

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

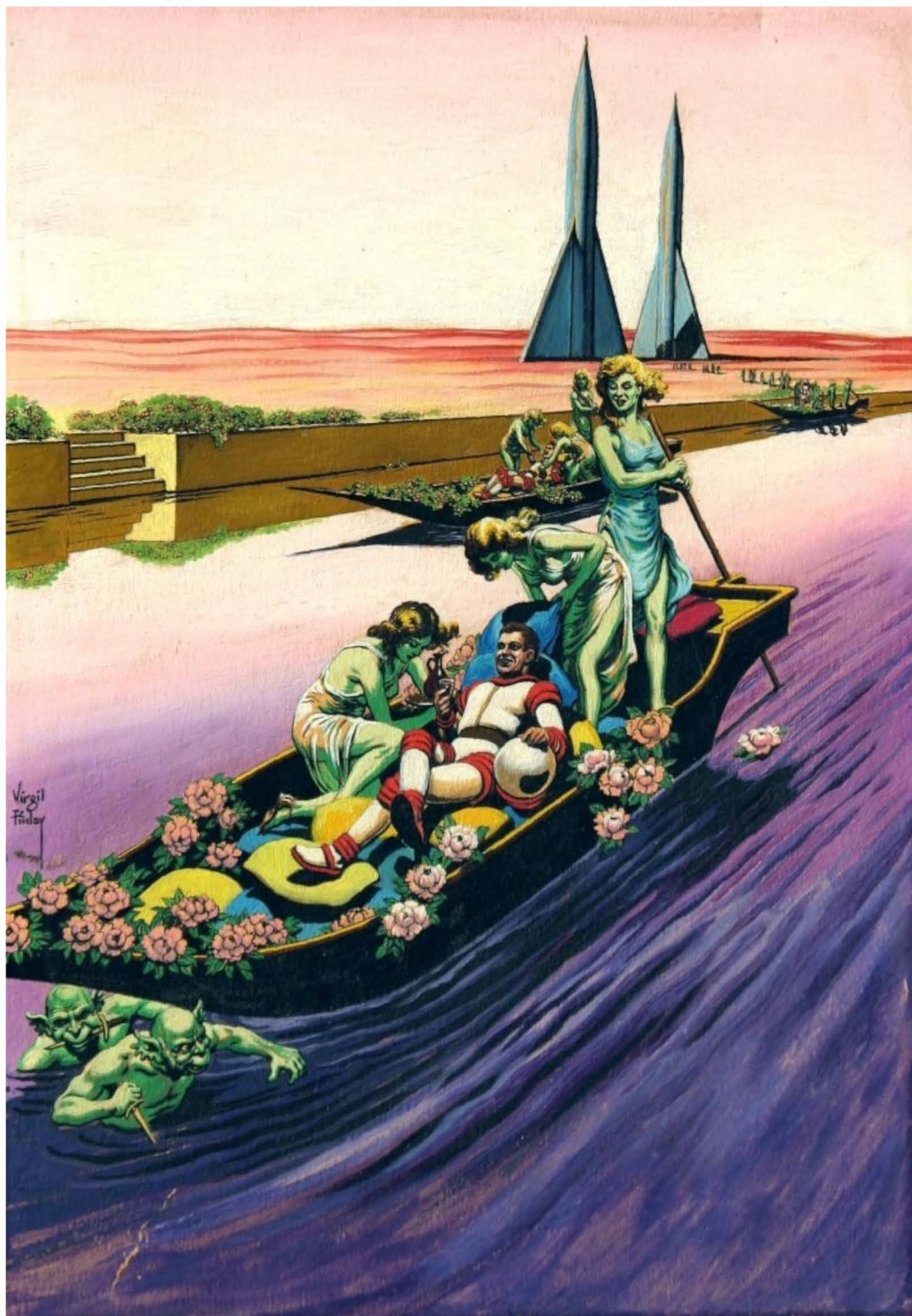
SCIENCE FICTION

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FEATURING 3 EXCITING NOVELETS
REVOLT ON MERCURY by STANLEY MULLEN
DEATH FOR A HUNTER by MICHAEL SHAARA
SOLDIER FROM TOMORROW by HARLAN ELLISON



THE CANALS OF MARS

This is the page where the cover artist usually tells the story behind the cover, as he sees it. We feel you will agree with us that Felix Boyd, author of *Welcoming Party*, which appears in this issue, captures with extraordinary skill much of the brooding horror and the menace lurking behind the flowers and the smiles of the young girls sent to welcome these Earthmen who have arrived on Mars.

The canals of Mars have interested writers and scientists for several generations, many acknowledging the possibility that Intelligences had been responsible for the coming into existence of the canals, but differing on the appearance of whatever life-forms, whether humanoid or otherwise, that might have survived. Allan Howard, in last month's issue of this magazine, describes the *canali* of Schiaparelli (first seen in 1877) as "indeed broad waterways, stretching from pole to pole, too regular to be anything but the work of intelligence," while other writers have seen life as still struggling for survival on Mars—sometimes in turreted cities and sometimes in cities reflecting something of the glory that had been Mars—civilization clinging to the edges of the canals or channels that unite and keep alive the planet.

