

Eando Binder
VIA DEATH

Hello, Earth!

Martian Expedition Number One resuming contact. Operator Gillway speaking.

Eight hundred and forty-seventh day since leaving Earth at last position. Forty-first day since leaving Mars. Batteries only at half-charge, since the sun-power mirror needs polish-ing, but presume this is getting through to you as we are now within a half million miles of Earth.

Please give return call immediately, acknowledging contact. Standing by. . . .

. . . Okay! Needless to say, we are glad to hear that a rescue ship is in readiness. We will undoubtedly have to land on the Moon. Our fuel supply will be barely enough, Markers says, to brake against the Moon's small gravitation. Landing on Earth, we would not be able to reduce speed safely and would probably burn up in the atmosphere.

But believe me, we are happy to be once again near the Earth-Moon system after our sojourn out Mars-way for over two years. Too bad Cruishank, Proosett and Alado can't be with us. But they lie buried under the golden sands of Mars—martyrs to this venture.

We do not regret our adventure in the least. It has been a thrilling experience. We have viewed the hills and deserts of another world. We have seen alien creatures of another evolution. We have battled giant three-foot ant-creatures. We have discovered pictures and records of a dead civilization, mysteriously linked with Earth's past.

Yet the grandest moment of all came just yesterday, when Earth changed from a star to a small disc. *Home!* That was the simple, humble word that made us all choke when Dordeaux said it aloud. A moment later he wept but no one blamed him. I don't think any of us were dry-eyed.

To recapitulate briefly: The asteroid Anteros, with its eccentric orbit, carried us faithfully from Mars' orbit toward Earth's in thirty-four days, as Markers calculated. We owe that tiny body a deep vote of thanks. Our limited fuel supply would not have been able to carry us across that forty-million-mile gulf in less than a year.

Will resume tomorrow; batteries low. Music would be much appreciated, if you can supply us... .

Eight hundred and forty-eighth day.

All went well during the trip, although once our gyroscope stopped and we wobbled dangerously close to Anteros' surface before the mechanism could be fixed. We then resumed our short orbit around the asteroid, as its satellite.

We had a narrow escape yesterday when we prepared to tear away from Anteros' gravity. Suddenly, our rockets went dead. It was imperative that we break immediately away from the asteroid's gravitational grip—or else it would carry us past Moon and Earth and sweep us outward again! We went over the engines like maniacs. Parletti finally noticed that the fuel line was clogged. We had a laugh over that, for Parletti is a geologist and doesn't know much about engines. The line fixed, our rockets easily floated us away from Anteros. We gave that little planetoid nomad of the void a rouserous cheer as it receded.

But here we are, approaching the Moon's orbit at five miles a second. The Moon, in turn, is bearing down toward our position at nine miles a second. It will take some neat figuring to escape a crash. Markers and Captain Atwell have worked forty hours consecutively on the computations.

Power fading; *au revoir* till tomorrow.

Eight hundred and forty-ninth day.

Urgent!

Send the rescue ship immediately and have its radio open for our call.

A rather grave situation faces us. Originally, we had planned to land somewhere on the Earth Side, noting the approximate location according to the standard Lunar map. This would have simplified the rescue ship's task of finding us.

But now, checking and rechecking the figures without avail, Captain Atwell announces that we must make a forced landing on the Other Side.

Our approach, of course, had been from Mars, toward the Other Side. Atwell had hoped to circle the Moon halfway around with our momentum and land on the Earth Side. But due to adverse factors of orbits and speeds, this might result in a bad crash. Our only hope, it seems, is to bear down obliquely on the Other Side, take up the proper tangent, and brake with our last bit of fuel for a landing there.

We are now about ten thousand miles from the Moon. We will land within the next twelve hours. We will try to land in some wide, open space, in direct sunlight, and note the nearby landmarks. This will make it simpler for that rescue ship to find us.

Must stop now. If our luck holds out, and we make a successful landing, we will contact the rescue ship immediately afterward.

Eight hundred and fiftieth day.

Successful landing!

Martian Expedition Number One contacting the rescue ship. Received your call a few minutes ago. Captain Atwell sends his grateful thanks to your Captain Macklyn, his old friend, for his encouraging words—"We'll find you if it takes a year!"

