



by Robert W. Lowndes

(Author of "A Green Cloud Came," "The Abyss," etc.)

When the inebriated experimenters invited the Martians to come to Earth, they didn't really mean it, but when the Martians took them at their word and sent a thousand armed ships. . . .

WHITLOWE'S EYES bulged; as if in a trance he continued working the can opener around and around the container of beans. "Gary," he called softly. No answer from the cellar. "Gary!" he repeated, raising his voice slightly. At the noise, the wicked serpentine head before him swayed and grew nearer. A sidewinder, thought Whitlowe, and here am I with nothing

more lethal than a can opener near me. What was holding up Gary?

A big head poked through the cellar door. "What's eating—?" his colleague began. Abruptly he glimpsed the rattler and disappeared down the cellar again. "Traitor!" hissed Whitlowe from the corner of his mouth. The snake darted its tongue convulsively and the man cranked at the beans

convulsively, not stirring a centimeter from the kitchen chair. One move, he thought, and—

Blam! The snake collapsed as if it had been cut from a string; Whitlowe dropped the beans, and the can went clattering along the floor. “Thanks,” he said not turning. Then he stood up shakily, reached for a bottle. When a full half-pint of the stuff had gurgled down his throat, he mutely passed it to Gary. The big man frowned and put it down.

“No time for comedy,” he commented. “Do you see any more around?”

“Wasn’t that one enough?” asked Whitlowe, spurning the limp corpse of the rattler. “I spilled the beans for its sake.”

Gary was reloading his pistol. “Now that’s settled,” he said, “let’s start unpacking. I don’t think there’s anything more dangerous around now than mosquitoes.”

“That’s okay—I’m well anointed with citronella.” They passed into the living room of the shack and attacked divers well-padded boxes and crates. Whitlowe tore off the top of a huge case and smiled happily. “Sweet of you,” he murmured, lifting from its depths one of many gleaming bottles.

“Okay,” said Gary shortly. “If you can’t work when you’re sober, then I have to do the logical thing.”

There was silence for a long while as the two scattered haphazard bits and sections of apparatus on the plank floor of the shack. A yellow-jacket buzzed aimlessly about until, having made up its mind that Gary was planning it no good, it veered from its course and stung him on the elbow. “Dammit!” roared the big man, slamming his huge palm against the insect. He turned slowly on Whitlowe. “You!” he said, breathing heavily.

“Cut it out, Gary,” begged his colleague. “We’ve gone over it all a dozen times.”

“You miserable little drunk,” whispered Gary poisonously; “not enough that you lose us a good job, but you have to publish a declaration to the world that *we*—just a couple of half-baked feature writers—are going to communicate with Mars!”

“Well,” hedged Whitlowe, “it seemed like a good idea at the time.” Then, with a flash of spirit, he snapped: “And what’s more, we can do it! We didn’t work three years of overtime for nothing—you’d be just content to stick at the grind until people got tired of us and we were canned. Our Public! What a prize collection of chumps and

mutts they must be to swallow the tripe we’ve been dishing out. ‘Will Future Man Be Bald?’ ‘Will Giant Ants Rule the World?’ ‘When the Moon Falls, What?’ It’s about time we quit that junk and *did* something. You’d never have dared to publish our findings, so I did.”

Gary grinned sourly. “So here we are in the great North woods,” he stated, “the eyes of the world on us, and loaded down with scads of equipment paid for by subscription. And if we don’t communicate with Mars, where are we? In jail, that’s where—fraud—obtaining money under false pretenses. Hell! Let’s get to work!”

ABOUT THREE HOURS later empty bottles and a maze of gleaming tubes indicated that something had been accomplished. “And a good job, too,” proclaimed Whitlowe, rocking on his heels.

“It’ll do,” grunted the other. “How about power?”

Whitlowe unpacked a new fuel battery, then proceeded to make intricate alterations on it with the aid of the junk piled in the center of the floor. “What setting?” he asked, fingering a dial.

“Lowest possible amperage; highest possible voltage.”

“Right,” answered the small, dark man, fumbling with a pressure switch. He connected the heavy leads of the battery to studs in the mechanism. Gary slid indicators on a computing machine, referring to a planetary chart. “It’s aimed,” he said, lifting the weight which set a clockwork mechanism into motion. Quiet ticking meant that the thrice bent beam of the apparatus was following Mars in its sweep about the sun.

