

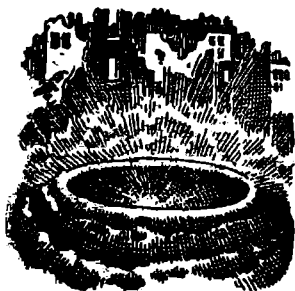
STARTLING STORIES

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March, 1947

An Amazing Complete Novel



The Laws of Chance

By MURRAY LEINSTER

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WHEN PLANETS

EDITOR'S NOTE: Some stories are forgotten almost as soon as they are printed. Others stand the test of time. Because "When Planets Clashed," by Manly Wade Wellman, has stood this test, it has been nominated for **SCIENTIFICTION'S HALL OF FAME** and is reprinted here. Outstanding fantasy classics are honored in each issue of this magazine. We hope in this way to bring a new permanence to the science fiction gems of yesterday and perform a real service for the science fiction devotees of today and tomorrow! Nominate your favorites!

FOREWORD

MY PART in repelling the attempted Martian invasion of Earth in the years 2675-77 was a limited one. As for my skill in telling of it, I again

recognize my limitations. Many learned and authoritative writers have said their say about our first and only interplanetary war. I, who am no writer at all, add to their works only because of a request from men in high places, who argue that my story is a unique chapter in that conflict's history.

Like wars of earlier times, the Martian-Terrestrial hostilities had a deep foundation in misunderstanding. Several hundred years previously radio communication was first established between the worlds and, shortly afterward, intrepid Martian scientists reached Earth in a pioneer space-ship. They were welcomed with both hospitality and suspicion.

Much was said to their faces of brother-



CLASHED

By
MANLY WADE WELLMAN

hood and good will across the emptiness of space; much more behind their backs of preparation against possibly dangerous visitors from the only other inhabited planet in the solar system. In succeeding years, whenever the orbits of the two worlds brought them into comparative proximity, a flourishing exchange of trade goods and tourists sprang up, and potential enmity as well.

The first strain in interplanetary relation came when representatives of the World League rejected the request of the ruler of Mars for permission to establish colonies on Earth. When the Martian executive protested that his planet, with deserts where oceans once stood, was dying, he was told

that Earth was rapidly approaching a similar condition and it could not engage to feed mouths from across space.

This and other differences did not help to maintain good feeling. Then one day a party of Martian tourists, riding in a sight-seeing car at St. Louis, seat of the World League's government, was surrounded by a crowd of roistering students. One wealthy Martian ordered his retainers to clear a way for the car.

A fight ensued, in which the Martians were severely beaten with sticks and cudgels. Three of them died, including a man high in office on his own planet. Others sustained bad injuries.

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The ruler of Mars sent a brusque demand by radio, calling the incident a proof of Earth's enmity. He asked redress for the families of the dead Martians, as well as the surrender of the Terrestrial rioters, then held in jail at St. Louis.

In the meantime, he proposed to seize and hold as hostages all Terrestrials then upon his planet. In this way it was expected retaliation might be made and the determination of Mars to see this thing through be shown.

After a brief consultation, the World League's representatives empowered their president, Silas Parrish, to send an even more blunt reply. In substance it refused the demands of the Martian ruler and also accused him of seeking an excuse for war with Earth. As for the Terrestrials he held, the World League sent its police to arrest all Martians on Earth as a retaliation.

This was followed by agreement to release hostages on both planets, and the return of the captives to their own planet. I was among those deported from Mars, and with my experiences at that time I begin this account, endeavoring to make it both accurate and readable.

JACK STILLWELL

CHAPTER I

Farewell

IF ALL the Terrestrials up on Mars at the beginning of hostilities, few, if any regretted more than I the order to return to Earth. Five years before, at the age of twenty, I had come to Mars as the youngest member of the Terrestrial Legation. My ties at home had been light, for I was an orphan, and I had gladly come to this strange planet to lay the foundations for a career and a fortune.

I had not suffered on Mars. In the years when one progresses from youth into manhood he gets much out of life in the way of pleasures, knowledge and friends. The latter, to me, were Martians of my own age. I found them understanding, responsive, square. We talked together of the good times to come when, grown to the leadership of our worlds, we would make for yet a stronger and closer alliance. And I had met Yann.

Yann to me was more sweet, more lovely and more loveable than any woman of my own planet—Yann, dark-faced, alert, with the flashing Martian black eyes and quick understanding. When her hand first touched mine in greeting I felt its pressure upon my heart. And would this war lose her to me?

On my last night in Ekadome, the City of

Martian Rulers, I left the company of my fellow Terrestrials as they sat in groups at the rocket port and glumly discussed the impending conflict. We were hemmed about with guards, but the commanding officer of the port was my old friend. To him I made my plea, and he readily accepted my parole and sent me, with a servant, to find a closed Martian electro-car.

"Back an hour before dawn," he warned me in the quick staccato Martian tongue. "When the sun rises, your ship clears."

The car whirled me through subterranean corridors to my destination. I stepped from it at last, and found a lift. The operator thought nothing of me, for, with my Martian clothes and haircut, and the deep tan of three summers in the Martian resort, Pulambar, I had little of the Terrestrial in my appearance.

He complied with my request to be taken to the upper levels, although, had he known my origin, he would have raised a shout that would have brought citizens of Ekadome to mob me. I reached the open air but five steps from a dear gateway I had come to know well.

Inside was Yann's garden, roofed over with a transparent, vitreous veil to shut out the cold night air. Blossoms as large as table-tops and of wildly gorgeous colors lined the path on either hand. Beyond them I saw Yann, on a seat beneath a clump of plants like giant, many-tinted cattails.

I swiftly reached her side. As she offered her hand I touched it with my lips for the first time. It quivered like a startled bird, but did not draw away.

"Sit down, Chac," she invited in her delightful Martian tongue—quick and vibrant.

"I have come to say goodby."

"Goodbys should never be said," volunteered another voice. It was Yann's brother, Nalo, who had been lounging in nearby Martian shadows. He now came forward to press my palm between both of his, Martian fashion. "Whatever our foolish worlds may do, Chac, you and I are friends."

"Friends and brothers," I replied.

"Well you may say that the worlds are foolish," said Yann as we sat down with her, one on either hand. "Every great man in our council tells the reason why we went to war, and each reason is different from all the others."

"The real cause is that we two peoples, while similar in appearance, are different in language and customs," said Nalo. "We find it too hard to speak each other's language or wear each other's clothes."

"Chac wears Martian costume and I don't object to his accent," said Yann. "It makes him charming."

She smiled to me as she spoke and for

such a smile I would gladly have died. I cannot tell you how oval was her face, how black her hair; how her figure was at once regal and delicate, how her every motion was grace quickened to life, how her glad spirit gave a light that illuminated my dark mood like a lamp. These things are sacred and have no place in a history of bloodshed.

"War is a childish thing in any case," went on Nalo. "Somewhere in the history of your world, Chac, a war was fought against organized criminals. With that exception, I can tell you of no fighting that was ever good or wise."

"You are right," I agreed.

"However, I don't think that there will be a long conflict. It is thirty days or more between worlds. During a space-ship's flight of that duration, friendship might last, but not hate. We shall all gather and laugh at this thing before we are a great deal older."

"Nalo is right there, too," smiled Yann. "The silly trouble will soon be settled. Then, Chac, you can come back to us."

"Yes," I said, "I can come back to you."

BACK to them—to her! The words in her mouth seemed so true, and were so much what I wished! I looked at her in adoration. Nalo read my heart and his white teeth flashed in a grin.

"There are guests inside," he said. "I must beg to be forgiven if I go to help my father entertain them. Chac, here is my hand between yours. May we meet again soon!"

He strode away, as true a gentleman as ever breathed the air of any planet. A door closed behind him. I turned to Yann.

"He knew I wanted to be alone with you," I said.

"With me? Delightful!"

The tears fought to break from my eyes, for I was very young, very miserable, and very much in love.

"Yann, dearest—" I choked. "How shall I say that I must leave?"

