

THE MARTIAN DIARIES

BY

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VOLUME.1 THE DAY OF THE MARTIANS

Part 1

Life

*Life? Who can consider, or fully explain, exactly what it is? Who can give a definition to something that has no barrier as to its choice of habitation, colour, shape or size? Once started, Life has a persistence, a way of unexpected continuation; **that** is a surprise, and a wonder, to all who encounter it; none more so, than to the inhabitants of the red planet, Mars.*

So it was, that a Martian cylinder was found. Cold, un-stirring, buried deep in the rubble, of the Welsh mountain it had crashed into.

Ogilvy the Astronomer was summoned, commanded to find out everything about this particular cylinder, as so different it was to all other Martian projectiles that had invaded our planet. It had remained silent, unmoving, entombed deep in a layer of dust and rock, with its primary screw cap still in place...

1913

The terror of the coming of the Martians was all but a distant memory, a bad dream that had

faded with time. Amid the tinkling of the tea cups and the boiling of the kettle, I sat contented as I finished my breakfast with Laura. Unfolding the Daily Chronicle, I read and realised to my horror, the discovery of a Martian cylinder. It had been found complete, intact, and as yet unopened, in a remote region of Wales and carefully transported to London. I thought then, of my wife's fortunate escape from the town of Leatherhead, just before a lone Martian fighting machine descended upon it with a heat ray. My stomach began to churn and to knot with a sickly unease and I knew for certain that my breakfast was over.

The very thought that I could encounter a living Martian again was awful, the worst possible news I could ever imagine. This would herald nothing but chaos, tremendous hardship and the likelihood of death. I glanced at Laura momentarily. She silently sipped her tea from across the table, still gently waking up it seemed, blissfully unaware of any renewed Martian threat, just as I had been only precious moments before. The very idea that my wife, sitting here with me now so safe, cosy in her dressing gown, could shortly be struggling again for her own survival against the elements and Martian monsters, was unthinkable. And yet, less than thirty miles away, hostile Martians, still very much alive, could be lurking in the newly-found projectile, ten years or so since their arrival on this planet. I could not comprehend why Ogilvy had brought the Martian projectile back with him, and so recklessly placed it on the outskirts of London in his exhibition. It made no sense. Surely it would have been far safer and less of a risk, to have examined the projectile where it was found in the sparse wilderness of Wales?

I knew then I had to go to London, to Crystal Palace, to find out more and to be there when they opened up the alien cylinder.

Train Journey

My first concern was much more personal to me - Laura. The Martian invasion was solely responsible for the death of all her family, and it was a subject we rarely spoke of. The thought of her being here in this house alone, combined with a new Martian threat, proved too much for me. I asked Laura if she would like to go with me to Crystal Palace, and after a lot of gentle persuasion, she went upstairs to change. While she busied herself getting ready, I

managed to read the front page entirely. I felt no better as I folded the headline, 'Is This the End of the World?' out of sight and carefully hid the newspaper away.

Making our way to the station, Laura said that before the end of the day she wanted to know what was bothering me. On the platform, I stood directly in front of the newspaper stand, blocking and shielding my wife from countless headlines of 'Doom', and 'The End of the World', hoping upon hope that she would not see any of it. Hearing the whistle of the approaching locomotive I held her close, as the 10:05 to Clapham Junction pulled in. After boarding the train, the doors slammed shut, the guard's whistle blew, and I wondered then if I was doing the right thing. The train juddered and began to move. Any sense of self-preservation or deep-held concern was crushed as my stubborn curiosity got the better of me. I had to know what was happening in order to prepare for the worst, and should the worst happen, I knew I had no plan.

The journey itself was unremarkable. The engine chugged along happily, occasionally blowing its whistle, as rhythmically. the carriages clanked, rocked and rattled over rails, points and under bridges. The frequent stopping at the stations along the line became a blur. Passengers got on and off, and I found myself trying to be normal, smiling, nodding, being polite, but completely lost in my own world. I had no plausible answers, just the frustration of many thoughts and questions. As the train puffed closer to London the more my apprehension grew. The scars of the Martian invasion could still be seen in almost every direction I looked. We began to slow to a gentle stop momentarily at a junction. I noticed a cluster of gaunt houses, mere burnt out shells of brick and stone. I pondered where the families of all those ruined homes could be, and if any survived. The train began to move again, edging slowly forwards. I wondered then, what the Martians inside the cylinder were up to at this particular moment. Perhaps the projectile was a Trojan horse, its only purpose a sudden and surprise attack. My hope for any sort of an answer was Ogilvy. He must have had a good reason to bring the Martian projectile here to London, but I could not think of any.

The train, it seemed, was in no particular rush, choosing today to be extra slow and unhurried. I grumbled, but Laura, wonderful Laura, not knowing the truth behind our destination or its importance, simply smiled, entertained by my lack of patience.

