

Neighborly Planet

"Exploring Mars," by Robert S. Richardson (McGraw-Hill. 261 pp. \$4), is an astronomer's report to laymen on what is known and conjectured about probably the most fascinating of the planets. Our reviewer, Robert H. Baker, is the author of *"When the Stars Come Out"* and other books.

By Robert H. Baker

IS THERE life on Mars? What is the significance of the canals of Mars? Is it probable that we can soon travel to the planet and see for ourselves its remarkable features that astronomers are observing through their telescopes? These are some of the questions people were asking last summer when they saw the red planet glowing brightly in the southern sky. Questions like these will be repeated in the late summer and early fall of 1956, when Mars is scheduled to come still closer to the earth and to shine even brighter than it did in 1954. At its closest next September its distance from us will be less than thirty-five million miles, which is really neighborly for a planet. Robert Richardson's book, *"Exploring Mars,"* is timely.

Dr. Richardson is an astronomer at the Mount Wilson and Palomar Observatories, where he has opportunity to observe with the largest telescopes in operation and also with the loftiest tower telescope for the study of the sun, his major field of inquiry. Interest in the planets and in possible rocket voyages through interplanetary space would seem to be among his hobbies; he approaches these subjects with the enthusiasm of the amateur combined with the restraint of the professional.

Is there life on Mars? The author asks us to consider the bleak desert of Tibet, to strip its air of practically every trace of oxygen, and to expose it to a daily temperature range of 200 degrees, and then to imagine what kinds of life could survive there. The conditions seem scarcely to admit any animal life known to us. Could animals of a very different type from our familiar ones be living there? He thinks that "we can hardly talk rationally about life we don't know about."

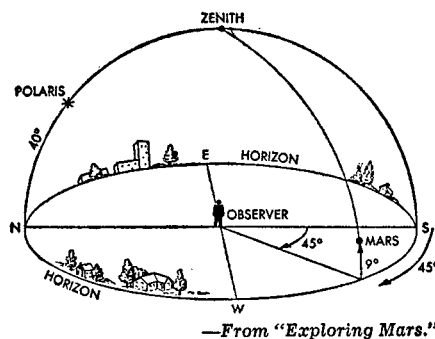
Mars is indeed a desert, almost waterless and swept by great dust storms. Yet it may not be completely barren. Large dark green areas contrast with the general red background, especially in the spring season there. Some of those areas turn brown, purple, and carmine in the fall. If they represent plant life it must be of a remarkably hardy type, perhaps

consisting of the almost impossible lichens. But the picture of lichens holding on desperately through the dust storms and other drastic conditions may not be adequate. The green areas suggest dense growth if they are really areas of vegetation.

Since their discovery some eighty years ago the fine dark lines which form a network on the face of Mars have caused acrimonious debates and occasionally ruffled feelings among astronomers; this was particularly so in the earlier days when some of our observatories were directed by ultra-conservative old gentlemen. Those "canals" have been seen by many observers but not by many others. They have the irritating way of showing more clearly through the smaller telescopes. They have been variously interpreted, the author explains, as optical illusions to which some observers seem not to be subject, as natural markings, and as artificial waterways. He tells us that he himself, formerly skeptical, has seen some of the wider canals through the telescope and in photographs. Another test of the existence of the narrow canals will be made in 1956 in photographs with large telescopes which permit very short exposure times.

THE author's account of proposed rocket flights into space adds little to what one has read in books such as Heinz Haber's *"Man in Space"*; but we are told that some new developments are top secret. The story is presented in a conservative yet lively manner. The small pay-load that a space-craft can carry is emphasized, as in the following quotation from the book: "The situation might be compared to a man who wants to go to Madagascar and has \$1,000 to spend on the trip. He finds that his traveling expenses will come to \$998, leaving him with two dollars in his pocket when he steps off the boat."

"Exploring Mars," which also describes features of other planets, is an interesting book for general reading. The drawings are well done and the Palomar photographs of planets are beautifully reproduced.



Mars as seen by an observer (lat. 40° N) at 10 A.M., Oct. 1, 1954.

Fun with the Fon

"The Bafut Beagles," by Gerald M. Durrell (Viking Press. 238 pp. \$3.75), is a high-spirited account of a naturalist in search of specimens in a sprawling West African area known as Bafut. Alan Devoe, our reviewer, is the author of *"Our Animal Neighbors"* and other books.

By Alan Devoe

EXPLORERS and zoological collectors who write books are not uncommon. Their works fill lengthy shelves in libraries. For most readers, however, these chronicles have limited appeal. Scientists of the pith-helmet-and-notebook breed (*"In Quest of the Aard-Vark," "Bird-Watching on the Zambesi," "An Entomologist in the Tropics"*) are the doers, undoubtedly, of fine important work; but the sad fact is that they also have a way of being a woodenly earnest, relentlessly stuffy sort of fellow, expert in their profession but not very strong on humor, esthetic perception, or any of the broader liveliness and awareness that make a substantial human being. When the reader has hunted rare toads or pursued the frumious bandersnatch with one of them he has pretty much gone exploring with them all.

Pretty much. But that is the generality. Comes now the Rare Exception; and comes in particular Gerald Durrell, author of *"The Bafut Beagles."* Mr. Durrell is about thirty now. It became plain a year or so ago, when he published *"The Overloaded Ark,"* that he was a zoological writer with a difference. With *"The Bafut Beagles"* the difference blazes in glory.