She put out her hand as if she knew how eager I was for her touch. As I clasped it in mine and bowed above it, the finger of her other hand rested lightly on my hair. So we stood silently for a second then our arms went around each other and for a blessedly aching space we kissed. Her eyes flickered shut in ecstasy, then opened and looked into mine.

"Sit down, Chac," she said.

I did so. She dropped onto the seat beside me, fondling my hand.

"We love each other," she said, "and now we must be worlds apart. But, my dear, let us be brave for each other's sake."

I nodded silently.

"You are returning to your earth. As a young man, you will be ordered to do your part in fighting my people."

"Never! Never!" I cried passionately. "I will go to prison before I make war on you and yours."

"No, Chac," she said. "That is not the way to think. You are a Terrestrial, beloved, and you must be true to your birthright. Do your duty as it is required of you. Work or fight, as you are bidden. Whatever you do, do it well and honestly. And, oh, Chac, try to avoid danger. Live through whatever befalls you, and come back when the war is over!"

I kissed her trembling mouth again and, holding her close, vowed that I would return to claim her if I lived. At last, when time came for me to return to the rocketport, I carried my head high and stifled the pain within me, for I gloried in the new-found love that Yann bore me.

We deported Terrestrials left Mars on the morning of January 2, 2675. On February 8—in those days the interplanetary passage took a month or longer—our ships slid into the atmosphere of Earth and settled onto the landing stages of the New Orleans rocketport. We emerged from the hatchways to be surrounded by port attendants and officers, eager to talk to us about Mars as we had last seen it. Was the Martian morale good? Was the preparation for warfare far advanced? Had we suffered indignities? And a thousand other queries.

In turn they gave us the latest news. Although our ships had been unmolested by the enemy (for such I knew I must thenceforth consider the Martians), several skirmishes had flared up between opposing patrols in space. One young officer, a red-faced lieutenant who was very vain of his expensive new uniform, had told me that only two days before he had helped beat back a combat group from Mars which had ventured to within a half million miles of Earth.

"They're going to be harder to whip than the news dispatches say," he told me. "However, we did plenty with our new ray-guns. If you've been away for five years, you can't have heard much about the disintegrator ray. Want to have a look?"

He took me to a long, rakish warcraft that rested on a stage nearby and in the gun room pointed out a complex system of levers and coils.

"Here is the target finder," he said. "Television, of course. With it you can locate and aim at a range of a thousand miles or more, though the ray itself won't be effective so far away. On the space-dreadnoughts there are long-range poppers that can do the busi-

ness at many times that distance."

He fiddled with the mechanism. "Once you spot the target, you put the 'finger' on it—the ray, that is, just like turning a search-light on some object—and press this lever. Whatever is at the other end will disintegrate on the moment. It's all more complicated than I can explain, full of atomic explosion formulas and the like."

"Did you get many Martians in the fight?" I asked.

"We washed out a dozen or so. I finished two myself, with this very ray-gun. So." He turned on the power. The finder showed us a distorted view of tall buildings.

"That's right here in town. Suppose we were attacking Shreveport." He spun a dial rapidly. A new skyline rose into view. "Now, if the ray was working, and I cared to, I could knock off that tallest building 'way up the Mississippi, as easily as I did those red and white Martian ships day before yesterday. Snip! Like that!"

"Red and white Martian ships?" I repeated. "That would be the Young Defenders. They're a junior sky corps, Martians about our age or a bit under. I know some of the officers. They're very decent fellows."

THE lieutenant looked at me queerly.

"That's a bad way to talk, now that we're at war," he said. "Martians are more appealing as targets than as house guests, just now."

"Rot!" said I, nettled. "You'd be glad to know such chaps at any other time. Can't we be sane about this scrap?"

He studied me with narrowed eyes as we left the ship.

"I'm not at all sure," he said in parting, "that I should have told you so much about the ray-gun."

He was too clumsy in his suggestion that I was a Martian sympathizer. Had he been less so, my temper might have gone. As it was, I laughed and walked away, but the discourse left a bad taste in my mouth which lasted all the way to St. Louis. There I went at once to the office of James Stillwell, staff member with the Intelligence Department of the Terrestrial Army. This man, my uncle and only living relative, was also my closest friend on Earth.

His duties were many, but he turned from them in a second to give me a warm welcome.

"You are home safe and happy!" he cried, forcing me into a seat.

"Not so happy, uncle," I told him.

"That girl on Mars, eh?" I held few secrets from him. "Well, Jack, I hope that you won't distress yourself too much about her. This is war, my boy, and there will be enough blood spilled to wet the way clear to

Mars and back again before you will be able to see her. Are you going into the service?"

"That's why I'm here."

"Good boy! And what branch do you want to enter?"

"I haven't made any choice."

"Then you need go no further than the Intelligence. You're young, smart, and just back from a long stay on Mars. Men like you are invaluable. We'll have you in a uniform this very day. What is your reserve rating? Captain, I think? Right? Well, come along."

I did so, glad for his wholesome cordiality. Yet my determination to do my utmost was fostered, not by anything that he said, but by the words of Yann, who had urged me to work or fight my best, even against her people.

CHAPTER II

Raiders from Space

WE OF Earth began the war in excellent spirits. We were mightier in numbers, richer in all resources, save metals, than the Martians. They had the better of us in volume of fighting materials—space-ships, ammunition, the thousand things that armed forces must have—but we did not expect them to be ready for a decisive attack upon us for quite awhile.

In the meantime the planets were swinging apart and two years and more would pass before they drew close again—ample time for us to gather and equip forces for our defense.

The new disintegrator ray-gun, the same weapon that was explained to me on the day that I returned from Mars, was one of our chief hopes. It was rightly believed to be far superior to the roving bomb, which was directed and exploded by radio controls and which, as a deadly weapon in aerial warfare, had often been used in the past by both Terrestrial and Martian nations. The ray-guns were being manufactured in quantity even as I came back, while thousands of young volunteers were learning their use and mechanism.

That the Martian agents would attempt to carry news and working plans of this device to their people was, perhaps, the chief fear of our High Command in those days. The Intelligence Department and its attendant throngs of operatives kept constant watch upon factories, broadcasting stations and other points.

Every message put on the wires or the air was rigidly censored. As an Intelligence officer, therefore, I found plenty to do to keep from brooding on what I had left behind

me on Mars.

On April first, 2675, war came in earnest, as dreadful as it was unexpected.

So suddenly were the raiders upon us that we knew it not. They struck Earth effectively in three places. Steel mills in Labrador, built to accommodate the large quantities of ore mined in the Republic of Greenland, were blown to bits in the night by roving bombs, while the attackers fled without being seen.

In the same hour, at Flagstaff, Arizona, the observatory and the interplanetary broadcasting station located there were demolished by a flight of Martian space-ships which were sighted but escaped unharmed. As noon of April first approached and sunset came to the other side of Earth, barracks at Algiers were smitten and two thousand newly-recruited soldiers killed like so many ants.

Vengeful swarms of Terrestrial ships sped into space, searching here and there, but to no avail. The Martians, their errand done, showed the cleanest heels in history, while the pursuers were forced to return for want of a trail in the trackless sky.

But return did not bring rest. Two nights later the Martians were back again. They neatly knocked a row of meteorological laboratories from the tops of the Rocky Mountains, as boys knock birds from a branch with stones.

Factories and warehouses at Rio de Janeiro were smashed to rubbish. At Nashville the raiders swooped down, but found a hot reception. Ray-gun defenses disposed of five and sent the others away, their errand of destruction brought to nothing.

In the morning this last incident was being celebrated as a victory by short-sighted folks, but those with whom the combat rested were really worried, the Intelligence Department most of all.

It chanced that I was in the office of my uncle when two of his fellow staff-members, Clyde Atrim and Gundell Goldansky, burst in. I rose, saluted, and started to go, but Atrim waved me to a seat.

"You may as well hear us, Captain Stillwell," he said. "It's a pity that all the department isn't here."

HE SEATED himself across the desk from my uncle.

"Because we put the finger on those five feeble Martians at Nashville Earth must consider the war half won!" he exploded. "It was no credit to us that they were washed out. They foolishly exposed themselves and, had they escaped, they would have been sure to draw reprimands!"

