

The Raid From Mars

by
Miles J. Breuer

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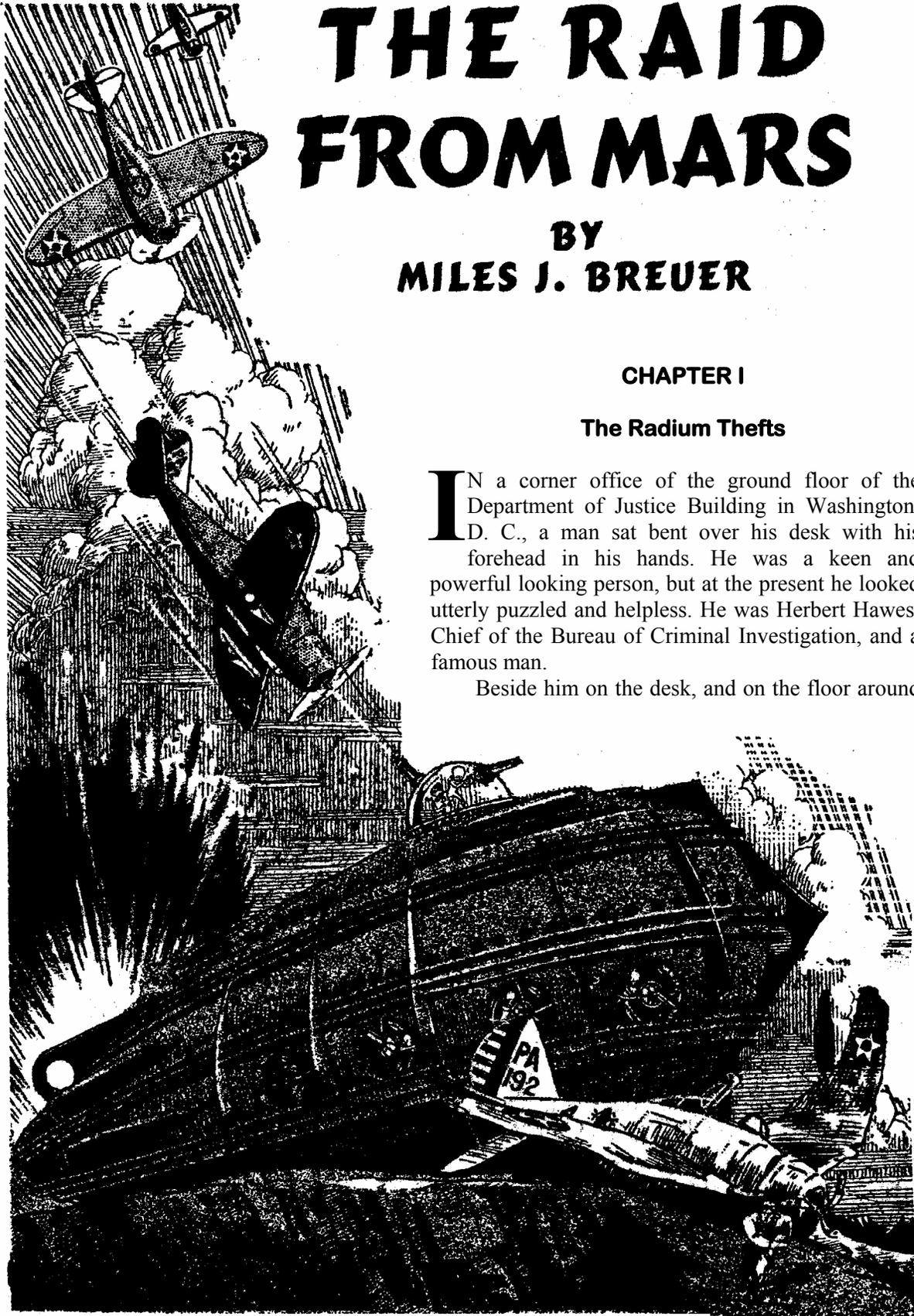
BY
MILES J. BREUER

CHAPTER I

The Radium Thefts

IN a corner office of the ground floor of the Department of Justice Building in Washington, D. C., a man sat bent over his desk with his forehead in his hands. He was a keen and powerful looking person, but at the present he looked utterly puzzled and helpless. He was Herbert Hawes, Chief of the Bureau of Criminal Investigation, and a famous man.

Beside him on the desk, and on the floor around



The squadron dove viciously down at the raider

his chair, were arranged stack after stack of telegrams, yellow with black headings, and white with blue headings.

"Mercy Hospital reports mysterious disappearance of radium salts during night"

"Entire stock of radium disappeared last night. Two attendants found unconscious!"

"One hundred thousand dollars worth of radium disappeared from Mt. Sinai Hospital. Nurse and doctor unconscious!"

"Total radium supply stolen. Locks demolished. No clues!"

