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WELL OF THE WORLDS

By HENRY KUTTNER

Things of Distinction

By KENDELL FOSTER CROSSEN



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STARTLING STORIES

MAR. 1952

THRILLING PUBLICATION

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Vol. 25, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

March, 1952

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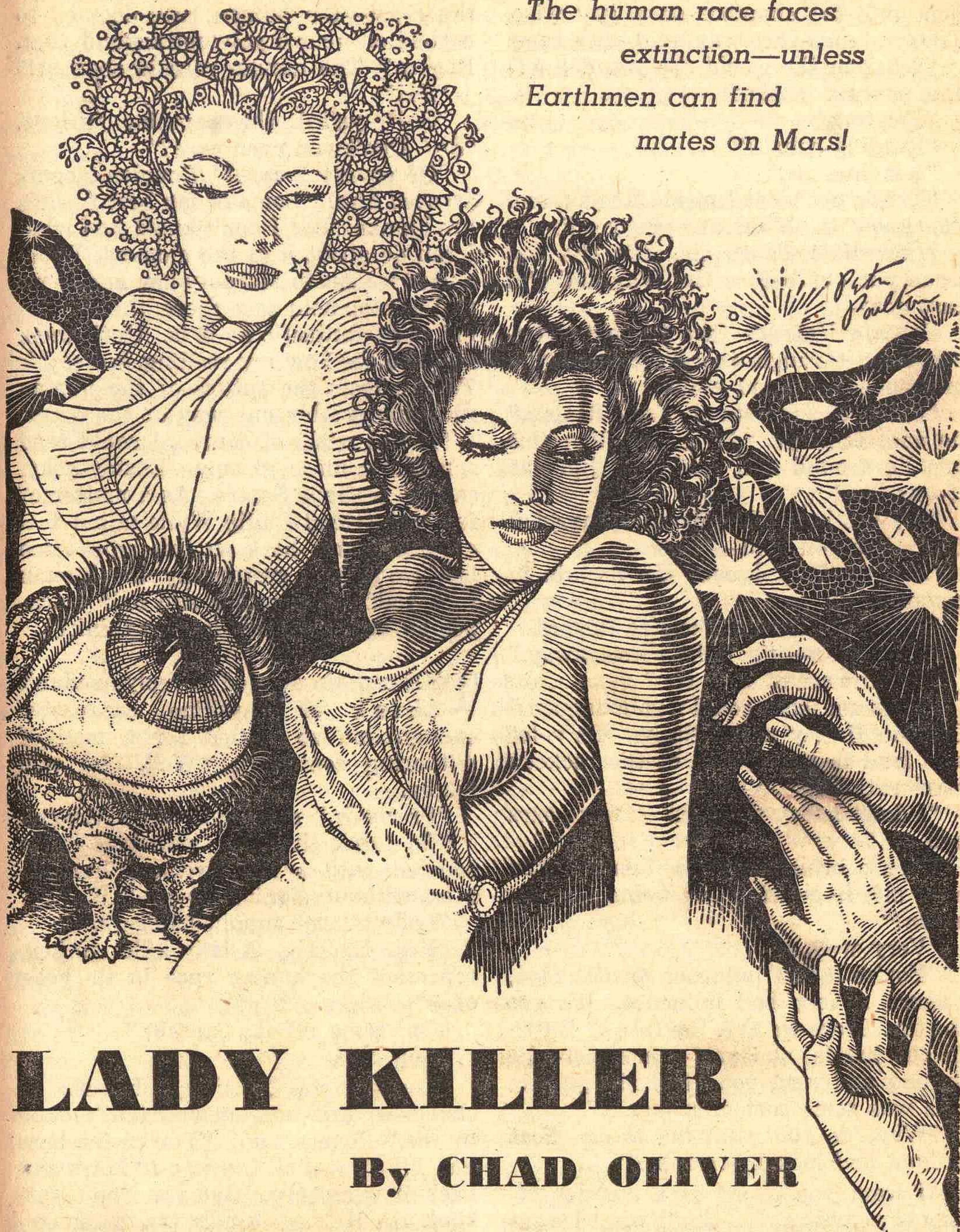
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A department of comment and criticism devoted to fandom

SAMUEL MINES, Editor

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The human race faces
extinction—unless
Earthmen can find
mates on Mars!



LADY KILLER

By CHAD OLIVER

DOUGLAS ROGERS settled himself comfortably into the acceleration couch and started in on Chapter Four of *The Green Terror from Procyon*. Except for the low hum

of the air purifiers the ship was silent around him. Nothing like free flight to give a man a chance to catch up on his reading, he reflected contentedly.

