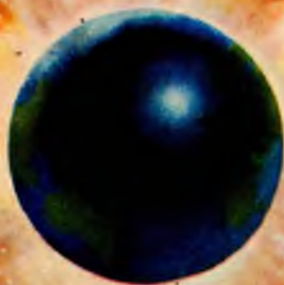


**GREAT PAN**



# **THE WORLD IN PERIL**

**Charles Chilton**



**An alien civilisation prepares to conquer Earth — and only four men can save her**  
**The third chilling instalment of the radio serial which enthralled millions**

*Is in the best BBC science-fiction tradition*

**BOOKS AND BOOKMEN**

**2/6**



## THE WORLD IN PERIL

Jet Morgan and his crew returned to their base on the Moon after an abortive visit to Mars in the space-ship *Discovery*. Indeed, after their encounter with the Martians, they were lucky to return at all.

Jet's radioed message concerning the Martians' plans for the conquest of Earth set the Space HQ in a fever of indecision. If disaster were to be averted, they said, reliable and detailed information as to the hour of invasion, the weapons to be employed and the strength of the Martian fleet must be obtained. And the only way it could be secured was for Jet to take the *Discovery* back to Mars. Never was there a commission so dangerous or having consequences so vital to all mankind.

*The World In Peril* is the third episode in the renowned 'Journey Into Space' saga. It is a highly exciting story by a novelist whose science fiction is best-selling material in five continents.

#### **CONDITIONS OF SALE**

This book shall not be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise disposed of by way of trade in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

THE WORLD IN  
PERIL

CHARLES CHILTON



UNABRIDGED

PAN BOOKS LTD : LONDON

First published 1960 by Herbert Jenkins Ltd.  
This edition published 1962 by Pan Books Ltd.,  
8 Headfort Place, London, S.W.1

© *Charles Chilton 1960*

*All the characters in this book are purely imaginary  
and have no relation whatsoever to any living persons.*

PRINTED AND BOUND IN ENGLAND BY  
HAZELL WATSON AND VINEY LTD  
AYLESBURY AND SLUGH

# 1

**A**PRIL 15TH, 1972—Earth time: The Mars Fleet, or what was left of it, was returning to its base on the Moon—nearly a year before its scheduled time. The expedition to Mars had started out with nine ships and twenty men, but only three ships and eight men had survived to make the return journey. Four men were dead, their bodies destined to drift around the solar system for ever or until, drawn to some planet by gravitational attraction, they go hurtling down towards its surface to be vaporised in the planet's atmosphere, like a meteor when it is captured by the Earth. The remaining freighters, empty of human life, are for ever encircling the planet in free orbit. Their crews are held prisoner on Mars with hundreds of other 'conditioned' captives of the Martians—Martians whom we never saw but from whose terrifying power we the survivors of the expedition had escaped only by a miracle.

It was with mixed feelings that we in the *Discovery*, the flagship of this ill-fated fleet, lay strapped to our couches waiting for the slight *crump* which would mean we had touched down safely on the Moon. How many times during the last six months had we dreamed of this moment, yet now that it had come we could feel no joy nor satisfaction in our achievements. For besides the loss of the fleet, we brought news which threatened the safety and happiness of the whole world.

The voice of Mitchell, our engineer, monotonously counted off the height as we drew nearer the surface. Lemmy Barnet, the wireless operator, fiddled with his controls.

"Position, Lemmy?" It was the voice of Jet Morgan, our captain, speaking from the pilot's cabin.

"Bang on."

"Three hundred feet," came the count.

Lemmy voiced the feelings of us all.

"D'you think they're gonna believe a word of our story, Doc?" he said to me. "Of what happened to us back there on the Red Planet?"

"Lemmy, keep your mind on your job," said Jet severely.

"Two-fifty. Two hundred. One-fifty," came the count.

The things that had happened to us, both during the journey to Mars and after we had landed on the planet, the strange things we discovered, the people we met, were so fantastic that, now we were about to get back to our own familiar world, they seemed remote and unreal. Yet I knew that it was up to us to convince the world of the danger confronting it.

"One hundred. Fifty. Forty. Thirty. Twenty. Ten. Zero!"

There was a bump and the ship rocked violently, shuddered and was still. We had made it.

"Cut the motor," came Jet's voice.

"Home at last," said Mitch.

"This is the Moon, Mitch. Home is still a quarter of a million miles away."

"All right, Lemmy. But at least we're close enough to the Earth to recognise her. That makes me *feel* I'm home."

"Well, it doesn't me," grumbled Lemmy. His voice changed suddenly. "Hey, Jet," he exclaimed. "There's a land truck already left Luna City and heading out this way."

"All right," replied Jet. "We'll wait until they get here. Call up the freighters and tell the crews to make no attempt to leave the ships until told."

"Yes, Jet."

We undid our safety straps, completed our log books. Behind us the two remaining freighters had also landed safely. It was all so normal and ordinary, as though we had just made a routine Earth-Moon flight. And yet . . .

A voice from the radio interrupted my thoughts.

"Hullo, *Discovery*. Lunar Controller calling."

"Hullo, sir. Morgan here. We're ready to leave the ship—may we come down?"

"Not yet. I want to come up there first. Get ready to let me in, will you?"



"The Controller, eh?" said Lemmy as we exhausted the airlock prior to opening the main door. "I thought there was something fishy in that land truck panicking out to meet us the minute we touch down."

A few minutes later the Lunar Controller was shaking us by the hand.

"Well," he said, "welcome home. To the Moon at any rate."

He looked a little embarrassed, I thought, as though he had something difficult to say and didn't know how to begin.

"This is a sorry business," he started slowly. "How many ships were lost?"

"Six, sir," replied Jet, "and fourteen men. I take full responsibility, sir. We should have turned back."

"Every member of every ship *agreed* to go on—you gave them a choice, remember?" said Mitch. "You weren't to blame."

The Controller interrupted him.

"Nobody's blaming anybody for anything—at least, not until after the enquiry."

"Enquiry?"

"Yes, Captain Morgan. You must realise that your account of how those men and ships were lost——" He hesitated. "It's fantastic—almost unbelievable."

"You mean that you don't believe what is in our report, sir?" asked Jet stiffly.

"It doesn't matter what *I* believe, Jet. In the two years I helped prepare you for this trip to Mars I came to know you very well. In my opinion there was nobody better qualified to handle the *Discovery* and lead this project than you. I can see no reason for changing my opinion."

"Thank you, sir."

"Just the same, you're in for a tough time. You will be called upon to verify every statement in your report. You will be subject to the most intensive interrogation."

"But the facts and nothing but the facts are contained in our radioed reports," protested Jet.

"Earth wants them confirmed," said the Controller. "And *proved*. Particularly in so far as they concern a probable Martian invasion. You must try and see their

point of view. For the first time in man's history not a shot has been fired in war anywhere on Earth for a whole decade. Fighting forces of all countries have been reduced to the minimum. The world has at last begun to settle down to a long era of peace. And then you come along with a tale of how another planet—Mars—is about to invade us."

"But it's true," said Jet. "The date was fixed for the close opposition of 1986, but if they were ready they could even attempt it in '73. Mars would still be close enough."

"And how will they attack us? What weapons will they use? How can Earth defend herself? And how will people react to the news that their world is about to be taken over by an alien race—beings no one has ever seen?"

"There could be world-wide panic," I said emphatically.

"Exactly, Doctor Matthews. But if what you say is true they must be told and prepared for the worst. And it is on your evidence alone, scanty though it may be, that the Committee must decide what to do."

So it was that instead of being taken back to Earth as we had hoped, we were kept, virtual prisoners, in Luna City for six weeks. The Investigation Committee worked hard. They saw at least one of us every day and plied us with questions by the hour. Mitch's experiences on the Red Planet, in particular, they found hard to swallow.

"You say, Mr Mitchell," asked one inquisitor, "in all seriousness, that in the middle of the Martian Argyre Desert you came across a farmhouse in which dwelt people who spoke English and believed they were living in Australia?"

"I do."

"What were they supposed to be doing there?"

"Raising sheep—they ran a station."

"But they weren't sheep really," put in Jet. "They were rather like ant-eaters."

"Now just a moment," said the inquisitor. "Mitchell says sheep; you, Captain Morgan, say ant-eaters? Who am I to believe?"

I thought it was time I put in a word.

"Mitch was 'conditioned'," I said.

"Conditioned, Doctor Matthews?"

"Yes," I went on. "Conditioned—hypnotised if you will—in the same way as most of the other people we met on Mars. That is to say they believed they were in some place other than where they really were—down on Earth usually, at home or in a place where they were happy. Mitch thought he was back in Australia. The place looked like Australia to him—he met Australians—and to him Martian animals looked like the animals he'd expect to find in Australia."

"And how is this—er—'conditioning' brought about?"

"It starts with a noise in your head," said Lemmy, "like you got bees in there. And then you hear a voice telling you not to worry, everything's going to be all right. Next thing you know you're back home—in London—a kid again with all your old friends round you. At least, that's how it was with me."

"You were completely conditioned?"

"No. Jet and Doc found me just in time. All that happened was I felt all cold inside when I woke up."

"What else do you know about this conditioning, Doctor Matthews?"

"We know that conditioned people are able to breathe the Martian atmosphere," I answered. "And that their body temperature is abnormally low, only about sixty-three degrees Fahrenheit. Also that some people, I for one, are immune to it."

"And the kidnapping," put in another interrogator. "You say in your reports that people have been kidnapped from Earth and taken to Mars."

"Hundreds of them," said Mitch. "We saw them with our own eyes."

"And this kidnapping has been going on for a great many years?"

"So we were told."

"And you also say that on Mars men live much longer than down on Earth. How long do the Martians live?"

"We don't know," replied Jet. "We never saw any."

"A pity. You might have tried your own hand at kidnapping and brought one back. It would have helped substantiate your story."

"How can you kidnap somebody you've never even seen?" said Lemmy indignantly.

For the fact remained we had never seen a Martian—only 'conditioned' earthmen or men like the flying doctor who acted on behalf of the Martians. Naturally we told the Investigation Committee all we could. Of the great underground factory in the Lacus Solis where hundreds of men worked building spherical spaceships under the impression that they were still down on Earth making aircraft for use in the Second World War; of the men who seemed to realise just who they were and where they were, and who begged us to take them back when we made our final dash to get away from Mars and back to the Moon.

After three months of gruelling questioning the ordeal came to an end. The Investigation Committee took a ship back to Earth and some days afterwards the Lunar Controller paid us another visit.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "a few hours ago I received the result of the first committee's investigation. It's quite a formidable document."

"What did they conclude, sir?" asked Jet.

"That you were probably telling the truth."

"*Probably*—I like that."

The Controller looked at Mitch severely. "You must remember, Mr Mitchell, your individual reports did not always agree. Apparently all of you, with the exception of Doctor Matthews, who seems to be immune, were at some time or another under the influence of the Martians—allowing that such beings do exist—and you are rather vague about events during that time."

"But they decided that at least something of what we said is true?" Jet asked.

"Yes. In fact they are quite prepared for the worst."

"The invasion?"

"Yes."

"What are they going to do about it?" asked Mitch.

"That's something for a body on a far higher level to decide. But this I do know—their report is to remain unpublished. Copies will be given to all Commonwealth and other major governments, and a world-wide conference

will then be held to decide how we can defend ourselves against a Martian invasion—should it come.”

“But how can they?” protested Jet. “They don’t even know what they’ll be defending themselves against.”

“Fact is, sir,” I added. “we know very little. When the Martians do invade we don’t know how they’ll do it or what in—we only know they will, probably in 1986 at the next close opposition.”

“Well, that gives us fourteen years to get ready for them,” said the Controller.

“But how do you prepare to meet something you know next to nothing about?” queried Mitch.

“That’s where you come in,” replied the Controller. “I had better come to the point straight away, gentlemen. The Committee recommend that you should return to Mars—to find out more about this invasion. How it will be done. What ships will be used. How they’re propelled and what measures can be taken against them. They also suggest that if possible you should bring back at least one conditioned man or woman. Will you do it, Captain Morgan?”

“Of course,” said Jet immediately. He turned and looked at us. “I think I speak for all of us?”

We nodded, although I, for one, could hardly take in what the Controller had just said. Go back to Mars? When we had only just returned?

“You will leave at the next opposition,” went on the Controller in a matter-of-fact voice.

“But Mars will be much farther away than during the last one,” protested Mitch, “what ship could reach her?”

“That will be taken care of. The back-room boys are confident they can modify the *Discovery*—install extra fuel tanks and a more powerful motor. They’re working on her now. One other thing,” continued the Controller. “This project is to be treated with the utmost secrecy. You are not to talk about it to anyone—nobody at all, you understand?”

Five days later Jet, Mitch, Lemmy and I were back on Earth. We touched down in Australia at the launching ground near the Horseshoe Range in Northern Territory,

and from there were immediately transferred to a waiting plane and flown to England. Security measures were stringent. We reached our hotel suite in London secretly, and a guard was placed outside our door, not so much to keep us in as to keep inquisitive people out. As far as the general public knew the Mars expedition was still out in space and not expected back for another year.

"How much longer are they going to keep us cooped up in here?" grumbled Lemmy, after we had been in London a few days.

"Look, Lemmy——" said Mitch at the window. "That couple walking down there—with the dog."

"Don't—it makes me think of Becky."

"What—the dog?"

"No, the girl. It's not so bad for you, Mitch. Your home's in Australia. But mine's here in London. And Becky's not above a couple of miles from here and she doesn't even know I'm in town. They won't even let me call her up on the phone." He paused. "What were you going to say about those two down there?"

"Only that if the Martians do invade neither they nor anyone else will ever have a park to walk through again."

"So?"

"So you should stop beefing about being shut up and realise that we're kept out of sight and guarded night and day because Jet, Doc, you and me are the only four people on this globe who have first-hand knowledge of what might be in store for the Earth. If the slightest inkling of what was afoot got out . . ."

"Oh, all right, all right," said Lemmy, "but I'm sick to death of just sitting here."

Things began to move the next day. A car called for us and took us down to an observatory somewhere in the country where the Controller introduced us to a Professor Hadley, an astronomer.

"The Professor has something interesting to show you," said the Controller.

We were taken into a darkened room where the Professor projected a series of plates on to a screen. They were photographs of the heavens, star clusters. I recognised the region of Hercules.

"Now, gentlemen," began the Professor. "You will no doubt recognise this portion of the heavens. But I want you to look in particular at a little group of elongated images just above the star marked Zeta."

"They must be moving pretty fast to produce trails that length," remarked Mitch.

"They certainly are, Mr Mitchell. Look at this plate, taken only two hours later. The same images appear in an entirely different part of the constellation, and you will notice that one of the trails is well ahead of the others now."

"They're not travelling at the same speed?" I asked, puzzled.

"No, Doctor Matthews. Although these objects seem to keep together most of the time, their speeds vary considerably as a group, as well as individually. And their track is no more constant than their speed—as you'll see in this plate. Here—you see their position is much lower. In fact, they've nearly moved out of Hercules entirely down into the region of Ophiucus—and all in the course of one evening. That can mean only one of two things: that their speed is far greater than anything ever seen in the heavens before, with the exception of meteors, of course, or that they are very close to the Earth."

"Which must be the right answer," said Jet.

"Exactly. There's no doubt about it, gentlemen, these objects, whatever they are, are encircling the Earth—some three thousand miles above its surface. And they have been doing it for at least two weeks."

"Blimey," interposed Lemmy, "the Martians—they're here."

"Have you taken a close look at them through the telescope?" asked Jet.

"I have. It shows them to be roughly circular and—the most astounding thing of all—between three-quarters of a mile and a mile in diameter."

"They can't be spaceships then," said Lemmy almost with relief.

"If it weren't for their extraordinary behaviour and their proximity to the Earth," continued the Professor,

"I'd say they were asteroids—great chunks of rock adrift in space."

"Do they mean anything to you, Captain?" asked the Controller.

"If you mean in relation to our visit to Mars—no, they don't," replied Jet. "The Martian ships we saw were spherical but made of some kind of metal. And quite small, some sixty feet in diameter at the most."

"So you think there's no connection between these objects and a Martian invasion?" asked the Controller.

"I don't know," replied Jet slowly. "I can't think of one. But . . ." He stopped.

"Yes, Captain Morgan?"

"The only way to find out what those things are is to go up and take a close look at them. How soon could an orbital rocket—a manned one, I mean—be got ready for takeoff?" Jet spoke decisively as though he had already made up his mind what to do.

"By tomorrow I should imagine," replied the Controller.

"Very well," said Jet. "That's what we'll do. Go up there and have a look."

At sunset next day preparations for the takeoff were complete. Jet had decided to take Lemmy with him in the rocket while Mitch and I were to watch events from the main control room. The rocket was a two-stage job, antiquated by our standards, not built for passenger service, and I could well imagine Lemmy grumbling at the reclining chairs which took the place of takeoff couches. However, it would serve its purpose for this trip. Takeoff and setting the rocket in its orbital course would be automatic, but once in free flight Jet would be able to manoeuvre the ship himself—within limits—so as to find the best position to observe the asteroids or whatever the strange objects proved to be.

Half an hour after sundown we watched the great ship rise slowly, smoke belching from her tail. She seemed to hang motionless for a minute, then shuddered and was off, rising smoothly and gracefully into her pre-appointed place in the heavens. We listened to Control giving instructions.

"Hullo, rocketship. Your maximum speed has now been



reached. Your height is seventy-eight miles. You will proceed along your present trajectory until the orbit of the objects you are pursuing has been reached. Then it's up to you to change the angle of your flight and increase speed. By that time you will have passed half way round the globe. It's quite dark on this part of the globe and those asteroids have already been sighted."

"Thank you, Control," came Jet's voice. "We'll let you know when we pick them up."

I, too, was watching the unidentified objects which to us looked no bigger than star images.

"They're moving pretty fast," I said to Mitch. "Jet will have to step on it if he's to overtake them."

"Increasing speed now," came Jet's voice over the speaker. "Lemmy's picked up something on the radar. We should be able to see them soon."

The minutes ticked by.

"Hullo, Control." It was Jet again. He sounded excited. "We can see them now. Almost directly in our path. They seem to be flying in crescent formation. And they're enormous."

"Are they asteroids, Jet?" I asked.

"We're still too far to tell, but we should fly right over them. Camera's in position. We'll start filming when we get a bit nearer."

A little later he called again. "Now they look just as I would expect an asteroid to, but a lot smoother. Not so jagged or shapeless as an asteroid. Very nearly circular, in fact. They haven't changed speed or position since we've been overtaking them."

"They're just meteorites maybe?" suggested Mitch.

"Except no meteorites would fly in formation, nor keep a constant orbit so close to the Earth, as these things do."

"You see nothing else, Jet?" I asked. "Nothing to suggest they might be ships—or . . ." I broke off. What could they be except asteroids?

"No, Doc," replied Jet. "Nothing. Hullo—what's that . . ."

"Hullo, Jet," I called. "What were you saying?"

There was no answer.

I called again. "Jet—come in, please."

"This is Control calling rocketship, come in, please," came the voice of the Supervisor.

"Maybe the radio's broken down," Mitch said. "Keep calling."

We kept calling. "If they don't answer soon," said the Supervisor looking worried, "we'll have to do something about getting them down."

I looked up at the sky. "Mitch," I shouted. "The asteroids—they've gone."

There was no sign of them. I was really worried now.

We called every minute for the rest of that night, taking it in turns to listen out and snatching a few hours sleep in between watches. By next day I began to think we would never hear from Jet and Lemmy again.

\* \* \*

"Doc Matthews calling. Calling Jet Morgan aboard Rocketship X412. Have not heard from you for some hours. Come in, please." Once again I gave the routine call and listened in vain for an answer. Then, very faintly, I heard something.

"Hullo, Doc—Lemmy here." His voice sounded far off and sleepy, as though he had just woken up.

"Lemmy!" I shouted in my excitement. "Mitch—did you hear that? It's Lemmy. Lemmy, can you hear us?"

The voice came back stronger now. "Yes, Doc—I can hear you. What's all the fuss?"

Mitch broke in. "What's all the fuss, he says. We've been calling you for more than twenty-four hours."

"Eh?" Lemmy sounded surprised. "Twenty-four hours, did you say? But only a second or two ago I was taking pictures of those asteroids—or whatever they are. In fact, I still had my hands on the guiding control when I woke up."

"When you woke up!" I exclaimed.

"I guess I must have blacked out, Doc," said Lemmy, sounding somewhat confused. "But . . ." He broke off suddenly. "Hey, Jet—Jet!" I heard him call.

"What's wrong, Lemmy?"

"Jet—he's slumped in his chair. He must have blacked out too. What's happened to us, Doc?"

"Try to remember, Lemmy," I said.

"I don't know. I heard a funny noise, and the closer we got to those things the louder it got. And then . . . well I don't remember any more till I heard you calling me."

"Listen carefully, Lemmy. Is Jet strapped into his seat?"

"Yes, Doc."

"Good. Now switch the ship over to automatic control. Then go back to your own seat and strap yourself in."

"Yes, Doc. Automatic Control—on. Now moving over to seat. What's the idea?"

"We're going to hand you over to Control and bring you down."

"But what about those asteroids? We hardly got more than a glimpse of them."

"Never mind that now. I'll explain everything when you get down."

Some hours later, Rocketship X412 was safely back on earth and Lemmy and Jet, who had recovered on the way down, talking to us in the Control Room.

"Then, as we got closer, the noise got louder," Jet was saying. "And the louder it got the more it affected us. The last thing I remember was seeing Lemmy hanging motionless just above his chair in front of the camera, which was still running."

"Yes," nodded the Supervisor, "and it continued to run until the whole reel of film had been used up."

"Is there anything on it, sir?" asked Lemmy.

"That we'll see, in just a few moments. Meanwhile, do either of you remember anything else?"

"Just before I blacked out," said Jet slowly, "I thought I heard a voice."

"You did," said Mitch. "Doc and I were calling like mad."

Jet shook his head. "No, it wasn't you or Doc." He stopped.

"Who was it then?" I asked.

"It seems impossible," said Jet. "But I'd stake my life on it. It—it was McLean!"

"McLean!" Mitch, Lemmy and I looked at Jet in amazement.

"Yes. He called me by name and said, 'Surely you remember me.' And then I blacked out."

"Who, may I ask, is McLean?" said the Super.

"He was formerly a crew member of one of the freighters in the Martian Fleet. But we lost him . . ." I paused.

"You mean he's dead?"

"No. At least he wasn't the last time we saw him. He was captured by the Martians and we had to leave him behind."

"What happened to the asteroids?" Jet said.

"A few moments after you had passed out they moved across the sky at a fantastic rate," said the Super. "They haven't been seen anywhere in the sky since."

"It looks almost as though they realised they were being observed from close quarters and got out of the way, quick," Mitch said.

"But how could they increase speed so quickly? How could they change their speed at all—just huge pieces of rock?" asked Jet.

One thing at least was clear to me. The way that noise affected Jet and Lemmy, the strange voice talking to Jet just before he blacked out—this was the identical method the Martians used to produce 'conditioning'. It had happened to Jet and Lemmy before, and to Mitch as well. It also happened to McLean and to Frank Rogers—and to every other member of the Martian Fleet we left on the Red Planet. I was certain that these controlled asteroids came from Mars.

The phone rang. It was the photographic section.

"Now we'll see just what the camera did capture," said the Supervisor. "What objective were you using, Lemmy?"

"Telephoto. That's what I was told to use. Camera was running just as soon as the objects were sighted."

The lights went out and the screen in front of us lit up.

The objects that moved across the screen were certainly very like asteroids. They were not of equal size, one in the centre of the formation seemed twice as big as the rest. They might have been miniature moons, pitted with little craters. But unlike those on the Moon, the craters were all of a uniform size, about one hundred feet in diameter. And they were equidistant from one another too.

"It was about now that Lemmy began to hear the noise," said Jet.

As the reel moved through the projector the objects on the screen slowly drew nearer until at last just one of them filled the whole picture.

"You know what I think," said Lemmy suddenly. "Those craters aren't craters at all. If they were, the sunlight would be lighting up part of their floors at least. But those things are jet black all over."

"Good grief, what's that?" I gasped. For something was coming out of one of the 'holes'.

"It's a sphere!" exclaimed Mitch.

"A spherical ship," Jet said.

"Just like the ones we saw on Mars," cried Lemmy. "Oh, blimey! and there's another—and another."

We watched fascinated as a dozen Martian ships left the giant asteroid.

Had the invasion already begun?

## 2

THE FILM stopped abruptly.

"That's the end of the reel," said the Super. "And with Lemmy sound asleep there was nobody to load up a fresh one."

"I always said those ships could never reach Earth unaided," Mitch said.

I understood him. "Seems they don't have to. They're transported here by those rocks—giant spaceship carriers—and merely cover the last few thousand miles on their own."

"But surely if that number of craft had landed on Earth, they would have been detected," protested Jet.

"Not necessarily," said the Super thoughtfully. "Maybe they *have*, but in some remote unpopulated part of the Earth where they wouldn't be detected. We must find out. I must report this right away."

The film certainly jolted the powers that be into action. If they doubted our story before, here was the concrete

evidence they needed. Conferences were held at the highest level. Within a few hours messages were going out all over the world asking for information about any strange unidentified objects that might recently have been observed in the heavens or seen to land on earth.

We were told to wait at the orbital rocket station for further orders. When they came, in the early hours of the following morning, they were startling.

The Station Supervisor awoke us.

"Sorry to come at this unearthly hour," he said, "but there's good reason to believe that one of those spheres has landed in the Lake District."

"What!" We were out of bed and crowding around him for details in a moment.

It seemed that a couple of kids camping out had got up during a bad storm and seen what they took to be a fire-ball racing through the air above their heads. It descended into a valley, seemed to stop—hang in the air for a few moments—and then descend slowly to the ground. Then, according to them, it went dark.

They were pretty scared and told the police what they had seen. A sergeant went to investigate and saw that something very big had ploughed its way through the trees of a wood. On further investigation he saw what he described later as a space missile—he believed it to be an experimental job that had crashed. A report was then sent down to London and from there to us.

"They want you to go and see it immediately," continued the Super. "In the hope that you can identify it."

An hour later we were looking down at the spot from our seats in a helicopter. Already a cordon of mobile police were in operation keeping off inquisitive sightseers. No one except ourselves had an inkling as to the possible nature of the 'thing' that had landed. Even the police believed it to be one of our orbital rockets that had come to a sad end.

A few minutes later we were making our way towards the silvery grey object we could see gleaming in the sunlight. When we were nearer there was no doubt in our minds as to what it was.

"That's a Martian sphere all right," said Mitch. "Iden-

tical in every detail with those we saw on the planet. Exactly the same as that Flying Doctor used. And the ones that came chasing after us when we decided to leave in a hurry."

We gazed at the smooth metallic surface of the spherical spaceship. So far as the eye could see there was no door or opening of any kind except for a few small portholes on the upper part. But we knew that if we searched we should find a small push button—a remote control switch—for opening the concealed door from the outside. If we pressed it, what would we find? A crew of conditioned earthmen or . . . Martians.

A sudden clanging sound made me jump.

"Just seeing if anyone's at home," explained Lemmy who had given the ship a sharp kick.

"Let's walk round and see if we can find the door," said Jet.

"Wait a minute, Jet," protested Lemmy. "You don't know what might come out. There might be Martians in that thing."

"Well, if there are we'll be the first Earthmen to come face to face with men from another world," said Jet imperturbably. "But I don't think they will be Martians. They'll be conditioned Earthmen—the kind of people the Lunar Controller said we were to go all the way to Mars to capture and bring back. This may save us the trouble."

"Looks as though it had to make a crash landing," remarked Mitch as we walked round looking for the tiny button which would open the door.

We found it and Jet pressed it, but nothing happened. Jet tried again.

"It's no good," he said. "The mechanism doesn't function. The only thing we can do is to burn our way through. How about it, sir?" He turned to the rocket station supervisor. "Could you get us the equipment?"

The Super nodded. "I'll go in the helicopter. You stay here and keep guard. Take this Very light and if you need help fire it into the air and fifty armed policemen will come driving over just as quick as they can make it."

We settled down for a long wait. I, at least, wondered somewhat uneasily whether the occupants of the space ship

were watching *us* on their televiewer and planning just how to deal with us. But, if so, why didn't they open the door themselves and come out? Almost in answer to my thought I heard a low whining noise. I looked at Jet. He hadn't touched the remote control. Then I looked back at the ship. The door was opening.

"Ay, ay," exclaimed Lemmy, "something's happening."

"Stand back, Mitch," said Jet warningly.

We waited. The door opened fully and remained open. But that was all.

"They're certainly taking their time about coming out," said Lemmy.

"We'll give them ten minutes," said Jet, at last.

Nobody appeared.

"Come on, Doc," said Jet. "Mitch, you stay outside with Lemmy."

"Stick close to Doc, Jet, and take your time," said Mitch.

We climbed up into the bottom section of the sphere.

"Doesn't seem to be anybody down here," I whispered.

"No," answered Jet. "Have a good look round, Doc."

I examined the cabin carefully. It seemed identical with that of the spheres we had been in on Mars. The control panels were the same and in the centre was a hollow pillar in which was a flight of steps leading to the upper section.

"Can you remember which controls were which?" Jet asked as we looked at the panel.

"No-o," I replied doubtfully. And then stopped short, for as I was looking at one of the levers, I saw it move—quite three inches. "Jet," I gasped. "Look!"

A light came on above the panel and we heard a faint whirring noise. "Are you mad, Doc? Did you touch one of the controls?"

"No, Jet, of course I didn't. It moved on its own. Look—there it goes again, back to its former position."

"Then there must be someone in here," said Jet decisively. "In the upper cabin, maybe. Come on, I'm going to find out."

"Now wait a minute, Jet—if there *is* somebody up there . . . this thing could take off with us in it——" I began.

"I don't think it *can*," Jet interrupted. "It would have done so two days ago, as soon as it was realised that its



landing had been discovered. Now, come on." He pressed another small button which opened the entrance in the hollow pillar, and a moment later I was following him up the stairs.

"Good grief," I heard him exclaim as he reached the top. "Look at this! It's crammed full of gear. There's hardly room to move. Nobody could possibly be up here. There's only one explanation. The opening of the main door and the operation of the flying controls must be remote controlled. That's why that control panel downstairs was alive."

"But who controls it?" I queried.

"Somebody up in those asteroids, Doc. They might even know we're in here—hear every word we're saying—maybe even see us."

"We've got to get out of here, Jet," I said urgently. "It might take off any minute."

We hurried down, and as we reached the lower section another light flicked and a low humming noise began.

"Hurry! For God's sake," I urged.

I pushed Jet through the door and dived out after him, landing in a spread-eagled heap on the grass. As I looked up and back at the sphere, the outer door began to close.

"Cor blimey, only just in time, mate," said Lemmy thankfully as he helped me to my feet.

The sphere was behaving very queerly now. As we watched, the whining noise started up again, the machine gave a jump and a shudder.

"Look out—duck!" came Jet's voice urgently. "Lemmy—get down!"

Just in time we threw ourselves flat on the grass as the sphere skimmed across the ground towards us and then went into a vertical takeoff. In a few moments it was no more than a tiny spot in the sky.

"What a fantastic climbing rate!" exclaimed Mitch. "If there was anybody in it, they'd be squashed flat."

"There wasn't," replied Jet. "We searched both cabins. It's remote controlled."

"Then why has it been sitting here for forty-eight hours doing nothing?" asked Mitch.

"I think it's been trying to take off but couldn't," said

Jet. "That's why the door kept opening and shutting. Whoever's operating the controls must have been pressing every button hoping that *something* would happen. The crew must have landed and left the ship," he went on slowly, as if he was working it out. "Presumably the sphere was supposed to return to its parent ship out in space once the crew had been safely deposited on Earth. But as it was damaged, it couldn't get away."

Lemmy said in an awed voice: "You mean there are Martians wandering about all over the place?"

"Possibly Martians, but more likely earthmen—people taken to Mars, put in a conditioned state and then sent back here as spies, a fifth column to prepare the way for the major invasion."

I felt a sense of helplessness and inevitability as I considered the implications of what Jet had just said. All over the world, maybe, spheres like the one we had just seen might have landed and dropped their crews, men undistinguishable in looks from ordinary earthmen. And how long had this been going on? Maybe for years.

"What are we going to do?" I said aloud.

"Our immediate problem is to find the crew of this ship," answered Jet briskly.

"But they may be miles away by now," objected Mitch. "And we've no idea what they look like."

I looked up as I heard the whir of a helicopter above my head. It was the Supervisor and with him was the Lunar Controller. We examined the situation.

"So there go all our hopes of capturing that ship," said the Controller. "I was hoping we'd learn something about how they worked. You'd better take that equipment back again, Jones, we shan't need it now."

"What do we do next, sir?" asked Jet.

"Search every square inch within a radius of a couple of hundred yards from where the ship landed," answered the Controller. "Look for footprints—anything that could give us some clue as to what kind of people came out of it."

"Very well, sir. We'll split up—start with a small area where the ship was, and gradually increase it."

It was Mitch who eventually found something. "Hey—look at this!" he shouted.

I hurried to where he stood looking down at the ground. At his feet were some clearly defined footprints. I examined them.

"The ground must have been quite soft when these impressions were made," I said, "though it's dried out since."

"Exactly," said Mitch, triumphantly. "Which means it must have been raining either when whoever made these prints passed this way or not long before—and we know that on the night the sphere landed there was a terrific storm."

The others had joined us by now and were looking at the prints with interest.

"Don't get too excited, Mitch," said Jet. "They look rather like the impressions of two pairs of golfing shoes—or the sort hikers might wear."

"You mean they may have been made by the two campers who first saw the ship?"

"It could be the campers," the Controller said, "but I'll get somebody from Control point to come over and photograph the prints and take some casts. Meanwhile let's have a look for ourselves, shall we?"

The tracks headed straight for the main road, but after that there was no further sign of them.

"They may have had transport waiting for them," said the Controller thoughtfully. "We have to face the fact, gentlemen, that this 'invasion' or 'pre-invasion' may have been going on for a long time. If the Martians already have some conditioned types working for them down on Earth, what could be more natural than for them to meet new arrivals? On the other hand they may have hitch-hiked to the nearest town or even walked along the road."

"In which case they must have been seen," I added, "if not during the night, then either yesterday or today."

"Yes," said the Controller, "and if they did stay in the neighbourhood there's just a chance the police might be able to find them."

"Two blokes we can't even describe?" queried Lemmy.

"Two people wearing exactly the same type of shoe can't be all that common. If they put up at a near-by town they might well have had the hotel 'boots' clean their shoes for them. They'd walked through plenty of mud."

"It's a long shot but I suppose it might lead to something," said Jet.

"It's the only thing we've got to go on," replied the Controller briskly. "If we can trace *these* two it might help us to track down the rest."

"The rest?" put in Lemmy, faintly.

"Don't let's fool ourselves that this was the only ship to reach Earth. Dozens of spheres left those asteroids and they must have landed somewhere. And if somebody left this ship—why not the others?"

Suddenly a thought struck me.

"If that sphere did crash land," I said, "there's just a chance of one, or even both, of the two men being injured. That might make it easier to identify them."

"Yes," said the Controller, "if anyone picked them up along the road they'd be more likely to remember them. But the only way we could find that out is by making a public appeal to motorists who were driving in the Lake District on the evening in question and I don't want to do that if we can possibly avoid it. It would put paid to all hope of secrecy. Anyway we'll try the police first. If that fails we'll have to do something more drastic."

Soon we were on our way back to the confinement of our hotel in London, while the police started their search. No trace of anyone wearing a shoe with a pattern like the one we found in the mud could be discovered at any of the hotels in the Lake District. It had to be assumed, therefore, that the two men had got a lift along the road.

The next step was to get from the police reports of every motoring incident of which they had a record for a week back. As they came in the Controller passed them on to us to read and we ploughed through pile after pile of papers dealing with everyday offences which seemed to offer little hope of providing any kind of a clue as to the identity of the men we were searching for.

I was about to set aside the report of a man named Joseph Moore found unconscious at the wheel of his vehicle in Hyde Park, when a phrase right at the end caught my eye. The man had been taken to hospital apparently suffering from loss of memory. He thought he was in

Warrington instead of London and—according to the police doctor—*‘his temperature was abnormally low.’*

“Jet, this might be something,” I exclaimed.

We read the report more carefully. He had been picked up near Marble Arch on the evening of 3rd July—the day after the sphere had landed.

Jet phoned the Controller right away. “There may be nothing in it, sir,” he warned, “but I think we should see him.”

It proved easier than I had expected to find Mr Joseph Moore. Although he had been discharged from Paddington Hospital, he had left an address in Manchester and was there when the Controller called.

A few hours later the Controller was at our door. “I’ve got him,” he said. “I’d like you to talk to him, Doc.”

“Did you tell him why he was brought here?” I asked.

“Not really. I merely told him it was in connection with his loss of memory.”

Mr Joseph Moore was a middle-aged portly man. A typical business man, with a strong forceful character.

“I can’t understand it, Doctor,” he said in a worried tone. “One minute I was driving near Warrington—in Lancashire, you know—the next I’m sitting in Hyde Park at the wheel of my car, without the slightest idea of how I got there.”