Thus ran the telegrams, all of them. They came from all of the large hospitals in the principal cities in the United States, and from numerous large University laboratories. From Bangor, Maine to Jacksonville, Florida, from Portland, Oregon, to Los Angeles, and criss-crosswise over the country, the story was the same.

"A raid on the country's supply of radium!" the chief gasped, and sank down in his chair.

The realization of the enormity of the affair grew on him by leaps and bounds.

"What a holdup!"

Now he sat at his desk with his head on his hands. There wasn't a clue. There was nothing to go on. He could think of no way to start. He sat there and worried.

He did not know how long he had been

Raiders come from Mars to steal Earth's radium. In desperate defense, an entire army division is wiped out. Then "Swoop" Martin, air pilot, volunteers a suicidal attack.

brooding there, when he slowly became aware of an insistent irritation forcing itself into his detached brain. It dawned on him that it was the telephone. He rubbed his eyes, shook himself and grabbed the instrument.

"Hello!" he said, as quickly as he could.

"Lincoln, Nebraska, calling," came through the telephone. "Is this Chief Hawes? Chief of Police Henderson, of Lincoln, wishes to speak to you."

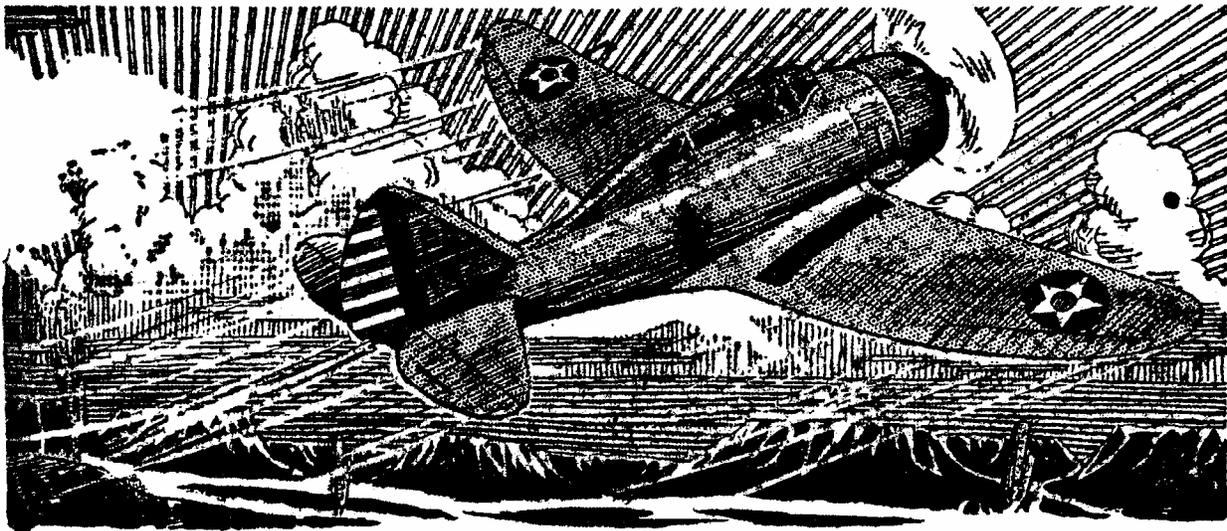
There was a momentary silence while the connection was made, then a gruff voice spoke.

The two chiefs identified themselves to each other.

"I suppose you are investigating the disappearance of the radium," said the Police Chief from Lincoln.

Chief Hawes grunted in a dubious sort of fashion. Chief Henderson from Lincoln continued:

"The accounts in the newspapers—"



Desperately Martin gunned the ship again into the blue

Chief Hawes just now thought to look up at the clock. Three o'clock. Four hours his head had lain sunk on his desk, thinking and dozing alternately after this terrific shock had struck him.

"—the accounts in the newspapers have been most unsatisfactory, but I gather there is a serious problem on, I have what may be a clue. Do you want it?"

"Do I? Do I? Come on quick!" roared Chief Hawes, banging his desk with the other fist.

Chief Henderson continued:

"There was a young chap, just a boy, in my office yesterday, with a most fantastic tale, which now strikes me as having a possible hook-up with this thing. It was so wild, that I told him it was bosh and sent him about his business. Now that this thing has turned up, I feel that there may be something in the boy's story. We ought to look into it."

"What did he have to say?" demanded Chief Hawes.

"He had a curious tale about some inventor with heart disease communicating with Mars—; shall I send him over to you?"

"Nuts! I thought you had a clue. What d'ya want to bother me with . . ."

"Well," the Western Police Chief explained, "his story said just that: stealing radium by some guys from Mars."

"Nuts!"

"Shall I send him over?" queried Chief Henderson.

"Yes! No!" roared Hawes, "*I'm coming over there*"

IN one of the homes on a modest residence street in Lincoln, Nebraska, a sixteen-year old boy walked into the living-room, where his father was reading a newspaper, and turned off the radio. By the door, at the foot of the hat-rack, a physician's emergency bag and two canvas paper-carriers' bags showed plainly that both father and son were busy men.

