

An astronaut's 16-month Mars orbit turns into a passage in which the ultimate Truth is revealed, but no one will believe his revelation. Almost no one...

The Lost Earthman

BY

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When they debriefed him they were struck first of all by the look in his eyes. It was the look of a man who had died and come back from death. In a sense this was true, even though Rowe had been spared physical death. When the *Demeter's* meteor-damaged engine had disintegrated, killing Olms and Stacy, who were Outside trying to repair it, and dooming the spacecraft to remain in Mars orbit for millennia, Rowe had been inside the module and hadn't suffered a scratch. He had been spared physical death, only to die psychologically.

Damage to the module itself had been slight, but the sophisticated AUDORB communication system had been knocked out, and Rowe lacked the know-how to repair it. Months alone, with no one to talk to but himself, the scarred and fractured face of Mars filling one window, the indifferent deeps of space, the other; a bone-chilling glimpse now and then of the skulls of the Martian moons; the spacesuited corpses of his fellow astronauts trailing behind the *Demeter*, out of sight, but not out of mind. Yes, in a sense, Rowe had died.

But the look in his eyes was as nothing compared to the words that came out of his mouth. The debriefers impugned those words, over and over again. Tried repeatedly to put to rout his "revelation." To no avail. For Rowe was convinced that the *Weltansicht* he had arrived at was the Truth. He had not arrived at it early or easily, but he had arrived at it, and having arrived, he was there to stay.

Ultimately, they humored him. Aside from his obsession, he was demonstrably sane. Moreover, he was a national hero. But they told him that for the time being the "thumbprint" and the "Flood" must remain classified information (the fact that he had mentioned neither to the members of the rescue team indicated that he could be trusted). Then they cleared him for one year's leave.

God knows, he'd earned it.

The penthouse party in progress atop the Robert Moses Sky-Rise in Newer York had failed to evolve into the major social event that its hostess, the Lady Jayne Castrelle, had envisioned. Thus far, the catalyst she had injected in the person of the "Lost Earthman" (the media term persisted, even though it no longer applied) had engendered nothing except his own isolation. He stood now, shunned like a leper, in a far corner of the salon riffling through the pages of a volume he had taken down from the recessed bookcase that held the Lady Jayne's internationally famous *editions vieilles*. Ranged round the spacious room, disengaged satellites as it were, were clusters of the varied and very important guests whom it had been his unstated mission to entertain.

In the adjacent pavilion, gaiety was the order of the night as mixed and unmixed couples writhed ecstatically to the guitar-accompanied dithyrambs of the Decibels, but as regards social gatherings of the caliber of this one, gaiety amounted to no more than icing on the cake. The cake itself had fallen flat.

The Lady Jayne was furious. Why hadn't she been forewarned that the "Lost Earthman" had been subjected to the equivalent of a laryngectomy before being foisted on the world from which he had been absent for so long? Why hadn't she been told that a single glance out of the bottomless pits of his eyes was enough to cause rime to form on the warmest of conversations?

She was furious — yes. But she did not let her fury show. She was a professional in her field, and no calamity, however catastrophic, could ruffle her exterior calm. Moreover, she maintained a staff of troubleshooters trained expressly to mend social breakdowns such as the one confronting her now.

One of the troubleshooters — the new girl — was standing fortuitously at her elbow. "Michelle — that dead man over there pawing through my *editions vieilles*. Consider him your mission tonight. Resurrect him, if you can, and move him to a less conspicuous spot. Preferably to one on the moon."

"Such a profound passage it must be, to have furrowed your forehead so."

Rowe looks up from *Pro and Contra*. He has been drinking since dawn, but his vision is acutely clear. He sees before him an exquisite glass of a girl, white-gowned, champagne bubbles rising to the surface of her face and bursting there in dancing eyes and dimpled smile and expressive tildes of brows. Her hair, long and black, lies upon the slopes of her shoulders like winter trees against a snowy hillside. "Ivan is about to give back his entrance ticket," Rowe says.

"How quaint."

Rowe frowns. "It wasn't meant to be quaint."

"I should have said 'absurd.' One little ticket, and all that fuss. All those words!"

Rowe closes the book and returns it to the bookcase. "I take it Dostoevsiy's not your cup of tea."