At last we arrived at Clapham Junction, and keeping pace with other passengers, Laura and I walked along the platform under the warm dappled light of summer that was streaming through the glass in the roof of the station. An express train came rattling through at another platform, noisily and quickly. The urgency at which it passed was soon forgotten, amid the slamming of carriage doors, the whistles of guards and trains, all suddenly hissed into silence by the sudden release of steam and pressure, in this cathedral of the locomotive. The heavy puffing and pulling away of a noisy goods train out of the station, now drew my attention, and as the last of the wagons disappeared from view, I became aware that my wife was no longer beside me; someone else, a smaller woman, a stranger, had taken her place. I looked behind. Laura had picked up a discarded newspaper. Her happy, carefree mood had changed to one of panic, as she fearfully read the headlines, and all I could do was watch helplessly as I hurried back to her.

Crystal Palace

We caught the connection to Crystal Palace and once there, we could hear sounds of brass bands playing and the thumping of bass drums, coming from the bandstands. Steam engines spat as they furiously boiled and whistled, slowly turning a tall Ferris wheel lit by weak electricity bulbs, all flickering randomly, painted in different colours. The horses of the merry-go-round, their faces agonized, chased each other up and down as they went, much to the delight of screaming children, as others stood by and waited their turn excitedly with their parents. In the air, amid the heavy smell of burning wood and coal, came a sweet and light aroma of freshly made toffee and fudge.

Just before we left the train, I told Laura that we were here to see Ogilvy and I wanted to interview him for a possible article about his extensive Martian collection. I soon regretted doing so as all the talk of Martians left my wife in a state of shock. Sombre and silent, Laura nervously gripped my arm as we approached the Great Exhibition of Martian Artefacts, knowing that the Martian cylinder she had just read about, was here at Crystal Palace. We paid and entered the exhibition. To one side, there was a protected area surrounded by a unit of armed soldiers, with cannons. An enormous marquee had been placed in the middle. It was clear to me that the Martian cylinder had to be inside that structure. Taking Laura out

of the queue, we gained entrance to the cordon, and into the restricted area. I asked to see Ogilvy in person and once inside the marquee, I stood in awe of the huge, bulky object that loomed in front of us. There was none of the expected black staining, charring, or clinker, anywhere on the alien cylinder; in fact, it was actually beautiful. On its perfectly clean and very shiny surface, there was only the finest powdering of dust. It gleamed in brilliant silver and shone like new. Apart from its size, there was nothing sinister about this Martian cylinder. Thoughts of it being a Trojan Horse concerned me greatly, and I began to worry now, more than ever.

Ogilvy

Ogilvy appeared and greeted me warmly. It quickly became clear that he had no idea or any explanation for what had happened to the cylinder, or why it shone like new. I demanded to know why he had brought the Martian cylinder here to London, and so recklessly placed it into the midst of human habitation. He told me there was no detectable sound or movement coming from within the projectile and he was convinced that no living thing was still inside. He assured me that the risk posed to London was minimal.

Taking me to one side, so as not to be overheard by any of the guards, Ogilvy explained off the record, that this Martian exhibition was indeed a charade; it was a public exercise to gently raise awareness of a new Martian threat, in an attempt to prevent a large scale panic of the people. He had observed through his telescope, vast clouds of green, luminous vapour, dissipating high in the atmosphere of Mars. My heart sank deeper as Ogilvy revealed that he had also detected a moving object in the form of a comet, heading towards our planet. He believed that in a matter of a few short months, the Martians would indeed walk again upon the face of the Earth.

“A comet coming from Mars? You mean a projectile, surely?” I questioned. “But a single projectile would be far too small, almost invisible, to be seen at such a distance. When is this comet of yours expected?”

“You have a very fine scientific mind. It's a shame you waste that intellect of yours, writing

papers. I am of the opinion that all of the Martians are coming this time, in one massive fleet or an Armada of projectiles if you like. I find it remarkable that they were able to launch so many of their projectiles that they actually look like a fair-sized comet. It won't be long before its unusual green colour will become visible to the naked eye, and every Tom, Dick and Harry will know exactly what it is. The comet will arrive just before the 25th of December.”

“Christmas? As soon as that? But, that's barely three months away... “

“Why does this cylinder occasionally shimmer green slightly? Look, it is doing so now.”

Shrugging, Ogilvy replied, “The shimmering started when we tried to remove what we thought was the screw cap a few days ago. I believe it is sending a signal. To where? I am not sure.”

“Could it be a homing beacon? Or simply a distress signal?”

Ogilvy's eyes widened. “That's the best hypothesis I have heard today, and one that would explain the slight deviation we detected in the course of the comet.” He hurriedly removed some scribbled notes out of his pocket. “Yes, of course. Then that can only mean one thing: the Martians are coming here to rescue their friend!” Ogilvy seemed distracted and suddenly worried, as he stepped back from the Martian cylinder, as if to observe the shimmering in its entirety.

“Maybe it's an advantage,” I gently suggested. “We could set a trap for them and force them to our terms.”

“They are not coming to negotiate. Once they start using their heat rays, their only terms will be the extinction of us all. They are coming here to conquer the Earth!”