"Dad," the boy inquired earnestly, "Would it be a good or a bad thing for the human race if someone discovered how to make people live forever?"

"Well, well," the doctor replied. "You are being mighty serious about it. Is that for one of your debates?"

"Yes," Ronald answered eagerly; that excuse was as good as any.

"I believe," the doctor continued, "that if everlasting life were given to the human race, it would be a very bad thing. If no one died, in a population which is now stationary, it would double in one generation."

"You mean," the son reminded, "that if the birth-rate continued unchanged?"

"It would," the doctor assured him. "No ifs are needed. You can fancy, after a few generations, the horrible crowding up of the earth. Think of the pressure, the competition, the lowered standard of living, worse than anything in India or China—and growing worse and no end to it."

"But supposing," suggested Ronald, "that birth-control were put into effect?"

"Don't make me laugh," his father countered. "Voluntarily or individually, people would never do anything. By public measures, perhaps in a hundred years after everybody was crazy, something might be done. No, I rather think your gift of everlasting life would be no boon to race, and of questionable benefit to the individual."

As the boy said nothing further, the doctor resumed his reading. At intervals however, he glanced over the top of his paper at his son, who sat there motionless in a stiff chair, staring straight ahead of him and saying nothing. Undoubtedly something was preying on his mind. The doctor, a practical man who knew boys well, said nothing, realizing that it would all eventually come out.

The boy maintained his puzzled posture for nearly two hours before he stirred. Then he rose, stretched himself, and remarked that he hated to go to bed.

At that moment there was a gallop of many footsteps on the porch floor, and a ring at the doorbell. In a moment the room was filled with Chiefs of Police and Government officers.

"**T**HERE used to be a light in old man Dragstedt's window every morning at 4:30," Ronald began his explanation, "when I passed his house carrying papers. I knew he was a sickly old man who never went anywhere, and lived alone. Sometimes one of the windows went funny colors in the night, as I went by with my paper-bags. He's got a crazy chimney on his

house, like a tall pipe, and shiny, like polished metal.

“Although it is against the rules of the paper, one morning I couldn’t resist trying a peek in at one of his windows. I tiptoed up on the porch, but the minute I stepped on his rug, an alarm went off somewhere in the house. The door opened, and he started to roar at me, and then collapsed on the floor. He has heart disease, and gets attacks when he gets sore.

“I dragged him to the davenport and was going to call up my dad, but he begged me not to. He had some pills that he took. I got them for him and they made him better in half an hour. I stayed with him and warmed him a glass of milk. I saw nothing in the house out of the way, but in the direction of the queerly lighted windows there was a closed door.

“The next day I walked boldly up and knocked on the door. He had me in and I asked him how he was. I got to dropping in that way and found that he was grateful for a lot of little things I could do to help him. But, he never opened that door.

“I thought I would never find out what was in there, until one day when I rang his doorbell and he didn’t answer. I opened up and went in, fearing that something had happened to him. I found the secret door open, and he was just about to come in through it, when he had another spell. He fell down and his face was so blue it gave me the creeps. I got him to bed, gave him his tablet, and had a look at the room,

“A lot of the stuff there was undoubtedly short-wave equipment. I’ve got a ham station of my own, and am up on it. The scanning elements and the big screen of a television set were also familiar. But there was an awful pile of strange stuff there that meant nothing to me.

“He came to as I was standing in the middle of the apparatus room, looking around, trying to figure out stuff. He didn’t get sore; he got to know that it would give him another spell with his heart. So I just shut the door, warmed him some more milk, and never said a word and he didn’t either.

“But after that he let me come in and watch him working at the apparatus. He used *cw*, but he had six keys instead of one; he played five of them with the fingers of his right hand like piano keys; it must have taken a lot of practice to get

that way, because he really made ‘em sing. Another odd thing was that his transmission wave had several tones to it—no; he must have had several transmission waves. It gave a musical effect as he sent.”

“Say!” interrupted Chief Henderson, “Where is this old bird? Dragstedt you say? We’ll listen to the rest of it from him.”

“Well, I guess he’s gone to them. Or they took him away with them. He hasn’t been at his house for 24 hours. But his stuff is all right.”

“What do you mean by *they*? *Who* took him away?”

The boy showed embarrassment.

“Well,” he hesitated; “I know you’ll think I’m crazy—”

“Suppose you are!” said the police chief, his voice rough with impatience. “Who took him away?”

“Well—the Martians. But wait till I get to ‘em.”

THE men settled in their chairs with a certain amount of relief. Martians! If that was all, they needn’t worry. They had thought it might be some well-known crooks. The boy continued his narrative:

“Then one day, when he didn’t come to the doorbell, I opened the door again and walked on in. The inner door was open. I could see him at the television apparatus. I really saw a Martian on the screen!

“I saw him plenty plain and had a long time to look at him. Dragstedt was so absorbed that he didn’t know I was there for thirty minutes.