Obviously the canals of Schiaparelli, if correctly identified, do represent a fantastic engineering achievement. If one of these canals should be moved to earth it would stretch from Texas to New York and be, a hundred miles wide.

But who built these canals that begin in one dark region and end in another, crossing each other from time to time at spots identified as oases? Lowell's explanation resembles that of Schiaparelli, except that he sees the canals as a fantastic system of planet-wide waterways, built in the final centuries when there was still life on Mars, the Martians making use of the melting mountain snows in a last desperate effort at survival, vegetation and what remained of civilization clinging to the canals until "the end".

And now comes Felix Boyd's explanation of the *real* meaning of those spots where the canals cross....

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welcoming committee

by *FELIX BOYD*

There were four of them.
Four lovely girls with pale
green skins, friendly, laughing,
chattering away in clear voices.

IT was a lousy landing. The tall spaceship tilted, wobbled, and finally jarred into the sand with a fin-rending crunch. Captain Moran looked at the back of Pilot Sinkley's sweating neck and resisted the impulse to close his hands around it.

"That was the worst landing I have seen since I have been in the service," he said. "This is a rescue mission—who is going to rescue us?"

"I'm sorry...captain..." Sinkley's voice shook as badly as his hands. "It was the glare...first from the sand...then the canal..." His voice died away like a run down record.

There was a grinding crunch from somewhere below and emergency lights began to dance across the board. Captain Moran cursed and thumbed the tell-tales. Trouble. Engine room. Aft quadrant. The intercom suddenly belched out the gravel voice of Chief Engineer Beckett.

"Some gear carried away when we landed, nothing serious. Two ratings injured. Out."

The pilot sat with his back hunched, either prayer or fear. He had goofed and

There have been a number of interesting suggestions as to what Mars may be like, but we feel you will agree that few have equalled the quiet brooding horror of the Mars of Felix Boyd, our cover story for this month. Felix Boyd is the pseudonym of a very well known sf writer.

goofed badly and he knew it. Captain Moran shot one tension loaded glare at the back of the lowered head, then stamped out towards the lock. Too much was going wrong and the responsibility was all his.

Dr. Kranolsky, the medical officer, was already at the lock, taking samples through the bleeder tube. Captain Moran chewed his lip and waited while the fat little doctor fussed with his instruments. The vision plate next to the port was on and he looked at it, at the dusty red landscape that stretched away outside. Like a questioning metal finger, the tall bulk of the other ship stood silhouetted against the sky.

That was the reason they had come. One year since the first ship had left, one year without a report or a signal. The first ship, *Argus*, had carried at least a ton of signalling equipment. None of it had been used. A puzzled world had built a second inter-planet ship—the *Argus II*. Moran had brought her this far—now he had to finish the job. Find out what had happened to the crew of the *Argus*. And get a report back to earth.

"More air pressure than I had expected, captain," Dr. Kranolsky's voice knifed through his thoughts. "And oxygen as well. About equal to the top of a high mountain on earth. Also the culture

plates remain clear. Most interesting, because—"

"Doctor. Make it short and make it clear. Can I take my men out there?"

Kranolsky stopped in mid-phrase, deflated. He had no defenses against a man like the captain.

"Yes...yes. You could go outside. Just be sure that certain precautions are followed—"

"Tell me what they are. I want to get over to the *Argus* while it's still light."

Back on the bridge the captain started to growl through the door of the radio room but the operator beat him to the punch.

"I've tried to contact the *Argus* on all frequencies, captain, right down to the infrared. Nothing. Either that ship is empty or the crew is—" He left the sentence unfinished, but the captain's thundercloud scowl finished it for him.

"What about search radar?" Captain Moran asked, "they might still be in the vicinity."

Sparks shook his head in a slow negative. "I've been looking at the slow sweep detail screen until I have pips on my eyeballs. There ain't *nothing* out there—earthman or martian. And at the distance I was using it that screen would show anything bigger than a baseball."

Captain Moran had a decision to make and it was a rough one. Almost every man aboard was essential to the operation of the ship. If he

sent a small party to examine the other ship they might run into trouble they couldn't handle. If they didn't come back none of them would get back to earth. But the only alternative to a small party was taking the entire ship's compliment. That would leave the ship empty—looking just like the *Argus*.

Moran chewed the problem for a minute and a half, then banged the intercom board with decision.

"Attention, ship's crew, all ratings attention. We are going out of here in fifteen minutes—all of us. Draw marsuits and the weapons you can carry. Now jump."

When they were all out on the red sand, Moran shut the massive lock door behind them and spinned the combination lock. Then, dispersed like an infantry squad, they slowly circled towards the *Argus*.

In alternate rushes they approached the lock of the other ship. It was wide open and there was no resistance or sign of life. In a matter of minutes the captain was standing under the gaping mouth of the lock. There was complete silence except for the rustling of wind churned sand granules. Red faced and panting hard, Pilot Sinkley raced up and slammed down next to the captain.

