply rocket, even if there had been reason to expect another one. Martin Devere knew it could mean only one thing—someone was paying him an unannounced visit.

He waited, watching through the igloo wall to see who had come to poke around and bother him after all these years.

At first he was annoyed that the people at the Institute hadn't let him know visitors were coming. Then he reminded himself that it had been years since he'd taken the trouble to listen to his radio receiver, or to read the messages they sent him along with supplies.

After a long time, he made out a smaller dust-puff, and then a little sandcat advancing slowly across the desert. Riding on top of it were two men in space suits.

Everyone on Earth who reads popular magazines or watches TV knows the story of Martin Devere, "The Hermit of Mars." Over the years, now that he is dead, he has become a sort of culture hero, as Dr. Livingston or Albert Schweitzer once were. Though Martin Devere could not be called a humanitarian in any sense of the word. After his divorce from his first and only wife, at the age of 45, he never gave much thought again either to women or any other kind of people—except for his long-dead Martians.

But everyone should know by now how Martin Devere first came to Mars at the age of 50. Even then he was the oldest man on the planet, and Mars sustained quite a large research colony at the time. Only Martin Devere's unchallenged scientific reputation, together with his apparent good health, enabled him to leave Earth as head of a five-man archeological team. This turned up the first fossil ruins far beneath the desert sand.

Then there came a day when the Space Institute of the United Governments decided to abandon Project Mars. It was getting too expensive to maintain. Everything of value to space research had already been learned about the planet, and the archeological site, though yet barely scratched, did not properly come under space research. Closing Project Mars would mean more funds for solar research, on Mercury, for the Lunar colony and for work on the interstellar drive.

So the hundred-odd inhabitants of

the Project received orders to leave the igloos and other equipment behind and come back to Earth.

Martin Devere, however, had been on Mars for three years now. When the Project physician gave him his routine exam, it was discovered that a valve in Martin Devere's aorta had developed a faint flutter. Nothing too serious, really. But enough to greatly reduce his chances of surviving another rocket lift-off.

Martin Devere smiled at the news and volunteered to remain behind, alone on Mars. Under the circumstances, the Institute was forced to agree.

On the day that the strange rock-et came down behind the desert hills, Martin Devere had been on Mars for a total of 38 years. For the past 35 of them he had been The Hermit—and quite happy about it...

The little sandcat was getting closer. Martin Devere smiled to himself, watching the two men in their clumsy space gear. It was high noon, and a nice comfortable ten degrees centigrade outside. If the two newcomers thought they needed full spacesuits to get around out there, Martin Devere wasn't going to tell them any different. Actually, though the atmospheric pressure was about the same as at the top of Mount Everest, on a beautiful day like this a man could get along easily outdoors with nothing more than an oxygen mask. But let them clomp around in their rubberized long-johns if they wanted to.

In a few minutes they would be coming in through the igloo's air-lock. Martin Devere turned away, scowling now. He hoped the Institute hadn't decided to reopen Mars Project. There was plenty of room in all these igloos and connecting tunnels that had been left behind, but with a new expedition here it might get pretty crowded. Mainly, Devere didn't want a bunch of amateurs poking around his diggings, breaking things.

His thumb rubbed slowly across the long stubble on his chin. He wondered if he had made some slip in that last report, or in some of the pictures of the ruins he'd sent back. He'd rather the Institute didn't find out about those fossilized machines he'd dug up. He didn't understand the gadgets himself, but some of the people at the Institute just might decide they were interesting enough to be worth sending up an expert.

The Institute, Devere knew, was interested in machinery, not art objects.

One of the men held an automatic pistol pointed at Martin Devere while the other was stripping off his space gear. Then the pistol changed hands while the first man removed his own suit. Martin Devere could have told them that he wasn't afraid of the gun. He didn't actually care much, one way or the other: let them point it if it made them happy. Martin Devere figured that he had already lived a lot longer, here in this feeble gravity and germ-free, oxygen-rich air, than his



tricky heart would have allowed him on Earth. Let them point the gun if they wanted to.

"If you make one move toward the radio transmitter I'll blow your head off," the taller man said. He had black wavy hair that hung over his brow. The other man was completely bald.