“The thing on the screen moved, and worked little pieces of a vast stack of machinery behind it. It had bright eyes, and arms and legs, and wasn’t so very different from people after all. But for a person, it looked small and fragile and easy to fall to pieces. It moved with quick jerks. As it moved, little buzzes on different notes came out of Dragstedt’s machine. It gestured with its hands, and then brought out papers. Or, you know, whatever they use for papers. But it looked just like papers. Some had maps and some had mathematical stuff on them.

“Then Dragstedt turned around and saw that I had been watching him. He came near having another spell. But, he’s a smart guy, and he

calmed down and held it off. He decided he might as well tell me about it. I understand the stuff pretty well and can give you the high spots—”

“Whatever Ronald says about radio and related subjects,” his father interrupted, turning to the police officers, “you can put down as being accurate and dependable. I myself am amazed at the amount of knowledge he has on those things.”

“Kids are hot on that stuff,” the grizzled old D. C. I. chief mumbled to himself.

“He had been a professor of physics,” Ronald went on. “But he inherited a lot of dough from a relative and got to experimenting on his own. He was interested in picking up the portion of radio waves that are reflected from the Heaviside layer. He had some odd notion about the thing and was measuring intensities. He found that the reflected portion was weaker than the transmitted portion to an extent not explained by the square of the distance equation. He tried it with direction beams, and the more nearly vertical he got his beams, the greater the loss in intensity—just opposite to what you’d expect—”

Chief Hawes grunted and mumbled something about what he would expect.

“When he finally directed a successfully controlled beam in an accurately vertical direction, he lost most of his short-wave energy. Can’t you see—that he was putting a wave *through* the Heaviside layer?”

Chief Hawes grunted again, so that Donald had to smile.

“He played with it a lot, and sent out a lot of amateur broadcasting, and *cw*.

“It wasn’t really very long, a few weeks, till he was amazed to find that he was getting signals in return. The poor fellow must have gone nearly crazy before he figured out what those odd, broken tones were.

“**F**OR many months he worked on them, but could make no sense out of them. After quite a while, it struck him that he ought to build a television apparatus in connection. By that time his heart was getting bad; he went to a doctor and the doctor wanted to put him in a hospital. He couldn’t stand that, and went back to his apparatus. After some weary months he finally saw his first Martian on the screen.

“Eventually he learned to talk to them. By

means of the vision screen and his multitoned *cw*, he and the Martians developed a language from gestures and pointing to objects, and then gradually into words. I got on to a good deal of the stuff myself as I watched him, and it isn’t so hard at that. When I got so that I could stand there and get what the *cw* was saying, I got quite a thrill out of it.

“Well, it turned out that these Martians lived under the ground on their planet, because it was too cold and dry on top and no air. They had it all fixed livable underground. They were an old, old race, much older than ours. They had learned among other things, the secret of preventing death, or at least of putting it off indefinitely. As their births were regulated in the laboratory merely to replace rare losses by death, the race was stable.

“However, within the recent century, a new disease had sprung up among them which they could not conquer with all their science. Deaths occurred in such numbers that the laboratories could not replace them by a sufficient number of births; their mathematicians predicted the early extinction of the race. Their physicists said that the disease was due to the complete loss of radioactive minerals, due to the old age of the planet itself. I saw some of the sick ones on the television screen, and it must have been some kind of cancer.

“What did Dragstedt do, but describe radium to them, and ask them if they knew what it was, and if they thought it would cure their stuff. Of course that is the first thing that would have occurred to me. No, all their radium had finally broken itself up into non-radioactive elements. But they grasped the idea, only too promptly.

“The gist of it is, that Dragstedt and the Martians got up a scheme, where he is to steer them to the caches of radium when they come to Earth in a space ship. In return, they will cure his heart disease and give him everlasting life. Dragstedt has been all over the country, getting the layouts of hospitals and universities, which he could easily do, for he is a well known physicist himself.

“Those birds up there on Mars even planned mechanical things to get around in, when they got to Earth, because their bodies are too flimsily built for our heavier gravitation.

“That’s all I know, except that I overheard that their ship is down in the sandhills, about fifty miles southeast of Alliance; and that they are sticking around about a week to treat old Dragstedt.”

CHAPTER II

The Martian Ship

BY the next morning, the entire Eighth Army Corps was on the move, swarming from all directions toward Alliance, Nebraska. Its airplanes, and also two squadrons of Navy hydroplanes from the Great Lakes Training Station, were at Alliance by daybreak.

Field artillery and tanks on flat-cars came in on the railroads from the East, West, and South. From four directions came tracks loaded with men and small equipment.

By noon, Alliance looked like the center of a war zone. The sky hummed with planes. Tanks clanked along the roads, and motorized artillery pointed its long, keen noses at the sky. Trim, khaki-clad detachments clicked precisely along the pavements, their rifle-barrels all neatly parallel. The entire division was mobilized. It was being strung out in a new-moon shaped line, thickest in the center, and the points feeling outward, to surround the object as soon as it was found.