"The sad thing is," continued his com-

panion, "that they'll be back again, tonight or tomorrow night or the next, at some point. Every raid cripples us worse. They're wrecking our factories, killing our fighting men right and left. We'll have to put a stop to them, or Earth will be whipped inside of three months."

"It stands to reason," argued Atrim, "that there aren't a great many of them, or they wouldn't hit and run. They'd stay and make a battle of it with our patrols. I'm willing to wager that the raiding parties are the same in each case, a small group of fast space-ships. They can dash out from hiding, strike at a previously designated spot and dash back again."

"Where is their base then?" asked Goldansky. "They certainly aren't flying to and fro from Mars every night."

"Hardly," said my uncle. "The interplanetary passage must be more than a hundred and twenty million miles just now. That would take a tremendous ship, and the journey would last three months or more."

"Then they must be on Earth somewhere," said Goldansky.

But, though thousands of air-scouts patrolled the entire surface of the globe next day and investigations were ordered in every community of every nation, nothing was learned. But, on the second night following the conference in my uncle's office, the raiders struck once more, bombing government granaries in Siberia.

Early next morning, as my uncle and I ruefully discussed the radio reports of the attack, Goldansky and Atrim, the latter carrying a suitcase, again burst into the office.

"We've spotted them!" cried Goldansky excitedly.

"Who?" asked my uncle.

"Why, the Martians!" said Atrim. "Look here!"

He opened the suitcase and dragged out a rumpled mass of metal-braced fabric, shaped roughly like a coverall garment.

"They shot down one of the space-ships in Siberia last night," he explained. "Luckily, it wasn't all disintegrated. Its equipment, which officers thought worthy of examination, was rushed here this morning. This was part of it."

My uncle considered the thing carefully, then raised questioning eyes.

"But it's only a space-suit, a standard piece of equipment in the lockers of any interplanetary ship."

"Only a space-suit, eh?" snapped Goldansky, almost belligerent in his earnestness. "Look at the thing's shoes!"

He pointed to them.

"They're worn and scratched, even if their soles are thicker and stronger than ordinary.

Now, these suits are designed to allow repair work on the outside of ships while in space. Isn't that right?"

"That's right," said my uncle.

"But this one has done far more than that. Its owner walked on soil and rocks!"

Again we examined the shoes and saw that what Goldansky said was true.

"And then?" prompted my uncle.

"The rest is obvious. Why wear the thing while walking on the ground? The answer is that there is no atmosphere above the ground. And where is there such a place?"

MY UNCLE gave a shout as understanding burst upon him.

"Why, they're on the moon!"

And I saw how possible it was. In those days we paid little or no attention to Earth's dead child, hanging in the near heavens without air or water. Adventurers, scientists and cranks had made some small explorations but there it ended.

One of the few true benefits of the war was that we came to learn what great mineral treasures our satellite held. Today citizens, mines and factories again bring life to its dead face.

But the Martians, I knew, had not so rich and pleasant a world as ours. Long ago, pressed for expansion room, they had reached and settled their own two tiny moons, breathing artificial air in cities that were covered with mighty domes.

What more natural than that they should see the possibility of similar use of our moon? The few hundred thousand miles to the earth could be traversed readily and quickly by fleets of small raiders, which could rain down destruction and escape to hiding again.

"Let's urge a punitive expedition at once," said my uncle.

"Not so fast," said Atrim. "We'll have to find their base first. Probably it is a small one, and the moon is large. The only thing of which we can be reasonably sure just now is that they are on the far side. The side toward us—always the same side, of course—would be too easily examined by telescope for their comfort."

"Better say nothing about this matter just now," said my uncle. "The Martian spies—and the city is full of them—mustn't guess that we know. Jack, do you mind leaving us while we discuss this affair? What you have heard is, I know, safe with you."

I rose, but Goldansky held up his hand.

"Let the captain stay. I think, in fact, that he should know everything we say."

"Why so?" asked Atrim.

"Because my suggestion is to send a single scout to find the headquarters of the Mar-

tians. He can be swift and unobtrusive. They would be aware of a large force, but one man could find them and come away unseen—the more because they wouldn't be looking for him."

"I agree with you," said my uncle.

"I agree also, and see your point in keeping Stillwell's nephew here," added Atrim. "What man could be a better scout than he, with his knowledge of Martian affairs?"

"Do you mean for me to be a spy, sir?" I asked Goldansky.

"Not exactly. Just to find out all you can about the place, if it exists at all."

"It would be a glorious adventure," said Atrim.

"And a dangerous one," supplemented Goldansky.

"I hope that you don't think my nephew will balk at danger," put in my uncle.

"Not in the least, but he should understand all the risks of the enterprise."

"I'd gladly go, sir," I said. "I'm flattered that you think me worthy."

"Good man!" said Atrim, offering his hand.

The greater part of the morning was spent in preparing for my dash. The moon, as Earth saw it, was new and therefore would be nearly full as observed from the far side. I studied exhaustively lunar maps and photographs and made copious notes. The space-ship which was selected for my use was a one-man observation craft.

It was long, narrow and sharp-bowed, almost needle-like in proportions, with barely enough cabin-room to accommodate one man, lying at full-length. Although it had no armament of any kind, its television and radio equipment was of the highest order and it was designed to achieve and hold tremendous speed.

Before entering I donned a space-suit, all save the airtight metal helmet, which I placed in the cabin locker. This suit was of Martian make, which, as it later turned out, was a piece of good fortune. In its pockets I put an automatic pistol, loaded with fifty shells. At a few minutes before noon I was ready to depart.

"Goodby, captain!" said Goldansky, wringing my gloved hand.

"Take care of yourself!" this from Atrim.

"God bless you, my boy," was my uncle's farewell.

I STEPPED into the padded interior which, as the ship was raised on its stern like an obelisk, held me upright. The panel closed, shutting out the three friendly faces. Before my eyes was the television apparatus, already set upon the disc of the moon.

I touched the starter and, as my ship rose lightly from its moorings, shifted my fingers

to the accelerator. Away I whipped, up, up into the blue, until I was past Earth's atmospheric envelope. Once in space, I increased to full speed and turned my eyes to where, on the screen, the moon bulked larger and larger with the passing minutes.

My craft seemed to hang motionless upon nothing. A glance out of the ports showed the starry black of space. Below my feet was the silvery full disc of Earth. Only the figures on my speed dials showed the breathtaking clip at which I was traveling; only the ticking of instruments and the rustle of my own movements broke the utter silence of my flight.

Some three hours after my journey began, with the face of the moon nearly filling my forward port, I cut down my speed. At a reduced pace I swung around the satellite's brightest edge. Its lightest portion changed from the shape of a sickle to that of a crescent, that grew and grew until, drawing close to it, I found myself sliding along a few miles above a bleak, mountainous region.

The topmost peaks, I knew, were far higher than any on Earth. Swiftly crossing them, I next skimmed along above a plain, hundreds of miles in extent. In one or two places there seemed to be straight furrows or ditches, full of shadows, that bore some resemblance to the smaller canals of Mars. My thoughts, going back to the waterways of that far planet, conjured up a vision of their own volition.

Once more I seemed to see Yann's lovely face, clouded around with dark hair, while she bade me to do my part in the war. Could she have foreseen my present task, would she still have counseled me so? I sighed, all alone in my hurrying shell. Then, slowing down until I floated almost motionless, I pondered the problem of my search.

I had to cover as much as possible of the moon's surface, and that within a very short time. The best plan, as I saw it, was to head for the center of the lighted area, mount to a position some fifty miles above ground, and there begin a spiral journey, watching the landscape through television.

Of course, there was the chance that the Martian force, wherever it was, might discover me first; but, since they were many and large and I was one and small, that chance was a slim one. And, even if they swarmed out after me, that by itself would show me where they were. Such knowledge once mine, I would trust to my craft's heels to give me a chance to make use of it.

Soon, therefore, I was travelling in an ever-increasing circle over the silent stretches. What appearance the Martian raiders' base would take I did not know, but I was sure that any movement or incon-

gruity would be triply noticeable in the ghostly stillness below.

