

# ARGOSY

VOLUME 223

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1931

NUMBER 6



*Excited cries rose at the little Martian chief's barked words*

## Red Twilight

*An outlawed scientist and his adventurous friend Ford Matthews alone dared to face the truth, when blood-colored vapors hid the sun and warned of disaster to Earth*

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### CHAPTER I.

#### OMEN OF DISASTER.

WHEN he first noticed the change in the light, Ford Matthews blinked and made a notation on his calendar pad. Eye

trouble. It was time he visited an oculist. He dismissed the matter and returned to the financial statement on his desk.

Just past thirty and looking younger, with his straight youthful body and Nordic blondness, Ford managed the

big export business he had inherited from his father, and did a good job of it. Already he was known to Wall Street as a clever youngster who was bound to make his mark.

But this everlasting grind, this battle of wits and of dollars, was irksome. Ford had looked forward to other things when in college. An outdoor life; adventure and travel. Most of all, a fantastic but hopeful search for his long lost brother, Paul. But the sudden passing of their father had brought a change in his plans. Ford was now chained to his desk in an office whose luxurious furnishings oppressed him; where the metallic chatter of the ticker was ever in his ears. He drove himself to his tasks here within steel and granite walls that towered at the lower end of Manhattan Island. Of all places, this sparkling June Day!

He grew restless now, without knowing why. The figures danced before him in a glow like that of fire-light. Ford looked up and brought his gaze to bear absent-mindedly on the spot where, but a few moments earlier, a shaft of sunlight had made dazzling golden-brown highlights and mellow shadows of the oaken panels and molding.

A mysterious alteration had come in the appearance of the rich carving; the tiny gargoyles grinned down at him maliciously, their wicked features wreathed in flame-lit haze. The shadows were deep and menacing with red mists. It seemed as if a vast conflagration flared in the heavens.

Somewhere in the outer offices a feminine scream rose hysterically and ended in a choked gasp. The door burst open and Ford's secretary entered, swaying uncertainly, with cheeks ashen and eyes staring wildly.

"Look!" she quavered, pointing.

"The sun, Mr. Matthews! The sky! It's the end of the world!"

And then Miss Knowles, coolly efficient and unexcitable business woman that she was, fell forward with a shuddering moan. Catching her in his arms as she toppled, Ford stretched her limp form on a divan. The overwrought girl had fainted.

Something very much out of the ordinary had happened. Ford could hear the clamor of his employees deserting their desks in the outer offices and crowding to the exits. He rushed to the window.

The sun, an enormous ball of fire, hung there motionless, its rim aflame and dripping blood-red in a crimson haze. In the lurid half-light the waters of the harbor rippled and smoldered like the surface of a vast lava caldron. A veritable gehenna had come out of the skies to visit the proud and prosperous New York of 1962.

**E**IGHTY stories below, Battery Park was a restless sea of humanity. Milling, gesticulating crowds already packed the area and every face was turned skyward. The frantic screams of women and the hoarse shouts of men mingled in a terrified roar that swelled to drown out the noises of the city.

A police siren shrieked somewhere in the cañon of Broadway, and the clanging of gongs added to the din as reserves were rushed to the congested areas. The roar of a high-powered airship rose to a thunder and then trailed off into a smooth purr as a five-motored monoplane of the Meteorological Service swept past and drove off into the red mist, its bright wings appearing to drip live flame before they were swallowed up in the eerie haze.

Suddenly it was choking hot; un-

bearable. The breath of a furnace drifted in through the open window, and it reeked of alien gases and of decay—of dead things.

Stifling, Ford stumbled to his desk and tore at the call lever of his visiphone. An interminable delay ensued before the frightened face of the operator flashed on the viewing disk. Mechanically, the girl repeated his number, and he saw that her eyes were vacant and staring. These girls stuck to their jobs through thick and thin. The crack of doom itself would not drive them from their posts.

The disk glowed anew, and Owen Wardell, most eccentric of Earth's scientists, looked out at him scowling. His lean jaw was set in grim lines, and the mop of iron-gray hair was tousled.

"Oh, it's you!" Wardell said. "Come out here right away, will you?" He was turning from the disk.

"But, Owen, wait! This crimson fog—what is it? The city is upset."

"I know," the scientist flung back. "It'll be worse later. I reported it to Washington, but those fools down there wouldn't listen, as usual." His scowl deepened and he shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Come right out, will you? I think this is the chance you've been waiting twenty years for."

The thin lips relaxed in a quick half-smile and the scientist reached for the lever of his visiphone. Ford's disk went blank. He could not summon his scientist friend to the screen again.

Galvanized into sudden activity, he dashed through the empty outer office and made his way to the street floor by way of the sole automatic elevator. The others had been forsaken by their operators. Dashing through the deserted corridor, he flung himself into the tangle of panic-stricken humans who struggled and fought and

screached outside the main entrance of the building.

Sweating red-lit faces were thrust into his own, then lost in the mob. Groans and wild shrieks smote his ears; curses and prayers. A woman fainted not three feet from where he was wedged in the midst of the jam, and he saw her head roll limp on her shoulders before she slid down underfoot. Some man reached to help her, was smashed aside by the mob.

Over at the subway kiosk on Bowling Green the press was thickest. A burly policeman climbed over ducking heads and heaving shoulders, scrambling to the top of the structure. He was shouting through cupped hands. Somehow his voice carried through the din.

"The subways are blocked!" he yelled. "Take side streets to the rivers. Spread out!"

Some one shrieked piercingly, an awful gurgling cry of horror.

A street urchin wriggled through from somewhere and looked up grinning in Ford's face.