The airplanes located it early in the afternoon. It was described as an egg-shaped affair as big as an ocean liner, located in a hollow in the sand hills, practically where Ronald Worth had predicted it would be found.

The young captain in command of the airplane squadron from the Great Lakes Navy Base saluted General Barry, the Commander of the expedition, and stood in front of him waiting for orders. He could not conceal a restlessness, stepping from one foot to the other, even though trying hard to stand rigid.

The grizzled old General smiled.

“What is the Captain jittery about?” he asked.

“Begging the General’s pardon,” the Captain said in embarrassment, “I am awaiting orders to bomb the space-ship. It is just a pippin of a target. We could smash it in thirty seconds—”

“What about the radium?” the General interrupted.

The Captains face suddenly fell, and he stood there puzzled.

“Do you know,” the General continued, “that the entire nation’s supply of radium is inside that vessel. If you throw explosives down there, you will scatter several million dollars’ worth of precious stuff out in the sand. It would cost as much money and take as much time to recover it, as it did to make it in the first place.”

“Yes, Sir!” replied the Captain meekly. “We’ve got a job on hand!”

IN the modest residence section of Lincoln, Nebraska, three swift cars that had just dashed across the town from the airport, drew up in front of Dragstedt’s deserted little house. General Barry, his aides, and a squad of guards tramped into the house.

There, in the room of apparatus which old Dragstedt had built, sat Ronald Worth, high-school student and paper-carrier. Sleepiness showed in his eyes, and at his elbow were partly consumed bottles of milk and plates of cheese and crackers.

“Ronald Worth calling Professor Dragstedt! Ronald Worth calling Professor Dragstedt! Will you please answer! It will be to your interest to communicate with us!”

The boy’s voice droned monotonously on, uninterrupted by the entry of the men into the room. Then he stopped, took a drink of milk, and put his hand on the six keys. The queer musical drone started and whined monotonously on. The military men stood silently about the room.

“You are sure that no other operator could take this over?” General Barry asked.

“I’d have to teach him. It would take time. Took me months to get on to it,” the boy answered. “This is different from ordinary radios. And common radios won’t tune with those of the Martians.”

“You look tired,” the General said.

Suddenly the boy stiffened, and took his hand away from the keys. The musical drone continued, in a different rhythm.

“He is answering. Wouldn’t answer on the telephone, but bit on the *cw* at once.” Ronald was elated.

"Tell him," said General Barry, "to tell these Martians, that if they give us back our radium, we shall treat them royally, entertain them, show them the Earth; and then let them go home unharmed, with a gift of enough radium for their purpose."

The *cw* transmitter hummed awhile; and there were stirs of impatience among the soldiers who filled the room. After a while, the boy spoke again.

"The best I can make out of these answers, Sir," he said, "is that the Martians refuse to recognize us as intelligent beings. They refuse to deal with us. They think we are just some sort of animals."

"You tell him, then," the General directed, "that we have got them surrounded on land and in the air. We shall not permit them to rise, and shall simply lay siege to them until they starve. Do not be alarmed when we put a small shell through the skin of their vessel; that will be to keep them from rising out into space. Advise them again, that they will be better off if they surrender."

The *cw* spoke again for a period; and again the boy spoke, with some excitement in his voice:

"Apparently the shell has arrived, and blown a hole in the nose of their ship. Dragstedt didn't think it did any damage. But the Martians have become very busy about something, moving jerkily about. The shell-hole seems to have interfered with their arrangements for decreased gravitation inside the vessel. He doesn't know how many there are, but over a hundred. He says they are disturbed."

"That was Grigsby of the 110th Field Artillery that disturbed them."

"SWOOP" Martin, the crack observation pilot, circled around over the scene of operations, at 30,000 feet. He had to use an oxygen helmet, fitted with binocular glasses. But he was invisible and inaudible from below.

He could see the gleaming, egg-shaped hull, nestling in the sand like some child's toy; and around it, the dotted, splotched, irregular circle formed by the Eighth Army Corps. As he watched, a puff of smoke came from one of the splotches below; in a moment a puff of smoke appeared at the smaller end of the egg; and when it cleared, a small black hole remained in the

metal. He reported it all promptly to headquarters by radio.

The next thing that happened was that a square of metal opened in the side of the vessel, like a door, and an odd thing stepped out of it, and started walking out across the sand away from the ship.

In another second, a dozen airplanes, far below him, swooped down toward the thing. The faint patter of their machine guns came up to him. The mechanical thing that had come out of the vessel careened over on its side and lay still. The door in the side of the hull quickly closed.