“Is it aimed?”

Gary nodded. “Any time you say we can turn it on.”

Whitlowe reached for a bottle and fortified himself. “Okay—I’m ready.” He placed himself before a compound lens as big as his head and snapped on a battery of cold mercury vapor lamps which bathed him in a metallic glare. Silently Gary turned a key and closed a simple knife switch. Their four eyes swiveled automatically to a copper plate set screenwise in the tangle of operations. There were a few flashes of light, then the screen went dark.

“Something’s wrong,” muttered Gary, then, as he turned to Whitlowe, “Hey, watch yourself!”

“What?” asked Whitlowe, stumbling against the battery. Tsk, tsking, he reached down to replace the connections he’d jarred loose. Now which went where? He put them in feeling more and more sure that they were bollixed up. One seemed to be left over, then he remembered that it was the other half of a double connection. “Eenie, meenie, meinie, mo!” He rammed it home and straightened up with a happy smile.

“Pretty high up,” said Gary thoughtfully. Whitlowe gasped: with disconcerting suddenness a scene had leaped onto the plate—unstereoscopic and without color, but recognizable.

Gary turned a heavy wheel the smallest fraction of a sector; the scene went black. “Field of vision went underground,” said the big man. He reversed the wheel with a lighter touch; the screen changed from black to reddish brown.

“City!” gasped Whitlowe.

“Yeah.” Fascinated, they scanned the copper plate. It was as though it were hanging about five feet from the street of this Martian metropolis, while scurrying creatures about the size of men darted dizzily about on all sides. There were no vehicles to be seen.

The two men looked at one another. “Very ordinary, I think,” said Whitlowe.

“Seems as if you’re right. Frank R. Paul would be horribly disappointed. Wonder if they have eyes.”

“We’ll soon find out. Unless our calculations are imaginary, a visual image of this plate, showing whatever is directly before it—in this instance, us—should be neatly projected just a bit above their heads. They ought to see the plate before long.”

One of the darting creatures was heading straight for the plate, its knobby head down. Some thirty feet away it stopped short.

“Hyperperipheral tactility,” muttered Whitlowe. “Why doesn’t it look up?”

The creature did, obediently. “I was shielding my eyes,” it remarked over the scores of millions of miles. “You are very brightly lit.”

Whitlowe switched off half of the merc battery. “That better?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” replied the creature.

“May we ask some questions?” broke in Gary, thrusting his head before the lens.

“How do you do? Certainly; whatever you wish.”

“About our communication, first. We can understand you because we had an operation performed on what we call the Cheyney-Biddle area of our brains. This so converts and awakens the translation faculty that any language not too remote from Terrestrial thought processes becomes intelligible to us. Are you actually speaking—vocally, I mean?”

“Hardly,” replied the creature with a sort of whimsical inflection. “It seems most probable that this operation of which you speak has had more far-reaching results than you think. You are enabled to receive basic thought-impressions and translate them into your own language. Most likely your friend does not receive the precise impressions as you—the wording is different.”

“But what of you?” asked Gary. “How do you receive impressions of us?”

“I’m sending through a sort of static discharge engendered by the friction of two special members. I perceive your thoughts as etheric disturbances. Interesting, isn’t it?” The creature’s mask-like face contorted and grew lighter, as far as they could judge from the monochrome of the screen, but these changes were accompanied by a wholly non-existent burst of rich laughter from the sounding unit.

“I wonder,” said Whitlowe, “what that sounds like to an ordinary person.”

“Probably a creepy conglomeration of totally unrecognizable sounds,” replied the creature. “And now,” it went on, “may I beg to leave you for awhile. You two are pretty gruesome-appearing monstrosities to me, and I can feel a psychological revulsion coming on. I think you’ll feel one, yourself, pretty soon. Suppose we switch off and contact later; after we’ve become accustomed to each other, it won’t be so bad. But, just now, the first enthusiasm and scientific elan is beginning to wear off. I’ll be sick as a dog in a few moments.”

Gary grinned. “I wonder,” he mused, “what the Martian equivalent of that phrase *really* is—if it exists in the first place.” He waved goodbye to the creature and turned the wheel abruptly. The screen went black.