"I don't even know if the radio works," Martin Devere answered. "I haven't turned it on in years. I should warn you, though, that if you shoot that thing inside the igloo here, it will puncture the plastic wall and let all the air out. I always keep the pressure up high indoors so I can boil water for coffee."

The tall man frowned in confusion and blinked at the weapon in his hand. Then he stared at the transparent dome above him, as if realizing for the first time that only a thin bubble of plastic separated him from near-vacuum, now that he had removed his suit.

"I was just making some coffee when you showed up," Martin Devere said, turning away. "Have some? I'm afraid it's instant. I've given up trying to get the Institute to send me a can of real coffee in the rocket. They think I need canned TV shows more."

"He's harmless," the bald man said. "You can see he's just an old senile nut. Leave him be, we've work to do."

The tall man lowered his weapon, then let it fall into the holster at his hip.

"No big hurry. I think I'd like some of that coffee first. Say, Pop,

how about cooking us a meal in a couple of hours?"

Martin Devere was spooning brown powder into three cups.

"Sure thing. What would you like — beans and franks, or franks and beans?"

"I suppose you wonder what we're doing, Pop?" The tall man held the disassembled pieces of his gun in his lap. He was carefully polishing each part with a chemically treated cloth.

It was three days since they had landed, and the tall metal skeleton was beginning to take shape out in the desert. At the moment, the bald man was out alone, testing circuits. Usually the two went out together — they had apparently decided it was safe to leave Martin Devere unguarded, though they had smashed his radio transmitter just in case.

The two men worked steadily during the daylight hours, came back at sunset to eat and sleep, then went out again at dawn. The towering lacework of steel was growing like an ugly flower.

The tall man held the trigger assembly of his gun up to the light. He turned it slowly between his thumb and forefinger. It cast an odd crescent-shaped shadow over the muscles of his jaw.

"No, I don't wonder what you're doing," Martin Devere answered. He was sitting at his workbench, crouched over an ancient metal plate as thin as paper.

The tall man began to put his weapon back together again. He

snapped the trigger assembly into the receiver. He pulled the hammer back and then released it; it made a sharp, hard click.

"Not even curious, Pop? Okay, then tell me what *you're* doing. What's that piece of tinfoil you've been staring at the past two hours?"

Martin Devere straightened and turned to look at the other.

"It's an ancient Martian scroll. It's nearly a million years old. I found it in a new pit I've been digging, five hundred meters down. It's the longest and perhaps most important bit of Martian writing I've found so far."

"Yeah? What's it have to say?"

Martin Devere shook his head. "Their language, their whole frame of reference, was fundamentally different from ours. It's something like higher mathematics, you'd have to learn the language to understand it. But I suppose you might say that this is a poem... Yes, an epic poem."

The tall man laughed. He shoved an ammunition clip into his weapon, pumped a round into the chamber, slipped the gun back into its holster. He got up and began pacing the floor of the igloo. The floor was cluttered with dozens of artifacts.

He stopped and nudged one specimen with his toe.

"What's this thing, Pop? An ancient Martian meatgrinder?"

"I hardly think so. They were vegetarians." He squinted at the object. "I'm afraid I have no idea what it is. It's some sort of machine, but I'm no engineer, I can't imagine what its function was. They

—don't build many machines, you know."

The man with the gun turned to stare at Martin Devere.

"You mean *didn't* build, don't you?"

"Yes, of course... Past tense." And Devere turned again to peer at the million-year-old poem before him.

"Damn it to hell. This might hold us up a week." The bald man flung the shatterproof helmet of his suit against the igloo wall. His tone of voice was matter-of-fact emotionless. Even the way he threw the helmet betrayed no real emotion. Still wearing the rest of his suit he sat down at Martin Devere's work bench and clenched his fists. His face was smooth, blank.

"What's the matter?" His partner put down some drawings and came over.

"The modulator circuit doesn't check out. I'll have to take the whole works apart and start over again." The bald man spoke—when he did speak—with a faint accent that Martin Devere could not identify.

"It doesn't matter." The other rubbed at his chin. "We're still ahead of our schedule."