“Did nothing happen in Warrington that seemed strange to you? Did you have a collision or something?” I asked.

“How could I have done?” replied Moore. “There was nothing wrong with my car.”

“But you couldn’t just be in one place one moment and in another the next.”

“I didn’t say I was,” snapped Moore. “I said it seemed like it.”

“What time were you in Warrington?” I questioned.

“In the early hours of the morning, but when I woke up in Hyde Park it was evening of the next day. I must have driven the whole distance myself—why else would I still be in the car? And the funny thing was,” he continued almost to himself, “I intended spending the night in Warrington—I had a hotel booked.”

"Did you notice anything strange about yourself before this—er—loss of memory occurred?"

Joseph Moore did not reply at once. Then, looking me straight in the face, he said: "Doctor, is it possible for a man to have nightmares while he's awake?"

"I don't know," I answered cautiously, "I've never known such a case."

"Well, it happened to me."

"Go on."

"I'd called at Penrith—that's in the Lake District, you know—and was kept there longer than I anticipated, so that when I set out for Warrington it was dark. I'd already done a full day's driving and was feeling pretty tired. I intended to get to Warrington in a hurry and decided to drive along the secondary roads to avoid the heavy traffic. Well, I found it difficult to keep awake."

"I'm not surprised," I said dryly.

"Well, I confess it now, I don't intend to hide anything from you, but when a man whose living depends on driving a car at all hours of the day and night for long periods . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I understand," I said, "What happened?"

"A storm blew up," he continued slowly. "One of the worst I've driven through for a long time. If I'd seen a hotel or an inn right then I'd have packed it in and got myself a bed. But I'd chosen the lonely route and decided there was nothing for it but to press on. And then it happened."

"What?"

"The bad dream—the nightmare."

"Tell me about it."

"I'm driving along—not too fast, mind you—talking to myself to keep awake, when suddenly there's a flash of lightning and I see two men standing at the side of the road and waving at me to stop."

"What were they like?" I said sharply.

"Quite ordinary, as far as I could see. But one of them appeared to be ill. When I stopped, the other man said his friend was hurt and could I give them a lift. Of course I took them in and . . ." He paused. "Well that was really all."

"All?"

"All that I can remember clearly."

"Try to remember," I said, endeavouring to speak calmly. "Tell me all you can about the two men. Did they seem quite—er—normal? What did you talk about?"

"Well, they weren't exactly chatty," replied Moore. "In fact the one who was hurt didn't say a word. I couldn't get much out of his chum except 'yes' and 'no'. That is until . . ." He paused.

"Until what?"

"Until he suddenly asked where I was going. I told him I had a hotel booked in Warrington, and then he said he wanted to get to London. 'You can pick up a train in Warrington,' I told him, 'or even charter a plane if you're really in a hurry.' He didn't answer that, so I asked him if his friend was badly hurt and needed a doctor. 'He does not need a doctor,' he answered in that flat monotonous voice of his and——"

"Stop a minute!" I exclaimed. "What was that about his voice?"

"It gave me the creeps," replied Moore with something like a shudder. "It was so—so unexpressive somehow. I've never heard a voice like it before."

He could not have given a better description of the voice of a conditioned type.

"Anything else peculiar you noticed about him?" I asked.

"Yes," he said slowly. "He kept saying he was too hot and wanted the window open. I thought he must be mad, for it was a cold night and he was already soaking from his walk in the rain. And later when I offered him some coffee from my flask he said he couldn't drink it because it was too hot, although I found it only lukewarm." Moore shook his head. "He certainly was a rum type."

"What happened next?" I said quietly.

Moore looked worried. "I—I can't really remember, Doctor. This is the part where everything starts going hazy. I remember that as we approached Warrington I said I couldn't take them much further, and the man replied——"

"Yes? What did he say?"

"He said, 'We are going to London.' Just like that—as though there was no argument about it. I was furious. I remember, and said that he'd have to find somebody else to take him, and then . . ."

"Then?"

"Then he climbed over into the front of the car and stared at me." Moore shivered. "Stared at me with those cold glassy eyes, closer and closer, so that I had to stop the car. 'We are going to London,' he said again, and then I think he touched me. Yes," went on Moore quickly, and his voice was frightened, "now I remember—it's all coming back. He stared and stared so that I couldn't take my eyes off him and then he put out his hands and held them against my face, and they were cold, so very, very cold. And then I knew no more till I woke up in London." Moore turned and looked at me. "Doctor, what does it all mean? What's the matter with me? Did I just dream it all?"

"Don't worry," I said reassuringly. "Now that you've told me all about it you'll find it will soon fade from your memory. I assure you it won't happen again. It was brought on by the strain of driving for long hours late at night, I've no doubt."

"You mean I imagined it all?" he asked doubtfully.

"Without question," I said firmly. "But you have no cause whatsoever for alarm. Don't drive too long and too late in future, that's all."

Joseph Moore went back to Manchester and I told Jet and the others of our conversation.

"Certainly sounds like a conditioned type," said Jet. "Does the description fit anyone we know? McLean, maybe? It was his voice I heard up there among those asteroids—I swear it."

"It might well be McLean," I answered, "it might be anybody. Obviously when Moore refused to drive to London he hypnotised him, and either drove here himself or got Moore to do it. Once in London, McLean and his companion abandoned the car with Moore. That was when the police found him."

"But what's the purpose of their landing here?" put in Mitch.



"They *must* be part of the Martian fifth column," Jet answered, "sent here to prepare the way for the main invasion."

"But what can they do?" asked Lemmy.

"Plenty. They look exactly like the rest of us, so they could easily get themselves jobs in high places—in the factories, in Government administration. The power they have to hypnotise would mean they could get official information, on our defence plans or anything else, from people who would have no idea they had given it."

"They could contaminate water supplies, upset communications and nobody need have any idea how—or why," I added. "In fact, if enough of them landed, the whole country could be at their mercy in no time."

The Controller, who had been listening intently to all that we said, now spoke. "Gentlemen, the gravity of the situation is obvious. Not only our country but the whole world is in peril. At least, thanks to your escaping from Mars, we have an inkling of what is going on. Otherwise thousands of 'McLeans' could have landed on Earth, been absorbed into dozens of countries and nobody suspect a thing."

"And if it's possible for the Martians to use mass hypnosis, as they certainly seem to on their own planet," put in Jet, "the world could wake up one morning conquered—yet not know it."

"Jet is right," said the Controller. "I must get down right away to Space HQ and report this. I'll get in touch with you just as soon as I have any further news."

"Well it shouldn't be too difficult," Lemmy said, when the Controller had gone.

"What shouldn't?"

"Finding a man who has icy cold hands, who can't drink hot liquids or stand high temperatures."

But Lemmy was wrong. A nation-wide search was instigated but no trace of the two men was found. If they were in London, as was supposed, the city had, apparently, just swallowed them up.

Two weeks later the four of us were taken to Space Headquarters and told to be ready to leave for the Moon Base at a moment's notice.

It was still intended that we should return to the Red Planet to pick up what information we could about the Martian invasion. In spite of the asteroids in the sky and the spheres down on Earth, Space HQ still believed that the main attack would not take place until 1986. They also believed that the men recently landed by the spheres were no more than an advance reconnaissance party and, for the moment, need not be feared too much.

We returned to our hotel to await transport to an airport outside London where we were to catch a plane for Australia, the first lap of our trip to the Earth's satellite.

By midnight we were packed and ready, waiting for the car to arrive. Suddenly the phone rang and Jet answered it.

"Morgan speaking. Oh, hullo, sir. Oh. I see. Very well, sir. Yes, sir. Oh, that's quite all right, we understand. Goodbye, sir."

"What was all that about?" asked Lemmy.

"The Controller. He won't be coming with us after all. Says he's been delayed and will meet us at the airport, but that our car is already on its way here."

Lemmy looked mournful. "Hullo, London—and good-bye," he said sadly. "I've never spent so long in one place and seen so little of it."

"Consider yourself lucky," said Mitch. "You at least saw your home town. That's more than the rest of us did."

A few minutes later there was a knock on the door and the guard who had kept watch outside our hotel suite ever since our arrival in London put his head round to say that our car was waiting.

The corridors were deserted as we followed him to the elevator with our suitcases.

The car was waiting at the rear of the hotel and apart from the chauffeur there was no one in sight. We climbed aboard. There was ample room for the four of us in the rear compartment. Curtains had been drawn over the windows and across the sliding glass partition which separated us from the driver. A few seconds later, we were on our way to the undisclosed airfield.

"How soon before we can open the windows, Jet?" asked Mitch as we sped along.

"Not until we're in the country. Controller's orders."

"I wonder how many people are raising their hats as we go by," said Lemmy out of the blue. "With the curtains all drawn like this, they must think we're going to a funeral."

After we had been travelling for about half an hour, Jet cautiously took a peek out. Nothing could be seen but trees and fields, so we drew the blinds and opened one of the windows.

"Find out from the driver which airport we're going to," said Jet.

Lemmy leaned forward, slid back the glass panel and spoke to the chauffeur. "Hullo, chum—how you doing up front there?"

"Very well, thank you."

I started. It was not the words, but the voice, which had made me jump. I looked at Jet and Mitch. Jet nodded and gave a sign for me to be quiet. Lemmy was talking again.

"How far have we come now?" he asked the driver.

"Twenty-eight miles."

"You must be travelling pretty fast. It's hardly half an hour since we left the hotel."

"Orders were to get you there as quickly as possible."

I was certain now. That flat colourless voice—like Whitaker's—like McLean's.

"What do we do?" I whispered to Jet.

"Sh. Lemmy hasn't noticed anything wrong. Let him talk. Keep quiet and listen."

"Which airport are we going to exactly?" asked Lemmy.

"Our destination is not to be divulged."

"Aren't you being unnecessarily cagey? Here——" Lemmy's voice changed. "Turn it up. What are you doing? There's no need to break your neck."

For the man at the wheel had put his foot down on the accelerator and the car was shooting along like a mad thing.

"What's he up to!" I cried. "Is he trying to kill us?"

"Hey, slow down there!" ordered Jet. "Do you hear? Slow down!"

The driver took not the slightest notice.

"Hey, you big goliath, we told you to slow down!" exclaimed Mitch.

Now Lemmy was climbing over the seat into the front of the car. "I'll handle this," he said. "Now, you—slow down, you hear? Or do I have to slow this thing down for you?"

"Lemmy, be careful," Jet called out, for Lemmy, seeing that the driver still took no notice, was trying to wrest control of the car from him. As his hands closed on the driver's, he suddenly recoiled in horror. "Blimey!" he cried. "His hands—they're as cold as ice!"

"Leave me alone," said the flat monotonous voice and, at the same moment, the driver turned and looked Lemmy full in the eyes.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" Lemmy exclaimed. And then, "Oh no, you don't. I'm wise to your little game."

Lemmy's hand reached for the ignition key.

"Take your hands off that key."

"Jet, stop him for Pete's sake," I yelled. But Lemmy was hopping mad now and screaming at the driver.

"Lemmy!" bawled Jet.

"Watch out! Look out in front!" I heard Mitch shout. There was a squeal of brakes, a terrific crash and I knew no more.

### 3

WHEN I came to, I found myself lying on the ground in the dark. Cautiously, I sat up.

"You all right, Doc?" came Lemmy's voice from behind me.

"Is that you, Lemmy?" I said with relief. "Yes, I'm all right." I moved my legs and arms around to make sure no bones were broken. "Just a bit dizzy. But where are Jet and Mitch?"

"Chasing off after that perishing driver," answered Lemmy. "We thought he'd been knocked out, too, but after we'd got him out of the car and laid him on the grass he got up and ran away. They've been gone nearly half an hour now."

"Won't be easy to find him in the dark," I said. "How on earth did he come to be driving that car, Lemmy? And why?"

"Search me," replied the Cockney. "And where the devil are we? Nowhere near the airport we were supposed to be going to, I bet."

Just then, very faintly, I heard something.

"Sh, Lemmy, listen!"

The noise was unmistakable now. A high-pitched whistle and whir.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Lemmy. "A Martian space ship—and taking off too. Doc—you don't think . . ."

"I hope not, Lemmy," I said. But I was as worried as he was. What if Mitch and Jet were aboard that ship? Had that been the purpose of this drive in the dark? To lure us all into one of those ships and take us from the Earth for ever?

I tried to think calmly. If Mitch and Jet had been carried off there was nothing we could do. If they hadn't—well, they would soon be back. We could only wait.

I said as much to Lemmy who was restlessly pacing up and down.

"Do you think they meant to kidnap us all, Doc?"

"Probably," I said.

"But how? How could one man hope to persuade four of us to enter that ship?"

"By the usual process. That driver, or someone else, would have hypnotised us first. In fact, just before the crash that was what he was trying to do."

"But how did he know we were expecting a car to pick us up? And where did he get that car from? It's exactly like the model Space HQ personnel use."

"I don't suppose it was too difficult to get," I answered. "But how did he know the Controller wouldn't be coming with us? That was a last-minute decision."

Lemmy was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly: "If he knew all this, he may have known everything—that we were going to Australia en route for the Moon and then to Mars. Blimey, Doc, if they *know* we're going back to Mars we haven't an earthly, we might as well not start."

"We're only surmising all this," I said. "At the moment I'm more worried about Jet and Mitch."

Just then I heard footsteps coming along the road. I listened anxiously.

"Hullo, Doc." I recognised Jet's voice. "Are you all right now?"

"Is *he* all right!" exclaimed Lemmy. "Cor blimey, it's you and Mitch we were worried about. We thought you'd gone and got yourselves conditioned and carried off to work in a Martian factory."

The relief was indescribable.

"What happened to the driver?" I asked.

"We couldn't find him," said Jet. "It was too dark. But suddenly we heard a Martian ship take off and we presume he was in it."

"We heard it too," I said. "That's what got us so worried."

"Well, we can thank our lucky stars we're not *all* in it," said Jet.

"What do we do now?" I said.

"Walk along the road till we find a phone box. We've got to let the Controller know what's happened."

After nearly an hour we came to a small village and, mercifully, a telephone booth. On a near-by signpost we read: 'Hindhead seven' in one direction and 'London thirty-five' in the other.

Jet got through to the Controller. "He's coming to pick us up himself," he said as he put the receiver down. "We're to walk along the road towards London. He'll have three headlights blazing and one will be flashing. When we see the car we're to step into the road so that he can recognise us."

Three-quarters of an hour later we were sitting in the back of the Controller's car.

"Well," he said, after he had heard the whole story, "thank goodness you're all in one piece at any rate. What I don't understand, is why you left the hotel without me."

Jet stared at him. "But you rang up, sir, to say you'd meet us at the airport—and that a car was already on its way for us."

"It arrived not five minutes afterwards," added Mitch.

"But I didn't ring anybody," the Controller protested. "Fact is, I called for you at the hotel half an hour after you'd left."

"Then who did ring us?" I asked.

"That's what I'd like to know," answered the Controller grimly.

"But I thought it was impossible for anybody to telephone us except through the exchange at Space HQ. And even then, only if they knew the code number of the line," objected Jet.

"Well, somebody knew it."

"They evidently also knew you were about to pick us up," I said, "and at what time."

"Do you think they knew of our intention to go back to Mars?" queried Jet.

"Probably," replied the Controller. "On the other hand they may have merely wanted to get you out of the way. You're the only people on Earth with first-hand knowledge of the way the Martians behave. The only people who could recognise a conditioned Earthman virtually on sight. You're the only real stumbling block to their infiltration plans—if that is why these men were landed from the spheres."

"One thing's certain," said Jet thoughtfully, "somebody friendly to the Martians—a conditioned Earthman—has been planted in Space HQ."

"It seems so," admitted the Controller. "But if there is, he or she must have been there for some considerable time. Years, in fact, to be allowed access to guarded information."

"Whoever it is might well have been placed on Earth during the last opposition," I remarked, "or even during the close opposition of 1956."

"If he was," said Mitch, "there can be hardly anything the Martians don't know about us. They must have known every detail about the first trip to the Moon, and of the trip to Mars, long before the public ever had an inkling of it."

"Of course they did, Mitch," said I. "That's why Whitaker was planted in the Mars Fleet. He probably had orders to wreck the whole project."

"And here we are getting ready to do it all over again," interjected Lemmy.

"You still want to go, Jet?" asked the Controller.

"Of course we do, sir. The fate of the world may well hang on it."

"Well, at least there'll be no Whitaker coming along with us this time—unless one of us happens to be a Whitaker. How about it, Lemmy?" said Mitch.

"Turn it up, Mitch. You're giving me the creeps."

So the Controller drove us to the airport which, incidentally, was on the opposite side of London, and there we found the super-stratocruiser waiting. We landed in Australia the next day and were taken immediately to the launching-ground where a Moonship was waiting to convey us to the Earth's satellite.

We handled the ship ourselves, of course, and the Controller, who was returning to his post up on the Lunar Colony, was our only passenger.

Full information of what we were to do when we finally reached Mars was not to be revealed until just before take-off from the Moon. It was to be relayed by radio, and not even the Controller knew exactly what our orders would be.

We boarded the great ship, and entering the little crew cabin strapped ourselves on to our takeoff couches. I was a little puzzled to see that Lemmy, before embarking, went round shaking hands with those remaining on Earth.

"Why all the handshaking, Lemmy?" I asked him.

"Just wanted to see if any of 'em was cold, Doc," he answered.

"And were they?"

"No," admitted Lemmy, "quite normal"

We landed on the Moon four days later. The trip out was uneventful, and, once the ship had touched down, we were conveyed to our old quarters in Lunar Colony where we were to stay until the time came for us to take off for Mars. From the observation tower high on the precipitous slopes of the Jura Mountains we could see across the Bay of Rainbows towards the launching platform where the modified *Discovery*, and the two freighters which were to



accompany her on the return to the Red Planet were standing.

Night on the Moon is equivalent to fourteen days on Earth but, when we touched down on the Moon, twelve of them had gone and the long, cold, lunar night would soon give way to the blinding, long, hot lunar day.

The sky was velvet-black and studded with millions of brilliant, multi-coloured stars, and above the horizon was the Earth, now almost full—its light much brighter than moonlight on Earth. We could see quite easily the launching-ground and its stately ships, as tall as skyscrapers.

All these ships had been adapted to carry more fuel and cargo than on the last expedition, but the freighters would carry no crews this time. They would be remote-controlled by the launching staff during takeoff, and from the *Discovery* during the long period of coasting out to the Red Planet.

One of the most impressive sights I know is the Lunar sunrise. At one moment the moonscape is dark and sombre, lit only by the reflected sunlight from the Earth; but the instant the first rays of direct sunlight appear over the horizon, the Moon's surface is transformed into a study of bright light and deep shadow—the shadows being cast by the mountains, hills and crater rims. As the long day progresses and the sun rises higher, the shadows grow shorter and the sunlight more brilliant.

To step out on to the Moon surface at noon—even in a cooled suit—is like stepping into an oven. The heat is almost unbearable, the temperature at ground level being well above that of boiling water.

The breathtaking sunrise was a sight not to be missed, so the four of us gathered in the observing tower.

"There's one of the peaks catching the sunlight now!" exclaimed Mitch as the tip of one of the high lunar mountains was suddenly illuminated.

"Hey," cried Lemmy, pointing in a more southerly direction, "there's another—and another!"

Sure enough, several pinpoints of light were appearing. But I was puzzled.

"Surely there aren't any mountains over there," I said, "that's the bay over there—it's quite flat."

"But *something's* catching the light up there," said Jet. "Good God," exclaimed Mitch, "they're moving!"

We all stared. There was no doubt about it. The lights *were* moving and pretty fast too.

"Let me get to the intercom, quick," said Jet urgently. He lifted the phone and got through to the Control Room.

"Is the Controller there? No? Then put me through to the observatory. Thanks. Observatory? Morgan here. Is the Controller there? He's on his way to our quarters? I'm in the look-out tower. Never mind—listen carefully. I want you to investigate some flying objects just above the horizon to the south-west. It's vital. One of you will have to leave your routine work and do as I say. Right . . . Listen carefully. Objects in the sky—half a dozen or more—moving eastwards. Just above the horizon on an approximate line between here and Helicon. Photograph in close-up—and hurry. They're moving pretty fast. What's that? . . . Oh, their height. Not more than a few thousand feet, I should say. Got that? Right. Thanks."

At that moment up came the sun and the whole Lunar surface was once more thrown into the brilliant white light and black shadow of a Lunar day. As we watched the sky it seemed as if the flying objects were deliberately increasing their speed and height, and heading for the night side of the Moon so as to avoid being seen. Soon they had disappeared.

"Come on," said Jet, "back to our quarters. The Controller had better hear about this."

He was waiting for us.

"Where the dickens have you been, Jet?" he began. "I've got news for you."

"Sorry, sir," said Jet, "but we went to look at the sunrise and then we saw some objects on the horizon——"

"Objects? What kind of objects?"

Jet explained.

"H'm," said the Controller when he had heard the story. "Well, we can't do any more about them till we get a report from the observatory—meanwhile I came to tell you your takeoff orders arrived less than half an hour ago."

"When do we leave?" asked Jet.

"In six hours," came the rather surprising answer.

The Controller handed Jet an envelope. "Here are full instructions as to what you are to do when you get to Mars. No, don't open it now," he said as Jet prepared to slit the envelope. "There's no point, in any case—they're coded. Every message from Earth I've received since our arrival has been the same."

"Well, we can decode them, can't we?"

"Not until you have taken off and are well on your way. Even I don't know what's contained in that envelope. Since the attempt to kidnap you four, all kinds of security have been tightened up considerably. HQ don't trust anybody now. You will take a machine with you for decoding. You will also use it to code every piece of information you pick up during your trip before you radio it back here. Normal routine calls may be made in plain language. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Now you will be ready to go out to the ships in four hours from now. Takeoff will be at fifteen hundred hours universal time. Any questions?"

"I don't think so, sir," answered Jet. "Except, of course, we'd like to know what the Observatory made of those objects—if anything at all."

"I'll go up and find out. Anything else?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"Very well, gentlemen. I'll see you in three hours' time."

When the Controller had gone there was silence for a while. Then Lemmy said in a resigned voice: "Well, that's that."

A bit later the phone rang. Observatory wanted us over right away as they had managed to get a photograph.

It confirmed our fears. There was no mistaking what the mysterious objects were now: asteroids. Exactly the same as those Lemmy and Jet had pursued in the orbital rocket.

"But what are they doing up here on the Moon?" exclaimed Mitch. "No point in landing any spheres here. The only habitable place is this Colony, where everybody knows everybody, anyway."

"Perhaps they're on their way back to Mars," said Lemmy.

"If they were there'd be no need for them to come so

close to the Moon," retorted Mitch. "Or the Colony, come to that. They must have known they were bound to be seen."

"Unless they wanted to find out what was going on," I said thoughtfully, "or whether we'd left for Mars yet."

"I'll lay a thousand to one they know we intend to return," said Lemmy, "and that fly-past was to let us know it. They've probably been hanging around here for days. Maybe even followed us up from Earth. And now they're just waiting out there for us to take off, all ready to pounce on us the moment we show our noses anywhere near them."

"Now you're just letting your imagination run away with you, Lemmy. They're probably miles away by now."

"Don't worry," said the Controller, who had joined us in the Observatory. "I'll have the whole area above takeoff point covered by radar section—if there's anything up there they'll detect it, even if we don't see it."

"What difference does it make, anyway?" said Jet. "We'll take off just the same. This is the most favourable time—by leaving now we reach the planet in the shortest possible period with the least expenditure of fuel."

"But what if those things *are* out there," Lemmy insisted, "and they get violent?"

"That's the strange thing about them, Lemmy," I put in, "they have never used violence of any kind—not in the physical sense. The only weapon they have seems to be this power of inducing sleep. And we discovered on Mars that even the hypnosis can be overcome if you're strong-willed enough."

"That's all very well for you, Doc. You're immune to this hypnosis business. But me—I only have to *imagine* I hear that noise and I'm out like a light."

In spite of Lemmy's forebodings, we prepared for take-off as scheduled. But I must admit that as, three hours later, I lay in the tiny cabin of the *Discovery*, nearly a thousand feet above the Moon's surface, strapped to my takeoff couch, my feelings were very different from those I had experienced when we made our first trip to Mars in 1971.

Then, we had left with a feeling of adventure. We had thought we were about to set foot on a world no man had

ever visited before. But, of course, when we did finally land on the Red Planet it was to learn that it was already populated by people from Earth, although few of them realised where they were.

On this, our second trip, we felt only apprehension. What lay in store for us during our long trip of nearly four hundred million miles out from the sun towards the orbit of the alien planet? And what of the Martians themselves? These were beings we had never even seen. Would we meet up with them this time—and, if so, what would they be like?

And the asteroids we had glimpsed only a few hours before? Were they lying out there in space as Lemmy thought, waiting to attack us? Or had they merely been homeward bound, perhaps with a load of new prisoners recently picked up from Earth, to be conditioned and trained to work in the Martian factories, building the Martian invasion fleet?

The main door closed and the voice of Control relentlessly ticked off the minutes.

*"Zero minus five minutes."*

We went through the usual routine, checking the televiewer, the gyro, the radar. "Ship now over to automatic control," came Jet's voice.

"Roger," said Control. *"Zero minus four minutes."*

I was watching the clock on the main control panel.

*"Zero minus three minutes."*

"Remember, all of you," said Jet, "during the firing of the first stage the acceleration rate will produce maximum *g*. We're going to be very uncomfortable for a fairly lengthy period—but try not to black out."

*"Zero minus two minutes."*

My limbs were a little shaky. No ship this size had ever taken off before. Certainly no crew-carrying ship had ever reached the velocity that this one would reach.

*"Zero minus one minute."*

"One minute—oh blimey!" exclaimed Lemmy.

"Relax," said Jet sharply, "no more talking from now on."

*"Zero minus one minute."*

I started. "But it should have been forty seconds," I protested.

"You sure, Doc?" asked Jet.

"Sounded like one minute to me," put in Mitch.

"Zero minus fifty seconds."

"Their clock's wrong!" I exclaimed, "there's only thirty-five seconds to go."

At that moment there came the whine of jets.

"The pumps!" cried Mitch. "There they go—ten seconds too soon."

"What on earth is going on?" It was Jet. "Position control panels. Be ready to take over on manual control if I give the word."

"Hullo, *Discovery*. Control calling."

The voice coming over the radio sounded strangely distant.

"Hullo, Control," answered Jet. "What's going on? Things seem to be all haywire."

"Everything's haywire down here too," came the surprising reply.

"Why, what's the trouble?"

"Takeoff," said the voice sleepily, "takeoff is"—a large yawn interrupted the words—"cancelled."

"Blimey, yawning at a time like this," gasped Lemmy.

"But somebody started the pump—the motor's bound to fire," protested Mitch.

My eyes were glued to the clock. "Twenty seconds to go," I said.

The sleepy voice of Control came through again. "Turn them . . . off . . . do you hear? Revert to manual control. Turn them off."

"What's happening down there? Hullo, Control, hullo, hullo."

"They don't even answer now," said Lemmy.

"Ten seconds," I said.

"Mitch, don't get off your bunk," came Jet's voice sharply. "You haven't the time."

"Five seconds."

"Mitch, get back—do you hear me?" said Jet even more urgently.

The ship was quivering now under the rising crescendo

of the jets. For one second she poised on the brink of take-off. Then, as the motors fired, and the brilliant flame of her exhaust shot from her tail, she rose slowly in the air. Whether we liked it or not we were heading for Mars.

"Switch to manual operation—now. Lemmy—televiwer—stern view."

"Stern view—on."

"Height, Mitch."

"Two point four miles."

Already the pressure was beginning to tell. It was difficult to move. Soon it would be impossible.

"Jet," Lemmy's voice sounded scared, "look, on the screen. Look what's down there!"

We looked at the little television screen and at the picture directly below us. Between us and the Moon, already a fast receding globe, hovered a regular formation of circular objects, a fleet of asteroids.

"What's happening to the boys down there?" gasped Lemmy.

"Whatever it is," replied Jet in a strained voice, for, as the pressure increased, it was difficult to talk, "there's—nothing—we can—do—about it. We've no choice but to keep going."

Soon I could think only of the weight on my chest, and the excruciating pain in all my limbs. As in a dream, I heard Jet's voice:

"Don't black out, for God's sake," he was saying. "Don't anybody black out. It's the only way we can control the ship now."

## 4

SOMEHOW OR other Jet and I had remained conscious in spite of the fantastic pressure of the terrific acceleration which pinned us helplessly to our couches. To our relief the ship was functioning normally.

Mitch and Lemmy had passed out, and until they felt well enough to get up from their bunks Jet and I carried on routine work between us. A check on the motor, the

fuel consumption and the positions of the freighters told us that our departure had gone off exactly as planned—except that we had left ten seconds too early. But, of course, we would have felt much happier if our findings could have been confirmed by Control.

Ever since he had recovered, Lemmy had been calling the Moon Base, almost constantly. But they didn't answer.

"There's nothing for it now but to contact Earth direct." said Jet at last.

Lemmy called up the Moon rocket base in Australia and, to his surprise, got through almost at once. Everything was quite normal down there although, of course, they were not expecting to hear from us. We asked for a check on our speed and position, and were relieved when a coded message from them agreed with our own calculations. But the rest of the message was more disturbing. On hearing that we had lost touch with Lunar base they had tried to make contact with Earth's satellite themselves, but failed. Immediately a rocket ship had been launched to find out what was wrong.

"Let's hope nothing happens to that ship," remarked Lemmy grimly when he heard this news.

"Well, whatever happens, we won't hear for five days at least," answered Jet. "It will take them that time to get there."

"Maybe by now the whole of Lunar Colony has been Whitakerd—Controller and all."

"What else does the message say, Jet?" I asked.

"Only that we are to proceed with trip as planned and until contact can be re-established with Lunar Base we are to stay tuned to Earth Control."

There was little for us to do. Every two hours we checked our position relative to the Earth, Moon and Sun, and carried out routine checks on oxygen supply, power packs, radar, radio, televiewer and other electrical circuits. We took it in turn to prepare meals, and two men were always on duty, sleeping being arranged accordingly.

It was perpetual night. To the port side of the ship lay the Sun—a brilliant, blue-white globe, its corona clearly visible. Behind us, the Earth and its attendant Moon, both rapidly getting smaller as we travelled further from them.



The two freighters, both of them as large as the *Discovery*, coasted alongside us. One side of each was lit up by the sun—the others were in total darkness. In spite of our speed, the ships appeared to hang motionless in the void. Being remote-controlled, the freighters carried no crews. Knowing they were empty of any kind of human life seemed uncanny. On our last trip these same two freighters had carried two men apiece—and aboard Number Two had been Whitaker—the first conditioned earthman with whom we had knowingly come into contact. How many others had there been? How many were down on Earth at this very moment?

A week passed, during which time we covered over five million miles, left the Earth's orbit and moved steadily outwards away from the Sun towards the orbit of Mars.

Then came the day when we received a message from Control regarding the Moonship that had left Earth in the hope of discovering what had happened to Lunar Colony.

Jet's face was expressionless as he took the decoded message from the roller and read it.

"Come on, Jet, let's have it," said Mitch impatiently. "What's happened? Didn't it get there?"

"It got there all right. Pilot informed Earth that he was touching down twenty-four hours ago. They've heard nothing from him since. All attempts to communicate further with the ship have failed."

"When did they lose contact?" I asked.

"Almost the moment the ship touched down. The pilot reported he'd made a safe landing in the Bay, and that was the last they heard from him."

"What happens to us when we get back from Mars?" asked Lemmy. "These ships can't land anywhere except on the Moon."

"We'll think about that in a year's time," said Jet shortly. "Meanwhile we have plenty of more urgent problems. We can only assume that the Moon base has been occupied by the crew of those spheres we saw landing."

"First the Moon, then the Earth," said Lemmy. "It seems to me the Martian invasion's already started, and what good we can do anybody out here beats me."

"It's up to us to get as much information as we can,"

said Jet decidedly. "What we find out on Mars may help the Earth to prevent the invasion."

"These Martians are no fools," continued Lemmy gloomily. "I bet they could snuff us out right now, only they realise that for the next six months, while we're coasting out to Mars, we're no danger to them. But when we get to Mars and start poking our noses into things they don't want us to know, it'll be a different story. We'll end up just four more conditioned slaves to help build their ships and grow their crops. Just as the rest of the Fleet are probably doing right now."

"We'll do our best," said Jet. "If we fail, it won't be for want of trying."

"If only we knew more of what we are up against," I said thoughtfully. "Who the Martians are—or even where they live. There was certainly no sign of anybody on the planet other than conditioned human beings—and they'd all been brought up from Earth by other Earthmen *already* conditioned."

"Well, those pyramid cities certainly weren't built by Earthmen," said Lemmy.

"No, they weren't. They must have been built thousands of years ago. Long before the first Martian set foot on Earth and picked up the first, unsuspecting prisoners."

"We never went inside those pyramids," said Lemmy. "Maybe the Martians live in them."

"And never come out?"

"Perhaps they don't need to," I said. "It's possible each of those pyramids is a vast control room from where the whole pattern of Martian life is operated."

"But," objected Jet, "if they can live happily in there, what would be the point of trying to conquer the Earth?"

There was no answer to this or to the thousands of other questions which haunted us as we sped helplessly onward towards the Red Planet. The full journey was expected to take nearly seven months. Cramped as we were in the tight little cabin of the *Discovery*, it seemed an eternity. There was no division of day and night, as there is down on Earth, to help mark the passage of time. In fact, it was always night. The main clock in the control panel was set to Greenwich Universal Time—the hours it ticked off

were the same length as those down on Earth. A day to us was twenty-four hours—nothing more.

There was still no contact with Lunar Base. A second ship had been sent up a week after the first, but the pilot had been told not to make a landing—merely to encircle the Moon and photograph the bay, the launching ground and as much of the Lunar Colony as possible. But that ship, too, had failed to return. From then on all Earth-Moonships were grounded. We were the only Earthmen now plying the spaceways.

We passed off-duty hours listening to radio programmes relayed up from Earth between routine calls with Control, played cards, or read books from our micro-film library. And then, at last, after more than six months coasting through the void—when Mars was close enough for us to see the details of its surface quite clearly, even through the little navigational telescope—we were able to do something different.

“Well, gentlemen,” announced Jet, “the time has come to refuel the ship and get ready to slow it down.”

“What happens if we don’t?” asked Lemmy.

“Then we overshoot our objective and continue our course round the Sun for another few months, until we reach the point from which we started.”

“At least we’d be near home,” mumbled Lemmy.

“But not near enough,” responded Jet. “The Earth would be in an entirely different part of its orbit.”

“Oh well, it’s better to have Mars to land on than nowhere at all.”

“What’s the drill, Jet?” I asked.

“Two of us will have to go over to Freighter No 1 and hitch up the fuelling lines. Lemmy and I will go.”

“Be nice to get outside for some fresh air,” said Lemmy.

“You, Mitch, will go down into the hold and see the *Discovery* receives her ration.”

“Sure,” said the Australian.

“You, Doc, will stay here and control the proceedings.”

A few minutes later I was watching on the TV screen as Jet and Lemmy in their space suits made their way towards Freighter No 1, pipe-lines in hand.

“Almost at the ship’s side now,” came Jet’s voice across

the radio. "There—we've made it. Now hitching pipelines. Pipe-line secure."

"Mine too," came Lemmy's voice.

"Now moving up to outer door."

There was a pause. "Now outside main door of No 1. Contact—door opening."

"Ship-to-ship radio system on—now," I said, pressing the button.

"In you go, Lemmy," said Jet as the radio operator hesitated. "Main door closing. Put the lights on—and hurry, for goodness sake."

"Give me time to find the switch—ah, that's better." Lemmy heaved a sigh of relief. "It's uncanny somehow, coming into this ship like this." They had filled up the airlock by now and Jet was opening the cabin hatch.

"Nothing to worry about, Lemmy. Soon as you get up in the cabin switch on the radio and I'll check the air-replenishing system. No point in working with our suits on if we can avoid it."

"Yes, Jet. But it still seems strange. Finding it all dark and without a crew. It's like going into an empty house—one that's been empty for years. *What was that!*" Lemmy's voice was almost a scream. "Didn't you hear it, Jet?"

"Hear *what?*"

"I—I thought I heard somebody talking."

"It was probably Mitch or Doc."

"But we shouldn't hear them," protested Lemmy. "The walls act as a screen. That's why we need the ship-to-ship system."

Then it came again. A sudden, sharp noise, which might have been someone talking.

"There!" exclaimed Lemmy fearfully, "surely you heard that."

"Yes," said Jet slowly, "I did."

"There's somebody up there," said Lemmy, pointing to the stairs leading up into the ship's cabin.

The 'voice' came again.

"Listen!" said Jet urgently. "See if you can make out what they're saying."

The crackling noise continued. It was like listening to a short-wave radio station with lots of interference.

"Can't understand a word," said Jet.

"I don't like this. Let's get back to our own ship," Lemmy begged.

"We can't. We've got to transfer the fuel. We'll never reach Mars otherwise. If there's anyone up there and they won't show themselves, we'd better show ourselves to them. Come on."

Jet led the way up to the ship's cabin. "OK, Lemmy," he called, "there's no one here. Close the hatch, I'll check the air supply."