A few moments later Whitlowe was leaning over the sink. “Get a move on,” said Gary weakly, “it’s my turn now.”

THE MARTIAN was friendly. It brought around several spidery friends who stared

through the window and answered questions as well as they could. One imposing Daddy-Long-Legs finally appeared and the others made way for it.

“Hello!” it said abruptly.

“How do you do?” answered Whitlowe. “Are you an official?”

“Official? Bah—Director, young man—Director!” grunted the Martian.

“Did he say Dictator?” broke in Gary.

“Director,” corrected the Martian. “Coordinator-in-Chief. Chairman. President. Planet Manager.”

“Oh!” replied Gary.

“Now—about this thing of yours. I mean your dashed window, or whatever it is.”

“Yes?”

“Understand—friendship, cordial relations, interchange of ideas, and all that—but privacy. Insist upon privacy. No prying without permission, understood? Agreed?”

“Certainly. Anything else?”

The aged creature considered. “Yes. There is. Young man—you might as well know that we’re in desperate straits up here. Carry on, and all that—but no show. Understand?”

Whitlowe was trying not to laugh. It had been such fun to think of the Martian as a member of the British aristocracy. And now all the speeches came out to correspond to his impression. The more he tried to control himself, the more stagily English the Martian speech became.

“I’m afraid not, your excellency,” said Gary.

“Pah! Water, you know. Going fast. Rationed as things are—haven’t had a water-bath for years. Dashed impertinence—chap of my age and all that. What I mean—understand?”

“No,” replied Whitlowe.

“Uh—no? This contraption of yours—thingumbob—just what can it do? How does it work?”

“It’s almost wholly psychological,” explained Gary. “Our apparatus”—he tilted the lens a bit so that the maze of equipment could be seen—“is only a sort of transformer for stepping up the latent clairvoyant faculties of our race. You’re working on our power, you know—you don’t seem to have the faculty yourself.”

“Ah? Your power precious? I mean, I should go off?”

“Not at all!” cried the Earthmen. “We have all we need and then more.”

“Oh. Wouldn’t want to inconvenience you. We Martians—quite considerate and all that—have to be, you know. Even though we did lick the damned mammals once before. Understand?”

“Nope. Please explain.”

“Master race and all that. Conflict—struggle. They or we. We won out—centuries ago. Still have records. Mammals—great ugly things with hair. Nothing personal—understand?”

“Of course,” said Whitlowe, draining a pint bottle. “But what were you saying about water?”

“Yes. Water—damned ash of hydrogen—waste product really. But we haven’t enough to go around. What I mean—can your contraption—thingumbob—send us some every now and then?”

Whitlowe looked around for Gary. “Excuse me, sir,” he said hastily into the lens. “I’ll have to find my partner before I could answer that. Cheerio.”

He switched off the screen. “Gary!” he yelled, looking wildly around. No colleague. There was a smashing of glass from the cellar; quick as thought Whitlowe popped down the rickety stairs. The big man was wallowing in a litter of bottles, mostly empty, and crooning softly to himself.

“Gary! For—”

He looked up owlishly. “Not a drinking man ordinarily,” he interrupted stubbornly. “But anytime I find myself talking to a bunch of half-baked giant spiders eleven trillion miles away—well!” He reached for another bottle and gulped noisily.

The little dark man grinned. “First time I’ve seen you stewed since college,” he stated happily. “If I join you, will you come up and consult with our friends? They want us to broadcast them some water—they’ve been thirsty for years and years.” He poured himself two fingers—widely separated, of course—of brandy and tossed it off.

Gary began to sob. “Poor things. Poor thirsty little Martians. With all the water we have here on Earth, we can’t send them one little drop.”

“Yes,” agreed Whitlowe. “Poor Martians.” He finished the bottle.

Gary was weeping copiously now. “Did you see the way they looked at us? So friendly and trusting. Most sweet little spiders I ever did see. And they can’t have any water—can’t have a bath or a shower or a swim all their life.”

Whitlowe felt something big rising in his throat. “Something must be done,” he said. “In fact, something will be done.”