"Rotten mess, ain't it, mister?" he shrilled. Then he was whisked away and flung violently against a stone wall that loomed suddenly close. There was a sickening crunch as the little bullet-shaped head struck a projecting ledge. And the scrawny body slumped down between those jostling elbows and scrambling, kicking feet that were everywhere around him.

The red twilight and the bloody haze that dimmed yet revealed the more clearly, made a nightmare of it all.

FORD managed to worm his way toward the corner, pressing close to the rough building wall. Knuckles skinned. It was in a bedlam of noise and of brutal struggling with

the frenzied horde. But he must reach Bridge Street. It was his only hope of getting out of the city for many hours—if ever he got out alive. For on the flat roof of Number Ten was safely housed his autogiro plane.

A surging wave of howling humanity swept him out across the curb and into the street. A moment later he stumbled over the sidewalk on the opposite side and into Battery Park, clinging desperately to the broad shoulders of a bull-necked individual who seemed to be leading the concerted movement. And then he was lifted from his feet and carried along helpless and exhausted. It seemed that his ribs must give way under the pressure of the stampeding multitude.

The crowding eased somewhat and he regained his footing just as a great voice boomed out overhead. The huge sound amplifiers atop the Custom House were in action. This meant that an official broadcast was to be made, and the struggles and outcries of the mob stilled noticeably. It was easier breathing now.

In the red twilight the monstrous voice from the air seemed a ghastly and supernatural thing, yet it brought a semblance of order on the streets. A bulletin from the Naval Observatory, it was, that came to them in reassuring words. There was no danger to the populace in this red fog, the report ran. It was merely the passing of the entire solar system through an enormous cosmic cloud of red dust particles that partly obscured the sun and brought the mysterious crimson haze.

A great roar of relief swept up from the streets and momentarily drowned out the booming voice of the amplifiers. Hats were flung into the air and perfect strangers embraced one another gleefully.

This cosmic dust, the bulletin went on, was so fine that it would have no effect on living beings. The world was absolutely safe, and the people might go about their tasks as if nothing had happened. Astronomers would be able to report within a few hours on how long the red cloud would last. It would not be long.

The effect was magical. Laughing and crying by turn, the people who had been so thoroughly terrified, now broke up into chattering groups, who gazed into the red sky and pointed steady fingers at the crimson disk of the sun. In the weird half-light that no longer held anything of terror in its ruddy glow, the park quickly took on the appearance of a holiday.

Knowing Owen Wardell as he did, Ford was unconvinced and more than ever curious as to what the ominous red fog really was. He lost no time in getting to his autogiro.

As he waited for the elevator to the roof, he thought again of what Owen had said: "This is the chance you've been waiting twenty years for." Was it possible that their great adventure, the thing they had planned and hoped for, had come at last?

## CHAPTER II.

### DARK CERTAINTY.

**D**URING the swift trip over the Hudson and across north Jersey toward the mountains, Ford's thoughts slipped back twenty years into the past, that horrible night when Paul Matthews had gone out of the world.

As a lad of eleven, Ford had worshiped his older brother. Paul, at nineteen, was a laughing, care-free giant for whom life was a great playground.

How well he remembered that great rocket ship, and the envious thrill that had stirred him when Paul had been given a job in one of the workshops on the huge field where it had been erected! A gleaming cylinder of steel, it stood on four massive columns and poked its blunt nose into the clouds, the wonder of the countryside and of the world at large; the cause of much heated argument in the press and in engineering circles.

In 1942, when everything had been ready for the journey to Mars, Congress had refused permission for the journey. The builders had taken the matter into the courts, and there it had stagnated.

Paul had been inconsolable at first, but gradually his old smile came back. He crept into Ford's room one night and awakened him with excited whispers. The ship would take off that very night, law or no law. And he, Paul Matthews, was to go along.

In a turmoil of delicious excitement, Ford had gone with his brother to the field. About twenty of them had entered the little manhole that was the vessel's entrance; the younger members of the group whose money and brains had gone into the construction of the rocket, and a number of mechanics, of whom Paul was one. Two or three women had been among them, wives and sweethearts of the adventurers, laughing and joking with the men as if the undertaking were no more than a pleasure trip.

The huge polished cylinder shone a monstrous ghost-shape in the moonlight. It seemed to shiver and sway.

Then the night was broken by a thunderous roar. The landscape was lighted with sudden terrifying brilliance, and the great rocket went thundering into the skies ahead of a trail

of blinding magnificence, driving through the atmosphere with a deafening screech. In an awful, earth-rocking instant the light had dimmed and the roar subsided. The devilish mechanism that carried his brother was little more than a sputtering light-fleck off there amid the stars.

Astronomers had sighted the rocket and had followed its course as it sped on toward Mars. All had gone well for the first few million miles, and then had come an explosion. But the rocket had not been wrecked, and though it had lurched and spun crazily, it had continued on into Space.

People had supposed that every one on the ship was lost; but Ford had never given up hope of seeing his adored brother again. He had gladly supplied the money for Owen Wardell's attempts to build a space ship, hoping some day to reach Mars.

Below him he saw the clearing on the wooded hilltop where stood Owen Wardell's laboratory, a rambling old structure with a small dome at one end, and he dropped the little autogiro through the red twilight to an open space near by.

"I'M glad you're here!" the scientist greeted him. He ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head as he squinted up at the blood-red sun. "You heard the bulletin from Washington, I suppose? All tommyrot! A hasty piece of guesswork, given out to calm the populace."

They had entered the workshop, and Ford saw that his friend looked tired and worn when he sank into the much-used revolving chair that faced his littered desk. He was more than ever aware of the greatness of the man; of his unselfish devotion to the cause of science.