Our landing was fortunate. We scudded down in a large, smooth plane of cheeselike pumice stone. We missed a mountain peak by millimeters. The rear part of the hull sprung a small leak from the strain of the landing. Greaves slapped a rubber patch over the slit before the air-pressure had dropped to half normal. All of us have bruises. Markers was knocked unconscious against the wall, and Dordeaux has a broken arm. Parletti already has it set and in splints.

Now we come to your problem of finding us. Frankly, it will be a task. We realize our chances are pretty slight. We are in a vast territory unidentifiable to either of us by definite landmarks. Your party must somehow locate our tiny speck of a ship in hundreds of square miles of limitless, jumbled topography.

We will try to guide you as best we can. Fortunately,

the stars shine with the sun in this Lunar sky, making observations of positions possible. Markers has computed, as nearly as he can, that we are about thirty-one degrees from the western edge of the Earth Side. And about seventeen degrees from the Lunar north pole.

The plateau we've landed on seems to be bordered a few miles west by a long range of mountains which run north and south. We can see their ragged peaks outlined against the stars. Just to the south of us, about five miles distant, is the rim of a crater that is probably fifty miles in diameter. This crater forms a triangle with two other large craters farther east. From the glimpse we had while descending, the line of bisection of the base-line opposite the nearest crater, ex-tended through the latter, points almost directly toward us.

Captain Atwell has thought of a way of indicating our position. He has just sent Greaves out in a spacesuit with our one remaining seleno-cell. Greaves placed it about three hundred yards from our ship. As soon as its charge builds up from the strong sunlight, it should start shooting out fat sparks, similar to those that killed the ants on Mars. There is just enough vapor-pressure here on the Moon's surface to duplicate the interior of a vacuum-tube, to carry the charge and ground it into the rock.

These sparks—there goes one now—are an intense bluish in color and will be outlined strongly against the white plateau floor. You should be able to recognize them easily. That is about all we can do. The rest is up to you.

And now something very vital. Markers has also calculated that the Lunar nightline is descending upon us. We have something like thirty hours of daylight left and then we will be engulfed in the total blackness of the Moon's night of two weeks. Searching activities would be impossible during that time.

Since it is doubtful if our air supply would last that length of time, we can only hope that you will locate us in the next thirty hours.

I will keep in direct touch with you beginning in an hour, after I have gone outside the ship in a spacesuit and polished the sun-power mirror.

Our morale is high. We are sure you will find us soon. We are looking forward to our arrival on Earth.

Eight hundred and fifty-first day. (1:00 A.M.)

Captain Atwell to Captain Macklyn. Buck up, old boy! You must not condemn yourself so bitterly for not finding us in these last ten hours of search. You are searching a world, man! We know you are doing your best.

Gillway speaking. The long narrow shadow of the nearest mountain peak crawls slowly along, but we are all in good spirits.

Markers has sketched the Sun's corona and halo a dozen times, as it subtly changes from hour to hour. He predicts that when interplanetary travel passes into an active stage, the Moon will quickly be equipped with a great astronomical observatory.

The nearest mountain looks scalable. It is about two miles high. It has unweathered outcroppings that form a series of giant steps to the peak. Swinerton, whose hobby on Earth was mountain-climbing, says he could negotiate it in twelve hours. I wouldn't doubt it, in this light gravitation. Greaves can jump twenty feet high without effort.

Though slightly feverish from his broken arm, Dordeaux induced the others to sing. It helps relieve our nerves.

Eight-hundred and fifty-first day. (11:00 A.M.) Only six more hours of daylight left.

We realize the difficulties facing you in locating us. We can't seem to hit a mutually recognizable landmark or topographical formation. We don't remember the two mountain ranges forming a cross that you mention. Perhaps you are still too far west of us. Are you certain that you can't make out three large craters forming a triangle? It is very definite here.

I thought perhaps I could tell you when you were drawing near by watching for an increasing strength of your radio signal, but I haven't noticed a bit of variation. I surmise from that that you are still a considerable distance away. I think I know why your attempts to locate my transmitter at the bisection of two or three beam-lines failed. I've been getting echoes from all directions. The mountains must be loaded with magnetized metals.