He rose to his feet. "Come," he urged, "since Mahomet cannot go to the mountain; the mountain will come to Mahomet. We'll issue a blanket invitation to the Martians to come to Earth and make their new home here. Plenty of water—plenty of big, beautiful wet water for everybody!"

Gary kissed him.

WHITLOWE SWEPT BACK a lock of dark hair and faced the Presidium. "Gentlemen of the Committee," he began.

"Nothing formal," warned the chairman. "Just explain yourselves. And make it good. . . ." He tapped his teeth with a pencil.

An expression of quiet, self-assurance passed over Whitlowe's face. The oratorical tones in which he had uttered the first few words melted away. His voice bespoke sincere simplicity. "First of all, I must refute the fantastic accusations which have been hurled against me and my collaborator." He gestured at Gary, slumped in a corner chewing his nails. "The assertion that we *invited* the Martians to come to Earth is ridiculous; under different circumstances I could laugh heartily at it. However, this is no time for joking.

"Let me say only that this canard is but another example of sensational journalism, something from which nearly all of you have suffered at one time or another."

He paused to let the words sink in, and, from the expressions on some of the faces, saw that his words had had the desired effect. Then: "The true story, gentlemen of the committee, is easily and simply told—even if incomplete. You will see why it cannot be complete after a moment or so.

"We raised funds through public subscription and fitted out our equipment and apparatus thus; we proceeded to the isolated scene of our experiments and assembled this equipment—suffice to say that, after a few minor adjustments, it worked.

"The Martians were revealed to us as huge insect-like creatures. I would not call them insects, although perhaps an entomologist might find reason for applying the term. However, that is beside the point; what I mean is: in appearance, the Martians more closely resemble the insect than any other known form of Terrestrial life.

"From the start, our intercourse and communication was on a friendly basis. I confess freely that, from the nature and general run of our conversations, no thought of danger entered my

head. Whether or not that was due, partly, to the influence that these creatures had upon us, I cannot say.

"Precisely when their attitude became menacing is also well-nigh impossible to state. We were being shown various sorts of machinery the Martians use when the—I'll have to use the term *ray* for want of a more adequate one—was run in on us. It had a sort of mesmeric effect; I distinctly recall doing things while my mind objected and while my thoughts warned me to shut off communication.

"My belief is that we have been made to forget a great deal of what we saw and perhaps much of what information we actually gave the Martians. It was only through accident—my falling over some obstacle and ripping out wires in the process—that communication was shut off. I think that is why we remember what we do; obviously the Martians wanted more information and, at the time of the break-off, had not yet gotten around to blanking out, completely, our impressions of them. My opinion is, that, had not this accident occurred, we would have been forced to destroy our apparatus and forget the entire incident of our actual communication with Mars.

"For, gentlemen, it cannot be denied that the Martians menace us. Before the fortunate accident, we had been informed—the answer to a direct question in regard to some of the information we had given—that the Martians intend to migrate, as a race, to this planet."

He paused to glance at Gary. The big man had stopped chewing his nails and a look of haunted, self-castigation had filled his countenance. "This would explain," continued Whitlowe, "the atmospheric disturbances observed on Mars last week."

His voice now became grim, assured. "Gentlemen, there is no time to be lost—the word must be *preparedness*—lest we be too late!

"Barricades must be erected; cities protected; offensive equipment set up. Earth must be ready to attack—and attack well—the instant these creatures land upon our planet. They informed us, early in the conversations, that they had superseded a mammalian culture on Mars; I have no doubt, now, in what manner this supersession took place. It must not be repeated here."

Wiping his brow, he collapsed in a chair beside Gary.

"It *was* a bit thick, wasn't it?" asked the big man cautiously.

"Maybe. But we have our own necks to think of first. Right?" . . .

"I guess so—ah!" The Director of the Presidium had risen.

"Are there any questions to be put?"

"Grab your second wind, murmured Gary. "Here comes a cross-examination."

GARY PAWED LIMPLY over a sheaf of newspapers, running from the first headline: WHITLOWE-GARY EXONERATED to the latest line, proclaiming: JAP-SOVIET WAR OFF—PLANET SECURITY FIRST. "Did we do *this*?" he muttered dazedly.

Whitlowe's grin was satanic. "All ours. Now if this were only some harmless little hoax, designed to bring peace on earth, it would be fine. But, unfortunately the Martians are good and nasty—and well-heeled as far as armament goes, apparently. According to the press reports, of course.