I flew over plains, over mighty mountain ranges and quiet valleys. The landscapes were as uncanny as those that arise in dreams. Often some strange sight impelled me to drop down for closer inspection, but never did I find traces of men or their works.

Hours passed. My chronometer, set in St. Louis, registered close to six o'clock. Another night would soon ride down upon my home—a night which might again bring the raiders—and I had not found their den as yet!

But just at that moment the television screen showed me something that brought my hands, all trembling, to correct the focus and clarify the image.

It showed me the interior of a crater, one of those that so plentifully pit the lunar surface. In it lay a dull-gleaming object of metal, cigar-shaped and evidently of great size. It was a Martian space-ship!

I glanced at my instruments, quickly calculated the crater's position, and fairly hurtled toward it. Unless a close lookout was being kept, aided by instruments for artificial vision, my little craft would appear only as a momentary flash of light. I therefore shot fearlessly to the very slope of the crater and then, after hovering for a moment, found a deep fissure into which I could lower my ship.

The shadows of the moon are as deep and black as pools of ink, for, with no atmosphere to diffuse the sun's rays, there is no refracted light. Therefore, when I had fastened on my helmet, emerged and mounted to the lip of the crack, I could not distinguish my vessel a few feet beneath me.

THE heat was terrific, even in my insulated space-suit. Yet I scrambled easily to the crater's edge, my Earth-trained muscles readily adjusting themselves to the reduced force of lunar gravity. Cautiously hiding behind a projecting rock, I peeped into the great depression below.

Thunder! What a space-ship!

The television had given me no definite idea as to the true size of the Martian craft. Now, looking directly down upon it, I was stunned by its vastness. It was fully a mile in length, and its greatest width, at the center, was perhaps 300 yards or slightly less. It tapered to a blunt point at either end.

In its interior must have been room for the laying out of a city, for the housing of regiments. Here and there on its upper surface bulged turrets and ports for observation, for weapons, for instruments. Along its sides were lines of air-locks for the passage of men—a few of them were moving around

near the ship, specklike by comparison—or for smaller vessels.

In what secrecy had the monster been conceived and built? At what cost and labor was it operated? And how to conquer and destroy it?

With a growing chill of despair, I realized that no combat organization now in service with the World League could hope to vanquish so mighty a war vessel. Even a glance showed that, for offense and defense, it was equipped to a magnitude hitherto undreamed of.

It could spot a Terrestrial fleet and wipe it out at long range. Even our disintegrator rays would make small impress on its massive shell. My scouting expedition had availed little, after all. The thing was invulnerable!

Then a new thought came. Invulnerable, yes, as regarded assault from the outside. But might not a man find his way into it, and from there do much? I wore a Martian space-suit and was familiar with Martian manners. It was worth trying.

Boldly I stepped out from behind my rocks and began to descend the inner precipice.

CHAPTER III

Within the Ship

I REACHED the floor of the crater shortly and made my way toward the big ship where it towered aloft nearly a thousand feet. My path took me past groups of Martians in space-suits similar to mine, working in caves and pits.

They were digging up various minerals and putting them in bags and containers, while other groups carried these toward the ship. My presence seemed to create no interest, and so I joined one silent detail of carriers headed for an air-lock.

The leader rapped out a signal on the lock panel, which swung open and admitted us. We passed through the lock chamber and I found myself in a busy corridor which, as I walked down it, gave in turn onto a larger one. The walls and the ceiling were of dull metal plating while the floors were covered with some material that eased the feet and deadened sound.

Throngs of Martians, uniformed or in space-suits, moved hither and thither in ordered haste. Now and then a small vehicle with three or four wheels moved down the center of the passageway.

On either hand, I saw, the metal partitions were pierced with panels, and some of these were open to disclose offices, machine-shops,

eating-rooms or apartments, just as on a city street.

Already the carrying party to which I had attached myself had disappeared. Unshipping my helmet and slinging it to my belt, I looked around. At first glance I would still pass for a Martian and no man paid me any attention, but on the other hand I felt as though I were wandering aimlessly. I had gained the inside of the ship; how was I to take advantage of my position?

With an effort at a casual manner I hailed a passer-by and asked him where to find the office of the commander.

He stopped and looked at me queerly. He was a black-browed fellow in the uniform of a sub-bomber.

"What commander do you mean?" he asked.

"Who but the commander of this craft, friend?" I returned.

"And do you not know? Answer me that!"

"Why answer to such as you?" I said, affecting haughtiness and turning away from his disquieting questions. But he shouted to other Martians, who hurried up. In a moment I found myself surrounded.

"What's this?" sternly demanded an officer in the uniform of a flight commander, who had been attracted by the ripple of excitement.

"He asks strange questions, sir," said the sub-bomber respectfully, "and he doesn't answer the ones I ask. I don't know him or his rank. If I spoke sharply to him, it was because I thought I should."

"You have done well," answered the officer, observing me narrowly. "By the cut of his hair this man is a Terrestrial."

"By birth only," I offered quickly. "I have never espoused the cause of Earth. I'm a deserter these six hours."

"Deserter? Here?"

"I stole a space-ship."

"And why did you come to this place?"

"To join you."

"You knew that we were posted here?" he queried sharply. "Not even our families on Mars know that—only a few officers in high places. Where did you get your knowledge?"

"I came on a wild guess."

"That is a spy's tale," he said scornfully. "If you were a real deserter, you'd have given yourself up a prisoner outside and wouldn't have sneaked into our corridors."

It was plain to see that my case was a sorry one and I racked my brain for more plausible lies to tell him. He sneered as he saw my confusion.

"Such zeal for a new cause is touching. The only trouble is that the whole story is too far out of focus. We aren't romanticists here, my Terrestrial friend. If you can't be

more convincing you'll be dead before another day has passed."

He turned to the others.

"Make him fast. He's going to prison."

The black-browed bomber seized one of my arms and another Martian stepped up to help. For a moment I contemplated fierce resistance, but I knew how useless that would be. Already others were gathering around, and nearly all of them were armed. I resigned myself to this reversal of fortune, just as another officer, wearing the insignia of a staff member, pushed through to us.

The flight commander saluted, Martian fashion, with a slight quick bow and both hands brought smartly to the forehead.

"We've captured a spy, sir," he said.

His superior turned toward me and my heart began to race like a motor.

It was Nalo!

A delighted smile lit up the handsome face of my old friend as, with a shout of welcome recognition, he sprang forward and threw his arms around me.

"Chac! Chac!" he cried. "I never thought to see you so soon! What are you doing here with us?"

"As I tried to explain," I stammered, "I deserted the Terrestrials and came here by chance."

"Of course! Of course! How fortunate that you should do so!"

HE ADDRESSED the others.

"I'll assume responsibility for this man," he said, "and myself will turn him over to the commander's office. I trust him, for he was long a resident of Mars and is not in sympathy with those who brought on the war. Is that sufficient for you?"

"It is sufficient," said the flight commander a little glumly, as he saluted and walked away with the others.

"And what will happen when I go to the commander's office?" I asked Nalo when we were alone."

He laughed loudly.

"As if I would permit it? Heavens, Chac, are you not well out of this war? Forget it, with its foolishness and its horror. May all others learn to despise it as I do! No, you will be my guest here, no more. When the war is over—and it will be at the next opposition of the planets—you will go back with me to Mars, won't you? And there you will see Yann again!"

To see Yann again! And her brother Nalo, who promised me that, was one of the raiders whose destruction I was sworn to accomplish! I choked in emotion and Nalo, prince that he was, thought I was sobbing with joy.

"I'm very close to crying myself, Chac," he said gently. "Come, my apartment is near

this place."

We went up by a lift and thence to his quarters. There I doffed the space-suit and my Terrestrial garments, while he gave me a plain Martian uniform from his own wardrobe.

"Lucky fellow!" he said as I pulled on the tunic. "No more war for you, ever!"

His words made me feel unutterably guilty as I stealthily retrieved my automatic pistol from the pocket of my discarded space-suit and tucked it out of sight in the waistband of my new costume.