"You think it is a serious menace to the world?" he ventured.

"I know it, Ford. In the first place, I've maintained all my life that other planets were inhabited by intelligent beings. For that I've been ridiculed by the whole scientific world. Now they will not listen when I tell them that this 'red twilight' is the direct result of certain radiations from Mars, which is now approaching conjunction with the earth—its nearest distance. But I have measured these radiations. Ford, this red twilight is a warlike move of the Martians!"

Ford stared agape. "What effect will it have?"

"I don't know. The world will find out within a few hours. You and I, Ford, are going out there and investigate. We'll make a trip to Mars and find a way to stop it, if the thing proves to be what I suspect."

"You mean," Ford demanded, "that the space ship is completed—a success? That we can do the thing we've talked about for years?"

"Positively." The scientist's eyes softened as they took in the sudden flush of excitement that mantled his young friend's cheeks. "I have taken it out beyond the stratosphere," he said, "and put it through a stiff course of sprouts. It's practical. We'll leave within an hour, if you are willing."

"Willing! But the export business—"

"There'll be no business for many a day! Look!" The scientist flipped the lever of his visiphone and called for a close-up flash of Union Square.

**P**ICTURED in the disk was a restless multitude gazing at the sky.

They jostled and shoved one another, as before. The police were everywhere in the throng, quelling as

best they could the minor riots. The cheering effect of the first bulletin had worn off.

At one point a soap-box orator was haranguing a little group of listeners. Wardell adjusted the focus and tuning.

"I tell you, friends," the wild-eyed speaker was shouting, "the Judgment Day is at hand! Hark not to the pratings of these scientists who would explain the vengeance of an angry God with their talk of harmless natural phenomena!"

Some one in the crowd booed, and a general laugh went up as the speaker fought to maintain his position in the midst of the increasing press. A woman struggled to his side and, flinging her arms over her head, screamed frantic prayers to the crimson heavens. Moaning then, she collapsed and the crowd drew back, suddenly stilled and ashamed.

The speaker's voice rose anew: "It is the last trumpet we are facing, my friends, and it behooves us to make our peace—"

His voice broke off abruptly and the disk went blank as Owen flipped the lever.

"You see," the scientist groaned. "Nothing can convince them that the red twilight is harmless."

Abruptly Owen Wardell rose from his chair, to stare white-faced at a slender tube partly filled with clear liquid. Enlightenment, Ford saw, had come to his friend in that instant.

"My God, Ford, it's the water!" he whispered huskily. "They're stealing our water supply—either to destroy us, or to fill their dried-up canals! See—the level in the graduate has dropped a full cubic centimeter in the past half hour. There'll be drought and famine in the wake of this red twilight. Desperation, and death! It's the end of

things for our world, unless we can head the devils off!"

"You mean to say, it's evaporating?"

"No, it vanishes into thin air without the slightest trace of vapor. In fact, the humidity of the atmosphere has been decreasing."

Suddenly he became active. His lean fingers ran through the papers on his desk and swiftly sorted out a number of sheafs of calculations which he stuffed in his pockets. The visiphone shrilled an insistent call, but he gave it no heed.

"Shall I answer it?" Ford asked.

"All right; but whoever it is will not hold us up now."

Ford flipped the lever. The anxious face which flashed into view was that of an astronomer at Swarthmore Observatory, Dr. John Holden.

"Wardell!" he exclaimed. "I believe you're right, after all. I find these same emanations you reported. And the water, man—it's leaving the earth. The streams will dry up, the lakes. The oceans themselves will be great arid valleys if this keeps up."

"Oh, indeed?" Wardell, too busy to give much attention to the frantic caller, was sarcastic. "So you've come to it at last, have you? Report it to Washington, John. And write a nice long article for the newspapers, too. We're going away from here."

### CHAPTER III.

#### ACROSS THE VOID.

THE space flyer was a great double-walled egg of metal, with one end flattened to form the base. It rested in a cradle Wardell had constructed on the laboratory roof. Ford and the scientist lost no time in bolting

the airlock door to its rubber seat when they had entered.

"So you discovered the secret at last!" Ford exclaimed as his eyes took in the familiar mechanisms of the control room.

"Yes. The wave forms I had been using were incorrect, though my charging frequency was of the proper value. I can now reproduce or nullify gravity as I wish, or multiply it tremendously merely by altering the charge in the motor spheres."

"And the speed?" Ford grinned as he saw the assured look that crossed his friend's face.

"The speed is ample," Wardell said soberly. Confident though he may have been of his ship, he appreciated the seriousness of their venture.

The motors purred as he threw in the starting switch, and the gentle throbbing of pumps showed that the oxygen apparatus was working.

Though Ford had looked forward to this moment for nearly twenty years, ever since his first talk with Wardell, never had he anticipated the thrill that charged him now as the vessel rocked gently and lifted from its cradle.

"Owen," he said in an awed voice, "this is the greatest achievement of man."

The scientist nodded absently, and increased the repulsive energy. Ford was pressed hard into his seat, and felt giddy. Bending over, he was able to look through the floor port at the red-lit landscape that dropped swiftly away beneath. The laboratory had already merged itself into the crimson-wooded mountains, and, off there to the east, the Hudson River was a slender ribbon of ruddy hue. A moment later it was lost in the red twilight.

Ford shivered. Everything was red

down there, the color of blood. This thing that was happening to his world was a monstrous nightmare, from which he must soon awaken.

"Owen," he asked, "you honestly think there's a chance of our doing something?"

The scientist shrugged. "I have hopes. If we fail it will be easier to die here than in the mad inferno they will make of Earth."