Ogilvy drew a deep breath and sighed deeply. In the previous invasion he had survived the glancing blow of a Martian heat ray, but only just, and pain from that encounter seemed to bother him still. He reached into his pocket for some medication, and taking it, appeared to relax. Ogilvy then explained in detail that the government wanted him to officiate at the

Observatory in Greenwich, to monitor and study the approach of the comet. He wanted to concentrate on opening up the cylinder, in the strategic hope of retrieving a viable Martian generator, the quintessential component needed to create a heat ray device of our own.

“The cannons and guns we have now will not do. We must have fire, in order to fight fire!” he warned.

To my mind, Ogilvy appeared to be wasting his time. Martian machinery was an advanced technology that no human had yet considered or conceived. Any scientific knowledge as to its theory did not exist. It was probably dangerous, or could even be fatal, to tinker with the mechanics of the projectile. I suggested to Ogilvy that something unforeseen had caused the demise of the cylinder. It had been rendered harmless in an accidental mishap or malfunction that was certainly serendipitous to our cause. The secrets of how the alien came to be disabled, had to be known and scrutinised in every detail. He gave no response, deciding instead to elaborate on his latest ideas and plans to get inside the Martian cylinder.

We sat together with Ogilvy in a noisy cafeteria and drank tea. Half an hour later, we thanked Ogilvy for the refreshments and bid him farewell. Taking Laura's arm, my suggestion of travelling far from this Martian object was met with her instant approval. At the nearest train station we bought tickets out of London and England, bound for the north-west of Wales.

Crewe

Missing the last train connection at Crewe, we chose a small but popular hotel for the night. Over dinner, Laura worried about the deliveries of milk and things we should be doing at home. She was completely oblivious of the silent green menace rushing ever closer towards the Earth. I was unable to tell my wife about the comet but it was all I could think about. In a few short months it would be here, and with it, a superior army of Martians with fantastic weapons, which we had no possible defence against. Our fragile civilisation was in serious trouble and the ending of it was in sight.

The next morning, I was up early after a restless night and from our window, I watched with

interest as newspapers were delivered to our hotel. Minutes later, as I entered the hotel reception, I was greeted with the warm, pungent smell of fresh newspaper and ink. Choosing a Daily Mail from the piles of newspapers, I read it quickly in the lobby, relieved to find no new mention of the Martian cylinder or the distant green comet. A little later, Laura and I had breakfast together in the hotel dining room, and we decided to go shopping in Crewe for overnight travel necessities.

Carefully stepping out of the horse-drawn cab in Market Street, Laura mischievously took my notebook from my pocket. I noticed how she wrote quickly, concentrating intently as the words flowed down her arm to her fingers and to the lead of the pencil that scribbled furiously on the paper. Smiling now, she quickly handed back the notebook.

Crewe was surprisingly busy for the time of day. We stopped outside a greengrocer's shop and the bell jangled briefly, noisily, as Laura opened the small glazed door. Suddenly, there was a voice behind me:

"I know you!" He sounded vaguely familiar and turning round, I found a uniformed officer grinning back at me.

"The Artilleryman! It's so good to see you. My wife Laura has only just stepped into this shop."

With hands behind our backs, we strolled very slowly up the busy, sunny street like on-duty policemen.

"Yes, well they decorated me as a war hero and made me an officer, just after I saw you last. Promotions come more quickly these days. Too many outright losses to the Martians. I am a Major now. I don't want to go much higher in rank, the paperwork is already too much. They like the way I get things done and they also know I am very keen on the use of explosives."

We reminisced over the times we had met before, and how, on the last occasion, we had attempted to dig a long tunnel by hand. My laughter faded quickly as the struggle of those times flooded back. I thought then of someone else, the Curate... and of his horrible death

at the hands of the Martians. I could have died that day too. I felt uneasy, but able to speak freely with Laura gone, I quietly said, "Trouble is on the way..."

"The comet?"

Nodding, I muttered, "Yes, I met with Ogilvy... he told me Christmas. I am off to the mountains of Wales to see for myself what happened."

"The Martian cylinder crash site? I was put in charge of the retrieval of that silver projectile. It was under my command and a very tough assignment it was too. The lads did well. We got the job done and removed it within the time frame. Thankfully, I am on my way back to London - I've had enough of dust, rock, rain, sheep and goats."

"I see... I believe that everything depends on finding an answer to a single question. What did happen to that Martian projectile? Didn't you notice how exceptionally shiny, or new the cylinder looked?"

"It's not my job to think, only to carry out orders. The salvage had to be done quickly. It took a lot of mining, but it was completed without so much as a scratch on the projectile. I then cleaned it up, and sent it down to London for Ogilvy."

"Cleaned it up? What do you mean? Did you remove clinker and scorch marks from its surface? No other projectile has ever been found so pristine. Did you polish it in any way?"

"There was no time to do anything with it. We simply brushed a heavy and thick coat of dust off the cylinder and sent it on its way south, exactly the way we found it. So that you know, the dust up there has to be seen to be believed, especially in the cavern. It's definitely no place for a lady."