"I find it difficult to take him seriously. He raved instead of wrote. I think it was the result of grand mal — don't you? Anyway, I am much more interested in spacemen whose eyes are the repositories of the quintessence of disillusionment."

"Did Lady Jayne send you on a rescue mission?"

"Yes."

"I don't need to be rescued."

"No, but her party does."

Rowe smiles. The smile is isolated from the rest of his face, a thing apart. He glances round the salon at the coteries of varied and very important people. Eyes that have been covertly upon him leap aside. The die has been cast: Lazarus will be invited to no more *converzationi*.

"I would like to dance," Michelle says.

"... All right."

She takes his arm and they thread their way through the coteries to the french doors that give access to the pavilion. The doors are open, but the decibels of the Decibels do not reach their ears till after they have stepped through the invisible acoustic field. Then the music is all around them, loud, coarse, throbbing, emanating from a dozen hidden speakers, seemingly unrelated to the musicians themselves, all of whom are nude and painted blue, standing on a platform near the parapet, thrashing their guitars.

Michelle faces him and they attune their bodies to the beat. Undulating, she says (loudly, so that he can hear), "You dance as though you'd never been away."

"It comes back."

They move out into the wilderness of writhing bodies. "Did you miss dancing?" Michelle asks.

"No. All it serves to prove, if you're of Darwinian disposition, is that man descended from snakes instead of apes."

"Perhaps. But how else can one express one's body, other than in bed?"

Rowe does not answer. The music is assailing him from all sides, bruising his tympana, yet somehow it seems light-years away. Michelle, too, seems light-years away. Why? He is not schizophrenic. They would have given their eyeteeth to have been able to pronounce him mad. But they failed. He is as sane as they are. Saner. For he alone accepts the Truth. He alone saw the thumbprint. It was there all along, staring them in the face, but he alone saw it for what it really was. But he can understand their reluctance to believe him. The thumbprint, in order to be perceived, had to be viewed from exactly the right altitude, under exactly the right circumstances, and over a long period of time.

The Decibels have paused between numbers. Michelle asks, "Have you visited Lady Jayne's all-u-kin-eat buffet?"

"No."

"Her all-u-kin-eats are famous for their diversity. There isn't a delicacy or an exotic dish you won't be able to find. I should think that a man who subsided on space rations for almost two and a half years would be ravenous for such gastronomic delights."

"Gastronomic delights to me would be considered by the Lady Jayne as offal. I come from a subpoverty-level family who considered themselves beefeaters when they could afford chuck steak once a month. My favorite dish is sowbelly and dandelion greens."

They have left the pavilion and reentered the salon. "At a Lady Jayne Castrelle all-u-kin-eat it's possible to become a gourmet in one easy lesson."

"To me," Rowe says, "'gourmet' is synonymous with 'glutton.'"

"I'm beginning to understand," says Michelle, smiling, "why Lady Jayne feared for the life of her party."

"I didn't ask to be invited to it. But come," he adds, "if you want to visit the buffet, I'll go with you."

"I, too, am conditioned to less elaborate fare. Shall we walk in the garden instead?"

The Lady Jayne views their exit from afar. She is please to have got the "Lost Earthman," temporarily at least, out of her party's hair. She makes a mental note to increase the new girl's stipend. To think she had qualms about hiring her ("I don't think you'll do," she had said when Michelle first came to her. "You are lovely — yes. But in an unobtrusive way. Sex should shout these days — not go about sotto voce. Subtlety is no longer *comme il taut* — if indeed it ever was." Then Michelle looked at her with azure eyes, and all her doubts dissolved. "But I'll take you on, despite my better judgment."

She is glad now that she did.

In Rowe's eyes, the Lady Jayne Castrelle's garden is on a par with her buffet. He was brought up in a rare region of meadows and stands of trees. His favorite flowers are gentians and columbines; in autumn, asters and goldenrod. Here, hybrid roses overrun intricate trellises, weighing the night air with their cloying scent. Everywhere there are parterres of gaudy blooms he doesn't know the names of. Topiary in the form of satyrs, unicorns, and nymphs abound. A white-pebbled path winds mazelike to the front parapet where an aircab beacon juts stalklike into the sky.