"Maybe they're hiding in some other part of the ship," said Lemmy, glancing quickly round the small cabin.

"The only place they could hide would be the inspection hole," said Jet in a matter-of-fact tone. "Now, take off your helmet, Lemmy, I've checked the air. Then call up Doc—see if the radio's working. Meanwhile I'll make a thorough search."

"Don't go doing anything stupid," implored the cockney. Suddenly he laughed aloud. "Hey, Jet," he cried, "how stupid can we get! Doc switched the ship-to-ship radio on, didn't he? That means the receiver in this ship must have been alive before we even got through the airlock. He's probably been calling us. That was what we heard."

Jet looked unconvinced. "Why isn't he still calling?"

"I'll call him up, Jet, just to make sure. Hullo, *Discovery*, Freighter No 1 calling. Can you hear me? Over."

I could hear him all right and told him so. "Are you all right, Lemmy?" I asked.

"Yes, mate—why?"

"Just a couple of minutes ago I thought I heard you calling. It sounded strange. All distorted. I couldn't understand a word."

"So you heard it too," exclaimed Lemmy. "Then it *did* come from the radio. I thought it was somebody hiding in the cabin. Have you heard it since?"

"No, Lemmy—only twice. Maybe Control is trying to contact us."

"Not on the ship-to-ship frequency, Doc."

"No, I suppose not. But who could it have been? Who would know we were using this frequency, anyway?"

Jet broke in. "Maybe it's some freak transmission—harmonic or something."

"On this equipment?" I protested.

"It has been known."

"It's all very strange," I said. "Normally reception is as clear as a bell."

"Well, as communication with the ships is OK we'll get on with the work we came over here to do."

"Very well, Jet."

The work of transferring fuel from the freighter to the *Discovery* went off without a hitch, but before Jet and Lemmy returned to the ship I heard the strange voice twice more. It seemed to me almost as though it were trying to contact somebody, and once I thought I caught the word 'Earth'. During the second call Mitch came up from the hold and he heard it too, but neither of us could make any more sense of it. And that was the last we heard of it—for the time being, at any rate.

Three more weeks passed. We had travelled another thirteen million miles, and the Red Planet now looked almost as large as the Moon does from Earth. Its polar ice caps reflected the brilliant sunlight, and the pink and olive green features of the planet's surface stood out sharply. Gradually, as it rotated on its axis, the familiar places passed before us; the Lacus Solis, the Argyre desert and the Mare Erythraeum were easily discernible. The planet looked lifeless. At this distance it did not seem possible that human and, so far as he knew, inhuman beings roamed its surface, tilled the land and populated the strange pyramid cities which we knew to exist in the oasis where the canals meet. Soon, now, we would have to slow our little fleet down to match the speed of our objective—unless we did we would overshoot and miss the planet entirely. Only five million miles separated us from Mars—but, in spite of our speed, our spiral course dictated that it would be another week before we could go into free orbit round the planet. We carried no forward motors in the *Discovery* or the freighters, so it was necessary to turn the ships over before the braking power was turned on. We strapped ourselves to our takeoff couches and got ready for the turn-over routine. Our points of reference were the

stars. As the braking power came into action, the great ships began very slowly to turn over.

"Turning rate, Lemmy?" asked Jet.

"Point five degrees," came the answer.

I could see the two giant freighters very clearly on the screen, motionless against a background of myriads of stars in a velvet black sky. Then slowly the sky began to revolve. Stars which for so long had occupied an apparently permanent place on our televiewer screen now seemed to move out of the picture and new ones to take their places. It wasn't the stars that were moving, of course, it was us.

"One degree," sang out Lemmy.

One degree. We had a hundred and eighty to go, at the end of which our tail would be facing the direction in which we were travelling and our nose in the direction we had come. At last the manœuvre was completed.

"One seven nine point five degrees."

"Stand by to cut gyros."

"One eighty."

"Ship's gyro cut," called Mitch.

"Freighter gyros—cut."

"Stern televiewer, Lemmy," shouted Jet.

"Stern view—on."

"And there she is!" I said excitedly. "The Red Planet—slap in the centre of the screen."

"Stand by to fire motors."

"Standing by."

"Position, Lemmy?"

"OK, Jet. No drift that I can see."

"Firing in fifteen seconds. Freighters, Doc?"

"In position and ready to fire."

"Motors, Mitch?"

"All set."

"Five seconds. Four—three—two—one. Contact!"

A few minutes later we knew that yet another stage in our journey had been successfully carried out.

"That's that little job jobbed," said Lemmy characteristically, when the motors had been cut and Earth Control informed. "And what's the next?"

"We prepare to go into free orbit round the planet,"

answered Jet. "But before that I want to discuss our orders. By this time tomorrow, gentlemen, if all goes well, we'll be encircling Mars in free orbit about a thousand miles above its surface."

"But we don't half need a big slice of luck to go down there, do all that Space HQ want, and get away safely again," said Lemmy. "As soon as we go into free orbit, they're sure to see us, aren't they?"

"Not by the naked eye," I answered. "Except maybe at sunrise or sunset. Then we're bound to appear as pretty bright objects to anybody down below."

"Whether they see us or not," Jet broke in, "the fact remains we have to go into free orbit and stay there for as long as it takes us to survey the whole surface of the planet—in close-up."

"What do you hope to see, Jet?" I asked.

"We shall be able to see the city in the Lacus Solis quite clearly. We could also confirm the existence of other cities, too. That so-called Flying Doctor told us there were many more in the northern hemisphere. Then we select the loneliest spot we can find to make a landing."

"What about the ice caps?" queried Lemmy, "they were good enough for us before."

"Landing on either of these means travelling such a long way before we can hope to meet anybody. And, in an emergency, a long way to get back. All our supplies would have to remain in the *Discovery*, so we can't afford to wander too far from it."

"There's one thing in favour of landing on the ice cap," said Mitch. "When we panicked away on our last visit we left a freighter full of supplies, a complete land caravan and a radio station at our polar base. If they're still there, they could be very useful."

"But I doubt whether they are, Mitch," I objected. "Even if the Martians didn't take them away, surely they must have destroyed them."

"I don't see why," returned the Australian. "That stuff couldn't have been of much use to them. They might well have left it there."

"Meanwhile," interrupted Jet, "we have more important things to discuss. There are three things, above all,



that Space HQ wish to know. First, how are Earthmen conditioned, and how, if at all, can they be brought back to normal. And, if they can, what will they remember of the time they were in a conditioned state."

"From personal experience, I would say very little," remarked Mitch.

"But when you came back to normal, Mitch, you remembered quite a lot."

"Only events in which you had a share or could remind me of."

"Exactly," I said. "And it's my belief that *all* the things you did while in a conditioned state could be brought back to you if somebody could remind you of some of them—or if you again visited the places in which they occurred. And Mitch's case isn't the only thing I'm basing that conclusion on. There were those men we met at that underground factory—the ones who asked us to take them back to Earth. I believe that until we came along they believed they were on Earth, just as most people up on Mars do. But their contact with us, our normal way of speaking, our clothes—all sorts of things about us—aroused long-forgotten memories. When we talked about Earth to them, the memories of their previous lives came rushing back."

"But those men hardly seemed to be conditioned at all, Doc," objected Jet, "any more than Webster did. Had the conditioning worn off?"

"Very probably it was allowed to wear off. We mustn't forget that even though those men looked young they were, in fact, very old, having been brought up here from Earth at any time in the last hundred years. They knew—even though they didn't admit it—that they were too old to return. Back home they would have reverted, physically, to their true age—and died. So there was no need to keep them conditioned any longer."

"Well, if we do get hold of a conditioned type, he'll have to be somebody who hasn't been up here very long," put in Lemmy.

"But how can we tell how old they are?" Mitch asked.

"The shorter the time they've been here, the deeper will be their conditioned state," I replied. "Remember Dobson and Harding—and McLean? Even Grimshaw and

Frank Rogers? Their conditioning was such that they would not move a muscle without being told. On the other hand, the Flying Doctor—who had been on Mars for more than fifty years—was, to all appearances, quite normal. But even he obeyed orders from somewhere.”

“Why—if he knew exactly where he was and what was happening?”

“Because he’d already outlived his natural span of years and was grateful for the opportunity to live a few more. He realised there was no point in his trying to get back to Earth and that if he behaved well he was treated well.”

“Traitor,” muttered Lemmy.

“It suited the Martians better for him to have command over his own faculties. Dobson, Harding and the rest didn’t—they were hardly more than robots. And that’s the type Space HQ want—the type we must try to take back. If we get back.”

“What’s next on the agenda?” said Mitch.

“The spheres,” replied Jet.

“They don’t expect us to capture and take one of those back to Earth with us, do they?” retorted Lemmy.

“No, Lemmy. But they do hope we may find out something of how they’re made and how they work. And if we can’t, then we must find out how they can be destroyed. If thousands of them suddenly appear over London one night, HQ want to know how to deal with them.”

“That’s about the toughest task of the lot,” said Mitch. “But one thing’s certain—those ships are not propelled by any method we’re familiar with. There are no rocket motors. Rate of acceleration can be slow or fast. Manœuvrability is fantastic. My theory is that the Martians have long ago tapped some power—magnetism, maybe—that pervades the whole solar system—maybe the whole universe. So, wherever they go, that power is always with them.”

“They use magnetic lines of force, you mean?” I asked.

“As a source of power?”

“Something like that—though what exactly it is I have no more idea than you, and haven’t much hope of knowing, even if we captured one and took it to pieces. What

could an ancient Egyptian make of a dynamo or a steam engine if he suddenly came across one?"

"And yet Earthmen—conditioned Earthmen, I realise—help build those spheres. Somebody down there must have an idea how they work."

"I bet that Supervisor geyser at that underground factory would know," put in Lemmy. "There wasn't much he didn't."

"Well, that's a job you can do, Lemmy," laughed Mitch. "Soon as we touch down, nip over to that factory near the Lacus Solis, capture the Supervisor and bring him back to the ship."

"No need to be sarky, Mitch," said Lemmy, offended.

"Then there's the exact date of the invasion," went on Jet. "Even if we never get off Mars we must find *that* out and radio it back to Earth at the first opportunity. Finally, there's the Martians themselves. Who are they? Where do they live? What do they look like?"

"And where do they get those asteroids from?" remarked Mitch. "The ones that carry the spheres. Are they propelled on the same principle?"

"They must be," said Jet.

"In that case they could leave for Earth or any other part of the solar system just whenever they please, they wouldn't be so dependent on favourable positions between Earth and Mars as we are."

"The outlook isn't very rosy, is it?" said Lemmy.

Jet ignored him. "Remember," he went on, "our main object is to radio all possible information to Earth. If we can get away ourselves later—with or without conditioned types—all the better, but our own safety is second to supplying the information that is so vital. If anything should happen to me, Doc will take over duties as captain of the ship. After him, Mitch."

"Don't go any further," said Lemmy hastily, "I'm not used to giving orders."

"That's all for now, gentlemen," came Jet's final words. "Exactly how and where we land will be decided after we've travelled round the planet a few times and taken a good look at it. Right now we prepare to go into free orbit."

Some hours later, when our preparations were almost complete, we were startled by a loud shout from Lemmy.

"Hey. Jet—Doc—he's here again. I heard him! The voice—— He's back. Came up almost slap on Control's frequency just as I was trying to call them up."

"Are you sure it *isn't* Control?" asked Jet.

"Of course I'm sure. I switched the gear on and there he was. I hadn't even called anybody."

"Could you make out what he said?" I asked.

"No, not really. He was on and gone almost before I realised it."

"Listen," I said suddenly, "there he is again!"

From the radio receiver came a mumble of indistinct words.

"Switch on the recorder," said Jet urgently.

I did so. This time I was sure. The 'voice' *was* calling Earth. "Hello, Earth—hullo, Earth," came the faint voice. "Mars Fleet, Freighter No 1 calling Earth. Can you hear me? Trying to contact you. Over."

"Eh?" It was Lemmy's surprised voice. "Mars Fleet, he said. And Freighter No 1. There's nobody in our freighters—I hope."

"Could he hear you if you called?" asked Jet

"I doubt it, unless I retune the transmitter."

"Right. We'll get permission from Control."

Lemmy called up Control and we sent a coded message to them. While we were waiting for a reply the 'voice' came through again, fairly clearly this time.

"Hullo, Earth. Hullo. Mars Fleet—Freighter No 1 calling Earth. Can you hear me? Trying to contact you. Over."

"He seems in a bit of a state, doesn't he?" said Lemmy.

After a time-lag of eight minutes Control answered our message. Permission to retune the transmitter was granted.

"Away you go, Lemmy," said Jet.

"What do we use as a call sign?" asked the wireless operator.

"XOP."

"Right. Now then—hullo, hullo, station XOP calling. Can you hear us—anybody?"

Nobody answered.

"Doesn't sound as though anybody does," remarked Lemmy.

"Give 'em a chance, Lemmy. He's probably millions of miles away from us."

Just then the faint voice crackled from the loudspeaker.

"Hullo, Earth. Hullo . . . Freighter No 1 calling Earth. Can you hear me? Trying to contact you. Over."

"Not so far away after all," said Lemmy.

"Call him again, Lemmy. Then get ready to take a bearing," ordered Jet. "Quick—he may not talk for long."

Lemmy obeyed him. Almost immediately the 'voice' answered.

"Hullo, XOP. Receiving you strength 5. Who are you? Are you Earth—or Moon Control?"

"Never you mind, mate," said Lemmy, "who are you?"

There was no answer.

"I'll take over," said Jet. "Hullo, Freighter No 1—XOP to Freighter No 1. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," said the voice.

"We asked you a question—who are you?"

"I asked you first who are you? Are you Earth or Moon Control?"

I whispered to Jet. "Listen, that's a conditioned type if I ever heard one."

"It's the Martians trying to contact those spheres that landed on Lunar Colony when we took off," said Lemmy suddenly.

"Then why would he want to talk to Earth?" objected Mitch.

"And he must know the signals between here and the Moon would take minutes to cover the distance. Yet there's hardly any delay between replies," I added.

"Which means he *must* be somewhere down there on the Martian surface."

Jet tried again. "Hullo, Freighter No 1. Moon Control. Receiving you strength 1. Over. Now," he added to us, "Let's see what that produces."

"Hullo, Moon Control," came the answer at once. "Thank goodness I've got you at last. I've been trying to contact you for weeks. Have most important message for you. Can you take it?"

"Hullo, No 1," called Jet. "Your call received. Will take it in a few moments. But first tell me who are you?"

"It's Freighter No 1 of the Mars Fleet."

"Where are the rest of the Fleet?"

The voice seemed puzzled. "The rest of the Fleet?"

"You are only No 1—there must be others."

"I can't . . ." the voice hesitated—then almost broke down. "I can't—remember. . . . Can you hear me?"

"Yes," answered Jet.

"It's all so vague. There were others—but I can't remember them," the flat monotonous voice continued.

"Can't you even remember who you are?"

"Rogers," said the voice—"Frank Rogers."

We gasped. "Frank Rogers? He *was* in No 1—in the original fleet," exclaimed Lemmy.

"It just *can't* be Frank," I said. "The Martians got him. He was deeply conditioned."

"Hullo, No 1," called Jet. "You say you are Frank Rogers?"

"Yes."

"Are you alone in your ship? The freighters carry a crew of two."

Once again a puzzled note crept into the otherwise expressionless voice.

"Two? Yes, that's right—I remember now. Grimshaw. Grimshaw—where are you, Grimshaw!"

Suddenly I saw that it *might* be Rogers—if my theories were correct.

"May I talk to him, Jet?" I asked.

"Sure, if you think you can get any sense out of him."

"Hullo, Frank," I began, "this is Doc."

"Doc?" said the voice doubtfully, then more decidedly:

"Oh—Doc. What are you doing down there? You should be out here in the Fleet with us—on our way to Mars."

"I am," I said, "I'm in the flagship."

"I must talk to Earth—or Lunar Control."

"If you have any message for them, Lemmy will pass it on for you."

"Lemmy?" The voice queried. Then, "Lemmy Barnet. I remember. He got lost—out in the land truck."

"I think this is Rogers, Jet. Every time we mention something to do with the Fleet it seems to jog his mind."

"But I was never lost in any land truck," objected Lemmy.

Rogers—if it was Rogers—was speaking again.

"Him and two others. They'll never get back to Earth. I'm the sole remaining member of the whole Fleet."

"Hullo, Frank," I called, "can you hear me?"

"Freighter No 1 calling," came the reply. "Have a message for you."

"For goodness sake, Doc," said Mitch irritably, "let's take the message. Maybe that'll give us some insight as to what's on his mind."

"Ready to receive your message," I called, "over."

"Hullo—here is the message. I—I . . ." The voice stopped.

"Hullo," I called, "receiving you. Give us your message please."

"From Freighter No 1 to *Discovery*. Have routine checks—are you ready to receive them?"

"Whoever it is, he must be clean off his rocker!" exclaimed Lemmy as he heard this.

"Hullo," said Jet impatiently. "Give us your message—do you hear me?"

"I can't," said the voice, and it sounded afraid now, "it's Whitaker. He's . . . oh my—keep away from me!"

"Whitaker!" gasped Lemmy. "But he's dead!"

"Get away, do you hear? Hullo—Flagship—emergency—Hullo, hullo, hullo . . ." The voice spluttered a little, then faded and died. We looked at each other in alarm.

## 5

NOW THE radio was silent.

"Sounded as though Whitaker was there with him," said Lemmy.

"And if it is Rogers, where's he calling from?" Mitch added.

"On the planet, of course—where else?"

"Yes, but from whereabouts on the planet?" said Mitch impatiently.

"Now you're asking."

We kept calling unsuccessfully for over an hour. Then Lemmy had to leave the radio panel and return to his bunk in readiness for the increase in speed that would carry the *Discovery* and the two freighters into free orbit a thousand miles or more above the planet's surface.

This went off without a hitch and the main transmitter was retuned and Earth Control informed.

We encircled the planet once every two hours. At the same time, of course, the planet was itself turning on its axis, so each time we completed a full circle it was to find a new part of the Martian surface below us. In this way, during a period of approximately twelve hours, we were able to observe every part of the planet. The ice caps, the deserts, the cultivated areas, the canals and other Martian features stood out sharply and clearly, except occasionally when the details were hidden by the high, thin clouds that are to be found in the Martian atmosphere—principally near the Polar regions.

After encircling the planet for three days our main interest was centred on the oases—the places where the canals cross—and, in particular, the great oasis known as the *Lacus Solis*, where we knew a Martian city was situated.

"Can you see it, Jet?" asked Mitch, as our captain stared through the telescope.

"Yes, Mitch, I can. I'm sure we would never have noticed it had we not known it was there."

"Well that establishes two cities up to now," I said. "The one in Ophir and the *Lacus Solis*. There must be many more."

"I'm sure there are, Doc. But to scrutinise the whole planet would take weeks, and we haven't the time."

"Then how about those—asteroids?" Mitch put in. "We should see them. They're bound to be parked near together, and should be easy to pick out."

"But they can't come from the planet, Mitch," objected Jet. "They're much too big. They would never get off the ground."

"Where do they come from then?" I asked.



"Goodness knows, Doc. That puzzles me more than anything else. But I've stared through this thing for so long my eye is weeping."

"I'll take it," offered Mitch.

"Thanks. I don't think there's much more to be seen in Lacus Solis, so cover as much as you can of the area up to the south pole."

It was not long before Mitch gave an excited shout. "Polar Base—it's still there. I can see what can only be the land trucks—both caravans."

We all took turns to look through the telescope and there sure enough were the two caravans we had left behind on our previous visit.

"But how come both caravans are there?" I queried. "There should be only one. Don't you remember, Jet? You left your caravan in the Argyre desert. Lemmy and I picked you up in that sphere and we completed the journey to Polar Base in that."

"You're right, Doc," said Jet. "Then how on earth did that other caravan get up there?"

"Somebody must have taken it, but who—and why?"

Just then Lemmy, who had remained at the radio, gave a shout. "Hey, Jet, he's at it again."

"What did you hear this time, Lemmy?" said Jet, going over to him.

"Frank Rogers again. At least I think it was. Listen."

"Hullo, Land Fleet. Polar Base calling Land Fleet." We all heard it this time. "Have a message for you. Over."

"Take a bearing on him, Lemmy," said Jet urgently. "We're so close to him now we ought to be able to find out his exact position. Hullo, Polar Base. What is your message?" he said into the microphone.

"Have routine checks for you. Are you ready to receive them?" came the mysterious reply.

"Go ahead, Polar Base," said Jet.

"Freighter now landed safely. What are your orders?"

"Well—er—will you repeat your message, please?" said Jet perplexed.

"Polar Base to Land Fleet. Repeat—freighter now landed safely, what are your orders? Do we unload the land trucks now, or do we wait for No 2 to get down?"

"First he's No 1—then he's Polar Base—now he's waiting for No 2," grumbled Lemmy.

"Hullo—hullo," called Jet. "Who do you say you are?"

"Polar Base—Frank Rogers calling. Am ready to start unloading as soon as you give the word."

"Polar Base, did you say?"

"Of course. Who else would it be?"

"Have you got a bearing on him yet, Lemmy?"

"Keep him talking just a little longer."

Jet called again. "Hullo, Polar Base—Flagship here."

"Flagship?" came the puzzled reply. "But you can't be. It is parked outside—not a hundred yards from here."

"Hullo," called Jet. "I'm afraid we're not hearing you very clearly now. Would you repeat your call, please."

"Hullo, Land Fleet—Polar Base calling. Repeat—Polar Base calling, are you receiving me now? Over."

"Receiving you," answered Jet. "Will call you again in a few moments. Stand by."

"Standing by."

"I can't make head or tail of it," said Jet.

"Well, if he is Frank Rogers and he says he's at Polar Base, why shouldn't he be?" asked Mitch.

"That might be the answer to both sets of land trucks being down there on the ice cap," I put in. "He could somehow have got away from whoever conditioned him, found the caravan and took it back to Polar Base. All the trucks carry radios—he could be using one of them."

"But how could he possibly know we'd be anywhere near Mars?" objected Jet.

"From what he says in his so-called message I doubt very much if he knows where anybody is—even himself," I replied.

"Well," said Jet, "I'm pretty sure there must be *somebody* down in those land trucks. Either Frank Rogers or somebody pretending to be."

"You think so?" cut in Lemmy, who up to now had been working on his figures.

"Why not?" returned Jet. "He says he's at Polar Base and we saw both caravans of the Land Fleet down there just a few minutes ago."

"Then maybe you can explain," said Lemmy almost

triumphantly, "why the bearing puts the transmitter which sent those calls slap in the middle of the Mare Australis."

There was an incredulous silence. I think we had all been secretly convinced that Frank Rogers *was* in one of those land trucks. Now we had to think again.

"Just a minute," I said. "Freighter No 2. That crashed in the Mare Australis, didn't it? It's probably still there. Frank salvaged most of the supplies from it and took them back up to Polar Base. The last time he was in there he got the radio to work, didn't he? Maybe it's still working and it's from No 2's transmitter that those calls have been coming."

"Could be," said Jet thoughtfully, "but why does he say he's at Polar Base?"

"If you ask me," retorted Lemmy, "he doesn't know whether he's on his head or his heels. He says he's in Polar Base waiting for No 2 to land, when all the time she's been tipped up on her nose down there on the Mare Australis for more than a year."

"Whoever it is calling us—and I believe it *is* Frank Rogers—is certainly not in control of himself," I replied. "His mind is wandering. Occasionally he does have periods of knowing exactly where he is. At other times he lives in the past—imagines he is still with the Space Fleet, coasting towards the Red Planet for the first time. And each time he doesn't just remember what happened over a year ago—he *re-lives* it. Hence his thinking he is sometimes in Freighter No 1, which was his old ship, and sometimes in Polar Base where he spent a great deal of his time after we landed on the planet."

"Where do you think he really is, Doc?" questioned Jet.

"Down in the Mare Australis—in the wrecked Freighter."

"Well, I still think he's where he says he is—at Polar Base," said Mitch. "I think the whole thing is a trap to get us to land near the wrecked freighter where we'll find a whole army of conditioned types waiting to greet us."

"The Mare Australis is as flat as a pancake," said Jet, "we'd be bound to see them. If we do, we could increase speed, rise again and land somewhere else."

"I still think Polar Base would be a better bet for a landing," said Mitch.

"I vote for the Mare," I said. "As near to the wreck of No 2 as we can safely get. I think Frank is in there."

"Right," said Jet. "The Mare it is. Code a message, will you, Doc? Tell Control what we're about to do."

After this had been done I went down in the hold to receive the fuel that Jet and Mitch were to pump into our tanks from the second freighter. We needed very little to propel us into the atmosphere through which, with the aid of our huge wings, we would glide the rest of the way. But to get off Mars again we would, of course, need a considerable amount, so we had no choice but to take it with us.

The transfer took about two hours. By the end of that time Jet and Mitch were once again safely back in the *Discovery*. Shortly afterwards Jet climbed up into the pilot's cabin and we prepared to take the ship down.

"All set, Mitch?" called Jet.

"Yeah, Jet."

"Twenty seconds," I said.

"You can say your last farewell to the freighters for the time being," said Jet.

"Fifteen seconds . . . Ten seconds."

"Hullo, Land Fleet, Polar Base calling Land Fleet." The voice made us jump.

"Five seconds," I called, "four—three—two—one."

"Don't answer it now, Lemmy," called Jet. "I'll tell you when."

"You don't think I'd get out of this seat, do you?" came the indignant reply.

The motors fired and we were off. Once again we heard the voice. "Hullo, Land Fleet. Polar Base calling. Can you hear me? Come in, please."

"You'll have to wait now, chum," muttered Lemmy, "we got other things to do."

Some minutes later the motors cut and we were falling slowly through the Martian atmosphere towards the surface of the planet. As we passed over the southern ice cap we saw the two caravans of trucks clearly visible below us. Soon we had dropped another twelve thousand feet and the Mare Australis came into sight.

"Get back into your seats," shouted Jet. "We'll be landing soon."

"Hullo, Land Fleet," came the plaintive call from the radio. "Polar Base calling, can you hear me?"

"Here, listen," exclaimed Lemmy, "he's very much louder now. He must be in that freighter, and the closer we approach it the louder his signals get."

"Hullo, I can see it now!" shouted Jet a bit later. "The wreck. Exactly as we left it, standing up on its nose. I don't think anyone's been near her."

Soon we were nearly down to landing speed.

"Let's hope the ground is firm enough to take the weight," Lemmy said.

"One thousand feet," called Mitch.

"No sign of any Martians, Jet—I hope?"

"No, Lemmy. You'd never guess there was any kind of life on Mars from this view."

"Eight hundred . . . seven hundred."

"Coming into touch down. Hold on to your hats."

"Six hundred."

"Here we go."

"Five hundred . . . four hundred . . . three hundred . . . two hundred . . . one hundred."

"Get ready. Straightening out. Touching down—now!"

After bouncing a few times, the ship ran to a standstill. Once again we had made a successful landing on the Red Planet.

The wrecked freighter was about half a mile away from us to the west. There was three hours before the sun went down and Jet decided to take the high-speed land truck and go with Mitch to see if Frank Rogers *was* there.

"While we're gone, Doc," he said, "look out for spheres or anything else that might point to anybody heading this way to investigate us."

"Right."

"And you, Lemmy, stay at the radio. Try to re-establish contact with Rogers and, at the same time, keep in constant contact with us over the personal radios."

"What if Rogers isn't over there?" asked Mitch. "I hope we're not walking straight into a trap."

"I'd bet my life there's not a Martian or a conditioned

Earthman within a hundred miles," stated Jet firmly. "If there was we'd have been sure to see some sign of them when we landed. Their spheres, at least—how else could they get here?"

"Well, let's go then," Mitch said. "I'll put on my suit and open up the cargo hatch."

As Lemmy and I watched the land truck speeding towards the wrecked freighter, on the televiewer, another loud call came through from Frank Rogers still insisting that he was at Polar Base.

"Tell him to wait for further orders, Lemmy," I said.

When they arrived alongside the freighter, Jet and Mitch left the truck and, putting on their helmets, walked across to the wreck. The cargo flaps were open, and entering the cargo hold they made their way towards the cabin airlock.

"Nothing here seems to have been disturbed," called Jet to me over his personal radio.

"In that case you should find the airlock open—the main door, anyway," I said.

"No, it's closed."

"Somebody must be in there then," put in Mitch.

"Call up Rogers," ordered Jet. "Tell him we're outside."

"I'll try," I said, "but he hasn't answered us for some time."

"All right," Jet replied, "then there's nothing for it but for us to go in."

They pressed the remote control which opened the main door and entered the airlock. "Now opening cabin hatch," he called.

"Take it easy, Jet," I said. "Have a good look round before you go in."

There was nobody in the cabin. But as Jet and Mitch entered a voice called loud and clear. "Hullo, Flagship—Land Fleet, Frank Rogers calling Flagship."

"Good grief," said Mitch, "did you hear that?"

"No wonder," exclaimed Jet. "The radio transmitter—it's on. It radiated that call."

"What?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, Doc—it's working by remote control."

"Where from?" I asked.

"That's what I'd like to know. Answer the call, Doc—see if you can get any sense out of him."

"Then switch off that transmitter," I said. "I'll contact him direct from here."

"Hullo, Land Fleet," I called, "Flagship calling. Receiving you loud and clear. Go ahead."

"Hullo, Fagship," came the relieved answer, "thank goodness I've got hold of you at last. Where the heck are you?"

"Where are *you*?" I replied.

"At Polar Base—my instructions were to stay here until further orders. Did you find the wreck?"

"Yes."

"How about the crew—are they hurt?"

"There's no crew in her, Frank."

"Then what's happened to them? Where have they gone?"

"Listen, Frank, you're up at Polar Base, you say? Are you alone?"

"Yes—that's the funny thing. Where is everybody? Yesterday the *Discovery* was parked right alongside these trucks—now she's gone. Where are you?"

"Listen carefully, Frank. Are the land trucks still mobile?"

"Of course. Why shouldn't they be?"

"Then these are your orders. You will drive your truck down to the Mare Australis. We'll put out a bearing beam for you. That should guide you straight to us."

"Very well. But what's happened—how did you get down there? Why wasn't I informed?"

"Never mind that. Just come here as quickly as you can—and call us as soon as you're under way."

"Message received and understood. Call you again in half an hour."

"Hullo, Jet," I called next. "Did you hear that?"

"I certainly did, Doc. It sounded exactly like Rogers that time."

"But he still seemed very confused. He really seems to be at Polar Base—he's been calling from there and using the transmitter of No 2 to boost his signals—just as we did last time we were here."

"Well if that is the case, and if he manages to handle the truck, he should be here in about thirty-six hours. I don't think there's much point in Mitch and I staying over here any longer. We're coming back."

"Doc—Doc——" There was a frantic cry from Lemmy. "Come over here quick!"

"What's the matter?"

Lemmy pointed at the televiewer. "Those perishing spheres—hundreds of them. Like a flock of birds—and all heading this way. Look at 'em!"

Sure enough there they were, a great swarm of objects growing larger every minute.

"What about Jet and Mitch?" asked Lemmy anxiously. "They'll be out in the open in a few minutes."

"Stay with the televiewer," I replied. "I'll tell them to stay under cover."

Hastily I called. There was no reply.

"They're getting very close now, Doc—almost directly overhead."

"Hullo, Jet," I called desperately, "hullo!"

"Those spheres are directly overhead now. And they've stopped. They're hovering right above—ready to pounce. I knew we should have gone to the ice cap, those calls weren't from Frank Rogers at all. It was just a trick to lure us down here."

"Hullo, Doc—can you hear me?" Thankfully, I heard Jet's voice.

"Hullo, Jet—receiving you. What happened?"

"Our radios went dead. I can't understand why. They seem to be all right now."

"Jet," I said urgently, "get into that truck as quick as you can and come over here. Look in the sky—directly above us."

"Good grief!" It was Mitch, "Martian spheres—dozens of 'em."

"Into the truck, Mitch, quick. Be ready to let us in, Doc."

"Right," I replied.

"Hey, Doc!" Lemmy yelled. "Those perishing spheres—they're coming down. I bet they don't intend Jet and Mitch to get back to this ship."



"They're about half way across now," I said.

"Oh blimey," cried Lemmy, "and those ships are about down on the deck. Doc—I feel all peculiar—what's happening?"

I didn't feel too good myself. There was a noise in my ears—insistent, compelling. I spoke with difficulty.

"Swing the televiewer round. Down to ground level. Pick up the land truck."

Lemmy's voice sounded far off. "Yes, Doc—swinging televiewer—now."

The land truck was not more than half way across. It seemed to have stopped.

"Hullo, *Discovery*," called a voice through the haze beginning to surround me. "Frank Rogers calling. Can you hear me? Over."

"What was that, Jet?" I said.

"It wasn't Jet, mate," said Lemmy. He sounded half asleep. "It was . . . it was . . ." His voice faded.

"Hullo, *Discovery*, Rogers calling. Can you hear me? Over. Hullo—hullo—answer me *please!*"

I tried. "Hullo, Frank, this is Doc. I—I . . ." Then my eyes closed and I knew no more.

## 6

WHEN I woke up it was pitch dark. For a moment I couldn't remember what had happened, and then it all came back. Where was Lemmy? And why was it dark? How long had I been lying here?

"You there, Lemmy?" I called.

There was no answer.

I sat up and knocked my head on something hard above me. I lay down again and tried to think. Lights—I must find the light-switch. Was it really dark or had I gone blind? The last thing I remembered was standing by the televiewer in the ship in broad daylight. Where *was* I? And what was I lying on? It felt like a mattress, but not like my bunk. And why, *why* was it dark?

I tried to calm myself and think coherently. I felt above

my head and found a wall extending behind me and down my left side. I stretched my right hand out sideways and felt—nothing. I put my right foot over the edge of the bed. There was no floor. Just a little further maybe? I stretched as far as I dared but contacted nothing. This must be a nightmare—I would wake up in a moment.

Just then somebody groaned. "Who's that?" I said sharply.

"Oh, my head," came a familiar voice, "blimey, what's happened to it?"

"Lemmy," I said with relief, "is that you?"

"Of course it's me," he said, "who should it be? What's happened, Doc? Why is it so dark? Perhaps the lights have fused. I'll see if I can find the switch."

"Just a minute, Lemmy," I said quickly. "Are you lying on some kind of bed?"

"Yes," answered the cockney, in a puzzled voice, "but it doesn't feel right somehow."

"Don't try to sit up," I said, "or you'll crack your head. And don't try to find the floor, there isn't one. Feel around with your hands first before you attempt to move."

"Have you gone crackers, Doc? There's nothing above my head at all, and as for the floor—well, I'm standing on it."

It was my turn to be surprised. "But you can't be . . ." I protested.

"Is that you, Doc?" It was Jet's voice I heard.

"Jet," I exclaimed, "are you here too?"

"Where are we?" said Jet. "What's happened? Why is it so dark?"

"Are you lying on some kind of a bed?" I asked.

"Yes, I am. How did I get here?"

"Jet—for Pete's sake what's going on?" It was Mitch.

"All right, Mitch," I said, "take it easy."

"But I can't see a thing." Mitch's voice was panicky.

"It's all right," I said soothingly, "we none of us can. And by some miracle we're all together again. How much can you remember, Mitch?"

"Being in the truck with Jet. Heading at full speed for the ship."

"That's all I remember too, Doc," said Jet.

"Those spheres had landed," I remarked, "I remember

that. One of them landed just outside the ship and completely blocked our view of the truck."

"Well, it's pretty obvious what happened," observed Jet. "We were overpowered, somehow rendered unconscious and brought here."

"Where's here?" Lemmy said grimly.

"We'd better find out," said Mitch energetically. "I'll get up and see."

There was a loud thud.

"Crikey—I cracked my head on something."

"Careful, Mitch," I called, "I did that. Don't try to get off your bunk. You'll find there isn't any floor."

"But I *told* you, Doc, I can feel a floor," Lemmy said. "What about you, Jet?"

Jet felt cautiously. "Yes, I can," he answered. "This bed can't be more than a couple of feet off the ground."

"Your voice, Jet—and yours, Lemmy," said Mitch slowly, "they seem to be coming from a lower level than Doc's."

"You're right," I said. "It sounds that way to me too."

"All right," said Jet, "you two stay where you are. Don't attempt to get up in case you fall and injure yourselves. Lemmy—if you can reach the floor safely, then do so. See if you can stand up."

"Right. Standing up now."

"Me too," said Jet. "Now stay put, Lemmy. I'll walk over to you. Keep talking."

"Over here, Jet. Mind how you go. Maybe the floor isn't level."

"Seems to be, up to now. I must be nearly with you. Not more than a couple of feet away, from the sound of your voice."

"There we are," came Lemmy's voice, "you made it." A note of alarm crept into his voice. "It is you I'm touching, isn't it, Jet?"

"Yes, of course it is. But you—Lemmy—you've got your suit on. You didn't have it on in the ship, did you?"

"No, I didn't. What about you, Doc? Have you got yours on?"

"Yes, I have," I answered, noticing it for the first time, "all except the helmet."

"Me too. What's the game? What is going on?"

"Stop panicking, Lemmy," said Jet firmly. "And hang on to me. We're going to find the wall and feel out this place. Come on."