"Rogers!"

He looked up and saw Captain Halsey float into the chamber on a guy wire. The captain's face was livid with rage.

"What in the world are you doing?" the captain barked.

"Reading."

"Reading what?"

"Reading, *sir*."

"That's not what I mean, Rogers, and you know it. *What* are you reading?"

"*Incredible Tales*, *sir*. It's the last issue put out before the War and I'm just now—"

Captain Halsey's face fluctuated uncertainly through the color spectrum and ended up dead white.

"I don't understand you, Rogers," he said tensely. "At a time like *this* you lie around and read that junk as if—as if—"

"It's not junk. It's about an invasion from Procyon and—"

"*Procyon!*" exclaimed the captain in complete disgust.

"Procyon," agreed Douglas Rogers.

"That star—it's light years away."

"I am aware of that, *sir*."

"That nonsense could never happen," Captain Halsey stated flatly. His voice was loud in the silence of the rocket's acceleration chamber.

"I don't know, Captain. A few years ago . . ."

"Don't bring that up again! You hear me, Rogers? *Don't bring that up again!*"

"Very well, *sir*."

"You're a bad influence on the men, Rogers, a very bad influence. It's got to stop. Here we are, the fate of Earth in our hands, and you—an officer—lie around and read your fool stories like this was some sort of a picnic."

"What do you want me to do—float around and look inscrutable?"

"I want you to act in a manner fitting to your station—that's what I want you to do!"

"May I point out, *sir*, that there is nothing whatever to be done until we land on Mars—if we land on Mars. Why shouldn't I read?"

"Every female on Earth sterile after the Blast—the human race doomed to extinction—can't you understand that, Rogers? The human race is doomed!"

"So?"

"So!" yelled the captain, furious. "So! Don't you even *care*?"

"Of course I care!" Douglas Rogers assured him. "Some of my best friends are human. But I don't know just what I can do about it at the moment. When and if we get to Mars—when and if we find a humanoid race there, then I'll do my part, fantastic as it is. Until then, I fail to see how my reading *Incredible Tales* affects the future of the human race appreciably one way or the other.

"If you wish, of course, I could read something more gloomy—Dostoyevsky, say, or perhaps Sartre. As a matter of fact our friend Philip Wylie might feel quite at home here on this ship—this last wonderful gesture by the human race, half sheer genius and half crackpot as usual. What do you think?"

THE captain started to reply, couldn't think of anything expressive enough and so settled for a look of withering contempt. "Well," he said finally.

"Precisely," agreed Douglas Rogers.

"To think that this ship had to be saddled with a man without humbleness, without dignity, a—a—"

"Lady killer," supplied Rogers.

"Yes. Exactly. A lady killer to help represent the human race in its hour of—"

"Oh, come off it, Captain."

"Rogers!"

"Look, Captain, you're technically in charge of this mission and that's okay by me," Rogers said. "You're the boss and I'll *sir* you all the way to Mars and back if necessary. But you don't outrank me, Halsey—kindly try to remember that if you can somehow manage to stop playing Man of Destiny for awhile.

"I don't *feel* humble and I'm not going to *act* humble unless I get a direct order from you that states that such

conduct on my part is imperative to the success of our Project Screwball. How about it?"

Captain Halsey just looked at him.

"Sounds a little asinine when you come right out with it, doesn't it?" asked Rogers.

"I just don't understand you at all," the captain said.

The captain turned himself around on the guy wire and floated out of the acceleration chamber, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"The saviour of the Solar System," Douglas Rogers muttered under his breath. "Hail and farewell."

He put the captain out of his mind and went back to *The Green Terror from Procyon*.

The next sleep period, when the lights were dim throughout the ship and only the two men on watch stood and watched the great black sea go by, Douglas Rogers had a dream.

The desperate mission to Mars had failed. Its failure was in the very air that sighed and whispered sadly across a dark field—a field on which men were laboring. Old men now and even the earth seemed dead around them in a passive expanse of gray monotony. There was no sound although the men worked hard. They were trying to build a ship, a great towering mammoth of a ship — a ship to reach the stars. Somewhere, lost in the stars, were life and love and children—waiting for them.

At last, in the fading twilight of the life of man, he had turned with all his might and energy to the problems of science and survival. The human race was out of the mud—working together for the stars!

But it had waited too long.

The cold wind whispered across the gray plain where the old men worked.