Markers has checked the longitude again; it still comes out close to thirty degrees west. Assuming an error of five per cent at the most, we are within thirty miles to the east or west of that position. Similarly, we are within thirty miles to the north or south of our computed latitude. So we have hopes that you will find us yet, though you have an area of three thousand squares miles to search.

The seleno-cell outside our ship is steadily flashing out its sparks about every ten seconds. They should be visible within a radius of ten miles. Captain Atwell says that a seleno-cell placed on the mountain nearby would be visible for fifty miles at least. But that is a useless thought. The cell will keep operating while there is sunlight. The two other seleno-cells we had lie useless on Mars.

We talk of nothing but Earth after our long absence. How green and lovely its fields, how sweet its air, how wonderful its foods. Greaves swears that after arrival he will fall down to the ground, bury himself in glorious mud, and stay there for three days. All of us have fantastic notions of what we want to do when we get back. Parletti is going to eat a roast steer, complete. Personally, I'm just going to fill my lungs with good, clean air, again and again and again.

Message from Captain Atwell to Captain Macklyn.

Macklyn, only desperation brings me to ask this. In six hours, if we are not found, we will be plunged into two long weeks of Lunar night. Our chances of living through that period are slim. I have brought these six men to Mars and back. So I suggest, though it entails great risk for your ship, that you lower your vessel to within a mile of the Moon's surface. If you then describe a large circle and keep shifting its center, you will pass over most of this territory. You cannot fail to see us at a mile's height. But it will take constant rocket power and careful maneuvering to do this.

I make no appeal for myself, Macklyn. I appeal only for these six brave men at my side.

Eight-hundred and fifty-first day. (6:00 P.M.) Black, chilling night surrounds us.

Captain Atwell wishes to thank you men of the rescue ship for your gallant effort, flying your ship at only a half mile above the Moon's dangerous surface. It was our fate not to be found.

All of us watched closely for your ship, in every direction. Once Dordeaux thought he saw a black speck and a tiny rocket flare, but when the rest of us looked,

nothing was there.

However, there is one remaining hope, now that we are surrounded by the night. We have a few ounces of fuel left in our tanks. We will discharge it from our uppermost rocket-tube. It should make a bright beacon if burned slowly with oxygen, perhaps enough to land by.

Markers suggests that you rise to a height of ten miles wherever you are and watch in all directions. Signal me when you are in position and we will then light the flare.

Eight-hundred and fifty-first day. (7:00 P.M.)

Captain Atwell to Captain Macklyn.

No! You must not try landing, even though you saw our flare and were able to approach. I forbid the landing attempt, Macklyn. You wouldn't have one chance in a million of landing in the dark without a bad crack-up.

We had expected the flare to burn a while longer. Fifteen more minutes and it would have given you time to approach and land. But it's too late now. However, my men and I join in saying—God bless you!

You must now go back to Earth and come back in two weeks. You must be prepared, if you locate our ship when daylight comes again, for the possibility of finding dead men instead of living.

Gillway speaking. Our morale is still high. We have faced worse hazards. Captain Atwell had put us on emergency rations from the moment of landing. Our oxygen consumption is down to one-third normal. Beyond a general feeling of lassitude, there are no ill effects.

Parletti carefully examined our air-supply and says that five of us, or at the most six, could live on it for two weeks. How seven of us can survive, the Lord only knows.

Must conserve battery-current for heating unit. Martian Expedition Number One signing off until the Lunar dawn.

Eight-hundred and sixty-fourth day. (3:00 A.M.) Hello to those aboard the rescue ships!

Martian Expedition Number One resuming contact after two weeks. Dawn came an hour ago, recharging my depleted batteries. It was a glorious sight to see the sunlight again—but painful also. When last we saw the sun, there were seven of us. Now there are only five!

Outside our air-locks lie the bodies of Swinerton and Dordeaux. They voluntarily sacrificed their lives, so that the rest of us might survive. God rest their souls!

We five that are left now have about four or five hours of oxygen left. We hope you can find us in that time.