For some minutes nothing happened, and then a row of little round ports appeared higher up off the ground. "Swoop" Martin could not see anything else happen, except that there were a dozen loud explosions, with flashes of fire in the air, and the airplanes which had fusilladed the Martian coming out of his ship, all exploded there beneath him, and only a litter of small fragments dropped on down to the ground. Then, systematically down there in that investing circle, one battery after another blew up in a flash and a cloud of smoke, huge gun barrels and artillery wheels flying high in the air mingled with the bodies of men, whirling down to be buried in a cloud of sand.

A few seconds later there were scores of explosions in the air, as distant airplanes blew up. There must have been communication from them to the ground, because some of the batteries in the second and third lines banged loudly two or three times before they finally blew up. Their marksmanship was good. Shells shrieked across the interval and huge holes were ripped in the shining side of the Martian vessel.

However, the Martians were the swifter. Before vital damage had been done to their vessel, there was not a tank, not a field gun, not an intact infantry company left. The Eighth Army Corps had been wiped out and was represented only by a few stragglers staggering in the sand.

"God!" exclaimed "Swoop" Martin, up in his plane above range of the damage. "All of that to pay for a couple of ounces of radium!"

As he circled around to head for safer regions, he could see repair proceeding rapidly in the holes in the side of the Martian vessel.

AIRPLANES from the Tenth Army Corps Area were on the spot in the morning, practically hitting their "ceiling" in order to keep out of the way of the Martians' destructive reach. They had expected to arrive and find the thing gone. But it was still there, and the shell-holes all repaired.

So, the Tenth Division moved up to fill the place of the Eighth. A few scouts first took their posts. As nothing happened, more and more men trickled in, and were slowly followed by heavy equipment. In a few days the line was again complete, among the blackened ruins of their predecessors. Their orders were:

"Surround the Martians. Keep quiet. Take no action against them unless they try to rise."

Now, those men who had filtered up to their positions at night with pounding hearts, expecting to be suddenly wiped out at any moment, were getting tired of week after week of inactivity. Army discipline, always irksome, was doubly so in the heat and the sand. There was sand in their clothes, sand in their hair, sand in their ears, sand in their food. There were hot winds, and nothing to do but wait all day and wonder what the airplanes above had to report. The enlisted personnel were not the only ones who were restless. There were constant, worried conferences in the General Headquarters tent.

"I have an idea!" exclaimed General Johnson, Commander of the Tenth Army Corps, one hot day, when weariness was at its height.

The headquarters staff deliberated long and carefully before the officers finally dispersed, each to his own sandy quarters. There was much tapping of the Royal Portable typewriter and sealing of secret orders during the next few days. There was code communication with Washington by radio.

Finally, one dark night, the men were overjoyed by orders to get up and move. A few moments later they were dismayed to find that their progress was going to be backwards. They were going away from the enemy. They pounded through the sand until they reached a paved highway, and were then whisked away by trucks. By daybreak the Division was comfortably making camp in a country that was not sandhills. Eventually it was discovered that the little city in the distance was Ravenna.

"Swoop" Martin, transferred to the Tenth Division, saluted General Johnson, as the latter stepped out of his car.

"Ready for orders, Sir," he said.

"Lieutenant Martin, there are no orders. You may do this if you care to volunteer, but you will not be ordered to do it."

"Instructions, I meant, Sir," said "Swoop" Martin.

In a few moments he was on the run for his plane, which stood ready for him.

CHAPTER III

The Attack on the Martians

"SWOOP" MARTIN in his monoplane made circles around over the Martian space-ship like a hawk. He swept around lower and lower. At a height of about 3,000 feet, he flew away to the distance of a half mile, and then dived steeply downward, toward the Martian vessel. A few hundred feet above it, he turned sharply upward again, making a sort of V. At the bottom of the V, a small black object left the scout plane, and described a parabola, striking the Martian vessel amidships. A ragged hole appeared, and then a dull explosion.

"Swoop" Martin was climbing fast, and thinking every moment was his last one; expecting to be blown to atoms any second. But until he was, he determined, he would go through with it. He guided his plane, watched his board, and went steeply upwards.

Finally, when he was gasping for breath, he leveled off, and put on his oxygen mask. He looked down below. Everything was the same as before. He was puzzled.

He cruised around awhile, thinking things over, and shook his head. He swiftly reported what had happened and asked for further orders. The General's message was to the effect that he did not wish to give an order of that kind; but that if Lieutenant Martin wished to volunteer to repeat his maneuver, it might be a good idea.

Down, down, the plane swooped again, toward the tiny globule nestling in the sand, and sent another bomb hurtling down from the front of its V-shaped path, and again fled upwards into the

heights. Again a jagged hole was torn in the top of the space ship; again "Swoop" Martin expected the worst as he climbed his way back to the height; again he waited in vain for something to happen, and nothing happened.

Back at the camp near Ravenna, a group of men stirred. In fifteen minutes, a dozen swift cars filled with officers and men, two high-speed tanks, and two high-speed four-inch field-pieces, were headed toward the Martian ship. They covered the ground rapidly, and by noon were on the site of the previous camp from which they had besieged the Martian vessel. The field-guns were set up and trained; a dozen men climbed into the two tanks, loaded with machine guns and hand-grenades. Above, a dozen airplanes droned, and made swooping circles, much like hawks.

