

MEN on MARS

Radioman Willie couldn't shoot straight, but he was on the beam!

By LAURENCE MANNING

PAST Kruts' shoulder he could see men plodding slowly nearer across the distant plain, where the rocket ship lay stranded like a silver whale. He wished they would hurry. "But what do you want to learn for?" Kruts was saying. "You can't shoot. You're just another radioman, that's all.

You're holding that rifle as if it was going to bite you. Oh hell, try again if you want to."

He tried again, loading, aiming, firing and gasping in the thin Martian air, until Kruts said, "Look, Willie, why don't you give up, for God's sake? Go twirl those blasted radio dials of yours—that's something you can do."

"I'm sorry to be so slow, Kruts."

"Skip it. Save your breath for climbing."

He pointed to the steep slope that dropped to the canyon floor, a thousand feet below. On the left the canyon opened into a wide circular valley; on the right it ran for miles, straight and narrow through the fiat Martian uplands. They had spent that morning walking along its rim to the far end—out on the other side and back on this. Now they were going to descend, cross and climb the opposite slope to their starting point, with an armed party from the ship waiting to meet them.

Fifty feet away, perched on a boulder, Lieutenant Joliffe was brooding over his notebook. Kruts was studying the scene below. Willie fidgeted, stared at the distant figures, sighed impatiently, said, "Gee, I wish they'd hurry up—I can hardly wait."

The first men on Mars! It felt great to Willie. But DeVoe and Dr. Wilson were the lucky ones. The station was going to be over in the valley. They'd have five years to explore it all! They'd have a little farm—even chickens. The eggs had started to hatch already and Stockton in the ship's supply office wanted to know if the skipper thought he had signed on as a farmer. There'd be a regular little settlement.

Kruts grunted, his eyes still intent on the canyon. "It'll be nice company for Smith's ghost," he said at last.

"Oh—I didn't hear what happened."

"He climbed down there yesterday afternoon like a damn fool. He never came back."

"Didn't they send a search party?"

"Yeh. We're it. There's nothing hasty about the skipper."

Willie stared down at the canyon. The only creatures visible were about the size of goats in scattered groups, peacefully nibbling at the vegetation, green now in the Martian spring.

"But what could happen to him? What's down there to be afraid of?"

"If I knew I wouldn't be afraid of it." Kruts stiffened, stared and shouted, "See it, Lieutenant? Near the far side, small and fast—gone now, sir."

Lieutenant Joliffe came out of his meditations with a start and grabbed his binoculars. Willie whispered, "He wasn't on the ball that time, was he?"

"Don't worry about him. *He* can shoot," answered Kruts from the side of his mouth. Then called out abruptly: "At the mouth of the canyon—another one—going away from us, Lieutenant!"

WILLIE caught only a glimpse of distant movement that vanished into the masking greenery below. He set himself to watch but it was many minutes before anything happened. Then the nearest group of animals, browsing right below them, burst into sudden flight.

Something small and black flashed among the shrubbery in pursuit. In a few seconds it overtook one and seemed to flatten out in a curious manner, almost to wrap itself around its prey. Both fell out of sight behind the vegetation.

The Lieutenant climbed off his rock and walked over to them. "Well, Kruts," he said, "you won't have time for a *second* shot at that—whatever it is. I can't make it out at all. The herbivora are about what you might expect, long thin legs and a big chest—Look out, man! Climbing up your boot!"

Kruts said, "Those damn tiger-bugs!" He slapped, then brushed the sticky mess away.

The Lieutenant nodded and said, "They can bite! One took a chunk out of me yesterday an eighth of an inch across." He held up a bandaged thumb. "I can't seem to classify them either. Two antennae, but definitely not insects—only one body segment and twelve legs. I don't even know what they live on. There are no animals up here and they don't seem to eat vegetation . . ." His voice trailed off and he stood stroking his chin thoughtfully.

Willie saw that the men had reached the opposite crest at last. He coughed, suggestively and the Lieutenant looked up, nodded and gave the word to start. It was a tough climb down. At the bottom they paused to get their breath. The shrubs turned out to be just too high to see over. Though spaced well apart, the vistas between were irregular and confusing.

In a low voice the Lieutenant gave his orders, "Thorgess, you will lead. Kruts and I will cover you. Go slow and keep your eyes open."

Willie started, trying, to keep a straight course as he wound in and out between the clumps. Each bush he passed with a little shiver—no telling what was hiding behind its grass-like leaves. It was utterly quiet. Feet made no sound in the thick dust that covered the ground but he could tell the others were behind him by the sound of their breathing. He heard Kruts whisper, "This walking blind is not good."

There was something white lying on the ground—a skeleton. He stepped over it, eyes probing the leafy corridors ahead. He paused a moment and heard the Lieutenant mutter, "No vertebrae, just one big bone-plate! Why, it's a whole new class! Good!"