The Major and I turned and strolled back to the greengrocer's in time to see Laura beaming at us through the thin glass of the door. It came to me that for a moment she appeared trapped, as if behind the glass of a grand picture, an oil painting, fragile, exquisite and precious in every detail. The shop bell jangled, breaking the spell. Laura was suddenly in

front of us, and the smell of earthy vegetables, ripe soft fruits and flowers, briefly met our noses. From the offering of three large red apples, the Major chose one quickly.

“Thank you,” he said smiling. “Find Ogilvy when you're in London, and you're sure to find me. They teamed us up you know. He does the science and I clean up after him. Sadly, I must be on my way. Good luck, to the both of you.” And with a small salute, he was gone.

“Thank you, too,” I said to Laura, as I bit into a tasty red apple. Taking my notebook from my pocket, I read her list. The last thing she had scribbled on the bottom of the page was, 'I love you.'

Blue Curtains

Mount Tryfan was cloud-covered and very much larger than I thought it would be. It had a majestic grandeur with its rocky top and grasses and pasture lower down. White sheep dotted the hillside and on the higher ridges too. Laura said that it was a wonderful place and that she had never visited this area before.

Even though it rained lightly, steadily, the charm of the serene vista was very pleasant against the grey of the cloudy sky. The horse trotted at a steady pace through the rain. Suddenly, the rickety cart hit a ditch and the jarring jolt returned us to reality. There ahead, just below the base of the cloud, was the scar where the Martian cylinder had so violently smashed into the mountain. Silhouetted against huge piles of rock, stone and rubble, was the abandoned heavy machinery used by the Major to remove the cylinder.

“What an absolute mess. It's horrible!” exclaimed Laura.

The scale of the excavations and size of the rampart were truly disproportionate and she was clearly upset by it. I was glad dusk came quickly, and in the dying of the light, only the dark, eerie mouth of the cavern was left to see on the mountain.

The track reached the top of a slight hill, and ahead of us at last were the welcoming lights

of the local inn. On our arrival the old woman, noticing that we travelled light, made our room more comfortable by lighting a fire. As she finished her preparations and was about to leave the room, I asked her about the cylinder hitting the mountain. It was clear to me she must have witnessed or experienced something, living so close to Tryfan.

“Well, that was something else completely. It was night time see. I heard the hissing and saw the shooting star while I was checking the chickens. It was a pretty green and fell as quick as you like. Then, Tryfan lit the whole valley up like a Christmas tree. Blue it was, as if huge lightning had hit it.”

“Hmmm.... Blue you say? Are you sure the lightning wasn't the same green as the shooting star?”

“Blue I tell you, as blue as Anwyn Llewellyn's new curtains. It felt like an earthquake see, and the noise was horrific!”

“Has anyone spoken to you, or asked you about the cylinder before?”

“Why? Why would anyone want to speak to me? I'm just an old woman and no one cares what I think. What do I know about such things?”

“You may well have saved us all.”

The old woman laughed heartily, and saying goodnight, she quietly closed our door.

“What do you mean, she may have saved us all?” asked Laura. “Is there something more you are not telling me?”

“It's nothing to worry about Laura, nothing at all, my dear. It has been a very long day, let's just get to bed.”

The Cave-in

Making our way along a damp, stony track the next morning, the weather hinted at improvement. Beside us ran a narrow but lively river. A group of five stone-built cottages huddled together, not far the track. Bright blue curtains hung at the windows of the last house.

“Look, I am sure Anwyn Llewellyn lives there,” I grinned, and my wife laughed too. Even the weather seemed to brighten. The horse and cart climbed steadily higher and I mentioned again that the cavern was probably no fit place for a lady. For some reason, Laura seemed not to hear. Frightened sheep jumped out of the way as we joined the new rampart, built as an access road by the Army and I realised the enormity of the task the Major had accomplished.

We secured the horse on a patch of short grass and I held Laura's arm to walk the rest of the way to the cavern. Huge, heavy chains rusted together in tall, thick piles.

“These are the machines we saw yesterday evening,” I told her. The massive, steam-powered engines were mostly a very odd, matt grey. They stood cold and silent, forgotten amongst the enormous piles of rock and debris.

“Martians, men and their metal monsters, destroying everything. Why does it have to be so?” asked Laura.

I shrugged, touching one of the ghostly-looking machines. I was surprised to find that the grey dust coated my hand easily. It exposed flaking, maroon paint underneath, which itself was smothered in oil or thick grease. Broad, milky-grey puddles were clustered at the cavern mouth. Laura picked up a discarded mining lantern and lighting it, we proceeded carefully into the deep darkness and gloom of the cavern.

Laura let go of my hand.

“Be careful, there has been a recent rockfall or something. Whatever it was blasted dust over everything outside.”

The soothing sounds of running water from a mountain stream came from deep within Tryfan, as our presence echoed softly too.

“Is this the heart of the mountain?” whispered Laura softly, picking up a small stone and cleaning it. “See how beautiful some of the rocks are, especially the blue ones.”