**F**OUR hours passed. Wardell busied himself with his astronomical instruments, and with a mass of calculations that he was setting down with flying pencil.

The controls of the vessel were set to provide for maximum repulsion from Earth and for maximum attraction to Mars. There was no possibility of swerving from their course. The acceleration was terrific. Ford stole a glance at the velocity indicator. They were traveling a thousand miles a second! And yet the space ship appeared to hang motionless in the void.

Earth was a tiny red orb, all but lost in the background of brilliant light-points that were the stars. The sun, visible only from one of the bunk rooms up top, was a flaming white mass that could not be safely viewed save through semi-opaque screens.

Ford wandered through the vessel, and marveled at the care with which each item of the amazingly intricate mechanisms had been assembled.

Nearly ten years had been spent in the design, the building and rebuilding. There were thousands of parts, manufactured to Owen's specifications in dozens of factories scattered all over the world.

Atomic motors driving gravity-wave generators used ordinary scrap iron as fuel. Disintegrating the atoms of the

metal and utilizing the nuclear energy, they would require only a few pounds of the almost worthless material for the present journey. Motor spheres, charged with this strange and intense energy of the purring generators, were capable of intensifying or reversing the effect of gravitation. The ship was propelled by the attraction or repulsion of the heavenly bodies. Starting with the old Einstein theory of the relation between magnetism and gravitation, Owen had worked out definite usable forces.

Ford climbed to the observation dome up on top and found his friend in a state of great excitement.

"Take a look!" The scientist indicated the eyepiece of a curious instrument attached to the lower end of the telescope.

Ford squinted through the tiny aperture and saw nothing but a weaving light-pencil of green flickering against the dark background.

"What is it?"

"The thing that's causing all the trouble. A beam of invisible vibrations, spanning the heavens in an enormous arc which reaches from Mars to Earth. Just as I suspected: the devils are stealing our water; transporting it over this ray. I made the thing visible by using a fluorescent filter-screen."

"But, Owen, I don't understand." Ford bent over to peer once more through the instrument.

Wardell shrugged. "Neither do I, quite," he admitted. "But it proves that—"

That was the last Ford heard. At that instant the slender green ray spread wide to fill his entire field of vision. With a vivid burst of light it seemed to sweep into his very eyes to strike him down. A shrill vibratory note rose high, to end in a deafening

crash. A violent heaving of the vessel. Darkness.

WHEN consciousness returned, slowly and painfully, Ford lay for a long time desperately ill. His entire body was shaken by convulsive twitchings. The very blood in his veins seemed to rush boiling to the extremities of his limbs, to build up pressure that must surely burst through the tortured flesh. His head ached abominably. And then at last came blessed relief.

He rolled over and raised himself groggily on one elbow. Blank metallic walls rose there before his eyes, swaying drunkenly in his blurred vision. Then sudden recollection and the swift return of his normal senses. Things stabilized and he sat up quickly on the edge of the cot. He'd been stretched here in one of the sleeping cubbies of the space ship.

The gentle purr of the motor spheres came to his ears. Too gentle, it was—they were running at reduced speed. Rising up on legs that shook crazily beneath him, he rushed out into the ladder-well, calling loudly for Owen.

He found him in the control room, hunched absorbedly over the horizontal disk of a portable visiphone. A monotonous droning voice clipped off abruptly as the older man flipped the lever and swung toward him. Wardell was pale and shaken.

"What's happened, man?" Ford asked thickly.

Owen was running swift fingers over his body, pinching his still tingling flesh.

"Thank God, you've recovered!" the older man exclaimed, dropping his arms. "I feared you were done for. The Martian ray—we drifted directly into it."

"Well, it's got a kick, I'll say." Ford sat down suddenly, his knees giving way in the reaction.

"Right. You took the entire charge. Made a good ground between the telescope and the floor plates, you know. You were stiff as any corpse, paralyzed for hours." There was a suspicion of moisture in Owen's eyes.

"Must be made of tough stuff." Ford grinned. And then he was aware of a slight rocking of the vessel. It had been entirely without motion before. His eyes strayed to the floor port, and he saw a vast sea of rolling clouds beneath them.

"Why, Owen, where are we?" he exclaimed.

"That's the new cloud envelope of Mars," the scientist grunted. "Water from our own Earth. It's raining like the devil down there; I dropped through and saw."

"We're here!" Ford was incredulous. "I was out of the picture that long?"

"Nearly six hours, Ford. And we made the trip, close to forty million miles, in little more than ten."

"Ten hours!" Ford was aghast. Here was vindication of his friend's old arguments against the slow, bulky rocket ships. "What to do now?" he exclaimed in a sudden burst of enthusiasm.

"That's the question." The scientist stared gloomily through the port. "It's a big job we've undertaken. Guess I was crazy to think I could do anything in time."

Ford remembered the voice he had heard. "The visiphone," he exclaimed. "I heard it speak. Was it the Martians?"

"No." Wardell shook his head slowly. "It was the voice of one of our newscasters at home."

"What! 'Way out here?" An awed realization of the vastness of the space that separated them from Earth crept into Ford's whispered words.

"Yes, 'way out here." Owen's voice was listless; tired. "We cannot communicate with them, of course. Our transmitter is too small. But the powerful central stations of the newscasters seem to span the distance easily. We'll know what's going on back there—only too well."

"Things are bad?"

"Bad." The scientist scowled darkly, then reached for the control levers. With a savage jerk he dropped the little vessel into the cloud bank below.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### MARS.

OVER the surface of a vast desert land they drifted. The rain beat down in torrents on thirsty sands that soaked it up without leaving the tiniest puddle as evidence of its coming. As far as the eye could see, there was not a trace of vegetation. No living thing was in sight, nor did it seem that life ever had existed in this drab and forbidding wasteland.