The sky is bejeweled with stars. The running lights of sky traffic wink on and off like swarms of fireflies.

Michelle says, "It is an ugly garden. It lacks a motif."

They find a bench and sit down in the scented half-dark. Rowe raises his eyes to the heavens, searches for Mars among the stars. It is not there; this month it is the morning star. He recalls the innumerable times in orbit when he searched the blacknesses for the distant sapphire-shard of Earth and wept each time he found it. But that was before the revelation. After the revelation he no longer wept.

He assumed at first that it was a voluntary revelation, but subsequent thought told him otherwise. The potter may leave incontrovertible evidence of his existence behind when he creates a defective pot, but he is unlikely to call attention to it. Even so, Rowe no longer wept. What was there to weep for?

Q. This "print" you describe. You say it's immediately north of Olympia Mons?

A. There are two prints, actually. One immediately to the north, the other to the northwest. The former is unquestionably that of His thumb. The other may possibly be that of His forefinger. West of the volcano there is a similar pattern that may have been created by the by the edge of His palm, but that is pure speculation.

Q. It's all speculation, isn't it, Commander? Speculation of the wildest kind imaginable. The fractures and ridges that comprise your so-called "prints" were classified long ago as eroded volcanic flows. They constitute exactly the sort of surface features one would expect to find in the vicinity of a massive shield volcano like Olympia Mons. Granted, they look like macrocosmic fingerprints; but don't you find it odd that the geologists who studied them failed to interpret them as such?

A. Not in the least.

Q. Would you be kind enough to explain why?

A. First of all, a geologist is incapable of seeing one inch beyond his geological nose. Like any other specialist, he works in a smug little room crammed with data relating to his specialty, and refuses to look

out the window. Second, the geologists in question were working from mosaics of high-resolution photographs sent back by Mariner 9 and, later, by *Viking* orbiters 1 and 2. The photographs were excellent ones, particularly the latter, but the best of photographs is still nothing more than an exact recording of what the camera saw. Its very objectivity is self-defeating. The human eye, regardless of how many times it has been likened to a camera and vice versa, is *not* a camera. When a person sees something firsthand, he does more than merely see it — he *experiences* it. Unless he experiences it, he can't relate it to his personal frame of reference, and can't accurately identify it.

Q. Are you arguing that subjectivity is essential to a true interpretation of reality?

A. To reality as we know it — yes. Kant to the contrary, I don't see why any other kind should concern us.

Q. You still insist, then, that the eroded terrain north of Olympia Mons constitutes one of God's thumbprints?

A. Yes. Left there by accident sometime during the Creation.

Q. Before or after the "Flood"?

A. I have no idea.

Michelle murmurs, her shoulder lightly touching his, "Were you as taciturn as this before your — your ordeal?"

"Probably not."

"The Lady Jayne expected great things of you. She envisioned you as the cynosure of her gala gathering. She saw you scintillating like a diamond among admiring rocks."

"The Lady Jayne was misled."

A breeze breathes through the garden. Michelle's hair lifts and falls, brushing his cheek. "You won't always be taciturn, will you?"

"No. Someday I'll shout the Truth. From the housetops. From the mountains. From the hills."

"The Truth?"

He does not elaborate. Instead, he turns and looks at her. Her face is a flower in the starlight, a rose in its own right. A white rose, somehow sad. He wonders why he doesn't bend his head and kiss the petals of her lips. He has not known a woman in over two and a half years. He should be ravenous for one. Ravenous for this one, so fortuitously dumped on his lap. Looking at her, he finds it difficult to associate her fragile beauty with sex. Difficult, but not impossible. He feels faint stirrings within him. He hears himself saying, "Do you live in Newer York?"

"I am staying here."

"Will Lady Jayne reprimand you if you come up missing for a spell?"

Michelle smiles. "Being a troubleshooter for the Lady Jayne entails periodic absences. I'll get my purse."

When she returns, they walk over to the parapet. Rowe actuates the air-cab beacon. It winks on and off as they stand there waiting for one of the "fireflies" to separate itself from the swarms and descend to the rooftop. After a long while, one does. "Your place or mine?" Rowe asks.

"Yours."