He was delightedly ready to accept the story I told to explain how I had come to the moon. When I was fully dressed we walked out together, he chattering the while about this vast and wonderful mother-ship that was the raiders' headquarters.

It was manned, he said, by nearly 200,000 picked men, and in its hangars were a thousand swift combat ships. Nearly a hundred levels were included between its top and its base. The lives of its tremendous crew were supported by chemically produced foods, water and air, all successfully made on Mars for centuries.

"Such a vessel could conquer the world," I said.

"Not for a moment, Chac," laughed Nalo. "Its very size makes that impossible. Why, it couldn't be operated inside Earth's gravity pull—no, not if it was but half the size. The engines had all that they could to lift it away from Mars, where it encountered but one-third of Earth's gravity. Here on the moon, where an Earthman weighs but a sixth of what he does at home it is slow and clumsy enough. No, it is only a movable fort, a sort of hive for the little raiders."

He sent for food and we ate together in private. Then he left to attend to some of his duties as a member of the mother-ship's staff, leaving me to wander about freely.

Nalo's attitude made my task at once easy and hard. I was roving through the corridors, a Martian in appearance, able to view all the secret workings of the craft; but all this I did with a heavy heart, for only Nalo's friendly belief that I meant no harm had made it possible.

I hardened my resolve. I had been entrusted with a mission, and I must carry it through. My hand, and my hand alone, could halt the Martian raids on my native planet. Determined but downcast, I returned at last to Nalo's quarters. He was waiting for me.

"Back already?" he said. "I thought you would find enough to keep you interested for days."

"But I understand so little of what is going on, and I'm afraid to ask."

"I'll explain to you. Staff meeting's over."

They're discussing the new raid on Earth."

"New raid?" I repeated. "Are they raiding again tonight?"

"You mean, of course, the night that is now on Earth. The lunar night won't be upon us for ever so long. No, they'll wait twenty-four of your hours and then shove off. It wouldn't do to have the raids too close together."

"Where will they attack?" I asked.

"Oh, Chicago and Omaha this time, to destroy factories for the building of space-ships. But why should you worry? The war is nothing to you, nor to me for the time being. I'm more interested in making a night of it. We have theaters, cafés, and there are three or four officers you'll remember. Shan't we have them in?"

"Not just yet, Nalo," I said, speaking slowly to control my voice, which was perilously near to breaking. "I'd much rather just visit all parts of the car."

"As you say. Where shall we go first?"

"Is it possible to see the atmosphere plant?"

"Absolutely. Come along."

His rank was sufficient passport to the sentinel who guarded the doorway to the small but complex laboratory. Inside, the workers showed us the machinery, the plans of the system, the control boards that hurried the air's circulation or shut it off, and the levers that could, if necessary, be operated to open big valves and exhale gases from the structure.

"These levers work thousands of vents," said Nalo. "As you can imagine, they can be put into many combinations. Don't touch them. You might evict the air from some apartment or corridor, and possibly it would cause trouble."

"But if all the master levers were thrown wide?" I asked.

"Then every gaseous substance in the whole car would be gone in about ten winks," said the supervisor of the plant.

"I see. If something went wrong, it might kill everyone."

"Not as bad as that. At the first hint of trouble with the apparatus, these automatic alarms would sound throughout the ship. There are space-suits in each apartment, and the men would quickly don them. Then they would be safe until all was running smoothly again."

We left, Nalo talking gaily, myself quiet and preoccupied. At last I knew how to do my duty.

IT WAS late when we returned to my friend's quarters. Nalo still wanted to invite our acquaintances in, but I begged him not to do so. I could not have stood it.

At last we lay down on separate pallets and I kept quiet until Nalo's breathing became measured in sleep. Then I carefully arose and donned my space-suit. The automatic I transferred again to the outside pocket. I searched until I located the exhaling valve which, according to the men at the atmosphere laboratories, was to be found in every apartment. This I carefully blocked with wadded cloth. Then I left, closing the panel tightly after me.

The lights were dimmed in the corridors and few persons were afoot. I went unchallenged to a lift which took me to the level of the laboratory. There I approached its doorway to find, as I had expected, a vigilant sentry on guard.

Unhesitatingly I walked toward him until he presented his automatic rifle and called on me to halt.

"Let me in," I said, the radio attachment in the helmet making my voice audible. "I have a message for the superintendent."

"Have you a permit?" he asked warily.

"Certainly," I answered, taking from my pocket a folded paper. As he reached for it, I suddenly sprang upon him. With one hand I grasped his throat, shutting off his cry of surprise and with the other I twisted his weapon from his grasp and flung it up the corridor.

Then, clenching my fist inside the heavy, metal-jointed glove, I struck him a heavy blow on the jaw. He dropped without a sound. Leaping over him as he rolled senseless at my feet, I pulled aside the panel of the laboratory, stepped in, and pulled it shut after me.

Half a dozen men were working inside. I quickly approached the air-forming machinery. The first of the workers to look up seemed to catch the menace in my attitude for, with an exclamation, he made for the alarm apparatus.

I snatched my automatic from my pocket and shot him dead in his tracks, hurrying forward as another dashed to take his place. We met in front of the instrument and, even as his hand was stretched out to press the button and warn all the thousands in the mother-ship, I brought the heavy barrel of my gun down on his head.

He slumped to the floor while I grasped the board to which the alarm mechanism was bolted and, exerting all my strength, tore it from its fastenings. A spark of blue flickered and died as the electric connections parted. It was wrecked.

Three of the others had drawn their guns. They now fired at me, all at once, but all three bullets, by some good fortune, missed me. The fourth man darted for the panel that led to the corridors.

I aimed and pressed the trigger. No report! The blow that I had struck with my automatic had somehow jammed it.

Desperately I hurled the gun. It crashed against the back of his head as he ran, and he fell to his hands and knees, stunned. Now I was arrayed, empty-handed, against three desperate Martians, all armed. I quickly knelt to fumble for whatever weapons might be on the person of the man I had knocked away from the alarms.

That quick move downward must have saved my life for, at the same moment, all three fired again, then rushed me. As it was, one bullet grazed my helmet with a deafening rasp, and it would certainly have pierced me had I been standing.

I stood up as the trio closed in and, catching the nearest one around the waist, swung him from his feet and hurled him against his fellows. The three rolled, shouting, on the floor, together while leaping onto the squirming pile, I stamped and kicked as I knew how.

I planted a heel upon a skull and felt its owner subside. Another man rose to his knees, but went down again as I kicked him behind the ear. I sprang away and made for the levers that controlled the exhalation of the tremendous ship.

One man staggered to his feet and tackled me around the knees. Down we clattered, while he tried to stab me with a dagger. Its blade glanced from a metal rivet in my space-suit and a moment later I caught and twisted his arm until he dropped the blade.

Still he fought to keep me from the levers. My strength, developed on Earth, was more than twice his, but he was unhampered by a space-suit and nearly made up the difference in desperation. Through my helmet's goggles I could see his distorted face, now close, now receding, and today it remains the clearest memory of that fight in the laboratory.

For half a minute we wrestled and I could not shake him off. Stern knocking sounded at the door. Then it partially opened. At the same time I managed to twist the fingers of my left hand in my adversary's hair and jerk his head forward. Raising my right metal-lined hand high, I chopped him on the back of the neck with its edge. He collapsed and I twisted out of his grip.

At the door appeared a throng of Martians, most of them with weapons of various sorts. Astonishment halted them momentarily, else assuredly I would have been struck down. But already I had reached my objective. One master level I pulled—another—another and another, until all were thrown wide.

A sudden gust of wind seemed to shriek in the room and in the corridor beyond. The men at the door fell in a writhing heap. A strange black exultation, that had nothing of

joy swelled in me.

I had succeeded in my mission.

CHAPTER IV

Traitor!

A HEAVY wrench was on a stand nearby. I grabbed it and attacked the air-forming machinery. At my first blow it rattled. A few more strokes stopped it entirely. Then I ran back to the master levers and so hammered and bent them that it would take some time and labor to move them from their position. This done, I sprang over the tortured forms at the door and ran up the corridor.