"Humph!" Owen grunted. "They surely needed the rain."

"Looks as if this were the first in centuries," Ford commented. He was thinking of what the verdant fields of his own country would look like when the Martians had finished. If there were any Martians.

"Thousands of centuries, more than likely. This planet is ages older than Earth." The scientist lapsed once more into gloomy silence.

A fringe of low hills appeared at the horizon and swiftly drew near. The barren, rocky slopes showed as little

promise of the presence of life as had the desert.

Ford stole a glance at his friend. It was not like Owen to crawl into his shell like this. Was it that he had despaired of success? Or had the visiphone brought to him something upsetting? Ford reached for its lever.

"Don't!" Owen snapped, observing his motion. "Leave the damn' thing alone. It makes you sick." The scientist scowled, and the gray of his eyes darkened with intense feeling. "They're feeding them the same bunk about the cosmic cloud. And they've put Holden in jail—the one man among them who has brains enough to learn the truth and who dares to tell it. The fools aren't worth saving."

So that was it! Ford chuckled, relieved in mind. Even in this crisis, in the face of the astounding thing he had accomplished in bridging the unthinkable distance between the two planets, the old feud rankled in Wardell's breast. He never would forget his differences with the accepted authorities of the scientific world.

"Wait until we return," Ford remarked solemnly. "They'll have to change their minds when the thing is done."

"I'll never go back!" the embittered man snarled.

He stared glowering through the floor port. Suddenly his face lighted and he extended a shaking forefinger.

"Look, Ford, look! One of the canals, and a village."

It was true. The canal, if it could be called such, was a deep gully no less than a mile in width and extending an unbroken straight line in both directions to the horizon. A tiny stream of water that was almost lost in the huge ditch wandered aimlessly over its uneven bottom. This great cut had

been planned by intelligent beings and carved across the surface of the planet in past ages by dexterous hands and ponderous machines.

Sprawling along the crumbling rock-walled side of the canal was a village of conical huts, seemingly constructed of uncut stone and mortar. The streets were mere paths connecting the scattered dwellings and running off into the oasis of stunted purple brush that lay alongside.

"Not much engineering ability displayed by the inhabitants of this town!" Owen snorted, dropping the vessel for a closer view.

The rain had ceased falling and the clouds were clearing away. The sun shone out weakly, casting long hazy shadows of the conical huts on the steaming ground. There was an eerie, greenish tint to the sky where it showed through rifts in the scurrying clouds.

AT first it seemed that the village was deserted. And then when the sun, which was much smaller than when viewed from the Earth, came into full view just above the horizon, several squat figures emerged from the huts and gathered together in a circular open space near the canal bank. They stood erect, like humans, but on spindly legs that seemed incapable of supporting their chunky bodies. They were clothed from neck to knees in some shimmering material that was fitted closely around the skinny thighs and bloused around the middle.

Their skin, where it was exposed, was white. Not like that of the white race of Earth, but of a sickly pallor like the bleached bones of a skeleton. Somehow, these curious beings struck him as pitiful things.

"Seem to be rather frail, don't they?" Ford remarked.

"You never can tell." Owen had left the ship hovering and was bringing a pair of automatic pistols and a handful of loaded clips. "We'll be prepared for them anyway, if they show fight."

He swung the vessel down over the village now and opened the thick glass door of the floor port. There was a swish as the air rushed out to equalize with the lower pressure of the Martian atmosphere. And a puff of rank vapor drifted in from the steaming brushland beside the canal.

"Hi, there!" the scientist yelled, when they were within fifty feet of the ground. "Look up, will you?"

Startled, the queer creatures craned their short necks skyward. Their open mouths and round, staring eyes could be seen as black splotches against the cadaverous pallor of their broad faces. And then with one accord they scattered and ran to their separate dwellings, where they ducked in through the low doorways.

"Either they're scared out of their wits, or they've gone for weapons," Ford observed, reaching for one of his automatics.

"Neither, I think. See, they're returning—swarms of them."

Hundreds of the gnome-like creatures scurried into the streets, running toward the gathering place over which the space ship hovered. Shouting in thin, querulous voices as they ran, waving their thin arms aloft, with palms spread wide to show they were unarmed.

"Game little devils," Owen said. "Don't seem a bit frightened, though our vessel must seem like a supernatural monster to them. I'm surprised they're not down on their knees."

"It looks as though they had been expecting us," Ford pointed out.

Owen was thoughtful as he dropped the space ship to within a few feet of the ground in the center of the gathering place where the Martians were assembling.

Chattering in their own outlandish tongue, these undersized beings of another world spread out into a circle completely surrounding the ship of the skies that poised in their midst. One, obviously a leader among them, made bold to step out in the clear space and stand directly beneath the open floor port.

He tossed back his long mane of glistening black hair with a human-like gesture and gazed up at the two Earthmen with shining eyes. In the depths of his wide black optics there was a gleam of friendliness, and his lips opened in a smile of welcome.

"COME down, you Merkans," he called out then in clipped English that brought astonished exclamations from the lips of the Earthmen. "Come down to Tos-kir. Make talk with Neet. We friends."

Ford gripped his friend's arm until it made him wince.

"Did you get that, Owen? He speaks our language! Called us Merkans — Americans! Do you suppose—"

"It must be." Owen rubbed his biceps ruefully. "That rocket wasn't lost twenty years ago. They got it going again in some way; managed to reverse and land here. I've always believed you might find your brother here." — Owen wrinkled his brow in thought as he dropped the ship softly to the purple sward. "Don't raise your hopes too high, though. Something is off color about this."