"They wouldn't have come if they hadn't been invited. However, it seems to me, that, once we try to welsh, it will be war to the knife. And I wouldn't be surprised if they did have terrific stuff up their sleeves."

Gary tried to picture the Martians with sleeves, but soon gave up. He scanned another headline: BALKAN STATES FORM DEMOCRATIC UNION. NO MORE WAR.

Gary poured himself an enormous mug of something, sipped at it, and set it down with a mouth of disgust. "Remembering what happened the last time I got tanked, I don't care to repeat the experience," he growled.

"Okay. It won't be wasted," grunted Whitlowe, emptying the mug. "Now, how about taking a crack at the communications angle—fishing for Martians in the depths of space . . ."

They turned into another room, filled with an elaboration of their previous apparatus, equipped with a scanner device that covered cubic miles of space, automatically registering and indicating foreign bodies. Dully they turned the thing on, and, after about a half hour of random scouting and reeling in meteors—celestial equivalent of rubber boots and old bottles—they came on a Martian, who smiled in amiable greeting.

Outside, newspaper headlines read: WORLD

COUNCIL FORMED; CITIES OF EARTH PREPARE BLACKOUTS.

GARY YIPPED agitatedly into the phone. "They're landing in about twelve hours, chief. We flashed them a little while ago; Whit's still talking to them. He's got their flagship."

Blocks away Major General Wylie scratched his head. "Maybe," he said, "you can talk them out of landing—?"

"We'll try, General. I'll talk to Whit."

He hung up, whispered out of the corner of his mouth to the little man: "Stall them. Wylie says to try to stop them from landing."

Whitlowe, who had been exchanging politenesses with one of the Martians through the lens, wiped his brow. "Friend," he called across space in a strained voice, "perhaps you can disengage yourself long enough to permit us to speak with your Director."

"Certainly," replied the Martian. "He's been waiting."

The visage of the Planet Manager appeared in the screen. "Ah," he said bluffly. "Dashed grateful and all—you know?"

Oh Judas, Whitlowe groaned to himself, can't I forget that British affectation? But his innate sense of humor refused to be budged. "How do you do, sir?" he said lamely.

"Happy we're on our way at last, young man. Understand? Had our ships for centuries—wouldn't come without a contact and invitation from you—boorish and all that. Then you and your machine—thingumbob—you know."

"It's about that I wanted to talk with you. I'd like to know if you've brought any—armaments with you."

"Bah! Of course. Race of soldiers, understand. Military life—life blood of our planet. Always organized—deuced struggle for existence. Might meet wild beasts—disease. You think?"

"*Very* unlikely, sir. I'm sure we can cope with our planetary dangers to your satisfaction. Why not lighten your ships for an easy landing?"

"What's this? Jettison our weapons? Unheard of, by gad! And the suggestion—if I may say so—dashed impertinence and all that. Nothing personal, of course—present company—understand?"

"Martian tradition?" asked Whitlowe hastily.

"Quite, young man. Just so. Millions of years. Dashed nuisance now, perhaps, but it wouldn't be

the thing. No show—whippersnappers—understand?”

“Perfectly,” said Whitlowe with a heavy heart. He tried another tack. “Where do you expect to land?”

“Right here—wilderness.” The Director produced a globe of Earth, held a reading glass of enormous power over a tiny section. “You know the spot?”

“Yes,” replied Whitlowe, studying it. “We call it New Jersey. Good place to land, too.” To himself he prayed they’d fall into the middle of a swamp and stay there. “About how many ships?”

“In round numbers, two thousand, each containing a thousand Martians. We aren’t a numerous people, but,” the Director grinned, “a powerful one.”

“Excuse me,” said Whitlowe, reaching for the tracer device. “I’ll have to sign off now. But we’ll keep our lens on you till after you land. All right?”