It was too late.

DOUGLAS ROGERS smiled in amazement. Impossibly they had done it. The green-and-orange bulge of the

planet Mars loomed large in the tele-screens.

Inevitably, Captain Halsey called them all together in the control room. His face was grim but his eyes were shining with triumph. His uniform was spotlessly correct as befitted a Man of Destiny.

"Comes now the speech for the history books," thought Douglas Rogers. "Just in case there *are* some more history books."

Captain Halsey cleared his throat and, in true epic hero fashion, launched into his deathless prose. "Well men," he began simply, "the human race has conquered the depths of interplanetary space. The first space-ship is about to land on Mars—and you may well be proud of the fact that you number yourselves among her crew. The oldest dream of mankind is now a reality."

"Hear, hear," Douglas Rogers said to himself.

"You all know our mission, men," the captain went on grimly. "Our scientists have shown that there may be life on Mars—intelligent humanoid life! During the recent atomic war, through which all of you fought so nobly, our race unleashed a force which we did not fully understand and which we could not control. As a result every female on Earth today is sterile! We won the war—but we destroyed the human race."

"A Pyrrhic victory if ever there was one," Douglas Rogers thought with a smile.

"But if we can find non-sterile, human females on Mars . . ."

"Then look out," Douglas Rogers said aloud.

"Rogers!"

"Sorry, sir."

"Arrumm! To continue. Our mission, as you know, is to try to obtain some Martian females—if they are humanoid—and take them back to Earth with us—peacefully if possible. To attain our objective we have with us many distinguished scientists—

anthropologists, nuclear physicists, psychologists. We have statesmen and diplomats. We even have one—er—lady killer in case all else fails.”

The captain looked directly at Douglas Rogers. Rogers flashed him his most engaging smile and the captain reddened.

“The fate of the human race is in our hands, gentlemen.” He rushed on. “There may be, there *must* be, life on Mars. But speculation is at an end—the question will soon be answered! In four hours this ship lands on Mars. Let us pray that our efforts have not been in vain. That’s all, men—back to your stations!”

Douglas Rogers—who was an engineer in addition to his more valuable accomplishments—worked his way down to the rocket room. In spite of himself he felt a thrill.

Four hours—and they would know.

The landing was deceptively simple. It had to be—it was a case of either flawless performance or annihilation. The thunder of the rockets died into silence. Man had come at last to Mars.

Douglas Rogers wondered what the captain would do now. He would not have been greatly surprised if Captain Halsey had stepped out smugly, planted a flag and claimed the Red Planet in the name of the Earth Empire.

The atmosphere was tested and the reports of the scientists were verified—the air was breathable although the oxygen content was appreciably lower than that of Earth. The men filed out in awed silence and looked about them.

The planet was green with strange vegetation and flaming clusters of orange flowers trailed like vines from the scattered trees. There was a hint of lavender in the air and a weak sun floated over a nearby range of hills.

“Well bless my soul,” Douglas Rogers said cheerfully. “So this is Mars!”

“Strike that from the record!” shouted Captain Halsey furiously to a pale individual with a notebook. He paused, glowering. Then he resumed his Great

Man of History pose and intoned, “Destiny flames in the stars.”

WITH this cryptic reference duly recorded for posterity and a photograph taken to immortalize the occasion Captain Halsey began to pace up and down before his brood, his polished boots gleaming in the Martian sun.

“Now men,” he commenced, “I know that there is no need to impress upon you the—”

“Hold it, sir!” whispered Mervin Gorelnick, the senior anthropologist. “What’s *that*?”

He pointed. Half-hidden in the tall grass was a curious creature, evidently alive although in no way alarming. It consisted mainly of a globe of featureless jelly, about a foot in diameter and lined with veins. It had four tiny legs almost hidden from view under its round body. It didn’t move.

“It looks like a lump of lard with legs,” one of the men ventured.

They promptly christened the animal with the humiliating title of the Lump and started toward it for a more detailed examination. They didn’t get far.

“Trouble at three o’clock!” yelled Douglas Rogers suddenly, doubting his own eyes. “Look—coming over that hill!”

Captain Halsey took one brief look and blanched. “Back to the ship,” he ordered shakily. “Prepare for alien attack!”

Douglas Rogers stared out through the ship’s port and shook his head. He didn’t believe it. Sure, the things were there—he *saw* them. But there was something . . .

“Easy now, men,” the captain’s voice came through the speaker. “They may be friendly.”