The tanks started off, throwing up clouds of sand, and dashed at high speed, straight toward the shining side of the Martian vessel. Their crews were tense, expecting to be blotted out instantly. But nothing happened. The old General sat at the front porthole of one of the tanks, watching ahead, gazing at the narrowing space between the tank and the Martian ship. Those gleaming walls began to seem very close, and the General expected the catastrophe any moment. But they roared and clanked onward, and still nothing happened. The airplanes came lower, till the roar of their motors was heard above the noise of the tanks. Still nothing happened. Behind, the men at the cannons watched through field glasses and waited at their radios, ready to rain a shower of shells on the Martian vessel at the least suspicion. But nothing happened.

Finally, they were under the very lee of the metal hulk. It towered above them like a skyscraper, and extended in both directions like a mountain range. Still nothing happened.

"All out!" the General ordered, as the tanks stopped.

Their feet crunching in the sand, their hands full of grenades, they made their way slowly alongside the ship. One hundred yards. Two hundred yards, three hundred yards, they walked along, and still there appeared no way of getting inside. The holes that "Swoop" Martin had made were on the upper surface, and there was no way to climb.

"Try a grenade," the General ordered.

They all backed off. There was a crash of flying fragments, but no damage to the wall.

"A four-inch shell, then!"

The only communication with the gunners was now by flags. The General's order was rapidly wig-wagged to them. The General and his men hurried to shelter behind a sand hummock, now genuinely expecting complete annihilation. The gun crew placed the first shot too short and merely threw up sand. The second was a little high, tearing open the metal plates of the hull about twenty feet above the ground. The third shot ripped open a hole that they could easily walk into.

FOR a moment the General contemplated with interest the twisted and blackened edges of the shiny, white metal that was unknown to him. Then he recollected that they were in danger, he and his little group of men, peering into the depths of the dark opening. There was some huge machinery visible, a long corridor with a bright, flat surface at the end of it. Nothing had as yet happened to them. They were still alive.

The General pushed back one of the men who was edging into the opening. He claimed the privilege of being the first to walk into danger. The men with grenades and hand-machine guns crowded behind him. The General found himself walking down a small corridor, and the men filed behind him. The corridor soon became a bridge out in a vast void, black and filled with machinery of enormous proportions. Then again it became a corridor, and the bright surface was a wall turning at right angles.

It seemed that they spent hours walking about with pounding hearts and thumping heads, expecting every moment to be attacked in some unknown way from dark ambush. There was endless machinery, large and small, everywhere.

Finally, at the end of a climb up a long stairway, they came to an open space, at what they guessed to be about the middle of the ship. It looked as though they had found the "living quarters" at last. They were in a vestibule. In front of them was a metal door with a glass window, through which they could look into a vast, ovoid, rotunda-like room or hall.

All efforts to open the door failed. There seemed to be no lock against which to direct

operations. The metal of the door was firm as a mountain against all their blows. So, they all stepped back, and a well-aimed grenade tore the door open wide enough for them to go through, their ears singing from the roar of the explosion. They went through cautiously, two experienced enlisted-men first, with their rifles at ready, then the officers with their pistols in their hands.

The lighting seemed to them rather dim, though it had the quality of daylight. Probably it corresponded to the lower intensity of illumination as found on the surface of Mars,

“Crash!” went the rifle of a soldier at something that moved slightly on a couch across the room, a hundred yards away. Whatever it was that had moved, jerked as though it had been kicked, shuddered a moment, and lay still.

The group stood huddled together near the door, looked around and waited. Not a sound, not a stir in the vast room. It had all the proportions of some huge Coliseum, though none of the ponderous evidences of constructional difficulties. They had time to examine the place. About two hundred cots or couches stood around its walls. It appeared that originally they had been arranged in precise order, but now there was confusion. All of them were occupied by little, shriveled, flat-looking bodies, that looked astonishingly human. They were small and frail-looking. On closer inspection they looked especially human because the faces were so very old and sad. The skin was blue, leathery, and wrinkled.

In the middle of the place was a cluster of some kind of apparatus: a foundation-pillar, a platform, elongated, casing-like structures of metal pointing in all directions like telescopes or projectors, wheels, knobs, and levers for control. It may possibly have been the control station for running the ship. Near one end of the space into which they were looking, three or four of the mechanical contrivances in which these creatures traveled around when they were on earth, lay propped up in a heap, and a motionless body was still strapped in one of them.

“All beds occupied but one, sir!” the veteran Sergeant said; “and that must belong to him,” pointing to the one in the machine. “Not one of them is stirring.”

“Just the same,” the wary old General said, “the four of you go around and prod everyone of

them to see if there is any life left. This is no time to get shot from behind.”