“Blue?” I questioned. She handed me the small piece of angular stone and I found it cool and damp. I noticed how surprisingly light it felt, metallic, and yet it had an organic quality, something equivalent to coal. In the dim, low light of the cavern, I could only just see how blue it was. I let the stone fall back to the ground and it disappeared in a plume of light dust. The Major was right, there was a lot of dust in here and it was almost impossible to gauge what was solid under foot. Laura was unusually quiet.

I said, “According to the Major, the cylinder was found encased in this dust. It certainly looks like ash from a grate, but a finer consistency. Look at our footprints... the dust could be mistaken for snow.” Laura replied tearfully, that greater care should have been taken in removing the cylinder, and that much of the damage to Tryfan, and the landscape, was avoidable. I was about to respond to her, when something caught my eye.

“What is this grey vegetation over here? I didn't notice it before,” I said. “Is it lichen?”

Moving too quickly I tripped helplessly, falling over an unseen rock hidden by dust. I heard my wife scream as the roof of the cavern started to give way. I barely had time to get clear as it continued to collapse in a huge rockfall.

I prayed Laura was not injured, or worse, on the entrance side of the cavern. I was battered and bruised, unsure what hurt; my dry eyes stung in the billowing dust, and only by squinting could I see anything. I became aware of a faint, greenish glow coming from above me. Coughing and spitting, I tried to peer through the thick dust to see if it was what I feared most: the Martians had indeed escaped from the cylinder after all, and quietly survived here in these caverns undetected. Suddenly, something hit me on the head, very hard...

Tryfanite

Laura held my hand. "Where am I?" I whispered.

"Back at the inn," she told me, and explained it had taken over a day to rescue me. "You've been unconscious for forty-eight hours, with a very large bump to your head."

"Two days? No! We must go back to Tryfan. I have made a discovery. There are Martians living in the cavern!" I coughed. I struggled to get out of bed, but a pain, sharp and intense at the front of my skull, forced me to lie back down quickly.

The large group of miners assembled at the mouth of the cavern. Looking for Martians seemed to be a magnet to these men and all of them were keen to find some. Armed only with pick-axes and shovels, it was clear that these miners had no real concept of what they faced. The true facts of the London invasion ten years ago were lost out here, after countless re-telling over time. The miners had no idea what a Martian heat ray was capable of, especially in close proximity. Laura and I were told that there hadn't been this much excitement in the valley since the finding of the silver cylinder and its subsequent removal. The men gave us recent newspaper clippings to look at, and Laura identified the Major amongst the blurred images of dignitaries who posed with the shiny projectile. Once inside the cavern we were taken to the place where I had nearly met my end. It was clear from the amount of fallen debris that I was lucky to be alive. I carefully adjusted the new bandage that covered my forehead.

After half an hour of searching, we found no opening above the rockfall, or indeed anywhere for a Martian to hide. I explained once more, exactly what happened during the cave-in and how I became trapped. Laura suggested that we should extinguish the lanterns, because no one was sure just how bright any luminous, green light could be. It wasn't long before one of the miners claimed that he could see something. He had found a very small gap with green light coming from it. I insisted that everyone should leave the cavern immediately. I knew that cornering a Martian armed with a heat ray was instant suicide for all. We assembled outside and it was suggested that the Martians could escape to somewhere else. After I had reasoned that the army should be sent for, I reluctantly went back with three of the more

experienced miners. They examined the roof of the cavern and discovered a cave system far more extensive than anyone thought, and all agreed that they had never encountered such a space before. Shining lights as best as we could, we discovered that most of the cave walls were covered in grey lichen, and it was this that was responsible for the green luminescence. No Martian generated that glow; it was only the lichen. Laura came to find me, as one by one, the miners slowly returned to see the caves for themselves.

Later, over a simple lunch in an old army hut, one of the miners remarked that he would be seeing Martians too, if he had a bump on his head like mine. We all laughed. I got to know the miners a bit more and openly shared thoughts about the mountain with them. "There could be many caves full of lichen inside Tryfan, because of the loose nature of its original formation. Sunlight doesn't reach down here. The lichen only grows because of the minerals found in the rocks." Laura passed round some pieces of the mineral she had collected and I continued with my explanation: "I am certain it is the blue mineral that gives the lichen food and everything it needs to survive in the dark. When the cylinder hit the mountain, it was intense temperature that vaporised all the clinker and black residue from the projectile, and made it shine like new. The impact of the crash caused the blue mineral to discharge its energy, just like coal does as it burns, creating a type of ash similar to burnt coal, but much finer. Look at the huge amount of dust around us."

"Or," suggested Laura, "when it smashed into the mountain, the mineral caused the Martian cylinder to discharge all its energy as intense blue lightning and heat, exactly the way our landlady described. Either way, we should call the mineral Tryfanite."

I turned to look at Laura in amazement, and that same instant, a searing vision of the green comet forced its way into my mind. It was the secret that I could not share. I rested a while. With the help of the miners, the afternoon was spent shoring up the cavern roof and collecting unusual minerals. That same evening, after packing away all the samples, my wife and I said our goodbyes and made our way back to London.