"Concussion grenade," Moran whispered.

Sinkley fumbled one out of his chest pack and handed it to the captain. He pulled the

pin, counted slowly, then flipped it through the open port. There was a blasting roar and Moran was through the port before the echoes had died away.

Nothing. No one in sight and no one in the carefully searched ship. The captain went to the empty bridge and tried to understand what had happened.

Moran was reading the log when he heard a hoarse shout from the guard he had left at the lock. He made it on a dead run, almost slamming into the men crowded there. Pushing them roughly aside he looked out.

There were four of them. Four girls. Lovely as any he had ever seen if you didn't take offense at their pale green skin.

"A welcoming committee. Boyoboy!", one of the crewmen said before Moran growled him into silence.

Yet that was all they seemed to be. They weren't armed and seemed incapable of any offense. The captain insisted on their being searched to everyone's enjoyment. Including the girls. They answered questions in clear and incomprehensible voices. The only information they conveyed was that they wanted the spacemen to go with them. In unmistakable gestures they waved towards the canal and beckoned the men to follow them. Captain Moran was the only one who

showed any hesitation about accepting. He finally posted a guard over the girls and called his officers aside for a conference.

There was only one course and they finally took it. They had to find out about the men of the other ship and the green girls were the only sign of a possible solution. There was no sign of any other kind of life on the red planet.

Well armed, they went in force. The girls were bubbling with happiness at the move and the whole thing had more of the air of a picnic than an expedition. Particularly when they found the boats moored at the canal's edge with two or three more girls in each boat. After a careful search that disclosed nothing, Moran allowed his men to embark, one man to a boat.

A barely perceptible current moved them along and the whole expedition took on the air of a punting trip in paradise. Captain Moran ordered and roared but it did little good. The sudden change after the long trip was dismembering what few shards of military morale the men had left.

Only one incident marred the even placidity of the trip. Dr. Kranolsky—whose scientific interest seemed to rise above his libido—was making a detailed examination of the boats. He called to the captain who guided his craft over until they touched.

"Something here captain, I have no idea what it might mean."

Following the doctor's pointing finger, Captain Moran saw faintly discernable scratches on one of the seats. Twisting and turning until the light hit them right he realized suddenly they were letters.

"SPII...that's what it looks like. Could one of the men from the *Argus* have written it?"

"They had to," the doctor said excitedly. "It is beyond reason that these martians could have an alphabet so similar to ours. But what can it mean?"

"It means," Captain Moran said grimly, "That they came this way and we had better keep our eyes open. I don't feel safe in these damn boats. At least we have the girls. Whoever or whatever is behind this won't start anything while we have them as hostages."

As the hours went by the current increased, they were soon moving at a deceptively rapid speed between the wide banks. Moran was worried and had his gun out instantly when he heard the doctor's shout.

"Captain, I have been thinking about those letters. They could mean only one word. If the man who scratched them here hadn't finished the last letter, only made the vertical

mark, the word could be SPIDER."

The captain put his gun back and scowled at the doctor. "And do you see any spiders doctor? There are none in these boats and these women are the only life we have found so far. Perhaps he meant water spiders. And if so—so what?"

Following this possibility Dr. Kranolsky took closet notice of the water. Captain Moran shouted orders to his men, but the boats were drifting further apart and some of them didn't hear him, or pretended they didn't. He couldn't be sure but he thought that things were going on in some of the furthest boats that were definitely against orders. Also the current was much faster. Only the presence of the green girls gave him any feeling of security.

There seemed to be a dark spot on the horizon, dead ahead. He tried vainly to make it out. Dr. Kranolsky's voice knifed irritatingly across his concentration.

"Being logical, captain, whoever scratched this word here thought it was important. Perhaps he never had time to finish it."

"Don't be fantastic, doctor. There are more important things to concern ourselves with."

For the first time since he had served under the captain, Dr. Kranolsky disagreed.

"No, I think this is the most important thing we have to concern ourselves with. If the man meant *spider*—where is the beast? Certainly these girls are harmless enough. Or the spider web—where is that." He mused for a second, his brow tight, then laughed. "It makes me think of a fantasy I had when we approached Mars. The canals looked like a giant spider web scratched on the surface of the planet."

Moran snorted with disgust. "And I suppose if this canal is a strand of the web, these girls are the 'bait'. And this building we are coming to is the spider's lair. Really doctor!"

The canal swept towards the giant black structure and seemingly vanished through an opening in its side. They couldn't control their small craft and within minutes were passing under a giant archway. Moran was frightened and to conceal his fear he poked fun at the doctor.

"And now we are in the lair doctor, what do you think a planet-wide spider should look like? How would you describe a beast that lives on a world as an earth spider lives on an apple?"

A scream was his only answer, a good enough answer.

Words are inadequate to describe the *thing* that completely filled the building.

Waiting.

Reaching for them....