Born in India, educated in France, Italy, Switzerland, and Greece, Mr. Durrell is a man whose chosen life work happens to be collecting zoological specimens in far-flung and improbable places. (He has sojourned at least twice in West Africa, a considerable while in the depths of British Guiana, and is at present said to be somewhere in the wilds of Paraguay. Between times he nurses his recurrent malaria, recuperates from snakebite, and writes things down.) He is no doubt a sound zoologist and a devoted collector. Foremost, however, he is an extraordinarily high-spirited soul, as acutely aware and observant of people as of animals, with a quite piercing perception of natural beauty and a no less piercing perception of how hilariously comical the world is. For expressing this temperament and

these capacities he has an exceptional ability to write.

Bafut is a sprawling West African area in which Mr. Durrell collected a large menagerie of curious creatures: rock hyraxes and hairy frogs, galagos and many snakes, monkeys, kusimansels, the golden cat. Of the hunting and gathering of his astonishing fauna Durrell gives in "The Bafut Beagles" an absorbing account. It is beautiful, exciting, and funny. But the rarest of his treasures, brought from this expedition into these pages, is a person. Over the African wilderness known as Bafut there presides a potentate, the Fon. Mr. Durrell became this chief-tain's guest, crony, and valiant drinking-companion. It was the Fon who organized his native subjects into the collecting-posse that Mr. Durrell called the Bafut Beagles.

The Fon of Bafut, whether robed in state on his throne or relaxing of an evening in Durrell's quarters, was rarely without a glass in his hand: gin, whisky, palm wine, brandy, or whatnot. Three to five fingers was his idea of a suitable jigger, and jigger followed jigger in a steady replenishment. Mr. Durrell, who appears to have as formidable a head for liquor as any Private Eye in print, joined the Fon in guzzlings that earned the potentate's profound respect. In the course of these alcoholic shindigs Mr. Durrell not only (somewhat to his surprise) taught the Fon and his retinue the conga, and conducted some of the most peculiar conversations on record, but achieved in seriousness an intimate understanding of the native chief and a very real fondness for him. The Fon of Bafut was something much more than a kind of dark, preposterous W. C. Fields. The depth and dignity under the 100-proof exterior came through to Durrell; and he catches this in a portrait that is tender, absurd, and penetrating.

In descriptive "nature writing" Mr. Durrell ranks with William Beebe and Ivan Sanderson. There is plenty of this in his book, and it is lovely. The natural history is abundant, expert, and interesting. One ought, probably, to issue a caution to any fond Aunt Emma who might think of giving "The Bafut Beagles" to a budding naturalist nephew of twelve for a birthday. Mr. Durrell is not without a fancy for lavatory references. He has a cheery, chortling way of discussing with total candor such matters as the sex-antics of monkeys and the techniques for gouging out parasitic worms. And, of course, there is the drinking. It goes on by the case. For Aunt Emma, for the stuffer sort of scientist, or for the WCTU "The Bafut Beagles" may be a possible source of some unease. For everybody else it is a rare joy.

The Scarlet Ibis at Home

"Coro-Coro: The World of the Scarlet Ibis," by Paul A. Zahl (Bobbs-Merrill, \$4.50), is a report on a one-man expedition into the wettest part of Venezuela in search of a rare bird, and the adventures that befell it on the way. Here it is reviewed by Lorus and Margery Milne of the University of New Hampshire, authors of "The Mating Instinct."

By Lorus and Margery Milne

THE many readers who enjoyed Paul Zahl's "Flamingo Hunt" will be delighted to follow the ups and downs of a second ornithological quest. The former volume started off with a celebrated murder case, his new one, "Coro-Coro: The World of the Scarlet Ibis," with a prosaic visit to the Bronx Zoo. In keeping with his vocational habit of putting down all relevant information, Dr. Zahl early lets the reader know how he met the problem whose solution fills the succeeding pages. In themselves these beginnings seem no different from those which happen every day to anyone. The difference lies in the way an inquiring and persistent and resourceful mind pursues an intriguing question to its final answer.

The stimulus which started the chain-reaction in Zahl's activities was a "sad-looking bird, with thin, stilted legs, feathers of palest pink, and a long arched-down beak." A placard on the zoo enclosure explained that, "al-

though the scarlet ibis in its natural habitat is bright red, its molt replacements in captivity are invariably pallid." This faded color led to some library search and to the discovery that "about thirty years ago the scarlet ibis had rather mysteriously vanished from the printed record." Anything alive and red is so perfect a subject for the modern color camera that the subject seemed worth further study. With the sponsorship of the National Geographic Society, a diminutive expedition was planned to find the bird in its native breeding haunts, and there to photograph the spectacular hues over which explorers had waxed enthusiastic in 1847, 1866, 1908, 1910, and 1917.

No attempt has been made to overdraw the hardships and disappointments which came as an essential part of the venture. If anything they are softened—usually with a touch of humor. Zahl's unfamiliarity with the language (Spanish of the uneducated river men and cattle ranchers), with the terrain (the flooded flatlands bordering the Apure River), with the ways of Venezuelans, even with outboard motors (including the one he had brought along), each provided its separate series of difficulties. They led him to conclude that "true exploration . . . must by its very essence have elements of high unpredictability." This view seems reasonable enough on its face. But he recognized it to be heresy, for a famous explorer had stated categorically that adventure on an expedition was a "sign of amateurishness or lack of preparation."

The lack of fluent Spanish, even of textbook variety, and of thorough familiarity in the field with the Sea Horse motor, certainly fit the explorer's description. But the terrain and its human inhabitants provided plenty of unpredictability—even to the point of getting the amateur expeditioner hopelessly lost in the middle of a swamp on his way out.

THE reader cannot fail to see a similarity in Zahl's account and any blow-by-blow history of a scientific investigation. Each contains about 5 per cent of stimulating progress and 95 per cent of frustrating, uncomfortable riding off in all directions except the right one. In his New York laboratory dishwashing could

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—Lexington.

Paul A. Zahl—"resourceful mind."