"You mean Neet is lying; that they plan treachery?"

"I think they're honest. But these little fellows are not the only inhabitants. Why, they haven't the knowledge or ability to steal Earth's water! Who then can be doing it but the scientists of that first expedition?" He shook his head. "I feel sure that Earthmen are at the bottom of this. It looks bad to me."

How well they were to recall those words in the dark days to come!

CINGERLY they stepped forth on Martian soil, tottering uncertainly because of the lesser gravity. Their weight here was but little more than a third of what it had been on Earth.

The air was cold and crisp as on a mountain top; but the vapors that rose from the steaming sward reeked of dry rot.

"Say nothing about the rains," Owen warned, when Neet, smiling broadly, advanced to them with hands outstretched, "Have to watch our step until we find out a few things." Ford nodded understanding.

The Martian who spoke broken English raised his voice in a few shrill syllables of his own tongue, and the pressing crowd quieted and drew back respectfully. With his barrel-like chest swelling proudly and his head thrown back that he might look up into their faces from his scant five feet of stature, he addressed the Earthmen:

"Neet glad you come, men from green star. All Tos-kir glad. You stop here for food and for night of sleep?"

There was something pathetic in his childlike eagerness and in the dignity of his pose. Ford turned questioning eyes on the scientist.

I A

"I am afraid not," Wardell replied, shaking his head gravely. "We thank you, Neet, and wish to thank your people. But we must go to your king or emperor without delay."

"King? Emper—what?" Neet's smiling countenance lengthened in puzzled disappointment.

"We wish to see your ruler, the most important personage in your land," Owen explained patiently. "We have tidings from the green star, and must convey them to the great man of this country."

"Ah-h! Bahspahl!" Neet's smile returned. "He greatest in all our world. Neet show you way."

"Is it far?" Ford asked, noting the Martian's swift frightened look in the direction of the space ship.

"Two light-time, one night, if walk," he returned. "Very quick in chariot of air."

"You will guide us there?" Owen questioned him.

"In chariot?" Neet's wide stare was one of mingled apprehension and exultant daring.

"Yes. It is perfectly safe."

"Neet have no fear. Neet come with you." The little fellow drew himself up in swift pride and turned to his people, snapping out short Martian words with all the precise intonation of a drill sergeant.

The effect was magical. The dwarf-folk of Tos-kir set up a cry of lament, their hands upraised to whatever strange gods they might have. Then, at a further barked command of Neet's, they dispersed quickly and made off for their homes.

Neet turned on the Earthmen, grinning wide.

"They not know," he explained. "They fear Neet return no more. But Neet know. Know men from green

star carry him to Thren-dis. Not harm."

"Nervy little cuss," Ford whispered in his friend's ear. Neet walked straight to the entrance manhole of the ship, looking neither to the left nor right, and clambered inside.

"You bet," Owen agreed enthusiastically, "I'll wager his knees are weaker than yours were, that first time you went up with me in one of the old helicopters."

"Oh, shut up!" good-naturedly. "I was a green kid then."

"Green around the gills!" Owen laughed. Their good spirits had returned, though they knew the greatest dangers were still to come.

NEET maintained a white-lipped silence for many minutes after the ship left the ground. He had indicated that they must follow the canal for a space in the direction of the setting sun. And then he clung fast to his seat while they accelerated.

The Earthmen studiously averted their eyes as he struggled with his fears. This mortal terror that came to so many when first they left the ground was a horrible thing.

The shadows below were lengthening as they skimmed swiftly over the rim of the great canal. Above them the sky deepened to an emerald hue. Owen muttered something about an analysis he intended to make of this thin air. Some element that must be present in large quantities was responsible for the green of the heavens.

They saw that the stream at the bottom of the canal had swollen from the rains. Though still shallow, it was a sizable river now.

A larger village slipped past down there, and a city. They shot up to five thousand feet to pass over a mesa that

thrust its sheer chalky walls up from the plain before them.

And then they saw it. A low-lying metal structure atop the mesa. Four immense latticed towers, and a network of gleaming metallic ribbon that stretched between.

"See that?" Owen whispered.

"That rain machine," Neet spoke up, rousing from his lethargy and speaking swiftly as a man does when trying to forget his fears. "Make rain first time to-day. Bahspahl work on it ten, twelve years; promise what it do. We not believe before. Now, all Tiron give thanks to ancient gods. Tiron give water to her people again. Food, health, flowers and birds—all will come back as in long ago."

"Tiron?" Ford gasped. But he knew; in a flash of revelation he had seen what this thing meant to the queer, likable dwarf-folk.

"Ah, I forget," Neet was saying. "You call Mars. We say Tiron. Tiron saved now. Bahspahl do it. He great man of Tiron. Most powerful."

Ford's startled and comprehending gaze locked with Owen's there in the failing light that shone in through the ports.

## CHAPTER V.

### GOD OF MARS.

**B**EYOND the mesa the great canal ended in a huge circular reservoir from which other canals radiated like spokes from the hub of a gigantic wheel. Fully five miles across and shaped like a bowl, its curved bottom was turbulent with the waters that poured in from the great ditches. Muddy, the swirling torrent lapped viciously at the crumbled stone which lined the man-made crater.

Neet squealed in delight.

"See, friends!" he chortled. "It is the beginning of a new age to Tiron. Is it not a miracle, the new water?"

"Hm," Ford grunted, looking longingly at the silent black case of the visiphone. It was a miracle here, no doubt of that. But on Earth, a catastrophe.

It was queer that the rain had abated. Had they abandoned the project? Or was it that—but, of course, Mars was simply turning on its axis in the same manner as Earth. Its day was about an hour longer, that was all, and the projector was no longer on the side facing the green star.