“Perfectly. Carry on!” The Martian’s image faded from the screen and Whitlowe snapped into action, reaching for two telephones at once and barking orders to Gary. “Get Wylie and have him mobilize all available infantry and tanks for concentration outside of Glenwood, New Jersey.” And then, into one of the phones: “Mayor? I’m Whitlowe of the commission. Evacuate Glenwood completely within four hours. Arrangements will be made for you in New York City—you’ll get confirmation and full instructions in a few minutes.” Then, into another: “Admiral? You’ll get the chance, now. Move the fleet up the Hudson, aiming at the swamps to the northeast of Glenwood, New Jersey. Confirmation from the White House and full instructions will follow. Firing orders will come only from the Commission.”

He snatched a phone from Gary. “Public Works?” he barked. “This is Whitlowe of the Commission. Get every inch of barbed wire in North America and recruit every volunteer male you can get to have it strung around Glenwood, New Jersey’s swamps. Deadline’s four hours—they’ll be here at”—he glanced at his watch—“eleven-thirty. Right? Right.”

He turned to Gary with haunted eyes. “That’s that,” he said slowly. “It isn’t a joke anymore. I don’t think I’ll ever laugh again. Let’s get out and give the unhappy town of Glenwood, New Jersey a speedy double-o.”

UP THE HUDSON steamed the dawn-grey might of the combined battle fleets of North, Central, and South America. Japan’s was on the way, not yet there. They were anchoring; guns were swinging toward the Jersey side, ready to drop shells within the neat rectangle bordered by several hundred miles of twisted and double-taped electrified barbed wire.

“Well,” said Gary, hefting the audio pack he was strapped into.

“Okay,” said Whitlowe, taking up a mike and tuning in. “Do not be alarmed,” he called to the Martian. “This is a wound-circuit without vision—we are on the grounds where you decided to land, with a—reception committee, and were unable to bring along the heavier vision-circuit.”

“You, is it?” the hearty voice of the Director replied. “Well, we’ll be down in dashed little time—ready to start our bally lives over again, what?”

“Yes,” said Whitlowe, gulping. He signaled an aide, who came running with record tape.

“No change in your landing plans?” asked Whitlowe desperately.

“None whatsoever. Decide and carry through—understand? Down in thirteen minutes, every one of the two thousand. Excuse me.”

Whitlowe snapped off the set. “Can you hear anything?” he asked the aide.

“No, sir. But we should—two thousand big ships, didn’t he say?”

“They each carry a thousand Martians, so they must be big. But we ought to hear them—or, if they’re silent, we should feel the wind. I don’t understand.”

“Keep your shirt on, Whit,” advised Gary. “It’s these skeeters that I can’t stand.” He slapped viciously at a vampirish insect that settled on his wrist for a drink.

“I’m going to”—began Whitlowe, impatiently snapping in the audio pack.

“Hello!” he called. “Are you going to land? Where are you?”

“About twenty miles up,” came the reply.

“We can’t see or hear your ships!” stated Whitlowe.

“You will. We’re ten miles down now. Excuse me—I have to—” the voice trailed off.

“Why,” fretted Whitlowe, “don’t they come out into the open? Are they going to bomb New York or something?”

“Cut it out!” growled Gary. “They’re on the level and they gave their word. That’s enough. Anything else you can set down to newspaper hysteria. They should be in sight any moment now. Calm down!”

They were interrupted by roarings from the audio. “We’ve landed!” shrilled a voice. “We’ve landed!” Staring insanely, Whitlowe inspected the swamp area. “No!” he stated flatly. “Not a sign of two thousand ships, each containing one thousand Martians. Not a sign of anything.”

From the audio came a cry of terror. “What’s the matter?” yelled Gary, snatching the mike. “We’re being attacked—by monsters! Huge monsters! Send help!” thundered the Director.

“Monsters? Like what?”

“Six legs; twice our height. Wings. Terrible

blood-drinking beak!”

“They didn’t land on Earth!” gasped Whitlowe.

Gary laughed suddenly. “Yes they did!” he roared. “Look there!” He turned the beam of his flashlight on a little dark clump in the air about a hundred feet away.

“*What!*” gasped Whitlowe, staring.

It was a turbulent knot of insects, distinguished by bluish flashes of light. Whitlowe lowered the beam to the ground below. There were arrayed the two thousand ships—tiny things, about the size of cigarettes.

“And that,” said Gary, “is the Martian race. All bets are off, and, if we wish to save our insignificant but witty friends from the monstrous gnats and mosquitoes that are besieging them, we’d better rush out some Flit.”