Jet and Lemmy felt their way along the smooth wall which seemed to surround us. After thirty-six paces they came to another bed, which was empty. "This must have been where I was lying," said Jet.

"Then I must be above it," exclaimed Mitch. "You sound very near to me now."

"Two pairs of bunks!" I exclaimed. "That must be it. Mitch and I must be way off the ground. Keep going, Jet. There must be some kind of door into this place."

"We haven't felt a thing yet," he replied, "just a smooth wall. And we haven't come to any corners yet, so maybe the room's circular."

"Hey," cried Lemmy suddenly, "I've found something. It's a knob or a button or something."

There was a sudden whining noise above our heads.

"The roof," exclaimed Mitch, "it's opening!"

Above our heads glimmered a circular patch through which we could see the stars.

"It's a sort of window," said Mitch. "You must have pressed the control which operates it, Lemmy."

The light coming from the opening was not very strong, but soon I could make out the faint outlines of the beds we were lying on. Mitch and I were more than ten feet from the ground, immediately above the bunks of Lemmy and Jet.

"How the deuce did we get up here, Doc?" exclaimed Mitch. "There's no ladder."

"We must have been put here," I answered.

"Must have been a pretty strong man to lift us this high."

"Hold on to your hats," called Mitch, "I'm coming down."

He swung his feet over the edge of the bed and jumped. We stared at him in amazement. He was floating gently down to the ground!

"Blimey, Mitch, what's wrong?" put in Lemmy.

"I'm all right," said Mitch, "but I must say it was a bit of a shock drifting down like that."

"This must be a ship," exclaimed Lemmy, "we must be adrift in space."

"Then there'd be no gravity at all," I objected.

"No, there wouldn't, would there?"

"We must be on Mars, Jet."

"Then why all this floating around?"

A thought struck me. "Hey, Jet—is it possible to get up to that window or whatever it is?"

"We can try. Any of those bunks movable?"

The bunks were not fixtures so it would be an easy job to move one under the opening.

We pulled ourselves on to the top bunk but were still not high enough to see out.

"Lift me up, will you, Doc," said Jet. "I can't possibly weigh more than a couple of stone by Earth standards—gravity is less than the Earth's moon."

I lifted him easily. "What can you see?" I asked.

"We're not in space, that's certain," Jet replied slowly. "There's land out there—and this place is built on it. We *must* still be on Mars then. The ground looks rocky and hard, not unlike the surface of the Moon."

"There's enough light out there for you to be able to see that much?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, Doc. It's as bright as moonlight down on Earth."

"But there's no moonlight on Mars," Lemmy objected.

"No," I added, "the two Martian moons are too small to give off light of the kind you're describing, Jet. Can you see where the light is coming from?"

"From behind me. And whatever is giving that light can't be very high in the sky. This place throws a very long shadow. Turn round, will you, Doc? Let me have a look in the other direction."

I did so. "How's that?"

"Fine. I can see it now. It *is* a moon. A huge one. Good grief! That's not a moon—it's . . . good heavens——"

"Well what is it, then?" asked Lemmy impatiently.

"It's Mars!"

"Mars!" The three of us echoed Jet's words unbelievably. How could it be Mars?

"It is, I tell you. Look for yourself, Doc."

We changed positions. There was no doubt about it—

there, like a colossal red moon, was the planet. But for it to appear like that we must be thousands of miles away from it.

"It's Mars all right," I said. "But where are we?"

"We must be adrift in space," Lemmy said. "I told you so."

"Wherever we are, Lemmy, we're not adrift," stated Jet. "That's solid land out there, with rocks and hills and a horizon. We're not adrift in space any more than if we were on the Earth's own Moon."

"That's it," said Mitch excitedly, "this must be a moon we're on—one of the Martian moons."

"Hey." Lemmy said suddenly, "if it's bright Mars light outside, then why is it so dark in here?"

"Because there's no atmosphere out there, Lemmy, that's why," explained Jet. "If Mars rises high enough in the sky to shine directly through that hole, then perhaps we'll see something of this place. If it doesn't, we'll see precious little. Let's get down, Doc, there's nothing more to be seen out there."

"Surely," I protested, "whoever brought us here can't intend to leave us for ever—without food or drink."

"Why not?" said Mitch. "This is probably some kind of prison."

"But if it was intended that we should be left here to die, why go to the trouble of laying us all out on beds?"

"Maybe they thought we were already dead," came Lemmy's lugubrious voice.

"Trust you to think of something cheerful, Lemmy."

"If they'd wanted to kill us, they could have done," said Jet.

"I don't think they intend to kill us," I said slowly, "there's no record of a Martian—or a conditioned Earthman—killing anybody. But it's no good sitting here moping. We've got to do something. When you found whatever it was that opened the skylight, you'd only got half way round this place. I think we should continue our search."

"Doc's right," said Jet. "We'll go back to the place where we found the panel. Two of us will follow the wall round one way, two the other. Feel up and down as far

as you can reach. When we meet we'll know we've been right round."

We spread out and started feeling our way around the perfectly smooth wall. Jet was trying to find the panel which had operated the skylight.

"It must be somewhere around here," he said, "but I can't seem to locate it. How are you doing, Lemmy?"

"Can't find anything except bare wall," said the cockney.

"Well, you should meet Mitch soon," said Jet. "Mind you don't bump into each other."

Just then we heard someone stumbling and there was a stifled exclamation from Lemmy. "Blimey, Mitch, you might have warned me you were that near—I nearly fell flat. And what are you doing down there? Surely there wouldn't be control buttons that low."

"What are you talking about, Lemmy?" came Mitch's voice from the other side of the room. "I'm nowhere near you."

"Eh? Oh well, it's you, Doc, is it?"

"I'm way behind Jet," I said. "Not over your side."

"Then who's this over here?" Lemmy sounded panicky.

"There can't be anyone," said Jet.

"There is, I tell you. I tripped over somebody. I thought it was Mitch, stooping down examining the wall. It was just about—here. Oh—mother . . . oh no! There is somebody lying on the floor. And he's cold, Jet—icy cold!"

Lemmy was really frightened now, and I must say his words sent prickles up and down my spine.

"Stay where you are, Lemmy," ordered Jet urgently. "I'll be right over. You too, Doc."

Carefully we made our way in the direction of Lemmy's voice.

"Now where's this—er—body?" I asked when I reached the radio operator.

"On the floor, Doc—right by my feet."

I knelt down and felt around. Sure enough, there was the body of a man. I took up one of the hands. It was unnaturally cold. Then I laid my ear against his heart. It was beating. But very slowly.

"He's alive," I said, "but his pulse is slow and he's cold to the touch. I'm going to carry him over to my bed."

"It gave me such a shock," said Lemmy. "I didn't think there was anybody in here but us."

"I wonder if there's anybody else?" queried Mitch. "Nobody's gone over the floor yet."

"While Doc's examining that fellow," said Jet, "we three had better finish going round the walls, and then cover the floor methodically so no part of it is left out."

When they had done they made their way to my bed where I had lain the unconscious man.

"I've made him as comfortable as I can, without being able to see him," I said.

"I suppose he is a normal man, Doc," asked Lemmy—"not—not a Martian or anything."

"Yes, Lemmy. And, like us, he's wearing a space suit—without a helmet. You found nothing else in the room?"

"No, Doc," answered Jet. "I believe we went over every inch—there are only five of us here."

There seemed no way of getting out of this place and, anyway, it wouldn't have been safe without our helmets. There was no atmosphere outside, or so Jet had said. The only thing we could do was to try to find out *where* we were.

Careful observation of the sky might tell us which—if either—of the Martian moons we were on. Two at a time, we climbed to the skylight to keep watch in what, by observing the stars, we believed to be two-hourly intervals. Mars, which had been hanging low in the sky like a great moon when Jet took his first look at the silent world outside, disappeared below the horizon during the first watch, leaving us only the starlight which sent the faintest glow of light on to the surface of the upper bunk on which we were standing.

Whoever it was that Lemmy had discovered lay, so far as we could tell, motionless on my bed. Occasionally I felt his pulse and listened to his slow, shallow breathing. His skin was still cold.

Lemmy and I had taken over our second watch and Jet and Mitch, feeling tired by now, had lain on their respective beds, Jet at the bottom, Mitch above him, while the stranger was in the bunk below us. In spite of no bed covers and without our space suits, the chamber was very warm



and Jet and Mitch were soon asleep. At least we assumed so for, a few minutes after taking over, neither of them answered when we called them.

"I don't like it. Something might have happened to them," said Lemmy.

"They can't sleep if we keep calling them every five minutes to see if they're all right," I said.

Then somebody groaned.

"What was that, Doc?"

"It must be Jet—or Mitch. Something *has* happened to them, Doc. I know it."

"Calm down, Lemmy," I said. "Listen."

We heard the groans again. "It's not Jet or Mitch. It's that fellow you found, Lemmy. I must go to him."

Hardly had I reached the floor when another noise startled me almost out of my wits. It was between a screech and a whine, and it came from no human voice.

"Get down to floor level, quick, Lemmy! We've got to wake Jet up."

As I spoke there came the sound of the hatch closing above our heads.

"Oh blimey," exclaimed Lemmy, "that's goodbye to what little light we did have."

There were more groans from the stranger in the bed.

"Shut up, can't you!" said Lemmy irritably. "Doc, where are you?"

"Waiting at the foot of the bed," I said. "Keep a tight hold on to the bunk until you reach ground level."

Again came the ear-splitting screech.

"Where are you, Doc?" yelled Lemmy at the top of his voice.

"Standing right by you, Lemmy, and don't shout in my ear."

Another screech shattered the silence.

"Jet!" I shouted, when the unearthly noise had died down, "Jet! Jet!—wake up!"

But the only response was an occasional groan from the stranger. I couldn't attend to him now. I had to wake Jet up. Slowly I made my way across the room. When I was halfway across the screech started up again.

"Oh crickey," I heard Lemmy say, "what are they try-

ing to do? Send us mad? Let me hang on to you, Doc," he said pleadingly, "I'll feel better then."

"All right," I said. "I'm half way across. Come on."

I stood waiting for him to join me.

"Ah, that's better," I heard him say. Then he broke off into a shuddering exclamation.

"Whatever's wrong, Lemmy?"

"That geyser—the cold one—he must have got up, and he's walking around. I bumped into him. I thought it was you, Doc."

"Then grab hold of him," I said urgently. "Hang on to him."

"Yes, Doc. Hey—you . . . Where's he gone? He was here a minute ago. I've lost him, Doc. He must have walked away from me."

"Never mind. Keep walking towards Jet's bed. But if you bump into him again, hang on this time."

"Yes, Doc . . . Oh blimey," as the frightful noise started up again. "It's giving me the creeps."

"Come on, Lemmy. You're getting closer to me."

"Yes, Doc . . . oh—I've got him, I've got him!"

It was my arm Lemmy was clutching.

"Oh sorry, Doc, I thought . . ."

*Whine. Screech. Whine.* The sounds came now with only a few seconds interval between them.

I reached Jet's bed with relief. How was it possible he could sleep through all this row?

"Wake up, Jet!" I yelled, stretching out my arm to shake him. Then I got my biggest shock yet. His bunk was empty.

"He's not in his bunk, Lemmy!"

"Oh no!" exclaimed the cockney who was close behind me. "This must be some horrible nightmare."

Echoing his words came another of those terrible shrieks.

"For Pete's sake," said a voice, "what *is* going on?" It was Mitch.

"Thank goodness you're awake, Mitch," I said. "Jet's missing."

"What!"

"And that fellow we found is up and walking around. Lemmy keeps bumping into him."

The whining noise broke out again.

"Good heavens—what's that?" exclaimed the Australian. "And who closed the look-out hatch?"

"It closed of its own accord, Mitch."

"I'm coming down, Doc. Keep talking so I can find my way to you."

"I'm just below you, Mitch. Wait!" I exclaimed suddenly. "Stay where you are!"

A new noise vibrated through the room—a low humming sound. "Look at the floor!" I said quite incredulously.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Mitch. "It's glowing! Part of it, anyway."

In the centre of the room a circular patch of light had appeared.

"It's a hole," exclaimed Mitch as he watched from the upper bunk. "I—I can see down into it. It's like a transparent manhole."

"It must be the entrance to this place," I whispered. "And—good grief . . ."

"Oh, blimey," cried Lemmy, "it's opening!"

## 7

WE WAITED tensely. Nobody spoke and nothing happened. All we could hear was one another's breathing.

Lemmy's voice broke the tension. "Quiet, ain't it?"

The manhole gave out quite a lot of light. We could see each other clearly for the first time since we'd been in the place. I suddenly noticed a figure standing by the far wall.

"Good God!" I exclaimed.

Then Lemmy saw the man. "That geyser—the cold one—it's Frank—Frank Rogers!"

"Strewth," cried Mitch, "so it is!"

He looked much the same as when we had last seen him on the Red Planet before he had been captured and conditioned by the Martians. But his eyes, though, didn't seem normal. He stared at me fixedly and, it seemed, right through me.

"Mitch," I said, "look around for Jet. Help him, Lemmy. I'll attend to Rogers. Stay well clear of that hole."

"Come on, Lemmy," said Mitch, "we'll start from Jet's bunk and work our way round the room. Thank goodness we've got some light now, at any rate."

"This is the bed he was lying on, isn't it?" Mitch continued, as he and Lemmy looked at the empty bunk.

"Yes, mate," said Lemmy. "Doc and me were on the top bunk of the other one, with Frank underneath. Wait a sec . . ." He broke off excitedly. "Look, Mitch—there he is. *Underneath* the bed. And still sound asleep!"

"Well, don't just stand there—put him back on again."

Lemmy did as Mitch said. "Hey, Jet," shouted Mitch, slapping his face, "wake up, for Pete's sake!"

"If he fell out, I wonder he didn't wake up," said Lemmy.

"Down on Earth he would have done. But up here, with the low gravitational pull, he must have floated down so gently he didn't notice it. And as he weighs hardly anything that floor wouldn't feel much harder than the mattress. Hey—Jet—Jet . . . Wake up."

At last Jet moved and stretched his arms. "Huh?" His eyes opened.

"Thank goodness!" Lemmy exclaimed. "Hullo, Jet boy—you all right?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" said Jet sitting up. "What's up? Where's the light coming from?"

"We thought we'd lost you," said Mitch. "You were lying under the bed—we couldn't find you in the dark."

"But it isn't dark. Good grief," as he saw the manhole, "what's that?"

"It opened up about ten minutes ago," answered Lemmy. "The light comes from a hole underneath it."

"And what's down there?"

"We don't know."

"Where's Doc?"

"Over on the other side of the room. That fellow we found on the floor turned out to be Frank Rogers."

"Here they come now," Mitch said as I led Frank over towards Jet.

"Thank goodness we've found you, Jet," I said.

"Hullo, Frank—remember me?"

"What are your orders, Captain Morgan?" replied Frank in that dull unexpressive voice which always gives away the conditioned type.

"He remembers you all right, Jet," I said, "but in a confused kind of way."

"Where does he think he is now?"

"Doesn't seem to know—or to care very much."

"I was hoping he might throw some light on how we got here," said Jet. "How did *he* get here? The last we heard from him he was in a land truck, heading down from Polar Base to the Mare Australis."

"Well it looks like we were brought here through that hole in the floor," remarked Lemmy. "Where does it lead to?"

"That's easily settled," Jet said. "We'll look and see. Come on. Tell Rogers to go back to his bed and lie down."

"Did you hear that, Frank?" I said.

"I am to lie down?" he questioned.

"Yes—and stay there till we call you."

Frank obeyed instantly, and the rest of us gathered round the circular hole. The light came from below it, from the underside of the rim, and as we looked closer we saw that a spiral stair led downwards.

"Well," said Mitch, "are we going down?"

"No, Mitch," answered Jet firmly, "if nothing happens in an hour or so, maybe we'll chance it—one of us at least. Meanwhile, now that we have more light in this place, you and I will search it thoroughly. Doc, see if you can get any sense out of Frank."

"Sure."

"And what do I do?" asked Lemmy.

"You'll stay here—by the hole."

"Eh?"

"If you see or hear anybody coming out of it, give a yell."

"I certainly will. I'll yell my head off."

Jet's search revealed little more than we had already discovered. As we had surmised, the place was circular, with smooth walls about ten feet high and a dome-shaped roof with the look-out hatch in the centre.

The little panel Lemmy had found which operated the shutter over the hatch refused to function now, even though Jet tried the control several times.

Meanwhile I made a thorough examination of Frank Rogers. He appeared to be in the same state as Mitch had been when we rescued him from the city in the Lacus Solis nearly a year ago. He was, in fact, in a partly conditioned state and vacillated between long periods of deep coma or delirium, and short spells of normality during which he was like a man recovering from an anaesthetic or the effects of a narcotic drug.

I remembered what Webster, the man who had helped us escape from Mars during our first trip, had told me about partly-conditioned Earthmen. "In this sleepy state," he had said, "it is possible to penetrate deep down inside a subject's mind. Tell them they're in Africa and when they wake up they'll believe it. That, Doctor Matthews, is the Martian method. On the other hand, put them to sleep again, tell them all that has happened to them since the time their memories failed them and when they wake up again they'll remember everything."

Webster's suggestion had worked with Mitch when he had been conditioned—it might work with Rogers, too. I waited for one of the moments when he passed from a deeply-conditioned state into the stupefied one of near-normality.

"Frank, do you know me?" I began.

"Hullo, Doc," he answered. "Where am I? What am I doing over here in the *Discovery*? I should be in the freighter. I was there a minute ago—with Whitaker. And he . . ." He groped to remember. "No, it couldn't have been him. He's dead. He was found in No. 6."

"That's right."

"Are we on the way back to Earth, Doc?"

"No, Frank."

"But we did land on Mars, didn't we? Everything is so vague. I don't seem to remember anything any more."

"Frank, look at me," I said firmly. "Can you see my face?"

"Yes."

"I'm going to put you to sleep, Frank. When you wake

up again I'm hoping you're going to feel a lot better. Look at me, Frank—now go to sleep."

As a doctor I had often used hypnosis and it was not difficult now for me to put Frank into a hypnotic sleep. I could not, of course, tell him of all the things that had happened to him on Mars because I had no idea what they were. I hoped, however, that I could take him back to the point at which we had parted on the planet. What happened to him after that would probably be a blank when he awoke unless something happened to remind him of events in which he was involved.

I left Frank to have his sleep out and joined the others standing round Lemmy who had heard or seen nothing.

"I'm getting that hungry," he complained, "and I'd give anything for a drink."

Jet looked down at the lighted staircase. "Well," he said, "I don't think anybody intends to bring us anything."

"We can't go down there," I replied.

"Why not?"

"Well, there's Rogers, Jet? We can't leave him here alone and I don't want to wake him before he's had his sleep out. It may last sixteen hours."

"No, Doc," Jet agreed. "And we can't leave you here with only Rogers for company. Mitch—you stay here with Doc. I'll take Lemmy."

Lemmy's face fell. "Me?"

"Yes. You're the hungry one. Now get your suit on."

"My suit? We've no helmets, anyway."

"No, but the radios might be useful should we get separated."

"Yes, I suppose they might."

"Very well then—we start down those steps just as soon as we're dressed."

Almost as soon as they were out of our sight the whining noise came again and the manhole closed in front of our eyes in spite of the efforts of Mitch and I to keep it open. Jet and Lemmy came panicking back up the steps and through the transparent cover we could see them putting their shoulders to the lid, trying to open it. Luckily the personal radios in our suits seemed to work perfectly so we could converse.

"As the radios are working, we'll carry on, Doc," said Jet, "as arranged. But keep in touch."

"OK, Jet."

"Here we go then. Come on, Lemmy—and keep close to me."

Jet and Lemmy descended again. At first they kept calling us on their radios but after a while we couldn't hear one another and we presumed the rock they were walking through was blocking the signals.

What happened after that I heard later from their own lips.

The steps, they said, led into a huge open hall with archways on either side through which they could see staircases similar to the one they had just descended. At the far end of the hall was a much bigger arch leading to a long corridor; it was towards this that Jet led the way.

"This place seems to be carved out of solid rock—like a great cave," remarked Lemmy.

"And beautifully carved it is, too," added Jet. "Look at those designs up there."

"Like those rock carvings you see in South America. Aztec—or Magyar—or some such name."

"Maya."

"Is that what it's called? Here, wait a minute. Those pyramids we saw on Mars—they were *step* pyramids. You find *that* kind of thing in South America too, don't you? Remnants of an ancient civilisation."

"Yes, Lemmy, but I'd say the Martian pyramids were more in the nature of the Ziggurat."

"A Zizzer—who?"

"Ziggurat—a kind of step pyramid built by the ancient Babylonians."

"Go on," said Lemmy. "Are those carvings Babylonian, too, then?"

"No, Lemmy—far from it."

They walked slowly along the deserted corridor which seemed to have perfectly smooth walls and no recesses, turnings or entrances of any kind.

"Listen!" said Lemmy suddenly. "Do you hear something? Like somebody singing."

"Somebody singing?"



"Yes, a lot of people—a choir or something."

Just then the weird screeching noise which we had heard upstairs echoed through the hall and corridor.

"I can hear *that!*" said Jet.

"That's the same racket Doc and me heard upstairs—before that transparent hatch opened. It's stopped now. But the singing hasn't. Can you hear it now?" asked Lemmy eagerly.

"I can hear something, but only very faintly," said Jet doubtfully. "But singing or no singing let's keep going. Look out for any kind of opening in the walls."

It was Jet who saw it first. A door which fitted flush into the side of the wall on their right, with no handle or lock of any kind. Jet banged on it.

"How on earth does it open?" he asked.

"It doesn't—at least not to you," said a voice.

Both men swung round startled. The corridor and hall were as empty as before.

"We didn't realise you were awake," continued the voice.

"Are we supposed to have been asleep then?" asked Lemmy.

"You were the last time we saw you—all five of you."

"All *five* of us?" queried Jet.

"He must know about Frank."

"Of course we do. We carried you up there and laid you on the beds. Where are the rest of you? Or have only two of you woken up?"

"Before we answer any more of your questions," said Jet, "would you mind telling us where we are and what's going on?"

"You are aboard No 734."

"734 what?" Jet asked.

"Asteroid 734."

"Is that what this is—an asteroid?"

"What else? But you must be hungry."

"I'm famished," answered Lemmy.

"Then keep walking, straight down the corridor. There's plenty of food for everybody here. But don't attempt to enter any door until I tell you. Stop at the fifth one you come to."

"I don't like this, Jet," whispered Lemmy.

"We've got no alternative," Jet replied. "Come on."

They stopped outside the fifth door in the wall, as directed.

"Well, this is it," said Lemmy. "Hey—Paddy—can you hear us?"

"Now how did you know my name is Paddy?" said a voice.

"Well," said Lemmy taken aback, "I—er—it's a common Irish name, isn't it?"

"And how did you know I was Irish?"

"I heard you sharpening your shillelagh."

"Look," said Jet impatiently, "we've got as far as the fifth door——"

"Then come on in," said the Irish voice. The door slid open revealing a recess not much bigger than a large cupboard.

"Come on," said "Paddy", "the second door can't open till the first is closed."

"It's some kind of airlock?"

"You might call it that."

"In you go, Lemmy," said Jet.

"Eh? But what happens if we get in there and the other door doesn't open? We'll suffocate."

"That's a fine thing to say," said the rich Irish voice, "when all I'm doing is trying to help you."

"Go on, Lemmy."

They stepped into the tiny room and the door promptly shut behind them.

## 8

MEANWHILE Mitch and I waited anxiously. Since the radios had gone dead it had all been silent until once more the unholy din started up and died down again.

"If only we could take another look outside," Mitch said, "I suppose that astro hatch still doesn't function?"

"It stopped working when the hole in the floor opened," I replied, "but now it's closed, perhaps it'll work again."

"Let's try, anyway," said Mitch eagerly.

He pressed the control in the wall and to our delight the whine which preceded the opening of the skylight in the roof started up. Slowly the hatch slid open and we had to clap our hands over our eyes, for the sunlight poured in, almost blinding us.

"Strewth, it's bright," said Mitch, "I didn't expect to see daylight. For some reason I imagined it was perpetual night in this place."

A moan came from Frank, still asleep on his bed. The sun was shining directly on to his face and I hastened to pull his bunk into the shadow. But he sat up and looked around him in bewilderment.

"Frank, how are you feeling?" I asked anxiously.

Another screech drowned my words.

"It sounded like a—like . . ." Frank started to say.

"Like what?"

"I don't know. It's very familiar, Doc, but I can't seem to place it."

"You know me then?" I questioned.

"Of course, Doc. Why shouldn't I?"

"Has he come out of that conditioned state, Doc?" Mitch asked.

"Conditioned, Mitch?" queried Frank.

"You know me then too?" said the engineer.

"Why not? Where are we? And who left that hatch open? The sun's rays can be dangerous out here."

"Out here?" I questioned gently.

"In space." Frank looked puzzled. "Isn't that where we are? But what ship is this?"

Frank's voice was normal now, but worried. His hand was no longer cold, his pulse was quicker. It seemed as though the conditioning had really worn off.

"There are a lot of things I must explain to you, Frank," I said.

Then I told him, as gently as I could, that more than a year had elapsed since we had last seen him. Of how he had spent that time on Mars in a conditioned state after crashing in one of our freighters in the Lacus Solis. As he began piecing together events as he remembered them, he came suddenly to a blank.

"You and Mitch were in that Martian sphere," he said slowly, "and I flew over the Lacus Solis and saw you, and then—and then . . ."

The by now familiar screeching interrupted him.

"There's that noise again," he continued. "I've heard it before. Many times. The wreck—No 2, I mean . . ."

"That has something to do with that noise?" asked Mitch.

"No, Mitch. I went back to it—the wreck, I mean. Alone."

"But how could you?" I queried.

"I distinctly remember I did, Doc, and I tried to call somebody. And then . . . that's all I remember about that. The next thing I knew I was at Polar Base trying to contact Earth. It was most important that I contact Earth. I had a message—a most important message. I had to get through. There wasn't much time."

"We heard your call, Frank," I said.

"You did?" said Frank in astonishment. "But where from?"

"I'll explain later. What was the message?"

Once again the 'noise' started up and seemed to jog his memory.

"The Fleet!" he exclaimed, "that was it—the Fleet!"

"You thought you were still in the original Fleet during our first trip here?" asked Mitch.

"No, not our Fleet. The Martian Fleet. That was it. I had to warn Control."

"What did you have to warn Earth about?" I asked.

"About the invasion," Frank said firmly. "Yes, Doc, I remember now. I had to tell them that the main invasion fleet had left and was already on its way to Earth."

"Good God!" Mitch exclaimed, "are you certain? How did you find out?"

"All I remember now is that I knew it *was* leaving and that I had to warn somebody," said Frank.

"Frank," I said urgently, "you must think hard. For a year you have been in the hands of the Martians, in a conditioned state. Obeying their orders, working for them in some way. You must have vital information that we need—that must be passed on to Earth as soon as possible.

Tell us what you've been doing. Where you've been—how and where you found out about the Martian Fleet."

Frank was silent for a moment. Then he shook his head. "It's no good, Doc. I can't remember any more than I've told you. Could I have something to eat, Doc? I'm so hungry."

"I'm afraid we haven't anything," I had to say.

"Not even a flask of tea?"

"Not even that, I'm afraid."

"Doesn't the ship carry tea any more?" asked Frank almost peevishly.

"There's loads of it in the *Discovery*—but we're not in the *Discovery*, Frank."

"Where are we then?"

"I wish I knew. Now take it easy—when you've rested awhile I'll come and talk to you again."

At least Frank was back to near normal. It is strange how when a conditioned type is brought back to normal, he forgets everything that happened to him when he was in a conditioned state, although Frank did seem to remember going to Polar Base and trying to contact Earth. It seemed almost as if the conditioning had been wearing off and, while it was, he passed through short periods of normality when he remembered the things he did when he *was* normal—remembered us, Polar Base, the land trucks.

"I suppose this business of not remembering is all part of the Martian plan," said Mitch. "A conditioned type up here remembers nothing of being brought here, or of Earth for that matter—except what the Martians want him to believe."

"While they're up here they believe they *are* on Earth."

"So any conditioned types who are sent back to Earth would lose all memory of having been to Mars if they suddenly reverted to normal—very handy."

"I see what you mean," I replied. "But how would they account for the years they'd been away?"

"Loss of memory. You read such things in the newspapers often. And, of course, that's the safeguard. Any spies or fifth column landed on Earth will carry out their orders to a T—so long as they remain conditioned. If the conditioning leaves them, the Martians have got nothing

to worry about, as they'd never remember they'd ever been to Mars."

"But if they went back to Mars it would be a different story?" I said.

"I doubt very much if any of them ever make the trip twice. It must . . ."

The 'noise' came on again. Why? I wondered. And what had happened to Jet and Lemmy? I was getting really worried about them now.

This time Frank sat up suddenly and got off his bunk.

"That noise . . ." he said. "I know now what it reminds me of."

"What?" I asked eagerly.

"A huge—well—a control room," said Frank slowly.

"Where?"

"I don't know. But lots of other men were there. Dozens of them. We were all seated at control desks."

"What were you controlling?" questioned Mitch.

"I can't remember. We manipulated the controls according to orders. And something I was handling always produced that kind of noise."

"Was it a ship, Frank? A sphere, maybe—a Martian sphere. The kind you saw on the top of the pyramid in the canal out on the Argyre desert—and again on one of the pyramids in the Lacus Solis."

"No—not exactly." He paused. "I seem to remember a sphere of some kind though, but a huge one. It needed a whole army of men to run it. We even lived in it."

Suddenly Frank looked around the room.

"I've—I've been here before," he said haltingly. "Or somewhere like it. There were beds in it—just like those."

"Where was it? Try to remember, Frank," I urged.

"That's it!" he said suddenly. "It was in a place like this that we slept when we weren't on duty."

"On duty?"

"At those control tables."

"Have a good look round, Frank," I said. "Maybe the sight of a few more familiar objects will bring more things back to your mind."

"Yes," said Frank thoughtfully, "yes, it's beginning to

come back. That hatch," he said pointing to the circular hole in the floor, "it leads downstairs?"

"That's right. But it won't open. Jet and Lemmy went down there just before it closed. We've heard nothing from them since."

"And that astro-dome up there," went on Frank, "does it give you a clear view of what's outside?"

"Yes."

"Is it barren out there?"

"Just like the Earth's moon—only a lot rougher and on a smaller scale."

"An asteroid!" The word burst out of him. "That's what we're on."

"Not one of the Martian moons?" I asked.

"Not if I'm remembering correctly."

"But what would we be doing on an asteroid?" Mitch asked.

"The Martians control them—live in them," Frank said with a sudden rush of words. "That's why you never see a Martian on Mars. They spend most of their time between here and Jupiter in the asteroidal belt."

"How can they possibly live on asteroids?" objected Mitch.

"They don't live on them, Mitch—they live *in* them," Frank replied.

"You mean under this floor—somewhere at the bottom of these stairs is a Martian?"

"Almost certainly. I understand there's at least one Martian on every asteroid. He captains it."

"And what about the Earthmen. People like you were?" I asked.

"They're the crew. They run them. This is a great spaceship. The Martians can propel these things through space."

"A spaceship!" I exclaimed. "Do they visit Earth, Frank?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because Jet and Lemmy saw exactly the kind of thing you are describing hovering over the Earth. Great spaceship carriers, carrying spheres which landed on Earth,

dropped a number of personnel and then returned to the mother ship again."

"I know nothing about that, Doc."

"But you were on one—or so you think?"

"Yes, but I don't remember ever going anywhere near Earth. I did my turn of duty at the panel and slept in a place rather like this."

"Well have a good look round," I said. "See if you're reminded of anything else."

I was convinced that if only Frank's memory could be jogged enough by seeing or hearing things with which he had been familiar when in a conditioned state, he would be able to furnish us with invaluable information, and even, I hoped, be the means of our finding Jet and Lemmy.

You can imagine our astonishment when we heard an Irish voice calling us by name.

"Are you there, Doctor Matthews and Mr Mitchell?"

"Who are you?" I exclaimed, looking round.

"The name is Flynn—Paddy Flynn. If you will just obey my instructions I hope soon to have the pleasure of meeting you."

"But what of Jet and Lemmy," I asked, "where are they?"

"They are here with me. Just do as I say and you'll soon be with them."

'Paddy' told us that when the hatch in the floor opened we were to descend the spiral staircase. Was it some kind of trap? But anything was better than sitting here for ever.

"Better take your suit, Mitch," I whispered, "and watch your step."

"You bet," he answered. "It seems that even the walls have ears in this place."

As instructed, we followed the route Jet and Lemmy had taken, until we reached the fifth door, which slid open as we approached. We stepped inside and with a whine the door closed, leaving us enclosed in the box-like compartment. Then there was another whine and the door on the other side slid open.

We walked through it and there, sitting at a table piled high with food and drink of all kinds, were Jet and Lemmy.



Never had I been so pleased to see anyone in my life! "Come on in, Doc, and get some food," Jet called out. "You must be starving. You too, Mitch, and Frank. Then we'll tell you all about it."

A dark curly-haired figure now came forward to greet us. "Welcome to Asteroid 734," he said with a smile.

"Oh—er—Doc, this is Paddy," said Lemmy with his mouth full. "Paddy meet Doc—and Mitch—and Frank."

I did not know what to make of it all, but I was soon enjoying a hearty meal. And it was after this that I heard how Jet and Lemmy had found their way to this place and been greeted most hospitably by Paddy Flynn. On hearing that we three had remained upstairs Paddy had immediately volunteered to call us down. He had meant to talk to us all before, he assured Jet, but he had had so much to do in another part of the ship that he had had to open up the hatch and hope that we'd come down of our own accord. Then he had gone into what he called the 'control room' next door and called us up.

"But I still don't understand," I said, looking at Paddy, "who you are and what you are doing here."

"Now that's an odd question to ask a man," answered Paddy. "What are any Earthmen doing up here?"

"But you're not conditioned—or are you? You don't sound like it."

Paddy laughed. "I have a strong mind, Doctor," he said. "The Martians did their best, but Paddy Flynn has a will of his own. Nobody conditions *him*."

"Then what *are* you doing here?" Lemmy asked. "On the asteroid? This is a Martian asteroid, isn't it?"

"It is to be sure," replied Paddy, "or perhaps I should say it was. The Martians think they control it—but they don't."

"Then who does?" asked Jet.

"Well, there's two of us—Jack Evans and myself."

"Is that all? Then there can't be much to control."

"Oh but there's all manner of things," said Paddy indignantly.

"Does this asteroid ever approach close to the Earth?" I asked.

"It never has yet," came the reply, "but it will do soon."

No 734 is only one of a whole fleet of asteroids—all bound for Earth."

"What!" We were all startled now.

"Yes. The invasion fleet. That's why we're in it. Jack and me want to go back to Earth, too, that's why we're aboard. This is the only chance we'll ever have to go back."

The Martian invasion fleet, a fleet commanded by a cocky self-assured Irishman! It was difficult to swallow. Question after question we fired at Paddy. He answered them as best he could, and as he talked Frank's recollections of the period he had spent on the asteroid came flooding back.

"I remember now," he said. "This isn't just an asteroid. It's a flying city. About a hundred and fifty people live on it. All of them conditioned types, trained to receive orders. Though where they come from I *can't* remember."

"From a place like this," said Paddy. "I give orders myself. Of course, I receive them from somewhere else in the first place. From what you might call the nerve centre."

"From inside the asteroid?"

"Precisely."

"But what gives *you* the orders?" asked Jet.

"The Martian who is in charge of this asteroidal ship."

"But where is he?" "What does he look like?" "Is he human?" Our questions flowed thick and fast.

"Now wait a minute," Paddy said, "I don't even know whether we should say *he* or *she*."

"Surely you can tell by the voice?" I said in surprise.

"It's very high-pitched. You might call it feminine. But the things it says and the way it says them are distinctly masculine. He never speaks except to give an order."

"You say he's on this ship," said Jet. "Where?"

"In a room which none of us has ever entered," said Paddy slowly.

"Why not?"

"There's no way in. There are notices to keep out pasted on the door—on pain of death."

"Then how can you be sure there is anyone behind it?" asked Jet.

"It's well known that a Martian dwells in every asteroid.

Some say more, two or three. They give the orders to trusties like Jack and me."

"And those orders are passed on to the conditioned crew who carry them out," added Frank.

We learnt that though he received orders from them, Paddy had never seen a Martian; as far as he knew they never came out of their private rooms. He had no idea of how they lived or what they looked like. As regards the running of the ship, he told us that all food carried aboard was grown on Mars. When it ran out the ship drew near to the planet and the spheres were released to pick up more. Also to pick up new personnel and send back old ones, for, it seemed, no man could remain conditioned for ever. The conditioning gradually wore off, but before this happened the men were returned to the Lacus Solis where there was a regular training school for conditioned personnel. Occasionally the conditioning wore off completely and the subject became immune. Then they had the choice of throwing in their lot with the Martians or working in one of the factories on the planet almost as slaves.

"So you threw your lot in with the Martians?" said Jet.

"They treat you well if you do," answered Paddy shortly.

"Then why are you treating *us* so well? We hold no brief for the Martians."