"Hey. Old man." The bald man pointed at Devere. "You have anything to drink in this cave of yours?"

Martin Devere frowned, thinking. He remembered a bottle he'd been saving for some special occasion—he couldn't recall what, just now.

"I think I have some bourbon," he said at last. "If I can find it."

"Find it. Mine straight, on the rocks."

When Martin Devere returned awhile later, the bald man was still wearing his helmetless space suit. He and his friend were studying a complex wiring diagram spread out on the work bench.

Martin Devere put two plastic cups down on the bench and poured them full. Neither of the men looked up from their diagram until he had set the bottle down.

"Pour one for yourself, Pop," the tall man said.

"Thanks. Don't mind if I do." Devere went to get another cup. Over his shoulder he said, "Hope you boys don't mind crushed ice instead of cubes. I just set a bucket of water in one of the unheated tunnels for a couple minutes. Then I hit it with a hammer."

It was four hours past sunset, the temperature outside was far below freezing.

"One thing you don't need on Mars is a refrigerator!" Pouring himself a drink, the old man suddenly laughed. It was a brief, senile giggle, that made the tall man turn to stare at him.

"Could be uncomfortable, though, if you were ever stuck out there at night." Martin Devere's face was sober once more as he lifted his cup and looked deeply into it. All trace of senility had vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. "Like, say, if you were out there long enough for your suit power to go dead. You'd freeze to a hunk of

ice in a few minutes . . . Me, I never go outside at night."

"Shut up," the bald man said.

All day the bald man had been out alone, working on his electronic circuits. Evidently this left his partner nothing to do except study schematics.

Now Martin Devere was aware that his guest had been staring at him for several minutes without speaking. Martin Devere went on polishing the green crystal vase he held in his hand. The vase looked ordinary at first glance, until you noticed that it wasn't quite symmetrical. There was a studied and careful asymmetry about its form, barely discernible, that would disturb you the more you looked at it — until you knew suddenly that no human brain could have created that shape.

The polishing cloth moved rhythmically across the vase's curving surfaces. The green crystal reflected light in a way that made you begin to think about boundless seas of water.

"I'll be glad when this job is over with," the tall man said, half aloud.

"When it is, will you go away?" Martin Devere turned the vase slowly in his hands.

"Not for a while yet, Pop." The man with the gun on his hip got to his feet and stretched.

"I don't mind telling you what it's all about, Pop. You're all right. It's simple. My partner and I were sent here by a certain national power that doesn't like being told how to run its own affairs by the United

Governments. We're striking the first blow for Freedom. That thing we're putting together out there is a bomb. It could — disable — most of Earth. It has a new kind of nuclear rocket engine behind it that could carry it across 200 million miles in a few hours.

"You get the idea, Pop? Here on Mars, they won't even find it. And if they did, we could deliver the bomb before they got a missile half-way across . . . So I hope you won't mind if my partner and I stay a while, Pop."

It was several seconds before Martin Devere answered. He set the crystal vase carefully inside a case and regarded it a moment.

"As long as you don't go messing up my diggings or break any of the artifacts, it's no business of mine."

"And what if I did, Pop?" The tall man walked closer to Martin Devere. He stood over the old man, his shadow on him. His hand rested lightly on the butt of his gun. "What if I were to take all your vases and statues and pots and tablets and smash them to bits, one by one? What would you do then?"

Martin Devere's eyes slowly closed and opened, he made no other move for a minute. Then he got to his feet without looking at the other man. He turned and began to move away, toward a tunnel door that led to the diggings.

Probably the tall man thought that he had finally put the fear of God into Martin Devere. But as he turned back to his pile of schematics he heard the old man's whisper:

"You might regret it."

The man with the gun did not answer

"Tell us about it, Pop."

"Yes, why don't you tell us about it."

They meant Martin Devere's work. The two men had finished their own job. The assembled bomb rested in the desert, silent but alive, like some abnormal growth.

Because of sunspot activity they hadn't yet been able to radio their employers on Earth. The bald man expected conditions to clear in two or three days. When they did clear, he would signal, "The bird is nesting." Then the nation he had mentioned would be ready to deliver its ultimatum to the United Governments.