Douglas Rogers made a half-hearted attempt at objectivity and then gave it up as useless. He felt much as he had felt long ago when, as a small boy, he had suddenly come upon a large snake coiled alongside a sunny pond. The snake was trying to digest a fish that

had swollen its coils to twice their normal size.

It looked at him with beady eyes and its forked tongue darted lazily in and out. Some people maintained that snakes were great—just the thing to have around the house on a rainy day. He didn't know. Snakes might be man's best friend, his staunch ally in a world of darkness, but he for one wanted no part of them.

And a terrible thought ran through the minds of the crew. If *these* were the Martians they had come so far to find . . .

The things that plodded over the hill and across the field toward the ship were impossible. That was the word—impossible. They couldn't exist. You couldn't really be afraid of them because you could never believe that they were real. And yet—you didn't laugh either.

They squished along past the Lump and stopped. They seemed to be a cross, Douglas Rogers thought, between an offshoot of the reptile kingdom and some nameless afterthought of a sly creation. They had scales and big bulging eyes. They had four arms, two legs and a tail. They looked like the deranged nightmare of an alcoholic painter.

Douglas Rogers snapped his fingers and ran back through the ship to the acceleration chamber. His boots echoed hollowly down the steel tunnels. He snatched up a magazine and raced up to the control room.

"Captain Halsey!"

"Why aren't you at your post? Great heavens, man, this is *serious*."

"This is urgent, Captain. You've got to see this."

"What? Come on, hurry, quickly now!"

"It's the cover on this *Incredible Tales*, sir. It's—"

"Good God, Rogers, you're carrying this crazy thing too far! You hear me? Too far! You're off your rocker, you irresponsible idiot! Can't you see what we're up against, you sorry—"

Douglas Rogers knew better than to try to argue. He simply shoved the magazine in front of the captain's face. Captain Halsey spluttered and ran down like a rusty engine using up its last gasp of fuel. He stared incredulously.

"Why, they're the same!"

"Exactly," nodded Rogers. "They've even got a name for them—bug-eyed monsters."

"Bug—bug-eyed—"

"Monsters," finished Douglas Rogers. "I don't know what I expected to find on Mars—practically anything, I guess. But not these things, not in a million years! It's too great a coincidence, sir. It just couldn't happen. There's a connection somewhere between this magazine and what's out there and that means . . ."

Captain Halsey peered into the screen and Rogers joined him. The monsters were milling around uncertainly. The two men stared at them in utter disbelief. For a moment nothing happened.

Then the monsters blurred strangely and retreated back across the brow of the hill. It was as if they had never been. There was only the green vegetation and the flaming orange flowers and the hint of lavender in the Martian sky.

And, of course, the Lump.

THE confused men began filing cautiously back out of their ship. A welter of voices hit the thin Martian air.

"Did you see that?"

"What the devil's going on?"

"Man, if *that's* what we came all the way from Earth for—!"

"I tell you we've all lost our marbles, that's what."

"Me, I'll take sterility any day . . ."

Douglas Rogers tried to slow his spinning brain down long enough to digest what had happened. Bug-eyed monsters and a magazine cover printed on another planet—somehow connected. They weren't connected by any physical

tangible substance. That left some sort of mental mumbo-jumbo as the only other possibility. And *that* left . . .

They had hardly got free of the ship before something else started tentatively over the hill toward them. This time it was a monstrous metal robot at least fifteen feet high. It clanked along mechanically with the rigor-mortis stride of Frankenstein's monster.

Somebody laughed.

The thing kept advancing for a minute and nobody believed in it. It was a fake and they all knew it. The robot ran into a wall of skepticism and turned defeatedly around. It started back across the hill and Douglas Rogers noted that it disappeared *before* it vanished from his line of vision.

"What a planet!"

"Crazy!"

"Next week—*Superman!*"

Everyone laughed. The thin lavender air whispered through the orange flowers.

It was then that she came.

She was all things to all men and every man of the crew fell in love with her on the spot. She was something divorced from reason, something you just *knew*. She came toward them. Beauty surrounded her like a tangible force that reached out and caressed the men with a sigh of silk. She was a dream.

And she was real.

She was subtly different from the women they had known but she was most emphatically a woman. She was perfect in the best sense of the word, perfect with a throbbing vital, perfection that understood and loved. She was animal and angel, saint and sinner. She was what every man dreams of before he has to compromise with whatever he can get.

Douglas Rogers moved out to meet her, his heart hammering. He did it without thinking, without planning. That was one reason for his success with the opposite sex. While others schemed and shed ecstatic tears over

Shelley's poems he went out and got down to business. There was even some sincerity in him but not enough to detract substantially from his appeal.