Everywhere, as far as I could see, lay dead and dying Martians. Singly and two and three deep they lay, silent or quivering, along my pathway. But I found a lift and quickly dropped it to the floor where Nalo was quartered. But a few seconds more found me at his apartment, from which, despite my precautions, air was escaping. Entering, I saw him gasping on the floor.

"Nalo!" I cried. "Up, man, there's no time to lose!"

I lifted him up and reached for his space-suit where it hung on the wall. He looked at me incomprehendingly.

"Why, Chac? What has happened?"

"I've wrecked the atmosphere plant, Nalo," I said. "No matter how—I did it. I had to do it. But I can't let you die like the rest of them. Here, get into this suit."

He shook himself free and staggered away, supporting himself against the wall.

"Wrecked the plant, Chac? You? That's a lie—you wouldn't."

"But I did. Everybody is dying and, if you don't hurry, you'll die, too. Come!"

He struck my hands away.

"No help from you, you false friend!" he cried. "Now you have made me a traitor as well!"

He collapsed to the floor, his senses all but gone. My heart went cold as I knelt and pulled the suit onto him. He feebly resisted, but the effort took the last of his strength. I fastened the helmet onto his senseless head and let in some oxygen.

Unconsciously, his lungs drew in the life-giving element. I raised him and laid him on the pallet. Later, when my work was finished, I would return and save him. He would have to forgive me.

But other problems still presented themselves. In the corridors moved a few men who had been able to don their space-suits before it was too late. Perhaps they would

find a way to recover their mighty craft, to prepare it and once more menace my planet. I must totally disable the mother-ship.

The lifts were stalled, and I ran up one flight of stairs after another until I came to the apartment where the radio-bomb controls were located.

Before me was a television apparatus. With its aid I sent one bomb after another roving through corridors and shafts. The first went to destroy the steering apparatus, the second to wreck the engine room, the third to complete the work I had done in the air-forming laboratory. Last of all I directed one to a magazine aft, where a great store of bombs was kept.

A moment later the mighty ship trembled in every atom with the explosion. The ship would be utterly unfit for movement now, I knew. My final act was to turn my automatic upon the bomb controls themselves and, with a series of careful shots, put them out of commission. Satisfied, I again descended to the level of Nalo's apartment and entered.

The detonation of the magazine had torn metal beams from the ceiling. Two of them pinned him down on his pallet. With the strength of anguish I lifted them away. Too late! His back was broken.

But his dead face was no longer stamped with an expression of hate, as when I had last seen it. When he had died, loathing for me had not been with him. Tears ran down my cheeks and fogged the glass goggles of my helmet as I gazed upon the body of my friend and knew that at the last Nalo had found it in his heart to forgive me.

I turned away and, descending to the lowest levels, found an air-lock. I crept through this like some noisome creature and walked away from that colossal and stricken hulk. A little knot of Martians in space-suits signalled to me from the distance, but I mounted the inside wall of the crater unheeding.

At the top I looked back once at the wrecked mother-ship. Truly, it would never again send out and receive raiders of the Earth.

After a brief moment of searching, I located my hidden vehicle. Once inside, I swiftly soared away on the road back. I took off my helmet and, tossing it aside, caught a reflection of my face in the dark, idle glass screen of the television. It was haggard, burning-eyed, sorrowful as death. My experience had wrought a deep and indelible change in me.

And that was the end of my adventure, the adventure which, in the minds of many, gives me an outstanding place among the individual heroes of the Interplanetary War. Yet neither then nor ever afterward could I find it possible to rejoice that it was I who

wrecked the mother-ship of the Martian raiders.

I WAS apathetic enough when I arrived at the St. Louis rocketport in the early morning. Before I was through checking in my ship, the three men who had sent me came rushing up.

Goldansky was congratulatory, Atrim full of questions and my uncle, almost clairvoyant in his sympathy with me, sensed my feelings and said little in front of the others. We two strolled away to his office at last, while I told him the whole story. When I had finished he clasped my hand.

"I'm proud of you, Jack," he said. "No man could have had a harder time of it. But I know that you don't care to talk any more about it."

"I don't, uncle."

"Then let's stick to shop. You know, of course, that you're to lead a combat group back to the Martian base."

"So I understand."

An orderly appeared with a communication from the High Command. The general officers of the Terrestrial forces had heard of my feat and were offering their congratulations. Soon they proposed to entertain me. In the meantime secrecy must be observed, until the Martians power on the moon was blotted out forever.

At first there had been talk of repairing and garrisoning the enormous shell which I had partially destroyed, but this plan was swiftly discarded. Late in the afternoon of that same day, I once more took to space, this time in the cabin of a squadron commander's ship.

It was easy to lead the expedition to the scene of my late conquest. We swooped down like a flock of vultures, taking up positions on the flanks of the mighty hulk. Some few survivors in space-suits came forward eagerly to surrender as our party entered the air-locks.

These prisoners were questioned thoroughly. They readily told our officers that the mother-ship represented the one Martian base on the moon, and they also served as guides throughout the airless corridors.

A number of the smaller raiding ships were found to be in fair running order, and these were manned and loaded with all that could be salvaged. Then, with explosives and disintegrator rays, wrecking parties set to work on the structure. For hours they labored, and in the end the mighty mother-ship was utterly wrecked, no longer fit as a menace or a threat to Earth.

I took part in none of this. My only act, after guiding the expedition to the spot, was to find and carry out the body of Nalo, to

take the remains back with me.

When we returned, and not until then, the news was broadcast throughout the earth that the Martian marauders had been obliterated. Loud was the noise of thankful celebration and I feel sure that every person loyal to the Terrestrial cause took part in it—all save myself.

For I was concerned with Nalo's funeral. His body was burned and the ashes scattered, according to Martian usage. His belt, his automatic pistol and half a dozen mementoes I put away in a locker. So long as they exist, they will recall memories of a gallant and too-faithful friend.

Goaded and stimulated, the manufacturers of fighting equipment speeded up their work, and preparation went on throughout the remainder of the year. The resources and labors of the entire earth were expended to build thousands of space-ships, to equip, maintain and train the millions of men needed to meet the Martians when the final battle came. Come it would, every Terrestrial knew. And then there would be as tremendous, as awful a conflict as mortal creatures ever saw.

It is not for me to discuss the policy of Martian commanders in sending four separate forces to attack Earth, instead of combining them into one. Some commentators have stated that the Martians made erroneous calculation for the joining of those forces in space. Others claim that they hoped to split and destroy separately the Terrestrial combat groups. And there have been rumors of misinterpreted orders and similar blunders.

However, those who really know—the officers who launched the Martian attack in the winter of 2676—have remained silent to a man. Until they speak, the curious must whistle for an explanation. I, for one, cannot give it.

In late November of the year 2676, scouts and radio brought news that a tremendous combat group had left the enemy planet, now approaching opposition, and was making for Earth at top speed.

The number of Martian craft, large and small, was estimated at 300,000. They were granted some eighty days in which to come within striking distance of Earth. So formidable a fighting organization had never before existed, save on paper, and in the story-books of the pre-Atomic Age.

But we Terrestrials, knowing that our ready forces numbered more than twice as many ships, were not panicky. We were more interested and serious at the news that came early in December, when a second Martian group, similar in size and makeup to the first, was reported en route to Earth.

SHORTLY before Christmas orders came directing all Terrestrial combat units to stand ready for clearing on the first of February. At that time we totaled 700,000 craft, ranging in size from mighty dreadnoughts of space to fleet scouts that held no more than five or six men. The crews that would serve and fight these ships mustered fully forty million. These forces represented the wealth of a world and the flower of its manhood.

A vast armada! But in the first week in January a third mighty mass of Martians was reported on the way. A desperate and almost even fight seemed assured, with the advantage on the side of the enemy. Everywhere one heard laughing and joking, forced out to hide the real concern which grew steadily as the jumping-off date approached.

During the last week of January, I received orders to report for active duty on the campaign. In the event of our landing on Mars, I was to help in establishing Intelligence Department headquarters there. My assignment was to the ship of Flight Commander Putnam, who headed a group of the swiftest combat ships of the entire service.

