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## **GOODBYE, MARTIAN!**

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At first he had peeped through a chink in the fence; then, jumping up, he had caught hold of its pointed palings, pulled himself up, and sat down on the horizontal rail. Night had fallen: the last traces of the pale twilight had disappeared from the sky beyond the horizon. When the boy closed his eyes, the road stretched before him like a landing strip and he saw the green forest; when he opened them, everything vanished in the dark. Only one spot in this hushed world was lit up. The house stood on the hill and somewhere far below, at a point where forest, sky, and the narrow path met, there was a fire. Great yellow flame, surrounded by the darkness, like the rim of goblet, flared upward and outward, smoke swirling in the empty space above it.

The boy looked back. Though lured and indistinct the house was quite visible, and this gave him a feeling of security. He heard the hum of an engine: an aircraft flew past high up. The boy watched on the distant fire intently, then jumped off the fence, trying to make no noise.

The house was the last one in the village and the road downhill began just there. The dust, though cold on the surface had retained the warmth of daytime underneath. This discovery pleased the boy, and for a time he trudged on, digging his toes as deep as he could in the dust. Then abruptly he wondered where he was. He had gone a fair way, and when he looked back, he could see neither the summit of the hill, nor his house, nor the other taller houses. The fire ahead was no longer visible either; another hill concealed it. The boy stopped. He saw the sky with all its little stars, looking so clean, even slightly moist and shiny, like a fresh paper transfer. He suddenly remembered the dim glassy sky of the big city, and no longer

hesitating resumed his course, looking up from time to time in an endeavour to find Mars. His former feeling of security returned and made him happy.

He could feel no heat yet, but there was a strong smell of dry smoke; and every minute he expected to come upon the blazing torch behind the dark trunks of the trees. He was tired from the long ascents and descents, the fearsome nocturnal forest, the great shaggy arm of the fir-trees that kept shutting out the sky, the sharp twigs and low branches, the prickly shrubs and the gnarled roots. Drops of sweat rolled from his face and down past his open shirt-collar.

Holding on to the warm trunk of a tree, the boy stood on the edge of the clearing. A sphere as high as a three-storey house was swaying right in the middle of it, and glowing. The bushes at the edge of the clearing were still smoking, and the branches facing the sphere were charred, but there was no more fire.

"An interplanetary spacecraft could even burn up in the atmosphere," the boy said to himself.

The sphere was cooling rapidly. When the boy had been watching it from the top of the hill all he had seen was a shapeless orange clump; as he approached, it had become a pale rose and its colour continued to change. Not so long ago the boy had been on an excursion to a factory: the pieces of metal taken from the furnace of the forge had cooled in just the same way. The envelope of the sphere became paler and paler and bluish streaks streamed down it, running into one another. The rose glow died away and it became dark. The sphere had probably become quite cold already. Then a searchlight blazed out on its summit, and its beam, brighter than any earthly one, but not at all blinding, began to turn like a gigantic radius. It came close to the boy, but he did not move away even when it fixed itself on him. A chink appeared in the side of the sphere and, as it grew rapidly wider, the boy realized that a hatch was being opened. The opening was illuminated from inside; a ladder appeared in it and lightly unrolled down to the ground.

"Our gangways are driven up," the boy thought. He went over to the ladder and felt its edge. It was hard to believe it had just unrolled itself, the surface he touched was so hard.

The light in the aperture grew brighter, and IT appeared, and slowly descended its steep gangway. Its figure was upright like that of a human, and two arms, like human arms, hung one on each side of its body. But the boy did not like its face. It was all bumps and folds and did not resemble a

human face. It reached the bottom of the gangway and stopped, as though pausing to consider and listen; then it stepped down on to Earth and threw the mask off its face.

"I congratulate you on your safe arrival," said the boy with a friendly smile. "I know why you have such an ugly space-suit. I read a book a while ago about bats—they have the same folds.

That's so they can find their way about in the dark, with the aid of ultrasonics."

The unknown being observed the boy in silence. It had large eyes—about twice the size of human ones—but their expression was pleasant.

"Where have you come from?"

Out of his pocket the boy took a creased, much thumbed stellar map of the sky. With scarcely a glance at it, the newcomer raised his hand and, like a conjurer, displayed on his palm an object of some kind, that he handed to the boy. It was a three-dimensional model of the solar system. It was incomprehensible how everything was held in position there, inside the transparent case, but there shone the Sun with the planets orbiting around it. The boy found Earth's orbit and wondered at the power of the distant telescopes, that had been able to make out on a tiny sphere the familiar outlines of the oceans and continents, and even pick out big cities. The long thin finger of the stranger pointed to Mars.