For the first time since landing on Mars, the two men were idle. They were waiting. They looked as if they were willing to wait a long time if necessary.

Meanwhile, Martin Devere's artifacts were the only amusements available.

Perhaps the old man knew they were making fun of him. But he seemed to take their question seriously. When he began to speak, they found themselves listening.

"We don't know exactly what happened." Martin Devere faced the two men across the cluttered workbench like a lecturer addressing his students. He held in his hand a small bronze statue that might have been a portrayal of one of the old Martian people or, just as likely, some long-extinct animal. In the

diffuse sunlight that came through the igloo wall, it cast a shadow on the work bench that was even more disturbingly alien in shape.

"No, we don't know what happened to them," the old man said. "The last of them died nearly a million years ago, before the first *Homo Sapiens* walked the Earth. From what we—I—have found we know a little about what they were like. But we don't know why they died.

"We do know, for instance, that they never had much interest in technology. Not that they lacked intelligence. They could build a machine when it suited their purposes, whatever those may have been. And I don't say they weren't interested in science. They had a highly developed theoretical science, as sophisticated as their art. You might say they were theoreticians. They were concerned with pure art and pure science—but not with applied technology, or commercialized art.

"My own theory is that they had no need for technology. In the first place, they were vegetarians, not carnivorous. So that their earliest men had no need for hunting weapons—or other gadgets. Probably they never developed the aggressive instincts which in humanity led to warfare with its subsequent impetus to applied technology. The Martians never got around to making cars or airplanes or bombs. They dedicated themselves, gentlemen, to the contemplation of beauty.

"Then, nearly a million years ago, something happened to them. Per-

haps Mars began to lose her atmosphere then. Her oceans evaporated, the air could no longer retain her heat at night, the farmlands parched and froze. A few of the plant types were able to adapt and survive. But within a few years, all animal life died out. One day, there were suddenly no more Martians left."

Martin Devere's dry, withered hand caressed the small statue he held.

"Who knows? If they'd had time to develop space travel they might have saved themselves. Then again, with a technology like yours, they might have blown themselves up long before the natural catastrophe..."

"What do you mean like *yours*?" the tall man said. "You mean like *ours*, don't you?"

But Martin Devere turned away without answering.

"Do you have another bottle of bourbon, old man?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Devere said. "There was only that one bottle."

"Too bad. We should have a little celebration." The bald man began sealing himself into his spacesuit.

"I'll wait for you here," his partner said. "I'd better start burning those plans."

Martin Devere looked up from the fragment of ceramic he was cleaning.

"You're going to send the message now?"

Neither of the men bothered to reply, since the answer was self-

evident. The bald man tested the air and power equipment of his suit, then turned to his partner a moment before sealing his helmet.

"You checked the sandcat's power supply?"

"Yes, but you'd better take another look at it. I think the battery's leaking."

The bald man nodded and went out the airlock. Martin Devere watched in silence as the other man began to gather up his diagrams and plans and tie them into a neat bundle.

"I guess we can take it easy now, Pop. As soon as that telegram's sent and I get this stuff burned, my partner and I are unemployed. Of course we'll have to hang around a while longer in case they want us to shoot off Baby out there, but there's nothing to that. In the meantime maybe I can help you dig up some more of those old pots and statues."

Martin Devere seemed to be thinking. He watched as the tall man checked to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, then carried the bundle of plans over to the electronic oven.

"Baby. You mean your bomb, out there. You think you might actually shoot it off then."

"Oh, maybe, maybe not."

"Couldn't they fire it from Earth by radio?" Devere asked.

"Nope. Somebody might try jamming."

"Oh, I see..."

Martin Devere was silent again until the tall man opened the oven and removed a bundle of gray ash.

He dumped the ashes into a bucket and began stirring them with his hand.

"Something else I was wondering about," Devere said. He began cleaning the fragment of ceramic again, his hands working in a slow circular motion.

"Supposing the United Governments find out where it—the bomb is. They might send a missile to blow it up."

"Told you, Pop. Baby can outrun anything else that flies. Wouldn't do them any good."

"Yes, yes... Still, the missile would hit Mars, wouldn't it? I mean, it would destroy all this—the igloos, my diggings..."