I quickly made friends with him and with the juniors officers of his ship—Captain Ferman, in charge of the ray-guns, and Captain Sughrue, chief of engineers and flight mechanics. Both were young men, about my own age, and inclined to view the coming struggle in the light of an exciting adventure.

They showed me how well equipped was their craft and its consorts for flight, speed and observation. Their only wish was for Martians on which to demonstrate their prowess.

We cleared from St. Louis, together with a thousand other ships. All over Earth rocket-ports saw mighty swarms of ships take to space. Once outside the limits of the atmosphere, we speeded up and drew into our appointed position, keeping contact with foreign units on either hand.

"Russians to the right," said the veteran Putnam, indicating the positions of our neighbors in one of the television screens. "Stout fellows and great space-wranglers, those boys. Our greatest speed engineers have been Russian—Manvelsky, Popoff, Schoeneckoff and the rest. The pioneers were Martians, of course, but they had little to teach these chaps."

"And who have we to the left?" asked Ferman.

"Chinese, I think," answered the commander, bending his grizzled head close to the screen. "They're good men to have along on this sort of business. Wide-awake, tricky, brave as the bravest."

He turned dials to clarify the image. "That nearest flight belongs to Wu Ting Fang. I know him well. His men are perhaps as clever with ray-guns as you'll see."

"No more so than my Missourians, I'll bet," said Ferman quickly.

"I hope yours are as good, captain," replied his superior. "There will be need for all their skill."

Our ships moved at an easy pace that day, and the next day, and the next. Our commanders proposed to operate on the defensive at first, with the Martians engaging us at a great distance from their own bases. Both machinery and morale would suffer from the long journey, went the argument, and a stiff resistance would be doubly effective.

I am sure the battle would have gone according to our calculations had the opposing forces remained as we figured them when we jumped off. But, on the morning of the fourth day, an orderly came from the radio locker to hand Commander Putnam a slip of paper.

The officer's face became stern when he read it.

"Gentlemen," he said to the three of us as we looked at him in surprised concern, "this is bad. A final group of Martians has just cleared."

"How large?" I asked.

"As large as the others, it says here."

Sughrue silently made a rapid calculation.

"Lord! They have one million two hundred thousand ships in space this moment!" he groaned.

"They could trade us ship for ship and still have half a million left with which to sack the cities of Earth!" added Ferman in equally gloomy tones. "Even at that, they may have more to come."

"It's not as bad as it seems," said the commander. "Our ships are faster and better manned than theirs, and we're far better armed. These ray-guns will do a great deal toward evening the odds."

It was small comfort, but it served to recall the two junior officers to better spirits. The news was relayed to other ships of the flight, while we in the commander's ship wondered what change this latest threat might make necessary in our plans and our fate.

We had not long to wonder.

The radio orderly appeared soon after this with another slip.

Putnam eagerly scanned it, then held it out to us.

"We're not on the defensive, after all," he said. "We're going to meet and attack the first Martian combat group!"

CHAPTER V

Earth Smites

AGAIN the news was passed along and Sughrue scampered away to his engines. In a moment we shot forward at an increased clip. The television showed our neighbors on all quarters closing rapidly, and the whole force concentrating.

"What's our new policy?" asked Ferman.

"A simple and logical one," said Putnam. "Our position is that of a giant who could conquer me alone, or you, or Stillwell, or Sughrue, alone. If the four of us rushed him at once, however, we could finish him easily. His best plan, therefore, would be to meet and defeat us singly.

"We are a single force of seven-hundred-thousand ships. The Martians outnumber us, but they are divided into four groups, millions of miles apart. We're fast-moving and hard-hitting. If we can tackle them singly, we have a good chance of cleaning them all up, a group at a time, or at least crippling them so that they won't present a menace to Earth."

"In the meantime, what happens to us?" I inquired.

"In the meantime, my boy, you have one chance in I don't know how many of ever seeing St. Louis again."

Sughrue, back from the engines, called us to the television apparatus.

"The Martians!" he cried.

In the screen was the image of a cloud of glittering specks against a black sky, like a strange new star-cluster.

"Martians, sure enough," agreed the commander. "The sun shines on them, making them visible to us. That must be the first group." He quickly checked up some figures on a movable scale. "They can't be so much as six hours away."

Radio messages came, bearing commands to stand by and prepare for action. Our screen showed the Martians shifting to open formation. Other, larger specks of light moved into our field of vision.

"Those are ships of our own advance parties, far ahead," said Putnam. "Look—there's the flash of a ray gun. They're opening the game."

He turned to the radio orderly.

"What have you now? Well, thank God, here's our order to join in. Full speed ahead, Sughrue. We're going to get our feet wet!"

It seemed no more than moments until Ferman, with the guns forward, shouted that the Martians were within range. At almost

the same time, the floor beneath me gave a sharp lurch.

"What's that?" I asked, staggering to keep my balance.

"That's Sughrue," replied Putnam, holding on by a rail. "He was snapping us out of the way of a roving bomb." He spoke into a microphone. "Well, Ferman?"

"The Martians are jumpy, too," came back Ferman's voice. "One big fellow is skipping away from us like a dog playing with the water from a garden hose.

"Whup!" he laughed exultantly. "We've put the finger on him!"

The television showed me half a dozen duels between members of our flight and Martians. Putnam, scanning the screen with practiced eye rushed a series of radio orders to various ship commanders.

They must have been very good orders indeed, for in a few moments our flight had accounted for twelve enemy ships and was driving away all others for some little distance around, while only two of our craft were lost.

"We've got 'em on the run!" Ferman's voice was crying.

"Because they weren't Class A fighters," said Putnam. "I'm glad it wasn't worse. Orderly! Radio my compliments to Captain Janecki commanding Number Seven. Call his attention to Number Six, hit by Martians. Tell him to go aboard and see if he can put her in the running order again. We'll need her."

In the meantime the battle was raging at a little distance in our front and on both flanks. Our superior numbers and armament counted heavily. Television glimpses showed Martians falling back on every hand, their ranks badly depleted.

"What now, sir?" asked Sughrue's voice, microphoned from the engine-room.

"Pursuit, orders say," answered Putnam. "Full speed ahead again."

Our flight rapidly overtook a group of retreating Martians. I went forward to Ferman's ray-guns, and through the target-finders saw one, then another enemy craft explode to nothingness.

"Better for them if they'd stop and fight," said the young captain. "Humph, that's just what they're going to do! Look at the boys in our flight. There are Numbers Nine, Twelve and Thirteen, all tying in. Now the others.

"Fifteen's hit. Too bad—not quick enough to dodge that roving bomb. Man, how the ray-guns are coming through!"

Again the Martians were melting all along the way. Yet their resistance was not in vain. In some places, we learned, they gave fully as good as they received before retreating. At last the order was sent along to

proceed at a reduced pace, letting the fragments of the enemy group make their escape.

Our own flight of thirty vessels had lost but three, while nowhere in our immediate neighborhood had our companion flights lost heavily. In the meantime, orders from the High Command were received in which all Terrestrial units were praised for the speed and dispatch shown in administering defeat to the enemy.

"If the others are as easily beaten as that, it'll be a picnic," grinned Sughrue.

As if in satirical answer, the latest radiogram arrived.

It told that the second and third Martian groups had merged into a single mass of 600,000 ships, a body in itself nearly equal to our entire force. Meanwhile the fourth group was hurrying to join in.

WHAT followed is known to every schoolboy; is remembered at first hand by millions of veterans on two planets.

We were no longer in a position where a slight advantage in offensive weapons would make us victors. We had shattered one group, yes; but the three remaining, if combined into one, would still outnumber us hopelessly. Our salvation lay in quick maneuvering, and our High Command knew it.

The quickly laid plan, therefore, was to hurry across space and interpose the Terrestrial group between the two Martian gatherings. With things so ordered, we would have a fighting chance for success and survival.

The fourth Martian group had the start on us, but here our faster flight mechanism stood us in good stead. In the six-day dash that ensued, our formation took the shape of a comet with tail flaring backward. The head was made up of the light, speedy units, Putnam's among them. Larger and heavier vessels followed, with the big, slow transports at the very tip of the tail.