On the morrow it would operate again, and the green star would be no longer green, but red. Fear-ridden and despairing, the people would collect on the streets in the red twilight. Day after day this would go on, until Earth was a parched and dried-out thing. Shriveled, cloudless, bereft of all life. Unless—

"Thren-dis!" Neet exclaimed.

They had swept over a ridge of straggling hills. A broad valley of luxuriant cultivated land spread before their astonished gaze. In the center of the checkerboard of carefully tended fields, there rose the tapered spires of a great city. Outlined sharply in its bleached whiteness, it stood out against the dusky blue and purple of the surrounding farmlands, a dream city.

There was a wide central square evenly planted to purplish shrubbery and laid out with broad walks. Fronting on it was an ornate, flat-roofed building of many stories. Earth minds had conceived that edifice in the Renaissance style; an architecture utterly foreign here, among the tapering piles of the Martians.

Ford drew in his breath sharply.

"No doubt about the expedition, Owen," he said. "They've done all this. It's new and orderly. Not like the towns and villages of the natives, nor like the ancient ruins we saw along the canal."

"Yes. And see! There are electric street lamps." Wardell was as excited as Ford.

The green dusk had closed in on them, and innumerable light-points flashed into being along the ordered streets. The great central structure—a palace, it seemed—showed glazed windows suddenly alight with warm radiance from within. Homelike; welcoming.

Ford's throat constricted. It was indeed a far cry to Earth, to the things and people he cherished. Perhaps he would never see them again.

WHITE faces were upturned in the square when the space ship settled softly to the pavement. An excited hubbub greeted them. Chattering Martians pressed in close, their gestures friendly. Smiles were welcoming. But Ford's hand closed over the cold butt of the automatic Owen thrust forward, and he tucked it safely in his breast pocket.

Neet, his chest puffed out and his voice raised high, was trying to force a way for them through the crowd. But the people of Thren-dis gave no heed. He was an outlander; a simple-minded villager of the drylands. And they were intensely curious; they wanted to see these oddly-garbed visitors from the green star at close range. Their slim white fingers stretched forth to stroke the leathern jackets.

Pushing good-naturedly and wriggling their way in with sharp elbows prodding, they hemmed in the Earth-

men. Ford thought grimly of the scene in Battery Park after the appearance of the red twilight.

An uncouth metallic clangor rose then in the square, and the elfin faces drew back, sobered instantly. The shrill cries of the gnome-folk were stilled to throaty gurgles of disappointment as two towering figures stalked across the pavement from the palace steps.

Human-like machines of glittering metal, these seven-foot monsters that strode through the shrinking multitude—robots! Their massive iron feet clanged resoundingly on the flagstones, and shining, cable-like arms waved back the crowd. Dome-shaped heads surmounted the cylindrical bodies, with small black disks for mouths and twin lenses for eyes. Expressionless, diabolical things of tremendous power.

"Machine-men of Bahspahl," Neet shrilled. "They not harm. They take us to Square House. Bahspahl control them by voice through the air. He see through their eyes."

The little Martian looked up at them bravely, but there was something of anxiety, something of uncertain terror in his round black eyes.

One of the robots drew near and a raucous voice issued from the tiny black disk there in its domed head.

"You will come to the Boss," it rasped. "He requests it." A many-jointed metallic tentacle-arm stretched forth, wrapping its slim end around Ford's wrist.

"Let go of me, you iron devil!" Ford yelled, reaching for his pistol.

The metal coil relaxed slightly and the radio voice spoke again.

"There is no cause for alarm, men from the skies. It is only that the Boss wishes to talk with you. Will you come?"

"What do you think we intended to do?" Ford growled. These big robots with their staring glass eyes gave him the creeps; they were a loathsome and entirely unwelcome reception committee of this Boss, whoever he might be.

"Easy now, Ford," Owen begged. "Everything seems to be all right. It's only the strangeness of these metal creatures."

The two robots stood passive; waiting. Each turned its staring lenses on an Earthman, entirely ignoring the small figure of Neet, who danced excitedly between their huge bulks. Their every expression was being watched on a viewing plate somewhere in the big house, Ford knew.

"We'll go in," he growled finally.

The tentacle slipped from his wrist and he breathed easier. But his fingers held fast to the pistol-butt as they followed the robots toward the broad steps of Square House, as Neet had termed it. The crowd drew back to a respectful distance, but their willing guide from Tos-kir hurried after them!

A fine state of affairs. Owen must be right. These Earthmen who had come over in the rocket ship might not want them here. The Boss; they were to see the Boss. The designation had an ominous sound, somehow. Bahspahl. The Boss. Boss Paul! Could it be that brother of his?

They slipped through the entrance and the great bronze gates clanged shut behind them, leaving Neet outside. The courageous little Martian had been hopelessly outdistanced.

A GREAT blond giant of a man stood facing them across a shining table top in the large room to which they had been conducted by the robots. His iron henchmen had retired to stand motionless at the door.

The Boss's keen blue eyes regarded them unsmilingly; the muscles of his huge chest were tensed with some emotion deep within, where they lay revealed by the skin-tightness of his silken shirt. A heavy, slightly sandy beard hid the expression of lips and jaw, lending a look of savage ferocity. He might have been a Viking of old.

Ford was not surprised to see how much Paul had changed in twenty years; for he had not expected his brother to be the same. Ford stepped forward, his face alight and pulses racing. But the quick scowl and booming voice of this strange brother of his stopped him in his tracks.

"You two are from Earth," the Viking roared; "did you come alone, or are there others?"