There was a pause, then Paddy blurted out:

"The fact is, Captain, you are looking at a rebel. So long as I knew there was no chance of getting back to Earth I did as I was told. But now there's the invasion. A whole fleet of asteroids just like this one is about to leave for Earth."

"Just *how* many of these asteroids are there?" Jet asked.

"Dozens of them—hundreds for all I know."

"And all the men on them are to land on Earth?"

"Oh no," answered Paddy. "Normal types—like me—are not allowed to. And only a selected few of the conditioned types will actually make the landing."

"And what do they do when they get there?" queried Jet.

"Nobody's told me that."

"But where does the rebellion come in then?" objected

Lemmy. "Seems to me that things are going exactly the way the Martians want them to."

"Ah," said Paddy, "that's where you come in."

"How do we make any difference?" I asked.

Before Paddy could answer another of the terrible screechings rent the air.

"Sorry," said Paddy. "But I have to leave you for a moment."

"Where are you going?" asked Jet.

"That din. It's section four—air conditioning—happens about every hour. Excuse me, I'll be back directly. The men down there can't do a thing unless I order them to." He hurried out.

"What do you make of all this, Doc?" Jet asked me.

"I don't know, Jet," I said slowly.

Suddenly a new and frightening noise hit us.

"Look at the wall!" I yelled, pointing to the far side of the room. "It's . . ." The wall seemed to have dissolved into thin air, and we were looking into a vast control room with hundreds of men in boiler suits sitting at tables. One of them got up and walked towards us.

"What are your orders?" His voice came to us loud and clear.

"We have no orders," stated Jet firmly. "Who are you? I said—who are you?"

The man took no notice of the question. "Orders received and understood," he said, walking back to his place.

"What's he talking about? Nobody gave him any orders," said Lemmy.

"What is going on?" Jet asked. "Either he's stone deaf or he deliberately *chose* to ignore us."

"I'm going after him," said Mitch. "If I tap him on the shoulder he'll just have to take notice of us."

"Careful, Mitch," said Lemmy. "Mind that wall doesn't reappear with you on the other side of it."

Mitch walked forward, then came to a sudden stop.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, holding his head. "There *is* a wall here, and I walked slap into it. It's solid but invisible. Feel it—go on, feel it."

"That's not a wall," Jet said suddenly. "It's a giant

televiwer screen—three-dimensional. And in colour. It's so realistic it completely fooled us."

"Then who was that foreman chap talking to?" asked Lemmy. "He was looking straight at us."

"He was, in fact, looking at the camera that picked up his picture," replied Jet. "That made him appear to look at us."

Just then the picture faded and the wall appeared normal again. I tapped it. It seemed solid as a rock, but when you stood back a bit you could make out the shape of the 'screen' and see that it was a little darker than the rest of the wall. Another whining noise, and Paddy reappeared from the door which led into the control room.

"Sorry for the interruption, gentlemen. But certain things have to be attended to," he said.

"Next time you play any of those Wizard of Oz tricks you might warn us," complained Lemmy.

"What Lemmy is trying to say, Paddy," put in Jet, "is that the moment you left, the wall over there disappeared and a three-dimensional picture took its place."

"Oh *that*," said Paddy. "Just a televiwer, that's all."

"With a three-dimensional screen the size of a wall?"

"But I thought televiwers were common things on Earth and that you even carried them in your ship—the *Discovery*?"

"We do," said Jet. "But the main televiwer is only three foot square and gives a flat, two-dimensional picture."

"Well that surprises me, I must say," remarked Paddy. "I understand that since I left the place great scientific progress had been made down on Earth."

"And when was that?"

Paddy looked sheepish. "That's the funny thing, I can never quite remember."

"But you must remember *something*?" I said.

"Oh I do," said Paddy hastily. "It's just that my memory is apt to get confused like. If you'd spent as long drifting around the solar system in this asteroid as *I* have, you'd be confused, too."

"But where did you live?" I asked.

"In Ireland. Er—Dublin," answered Paddy. "When I

lie in bed," he went on almost to himself, "I see green fields. There's nothing like it on Mars."

"Is that how you remember Dublin?" put in Lemmy, "as green fields? He'll be saying he was picking flowers in Piccadilly Circus next."

"Can't you recall anything else?" I asked.

"The railroad I was helping to build. There were hundreds of us. I can remember the names but I can never remember their faces."

"Where were you building this railroad?" I enquired.

"That I can't remember. But we lived in a special train. As the track got longer the train moved up. We always lived at end-of-line. I was a grading supervisor. You know—levelling out the ground the track was to be laid on."

"What kind of equipment were you using?"

"Picks and shovels—and dynamite," came the reply.

"No bulldozers?" asked Lemmy in surprise.

"I was a railroad builder, not a farmer," said Paddy indignantly.

It was evident Paddy had never heard of a bulldozer. Nor had he seen a televiewer before he left Earth. I questioned him further. He spoke of steam engines and had never heard of a diesel engine, a helicopter, atomic power or any of the other discoveries and inventions of the twentieth century. Another of the asteroidal 'noises' brought our conversation to an end, and Paddy made for the door. "I'll be back soon. Stay here—don't leave this room."

"Do you think he really remembers anything about Earth?" asked Mitch.

"Yes, he does," I said slowly. "But he's talking of a time so long ago it's a wonder he remembers anything at all."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean that all his memories of Earth date back a hundred years or more."

"Oh blimey," exclaimed Lemmy, "we'll be meeting Cleopatra next."

"But he's hoping to go back to Earth," said Mitch.

"You know what will happen the moment he sets foot on Earth?" I added.

"He'll revert to his true age."

"Precisely."

"And what about the rest of the fellahs on this ship," exclaimed Lemmy. "How old are they?"

The whine of the door sounded.

"Sh—Lemmy," I said, "it's him."

Paddy seemed excited. "It's come at last," he cried as he entered the room. "We'll have to work fast now."

"What for?" enquired Jet.

"We're getting under way. We have to join the main fleet." He waved his hands triumphantly. "We're going back to Earth—back home!"

## 9

**I**N THE light of what I had just been saying, Paddy's enthusiasm was pathetic.

"Paddy, have you made the trip before?" asked Jet suddenly.

"No," he answered, "but I know one of the men on an asteroid that has. To pick up new personnel. It's him that tells me of what's going on down there."

"Did your friend ever actually land on the home planet?"

"No—the men who land on Earth are highly conditioned. If they weren't, there'd be no guarantee they'd ever come back."

"Then how do *you* propose to make a landing?"

"I've got it all worked out," said Paddy. "All I have to do is to carry out the orders I receive from the Martians until we reach Earth, or as near to Earth as the asteroids ever go. When the time comes to transfer the selected crews to the spheres—the ones that will actually land on Earth—the crew of one of them will not be selected personnel at all, but us. You and me and Jack Evans—of course. Oh, what a surprise for the folks back home when I turn up after all these years."

"Just how many years do you think it is?" I asked quietly.

"Oh—er—I don't know exactly. I've made six trips in this asteroid. And they usually last about nine months."

"And what about the time before you began making them?"

"That's the funny thing," said Paddy uncertainly. "I don't remember anything about that."

"If you were conditioned that would explain why you don't," I said.

Paddy looked indignant. "Paddy Flynn is not the type that can be conditioned. I told you, when they tried it, I laughed at them."

One of the many peculiar asteroidal noises came again.

"Oh, dear," said Paddy, "there it goes again. It's going to be like this all the time now." Hastily he moved across to the door.

Where he had gone and why we had no idea. Yet, in spite of his odd behaviour, I felt somehow that we could trust this strange Irishman. I was certain that although he was, mercifully, quite unaware of it, he had been away from Earth too long for him ever to be able to return. Perhaps it was this knowledge that made me feel sympathetic towards him.

As we waited, I wondered if we would ever get back to Mars where, presumably, our own spaceship still stood lonely and deserted? Or would the *Discovery* remain, for all time, empty of human life, an ironic monument to all we hoped to achieve when we set out on our second trip to the Red Planet? Was Control, even now, still trying to call us? Was the urgent voice of the radio operator echoing round the empty crew cabin? Or was the speaker already silent and all hope of contact now abandoned?

Paddy's mistaken belief that he would soon see his beloved green hills of Ireland had seemed, at the time, only a personal tragedy for him. But now I began to wonder if any of us would ever again see Earth. We were completely cut off from home; helpless intruders on an alien world—a world, for all we knew, peopled by beings who, although our destiny lay in their hands, we might never even see.

There were so many questions we wanted to ask Paddy. Why did he have to keep going into that other room?



Where was this Jack Evans? Where did we join the main fleet, and when? What about the Martian who was supposed to be on board? If we did try to take over the ship, surely he would stop us. Did he know we were here? Was he even at this moment looking at us and laughing up his sleeve at our puny efforts to escape? Escape?—the prospect of this grew dimmer and dimmer.

"Paddy's our only hope," said Jet firmly at the end of an hour. "We've got to find him."

"There must be some kind of intercommunication system in this place," I suggested. "How else could he have spoken to us when we were on our way down here?"

Jet marched towards the door through which Paddy had disappeared and pressed the control panel. "We'll have to do a little exploring," he said.

The door slid open and revealed a small room, empty except for a complicated control table of some kind above which was set a small television screen. Of Paddy there was no sign. We pressed a button which obviously operated another door at the far end of the room, but nothing happened.

Then a sudden noise set us whirling round towards the control table. There sat Frank, manipulating various knobs, and above him on the television screen was a picture of the big hall we had passed through on our way to meet Paddy.

"Frank," I said in astonishment, "have you operated one of these things before?"

"Yes, Doc. The more I handle it the more familiar it seems. It's a sort of vision phone. Although you can see the person you're talking to, he can't see you. But he can hear you—if you want him to."

"Hey," cried Lemmy, "I can hear that singing again, Jet."

The sound of men's voices echoed through the room. And then suddenly we saw the singers. Into the picture on the televiewer marched an army of men. Dressed in what looked like boiler suits, they marched methodically across the great hall. I couldn't make out all the words of the song, but one line kept cropping up: 'Green Hills. Back to the Green Hills of Earth'.

That was what Paddy had been looking forward to. Green fields and hills. But what did it all add up to?

They passed out of sight.

"Can you get a different view on that thing, Frank?" asked Jet urgently.

Frank fiddled with some knobs and the picture changed. At first we couldn't make out what we were looking at. Then it dawned on me. It was the barren rocky surface of the asteroid with, in the distance, one of the domes which housed the sleeping quarters such as we had been in. I looked up at the sky.

"Good heavens," I exclaimed, "look at the stars! They're dipping below the horizon. At a tremendous rate too. This asteroid must be rotating."

"There's only one reason I can think of," said Jet grimly. "We must be moving. We must be on our way to join the main Martian Fleet."

"Can you rotate that camera, Frank?" I asked.

"I'll try, Doc."

He turned a knob and suddenly we saw Mars moving across the sky. There was no doubt about it. We were on the move.

"Where the hell is Paddy?" The question exploded from Jet's lips. "We've got to find him. We've got to find out from him if there's any way of getting in touch with Earth from here. After all, they must use radio sets of some kind. We've got to warn Earth that the invasion is about to start."

I reflected a moment. The only place Paddy could have gone was through the door on the far side of the wall. The one which we couldn't open. Then another thought struck me. Maybe that door wouldn't open unless the other one—the one we had come through—was shut. Rather like the airlock of the *Discovery*. It was worth trying. I pressed the panel and shut the door.

"Try that other door now, Jet," I said. He pressed the panel and to our excitement it slid open.

"Now we try to find Paddy," said Jet. "Frank will stay and keep working on that control table. From here it's probably possible to look at and communicate with every

part of this asteroid. Do you think you can manage that, Frank?"

"I think so, Jet," answered Frank. "All we have to do is remember which combination of controls produces which pictures."

"Hullo," Jet exclaimed suddenly as Frank touched a knob and the picture changed, "what's that?"

We were looking once again at the big control room we had seen on the huge television screen in the other room. As we watched, the foreman—the one who had asked for orders before—came walking towards the camera.

"What are your orders?"

Jet answered him. "You can hear me?"

"I can hear you," said the monotonous sing-song voice.

"There are no orders at present," said Jet. "Carry on."

I expected the man to walk back to his place, but he stood facing the camera, a puzzled look on his face.

"Frank, turn it off," Jet said quickly. "He didn't seem to respond."

"Because he got no orders?" queried Lemmy.

"No. The voice was strange to him."

"He expected to hear Paddy, you mean?" I said.

"You should have asked me to talk to him," said Lemmy putting on a good imitation of Paddy's thick brogue.

"As I was saying, Frank," went on Jet, "if this contraption *can* pick up any part of the asteroid you should be able to follow us up when we leave here."

"I'll do my best."

"Mitch will stay with you. Doc, Lemmy and I will see what we can find."

The corridor seemed endless. Fortunately it was well lit, which led us to the conclusion that it must have been one of those in constant use. Occasionally we passed openings in the wall of the corridor and could see the same kind of narrow spiral stairways that were to be found in the great hall, but as these were in darkness we made no attempt to descend them. After an hour we had seen no sign of any living thing, nor heard anything save our own voices and footsteps.

Then suddenly we came to a T-junction and paused, undecided which way to go. In the end we turned left

and had hardly walked a few steps before we heard Mitch's voice.

"Hey, Jet—Jet . . . Can you hear us?"

"Yes, Mitch. Can you hear us?"

"*And see you,*" replied the engineer. "Frank's really got the hang of this control panel now. We've been tuning in to all manner of things. There are five cameras up on the surface—three on the equator and one at each pole. There's no part of the heavens we can't bring into view."

"What else?"

"There are three other great halls besides the one we passed through, and we've been able to locate the living quarters that each of them connects with."

"And we've discovered how to look in on that control room without attracting the attention of the conditioned type in charge," put in Frank. "He'll only come running over to the camera if the sound system is switched on."

"That's a great comfort," remarked Lemmy. "I wonder who's watching *us*—without *our* knowing it."

"We looked through miles of corridors before we finally caught up with you," Mitch went on.

"What about Paddy?" I asked.

"No sign of him, Doc. I've looked next door twice but he hasn't turned up yet."

"Well, keep us in your picture if you can," said Jet, "with the sound system on. We must come to something soon."

"OK," answered Mitch.

We had hardly turned the next corner when a noise like an alarm bell made us jump.

"What on earth is that?" exclaimed Jet. "That's a new one."

"It's coming from round the next corner," I said.

Cautiously we rounded the bend.

"Go back!" said a voice. It was high-pitched, almost metallic. Like no voice I had ever heard on Earth. Cold shivers went down our spines.

"Who was that?" asked Lemmy in a scared whisper.

"*No crew personnel are allowed in this section. Go back immediately,*" came the clipped precise tones.

I suddenly thought of what Paddy had said. The Martian! That's who it must be.

"Go back," repeated the voice. "*No crew personnel are allowed in this section. Go back immediately.*"

"You said that before" remarked Lemmy.

"*It is forbidden to come any further.*"

"Hullo," said Jet. "Can you hear me?"

"Go back," said the Martian.

"Hullo—who are you?"

"*It is forbidden to go any further.*"

"Well, I'm not turning back," stated Jet decidedly.

I called Mitch. "Hullo, Mitch. Can you hear us?"

Mitch could and he had heard 'the Martian' too.

"Listen, Mitch," said Jet. "Can that vision phone go on ahead of us?"

"I should think so. We've been following you easily enough for the last ten minutes."

"Then take a look round that bend—see what's there," ordered Jet.

"Go back," repeated the Martian. "*Go back immediately.*"

"Who's he talking to now—us or Mitch?" wondered Lemmy.

"Hullo, Jet," called Mitch. "We've followed the corridor on round the bend. Can't see anything out of the ordinary."

"How far ahead are you?"

"About thirty yards."

"All right. We'll move on. You keep that distance ahead of us. If you see anything that spells danger, let us know before we reach it."

"*No crew personnel are allowed in this section—go back immediately.*"

"Come on," said Jet, moving forward.

"You heard what that geezer said . . ." Lemmy protested.

"Come on."

We went on. Round the next bend and the next. There was nothing but the same smooth curving corridor.

"Still clear ahead," came Mitch's voice.

"We haven't heard that voice for some minutes now," I said.

"He's getting ready to do us—that's why," said Lemmy lugubriously.

"Attention!"

We froze in our steps.

"What did I say?" exclaimed Lemmy.

"*You have ignored the order not to proceed. Personnel proceeding beyond this point do so at their own peril.*"

"Hullo—can you hear me?" called Jet.

"Go back."

"I said 'Can you hear me?'"

"Go back."

"The least you can do, mate, is answer a civil question," said Lemmy indignantly.

"*You have ignored the order not to proceed.*"

"Why does he keep saying the same old things?" I said.

"It sounds to me as though he just keeps repeating the same orders at regular intervals," said Jet.

"We go on then?" I enquired.

"Yes."

Our footsteps echoed through the silent corridor.

"Hey, Jet," called Mitch suddenly. "Jet—can you hear me?"

"What's up, Mitch?"

"You'll soon be coming to the end of this corridor. It leads to a wall with a door in it. Like most of the doors we've seen here up to now. Big, hefty and, I should think, airtight."

"Is that where his nibs is?" asked Lemmy.

"How should I know?" answered Mitch. "But take it easy, fellahs. You'll be there soon."

"*This is the last warning.*"

"Who are you?" asked Jet. "Where are you? Why don't you answer us?"

"Go back."

We had turned another corner and there before us was the door that Mitch had seen.

"*This is your last opportunity to return to your quarters.*"

"We have no quarters on this ship, mate—we're stow-aways," said the irrepressible Lemmy.

"Wait here," said Jet softly. "I'm going to examine that

door. If anything *should* happen it's best that it happens to only one of us."

"Watch it, Jet," called Mitch.

"*This is the last warning,*" repeated the high-pitched voice.

We watched anxiously as Jet walked slowly towards the door. We could see no way of opening it, no control or panel of any kind. Jet was very close to it now.

"Go back."

"Perhaps I would if you answered my questions. Who are you?"

"Go back."

"No."

Warning sounds.

Jet was at the door now. He stretched out his hand to feel its surface when an insistent human voice suddenly came over the speaker system.

"Captain Morgan—Captain Morgan!" it called urgently.

"Paddy!" I cried.

"Don't touch that door," yelled Paddy. "Don't touch that door!"

But his warning came too late. Jet had already made contact with the door. Immediately he recoiled with a stifled cry and to our horror fell to the floor senseless.

## 10

NOTHING I could do would rouse Jet.

"He must have received some kind of shock when he touched that door," I said.

"An electric shock, you mean?"

"Something like that."

"Hullo, Doc." It was Mitch calling. "Is Jet all right——"

The whine of an opening door interrupted him. I heard Lemmy gasp.

"Look out, Doc! The door—behind you."

I wheeled round and there emerging from a concealed doorway we had not noticed before, was—Paddy!

"Oh dear, I told him not to touch that door. Pick him up and follow me."

"What's happened to him?" asked Lemmy. "Will he be all right?"

"Of course he will," said Paddy. "Though why he had to go and touch that door beats me. Didn't you hear Nicholas give you a last warning?"

"Nicholas?" I questioned.

"The Martian," said Paddy in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Come on, Lemmy," I said. "Pick Jet up and let's get out of here. But for goodness sake mind that door."

"Oh it wouldn't matter now anyway," said Paddy. "The shock apparatus switches itself off just as soon as I get here. It's like this, Doc. No asteroidal personnel are supposed to come along here. If they do, they get these warnings to turn back. If they get as far as the door it comes alive, a warning sounds all over the ship and I come running up here to get the victim."

"Victim?" Lemmy queried in alarm.

"I call him that because by the time I get here he's usually touched the door and flat on his back like Captain Morgan is. But there have been only two. They never do it again and the next time we touch down on Mars they're taken off the asteroids and put to work in the factories."

"Why?" asked Lemmy.

"Because no fully conditioned personnel would dare disobey Nick's orders."

"Have you ever tried it, Paddy?" I asked.

"I've got better sense. If just touching it can lay you out, what must be the result of going inside?"

"Then you've no idea what's in there?"

"Nicholas. He's in there. I told you, there's a Martian on every asteroid and that's where he lives."

"But as he never comes out, and you've never seen him, how can you be sure he's in there?" asked Lemmy.

"You heard him talking, didn't you?"

"That's not proof," Lemmy pointed out.

"He certainly didn't reply to any of our questions," I added.

"Martians don't answer questions. They give orders—"



and they expect them to be obeyed. Nick's in there all right. You can take it from me."

On Paddy's instructions we took Jet to what he called the sick bay and laid him on one of the empty beds. He told us that the shock would wear off after about half an hour and that Jet would suffer no ill effects. I asked Paddy why he had left us alone so long.

"I didn't intend to be away so long," he replied. "Fact is, after I left you I was called down to the main control room. I had to get the ship under way."

We must have looked alarmed for he continued: "Yes, we've been travelling through space for more than two hours. We're on our way to join the main fleet."

"And when do we meet them?" I asked.

"I dunno. But you can bet your life it won't be long from now. Maybe in thirty-six or forty-eight hours. And then, when the whole fleet is assembled, we start out for Earth. But don't worry—I'm sure neither Nicholas nor any other Martian knows of our plan."

"Paddy," I said. "We don't care if *we* never get back to Earth. What we've got to do is prevent the invasion taking place."

"But you can never stop them now," said Paddy. "Nothing can."

Maybe Paddy was right, but we had to try and do *something*. To my relief Jet came round about fifteen minutes later. He didn't seem to have come to any physical harm. I could find no ill effects whatsoever.

He soon forgot all about it when he learned the news that the asteroid was on its way to join the rest of the Martian invasion fleet. He bombarded Paddy with questions, but the Irishman could tell him nothing more than he had already told us. He didn't even know in which direction we were travelling. All he knew with certainty was that as soon as we had kept our rendezvous with the other asteroids that formed the Fleet we would be on our way to Earth.

We soon realised that Paddy really knew little other than his duties aboard the asteroid which consisted merely of passing on the orders received from the Martian. Every-

thing on the ship was so designed that it could be controlled by a man with the most elementary training.

But there was a lot we could find out for ourselves, and the first thing we wanted to discover was how fast we were travelling and in what direction.

So we returned to the great televiewer room where Mitch and Frank were and projected a picture of the asteroid's surface and the surrounding sky on to the screen.

The three-dimensional picture was so realistic that it was difficult to believe we were not gazing at the fascinating scene through a great hole in the wall. As the asteroid rotated, once every four hours or so, we saw the whole heavens revolving. Mars, the Earth and Jupiter, with his thirteen attendant moons, all passed across the screen in their turn. We watched the awe-inspiring picture for hours and, with the aid of improvised instruments, hasty calculations and, I must admit, not a little guesswork, finally arrived at a rough estimate of our speed and position.

"Sixty thousand miles an hour!" gasped Mitch. "That's fantastic."

"Only twice as fast as the speed *Discovery* was capable of," pointed out Jet.

"Yet I hardly noticed any acceleration," I put in.

"It was too gradual," said Jet. "It must have taken us hours to reach the final speed. The *Discovery* does it in minutes."

Our course gave us an even greater shock. Admittedly our calculations were far from accurate, but it was quite definite that we were heading in exactly the opposite direction from Earth: probably towards Jupiter.

"You mean we're not going back to Earth at all?" asked Paddy in dismay. Then his face cleared. "We must be heading for the asteroidal belt," he said. "Maybe there's a new ship just been completed like this one. It takes ten years to dig into an asteroid this size, install all the equipment and convert it into a ship."

"You mean every time the Martians need a new ship they convert a minor planet from the asteroidal belt?" asked Mitch in astonishment.

"Yes," said Paddy. "The Martians have to live some-

where. Their own planet can't support them any more—at least, not on the surface. Or so I've been told."

"And when did they get the idea of colonising the Earth?" I asked.

"They've been getting ready for it for years—long before I got here." A thought struck him. "Maybe the invasion fleet is assembling in the asteroidal belt," he added.

"If they are, there's no guarantee that *this* asteroid is going with them," said Jet. "The fact is you're not sure where this ship is going. For all you know the invasion fleet has already left."

"But . . ." Paddy tried to say.

"And if it has we must warn Earth. This thing carries a radio, doesn't it?"

"Not that I've ever seen. Nobody here ever has need of one. The only people I ever communicate with are on the ship and I can speak and see them over the intercommunication system."

"Where does that Martian get *his* orders from?" put in Lemmy.

Paddy didn't answer.

"They must come either from another asteroid—or Mars itself," said Jet.

"But if they do, Nicholas's radio machine must be where *he* is."

"Fat chance *we* have of using it—even if we know how to operate it," said Mitch.

"What do we do then?" asked Lemmy. "Build one for ourselves?"

"We have a perfectly good radio in the *Discovery*," Jet said slowly.

"But that's down in the Mare Australis—on Mars," exclaimed Paddy.

Jet turned on him sharply. "Paddy, you've got to reverse this ship and head back to the Red Planet."

"But only Nicholas knows how to do that," Paddy stammered. "Nicholas receives his orders from outside, and then decides what orders *he* has to give. He just spouts out a long string of instructions over the intercommunication system. But he doesn't tell me what they mean. I

don't know what results they will produce until it happens."

"But you must be familiar with some of them. The same type of instruction must produce the same result," Jet shot at him. "Can you remember any specific one?"

"I remember a few."

"Well, could you *stop* this thing?" asked Jet impatiently.

"Er—yes, I could," said Paddy hesitatingly.

"Then do it," said Jet.

Once again Paddy stared at him blankly. "Well, *I* don't do it exactly . . ." he stuttered. "What happens, you see, is Nicholas comes on, tells me to stop the ship, and I tune into main control. Tell them to stand by. Then I press the little button in the control panel—here."

As he did this we heard the high-pitched metallic voice of 'the Martian'.

"Control Section One. Operator 2D. Panel A—red depress. Panel A—blue depress. Panel C—green release. Operator B. Panel G—red depress."

"The orders you hear now would slow the ship down," Paddy explained.

"Is that a recording?" I asked.

"Of course," answered Paddy. "But recording or no recording, those conditioned types in the control section do whatever they hear him say."

"Can they hear him now?" queried Mitch.

"Oh no. He can't be heard beyond this room at the moment. The voice is reproduced on this recorder." Paddy indicated an instrument beside the control table.

"The next time Nicholas gives any orders I want you to record them—every one," said Jet. "By playing back the tapes we might get a clue as to how to control the ship. Now, have you anything else we can hear?"

"This is the stabilising procedure," said Paddy. He pressed another button and we heard another string of instructions. "And this, manning the bays where we keep the spheres—the ferry ships that go down to the Martian surface," explained Paddy. "Then there are shift change-over announcements. Sphere crew assembly. Oh, and this," he added, pressing another control.

This time we heard a lot of them singing the 'Green Hills of Earth', as we had heard them when they were marching through the great hall.

"Do you like it?" asked Paddy eagerly. "It's the rebel song. I composed it myself. You can't lead a rebellion and not have a rebel song," Paddy went on naively. "I have it played over to every part of the ship every day. I order the men to sing it whenever they are marching to or from their living quarters. And it's funny, you know. Nicholas doesn't seem to mind at all."

"Is everything the Martian would ever want to say already recorded?" went on Jet.

"Oh no. He sets speed and course and gives orders concerning anything else outside normal routine in his own voice," answered Paddy.

"Would you know how to set a course?"

"Oh no. It's far too complicated, and I don't do anything myself—unless ordered to."

"All right, Paddy," shot Jet suddenly. "Stop the ship."

Paddy looked confused.

"Go on—it's an order."

"But—but—Nicholas hasn't ordered it," stammered the Irishman. He was obviously frightened. "Terrible things might happen," he said. "I've never done anything without being told. I—I . . ."

"Frank," said Jet sharply, "tune in to Control Section."

Frank sat down at the control table and began to fiddle with the knobs. He soon had the Control Section on the screen, and the foreman in charge was already walking towards the camera.

"Tell him, Paddy, to stand by to slow down the ship and to stop," ordered Jet insistently.

Paddy shrank back. "I daren't," he quavered.

"What are you orders?" came the toneless conditioned voice of the foreman.

"Go on, Paddy. He's waiting."

"No—no." Paddy turned away. "You don't know what you're doing."

"What are your orders?" repeated the foreman.

Lemmy leaned forward suddenly. "Stand by to slow down ship," he said in a good imitation of Paddy's brogue.

The foreman looked puzzled. "Orders not understood," he said.

Lemmy repeated the order in Paddy's voice, and to our relief he answered: "Orders received and understood."

"That seems to have done the trick, but he seemed a little surprised," I said.

"At receiving the order or at hearing Lemmy's voice?" asked Jet.

"What do you mean 'my' voice?" said Lemmy indignantly. "That was supposed to be Paddy's."

"It wasn't the voice," put in Paddy. "It was what you said. All orders have to be given in the proper way. You should have said: 'Slowing down procedure, stand by'."

"Now which control gives the order, Paddy?" Jet asked relentlessly.

Paddy was really scared now, but he indicated a knob.

"That one."

Jet pressed the button.

"*Attention! Attention!*" It was the Martian voice. "*Control Section One—Operator 2A.*"

Fascinated we watched as an operator on the third table from the left sat up.

"*Panel F—green depress.*"

The man pressed a button on the panel in front of him.

"*Operator 3 C. Panel 3. Blue release.*"

Another man jumped to obey the command.

Suddenly I experienced a peculiar sensation. "Do you feel anything, Jet?" I asked quickly.

"A tendency to lean over to one side?" he queried. "We must be decelerating. It's working."

"*Operator 4D. Panel H—red release.*"

"I can hardly keep my feet," said Lemmy in alarm.

A low humming noise started up, gradually increasing in volume. The Martian continued his intricate orders, the men in the control room obeying blindly. I felt the room swaying. I looked over at Paddy. He was as white as a sheet.

"Paddy," I cried, "what's wrong?"

"The ship," he said with difficulty. "I think it's out of control. I've never felt this before," he said faintly.

"It's the deceleration. It must be extremely rapid," Jet said.

"This is—the first time—I've . . . ever . . . noticed it." Paddy could hardly speak now and fell hard against the chair in front of the control table, where he lay senseless. The vibration increased and I had to grasp the table to keep from falling as the floor seemed to come up to meet me.

"*Attention! Attention!*" The Martian voice cut through the confusion. "*Emergency!*"

"Oh, blimey! Then there must be something wrong," exclaimed Lemmy.

"You didn't think this was the normal course of events, did you, Lemmy? How's Paddy, Doc?" asked Jet anxiously.

I had managed to reach Paddy and was bending over him.

"I can't rouse him."

"*Attention, attention. Emergency. Emergency.*"

The vibration and the pressure increased.

"Lie down, all of you," yelled Jet. "Lie down!"

"*Operator 2A. Panel J.*"

I saw Lemmy slide across the floor and crash into the wall.

"*Operator 4B—panel C,*" continued the inhuman voice.

"Look out!" cried Mitch. "Hang on to something. We'll all be over soon."

I clutched at the table and caught a glimpse of the televiewer screen above me. In the control room all was confusion. Operators were sliding across the floor, desperately trying to keep their balance. A terrific weight seemed to press on my head. As in a dream, I heard the relentless voice continuing:

"*Operator 5C—panel D. Release. Operator 6F—panel B . . . release . . .*"

## 11

"*Attention! Attention! Emergency! Emergency.*"

The monotonously repeated words throbbed through my head. I opened my eyes. Lemmy was sitting next to me on the floor, and Mitch and Jet were trying to get up. Paddy still lay unconscious.

"You all right, Doc?" Jet asked.

"Yes, I think so," I replied, "but what's happened? The pressure seems to have gone down."

"*Attention! Attention!*" came the voice. "*Stabilising procedure to be put into operation immediately.*"

"We must have stopped being propelled," explained Jet. "We're now in a natural orbit round Mars, or the sun maybe."

"I'll get over and have a look at Paddy," I said.

"Be careful. It's not easy to walk. There seems to be hardly any gravity." The asteroid was rocking now like a ship in a heavy sea. Paddy opened his eyes as I gingerly approached him.

"How do you feel, Paddy?" I asked gently.

"It's my legs, Doc—and my back. I can't move . . ."

"Lie still. Don't try to move," I said. "You took a nasty fall."

"Stabilising procedure," he managed to whisper. "Tell Control Section."

Frank tuned in the televiewer and soon we saw a chaotic scene in the control room. Half the operators were on the floor, but as we watched the supervisor stood up and came over to the camera. "What are your orders?" he asked.

"Tell him," said Paddy with difficulty, "tell him . . . stabilising procedure—stand by."

Lemmy gave the order in Paddy's voice and pressed the appropriate control. The Martian voice droned out his orders.

"We'll be all right now," said Paddy. "The ship was rocking on her axis." He groaned. "There'll be the devil to pay for this. I told Captain Morgan it was dangerous to do anything without the Martian gave the order first."

"The procedure to stop the ship must be the same whoever gives the order," objected Jet.

"But how can we be sure, Jet?" I said. "Maybe that Martian has to carry out some kind of operation at the same time as the men in the control room. That's why it's so necessary for his orders to be followed and timed so accurately."

"*Attention! Attention!*"

Lemmy jumped. "Blimey, what again!"



*"All injured personnel are to be removed to sick quarters. Remainder of ship's crew are to remain at their posts until further notice. Damage to installations may be extensive. Nobody but injured personnel are to move about the ship. Remain where you are. Repeat. Remain where you are. Stand by."*

"If the ship's unfit to continue, we have to stop here until another asteroid comes to take off the crew during repairs," explained Paddy.

"And what happens to us?" asked Lemmy.

"You'll be taken back to Mars with the rest I imagine."

"As prisoners, Paddy?" queried Jet.

"Almost certainly. Unless the asteroid that comes here has rebels aboard like me. If not, you'll be conditioned and put to work."

His words were almost drowned by the familiar loud screeching noise.

"That's the warning that all airtight doors are to be closed," Paddy continued. "Inspection for damage is about to begin."

"You mean we can't get out of here?"

"Not until the inspection's over—it might take hours—days even."

"You've done enough talking," I said to Paddy. "I want to have a look at you."

The others discussed the situation. Jet felt badly about the whole thing, blaming himself for Paddy's injuries and those of the control room operators. But we could not undo what had been done. The question was what to do next. The Martian's attitude was what puzzled us most. Did he know that *we* had stopped the ship? Or even that we were on board? He seemed to be completely indifferent to everyone, but surely he would know that none of the conditioned crew of the ship would attempt to put the brakes on unless he ordered them to. Surely if he knew what we had done he would take steps to prevent us doing any further damage. Why didn't he?

"He's too busy finding out the extent of the damage, that's why," said Lemmy gloomily. "In any case, we can't escape."

*"Attention! Attention! Damage to the ship is super-*

*facial. But the voyage will not be continued. Number 734 will remain in its present orbit until asteroid 786 arrives."*

Paddy explained that asteroid 786 was a kind of space breakdown wagon with mainly engineers aboard who attended to damaged asteroids. It would take at least a few hours to get here—maybe a few weeks.

Paddy's injuries were serious. His spine was injured and I was not at all sure that he hadn't broken his back. We could not leave him lying on the floor.

"We'd better try to get him down to that sick bay," I told Jet.

"But the conditioned types will be there," objected Jet. "You heard the Martian."

"What of it?" I replied. "They probably won't even notice us. He can't stay there on the floor."

"We'll bring a bed here," went on Jet, "from the sleeping quarters. I'm sure we could find our way back to that place we woke up in."

Reluctantly I agreed. It was decided that Lemmy and Mitch should go and Paddy gave them precise directions how to get there.

"Watch your step," said Jet, "and hurry back as quickly as you can. Bang on the door when you want to be let in. We'll try as best we can to follow your progress on the vision-phone."

When they had gone Jet turned to Paddy again.

"Paddy, who knows we're on this asteroid—besides you?"

"Jack Evans. It was his idea that we picked you up."

"And Nicholas—the Martian?"

"I think he knows everything."

"Then he must know why the ship came to such a sudden stop? And he would have told the crew aboard 786?"

"Sure."

"Yet he never mentions us," went on Jet. "He's never attempted to keep us in check, or to stop us slowing the ship down."

"I was supposed to keep you in check," Paddy answered.

"Will any action be taken against you because you didn't?"

"I'll never command an asteroid again, or get another chance to go back to Earth," replied Paddy. "I'll be taken off this ship as soon as 786 gets here."

"I'm sorry, Paddy." Jet showed his concern.

"Don't be sorry for me. You've got to look after yourselves. You must get away from this ship—get back to Mars. Jack Evans—find him." Paddy's voice was fainter now. Gently Jet pressed his questions.

"Where is he, Paddy? You've talked of him often but we've never seen him."

"He's in charge of spheres and sphere personnel, on the far side of the asteroid. He seldom comes over to this section."

"Can we raise him on the vision phone?"

"Oh no," said Paddy quickly, "don't do that! Contact between main sections can be made only through and by permission of Nicholas."

"You mean you call him up and ask him to put you through?"

Paddy nodded.

"Then you *can* talk to him—Nicholas, I mean?"

"Oh no. You make your request and wait. If Jack comes on the screen then your permission has been granted. But nine times out of ten he doesn't, and you assume it hasn't."

"How do we get to the far side?"

"It's not easy to find unless you know . . ." Paddy paused and groaned. He was very pale.