As it was, the race developed into a question of minutes. The first five or six Terrestrial flights dashed in between the two hostile bodies at last, winners by the shortest of noses. The Martians reeled and hesitated before the blazing ray-guns, then retaliated with such deadly effect that practically all the Terrestrial van was wiped out.

The heroic sacrifice of those ships, however, served its purpose, for, almost at the moment of joining their fellows, the foremost members of the smaller Martian group dropped back for a moment; and then it was too late. More Terrestrials sped into the gap, quickly deploying to keep the Martians separated.

We were hotly beset on both sides. Putnam's twenty-seven ships, going into action

close behind the luckless first flights, were diminished by nine within five minutes. The others, fighting pluckily against overwhelming numbers of Martians, would soon have gone the same way but for the providential arrival of Terrestrial dreadnoughts. These, with long-range disintegrators effective at thousands of miles, drove back our immediate antagonists.

Other flights around us also lost heavily, but in the meantime the gap was kept open, while more and more of our fellows poured in to take up position in it.

An hour passed before the fighting was on anything approaching equal terms, and for thirty minutes the conflict raged unceasingly, while the Terrestrial position grew constantly stronger and stronger. We were now like a curtain hanging between two swarms of wasps of unequal size—angry wasps, endowed with motion and intelligence, that with murderous valor strove again and again to tear apart the curtain's fibers and join into one enormous and invincible swarm.

In Commander Putnam's ship, floating gracefully in a locality where the battle had lulled, the veteran was pouring over diagrams and tables of figures in an effort to visualize the engagement.

"Our formation is coin-shaped," he explained. "It is thousands of miles across and thousands of miles thick. This whole battle is being waged over a section of space large enough to hold Earth, Mars, and the moons of both planets."

"How are we holding up?" asked Ferman, biting hungrily at an apple which had been his sole food in twenty-four hours.

"Splendidly, it seems. I haven't had much time until now to compare messages from other flights, but, so far as I can make out, we're doing our part, and more."

At this juncture came orders for our unit to speed to the edge of the position, where all the fast ships were being gathered to prevent any effort of one Martian group to creep around our flank and join the other.

It was comparatively quiet out on the flank of the battle, and we had time to observe the conflict through our television—a conflict that looked like a myriad points of light against the black sky, a Milky Way that seethed and churned as the divided Martian forces strove desperately but in vain to hammer their way through us and to merge into one army.

At last the moment arrived when the Terrestrial force had achieved its desired position and formation. Then, like a flash, orders were radioed to ships great and small. The whole coin-shaped mass swung sharply away from the larger enemy host and rushed upon the smaller.

The distances, great as they seemed, were relatively as nothing to the mighty space-eating mechanisms, now roaring at fullest pitch. A concerted operation of ray-guns withered away the first ranks of Martians like flies in the flame of blow-torches. Those further back, confused by the sudden assault, were slow at resisting.

Meanwhile our formation suddenly slowed down in the center and speeded up along the edge, transforming its shape to that of a dish to hold the Martians in its center. Our ceaseless fire from the front was augmented by attacks on every flank of the enemy.

In vain did the Martians fight back. It was but a matter of minutes before the entire group, which had left its native planet with 300,000 craft, was crumpled up, demoralized and shot to pieces.

Another order flashed out and we fell away, none too soon. The larger Martian organization, surprised for a short space, had rushed upon us as we turned our backs and we had to whip around to defend ourselves. At last we were on somewhat even terms.

At the moment, according to government records, each side mustered about four hundred thousand ships. All others, totalling nearly a million, had been destroyed or disabled in the fight.

And so might we have fought until the work of destruction was complete and the last craft dropped to pieces in space. Already Putnam's ship bore down on a Martian adversary. Ferman was setting his ray-guns upon it, and Sughrue was holding his engines at full tone to dodge away from bombs. But the newest order was rushed from the radio. Putnam snatched it.

"Cease hostilities at once," he read excitedly. "An Armistice has been signed."

AND so, with no decisive victory on either side, the two forces fell apart and hung silent in space. A little later came directions for both sides to return to bases. A truce had been made, said the dispatches, and Martian envoys were hurrying to Earth to make terms and pledge better understanding.

Terrestrial delegates were also sent to Mars. I arrived at St. Louis shortly before their ship left, and my uncle secured me a place among the young officers who went as attachés. Early in March we cleared for a journey that, even when the craft exerted the utmost power at its command seemed to me at least, to be but a crawl.

We docked in Ekadome, the City of Martian Rulers, to be courteously received and entertained. That awful battle in space had demonstrated the utter and dreadful sense-

lessness of armed conflict. There was a grave, courteous discussion and agreement. Afterward, a dinner was announced, with the Terrestrials as guests.

But I slipped away as evening came down, and hailed an electro-car. The driver eyed my Terrestrial uniform glumly, but accepted me as a fare. We slid once more through familiar subterranean ways, to where a lift would bring me to the surface in another part of the city. With beating heart I mounted and stood again before the gateway from which I had once departed almost in tears.

My heart was like ice within me and my eyes swam as I slowly pushed that gate open and walked in. The huge, brilliant flowers, the seat beneath the strange clump, were as they had been, but no one was there. Walking to the seat, I dropped into it.

"Who are you, Terrestrial?" said a startling soft voice near at hand. I rose quickly and looked to see the dark eyes of Yann as they widened.

"Yann! Oh, Yann!" I said, and clenched my hands in desperate futility of speech or action.

"Have you truly come, Chac?" she said in muffled tones. "Sit down. How tired you look! And your hair, it is streaked with gray."

I was sitting again, and once more I felt her hands on my head.

"Don't touch me—don't touch me!" I cried wildly. "Yann, I would not have come, had it not been that I could not stay away!"

"Chac, you are ill; see how your hands tremble."

"My hands! Yann, do you know that they are red with the blood of Nalo, your brother?"

"I know it, Chac, I know it."

"You know it!" I was aghast. "How could you know it?"

"When one world rang with your praise, would not the other hear? We all knew what you did, alone against thousands. My father cursed you bitterly, swore vengeance. Better had he kept silent. He was killed in that final battle."

Had she wept or screamed or reviled, I

might have found more to say. I might have offered explanations, defenses. But, since her voice was soft and calm, I could do nothing but rise in silence and walk toward the gate.

"Chac!" Yann was running after me. "Chac, where are you going?"

"To Earth. I must never look at you again."

"But, my dear!" she caught my hands. "I have lost so much in this war. Must I lose you as well?"

She gripped my shoulders.

"I bade you go and do your part in honor or bravery—don't you remember? I prayed, of course, that you and Nalo might never meet. But things turned out otherwise—and what else could you have done?"

My heart beat wildly as, at last, I dared look into her eyes.

"The worlds now see war in all its scurvy reality," she went on. "Well might they have let the battle continue so long as one drop of blood flowed in a fighting man, or so long as there remained a ship or a gun or a bomb. But they have stopped, have sworn to forget the strife and to build on what is left. Surely, Chac, we can follow so good an example?"

Now I knew her for a thing more lovely, more wise and more desirable than even my dreams of her had been. I trembled as I put my arms around her and drew her pliant form close.

"I haven't much time here, Yann," I murmured. "Tomorrow, or the next day, our ship must start back, before the planets draw too far apart. Will you go with me?"

"Gladly, dearest love."

"You'll love it on Earth, Yann. The fields and meadows are green there, instead of blue and red and orange. The days are not too hot, nor the nights too cold. And there are mighty seas of water, stretching beyond your sight.

"I can't tell you a tenth of Earth's beauties. And there are friends there too, sweetheart, kind, courteous people such as you will love."

"I know, I know. How sad that the war was needed to assure one world of the humanity of the other. But let us sorrow not more, lover—come to me!"

Her kiss was a final comfort and blessing.

NEXT ISSUE'S HALL OF FAME NOVELET

THE DISC-MEN OF JUPITER

A Sequel to "When Planets Clashed"

By MANLY WADE WELLMAN