Now to go back two weeks: After the Lunar night closed in on us, despair came with it. We were hopeful when our last bit of fuel was used as a flare, but when that failed, we knew our situation was really desperate.

Our air supply, no matter how many times Parletti and Markers figured it out, could not last seven men for two weeks, even at the one-fourth normal consumption rate which we had already cut it to. Finally, at the end of that first day, Swinerton tried to go out the air-lock, but Greaves stopped him just in time.

Swinerton simply explained, "One of us has to go now, or seven of us will go in the next two weeks!"

We all looked at one another. There was no escaping that logic. Captain Atwell then said, "Men, my leadership is no longer needed—"

The rest of us shouted him down on that before he got any further. Each of us volunteered to sacrifice himself. Melodramatic? The world will never understand. The de-cisive voice of Captain Atwell finally quieted us: "We will draw lots!"

That, of course, was the only way. Using the short and long sticks, Captain Atwell offered lots to each of us. He drew last, with Parletti holding the sticks. Seven times the process was repeated, to eliminate us one by one.

Finally it narrowed down to Swinerton and Dordeaux. I will never forget that final scene. None of us will. Swiner-ton tight-lipped but calm. Dordeaux pale, favoring his broken arm. The rest of us far more nervous than they.

Each drew three times—with death standing over their shoulders, watching. Swinerton drew two shorts and one long. He looked up with a brief, grim smile. The odds were strongly against him.

Dordeaux drew three shorts in a row, however. Swiner-ton looked dazed at this sudden reprieve. After a simple fare-well and handshake with each of us, but with a depth in each movement that those on Earth will never know, Dor-deaux stepped out of the air-lock.

Not many words were spoken in our cabin in the next hour.

In answer to your query, our map does not show the mountains you mention to the northeast, nor can we see any.

Will resume in an hour, when my batteries build up more of a charge from the sunlight.

Four A.M.

After Dordeaux was gone, we settled down to a rou-tine to pass the interminable hours. We clung to the floor as much as possible to breathe less oxygen, but we seldom slept. Captain Atwell forced us to keep a card game going with rotating partners. The vague interest in this and the noises it made helped us to forget the awful stillness about.

At times, though, there would be moments of silence which would hold us in a sort of hypnotic trance until some-one coughed. Then we would all cough and scrape our feet and make noises, not wanting it to happen again.

We could not use the radio, naturally, since our batteries were not any too well charged. I reported that the current would never last. So Atwell ordered that the one dim bulb

we had burning be on only half the time. He also cut the heating unit's output to its barest minimum. Thereafter, we existed in a temperature not much above freezing, with all available clothing on our bodies. Radiation of heat from our ship, over the days, mounted up, though it was a slow process.

Our food rations also had to be cut, for they too had reached slim proportions. One-quarter protein stick a day and one biscuit for each of us, washed down with a pint of water.

The thought of seeing Earth once more kept us alive. We also speculated on what

a sensation our pictures and records of former Martian civilizations will create. These will eventually be found and brought back to Earth, even if we are not. That thought alone comforts us.

We are keeping sharp watch at our ports in every direction. If we sight your ship, I will radio immediately. Air gauge pretty low now.

Five A.M.

It is simple to tell of Swinerton and why he lies outside —dead.

Soon after Dordeaux had gone, Swinerton addressed us all and insisted that he should follow him. Five, he argued, would have an excellent chance of surviving, whereas six was still doubtful, as Parletti admitted. By drawing of lots, Swinerton insisted he was next to go anyway. Swinerton did not say these things in any exaggerated fashion. There was no fanaticism in him. He was one of those rare individuals who think things out calmly and dispassionately and then do them.

Captain Atwell, however, sternly forbade any further discussion of the subject. Thereafter, he slept and rested almost continuously rolled in blankets before the air-lock. Swinerton had a gleam of determination in his eyes.

The second night Parletti, whose bunk is just over Swinerton's, heard a strange, stifled gasping. We found Swinerton with a strip of cloth twisted tightly around his neck. His

purpose, though he would not say a word, had been to strangle himself quietly so that we would have a better chance.

We all kept an eye on him after that. It was no good to talk to him, tell him he was wrong. Perhaps he was insane.

But it is not for us to judge.