"Let him rest a moment," I begged Jet. "He's exhausted. I wish Lemmy and Mitch would hurry up with that bed."

I turned to Frank who had been sitting at the televiewer trying to pick up Lemmy and Mitch, so far with no luck. Half the places we had been able to get before no longer appeared. We could only conclude that the vision phone had suffered damage. Either that or somebody was deliberately preventing our contacting Mitch and Lemmy.

And then we heard Nicholas again.

*"Attention! Attention! Sick quarters. Two men to go to main televiewer room at once."*

"That's here, isn't it?" I whispered to Jet.

*"Pick up supervisor of Control Section One. He is badly injured. That is all."*

So they knew about Paddy. Someone was coming to get him.

"What do we do, Doc?" asked Jet urgently. "We can't let them take him."

I thought quickly. "It depends on whether he gets expert attention down in those sick quarters. If he does maybe it would be better to let him go."

"But surely there wouldn't be doctors among the conditioned personnel," protested Jet. "I think he'd be better off with you, Doc."

"Don't worry," I said, "I will go with him."

"I don't like the idea. We've heard nothing from Mitch and Lemmy, and they were only going to sleeping quarters."

"I can take care of myself," I replied.

"Mitch and Lemmy thought the same," was Jet's grim reply.

"Don't let him go," Frank begged. "We don't have to let those fellows in if we don't want to. Just keep the door into the main televiewer room open. The one leading out of here won't open unless *that's* closed."

"But what about Mitch and Lemmy—they won't be able to get in either," I protested.

"They'll bang on the door first—as we told them," said Jet.

So I agreed that if Mitch and Lemmy returned first with a bed we would try to keep Paddy with us. Shortly after this we heard a whine indicating that someone was trying the door.

"It's not Mitch and Lemmy—they would have banged first," whispered Frank.

The whine came again. And again. But the door stayed shut.

*"Attention! Attention! Main televiewer room. Open the door immediately."*

"And what if we refuse?" said Jet. There was no answer.

Suddenly I noticed Frank pointing to Paddy. I hurried over. The Irishman was unconscious. His breathing irregu-

lar, his pulse faint. The whine of the door came again. Then the Martian's voice:

*"Captain Morgan."*

It was the first time he had called one of us by name.

"Well?" answered Jet.

*"Paddy Flynn is seriously hurt and needs medical attention at the earliest opportunity. You are preventing him from receiving it."*

"If we open the door, will you allow Doc to accompany Paddy and guarantee Doc's safe return to us?" replied Jet.

Silence.

I caught Jet's arm. "Listen, Jet. No matter what he says, Paddy must be moved from here—and quickly. He's very bad. Maybe they can do something for him down there."

"You mean—he might die?" Jet asked, shocked.

I nodded.

*"Doctor Matthews may accompany Paddy Flynn. We guarantee he will not be detained anywhere against his will. He may return to you whenever he wishes."* The voice was, as always, metallic, impersonal, devoid of feeling.

"Well," I said, "we do know for certain now that the Martian is not just a piece of recording tape. Frank, let those men from sick quarters in."

The conditioned types entered and picked up Paddy. I went with them. In the sick bay I found ample medical facilities and a conditioned type who, I assumed, had received Earth medical training. But I could find out nothing about him. He would talk only about Paddy's injuries. However, judging by his old-fashioned methods, I gathered that he, too, must have left Earth early in the century. But he did not resist my medical instructions and seemed only too willing to allow me to supervise Paddy's case.

But there was nothing we could do to save him. I remembered how Webster, the man who was injured in the fight in the underground factory down on Mars, had died from injuries far more superficial than Paddy's.

I was allowed to return to Jet and Frank without hindrance.

"There's no need to worry about Paddy any more," I said quietly.

"You mean he's dead?"

"Yes, Jet. There was nothing we could do." We none of us could speak for a moment. We had all come to like Paddy and losing him was a great blow. I remembered the grim transformation which had come over his features just as he breathed his last. "He had been up here as long as we thought," I said gently. "Nearly a hundred years. He would never have got back to Earth."

Frank had constantly been trying to locate Mitch and Lemmy, but without success. For the sake of clarity I will set down now their story as they told it to us afterwards, and to do this I must go back to when they opened the door of the televiewer room and found themselves in the corridor beyond.

Paddy's instructions had seemed simple enough but they soon found the maze of corridors much more intricate than they remembered and, to add to their confusion, perhaps because of the damage, very few places were lit.

Long after they should have reached sleeping quarters, they were still walking aimlessly down one corridor after another. Eventually they tried to retrace their steps but this was just as confusing.

Suddenly Lemmy said: "Hey, Mitch, we've been *here* before. It was at the end of a curved corridor like this that we came to the place where that Martian was supposed to be."

"That's fine," Mitch replied. "The door to the left of it leads back to the great hall. We'll get our bearings there. Come on."

Soon Lemmy stopped again. "That's funny," he said, "we should have been warned to turn back by now. In fact, we'd got this far when we had the second warning before."

"Maybe it's not the same corridor after all," said Mitch. They had rounded another bend and come upon the great door from which Jet had received the electric shock. To their amazement, it stood wide open.

Lemmy's first impulse was to turn and run, but Mitch

caught his arm. "This is the chance we've been waiting for," he whispered. "It may never come again."

"What chance?" stammered the cockney.

"To see just what that Martian does look like."

"You mean—we're going in there?"

"That's just what I do mean. Come on."

Cautiously they approached the door and paused uncertainly on the threshold. It was very dark. A faint hum as of a dynamo or electric motor grew louder as they stepped gingerly through the door. They felt the ground vibrating. Suddenly both humming and vibration stopped, and a series of whirs and clicks and other weird noises began.

"Maybe it's Nicholas gnashing his teeth." Lemmy's facetiousness covered his nervousness.

In the gloom ahead loomed the outlines of an enormous square-shaped, box-like structure, "as tall as a house," as Lemmy put it. They had almost reached the base of this contraption when the screeching noise which Paddy had told them was the warning for all doors to be closed sounded loudly behind them and, turning in alarm, they saw the door through which they had entered was now closing.

"Stay where you are," said an authoritative voice from nowhere. "Don't move."

"Eh?" gasped Lemmy.

"Attention! Attention!"

"That's Nicholas," whispered Mitch.

"Control personnel—Section Two. Operators 3A, 3D and 3C report to Control Section One immediately. That is all."

"Sounded as though he were shouting right in my ear," complained Lemmy.

"He's in here all right," said Mitch, "he can't be more than a few yards from us."

"But who was that geezer who spoke first?" questioned Lemmy. "That wasn't a Martian. His voice was quite normal."

"If only it wasn't so darned dark," began Mitch. He moved forward a few steps. "Hullo—is anybody there?"

"You may proceed," said the normal voice that was not the Martian's, "it is quite safe now."

"Who are you and where are you?" cried Mitch.

The voice continued speaking as though it hadn't heard.

"But whatever you do don't touch the co-ordinator."

"The what?" exclaimed Mitch.

"The big square construction directly in front of you," explained the voice patiently. "Go round it."

There was nothing to do but obey. As they skirted the monstrous construction another series of clicks and whirs started up, making Lemmy jump.

"Hey, listen," he exclaimed, "those noises are coming from inside that thing."

"You've got us into a fine mess, haven't you?" said the same voice out of the darkness.

"Us?" said Lemmy in surprise. "What have we done?"

"Well-nigh wrecked the ship, that's all."

Mitch was listening intently. "That voice——" he said, "I swear I've heard it before."

"Very observant of you, Mr Mitchell."

Lemmy turned to Mitch excitedly. "Mitch, I know who it is—it's . . ." He broke off. "No, it can't be. It's impossible."

"What happened to Paddy Flynn?" the voice said sharply.

"He was injured when we decelerated," replied Mitch.

The voice continued to snap questions. "How badly was Paddy injured? Why had they left him? What were they doing? How had they got through the door?"

"It was wide open, mate," replied Lemmy to this one.

The voice seemed surprised. "Was it? Well, that's something else for 786 to attend to when it gets here."

All this time Mitch and Lemmy had been walking at the side of the 'co-ordinator', as the voice called it. The black structure still seemed to stretch endlessly before them.

"This 'co-ordinator' is not only as tall as a house," said Lemmy, "but it's as long as a street."

"*Attention! Attention.*" The metallic Martian voice shrilled forth. "*Sick quarters. Two men to go to main televiewer room at once. Pick up supervisor of Control Section One. He is badly injured. That is all.*"

This, of course, was the order which had so surprised Jet, Frank and I, as we had waited in the televiewer room.



"What's going on?" exclaimed Lemmy.

"You want Paddy to be looked after don't you?" said the 'normal' voice calmly. "You don't seem to have done the job very well yourselves, so I attended to it for you."

"But it was old Nick who gave the order," objected Lemmy. "I thought he was supposed to run this place."

"He does."

"Then where is he?" went on Lemmy. "That's who we came in here to find."

"He's as tall as a house and as long as a street," quoted the voice. "You're walking by him now."

"You mean this thing is the Martian?" gasped Lemmy.

"Not really," came the answer. "That's only his *brain*. You will have walked the full distance soon and have passed him. When you have, you'll see an open door in the wall that faces you. Behind it is a flight of stairs that lead up to the surface. Climb them."

"But we've got no helmets," objected Lemmy.

"They're up here. They're with me."

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"I have to—that's my job."

They came to the flight of steps down which shone a shaft of light.

"Well, it's nice to see a little light again," said Lemmy.

"It's even lighter up here," came the suave voice, "the sun's shining."

"I swear I know your voice," muttered Mitch again.

"Then why not come up and see if you know my face?"

"Come on, Lemmy," said Mitch firmly. "We'll get to the bottom of this, once and for all."

They ascended the steps and went through the door at the top. As their eyes accustomed themselves to the blinding sunlight, they found they were in some sort of circular look-out tower built high above the asteroid's surface. The walls were entirely transparent so that the entire rocky barren surface of the asteroid was spread before them.

"Well, where are you?" said Lemmy peevishly. "We can't stay here long. The sun will burn us to a cinder."

"Don't worry," said the voice. "The harmful rays are filtered out by the walls—just as they are by the air on Earth."

"Why don't you show yourself?" asked Mitch irritably.

"Would you mind closing the door first?"

"Close it, Lemmy," said Mitch. "Let's get this over."

Lemmy pressed the control and the door closed. There was a second door in the far corner. Slowly it slid open. A man stood there smiling faintly.

"Hullo," he said, "nice to see you again."

It was the Lunar Controller.

## 12

"YOU COULD have knocked me down with a feather!" said Lemmy, when telling us about it afterwards. "To see him, of all people, standing there smiling at us, just as though it was the most natural thing in the world."

"It gave me a shock too," admitted Mitch.

"How did *you* get here?" Mitch had asked when he had got over his surprise a little.

"Well," said the Controller slowly, "you remember when you took off from the moon a fleet of Martian spheres landed near the Lunar Colony?"

"That's right," said Lemmy. "Well-nigh wrecked the takeoff."

"You were lucky to get away at all. The spheres were late. They were due to arrive three hours before."

"You mean you were expecting them?" asked Mitch incredulously.

"Of course."

"But how did you know they were coming?"

"Well, you saw them yourself when you were watching the sunrise. It was you and Jet Morgan who drew my attention to them—and very grateful I was for the information too."

"But just seeing them didn't mean they were going to land," objected Mitch.

"To me it did," replied the Controller.

"You mean you had advance information?" exclaimed the Australian.

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Mars, of course. I knew when those spheres would land on Earth, too, and where the men in them were bound."

"You *knew*? You mean you knew about the one that landed in the Lake district?"

"Yes. Its crew had left the ship twenty-four hours before you arrived on the scene. They had already reported to their contact in London when your helicopter got there."

"You knew all this—when you were supposed to be looking for them?" Mitch's voice was growing angry now.

"So long as I was sure we wouldn't find them I was willing to give you, the police and anybody else all the help I could."

"Now wait a minute." Lemmy too, was getting angry. "Are you trying to say you've been working with the Martians all the time?"

"Yes."

"And that the Lunar Controller, one of the highest officials in Space HQ, is a traitor?" Lemmy was really worked up now. "No wonder every flipping move we made was known. No wonder that conditioned geezer picked us up in an official car and took us down to Hindhead instead of the airport where you were supposed to be waiting."

"No wonder at all really," said the Controller smoothly.

"All your talk about there being conditioned types planted in Space HQ! It was you that planted them there."

"Of course."

"And keeping us shut up in that hotel. 'For the safety of the public,' you said. 'A necessary move to avert nationwide panic.' And then you have the nerve to allow us to take off for Mars again. 'Find out all you can about the invasion,' you said—you big . . . you—you—you knew about it all the time!" Lemmy's voice shook.

"I had to get you off the Earth," explained the Controller. "I nearly succeeded with that phoney chauffeur, but you were too smart. So I then had to let you get at least as far as the Moon. Nobody on Earth, in Space HQ or anywhere else could possibly suspect that I had any other interest than getting the Mars Fleet safely on its way. Just before takeoff the spheres from that fleet of asteroids were to have arrived, overcome the Lunar Colony and all

the personnel—including you. But they were a little late. And, before they appeared, your rocket motors had been fired. The *Discovery* and the two freighters *had* to take off then. I really must congratulate you on getting away safely—without any further help from Lunar Control.”

“And what happened to them?” enquired Mitch.

“Oh they were easily overpowered. They were all hypnotised, transferred to the spheres, later up to the asteroid and then to Mars. They got there some three months before you. I believe they’re all getting along very nicely now.”

“And what about the Colony now?”

“There is no such thing. The two ships that were sent up from Earth to investigate the Colony’s failure to answer radio signals were dealt with by a skeleton staff of specially trained personnel, and once Earth stopped sending ships to the Moon the place was evacuated.”

“How about the Earth itself?”

“One hundred thousand conditioned personnel have been landed to date. They are living among normal people, just waiting for the invasion to start. They know exactly what to do when it does. Taking over will be an easy matter. Ninety per cent of the population won’t even know what has happened. There’ll be no bloodshed. No fighting——”

“How could you avoid it?” interrupted Mitch.

“Did either of you ever watch television on Earth?”

“Of course,” said Lemmy impatiently.

“You can’t get away from it,” said Mitch. “It’s in every home.”

“Precisely. In every home, or nearly—in the tele-cinemas, rest rooms, works’ canteens, schools, hospitals, restaurants—you even had it laid on in the common rooms of the space ship launching bases down on Earth, and in your private rooms on the Lunar Colony. Television is the most important weapon at our disposal.”

“What are you talking about, chum?”

“Have you forgotten Professor Catlin?”

He was referring to a man who had given a lecture on hypnotism which was relayed on television stations throughout the British Commonwealth. His powers as a

hypnotist proved to be so strong that he had only to stare fixedly at the camera a few minutes and speak in his soothing way to have half his viewers falling asleep.

"Professor Catlin had spent some years on Mars," continued the Controller.

"What!" gasped Mitch and Lemmy together.

"Before that he was an ordinary medical student. But on Mars he was conditioned, trained as a hypnotist and returned to earth to practise his art. His appearance on TV, on a world-wide link-up, was engineered by us, by way of experiment. It worked beautifully. If it succeeded so well with a trained Earthman, you know how well it will work when a Martian—to whom hypnotism is a commonplace—carries out a similar experiment."

"But how far do you think he'll get?" Mitch protested. "Catlin was cut off the moment the first reports of the effect of his talk reached the television authorities."

"And, in any case," put in Lemmy, "the cameraman went to sleep and at the end the only view people got of him was his knees!"

"The cameraman won't go to sleep next time," stated the Controller categorically. "People already conditioned will be unaffected and will carry on as they normally would. We've got conditioned types planted in all television organisations the world over. Every station in the world will carry the picture. It has all been arranged."

"But," objected Lemmy, "how's a Martian—especially if just his brain is as long as a street, as you say it is—gonna get into a studio without being noticed?"

"At the time of the transmission he will be in an asteroid poised above the Earth. Then every station in the world will suddenly tell its viewers to stand by for an announcement concerning an international emergency. They will be told to bring as many people as possible to the receiver. And then it will happen." There was a triumphant note in the Controller's voice. "It is estimated that everybody watching the asteroid transmission will be conditioned within two minutes."

Lemmy listened in horrified fascination.

"They will not be able to resist doing exactly as they're told. And they will be told to carry on life much as before

—at work and at home—and obey the orders of the local supervisors who, by then, will have taken over and have things well under control.”

“But surely these people will know *something* must have happened to them?” protested Mitch.

“Not at all,” said the Controller calmly. “They’ll never realise life was any different.”

“Slaves of a television screen,” Lemmy murmured.

“They’re hardly less than that now,” pointed out the Controller.

“And what about the people who won’t be watching?” asked Mitch. “Won’t they realise the rest have suddenly become abnormal?”

“On the contrary; by then it will be they who are the abnormal ones. It’s all a matter of comparison, you know. The majority always consider themselves normal; so to be in a minority is to be abnormal. You may be sure that the majority will soon try to bring the rest into line. They will be fully briefed that they merely have to inform the local supervisor or his representative. All abnormal people will then be rendered ‘normal’ by conditioning.”

“What if they’re immune to it?” pressed Mitch. “Or want to carry on their lives in the way they always have.”

“I have no doubt arrangements have been made for such people,” answered the Controller dryly.

“And how long have you been a supporter of this happy project?” asked Mitch ironically.

“Since before I was returned to Earth—five years ago.”

“You were on Mars before?”

“Yes.”

“You’re a trusty?”

“That’s right. And for that I am to be rewarded with the post of Supervisor to the London Region. One of the most important positions a man could wish for.”

“And what good will it do you?” asked Lemmy.

“It will be a comfortable life. Once the whole world is under Martian government, there’ll be no wars, no hunger. With people properly organised, not having to think for themselves because it’s already all worked out for them—why should they be anything but happy?”

“Why should they be happy?”

"What is happiness but the absence of unhappiness?" argued the Controller.

Lemmy sniffed.

"I like to be happy in my own simple way, thanks. I don't want it all organised for me."

"But if you are unaware of it, what difference does it make? Is a poor child playing with simple toys any happier than a rich child with the most expensive ones?"

"A child doesn't know any better."

"Neither do conditioned types."

"But we're not conditioned," said Lemmy heatedly, "and neither are the people down on Earth yet. Or are they?" he added as a nervous afterthought.

"No," admitted the Controller. "The invasion hasn't quite begun."

"Then why don't you ask the folk down on Earth what they think of your plan to make them happy?" Lemmy was shouting now.

"I'm not planning this invasion," protested the Controller. "I'm merely helping to effect it."

"Calm down, Lemmy," said Mitch. "Losing your temper won't help."

"You are helpless, Lemmy," the Controller said smoothly. "You might as well accept it. There's nothing you can do to stop our plans being put into action. If you have any sense, you'll listen to my proposition."

"You can keep your propositions," said Lemmy shortly.

"That goes for me, too," reiterated Mitch.

"A pity," said the Controller regretfully. "Men like you and Jet and Doc would be so useful to us. You could gain much from co-operation."

"Well, we ain't co-operators," said Lemmy firmly. "Now if you don't mind opening the door, we'll get back to Jet. He must be getting worried about us."

"I'm sorry but that can't be permitted. Neither of you can leave this room."

"You mean we're prisoners here?"

"In effect, yes. Unless you care to think again about co-operation."

"The answer's 'no'," Lemmy answered quickly.

"Very well, then you'll have to stay here. When 786

arrives, I'll have you transferred to it—to be taken back to Mars. Maybe a few years in one of the factories down there will make you wish you'd changed your mind."

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, back in the televiewer room Jet, and Frank and I had despaired of finding Mitch and Lemmy on the vision-phone. Finally we decided that Jet and I would go in search of them, leaving Frank at the controls.

We set off, but like Mitch and Lemmy soon found Paddy's directions totally inadequate. It wasn't long before we were lost.

After a while we found ourselves in a long, winding, well-lit corridor. Suddenly I caught Jet's arm.

"Flat against the wall, quick," I hissed. For I had heard the sound of marching feet, growing louder every moment. We looked round desperately for somewhere to hide but the corridor stretched smooth and unbroken behind us. The next minute, round the bend ahead of us came a group of conditioned types, walking as if in their sleep, staring straight ahead.

"Doesn't seem to be anybody in charge of them," I whispered. "I wonder where they're going?"

"When they get level with us we'll find out," answered Jet. He stepped directly in their path and held up his hand. "Stop!" he ordered.

Automatically they halted.

"What are your orders?" asked their leader.

"Where are you going?" demanded Jet.

"To Sphere Bay Number Five."

"What for?"

"It must be made ready to receive the sphere from asteroid 786."

"When is 786 due to arrive?"

"I do not know."

"Who'll be in that sphere when it does get here?"

"I do not know."

"Well, who told you to get the Bay ready?"

"Orders were received and orders must be obeyed without question at all times."

I thought quickly. If these men were going to get a sphere



bay prepared they must be going out on to the surface of the asteroid. But they were dressed in their ordinary boiler suit affairs. Surely they must collect some kind of space suit first?

"Jet," I said eagerly. "Mitch seemed to think it would be possible to get off this asteroid if we could only get out to that large sphere which he was sure could cover far greater distances than the smaller ones. To reach it we would have to go outside. But we've been without helmets ever since we came aboard this ship."

"And if these men *are* going outside they'll need suits, of course," said Jet thoughtfully. "We'll follow them, Doc. We may find where the suits are stored—perhaps even find our helmets among them."

"What are your orders?" said the leader of the men again.

"You will proceed to Bay 5 and carry out the orders already given to you," answered Jet quickly.

"Orders received and understood."

We walked alongside the men through at least a mile of corridors, climbing nearer and nearer the asteroid's surface. At last we came to a huge circular door. The man Jet had spoken to approached it and pressed the control. Immediately there came the rasping sound of the warning for all doors in our section of the asteroid to be closed. Then the door opened to reveal a great hall at the far end of which was another airtight door, similar to the one we were now passing through. In the side walls were a number of smaller doors. When the first door had closed behind us the men split up into fours and made for some of these side doors, Jet and I following the four men who had been in the rear of the column.

Lining the walls of the small room in which we found ourselves were rows of grotesque figures. They looked like some peculiar species of man—Martians, perhaps. Then I realised—they were space suits, standing up stiff and straight of their own accord. As we watched, fascinated, the others started taking a suit apiece to bits and putting it on.

Jet urged me forward eagerly. "Come on, Doc, we'll put one on too. We can come back when they do. We might get

a chance to examine those spheres out there—the big one in particular. We may learn quite a lot that will help us get away. Nobody will recognise us in these get-ups. Watch closely, and put every piece on in the same order as they do.”

It proved easy enough. The suits felt stiff and rigid, rather like a suit of armour. The helmets, we noticed, after being pulled on the head were snapped into place by pressing both hands on the crown. Before we put them on Jet said: “Stay close to me all the time. I don’t know if these suits have any means of communication, but if not we’ll use hand signals.”

I fixed the heavy helmet on my head. “Hullo, can you hear me?” I called.

“Yes, quite clearly, Doc,” Jet answered at once. “These suits must carry radio.”

“But where?” I said. “And where does the oxygen supply come from—and what do we do if it runs out? We——”

“They’re going,” Jet interrupted. “Come on. Fall in behind and stay close to them.”

The Martian’s precise clipped voice was heard ordering all personnel to assemble at the Sphere Bay airlock. Blindly we followed. The door to the airlock was opened and we entered. It was an anxious moment when the air was exhausted prior to opening the outer door. But I felt no ill effects. The suits must be working properly.

The outer door opened.

*“All personnel will proceed to their posts and carry out their orders as instructed. On completion of tasks you will return to the airlock. That is all.”*

We stepped out on to the surface and looked around. We were in a gigantic crater. On the floor were parked dozens of the small Martian spheres just like the one that had landed in the Lake District. To one side was a larger sphere like the one Mitch had seen on the televiewer.

As we watched, the group of men broke up and spread out in all directions.

“Shall we follow one of them?” I asked.

“No point in that. We’ll go our own way. I want to get a really close look at that big ship.”

We walked boldly up to the large sphere and pressed the control which opened it.

"Anybody watching us?" asked Jet.

"No," I replied, "I can only see a couple of conditioned types and they're some distance away."

"Right, then, Let's get inside."

We entered. The sphere seemed to be built on exactly the same lines as the smaller ones, except that the stairs leading to the upper deck brought us to a large cabin with eight bunks, proof that the ship must be built to cover long distances. Above were yet two more decks, one of which contained stores and supplies, and the other the cabin, presumably, of whoever captained the ship. It was well stocked with food and water and, we imagined, must work on exactly the same principle as the smaller spheres. If, as Paddy had told us, Frank was trained to be a crew man on a ship like this, the sight of that control room downstairs should bring back to him all the training he received when he was conditioned. Operating it should then be simplicity itself.

But we couldn't make any plans to escape until we had found Lemmy and Mitch.

We left the sphere and looked around to see what the conditioned types were doing. They were gone. There wasn't a soul in sight. As fast as we could in the clumsy suits, we made our way back.

Jet reached the door of the airlock first. "Doc!" he gasped, and his voice was tense. "It's closed. And there's no way of opening it from here. It's remote controlled. We're stuck out here on the asteroid's surface."

## 13

ALL THIS time, of course, Mitch and Lemmy were still in the large circular room with the Lunar Controller. It was not unlike a colossal lighthouse full of gadgets such as vision phones and control panels which, with the help of those operated by the conditioned types in the under-

ground rooms, controlled the ship, like the bridge of a gigantic ocean liner.

It was, in fact, the main control room—the asteroid's nerve centre. The underground control suite could be compared to ships' engine rooms, although their tasks were far more numerous. There, if the asteroid's flight was to be correctly maintained, the conditioned types had to work in perfect co-ordination under the direction of the Martians.

All this was explained to Mitch and Lemmy by the Lunar Controller who treated his prisoners politely and seemed willing to answer their questions as to how the ship worked.

"It seems to me that *you* run this asteroid—that *you're* the Captain?" Mitch said.

"Perhaps first mate would be a better description," answered the Controller.

"Then who *is* the Captain?" Lemmy questioned. "Jack Evans?"

"I am Jack Evans," came the surprising reply.

"You! But Paddy Flynn told us Jack Evans was a rebel!"

"Paddy Flynn was a good asteroid crew man, but he was a fool. I knew his plan to get back to Earth could not succeed. By the time we reached Earth he would have been safely locked up out of harm's way."

"Meanwhile you let him believe you were a rebel, too?"

The Controller shrugged. "What did it matter? It kept him happy, and a happy man works well."

"But that rebel song he taught the crew," objected Mitch, "wouldn't their singing it have influenced them? That song mentioned the Earth. Didn't that have any effect on them—remind them of their native planet?"

"Mr Mitchell," said the Controller patiently, "to a conditioned type Mars *is* the Earth. They all think whenever they touch down on Mars they have reached home. It's a state of mind."

"Just like those so-called sheep farmers on the Argyre Desert," meditated Mitch, "they thought they were in the Australian Outback."

"And that Martian?" piped up Lemmy. "Is he a state of mind—or does he really exist?"

"To the conditioned types he does. He did to Paddy."

Lemmy was not satisfied. "That still doesn't answer my question."

"Most of the orders you hear that voice give are definitely Martian."

"But the geezer who gives the orders?" pressed Lemmy. "What is he?"

"I told you," said the Controller, "he's a colossal brain. In that big box downstairs is a mass of electronic equipment, far beyond the understanding of you or me."

"Is that what a Martian consists of, then—a mass of electronic equipment?"

"On this ship it does."

"And the voice?"

"It emanates from the same place. It is produced by electrical impulses."

"But it seemed to be able to think," objected Mitch.

"It can," explained the Controller, "as computing machines do on Earth, or the one on the *Discovery*. Only a very great deal more so."

"So it's not a Martian at all. Just a colossal electronic brain which you operate?"

The Controller hesitated. "To a great extent I do, but I also receive my orders from it."

"You mean," said Lemmy in astonishment, "that a machine tells you what to do?"

"Yes, and I have better sense than to disobey."

"Would it know if you disobeyed?" Lemmy asked next.

"Yes."

"But who built this thing?"

"It was assembled by specially trained conditioned types."

"Who designed it?"

"The Martians. The conditioned types do only the manual work."

"So this story of there being a Martian on every asteroid is a lot of nonsense?" queried Mitch.

"Not really," answered the Controller. "That great electronic brain represents the Martians. It amounts to the

same thing as having a Martian aboard the ship. My contacts with the Martians are made through it."

"You mean it's a radio receiver as well?"

"Receiver, transmitter, computer; it does everything a man could do, but a million times quicker. It will even answer questions. Watch."

The Controller pressed a button. A loud ticking noise started up. "Now," he said, "you can ask it anything you like?"

"What is the distance from here to Mars?" said Mitch.

The ticking noise increased. Then we heard the Martian voice: "*Distance to Mars is one million, eight hundred thousand, three hundred and thirty-one point five miles. 331.6. 331.7. 331.8.*"

"Why is he increasing the figure?" asked Lemmy.

"We have a slight drift. Our orbit round the sun is not quite fast enough to keep the distance between us and Mars constant. Your slowing the ship down so recklessly has upset the mechanism slightly—we're lucky it didn't do even more damage."

"How does 786 find its way here?" asked Mitch.

"On a homing beam that we're transmitting. It will fly to us automatically. The brain could compute its arrival time to the nearest minute."

"Can we ask it?"

"Go ahead."

Mitch put the question, and almost immediately the metallic voice answered: "*Estimated time of arrival of asteroid 786 is 47 hours 52 minutes. Ferrying sphere will arrive at Bay 5. Have landing arrangements completed in good time.*"

"Nobody asked him anything about that," said Lemmy in surprise.

"Just a check," the Controller explained. "Extra information relating to your questions is often given. The Bay has already been prepared—I sent a party out under an hour ago."

"Where is Bay 5?" asked Mitch.

Through the transparent side of the tower the Controller pointed to an oval-shaped patch which showed up darker than the rest of the asteroid's surface. "That's the

crater known as Bay 5. If we were close enough to look on to its floor you could see the ferry spheres stowed there. You'll be able to see the sphere from 786 land."

"So we'll still be in here two days from now?" asked Lemmy.

"Yes—until I have you transferred to 786's ferry."

"What about Jet, Doc and Frank?"

"I'll have them at the Bay in good time."

"Well, I'll say this for you, mate," concluded Lemmy, "you got things well organised."

"Yes," agreed the Controller. "You see how powerless you are—yet, by co-operating with us, you could have many privileges. You could——"

"Now don't start that again," interrupted Lemmy.

"Very well. But remember, there is nothing you can do to save the Earth—but plenty you can to save yourselves from spending endless years in an underground factory down on Mars."

Shortly after, the great Martian brain issued an order to the Controller which sent him hurrying from the room. Immediately, Mitch and Lemmy tried the door through which they had entered the control room, but it would not open.

"Let him get well clear first, then we'll try the door he went through," said Mitch. "We don't want him to know we're following him."

"He wouldn't have left us here alone if we could get out," said Lemmy gloomily.

Then he brightened. "Maybe we can contact Jet. This vision phone seems to be exactly the same type as the one downstairs in that televiewer room."

He sat down at the controls and turned a knob. On the screen there appeared a man walking down a flight of stairs.

"Retune it, Lemmy—quick!" shouted Mitch urgently. "That's the Lunar Controller."

Hastily Lemmy moved the knob round. "Phew, that was a near one!" he panted.

For ten minutes he tried to tune in to the televiewer room but, although almost every other part of the asteroid came into view, there was no sign of it. At last he looked

up. "It's no good, Mitch," he said, "there must be some special way of getting that place which only Mr Jack Evans knows . . . Oh blimey!" His voice changed. He was gazing in horror through the transparent wall out on to the surface of the asteroid. There, walking on the uneven ground, were two figures.

"Martians!" gasped Lemmy. "How horrible they look!"

"Don't get excited," said Mitch. "They look like ordinary men to me, in space suits."

"You've never seen a space suit like that?"

"Conditioned types must need suits if they ever go outside," said Mitch logically, "and they're bound to differ considerably from ours."

"Well, whoever they are, they're heading directly for this look-out tower," Lemmy said fearfully. "They must be off the sphere from asteroid 786. They're coming here to pick us up."

"But the Martian said 786 wasn't due to arrive for more than forty-seven hours."

"He could have been wrong, couldn't he? Let's get out of here," begged Lemmy. "While the going's good. Let's try that other door."

"All right, but I haven't much hope of our getting far."

Mitch pressed the control outside the door through which the Lunar Controller had disappeared. It opened and they saw a sumptuously appointed cabin, obviously his living quarters.

"Super, ain't it?" remarked Lemmy.

Another door led from the cabin to a spiral staircase. They descended it hastily, to find yet another door facing them, and a lofty corridor leading off to the right. They tried the door but it remained fast. Their only other course was the corridor but before they had gone many yards the Martian voice sang out:

*"Attention! Attention! Crew personnel are warned that it is dangerous to proceed beyond this point without protective clothing. If you are not suitably dressed, turn back immediately."*

"Must be something to do with that door at the end there," said Mitch, pointing down the corridor. "Let's get a little closer to it, Lemmy, but take it slowly."



They went a few steps nearer.

*"Attention! Attention! The door you are now approaching leads to the asteroid's surface. It is dangerous to proceed any further unless you are wearing suitable clothing. This is the last warning."*

"He means space suits," said Mitch. "And we haven't got them. We'll have to go back, Lemmy."

They heard a whining noise, followed by a hiss of air.

"Hey, Mitch," cried Lemmy, "that sounds like an airlock."

"Somebody must be coming in," gasped Mitch.

"You mean those two geezers we saw outside?"

"We might as well face them here as upstairs," Mitch decided quickly.

The door slid open and out of the airlock stepped the weird-looking figures they had seen out on the surface. Mitch and Lemmy stood paralysed as the terrifying objects advanced upon them rapidly.

The nearer one started to remove his helmet. As it slipped off Lemmy caught sight of the face inside. "Jet!"

"And Doc!" exclaimed Mitch, as the second figure removed its space helmet. "Where in tarnation did you spring from?"

"Crikey!" gasped Lemmy. "We thought you were a couple of Martians."

I don't know which of us were the more surprised. After we had found the door closed against us, Jet and I had managed to climb the sides of the crater which held the spheres, and seeing the control tower had made towards it in the hope of finding another way into the asteroid. Luckily for us the remote control button operating the outside door was working and so we had stumbled on Lemmy and Mitch.

It seemed at first to Jet and I that all our problems were now solved. We had only to pick up Frank, help ourselves to space suits and make off in the large sphere standing in Bay 5. When we heard Mitch and Lemmy's story, we thought at first they were joking. How could the Lunar Controller possibly be aboard?

"There isn't time to explain," said Mitch. "What is more important is that you should be fully acquainted

with the manner in which it is intended to conquer the Earth. Then you must get back to the *Discovery*—if that sphere will take you—and warn Earth to close down every televiewer station until further notice. Lemmy and I are prisoners here—we can't go out, as we have no suits and the door leading back into the asteroid won't open. But you and Doc have. You can go back to that sphere and warn the world."

"But we can't leave you and Lemmy and Frank behind," I protested.

And Jet, too, was adamant. In any case, he said, we had no idea how to navigate that sphere. We were relying on Frank to help us. Either we all went, or none. That was final.

In the end Mitch and Lemmy took us up to the control tower and told us the whole story of their adventures, and how the Lunar Controller had explained the working of the ship. They showed us how the great Martian brain could answer questions.

"Have you any idea when the Lunar Controller will be back?" asked Jet at last.

"Not the slightest, Jet," answered Mitch.

"Then we must work fast," stated Jet decisively. "Lemmy, go into that other room, the Controller's bedroom. Take the sheets off the bed and put the rest of the covers back so they look as though they haven't been disturbed." Lemmy obeyed with alacrity.

"I think we might persuade Mr Jack Evans—Lunar Controller or whatever he calls himself—to help us get away from here back to the *Discovery*."

"How?" I asked.

"He probably doesn't realise that Doc and I are here," Jet answered. "He's not superhuman like that electronic brain. He could only know we were here if he were told."

"He may have a viewer phone where he is and be looking at us and listening to what we're saying right now," I pointed out.

"We'll work on the assumption that he isn't." As usual Jet was at his best when there was some definite plan of action. Lemmy soon returned with the sheets, and Jet ordered us to rip them into strips. While we were doing

this, Mitch at Jet's direction asked the 'brain' how long it would take a ferry from Bay 5 to reach Mars. The answer disconcerted us.

*"Ferries cannot reach Mars—from this distance."*

"But I meant that large sphere," said Jet. "What on earth do they call that, I wonder? Until we know, we can't ask the 'brain' any questions about it. But I'm sure it *would* reach there—it's well stocked with food and obviously is built for long-distance. I want to know how long we can expect to be travelling. A lot may depend on it—an asteroid like this could easily overtake one of those spheres. I must know if we have a chance."

We handed the strips of material to Jet. "Now what do we do?" I asked.

"Mitch and Lemmy will sit here in front of the door where Jack Evans can see them as he comes in," answered Jet. "You and I, Doc, will stand out of sight by the side of it. Then, as soon as he's in the room——"

"Listen!" broke in Lemmy. "That sounds like him."

We heard the whine of the opening door.