"You're a Martian!" exclaimed the boy overjoyed. "That's what I thought somehow. Well, hello! Let's introduce ourselves! I'm Sasha, an inhabitant of the Earth." He pointed to himself.

"Oo," said the Martian, doing the same.

The boy held out his hand, and the Martian his. His firm grip did not hurt the boy.

"Come on," said the latter, pulling the Martian along. "People must know as soon as possible about your arrival. They must have seen your spaceship—they couldn't have taken it for a shooting star. They may even be searching for us already: do you hear the hum of the engines? But they can't see anything because of the trees.

There's a village not far away with a telegraph office and all sorts of people."

He got out a bit of pencil and wrote on the back of his stellar map: "Not to be touched until the arrival of the Academy of Sciences," and stuck the note on a thorn on a nearby bush. Then he glanced for a last time at the

clearing where the greatest event in his life had taken place: the dark trees seemed to have parted and he saw all the great cities of the world and crowds of people rushing about.

The Martian waved his hand; the gangway rolled up and disappeared through the opening, the door closed, and the light on top the sphere went out.

"We'll be back soon." The boy started off, the Martian following. Thoughts were racing through the boy's head.

"I ran here without looking where I was going, and I didn't mind getting scratched; but now we'll go right round until we find the path, so that not a single twig touches you. Because you are a guest of Earth. Oh! How I love you, Martian! How I've been waiting for you! I believed you'd already visited us once before but, not having met anyone of equal intelligence, had flown away again. And now you're here again! You aren't at all cruel, Martian, you're kind. You won't destroy anything of ours and you won't try to conquer us, because you're a highly-developed being, you know. How I waited for you, Martian! If you hadn't flown here, I'd have found the way to you myself. In ten, fifteen, or twenty years I'd have come. May be we'll fly together yet—to some other galaxy, perhaps."

They were following the path, the boy pushing branches aside and holding them back and making sure the Martian did not stumble over the tangled roots. It was already getting light, and the dew was glistening, and the birds singing, and a mist rising from the forest ravines. The boy kept glancing at the Martian, wanting to see how he liked the colours, smells, and sounds of Earth.

Three helicopters were hovering above the edge of the forest. No sooner did the boy and the Martian come out into the open, than the helicopters began to descend, rope ladders were flung out, and civilians and military men got down. The first to land was a man in the black cap of an Academician and a bushy grey beard that was blowing about in the wind. Taking the Martian by the hand, the boy ran to meet them.

"This is a Martian!" He led his companion up to them and stepped back.

The Academician lifted his cap, the military men saluted, the cameras clicked.

"His sphere is over there in the forest," said the boy. "I saw the glow at

night."

"Good lad!" The Academician pulled out a big notebook with gold letters on it. "Your name and address? I shall inform all the newspapers. Tomorrow we shall have a big expedition here and I shall wire for you. But now, get home."

He motioned the Martian towards the ladder. The Martian nodded and got into the cabin. The Academician followed him, and all the rest of the men ran to their machines. The blades of the helicopters began to revolve faster and faster and ripples swept over the grass. The boy raised his head:

"Goodbye, Martian! I'll be waiting for you! Goodbye!"

The helicopters made straight for the red rising sun. It was getting larger and larger, as in the window of a spacecraft, and fiery spirals wound round the blades of the helicopters.

A rescue team had been quickly got together. Six men went by road to the forest, going off in different directions to start searching for the boy. It was a fine day, the sky was clear, clouds of dust were raised as loaded lorries one after the other passed along the road. They did not have to search long: they found the boy at the very edge of the forest. He was fast asleep under a bush; tall blades of grass swayed above the pale untanned face of the city-dweller. His bare legs below his shorts were a mass of scratches, and his light sandals were grimy with ashes. His breathing was irregular, and he twitched in his sleep, and he was scratching with his hands. A doctor bent over him, listened for a moment, and then straightened himself.

"It's all right. He's only asleep."

The men—all in high rubber boots—stood around motionless, looking serious. They did not know whether to wake the boy and give him a welcome scolding then and there or to sit down and have a smoke, and wait.

"I can't understand it, I just can't!" The father was still bewildered, but was beginning to recover his ability to think. "I come here for my holiday and bring him with me, and the third night he runs away. Where to? Why?"

"He's only a boy." The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps the fire attracted him? A haystack burned down on the clearing. It took him some time to get there and to come back again. It was all quickly put out.

**The End**