The aircab lifts them high above the city. It is a raft, really. A helium-filled raft equipped with a battery-powered propeller. The night is warm and there is no need for the canopy to be raised. The wind of their passage fans their faces as the propeller fans the summer air. Michelle's hair drifts, floats, shimmers. Rowe's, grown shoulder-length in space, streams behind him like a dark wake.

His apartment is in one of the refurbished buildings of the old section. There is a dinette-kitchen, a bath, a bedroom and a living room. He came to Newer York directly following his debriefing. He is not yet ready to go home. The fields and streams and stands of trees of his boyhood are no more — housing developments have eaten them all up. The house he was born in still stands. In it, his father lives with a whore of Babylon. His mother died when he was nineteen. Maybe he will never go home. Maybe Wolfe was right.

In Newer York he has felled media men left and right with burning glances. Even had he not been sworn to silence he would not talk. He is not ready to yet. Ready to reveal the Truth. But someday he will be. The networks, so greedy for his words, shall have them, and the Truth shall be shouted to the whole world, shall flow like a mighty wind and topple steeples and level shrines and blow in the staid windows of scientific institutions. *And I looked, and lo! below me I saw proof of His being and of His vengeance.*

"Mix us a couple of drinks," he tells Michelle as he turns on the lights. "There's booze in the cupboard and ginger ale in the refrigerator."

She heads for the kitchen. He sits down on the sofa and turns on the big holosole that, like the sofa and the rest of the appointments, came with the apartment. Michelle returns presently and sets two brimful glasses on the coffee table. She seats herself beside him. "There."

He says abruptly, "I don't get it. You're not this kind of girl."

"What kind of girl are you referring to?"

"The kind you're obviously not."

He tunes in a "nostalgic." Like hoards of others, it has been preserved for all time. Quinn Martin made immortal. Unfortunately, the addition of a dimension has in no way enhanced the original.

He takes a huge swallow of his drink. Another. "I tried to get drunk after they finally cleared me. I couldn't. I still can't. I keep seeing —seeing—

"Yes?"

Her azure eyes are full upon him, her gaze intense. Is it concern he sees upon her face, or professional curiosity? Mental gears, running independently of one another, suddenly mesh. He has known but few women in his lifetime, but he has known enough of them to know that his instinctive remark of a few minutes ago was on the mark. This girl is *not* that kind of girl; ergo, what is she doing in the Lady Jayne's stable?

"Yes?" she says again. "What is it you keep seeing?"

"Nothing." Then: "I don't even know your name."

"It's Michelle."

"Michelle what?"

"Michelle will do."

The meshed gears, turning so swiftly, begin to slow. He takes another swallow of his drink in an effort to speed them up again. "Do you work for NASA directly, or are you from the CIA?" he asks abruptly.

"I don't understand," she says, but her eyes tell him that she does.

He rushes on. "I don't trust what made me assume that an organization that doesn't trust anyone — that can't afford to — would make an exception of me. Maybe all that time alone really did scramble my brain. Anyway, you can send back word that I haven't talked. At least not yet."

"Talked about what? I still don't understand."

"The hell you don't!" Rowe says. He starts to get to his feet, only to find his legs have gone numb. He sinks back into the cushions, darkness gathering along the periphery of his vision. The mental gears, so smoothly functioning a short while ago, have become cumbersome, lethargic. He feels Michelle's hand touch his forehead. He tries to turn his head away. It will not turn.

Q. What evidence, Commander Rowe?

A. The polar caps. The fact that they're composed of water ice instead of frozen carbon dioxide, as previously supposed. The presence of water in the crust and the regolith.

Q. Water ice, even in large quantities, doesn't necessarily indicate a flood. What other evidence can you supply?

A. Valles Marineris. The so-called "chandelier." Nirgal Vallis. Mangala Vallis-

Q. It's been fairly well established that Valles Marineris are the result of fractures caused by magma withdrawal. On the other hand, many of the channels on Mars are unquestionably the result of water flow; but this hardly constitutes evidence of a flood. Certainly not one of the proportions you describe.