"Get in your places," whispered Jet urgently. "Try to act natural, you two, until I give the signal."

Jet and I flattened ourselves against the wall as the Lunar Controller entered. To our surprise Frank was with him.

"Mitch! And Lemmy!" exclaimed Frank. "So this is where you are."

"And this is where you stay—until the big asteroid arrives," said the Lunar Controller sharply. "Then you'll be taken back to Mars—all of you. Now, where's Jet Morgan and Doc Matthews?"

"I'll tell you!" shouted Jet, springing into action. His fist shot out and caught the astounded Controller square on the chin. He toppled gently to the ground.

"Nice work, Jet boy," chuckled Lemmy.

"Tie him up," said Jet curtly.

The strips of bed linen made good bonds.

"Well, Mr Jack Evans," said Jet to the dazed Controller, "how does it feel to be a prisoner yourself?"

"You can't get away with this. Untie me immediately. What do you hope to gain by this, anyway?"

"We intend to get away from here," replied Jet. "In that big sphere in Bay 5. With your assistance I think we will."

"And what assistance do you expect from me?"

"Show us how to open that door so we can find our way back to that storeroom and get some more space suits," said Jet. "Also you can show us where our helmets are kept."

"I'm showing you nothing," said Evans sulkily. "You haven't a chance—786 will be here in less than forty-five hours. Anyway, you wouldn't get very far. You'd be overtaken long before you reached Mars."

"We'll take that chance. Now, how do we get to that storeroom? If you won't co-operate, we shall have to make you. Doc," he ordered, "put that space suit on. I think perhaps the Controller would like a walk outside. Give him time to think things over."

"But we have no suit for him," I protested.

"He can go as he is," said Jet deliberately.

A look of horror passed over the Controller's face.

"Unless, of course," continued Jet carelessly, "you care to change your mind."

"You're bluffing. You wouldn't murder a man—not deliberately murder him."

"What's the life of one man when the freedom of the whole world is at stake?" answered Jet. "Right, Doc. Put your suit on."

I obeyed, although I couldn't believe that Jet was serious. But he was putting on his suit, too.

"What about helmets?" I asked.

"We'll wait until we're in the airlock," said Jet, "else we may not hear if the Controller says he's willing to co-operate after all."

"I still think you're bluffing," he said uneasily.

"Pick him up, Doc," said Jet curtly, "and let's go."

The Controller was not tall, and rather thin and wiry. I lifted him easily, and soon we three were making our way towards the airlock. The high-pitched tones of the Martian startled us.

*"Crew personnel are warned that it is dangerous to proceed beyond this point without protective clothing."*

"You heard that, Mr Evans?"

"Of course."

"And you're still willing to let us take you out there?"

"Go ahead. You can't scare me."

Was he going to call Jet's bluff? It very much looked like it.

The Martian gave the final warning.

Jet pressed the button which opened the door of the airlock.

"You still don't want to change your mind?" asked Jet.

"I'm not a fool, Captain Morgan! You wouldn't murder anybody. You won't get me to talk this way."

"Take him inside, Doc," was Jet's only reply.

I dropped the Controller on the floor like a sack of potatoes and Jet closed the door. Then he addressed his prisoner gravely.

"In just a few moments we'll be exhausting the air from this place. You know what that means."

The Controller's face was tense. Perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"You don't have to suffocate," Jet told him. "All you have to do is give me the information I require."

"I daren't do it," quavered the Controller. "The Martians would send me to work in the underground factories down on the Red Planet for the rest of my days. And, on Mars, that can be a long, long time."

"You could come with us—back to Earth," said Jet.

"You'll never get back to Earth—any of you."

"We'd rather try than stay on this asteroid."

"I'd rather stay here than try."

"Then you can," snapped Jet. "For good. Put on your helmet, Doc. Mitch," he called, "can you hear me?"

"Sure, Jet," said Mitch. He and Lemmy had been watching on the vision phone.

"Doc and I will be able to talk to you and to each other through the radios in our helmets, but we won't be able to communicate with the Controller. If he has anything to say he can say it to you and you can tell us."

"OK," answered Mitch.

"Right. Start exhausting the air from here, Doc—and slowly."

There was a slight hiss as I manoeuvred the lever. "Contact!" I called.

"In five minutes," said Mitch, "it will all be gone."

The sweat was pouring off the Controller's face. His mouth was moving but I couldn't make out what he said.

Mitch's voice came again.

"You have about as much air now as you'll find on top of a mountain—and it's getting thinner."

The Controller's mouth moved again, convulsively. He appeared to be breathing with difficulty.

"All right, Jet." It was Mitch again. "That's it. He's willing to tag along."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Jet's voice held no trace of emotion as he said: "All right, Doc. Fill her up again."

When the airlock was full we took off our helmets. The Controller's face was ashy-grey.

"I'll do anything—anything you say," he whispered.

"That's more like it. Take him back upstairs, Doc. Then we'll have another little talk."

Gladly I complied. The Controller was gulping great breaths of air as though he had been on the point of suffocation. But I knew, and I think Jet knew too, that I had let hardly any air out of the airlock. It was all in the Controller's imagination.

## 14

WITH THE Lunar Controller's aid it was comparatively easy to get the necessary space suits. Mitch and I collected three more—and also some metal bars which Jet remembered seeing there and had asked us to bring for what reason he didn't say.

Jet was questioning the Controller when we got back.

"That big sphere in Bay 5—can it reach Mars?"

"Yes. But she's a slow old crate compared with the flying asteroids."

"How long would she take to get there?"

"Why don't you ask the brain?"

"I tried," replied Jet, "but I don't know what those big spheres are called."

"Long distance crew ships. That one is Number 7. Just ask for the information you want."

A few minutes later the brain was telling us.

*"The estimated time for a long distance crew ship to reach Mars from this position is three days."*

"Three days," said Jet thoughtfully. "How long would it take this asteroid?" he asked the Controller.

"About half the time. But it's not functioning properly, you know that. Why do you want to go back to Mars, anyway?"

"I have my reasons," said Jet shortly.

"But don't you know that immediately this sphere takes off from this asteroid a signal will automatically be sent to Mars and to all members of the Invasion Fleet? Somebody will be after you almost at once. That little bank of apparatus over there is constantly sending signals to HQ down on Mars and to the flagships of the Invasion Fleet. They know everything that goes on. No sphere is supposed to leave any asteroid without permission. The minute you take off, questions will be asked."

"And if no one replies to them?"

"That has never happened yet."

"This is one time it will," said Jet decidedly.

He told us to put on the Martian space suits and carry our own. Lemmy had already collected our helmets which the Controller had stored away in his living quarters. But first Jet handed a metal bar to each of us.

"Now," he said, "we're going to destroy that apparatus. Smash it up."

"What, all that lovely equipment?" said Lemmy.

"That 'lovely equipment' will have a whole fleet of asteroids on our tail unless we render it useless. Now wreck it."

We needed no second bidding. After smashing the vision phone, we attacked the main section of the equipment. As we crashed our way into the intricate mass of machinery the familiar 'voice' broke out.

*"Attention! attention!"*

"Ay ay, we've woken him up," said Lemmy cheerfully.

"*Emergency—emergency.*"

"You've never had an emergency like this one, chum."

Soon the innards of the Martian apparatus lay in small fragments. But like a worm cut in half the Martian voice refused to die.

"*Emergency.*"

"Shut up!" shouted Lemmy, bringing his bar down with a tremendous crash on the remains of the machinery.

"*Emergency.*"

Lemmy's bar went into action again. "I said 'shut up'."

"*Emer . . . emer . . .*" The voice croaked and faded.

"There," said Lemmy, "when you're dead, mate, you should lie down."

We put on our helmets and followed Jet to the airlock which led out to the asteroid's surface. The Controller went with us, as Jet had decided that his knowledge might be useful.

Once through the airlock, we made our way across the pitted asteroidal surface towards the crater known as Bay 5. Like a good omen the brilliant sun suddenly appeared above the horizon and lit up the entire landscape in a magnificent awe-inspiring contrast of dazzling white rocks and long, pitch-black shadows. We reached Bay 5 and carefully climbed down the precipitous wall. After crossing the floor to the large sphere we pressed the door control and went inside.

The airlock was just big enough to hold us all. We closed the outer door, filled up the lock, opened the inner door and entered the roomy cabin.

The Controller was sent up into the rest room with strict orders not to move without permission, and the rest of us took off our suits and gathered round Frank who was examining the control panel.

"Jet," he said slowly, "I think I can handle this. It's strange, I don't remember being trained as a crew man for one of these ships, yet this cabin is as familiar as my own room down on Earth."

"Good. Then the first thing is to explain to us how to operate the controls."



We were soon all well briefed in the operating of the craft. It was simplicity itself.

"What's the acceleration rate?" asked Mitch. "There are no takeoff couches in this cabin."

"It's quite slow, Mitch," Frank assured him, "but goes on for a long time. The highest possible speeds can be achieved with very little discomfort."

"Well," said Jet, "I think we know enough now to risk a takeoff. Frank, you'll take the main panel. Mitch, you take the other—the one that sets us on course."

"Roger."

"Lemmy, tune in that televiewer. Make sure everything is clear outside."

Lemmy obeyed and a few seconds later we heard his voice:

"Televiewer rotated full circle—all clear."

"Then let's go," called Jet. "OK, Frank, take her up."

We waited tensely. Nothing happened except a low whine and a very slight vibration. Then suddenly I realised that we were moving, incredibly slowly.

"Height six feet," I called out soon, "and she's as steady as a rock."

"Increase the climbing rate, Frank, but take it easy," called Jet.

We were climbing rapidly now. Soon we had reached 2,000 feet.

"Hold her there, Frank. That's high enough," came Jet's voice. "Get ready to set course, Mitch."

"I'm all set, Jet," replied the engineer. "All I need is for Lemmy to give me the necessary picture."

"Manipulating camera now," called Lemmy.

The picture on the screen changed, and gave way to blank sky. And then—there it was, bang in the centre, the Red Planet.

"Hold it," called Mitch. "Now—pre-set course. OK," he said. "Course set. Now turn on the juice and see what happens."

"Away you go, Frank," ordered Jet. "Maximum comfortable acceleration. Lemmy, keep your screen tuned to the asteroid."

"Contact!"

Frank pressed the control and a few seconds later we were racing away from the asteroid, heading, we hoped, straight for Mars. It seemed all too easy. Almost too good to be true. I looked at the fast receding asteroid. There was no sign of movement. Yet I could not shake off a feeling of foreboding. Everything was going too well.

During the next two days as we sped on I grew more hopeful. There was still no sign of anyone in pursuit. Frank seemed to have complete control of the ship, landing on the planet shouldn't present much difficulty. But would we, as the Controller seemed to think, find a reception committee there to meet us? Had Asteroid 786 already landed on the asteroid we had left and relayed news of our escape to Mars? Would we find the *Discovery* where we had left it?

Some hours later we were looking at the Martian surface in close-up, and my last query was answered. To our delight the *Discovery* and the wrecked freighter alongside her were still lying in the Mare Australis exactly as we had left them. There was no sign of anybody.

Frank made a perfect landing, and we hardly realised we had reached the deck until the sphere came to a halt. Jet and Lemmy hastily put on their suits and prepared to go over to the *Discovery*, for every minute counted if we were to contact Earth before the Martian plan was put into action. The rest of us stayed behind to keep an eye on the Lunar Controller in case he should try to communicate with any of his old cronies on the planet. By radio we could hear the comments of Jet and Lemmy as they approached the flagship.

"Just coming round to the main door now. Well . . ." Jet broke off in surprise. "The door—it's open."

"Of course it is," Mitch put in. "Doc opened it to let you and me in—just before we were carried off to the asteroid, remember?"

"No, I don't."

"What does it matter anyway?" added Lemmy. "Come on—let's get inside. This is just like coming home from a long, wet, dull holiday," said Lemmy excitedly. "Oh blimey . . ." His voice changed suddenly.

"What is it?" I asked impatiently. "What's wrong?"

"The inner door is open, too," he replied. "The air-lock."

"But that's impossible," objected Mitch. "One door must always be shut. The other can't open unless it is."

"Both of 'em are wide open—as large as life."

We waited expectantly. This time it was Jet who exclaimed, "Good grief!"

"Now what?" I asked anxiously.

"The whole place has been stripped—equipment, bunks, lockers. Everything. There's nothing but bare walls."

"And we've lost all chance of contacting Earth," said Lemmy lugubriously.

Everything movable had indeed been removed, land truck, food, oxygen cylinders, water and, of course, all the radio equipment. As Lemmy said, we should never be able to broadcast to Earth from the *Discovery*. The only other hope was the wrecked freighter, and to our joy, when Jet and Lemmy examined this they found that, although most of the gear had been removed, the Martians had not bothered with anything damaged. As the freighter had crash landed this meant quite a lot, including the radio and the emergency power packs—the storage batteries. Lemmy got to work at once on the radio. "Well," he said at last, "she's working, but only giving about twenty-five per cent of the output that she should."

"Is that a fault you can correct?" asked Jet anxiously.

"I don't know. You'll have to give me time to find out."

After what seemed an eternity we heard Lemmy's voice again.

"It's no good, Jet. She'll never work any better. In any case, those storage batteries won't last much longer, and we've got no means of re-charging them. There's only one other way that I can think of," said Lemmy slowly. "And that's to use the two freighters we left in free orbit. Their radios should be working all right."

"But they're not strong enough to reach Earth either," Jet protested.

"They could be if I coupled this job to one of them. We've got no power supply problem out there. That sphere would get us out into the same orbit as the freighter, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, but how long would it take to disconnect this lot?"

"A couple of hours at the most."

It seemed the only thing to do. Mitch and Frank went over to help Lemmy dismantle the equipment while I kept an anxious look-out. At last the transmitter was safely in the sphere. We thanked our lucky stars for the mobility of the Martian sphere. It should be easy to take off, find the freighters, match their orbital speeds and draw up alongside them.

Slowly the great sphere rose from the Mare Australis into the deep mauve evening sky from where we took what was to be our final look at the *Discovery*. As we rose we also encircled the planet, gradually gathering momentum which would eventually place us in free orbit round Mars. We had been travelling about an hour and were over the sunlit side of the planet when Mitch, who was at the sphere's main televiewer, sighted the two freighters.

"There they are! Just a couple of dots," he called excitedly.

"Line them up on the centre of the screen," ordered Jet. "We'll fly to them with the aid of the automatic navigation unit."

Half an hour later we were close enough to attempt the transfer, for Jet had decided that all of us, including the Lunar Controller, should transfer to No 2 freighter. We fastened our safety lines and propelled ourselves across, Lemmy towing his precious transmitter carefully behind him.

The ships had not been tampered with, and while Lemmy set to work on the radio Jet sent Frank and Mitch over to the other freighter for as much equipment as they could manage, including food and fuel.

"What about me?" asked the Lunar Controller. "I could help transfer equipment, too."

"We'd rather you stayed here," said Jet shortly. "You can give Lemmy a hand."

"You still don't trust me, do you?"

"No, I don't. And I don't intend to let you out of sight at any time. So you can get your suit off. You won't be needing it again for some hours."

"And hurry up, mate," put in Lemmy, "I'm ready to start."

Lemmy worked steadily and methodically.

"How much longer?" Jet asked at last. "It's ten hours now. Time's running out fast."

"Just a couple of minutes, Jet, and I'll be turning her on. Now we should be all right. Switch her on, Jet . . . Now, see what aerial current we can get out of the transmitter. Oh, bags!"

"Hullo, Space Feet—Control calling Space Fleet. Have lost contact with you. Can you hear us? Repeat. Can you hear us?" The voice was faint but distinct.

Lemmy gave a whoop of excitement.

"It's Earth! It's Control. We've got them!"

"I *knew* they wouldn't give up all that easily," said Jet eagerly. "Go on, Lemmy, answer them."

"Give us a chance. I got to tune the transmitter first."

We crowded round eagerly.

"Hullo, Earth," he called at last. "Space Fleet calling. Repeat: Space Fleet calling. Freighter No 2 calling. Picked up your call a couple of minutes ago. Can you hear us? Have most urgent and important message for you—we much establish contact. It's a matter of life and death. Over."

"How long before you're likely to get a reply?" I asked.

"If they answer immediately, about eight minutes." When Mitch and Frank arrived back with the supplies from the other freighter, they were delighted.

"Going back to Earth in this isn't going to be very comfortable, but we'll modify it as best we can. It's our only hope," said Jet. "But the most important thing now is to get our message to Earth. What happens to us is of secondary importance."

All this time I had been revolving the camera round the star-studded heavens. Suddenly I stopped and gazed intently at a star cluster in the centre of the screen. A few minutes before it had been just a hazy patch but now, as I watched, it was resolving into separate, star-like bodies, dozens of them.

"Jet," I called urgently. "Look at this!"

He came over to the screen and I explained what I had seen.

"Then they must be approaching us. They can't be stars."

"Hullo, Freighter No 2. Control calling."

Jet turned sharply. "Control! They heard us. I'll be back in a moment, Doc."

"Control calling Freighter No 2. Have received your call but very faintly. Strength 1. Could you repeat your message please and boost the power of your transmitter?"

Jet looked at Lemmy, who shook his head decisively. "It's working flat out."

"Then call them again. Repeat everything twice clearly and distinctly," Jet ordered.

He came back to me. The objects on the screen were larger and considerably spread out.

"Whatever they are," said Jet, "they're lying astern and heading in this direction."

"Could be our pursuers," I said. "Maybe a whole fleet of spheres similar to the one we escaped in."

"There's only one person who'd know for sure. Hey, you," Jet shouted at the Lunar Controller. "Come here."

The Controller glanced at the screen.

"They're asteroids," he said slowly.

"What! But there must be hundreds of them."

"There are." The Controller spoke deliberately. "That's the Martian invasion fleet. On its way at last. On its way to invade the Earth."

There was dead silence.

"And, Captain Morgan, there's nothing you can do to stop them."

"Maybe not," answered Jet sharply, "but there might be plenty we can do to prevent their conquering the Earth."

"You may be glad of my help before long," persisted the Controller, "I'm the only one here who can tell you the speed of those asteroids—and what course they will take."

"If they're on their way to Earth, that's all we need to know."

"And what if this ship is lying directly in their path?"

"It won't be for long. We're encircling the Red Planet ourselves. Soon we'll be on the other side of it."

"And later you'll be back in this position and those asteroids will be much closer than they are now."

What was the man getting at?

"But they couldn't hit us," I protested. "It's a thousand to one chance."

"Not if the speed of that fleet has been so calculated that it will be in this precise spot at exactly the same time as we are." The Controller waited for his words to take effect before continuing. "The Martians are not fools. Do you think they don't realise you'll be trying to make radio contact with Earth?"

"You mean they'd try to prevent it by colliding with us?" gasped Jet.

"They have no other way. The Martians have no weapons. No guns, no death rays, to destroy us from a distance."

"Mitch," Jet rapped out. "Figure out the speed of those asteroids. I want to know to the nearest minute when they will reach this position, and what our position will be at that time."

"Right."

"And Lemmy—have you heard from Earth yet?"

"Not a twitter."

"How long since you last called?"

"Twelve minutes. We should have had a reply by now."

"Then call them again—and keep calling."

Mitch's calculations confirmed our worst fears that the asteroids were aiming at us, to crush us to pulp by colliding with us. They were so enormous that any damage they suffered would be about as much as a tank would be affected by a catapult shot.

Then Control came through again, saying they had not heard from us for more than an hour.

"So much for getting your message through," sneered the Controller, "and the invasion fleet is getting nearer all the time."

Jet ignored him. If we used every scrap of fuel we have, Mitch," he asked, "what speed would we reach—just an approximate figure will do?"

"About 60,000, I should say," answered the engineer.

"And what's the speed of that fleet?"

"Roughly the same."

"We'll play for time," Jet decided. "We'll use every bit of fuel so that we can stay ahead of the Martian Fleet as long as possible, and set a course for Earth. They're bound to overtake us eventually, but it will take them some days. And each day will bring us that much nearer Earth with that much greater chance of getting a message through."

"And what happens when we get to Earth? We'll have no fuel to slow down—won't be able to stop. We'll just go sailing round the sun for ever," Mitch said.

"Is that important when the fate of the whole world is at stake?"

"I suppose not." We were all shaken. We realised that Jet was right. It was the only course open to us. But it was not easy to accept the prospect of certain death, with a ship adrift in space for our tomb.

My mind was immediately occupied, however, with more practical things, such as improvising takeoff couches, for the Freighter had not been equipped to carry a crew. I collected any soft material I could find and, on Jet's suggestion, we decided to inflate our suits for air cushions. They would, of course, be ruined, but we still had the Martian space suits. We removed every piece of metal or other hard object from the floor so that no one would lie on it.

Some hours later we were ready. Jet had recorded the message we wished to send to Earth and Lemmy had fixed things so that a continuous tape was fed into the transmitter which would be left running the whole time the motors were firing. In this way, we hoped, no matter what happened to us, Earth might hear our warning and take the necessary action. The message would be repeated automatically every five minutes until we either switched it off—or the ship blew up.

"Very well, gentlemen. On to your couches." Jet's voice was steady.

"Everybody must be sure to have sufficient padding under his neck and in the small of his back," I said. "I'll come round and see that you're all comfortable."

"Do we get a bedtime story?" muttered Lemmy under his breath.



"You'll stay by the motor controls, Mitch, and I'll stay by the televiewer. Soon as our position is favourable, I'll give you the order to fire the motor. Then get to your couch as quickly as you can," said Jet to the engineer.

"Roger."

As we reacted automatically to the familiar orders for takeoff, as we had done so many times before, we could not believe it was to be for the last time.

"Stand by for firing. Coming into centre—nought point nine degrees."

"Would we reach sufficient speed to keep ahead of them? When they saw us trying to get away would they try to overtake us? We'd be helpless by then, with not even enough fuel in the tanks to take any evasive action . . .

"Don't move, anybody. Lie flat."

". . . Nought point three. Nought point two. Nought point one.—Contact!"

We were off. There was no turning back now. Somehow it was a relief.

"Lie down, Jet," I urged. "Quick—while you've still got the chance."

"I'm OK," he replied. "How about you, Mitch?"

"I made it, Jet, don't worry."

For the next few minutes the pressure on my chest was agony. I could hear Lemmy groaning, and the Controller seemed to have passed out. The time seemed interminable and I began to think we must have much more fuel left than Mitch imagined when, abruptly, the roar of the motors faded. We had used up the last drop of fuel and were now adrift in space.

Had it been worth it? When we had recovered from the effects of the terrific acceleration we set about finding out. Lemmy was at the radio.

"Control calling Freighter No 2."

"I got them!" he said excitedly.

"Repeat. Control calling Space Fleet. We still have not heard from you. Please increase your signal strength. Increase your signal strength."

"But I *can't*!" yelled Lemmy savagely.

Jet put a hand on his shoulder. "All right, Lemmy.

Every hour brings us a little nearer to Earth, and with it a better chance of establishing contact."

"How's it going, old boy?" I said to Frank at the televiewer.

"They're there all right, Doc. But not nearly so close as they would have been had we not fired the motors."

"Well, that's something," said Mitch.

After calculating, he announced: "Their speed is only slightly more than ours—if it remains constant it will be a week before they overtake us."

"Then we've a little over seven days in which to establish contact with Control," I said.

"Jet!" Frank's voice came sharp and urgent. "Come over here—quickly."

"What's the trouble?"

Jet went over to the televiewer. Frank was watching it numbly.

"The asteroids—they've increased speed by at least twenty-five per cent."

"What!"

"They're closing in on us very rapidly. Check it for yourself."

"There's no need," answered Jet grimly. "I can tell they're closer by their size on the screen."

"They'll be on us in less than a couple of days," exclaimed Mitch.

"If they go on increasing speed, it'll be only a matter of hours."

"Oh, blimey." Lemmy sat down at his controls again. Soon I heard his voice:

"Hullo, Earth—Space Fleet calling Earth. Can you hear me? Have most important and urgent message for you. If you love me, answer my call—please answer my call!"

## 15

ALL THIS time the Lunar Controller had been unconscious, but now he opened his eyes.

"Where am I? What happened?"

"You blacked out, that's all," I said. "You'll be OK."

"What about the Martian Fleet?"

We explained the position.

"They can reach a maximum speed of 75,000," said the Controller. "They're bound to overtake us. Crush us to pulp."

"We won't mind that so long as we get a message through to Earth first," said Jet shortly.

"You may not mind, but I do. I don't want to die just yet."

"None of us does, but what can we do about it?"

"If you've got a radio aboard with a high-frequency transmitter, we can use it to contact the Martian Fleet. Put ourselves into their hands."

"Surrender to them, you mean?"

"That's better than dying, isn't it?"

"Not to my way of thinking."

"What have you to lose?"

"The opportunity to get that message back to Earth—to prevent the invasion from succeeding."

"You'll never do it—and what matters if you don't? The people on Earth will never even know it has taken place. It will be all over before they even realise what's happening."

"The answer is no."

At Jet's reply the man seemed to go berserk.

"Out of my way!" he screamed. He headed straight for Lemmy and the radio. "Out of the way, you!"

"Here, turn it up," Lemmy began. "What do you think you're doing?"

In answer the Controller's fist shot out. The cockney staggered back in pain and surprise. "Why, you dirty so-and-so! Take that!" Lemmy's blow caught the Controller full on the chin.

The attack had been so sudden that the rest of us stood there open-mouthed.

"Grab him . . . Mitch—Doc!"

Jet's order galvanised us into action and between us we seized the Controller, who struggled furiously.

"He's gone crackers," exclaimed Lemmy. "Completely off his rocker."

"Oh, not me," muttered the Controller. "I'm the only sane one here."

"Listen to me carefully," said Jet. "We don't intend to co-operate with any Martians—or with you. We shall continue to make every endeavour to contact Earth Control, until that fleet of asteroids overtakes and all hope is gone. Now, put on one of those Martian suits. While you're wearing that your movements will be a bit cramped. But any further attempt to go near that radio or any other vital equipment and you'll go down below in the hold."

I went over to Lemmy. "Let's have a look. Hm—you're going to have a nice black eye."

"There's no need to get riled," put in Mitch.

"I'm not riled—just busy. You want me to contact Earth, don't you? We've got those Martians on our tail, haven't we?"

It was obvious that Lemmy was his old self again.

But his efforts at the radio were fruitless. Occasionally he picked up the voice of Control, only to learn that they still failed to receive us.

Meanwhile the Martian Fleet slowly but surely overtook us. They now showed on our televiewer screen as bodies of a definite solid appearance. The Freighter, unlike the *Discovery*, carried no telescopic lenses, so we were unable at this stage to get a close view. At this distance there were far too many to count but we could easily see the twenty-one leading spheres flying in crescent formation. In the centre was a huge asteroid—at least twice the size of those escorting it, ten on each side, the line tapering back like a huge pair of wings. Behind the first formation we could see others—all identical with the first, stretching back into the distance for what must have been hundreds of miles.

Twenty-four hours passed. The asteroids that went to make up the leading formation more than filled the whole televiewer screen. The huge, global-shaped rocks—miniature planets, in fact—were creeping up on us, closer and ever closer. It was a fascinating but awful sight. The Lunar Controller seemed to have lost interest in everything and sat slumped for hours on end with his head buried in his arms.

Now the immense mass of the great asteroid almost filled

the whole screen. We could see the sphere bays on her, just like those on the other asteroid, and also the spheres lying on their floors.

Then the smaller spheres seemed suddenly to become bigger. "They're leaving the asteroid," I cried.

"They must mean to surround us!" exclaimed Jet. "They're leaving formation, going on ahead."

"Jet! Jet!" It was Lemmy calling excitedly. "Control—they've heard us." Control had heard us Strength 1. They were ready to receive our message.

I heard Jet's voice in the background sending the vital message: "Listen carefully. The main fleet is already on its way. The method by which the Martians hope to overcome all resistance to their invasion plans is as follows . . ."

And then his voice was drowned by a noise we all recognised.

"Hey, listen," shouted Lemmy with a scared look on his face, "I know what that is, it's that Martian music—the kind that puts you to sleep."

"So that's their little game," cried Mitch. "They're trying to hypnotise us."

"Then don't let them," I said urgently. "Fight it! With all your willpower. We *must* resist it."

The 'music' increased. I took another look at the screen. The spheres were all around us now.

Lemmy yawned. I slapped his face hard. "You've got to keep awake," I urged. "Walk up and down; pinch yourself—anything. Whatever you do, don't go to sleep. Frank, you too—start walking."

Lemmy was marching up and down, repeating to himself: "I must keep awake, whatever happens."

I went over to Jet, who had finished transmitting his message.

"Doc, what's happening? That noise . . ." he exclaimed.

"We're completely surrounded by spheres," I said, "and they're trying to condition us. Whatever happens, Jet, we've got to stay awake." I looked at him anxiously for he was yawning and stretching and rubbing his eyes.

"Jet!" I yelled.

"The recorder," he said sleepily. "The message is on there, too. Switch it on. It will transmit . . . automatically

. . . not matter what happens . . . to . . .” His eyes were closing. I shook him hard and slapped him, but in vain. He was asleep.

I switched the recorder on and went back to the others. Lemmy was still pacing up and down. “I must not go to sleep. I must not go to sleep.” The words came fainter and fainter. And then, all of a sudden, Lemmy halted.

“The music—it’s stopped,” he exclaimed. “Oh blimey! Look at the others!”

Jet, Frank, Mitch and the Lunar Controller were standing exactly as they had been when the noise started, but they were all fast asleep—a quite uncanny sight.

“Switch on the receiver, Lemmy,” I said urgently. “Turn it up full so that we can hear Control if they reply, and then look at the televiewer and see what’s going on outside. I’ll try to rouse the others.”

But I had hardly left him when he yelled: “They’re coming, Doc! One of the spheres is heading straight for our ship.”

I rushed over. “They must think we’ve all been overcome by that hypnotic music, as we were on Mars. Quick—over to the airlock! Disconnect the outer control so they can’t open the main door. And I’ll disconnect the door into the cargo hold so they can’t come in that way.”

Once the doors were out of action we took another look at the screen. The sphere was right outside the ship now. As we watched, its door slid open and some men in Martian space suits came out and drifted towards us. Soon we heard a click as they tried the main door.

I was working on Jet again, slapping him, shaking him, kicking him. Somehow, I *had* to wake him up. “Jet! Jet!” I yelled frantically.

They were trying the door again. A series of angry clicks seemed to indicate that it wouldn’t work.

“Doc? What the . . .”

I swung round. Jet had opened his eyes. “Thank goodness,” I exclaimed, “you’ve come round at last.”

In a few words I explained the situation.

“Hey, Doc,” called Lemmy, “those geezers are giving up. They’re drifting back to the sphere.”

"That couldn't be better," I said thankfully. "Keep your eye on them while I rouse the others."

It was fairly easy to wake Mitch and Frank, but I had to work harder on the Lunar Controller. While I was still trying to rouse him Control came through.

"They heard us!" Lemmy shouted excitedly. "They got the message."

"Repeat," came the voice of Control, "received your message but do not understand the contents."

"Eh?" said Lemmy. "Can't he understand English?"

"Quiet, Lemmy!" hissed Jet.

"Full consideration to your request is being given at the highest level, but it is imperative that more information as to the reason for closing down all television stations on Earth be given immediately."

"We haven't time to explain everything," said Jet worriedly. "It would take hours. If reception is still bad, they'd be constantly asking for repeats."

"All they've got to do is do as they're told," protested Lemmy. "We can tell them why after they've done it."

"You think so?" I asked. "By now the Martians on that asteroid—if there are any on it—must realise we're not all unconscious as they expected."

Jet called Control again and tried to stress the urgency of our request. "It is essential that you act on this information immediately. Repeat, act immediately. It will soon be too late. Repeat—too late."

A cry from Frank interrupted him. "The ship—she's falling!"

I hurried to the televiewer and saw, to my horror, that he was right. Very slowly, but unmistakably, we were falling—towards the asteroid. We might have expected it. A body as large as that was bound to have some gravitational pull on a little ship like ours. It was attracting us like a pin to a magnet. And we could do nothing about it. We hadn't a scrap of fuel left to counteract the pull. We would just drift helplessly down and probably land with enough force to damage the ship severely—if not irreparably.

"They've got to believe you, Jet," I said as he came over to where I stood. "We shan't get another chance to send

that message. The fate of the whole human race depends on their immediately closing down all television stations the world over."

"I've done my best to convince them, Doc. I can't do more," answered Jet sombrely.

"Ain't that just like 'em?" put in Lemmy. "Send us all this way to Mars to find out how the invasion will be made, and then, when we tell them, they don't want to believe it."

"I don't blame them, I must say," said Mitch. "Whoever thought that television would be their major weapon?"

"It's been a major weapon in the hands of many people on Earth for years," remarked Lemmy.

"But never for such a sinister reason."

"No?"

"This is not the time to debate morals," Jet said. "We've about five minutes to get ready for the impact. Now get on your beds. I want nobody on their feet when the crash comes."

"What happens if Control comes through meanwhile?" asked Lemmy.

"They won't—not before we touch down, anyway. Afterwards, if the radio's still working, maybe we'll learn they've decided to act on our information after all."

"Let's hope we're all in a fit state to hear them say so," said the ever-optimistic Lemmy.

"*Calling Space Fleet.*"

"Ay ay. They're here already."

"*Calling Freighter No 2.*"

"But that can't be them," objected Jet. "Our signal has hardly had time to reach them."

"*Calling Freighter No 2. Can you hear me?*"

"That's not Control," said Jet decisively.

"Sounds like a bloke with a frog in his throat," put in Lemmy.

"*Can you hear me?*"

The voice, indeed, was most peculiar. It was like Control in what it said but its tone was somehow different. Almost mechanical.

Jet left his improvised bed and went to the radio.



"Hullo. Freighter No 2 answering. Receiving you—strength 4."

The answer came immediately. *"Your ship is falling. You are in danger of crashing on to the asteroid."*

"We realise that, thank you. Who are you?"

*"We will do our best to save you from the crash."*

"What can you do to prevent it?"

*"You will put on your space suits and accompany the escort I will send for you."*

"What if we don't care to leave here?"

*"A sphere will set out from here immediately. Be ready to leave your ship and transfer to it when it arrives."*

"Answer my question," said Jet impatiently. "What if we don't care to leave here?"

*"You have very little time left. Prepare to transfer at once."*

"We prefer to stay here and take a chance, thank you."

*"The sphere is ready to leave."*

"You're wasting your time, Jet," said Mitch. "That can only be another of those electronic brains."

"You think so?" The unexpected voice made us jump. The words were the first uttered by the Lunar Controller for some time. "That is not the voice of an electronic brain."

"What do you mean, Evans? What is it, then?" asked Jet.

The Controller didn't answer.

*"If you have any questions to ask, ask me,"* said Lemmy.

"What was that, Lemmy?"

The radio operator was shaking like a leaf. Jet looked at him in surprise. "What's the matter, Lemmy?"

"I—I never said anything, Jet. It wasn't me."

"But I distinctly heard you, Lemmy."

*"No, you didn't,"* said Lemmy's voice. *"It was me you heard."*

Lemmy had gone very white and I couldn't blame him. For it was definitely his voice we heard and yet I could swear he hadn't opened his mouth.

"Oh I must be sick," he said now. "I must be going off my rocker."

*"Not so sick as you might be if you don't listen to me."*  
It was Lemmy's voice again and it came from the radio.

"What on earth is going on?" exclaimed Mitch and Jet together.

"Look out, Jet," came Frank's voice urgently. "We're going to hit the deck. For God's sake lie down!"

We threw ourselves on our bunks and held our breaths. A few minutes later the crash came, and the ship shuddered, rocked violently, then lay still. We had landed. And we were unhurt.

Jet took command immediately. "See if the radio still works, Lemmy. The rest of you over here. Including you, Evans. Now we're on this asteroid, and I think we're safe for the present. The Martians can't get in unless we allow them to."

"They'll find a way," muttered the Controller.

"Maybe—but, meanwhile there are a few things which you can tell me."

"What things?" asked the Controller sulkily.

"This asteroid we're on is the biggest we've seen so far. It must be a very special one."

"It is," put in the Controller. "It's the flagship—the nerve centre as you might say—of the whole fleet."

"Then whoever gave you your orders when you were in command of 734 might well be aboard it?"

"Almost certainly," agreed Evans.

"Martians?"

"How should I know? I've never been inside a Martian ship of that size and I've never seen a Martian—or knowingly spoken to one. No one has, that I'm aware of."

"That voice we heard talking just before we touched down, that sounded like Control but couldn't have been..." began Jet.

"It was far too strong. And it had a most peculiar quality about it," I put in.

"What is your opinion, Evans?"

"I have no opinion."

"Now listen," said Jet authoritatively, "it's no good your playing dumb. If you refuse to answer my questions I'll dress you in your space suit and put you outside where the Martians can pick you up at their leisure."

"All right. I'll answer your questions—if I can."

"That's more like it. Now, could that have been the voice of a Martian talking to us?"

"No more than that electronic brain you wrecked was a Martian."

"But that brain received messages from outside which you said *came* from the Martians. It translated them into speech—that was the way you received your orders."

"Yes."

"But you at no time had any direct contact with a Martian?"

"Never."

"Why not?"