A keen-looking officer with a lieutenant-colonel’s leaves on his shoulders, was also looking the bodies over. They were indeed all dead. He walked up to one and another, and even thumped and prodded several with professional skill and interest. The General watched him in mute inquiry.

“Well, doctor,” he finally asked, “what killed them?”

“Radiation!” the medical officer replied. “As I see it, they had developed no natural protection against radiation because they live underground, and because there is so little radiation of any kind on Mars, both because of its distance from the sun and because of the scarcity of its radioactive minerals. Apparently there was no warning in their mathematics, of the terrific power of radium against their own flesh, even through the lead walls of its containers. See the deep destruction of skin and tissue on some of the older cases.”

THE General stood a moment, lost in thought. Then he sent two men back to the main force with orders that proper guards be brought up for the Martian ship.

“Now we’ll look for the radium,” he said. “It can’t be far from here.”

The men stuck close together as they moved here and there. It was a jittery place. The vastness and dimness of it, the two-hundred odd dead Martians, the jungles of incredibly huge machinery filling the great spaces all around them, between them and honest daylight, with God only knew what lurking in the depths, were conditions to which they were unaccustomed. They would have preferred a concrete human enemy in front of them no matter how well armed. They went to one of the doors that were let into the wall at intervals, then to another, then to several in succession.

The doors were of the same character as the first one they had encountered. There seemed no way to open them except by explosives, and this for the present they hesitated to do. The light from the rotunda penetrated the glass windows of the doors only a short distance, and was lost among the huge bulks and dizzy reaches of machinery.

Suddenly a harsh cackle sounded behind

them.

They wheeled around and stood petrified, the enlisted men with their rifles automatically aimed in the direction from which the laugh had come.

“Ha! ha! ha! ha!” rasped a harsh, dry laugh. “Go ahead and have a shot at me, boys, and see how much harm it does!”

They saw Dragstedt standing there his eyes gleaming.

There was a moment’s pause. The General whispered:

“He’s insane.”

“Who wouldn’t be?” the medical officer said.

The madman’s dry cackle rose again to the lofty ceiling:

“Ha! ha! So you think you can get the best of me, eh? Look what I can do to you!”

He whirled a little wheel, which slowly swung one of the long casings so that it pointed at a dead Martian on a couch. He moved his hand to something else, and an intense red ray shot across the intervening space. The Martian and his bed simply flew into pieces, and the fragments also disappeared, leaving behind them faint clouds of smoky vapor. A dull thud shook the room.

“Look! and look! and look!” the madman shouted excitedly, aiming at one after another of the Martians, blowing them into smoke with red streaks and dull thuds.

Crash! went a soldier’s rifle as the ray began to swing too close to them.

The soldier dropped his rifle in one hand, and held the other to his head as though to nurse a headache.

“Swipe me! I could hit a pinhead at that distance!” he moaned.

“Fire at him again!” the General ordered. They all watched closely.

Crash! went the rifle. At the same time a small puff of smoke appeared in the thin air about a foot from Professor Dragstedt, and in line with his heart. The bullet had been caught and disintegrated by some field of force.

Again the long, cackling laugh:

“You see, I’ve got you!”

“Yes,” said the General. “What do you want?”

“I’m sailing this ship to Mars,” the Professor said. “I’m going to sell them the radium there. I’m going to be rich. I’m going to get power! I’m

going to rule. I’ll be the biggest—”

“But what about us?” the General interrupted.

The madman’s face became crafty.

“You will come with me, and be my royal Guard,” he orated. “Or—” he waited thoughtfully a moment as though a new and more interesting idea had struck him—

“—or, I’ll blast you into smoke. What would you rather do? Go to Mars, or get flashed into nothing?”

Someone in the group whispered:

“But the ship’s got holes in it. If he goes out into space, we’re all goners in a few seconds.”

Another voice whispered:

“Does he really believe he can handle this ship? And get it to Mars? Looks complicated to me, and I’m—”

The old General’s head probably worked faster than anyone else’s.

“You go to hell!” he thundered to the mad professor. “We’ll get you yet, and court-martial you and shoot you.”

Professor Dragstedt gave a shrill yell.

“Whoopee! All aboard for Mars! Here we go!”

He adjusted a number of little wheels, lumbered all the casings into different positions, and took hold of a large, heavy lever.

The men looked at each other blankly. In a few seconds the cold of space would penetrate into their bone marrow, and all the air out of their bodies would be lost as an infinitesimal whiff in the limitless void. Irresistibly they turned to Dragstedt again.

With a wild grin on his face, he leaned back, and gave a long, hard pull at the heavy lever in front of him.

Suddenly they were pressed to the floor with an immense weight. The sensation was over in a second. During that second the spectacle in front of them took place. A fountain of a dozen streams of red beams played for an instant at steep angles, crisscrossing each other and forming a hyperboloid. When they subsided, the tower in the middle of the room was a molten mass, and the only trace of Professor Dragstedt was a whiff of smoky vapor, slowly dissipating itself in faint swirls.