To recapitulate: Do you seriously expect us to believe that in creating Mars God left his fingerprints behind; that there was a species of Martian mankind; that God was so disgusted by his own creative ineptitude that He abandoned the project and got rid of the Martians and every other living thing down to the minutest microorganism by means of a Deluge of which He gave no forewarning —and which, by the way, wouldn't have accomplished His purpose in any case?

A. I don't expect you to believe anything. You're so mired down in scientific sludge you can't see any farther beyond your nose than the geologists can.

Q. The hell of it is, Commander Rowe, ordinary people aren't "mired down," as you so quaintly put it. They'll believe you. Because you're an astronaut. Because you were there. And we simply can't allow that to happen. It would jeopardize the entire space program. But we'll set that aspect of the problem aside for now and take up the matter of your reaction to your "discovery." This so-called Truth you arrived at sometime during your sixteenth month in orbit, not long after you'd identified the terrain north of Olympia Mons as a "thumbprint" —why did it depress you? You'd found evidence of the existence of a Supreme Being, hadn't you? According to your dossier, you're a devout Presbyterian. Why, then, weren't you exalted?

A. I'd been led to believe that God, being both omniscient and omnipotent, was incapable of making a mistake. Yet Mars unquestionably was a mistake — a glaring mistake. Which left me with a fallible God — one I couldn't — can't — accept. And consider this: If He made one mistake, isn't it probable He made many more? Maybe the entire cosmos is a mistake. Maybe—"

Q. Are you implying that Earth —and, by extension, the human race —was a mistake?

A. I should think that that aspect of the Truth would be self-evident.

Michelle's hands are gently massaging his temples. Her face is close to his. He manages a feeble whisper. "What did you put in my drink?"

"I put nothing in your drink. I have no need for potions." She touches her lips to his forehead. "Sleep, little Earthman — sleep."

The black curtain that descends before his eyes rises almost immediately. He is lying on a vast plain. A great winged creature stands above him. He recognizes Michelle. A thousand stars have encrusted themselves into a diadem for her head. She holds a huge sword vertically above him. Its burnished blade flames as it descends, but he knows no fear. He has been lost too long. He welcomes the point of the blade as it plunges into his chest.

The blackness of his hangover is undeniable, but it is undeniably not the blackness of death.

Dawn is in the room, wearing a drab gray dress. Michelle has gone. The lamp on the end of the table next to the sofa emits a pale and sickly glow. Snow is falling in the cube of the holosole.

He may have passed out, but he did not blank out. The events of the night before and the dream that climaxed them do a vivid playback before his eyes. When the playback is over, he feels like a fool.

He gets up, goes into the kitchen and brews coffee. It does little for his black headache, but after three cupfuls he is sober. Sober for the first time in days

Perhaps years.

The magnitude of his obsession, now that he has shaken free from it, dumbfounds him. The "thumbprint," the "Flood," were bad enough; but how could he have believed, even in a dream, that one of the Lady Jayne's deluxe whores was an apocalyptic being come to exact punishment for his apostasy?

Indeed, he had been lost too long. At a later, more appropriate hour, he will contact NASA and lay the "thumbprint" and the "Flood" to rest.

Meanwhile, he will pack, and make arrangements for his deferred journey home.

The first rays of the morning sun cascade through the kitchen window and collect into a golden parallelogram on the tile floor. *Fool's gold*. ... The thought is no more than a whisper in his mind. It is gone almost the minute it materialized, and the lips that would have formed it break into a vacuous smile.

"Madam, as of this morning I am terminating my employment."

The Lady Jayne turns from her supervision of the cleaning up of the salon. For a split second disappointment shows in her cold blue eyes. "I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't realize the assignment I gave you last night would be so distasteful."

"I did not find it distasteful. The time has merely come for me to go." "Go? Go where?"

Michelle does not answer. "Remuneration for my services," she continues, "will not be necessary. You can donate, if you like, whatever amount I have due me to the church of your choice."

"Very well. It shall go to Saint Angelica's."

"As you wish. Good-bye, madam." The Lady Jayne watches her walk lightly into the garden. Such a strange girl! On an impulse she goes over to the archway and peers past the parterres and the trellises and the topiary to the parapet where Michelle stands waiting for an aircab. The Lady Jayne glances back into the salon to see whether all is going well. The aircab must have come at once, for when, a moment later, she looks back at the parapet, there is no one there.