"It is said that Martians cannot speak in the way we understand. That's why electronic brains were designed. They are the only medium by which contact with Earthmen, conditioned or otherwise, can be made."

"But that doesn't explain why that voice sounded like that of an operator down on Earth. Or the voice of Lemmy. And it was definitely the voice of Lemmy coming out of our receiver. How can you account for that?"

"I can't. I wish I could."

"There's something very strange going on," said Jet thoughtfully.

"Could they be trying to scare us into submission?" I suggested.

"Maybe," answered Evans.

Lemmy announced at this moment that although the receiver was all right, the transmitter would only work on a low output. No signal from us would reach Earth now.

"Well let's try again—it can't do any harm," said Jet.

"All right," agreed Lemmy, "if you say so, but it'll only be a waste of time." He spoke into the microphone. "Hullo Control. Freighter No 2 calling Earth. Are you receiving me? Over."

"Now switch on the receiver, Lemmy. Give them time to answer," said Jet.

Lemmy did so, and immediately we heard:

"*Hullo, Freighter No 2.*" But it wasn't Control. It was Lemmy's voice again.

"Eh?" said the astounded cockney.

*"Receiving you loud and clear."*

"Oh no. It's me own voice again. What's going on here? I must be having a nightmare."

*"This is no nightmare, Lemmy. I thought you liked the sound of your own voice."*

"Not when I haven't got control of it I don't. Somebody's having us on. It's a trick." Lemmy's voice was panicky now. "It's—it's a new form of psychological warfare—a method of sending us all crackers."

*"Not at all, Lemmy. If I'm to talk to you I must use a voice of some kind."*

Lemmy stared in a dazed kind of way at the receiver.

"Then why use mine?"

*"How about this?"*

I jumped. It was *my* voice coming from the radio now. But I hadn't said a word.

*"Or do you prefer Mitch's voice?"* The Australian accent was there to perfection.

*"Or Frank's?"* It changed again.

*"Or even our mutual friend—Mr Evans?"*

"Haven't you got a voice of your own, chum?" moaned Lemmy. "You're getting me all mixed up."

*"Yes, I have got a voice of my own,"* came Lemmy's voice from the radio.

"Then why don't you use it?"

*"It wouldn't help the situation if I did."* This time it sounded like Jet speaking.

"Listen to me," said Jet firmly, "whoever you are. This may be great fun for you, but it's not to us."

*"I'm sorry."* The voice sounded contrite, and it was my voice it was using now. *"I'll stick to just one voice in future."*

"Thank you. Does it have to be one of our voices?"

*"I'm afraid it does. I'll use Dr Matthews."*

"Thank you."

*"Now you listen to me. Do you want to stay out there on the surface—all the way to Earth?"*

"What else can we do?"

*"You could leave that ship and come in here. I can offer you comfortable quarters for the rest of the journey. But if you prefer to stay, then you may do so."*

"Not long ago you were ordering us to leave here. Why the sudden change?"

*"Most people aboard this ship have to be ordered—to everything."*

"Conditioned types, you mean?"

*"Exactly. Ordering you was more a matter of habit. Besides, I didn't think you'd want to stay in there from choice."*

"We don't think you can possibly have any reason for wanting to help us. We are entirely opposed to your plan to invade the Earth. If we could possibly prevent it we would—you can tell the Martians that from us."

*"It is known already. Our only regret is that you are against us instead of with us."*

"That we will never be."

*"Is yours the spirit that prevails down on Earth?"*

The question surprised Jet. "You know nothing of Earth at all?" he asked.

*"Plenty. I know of its green hills—its forests—its seas—its temperate climates. The Earth is a beautiful planet. In the flower of its youth. Not like Mars—old, worn out and dying; covered in deserts, deficient in water and oxygen, cold by day, frozen by night; hardly able to support life of any kind any longer. I have been looking forward to this trip for years and years."*

"You make Earth sound like a regular paradise, chum," remarked Lemmy.

*"It is, and will remain so, if the people who inhabit it know how to take care of it."*

"You think they don't?" asked Jet.

*"They don't act as though they do. The planet will die soon enough without their hastening its end. A millennium ago, it was the same on Mars—the Martians learnt too late. By the time they did, a fruitful world was rapidly becoming a desert. Animal life all but disappeared. The intelligent, thinking beings took to living underground. The rest perished. The deterioration continues with frightening rapidity. Soon Mars will support no kind of life whatsoever. The time has come to find a new abode. The Earth."*

"And you'd help the Martians to take it?" said Jet angrily.

"Who do you think I am, Captain Morgan?"

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it? One of the Martians."

"No." The voice paused. "*I am the Martian.*"

"You mean the chief? The head one—whatever you like to call it?"

"No." The voice was almost sad now. "*I am the Martian. The only Martian. The only one there is left.*"

## 16

I FELT AT that moment what was happening couldn't possibly *be* happening. I could not be listening to this infinitely sad voice, *my* voice and yet not my voice, telling us that he was the only Martian left. It was crazy. Yet, somehow, I knew it was true.

"But how *could* there be only one?" protested Mitch. "Think of the organisation down there on Mars. All those people who have been picked up from Earth—the factories—the spheres—the whole Martian Fleet. How could just one man organise and control all that?"

"And why not?" I said slowly. "Those spheres, factories, electronic brains and everything else must be the culmination of thousands, if not millions of years of scientific thought and achievement. With mechanical and electronic devices doing all your thinking for you, with all the victims from Earth in a permanent hypnotic state and in absolute subservience, it could be possible."

"*I assure you I am the last one.*" We had almost forgotten the Martian.

"But," asked Jet hesitatingly, "what happened to all the others?"

"*When a planet dies,*" said the voice slowly, "*every living thing connected with it dies also, including the animals and plants. No amount of science, of planning, of burrowing underground, of creating artificial living conditions can stave off ultimate extinction.*"

"And is that what happened to your—race?" queried Jet.

*"We did our best to prevent it. We lived underground for centuries. But that didn't solve our problem. The few of us that were left soon realised that our only hope lay in moving to a new planet. So we did."*

"Where to?" asked Jet in surprise.

*"The Earth, of course. Where we could breathe—and smell the fresh, green grass and the forest—and feast our eyes on its oceans of precious water."*

"You mean you invaded the Earth once before?" Jet said in astonishment.

*"Yes."*

"Then why aren't you there now?" I questioned.

*"We made the mistake of landing on Earth peaceably. We had no idea of the nature of the people who inhabited it—as we discovered to our cost."*

"How?"

*"We tried to be friendly, but they hunted us down and killed. It seemed hardly possible that so much hate and cruelty could exist in such tiny people."*

"Tiny!" exclaimed Lemmy. "What are you then?"

*"By your standards, a race of giants."*

As the Martian continued his incredible story we listened spellbound.

*"We returned to our native planet leaving more than half our number behind. But the Earth has not forgotten us. Though this happened a long time ago, ever since then giants have been looked on as evil, and stories of how they were slain have been handed down from generation to generation."*

"You mean you are the origin of all those legends and fairy stories about giants?"

*"Yes. Why else would they assume that giants lived in the sky? That is certainly where we came from."*

"But you didn't come down no beanstalk, chum, I wager," muttered Lemmy.

"But this plan to invade the Earth a second time—did you instigate that?" asked Jet.

*"Oh no. That has been in existence for nearly five hundred Earth years. I am only three hundred years old—"*

*Martians live a long time by Earth standards,"* the Martian explained.

"Blimey!" exclaimed Lemmy.

"*But this time,*" he continued, "*we wanted to be sure we would not be opposed. During our first visit to Earth we had intended to teach its inhabitants to take care of their planet, not to destroy it, as we had virtually destroyed ours. But they would not listen. Our visits to Earth were now only to pick up Earthmen from deserted places, condition them, as you call it, and, after training them, return them to Earth to get more. Soon the Earthmen on Mars greatly outnumbered the Martians. They worked for us, built our ships, grew our food—but still our kind rapidly diminished. We eventually left Mars and took to living inside the asteroids between here and Jupiter, but with no better result. We needed desperately to get to Earth, but, until we could be sure that its inhabitants would not oppose us, we had to bide our time.*"

"You mean you had to wait until you had all the Earth in a conditioned state?" asked Jet.

"*Exactly. But we had no way of hypnotising the millions of people on Earth until television became world-wide. Now, at last, it is. But almost too late. I'm the only Martian left.*"

"You hope to carry the plan through alone?" Jet exclaimed incredulously.

"*Why not? I must. It is to save the world. So long as I have control of its people I can save it. Twenty more years and it could have been done, smoothly and effortlessly, with nobody on Earth being aware of it.*"

"Then who put the spanner in the works?" Lemmy enquired.

"*You did. You and your captain and the rest of your crew. Your successful voyage to Mars—how do you say it ... ?*"

"Let the cat out of the bag?" suggested Lemmy.

"*That's it. So the invasion date has been advanced—we're on our way.*"

"You'll attempt to conquer the whole world—for yourself alone?" repeated Jet.

"*Yes, nothing but good for the world can come of it. I*



*shall not allow Earthmen to make the mistakes my grandfathers made. They will not bring their home planet to an untimely end."*

"It's their planet," objected Lemmy, "why shouldn't they if they want to?"

*"That is all I have to say for the present."*

"Well, that isn't all I have to say," insisted Jet. "You've done all the talking up to now. Hullo—hullo—are you still there?" The radio was silent.

"Hullo—hullo!" called Jet again. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Captain Morgan—we can hear you."

I started. This was a different voice, but not one of ours.

"Who's that?"

"This is Harding, Captain Morgan. Do you remember me?"

I recognised the voice now. Harding had been one of the freighter crew in the original Mars Fleet. He had been taken prisoner at the same time as Frank.

"I'm outside, Captain. Let us in."

Jet hurried to the televiewer and switched it on. He rotated the camera over the surface of the asteroid and suddenly we saw them: a whole army of conditioned types, all looking identical in their space suits, marching towards the ship.

"Hullo, Captain Morgan." It was Harding's voice again. "Leave your radio on and we can hear you. Can you hear me?"

"Yes—what do you want?"

"It can't be comfortable in there, with your ship lying on its side. Put on your suits and come on out."

"We prefer to stay," said Jet stiffly.

"You're just being stubborn. Come on out."

"No."

"Then I'm afraid we have no choice but to come in."

We looked at each other uneasily. The Lunar Controller shrugged his shoulders. "I told you they'd prise us out sooner or later. With Martian equipment it won't take long."

Almost as he spoke we heard the sound of a drill.

"If you'll take my advice, Captain Morgan," said the Controller, "you'll order your crew to put their space suits

on. When they cut through the main door, every scrap of air in this place will disappear and leave it a vacuum."

"They have two doors to cut through before that happens," said Jet shortly. "Now, I want to get to the radio. Hullo—hullo, Harding."

"Hullo, Captain," came Harding's voice.

"What kind of a man are you, Harding?" said Jet curtly. "Throwing in your lot with the Martians?"

"I see nothing wrong in that," replied Harding. "Only good can come from this invasion."

"You think so?"

"It's just what the Earth needs. One authoritative government which has not just the future of one country at heart but the whole world."

"And you think you can't achieve that without the Martian taking over?"

"Earthmen have been threatening to do it for years, but they've never managed it yet. They're too concerned with their own personal or national desires to make the necessary sacrifices. They need somebody from outside to show them how it can be done."

"The Earth's entitled to a choice in the matter. And we have the right to remain here if we wish."

"About as much right as you have to claim Mars as a colony for Earth. We shall be in, Captain Morgan, in roughly two hours. Be sure to have your suits on."

"Why?" asked Jet. "What harm can we do by remaining her?"

"We want to be sure you don't re-establish contact with Control, that's all. I'll see you later."

"Well, gentlemen," Jet said slowly, "it seems ours is a fairly hopeless case."

"If we can't stop them, is there any point in waiting for them to bore holes in the ship?" asked Mitch.

"Yes, Mitch. It gives us a little time to transmit our final message to Earth. If we set the recorder going, and let it keep repeating our last message over and over again, they might hear it and take the necessary action. After all, we're getting nearer to Earth every minute. Attend to it, will you, Lemmy?"

"Yes, Jet," replied the wireless operator.

"We'll put on our suits and evacuate the ship as soon as Harding and his men get inside."

Forty-five minutes later we saw in the televiewer that Harding and his men had cut a great hole in the main door, but Jet was determined to keep the message to Control transmitting until the last possible moment. Once we left the freighter all hope of contacting Earth again would be gone. It was a sickening thought.

Soon we were face to face with Harding and his men. His greeting was cordial. We were to accompany him to the interior of the asteroid, whilst his men ripped all the gear out of our ship and transferred it to the asteroid's storeroom.

"Whatever use can it be to you?" asked Jet.

"Nothing should ever be wasted, Captain," replied Harding almost primly. "That will be one of the first things people down on Earth will learn when we take over."

We followed him across the asteroid's surface and entered the airlock of a control tower similar to the one we had encountered on 734. Eventually Harding led us into a comfortable-looking sitting-room

"These are your quarters, gentlemen. I hope you find them to your liking."

"Posh, ain't it?" said Lemmy. "A sight more comfortable than that old freighter."

"This is just your common room," continued Harding. "You have a bedroom apiece behind the doors leading off here. Your meals will be brought. The controls on the wall manipulate the entertainment circuits. They're clearly labelled: radio, film, or—in a few weeks when we get close to Earth—you'll be able to receive the television programmes radioed from stations in every principal city down there."

"So," I said slowly, "the television stations down on Earth are still operating."

Harding looked surprised. "Of course. Why shouldn't they be? Well, I must leave you, gentlemen," he went on briskly. "You'll find a change of clothing in the closets in your bedrooms. Meanwhile you will remain here until you are sent for."

"When will that be?" enquired Jet.

"I've no idea. Maybe in an hour—maybe in a month. But don't attempt to leave this place without permission."

When Harding had gone I turned to Jet. "Do you think he really knows if the television transmitters down on Earth are still working?"

"How can he?" answered Lemmy. "TV signals would never reach this far. It will be weeks before we get close enough to Earth to pick them up."

"We'll never know now whether Control received our last message—and whether they took action on it," I said.

We remained prisoners in the large and comfortable living quarters for what must have been weeks. During that time nobody came near us, except one or two conditioned types to bring us food and to clear up. We passed the time by listening to radio programmes from Earth, and watching innumerable films which we could select at the press of a button, or spend hours gazing at a televiwer screen which showed us the universe outside. Always, right in the centre of the picture, was the Earth, ever growing larger. After seven weeks we were able to pick out the features on its surface with ease. Slowly the five continents revolved before us. The white clouds appeared to be touching the Earth's surface, and the sea, like a skin of pale blue glass, seemed to be part of the land masses.

At this distance, the globe looked as solid as the brilliant polar ice caps which formed its brightest part. We were getting very close to home now, and in normal circumstances would have been thrilled. But with the fate of the whole world at stake, our homecoming was far from a happy one. Every few hours we tried all the television channels, but with no success, whether because we were still too far away or because the stations had closed down we didn't know.

And then one morning Harding came in. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said briskly, "I trust your stay here has been pleasant?"

"We've no complaints, thank you," answered Jet shortly.

"Good. The journey's nearly over. But right now,"

Harding continued, "you have another little journey to make."

We looked at him apprehensively.

"I am to take you to the Martian's suite," he went on impressively. "He wants to see you."

"Why can't he talk to us over the intercommunication system?" asked Jet.

"I never question Martian orders, Captain. Shall we go?"

"I don't think I want to see him," said Lemmy nervously. "He said he was an ogre, didn't he?"

"A giant, Lemmy," I reminded him.

"You will all follow me," said Harding firmly, "all except you, Mr Evans."

"Why single me out?" demanded the Controller.

"Orders are that you stay here."

He led us through the maze of corridors to a huge hall. Here he stopped. "This is as far as *I* go—but you go on. You can't get lost. Just proceed to the far side of the hall and follow that corridor to its end. I hope your interview will be a pleasant one, gentlemen. And I hope the next time we meet we'll be working *with* and not against one another."

Were we to be subjected to some more conditioning by the Martian? I warned the others to be on their guard.

The corridor led to a large, circular room. It was very dark. At the far end of the room we saw the faint outline of somebody standing against the wall.

"Stand still," said Jet sharply. Raising his voice he shouted: "Hullo—anybody there?"

"*Would I have invited you here if there wasn't?*" came my voice in answer.

"I thought he said he was a giant," Mitch objected. "Whoever that is isn't any bigger than us."

The figure didn't move. Only its eyes seemed alive, glowing brilliantly in the darkness.

"*Come along,*" said the Martian cheerfully.

To my surprise his voice seemed to come from the ceiling and not from the direction of the figure.

Cautiously we crossed the room and then Jet gave a startled exclamation: "Well I'll be darned! It's nothing

but a statue. Carved from stone—with precious stones for eyes!”

“It’s like a relic from an ancient South American civilisation,” I exclaimed incredulously.

*“That’s exactly what it is,” answered the Martian. “But when my ancestors picked it up from Earth thousands of years ago the civilisation which produced it was contemporary. The city from which it came has long since been destroyed by earthquake and its remains overgrown by jungle. One of the first things I shall do when I return to Earth is have the city rebuilt on the same site.”*

“Why?” Lemmy asked bluntly.

*“The people who lived in it were kind to us.”* The voice was gentle now. *“We brought most of them back when we returned to Mars. They built our pyramid cities for us.”*

So that was why those pyramids down on the Lacus Solis were so familiar.

*“Before we took those Indians back to Mars,”* continued the Martian, *“it never occurred to us to build upwards—we always built down—into the ground. Their descendants are still with us. The younger ones are travelling with the invasion fleet. Those that are too old to make the journey have remained behind.”*

“Have you brought us down here just to tell us that?” asked Jet.

“No,” said the voice, *“I wish to talk to you.”*

“What about?” asked Jet.

*“I have a great liking for you and your crew, Captain Morgan. I admire the way you have remained steadfast to your purpose. It is only a pity that you should have spent so much of your time and energy on a lost cause.”*

“All is not lost yet,” said Jet stiffly.

“You still live in hopes of Earth having taken action on your information about television stations?”

“Of course.”

*“I’m sorry to have to disappoint you.”*

A low humming noise started up and on the wall in front of us we saw the faint glow of a televiewer screen. As we watched, the picture appeared of a variety show, which the audience were enjoying.

Lemmy groaned. "They wouldn't laugh if they only knew."

"*All stations are working at full pressure,*" came the voice of the Martian. "*All over the world. Madrid.*" The picture changed, and now a Spanish dancer moved gracefully across the screen. "*Paris.*" Dejectedly we watched the grimaces of a popular singer. "*London.*" They were still playing cricket at home. "*New York.*" Galloping hoofs and gunshots proclaimed the ever-popular horse opera. The programme ended and an announcer appeared.

"Are you feeling tired and run down? Out of sorts? Then you need Voko, nature's own tonic. Remember the name—Voko. V-O-K-O. . . . It will put you in prime condition."

"Condition is right," said Lemmy despairingly. "It'll take more than Voko to get you out of the condition you'll soon be in, mate."

The viewer was switched off.

"*So you see, Captain Morgan,*" came the Martian's voice, "*all your efforts have been in vain. It is futile for you to hope that you can do anything to prevent the invasion now.*"

"Well?" said Jet impatiently.

"*After the conquest, as you call it, the Earth will need men—Earthmen—to carry out my orders and help it run efficiently. I'd rather the Controllers who are appointed to such tasks are not conditioned types. And there are very few normal men whom I can trust. I know I could trust you—if you decided to accept such positions.*"

"The answer is definitely 'no'," said Jet.

"*A pity,*" said the Martian softly. "*What else can I offer?*"

"To call off the invasion and go home," replied Jet boldly.

"*Would you have called off your invasion of Mars had I asked you? At least I have a good reason for invading Earth—I'm looking for somewhere suitable to live.*"

"But why choose our planet?" protested Mitch. "Aren't there others just as good?"

"*Not in this solar system.*"

"You talk as though there are others," I remarked.

*"There are. Do you think that of all the millions of stars visible from this part of the galaxy, our own sun is the only one with an attendant family of planets? It isn't. Our nearest neighbour, the star you know as Proxima Centauri, has fifteen attendant worlds—and all but two of them supporting life of some kind. One is remarkably like the Earth, with living creatures on it. But not intelligent, thinking creatures like you and me.*

*"Proxima Centauri is four light-years from here. Traveling at the greatest possible speed these asteroids are capable of, it would take seventy years. A whole lifetime of an Earthman, and one-third that of a Martian."*

"That means you could go, then. Why don't you? It would solve all your problems." Lemmy spoke quite hopefully.

*"It is not just myself I have to consider," said the Martian wearily. "There are the thousands of Earthmen in this fleet. Do you deny them the right to return home? They cannot return without me. Besides, I am not so young. If we went to Proxima Centauri there would be precious little of my own life left by the time we got there. And none at all for the Earthmen. The only ones who could hope to survive are their children. Also, my plan which is so terribly important to me, can only result in ultimate good. I am quite convinced that unless Earthman is forced to take care of his planet, he will rapidly destroy it, himself and all other kinds of life. I offer the Earth the benefit of a million years of bitter experience."*

"But you can only do it by holding the Earth in subjection, completely under your control. By hypnotism," Jet protested.

*"The subjects will be unaware that they are hypnotised. To them nothing will appear to be changed, and their future happiness is assured."*

"What makes you think they'll be happy? Do you think they'll obey your orders without question at all times, forever?"

*"They will not have to. My time is nearly over." The Martian's voice was wistful now. "I want to spend the time left to me quietly; among the Earth's green hills, under its blue sky and along its golden shores. By the time*



*I am dead, the Earth will have learned its lesson, and be glad to lead the kind of life I will establish, because it is the only way."*

"But your Martian way of life is entirely alien to us," protested Jet. "Earthmen do not like being forced to take orders."

*"Your own crew take orders from you."*

"Because that is their wish. You'd soon see a difference if I ordered them about at the point of a gun. You have forgotten the one thing that Earthmen value above all else."

*"And what is that?"*

"Their freedom, the most vital thing a man can have, next to his soul. Earthmen in all parts of the world have been conquered many times by other Earthmen. In many cases the conquest has brought the conquered a more comfortable life, and turned them from fierce savages into civilised beings—all the things you hope to achieve by your invasion."

*"They should have been grateful."*

"In a way they have. But most men prefer to control their own destinies—the longer they are held down, the stronger their desire for freedom. The moment people on Earth wake up to the fact that they are ruled by an alien like you—and one day the conditioning you will subject them to *will* wear off—they will revolt. I guarantee it. History proves, time and again, that you can only hold a group of people down for a time. You cannot hold them down for ever. The desire for freedom is too strong."

"And you'll find half the men leading the revolt will be your supervisors and controllers," I put in.

"Men like Jack Evans," added Lemmy, "who won't be above organising a little conquest of their own if they get the chance."

"The Earth will be in a far greater mess than it is now, and all your good intentions will have come to nothing." It was Mitch who had the final word.

For a moment there was a silence. It seemed almost as though Jet's eloquence had made an impression on the Martian. Then we heard his voice again.

*"You put up a good case, Captain Morgan, but the*

*invasion will be carried through. Remember, this is no ordinary conquest, Captain. Above all," he warned, "do not underestimate my power."*

The entire wall in front of us suddenly glowed.

"It must be another of those three-dimensional televiewer screens," I whispered.

The picture of a man appeared—a giant of a man. It could only be the Martian.

"Blimey," gasped Lemmy, "he's as tall as a house."

*"Mere size could not frighten you, Lemmy. Look at me. Look into my face, Lemmy."*

"What are you playing at?" Lemmy asked.

*"Look at my face."*

"No."

*"Look into my face, Lemmy."*

Lemmy's eyes slowly rose to the gigantic face towering above us. I watched in horrified fascination.

*"What do you say now, Lemmy?"* came the relentless voice.

"What are your orders?" It was the toneless, expressionless voice of a conditioned man.

The Martian's voice changed. *"You see, gentlemen, how easy it is? Everything down on Earth is ready. Every televiewer station will carry my picture at the appointed time and the majority of people on Earth will be watching. Lemmy's conditioning is slight. A few slaps on the cheek will soon bring him round. The interview is ended. You may return to your quarters."*

The picture on the wall faded. I slapped Lemmy hard on each cheek. "Lemmy—wake up!"

"Ooh—what happened?" Lemmy looked at me anxiously. His voice was normal again.

"You're okay," I answered. "We're now going back to our quarters, the interview is over."

The first thing we did was switch on our televiewer receiver. The stations were working normally. Earth, apparently, was completely unaware of the danger it was in.

Two days later we had crossed the Moon's orbit and were rapidly approaching Earth. The final stage had come. The asteroid was slowing down, preparing to go into orbit round the Earth. According to the Lunar Controller our

asteroid would remain approximately five thousand miles above the surface. The smaller ones would go in to about a thousand miles, and when every ship was in position the broadcast would be made. The Martian's face would appear on every receiver working down on Earth and in a few minutes it would be over. Everybody watching the transmission would be conditioned—probably at least seventy-five per cent of the population. The spheres, carrying the Martian's invaders, would then leave the asteroids and go down to take over.

"And the Martian?" Jet asked the Controller.

"He will descend only when the whole Earth is under control. In anything from two days to a couple of weeks."

And there was nothing we could do.

Thirty-six hours later we were in free orbit round the Earth and the rest of the fleet—hundreds upon hundreds of smaller asteroids—had taken up their positions. They formed a belt round and above the Earth's equator, a thousand miles up, similar to those that encircle the planet Saturn. We were powerless. We could only stand helplessly by and watch.

Suddenly Jet spoke. "Lemmy, turn on the television receiver."

"Whatever for?"

"We might as well know when the end does come."

"Careful," warned the Controller, "when the Martian begins the conditioning process it will affect everybody who is watching—including us."

"Then we won't watch," Jet decided. "We'll just listen."

Lemmy turned the sound up. We heard the melancholy strains of Chopin.

"It's London No 1," exclaimed Lemmy. "And that music they're playing couldn't be more appropriate."

"How much longer before the fatal transmission?" I tried to speak calmly.

"It was scheduled for 1600 hours, Universal Time," answered the Controller.

Ninety minutes to go. There didn't seem to be anything more to say, and we sat listening to the delicate music.

Suddenly it stopped; abruptly, in the middle of a phrase. Lemmy looked startled.

"The receiver!" he exclaimed. "It's cut!"

"The picture, Lemmy," urged Jet. "Has the picture gone too?"

Lemmy turned up the knob. The screen remained blank.

"The set must have broken down," I said.

"Martian receivers don't break down," answered the Controller.

"But Earth's transmitters do," Lemmy reminded us.

"Switch to another channel, Lemmy," ordered Jet.

Lemmy obeyed. There was nothing there either. We tried them all. There wasn't a transmitter working anywhere.

"Let's hope it's not just this receiver that's gone wrong," I said.

Lemmy shook his head confidently. "It's not the receiver, Doc. There's definitely nothing to pick up. His Nibs has had it now."

It seemed too good to be true.

"He'll think of something," said the Controller, "he'll not be beaten that easily."

"He'll have to do *something!*" said Lemmy. "He can't just leave the entire fleet encircling the Earth for ever."

Hours passed. Nothing happened. Not a sound, not a voice.

"They don't know what a narrow escape they had down there," ruminated Mitch. "Why did they wait until the last minute?"

"I think that's easily explained, Mitch," said Jet. "They got our message all right but they didn't expect the Fleet to arrive for another couple of months. Space HQ must have been wondering how to convince every country in the world that its television services would have to be stopped without telling viewers the truth and throwing the whole world in a panic. But when the asteroids appeared in the sky—and everybody on Earth must have seen them—they had no choice but to shut down the stations immediately."

"I bet there's pandemonium going on down there now then," murmured Lemmy.

"Not half the pandemonium there will be if the Mar-

tian attempts a landing without having conditioned everybody first," remarked Jet.

"*Captain Morgan,*" came from the radio receiver.

"Oh crikey—him again," said Lemmy.

"*You have exactly one hour in which to leave this asteroid. You will be conducted to a sphere bay out on the surface. You are at liberty to board one of the spheres and fly it down to Earth, with the rest.*"

"You mean you're going to attempt an invasion, after all?" asked Jet.

"*Oh no. It was never part of my plan to spill blood. All over the Earth great armies and air forces are standing by, ready to repel us should we set foot on the planet.*"

"And so you are sending us down?" cried Lemmy indignantly. "What do you think we are—clay pigeons?"

"*I'm sending nobody,*" said the Martian impatiently. "*Anybody who returns to Earth at this stage does so of his own free will.*"

"Will any others be going?" asked Jet.

"*Thousands. More than half the personnel of the entire fleet. They have chosen to go.*"

"I don't understand."

"*It's quite easily explained,*" said the Martian. "*I cannot invade now. My strongest weapon has been snatched from me, so I've decided to withdraw. And I have given the members of the Fleet a choice of returning to their native Earth if they wish. When I think of the beauty of your planet I cannot blame those who have elected to go,*" said the voice sadly. "*Yet it pleases me to know that so many are prepared to remain under my command, in spite of my decision to withdraw. You may not believe it, Captain Morgan, but many of the people aboard this fleet were enthusiastic supporters of my plan to invade.*"

"They hardly had any choice, did they?"

"*They have a choice now. Yet still they prefer to stay.*"

"Why?"

"*Switch on the intercommunication televiewer.*"

"No, don't," warned the Controller. "One look at him and he'll condition us all."

*"Go on, this no trick. It's not my picture you will see."*

"Switch it on, Lemmy," ordered Jet, convinced by the sincerity of the Martian.

As the set warmed up we heard the sound of men singing Paddy's rebel song about the green hills of Earth. Then we saw the singers.

"It's a group of conditioned types," exclaimed Lemmy.

*"They are conditioned no longer,"* the Martian said. *"They are men with minds of their own. They're going up to the surface to prepare spheres for the others who have chosen to return to Earth."*

"So these men are going with you?" asked Jet. "Why?"

*"Look at them—closely. They are men picked up from all parts of the Earth. They are composed of all kinds of races and colours—but they have one thing in common."*

"What?"

*"They come from minority groups. Many of them, during their lives on Earth, suffered persecution; often they went hungry, were denied common human rights. Earth does not hold particularly pleasant memories for them."*

"That's true," agreed Lemmy softly.

"And yet they're singing about Earth?" questioned Mitch.

*"It is another Earth they have in mind, where persecution, hunger, misgovernment and wars do not exist."*

"But where is this Earth they sing about?" said Jet.

*"Four light years from here."*

"Proxima Centauri?" gasped Jet. "The planet which you say is remarkably like our Earth? You're taking them there?"

*"I shall do my best,"* said the voice slowly. *"I don't guarantee that I shall manage it. Most of those who go with me will be dead, long before they get there, but they go for their children's sake. There's little point in our returning to Mars—we leave that to you. There's still some life left there. Large areas will still grow food—if you can find a way of releasing oxygen from the rocks and increasing the water supply. But it will never be like your Earth. Now, you haven't much time. Are there any of you who wish to remain and chance the trip to another star?"*

There was silence at his question.

"Nobody?"

"Now's your chance, Jack Evans," Lemmy said to the Controller.

"I'll return to Earth, thank you," Evans replied stiffly.

"*Very well,*" said the Martian. "*Put on your suits. Harding will escort you to the bay. The others are waiting.*"

"Others?" asked Jet. "What others?" There was no reply. "Hullo—hullo."

But the Martian had gone. It was the last time we were to hear his voice.

Soon we were on the surface of the asteroid, following Harding towards the sphere which was to take us home.

"There she is, gentlemen," he said. "All you have to do is climb aboard—and head for Earth."

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Jet.

"No."

"You prefer to risk your neck getting to Proxima Centauri?"

"Yes, and I have no doubt that we shall get there. And if we can, we can get back—remember that. Tell it to your children."

"Well, I'm glad you're so confident. Goodbye, Harding—and good luck."

"Good luck to you, sir. Sorry your conscience won't allow you to come with us."

We boarded the sphere and Frank sat down at the controls. Jet turned to the Lunar Controller. "Now Evans, if this ship carries a radio, show Lemmy how it works. Try to contact Control, Lemmy."

"All set, sir," called Frank. "Take off whenever you're ready."

"We're ready now, but take it easy."

"Contact!"

Slowly the sphere rose from the barren surface of the asteroid. I turned the televiewer on. In front of us loomed the Earth filling nearly the whole screen. I switched to rear view and gasped. Following us came hundreds of other spheres, all leaving the surface of the asteroid.

"Are they all going down to Earth?" I exclaimed.

"Where else?" said Mitch. "Those are the others the Martian meant—the ones who've decided to return home."

I could hear Lemmy at the radio.

"Hullo, Earth. Lemmy Barnet calling. Calling Control. Can you hear me? Repeat. Lemmy Barnet calling Control—can you hear me?"

"Get to the televiewer, Mitch," ordered Jet. "Select a place on Earth to which we can home on the automatic navigation control."

"Roger."

"We're not quite out of the wood yet, Doc," Jet warned. "We still have to convince Earth that those spheres outside—and ours—are no longer part of an invasion fleet. When Control do come through I'll have a lot of explaining to do."

Just then Lemmy gave a yell. "Jet, I got 'em! It's Control. They've heard us."

"Thank you, Lemmy," said Jet calmly, though his face was tense. "I'll take over now."

"Yes, mate."

Jet's voice was controlled. But I could sense his excitement. "Hullo, Control. Morgan speaking. Have very important news for you. Listen carefully. This is *not* the invasion fleet—repeat, *not the invasion fleet*. It's us, on our way down to Earth. Repeat—on our way down to Earth, accompanied by hundreds of peaceful Martian spheres."

Some hours later the Earth was spread out like a map before us. We could see the green hills and the blue seas.

"Look at it," said Lemmy softly. "It really is green, isn't it? What a difference between the Earth and Mars. There's one thing I've learned on this trip if I've learned nothing else—there's no place like home. There's no planet like the Earth. We're lucky to have been born on it."

"Yes, Lemmy," I said quietly.

Then Jet gave a yell. "Doc—Lemmy—if you want to see a sight, come over here!"

We hurried over.

"The Martian fleet!" Jet exclaimed. "It's on its way. It's leaving."



There, high up in the heavens, in perfect crescent formation and moving as one body, the great array of asteroids drew further and further away from us, the giant asteroid in the lead. They were a magnificent sight.

"I hope they make it," murmured Jet.

"Good luck to 'em."

"What was that, Lemmy?"

"I said good luck to 'em. At least they got courage and, if you ask me, that New Earth of theirs won't be such a bad place to live in."

"Why didn't you go with them if you feel that way about it?" asked Mitch.

"What—and leave my Becky behind?" answered the Cockney indignantly. "Gertcha."

"It's getting very close to landing time, Jet," called Frank.

"Get back to the radio, Lemmy," ordered Jet, "and tell them we'll be touching down within thirty minutes."

"Yes, mate."

"Get over to No 2 control table, Mitch. Get ready to take us down."

"Roger."

We must look a pretty impressive sight ourselves, I thought, with all those spheres behind us. I wondered what the men down below on Earth thought about it. What an incredible story we had to tell them.

"Hullo, Control. Lemmy Barnet calling."

"Hullo, Lemmy. How you doing?"

"You should be sighting us soon. We'll be on the deck within thirty minutes."

"We're all ready for you," came the comforting voice of Control. "Anything else?"

"Just one thing," said Lemmy, with a delighted chuckle.

"What's that?"

"Put the kettle on, will you? I'm dying for a cup of tea."

**THESE ARE  PAN BOOKS**

**Constantine Fitz Gibbon**

**WHEN THE KISSING HAD  
TO STOP**

Described as the most frightening novel of this generation, the shattering theme of this book is of a Britain in which moral degeneration allows every kind of vice to flourish, pitched battles are fought between police and gangsters and a Ban the Bomb movement sweeps a Socialist megalomaniac into power—allowing the Russians to occupy the country. (2/6)

'Relegates Orwell's *1984* and Huxley's *Brave New World* to the nursery'—*Daily Mail*.

'Horriying, fascinating!'—*Punch*.

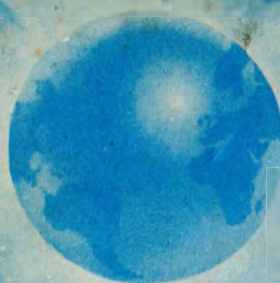
**TO OUR READERS**

A very wide range of PAN best-sellers—the pick of the paperbacks—is readily available from your bookseller or newsagent, and in the coming months many exciting new titles will appear. Full details are given in PAN RECORD, our illustrated magazine/catalogue, a copy of which will be sent to you on request. Please write to:

PAN RECORD, PAN BOOKS LTD.,  
8 HEADFORT PLACE, LONDON, S.W.1

**PICK OF THE PAPERBACKS**





**THE GREAT FLEET  
WAS DRAWING  
NEAR THE EARTH**

**— the twenty-one leading spheres flying in  
crescent formation and, behind them, the others  
stretching back into Space for hundreds  
of miles ...**

Jet Morgan and the crew of the *Discovery* return to Mars on the most dangerous and vital mission ever undertaken by man — to obtain the Martian plan for the conquest of Earth. Too late, they find themselves part of the invasion fleet itself.

**There is only one course left to them — if  
they are to save the World ...**

SHEFFIELD STAR —

**HIGHLY EXCITING'**