The tall man gave a laugh.

"Don't worry so much, Pop. We'd have plenty of time to get in the ship and clear out. We might even take you with us."

"Still..." But the old man lapsed again into thought.

An hour later, the short-range radio gave a shrill beep. The tall man went over and flipped the *talk* switch.

"Yeah?"

"Hello. Listen, I did something stupid."

Martin Devere looked up at the sound of the bald man's voice. Devere's hands still held the piece of ceramic. He had polished it until a complex geometric design was visible, etched in reds and blues. It might have been equally a decoration or some mechanical diagram.

"Did you get the message sent?" the tall man asked.

"Yes, that part's all right. I got to the ship and contacted headquarters. I think they're going to deliver the ultimatum right away. Now we just wait for orders. The only thing is, the sandcat's power went dead on me while I was halfway down a hill. It started to roll, and I forgot I was wearing a spacesuit. I jumped out. This low gravity fooled me too. I think I've broken my ankle, it hurts like hell."

The tall man cursed in a low voice.

"All right, all right," he said after a moment. "Just take it easy. I'll have to come out and get you."

"I think the sandcat is all right. Stupid of me to jump like that, wasn't thinking. Better bring a spare battery with you . . . Oh, and you'd better bring a light too. It will be getting dark in another half hour."

"Okay, just wait for me. I'll home in on your suit radio."

The tall man switched off the receiver and went to his own suit locker. Martin Devere watched as he removed the holster and weapon from his hip. He pulled the heavy plastic trousers over his denim jumper and then buckled the gun back again before starting on the rest of the spacesuit.

"Nothing serious, I hope?" Martin Devere put the ceramic down carefully and picked up another object from a stack of artifacts.

"You heard, didn't you? You any good at setting a broken ankle, Pop?"

"Oh, I could manage, I guess. Broke my arm down in the diggings

once. Had to set it myself. Twenty years ago, I think it was. I've been more careful since then." He gave a laugh. It started as a normal laugh, then broke to a senile giggle. Then his face was serious again. He carried the new artifact closer to the man with the gun.

"You know, I was telling you. . . The Martians were vegetarians. They never made any weapons for hunting. They did know about explosives, though."

"What's that thing?" The tall man, struggling with the buckles of his breathing equipment, glanced at the object in Devere's hands. It looked like badly corroded bronze, and consisted of a long tube with a large bulb at one end.

"This? Oh, this is some kind of a tool I found. I think it was a digging tool, used for breaking up rocks. They *did* build canals, you know. . . As I was saying, they knew about explosives. This tool, for instance. It worked by means of a small, shaped charge inside this bulb here. The explosion was so well-focused that there was almost no recoil. A high-energy shock wave was emitted from the barrel — very effective at short range. But the most amazing thing about this tool is that the chemical explosive is still potent after lying underground for nearly a million years. . .

"Oh, by the way. There's nothing wrong with your sandcat's battery. It was the motor I sabotaged."

Then Martin Devere pointed the ancient digging tool at the tall man and blew him into two neat pieces.

The Hermit of Mars never did get around to walking out to the space ship and using his visitor's radio to tell Earth what had happened. He really intended to, but he forgot. The ultimatum that was delivered to the United Governments failed, of course, but no one knew exactly why until the next Earth-Mars conjunction.

The United Governments was prevailed on by the World Television Service to send out someone to interview the Hermit, if he were still alive.

That interview was unfortunate. It might have established Martin Devere as the world hero that he was, and he might have been awarded some kind of medal. As it went, his rude and insulting answers to the young man's questions made him unpopular for years.

His last answer in the interview was the worst. The young man, already sweating, looked in desperation at the green crystal vase that Martin Devere insisted on holding in front of the television lens. (Back at the Institute, a dozen faces were flushing red with indignation as their owners realized what the old man had been holding back.)

"Tell me, Dr. Devere," the young man asked. "You seem — er — a very modest man. Doesn't it make you the least bit proud to know that you've saved the world?"

Martin Devere lowered his vase and gave the young man a puzzled look.

"You mean Earth? Tell me, why should I want to save *that* world?"

END