The others let him go. They sensed that this was no job for a statesman, a diplomat, a scientist—and after all the fate of the human race hung in the balance. Somehow, though, that didn't seem so important now.

"Hello," Douglas Rogers said wittily. He couldn't think.

"Hello." Her voice was like distant bells and she smiled at him.

"You speak English?"

"No."

"But . . ."

"It only sounds that way, Douglas Rogers. I can read your mind."

She smiled again. He flushed uncertainly.

"You — ummm — know what I'm thinking, why I'm here?"

"Yes, Douglas Rogers. And I *like* your mind."

"You'll—you'll—"

"I will not leave you, man from Earth."

DOUGLAS ROGERS took her hand and thrilled at her touch. A strange perfume swept over him and he knew that he was lost. He led her to the others, who stood silently with their caps in their hands.

"Captain Halsey, sir, this is—uh—"

"My name is Ayn," the vision said.

"Well, Miss Ayn—" began the captain.

"Mrs. Ayn." She corrected him sweetly.

"Mrs. Ayn," the captain stammered. "Er—in this momentous instant in the history of our two races, may I just say—"

"Never mind, my captain," she said in her lovely voice. "It is all settled. Douglas Rogers"—she caressed the name—"and I have already talked."

Douglas Rogers pressed her hand gently. He was feeling pretty good. "Women on Mars, have no fear." The

refrain kept running through his head. "Douglas Rogers will soon be here."

"Are there—harrummm—more of you?" the captain asked.

"Many more."

"And will they—"

"You will not leave without them."

"The human race is saved!"

"Perhaps," she said sweetly.

"Those—those other things," the captain said uncertainly.

"I made them," said Mrs. Ayn. "They were projections of my mind, a linkage between myself and the thoughts of Douglas Rogers."

"But why—"

"That is just the way we Martians are," she said. Her loveliness was almost unbearable. "Between my race and yours lies the river that flows between the worlds."

"Well," said the captain, stumped.

"You're mine," whispered Douglas Rogers, stroking her silken hair. "You're mine!"

"And you are mine," she breathed. "I will never let you go."

"Don't worry, baby," Douglas Rogers assured her. "I ain't going *nowhere*."

"That's right," she said.

"And the human race is saved!" exclaimed the captain.

"No," she said.

It was as if a bomb had exploded in the thin air of Mars.

"No?" the captain echoed.

"What do you mean?" cried Douglas Rogers, a terrible fear leaping through him.

"It is the way we Martians are," she said sweetly. "I told you about our thought projections."

"No!" screamed Douglas Rogers. "You're here, you're real! Ayn—"

"I am here," she said softly. "I am real. But I am not what I seem."

"Ayn—no—*don't!*"

She laughed and her laughter was as the music of fragile bells. She wavered, blurred. She was gone.

"Ayn," whispered Douglas Rogers.

"She said she was real," one of the men said.

"She said she was here," Captain Halsey choked.

Douglas Rogers turned slowly and looked down into the tall grass. The others followed his gaze. It was still there—a globe of featureless jelly about a foot in diameter and lined with veins. It had four tiny legs. A section of the jelly lifted. It was a prodigious eyelid. A great baby-blue eye on four little legs looked back at them.

Even as they stared in blank incomprehension the Lump winked slyly at Douglas Rogers.

Someone screamed.

The men from Earth ran back into their ship. They had failed but they didn't care. Just one thing counted now—get away, get away, get away!

They were at their posts. Dials were set, orders given, switches pulled. And nothing happened.

The ship was dead. They checked and rechecked. Nothing was wrong but the ship was dead, the rockets silent.

They stumbled back out of the ship. Douglas Rogers staggered, his mind a chaos of half-remembered horror. The silk of her hair, the touch of her hand. And her words, her words!

"Many more . . ."

"And you are mine . . ."

"I will never let you go."

They clawed their way back through the grasses. The Lump was waiting for them. Her eyelid fluttered coyly at Douglas Rogers.

The planet was green with strange vegetation and flaming clusters of orange flowers trailed like vines from the scattered trees. There was a hint of lavender in the air and a weak sun floated over a nearby range of hills.

"Women on Mars, have no fear." The mocking refrain sang out at him. "Douglas Rogers will soon be here!"

A thin wind whined through the tall grasses. With a final, ironic horror Douglas Rogers began to laugh loud and long into the lavender air of Mars. ●