He seemed to get over it in the next three days. We relaxed our vigil. He joined in our card game and conversation as though nothing had happened. But he would sit for hours when the cabin was dark, staring out of a port at the looming mountain nearby as though still thinking he would like to meet its challenge and climb it.

We all spent much time at the ports for that matter.

Somehow, the Moon is a fairyland in the starlight, its harshness softened. Surprisingly, in this airlessness, the starlight has considerable strength. Every detail of the night scene stands out.

The third night Swinerton was gone! Atwell had fallen into an exhausted sleep at the air-lock. Before he could jump up when he heard the levers squeak, Swinerton had got into the lock chamber. Atwell stood by helplessly, hearing the

outer lock swing out and then clamp shut again. We found the captain there, shoulders sagging, eyes dull.

"There went the bravest man the world has ever known!"

he said hoarsely. And that, if we who are left are not alive to carry it out, is to be the epitaph engraved on Swinerton's tomb. Remember!

Six A.M.

There is not much more to tell of those two bitter weeks.

Aching lungs, starved bodies, blue-cold fingers—and the silence. That damnable silence! Well, we have survived it and when we saw the first bit of the Sun's rim climb over the hori-zon, it was the end of an eternity.

The coming of the Sun has raised our spirits as well as our thermometer. We are keeping sharp watch for your ship. We are not losing hope. We have cut our oxygen a little lower again. You have been searching for three hours so far, since dawn. There are one or two hours to go.

Atwell has just announced something strange. The huge shadow of our guardian-mountain has retreated enough to reveal the space before our ship. The seleno-cell is gone!

Furthermore, Swinerton's body cannot be seen anywhere around the ship! The corpse of Dordeaux is plainly visible.

And now a third thing. A spacesuit and a small oxygen bottle which goes with it are gone!

What does this all add up to? We can guess but it seems incredible. Captain Atwell has just gone out in our spare suit to bury Dordeaux. We will then hold a brief service for him.

Six forty-two A.M.

Attention, rescue ship!

Markers has just noticed a moving light among the stars to the west. If it isn't a comet, it may be your ship. There is a silence in our cabin, and a prayer on every lip. Our oxygen gauge's needle is almost touching the zero mark.

Yes—it must be your ship!

Or rather, the orange-red flare of your rockets. Slow down and turn east immediately—but I see I am giving you needless directions.

You are now approaching, as we can see the rocket blast getting brighter.

You are now crossing the mountain range. The plateau beyond is the one we are on. We can make out the outline of your ship now. Captain Atwell says not to lower for a landing from that direction, as the space is shorter that way. Swing south and come up to us from that direction.

You can see our ship now? Thank God—we are saved!

It is plain now. Those giant blue sparks that are playing around the peak of the mountain nearest us, and which you saw from fifty miles away, are from our missing seleno-cell!

Swinerton's body must lie beside it, lifeless since ten days ago, when he left us. None of us suspected at the time that he had taken the spacesuit. He had oxygen enough for about twelve hours. He had said he could climb that mountain in twelve hours. And he did it, in the starlight and carrying the seleno-cell!

We have already written Swinerton's epitaph. We cannot add to it. Someday we will have those words engraved on the side of that mountain, in letters of gold.

But now, what shall we say of Dordeaux? Burying him, Captain Atwell noticed his one hand half open, holding some-thing he had been clutching before death overtook him. It was simply a bit of wood—one of the short sticks we had used in drawing

lots. We had noticed Dordeaux fumbling the stick he drew each time with his two hands, but we had attributed this to his broken arm. Now it is obvious that the sticks he showed and the sticks he drew were not the same!

He had an eighth substitute short stick all the time, with which he made certain his own sacrifice!

We can see your ship now. As you touched and plowed along, a sparkling shower of pumice-spray surrounded you, like snow.

And as your ship stops, a half mile away, my companions are cheering and screaming and pounding one another on

the back—I'll join them in a moment. Soon you will be coming to us to take us into your ship. Soon we will be on Earth! We can hardly believe it.

By the grace of God, five of us live to see this great moment. But only at the price of others whose names will go down forever in the history of man.

Martian Expedition Number One signing off.