"We came alone," Owen replied, with a warning look in Ford's direction, a signal for silence. He was afraid of Ford's impetuosity. The younger man drew back.

"Why did you come?" the giant demanded.

"There were two reasons," Owen returned. "First, there was the matter of the red twilight. Second, we hoped to find trace of a group of scientific men and adventurers who left Earth in a rocket ship some twenty years ago." He smiled guilelessly at his interrogator.

"I see"—with a grunt. "Well, I was one of those rocket travelers. But, what do you mean by the red twilight?"

Owen Wardell cleared his throat. "You have a huge ray projector out there on a mesa, turned on the Earth. You are stealing our water for use on Mars."

"You have found that out, eh? Well, I ain. I intend to keep on until we have enough. What has this to do with your

red twilight?" The blond giant was unmoved; merely curious.

"A crimson haze accompanies the action of your ray. The Earth populace is in terror; there is rioting and killing. You are an Earthman—don't you realize what this is doing to your own kind?" There was bitter contempt in Wardell's voice.

The Viking gave an unfeeling laugh. Ford stared at him in amazement. Was this the fine brother whose memory had haunted him?

Owen's tone lowered a little. "If this ray of yours keeps on, a drought is coming down there on Earth such as history has never recorded. There will be famine and death; the horrible torment of maddening thirst. Can you, a man of Earth, bring down this catastrophe on your own race?"

"What about the Martians, the people among whom I have lived these twenty years?" The Viking's voice was terrible. "It is to prevent their annihilation I am doing this. Earth can divide her water with us. What do I care for them? I was never one of them; they cast me off."

"Paul!" Ford shouted, bringing the giant up short.

"You call me Paul?" the big man said in an awed voice.

"Paul Matthews! Don't you remember me? I am Ford, your own brother." He looked at the glittering blue eyes of the giant for recognition, but saw none. "You are Paul, aren't you?" he demanded.

The big man softened then.

"Yes. I am Paul Matthews." A big paw closed down over Ford's hand, gripping it tight. "It all seems so long ago."

Owen's face was still hard, but he spoke more quietly.

"Paul Matthews, you are bringing

sure death to your own kin. Your brother and I ask, in the name of the human race, that you shut off the ray projector."

The giant shrugged, and growled: "I won't discuss it to-day. That is final."

It was not wise to press him, the scientist decided.

"So be it. If there's another room I can use, I'll leave you with your brother."

"Sure, come along!" said Paul almost cordially. "I'll be right back, Ford," he tossed over his shoulder. His voice trailed away.

Ford drew back into the room and stared fascinated at the silent, immovable robots.

WHAT power Paul had attained! Strange, though, that he had not been more friendly. He evidently didn't feel the same thrill in the reunion that Ford had. He had been almost ill at ease—furtive, calculating; it didn't fit in with his hard-boiled manner at all. Ford could not down the idea that some ghastly secret was preying on Paul's mind.

Where were the others, those bold spirits who had defied the government and set off in the rocket ship? Surely they were not all dead!

Paul had been the youngest of the lot, but there were plenty of husky fellows among them.

Bahspahl! A name with which to conjure, here on Mars. A god he was, almost, to the dwarf-folk of Tiron.

The eerie stillness of the place oppressed Ford, and the unseeing eyes of the robots' squat headpieces. He turned his back to them, moving over to the table.

Under its transparent covering was a color photograph of a startlingly

beautiful woman of perhaps forty. Beautiful but dangerous. Her eyes were those of a tigress—fierce and compelling in their intense stare.

Something clanged behind him and he wheeled about swiftly to face one of the robots, which had moved from the door. There was cold blue light deep in those lenses of eyes. They were not unseeing now!

Ford's automatic roared deafeningly and one of the lenses crashed in, leaving a jagged hole gaping in the smooth metal of the headpiece. A rasping screech came from the black disk beneath, and the flexible steel arms of the thing were around Ford, crushing his own arms to his sides. He cried out, faint with the pain.

"Paul! Owen!"

The black disk rasped, chuckling hideously. Ford's helplessly wriggling body was raised high and he looked down into a yawning pit which had opened at the robot's feet. A great chunk of the smooth floor had silently dropped away. Inside, all was blackness.

Ford's breath was shut off; his ribs cracking with the constriction of those awful metal tentacles. His vision blurred. And then the pressure was suddenly released; he was tumbled headlong through the open trap-door.

Half conscious, he plunged down into the blackness; squirming. Above him, a raucous laugh—metallic, yet horribly human. Gloating.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK.



## *Bush Doctors*

**B**EAUTIFUL but serpent-haunted, St. Lucia in the British West Indies offers fertile tracts of land for sale at attractive prices. But no one will buy them for fear of the terrible *fer de lance*, whose bite means an agonizing death within a short space of time. There is no cure for a *fer de lance* bite except immediate amputation of a bitten member. Local bush doctors, however, possess remedies for the bites of other less venomous serpents. Often these native bush doctors are successful in their treatments, which consist of using a series of ligatures and rubbing the wounds with herbs unknown to civilized medicine.

It is locally believed that a bush doctor, if well paid by a patient, will call to him the very snake which did the biting. The snake is then killed and exhibited to the patron as evidence of the bush doctor's magic. But the bush doctor—like other medicos—can kill as well as cure. The credulous say that he can send a snake to bite a person whom he wishes to destroy, and that he can send a snake into a house to steal jewelry or anything else that a serpent might carry in his mouth.

Another feature of the bush doctor's trade is the curing of bites inflicted by humans. Women of the lower classes frequently bite other people when fighting with them. Then the bitten person calls in the bush doctor who not only heals the wounds, but, every one believes, causes the teeth of the biter to drop out.

C. A. Freeman.