Return to London

Laura and I returned to Crystal Palace later the next day with the samples. Ogilvy had indeed found a way into the Martian cylinder with the Major's help. The two men had discovered the unpleasant, liquefied remains of the dead Martian crew and in a Herculean effort they had completely dismantled the projectile on the inside. The mechanical contents of the Martian projectile were now laid out for inspection. Ogilvy was particularly keen to show me the partially assembled elements of a Martian heat ray, set out on a large bolted jig he had created.

"Does it work?" I asked.

"No. I am not sure how to get the Martian power to it, but that's only a matter of time, which we do not have. Have you seen the comet by any chance? There is no moon tonight and you will find it low on the horizon, below Mars. It is quite a sight."

I then told Ogilvy of our trip to Wales and showed him the sample of minerals we had carefully collected. "Take a look at this one in particular. We call it Tryfanite."

"The blue mineral. It is a very strange substance. I came across it when I was first up there at Tryfan. The cylinder was actually encased in the mineral when we found it, under a thick layer of that wretched dust. Did you find anything else? I didn't get a chance to carry out a more detailed study of the place."

"Yes, this vegetation feeds upon the same blue mineral and is capable of glowing in the dark." I showed him the dull-looking, grey lichen, and taking the clear glass jar, he shook the sample while peering inside.

"All very good indeed, but nothing new. I am extremely busy." Ogilvy politely said goodbye to Laura and she began packing away the samples. As he moved away I followed him.

"Is this projectile still signalling?" I asked

"It never stopped, even when we emptied it. Quickly, see for yourself." I watched, as a gentle, faint glow on the silver surface of the Martian projectile disappeared. "I don't have time to

chat. This needs to be working and as quickly as possible,” Ogilvy continued, pointing to the heat ray. “Everything depends upon it.”

“Ogilvy, listen. In the presence of the Tryfanite mineral, Martian energy transforms into a higher more unstable electrical state. It disrupts their machines and renders them useless in every way and function.”

Ogilvy again stopped what he was doing, but this time appeared to be more interested.

“You may well have stumbled across something important. Here, let me take a look at the mineral again. By the way, what did you do to your head?”

The Major's Office

“Major, I must talk with you,” I said as his office door creaked open.

“That's a nice war wound you have there. Tryfan? Come in, both of you, take a seat.”

I readjusted the fresh bandage on my head, following Laura into his office.

“You have both done very well. I heard of your blue mineral discovery - the top brass informed me. They are very excited. It's hard to believe you are an adviser to them, and actually, I am working for you now. They want to take immediate advantage of all the slag heaps we blasted from the mountain and remove any Tryfanite. There are tons and tons of the blue stuff in that rubble. I told them your Tryfanite could save us all.”

“Yes, but there won't be enough in the debris alone. The Tryfanite needs to be mined in far larger quantities, in order to create thousands of shells loaded with the mineral. Each shell would have to be on target and I am not sure if there would be time to aim our cannons at close quarters against a Martian armed with a heat ray. You know our losses would be horrendous. Also, it would not be physically possible to test any of it before the Martians arrive with their green energy.” I looked over at Laura, after realising what I had said.

“Don't mind me. I realised what was going on a while ago. I did as Ogilvy said, and looked for the comet. It is quite green you know and well worth a look. Have either of you actually seen it? ” asked Laura.

There was an awkward silence and then the Major said in a lowered voice, “The Tryfanite is being extracted from the mountain as we speak.”

Laura was instantly on her feet. “And what about the landscape? Are you going to blow it all up? Where and how will the lichen survive without that mountain?” I had never seen her like this before. She glared at us both, her eyes on fire. “The Martians smashed into Tryfan with their projectile and now both of you intend to destroy the entire mountain. What is the difference between us and the Martians? We talk of life on other planets, but what about the needless destruction of life on our own planet? We know precisely where to dig for the mineral only because the lichen showed us. Why not take the hundreds of tons of Tryfanite you need from the rampart you made, instead? It is certainly big enough. Wouldn't that be the quickest and easiest thing to do? That mountain deserves our respect, not its complete destruction!”

Sheepishly the Major nodded and I agreed too.

Laura Has Gone

I used my position to request that Laura also be considered for an advisory role and with the Major's help she was finally accepted. Her posting had authority and was to include the effective means and methods for the supply of Tryfanite but ultimately to save Tryfan and the lichen. She was returning to Wales without me. I kissed her and waved goodbye, as the train puffed away, disappearing in a cloud of white steam and early evening mist, taking her back to Wales. I was very proud of Laura and her noble mission. Secretly, I was glad she was going away to safety, at least for the time being.

A mother and her four young children had also been waving, saying goodbye from the train. By accident, I made eye contact with a man, and I knew instantly that it was his wife and

family who had left. I spoke briefly with him. He had been called up, conscripted... and he did not know why. Briskly he left, saying no more.

All alone, with the solemn emptiness of the platform, I thought of my parents and my childhood, and I realised that it was very likely that those young children would never see a family Christmas again. I wanted the train to come back.

The Restaurant

Later that day, I headed into London and met with Ogilvy and the Major in the surroundings of a fine restaurant. We sat and drank with the Major. He seemed to be happy, very much enjoying the social occasion, and at one point he politely excused himself to join in the banter and laughter at another table.

I noticed Ogilvy was restless and uneasy. "You haven't said much all evening. What's the matter?" I asked, trying to start up conversation.

"The Martians have completely abandoned their world for ours you know. I dreamed last night that we managed to get high above the clouds in a flock of giant, white air balloons. Each carried underneath an enormous glass lens, and several men focused the sun's great energy into a primitive heat ray of our own." He chuckled briefly. "It was only a dream, sadly, only a dream." He put his empty glass down. "If only men could transit into the void of space we could attack the comet while it is still in flight between the worlds..."

I realised that Ogilvy was trying to tell me something new. I helped him pour another drink.

He continued: "To the Martian way of thinking, this planet has to be as sterile as Mars. Do you know they are actually coming here to wage war against bacteria and fungus? They regard us humans as mere ants, and only a minor irritation. By eliminating the bacteria and all of the fungus, any remaining life, including us humans, will not survive. Understand, it is the bacteria that they want to destroy and that is all that their great intellect is focused on at the moment. It is the way they think, and the way they live, as with a single mind, a single

thought.”

“But, how do you know all this, Ogilvy?” I questioned.

“Ahh...well... as you know, the last time they came, the Martians conquered us humans in less than a week, and their Red Weed flourished without hindrance. We were helpless before them. The Earth for a time became the domain of the Martian, except that the bacteria killed them - killed them all - any of them who dared to breathe and consume anything on this world. The Martians now know exactly what happened and why. Without bacteria, they could enjoy Earth's abundance of liquid water, floating around in a nice warm bath all day, or go for a stroll in their machines through vast forests of their thirsty Red Weed.” A cynical smile disappeared almost as quickly as it came.

Ogilvy suddenly seemed older and tired. “The Martians are bringing with them a huge dark object. They hide it inside the greenish glow of their comet's corona. I know it is there. It doesn't shine, it doesn't glow. It is little more than a shadow, which I have continued to watch through my telescope for some time now. Briefly once, a tiny star seemed to shine in the head of the comet. I thought at first I was mistaken, it was such a small pin-prick of light, but it grew to such an intensity and so very quickly, I had to look away. When I dared to look again, the light was gone. The same thing happened for the third time last night, and each time it is definitely brighter. The shadowy thing doesn't appear to have much in the way of mass but, every twelve and a quarter hours, regularly as clockwork it glows momentarily, brighter than the sun. The Martians must have initiated this reaction to coincide with their arrival just above the Earth's atmosphere. The weapon is about to reach its full potency. It will be able to penetrate deep into the Earth's surface and scour the oceans with fingers of invisible light to kill bacteria. They must have a technology which shields them from the lethal effects of this shadow-weapon within the comet formation. I believe it to be our duty to save the Earth's bacteria and fungus from the Martians, the same way the bacteria saved us from that first Martian invasion; a form of symbiosis if you like. That weapon must not reach our atmosphere. Make no mistake, it will be the end of bacteria, and quickly thereafter, the death of all that we know ... and love.”

I tried to refill his glass and found that my hand shook terribly. As calmly as I could, I asked

him, "Does anyone else know about this? Does the Major know? You told me."

"You're certainly no a fool; why would you tell the world? It would be blood on your hands. There would only be more chaos, panic and disorder and haven't we seen enough already of that? Besides, what can anyone do about it? No, I haven't told the Major, I dare not, he has enough to think about. Civilisations come and they go, you know. It is simply happening to us just now, and it will happen to the Martians too, one day in the future I'm sure." Ogilvy emptied his glass quickly and continued, "There is more..."

I noticed that he seemed to be laughing - or was it crying - or both? "More? How can there be much more?" I exclaimed. The thumping in my head grew painfully worse. I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear any more.

"There are, as you know, good and bad bacteria, but remove all the bacteria and fungus, and you destroy a very basic process of life that this planet needs to be healthy. It is a paradox." He cleared his throat. "More importantly, without bacteria and fungus, nothing would decompose very well and certainly not the way we are used to. It wouldn't be long before dead bodies piled up everywhere, essentially all as fresh as the day they died. Mind you, anyone or anything biological, left outside would of course be prone to the elements - sun or wind damage – you know, that sort of thing. Other than by an extremely slow, chemical process, nothing would actually decompose the way we know it, and the only scavengers on the Earth would be the Martians themselves, able to pick and choose..."

"No Ogilvy! That's enough! What you are suggesting is so vile as to be beyond hell."

"A larder of a world, where nothing is alive or decomposes. All the blood they could wish for, and so fresh too. It is a perfect Martian solution don't you think?" Ogilvy coughed deeply, obviously drowning in his thoughts for the longest while, then, surfacing again, he continued suddenly in a lighter tone: "However, the distress signal from that cylinder of ours, must have come as a complete surprise to them. They cannot sterilise the planet before any new invasion. They obviously believe there are Martian survivors of the bacteria alive down here. They were already in flight when they learned this so it will be interesting to see how they resolve the problem."

Cautiously I said, "We know the Martians are committed to finding and rescuing their friends, but wouldn't the rescuers be put at risk too if they used the shadow-weapon? There is no means of escape once they land."

"Like I say, the Martians have already thought of that, only we haven't seen their solution to the problem yet." He reached for his glass again and found it empty. He placed it back down. "When they come for that cylinder, there is a chance, only a slim one mind you, that we can scare off the main comet altogether, by completely destroying their landing party... I must get that heat ray to work and very soon. With our own heat ray, we can at least fight fire with..." he suddenly seemed to lose his train of thought again.

I, on the other hand, had received the worst possible prognosis from my doctor. Unfortunately, I would not be alone in my dilemma. I, we, all the life on this world, had only a few short weeks to live and there was nothing to be done about it. My head began to swim, full of thoughts of mass death and global extinction. Laura, yes Laura too. Once the shadow-weapon irradiated and killed the fungus and bacteria, our bodies and the world's ecosystems would collapse with no proper way to process food. Everything would die of hunger in the same week; everyone, everything, everywhere, never to return to the soil. I was struck by the enormity of what I had heard, and worse still I knew Ogilvy was right.

The Major came back to our table and detecting the mood snapped, "Your pessimisms is legendary Ogilvy. Be a good fellow, and save it for after Christmas, but not tonight, please!"

"Alright, alright, 'til after Christmas then," said Ogilvy, as he reached again for his glass, refilling it for himself this time, from a new bottle.

"Why after Christmas?" I asked nervously.

Ogilvy said in a lowered voice, almost a whisper, "Really? You already know the answer to that, dear boy – the Earth will be firmly under Martian rule by then."

An hour or so later, in a very slurred voice, Ogilvy turned to me and said, "Your wife is quite

a lady. We will certainly need more like her before this is all over.”

I could see his remark irritated the Major greatly. I tried to make light of it, knowing that I had not helped much, by fuelling Ogilvy's drunkenness. The old astronomer's previous personal encounters with the Martians had caused him life-changing physical injuries and now, with the coming comet, he suffered untold mental anguish. I watched as he sat back to puff deeply on an extra-smoky cigar and as he coughed again, the smoke began to drift slowly across the room. Big Ben struck ten. My mind raced, as I realised that I had encouraged Laura to leave for no reason; I wanted us to be together, if everyone was going to die. The three of us sat there in the busy restaurant and listened to the last of the doleful chimes of Big Ben, in silence.

Frowning, the Major suddenly asked Ogilvy in a raised voice, “Has anyone ever told you that it is not wise to light a flame in a dusty room?”

I looked at the Major, desperate to formulate an idea. Suddenly, there was a slither of possibility to cling on to. “Of course! That's it!” I exclaimed, “Dust! Dust is the answer. We don't have to target individual machines - only the area. It's a simple and safer way of scattering and distributing the Tryfanite evenly over all of the Martian landing party. We could pulverise the Tryfanite into a fine powder or dust, and disperse it as a cloud or some sort of heavy gas over any area, no matter how vast.”

The Major seemed to understand my reasoning. “Yes... and that could be done with warships. Several hundred in co-ordinated firing, could deliver hundreds of tons of Tryfanite and quickly too, in air blasts over the invaders. The shells would have to be specially made - a difficult but not impossible task.”

Stirring, Ogilvy seemed to come out of his stupor. “But there would be only a few minutes, or seconds perhaps, before weather or gravity disperses it and renders the Tryfanite ineffective. The chances are a million to one against any form of success, so pray that there is not even so much as a breeze, or a single drop of rain, or snow.”

I added excitedly, “We would need to choose a new location for the Tryfan cylinder, which is

the homing beacon for the invaders. We must place it near to the coast, but not so far from London that the Martians change their minds, and instead land where they choose and prefer. We must draw them to us.”

“And how will you spark the Tryfanite?” muttered Ogilvy.

“Leave that to me. A minute or two is all I need,” said the Major smiling, “and I shall hit them harder than they have ever been hit before. Have you heard of the Excalibur? A very fine weapon. A short range, heavy cannon, very powerful. Armed properly, it will spark your Tryfanite. We should dig trenches, and position our men and weaponry below ground level, where they won't be seen by the Martians.” He suddenly stood, glass in hand. “Gentlemen, during the last invasion, Martian machines caused men to fear and to live like animals. We were firmly trapped under their metallic heel. We faced chaos, calamity and certain death. But the survival of humanity is, as always, in God's hands, and through his foresight in creating bacteria, the Martians were destroyed. We will soon see more of those same fighting machines again. So, let us drink to renewed hope and the future of mankind.”

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