Kruts said, "Not so good, sir. What kind of a thing kills and eats its prey without tearing off so much as a leg?" Willie led on, his rifle hugged to his armpit as Kruts had told him. He nearly took a shot at a pile of gray boulders between the shrubs ahead. He gasped at the thought of such a blunder and hoped Kruts would think the sudden movement of his gun had been only alertness.

The Lieutenant whispered, "Climb up, Thorgess. Maybe we can see something from up there." He and Nests waited, rifles ready, while Willie got up, then joined him. Together they peered cautiously over the top.

Not fifty feet off two animals stood eating. If you could call it eating, thought Willie. Each tore off a mouthful of leaves, munched it, spit it out again on the ground, nuzzled it, to suck up the wet cud with an audible schloop and gulp it down at last. Each had a horn about six inches long in the middle of its forehead. They scuttled out of sight just as Kruts was cautiously getting his rifle into position for a shot.

Something fast and quiet was running among the shrubs close by. Then it flashed into view, small and black, and was gone again. But in that instant Kruts' rifle had fired. It was hit but its pace had not even faltered. Willie shut unbelieving eyes to recapture the brief image.

Four legs rising to a big lump of muscle—that was all. No head, not even a real body. Just a lump where the legs joined together like the arched back of a black cat that had no head or tail. Or like a man cut off at the waist whose legs ran around by themselves—like nothing Willie had ever seen in real life.

"That bullet would stop an elephant but not that little beggar. Now what do we do?" said Nests.

Willie had been staring across the canyon and interrupted, "The ship's party has started over toward us. They'll run slap into that thing."

There were a fusillade of shots and sounds of distant shouting. Then three figures were climbing hastily up the far slope, making extraordinary motions as though dancing and slapping themselves. Partway up they stopped and began shooting at something hidden below them.

"There's only three of them," said Willie. "Why did they leave the other man?"

"Probably because he's dead," barked Kruts.

The Lieutenant got quickly to his feet. "We have to cross the canyon some time. If we do it now we may be able to help—come on, men!"

IT came at them from behind the tenth clump of shrubbery, swift and sudden. All three fired. Two

holes gaped but it kept on coming and was almost at their feet when it fell. Five separate pieces, not one body, tumbled to the ground. Each piece as it struck broke into hundreds of tiny individuals that wriggled in separate life. The ground was covered with a writhing mound of tiger-bugs!

At once, while they stared stupefied, the parts began to reassemble. The small creatures clung to each other to make lumps and strands of tissue. Legs formed and began to join and raise themselves off the ground again. The weird resurrection was nearly complete when Kruts put three bullets, one after another, into the mass. A few tiger-bugs were knocked out but the structure did not fall entirely apart this time. "Back to the rocks!" shouted the Lieutenant. The unkillable thing was in swift pursuit before they got there. Kruts whirled to pump bullets into it. It fell, splashing tiger-bugs on his boots. Then he followed the others up the rocks, slapping himself and cursing.

Willie said, "Hold still a minute, Kruts," and squashed one in the middle of his back.

Their pursuer was running again by now but not toward them. It went around and around the rock pile, veering away when it came too near. The Lieutenant said "Oh-oh! Here comes another." They waited, rifles ready. But the second one also raced in a circle, also avoided coming close to the rocks. After a minute Willie gave a gasp of relief.

"Looks like maybe we're safe up here. Whew! That was close."

"Yes, Thorgess," said the Lieutenant, "it does look that way. Now why should it? Why do they keep away from the rocks?"

Then he added, "Give Kruts a hand with that bandage on his shoulder." He watched a minute. "Those bites must hurt like the devil, Kruts. I'll have to report you unfit for duty. The Captain will have to know about all this anyway. Get the ship on the radio, Thorgess."

When the report had been made, Willie could hear the faint tinny voice of the skipper in the earphone and caught the last words "... sweat it out where you are while I think it over awhile, Lieutenant."

For an hour nothing happened, hardly anything was said. Kruts was swearing to himself as he tried to find a comfortable position to rest in. The Lieutenant was alternately looking through his glasses and writing in his notebook. Willie watched the circling horrors.

There were at least five of them at various locations in the canyon. The horned browsers had more speed than he had first thought. Though put to flight eight times in the hour only one was caught. It fell in an open spot where he could watch the kill in detail. A black tide flower over it and its struggles ceased almost at once.

Then the tiger-bugs, gorged, began to leave, each carrying a piece of flesh in its jaws. They formed a procession, like a line of ants returning from a raid, marching toward the canyon wall on the left. Willie was shocked to see how quickly the carcass was stripped to its bare bones.

The Lieutenant had been watching too and muttered, "Marvelous! What organization! Bees or ants ail, nothing compared to them! Why, they swarm like slime-mold in a microscope!"

He put down his glasses and turned excitedly to Willie. "Don't you see the parallel?" he asked. "The slime-molds gather into a slug that crawls about like a true animal. After it culminates the cells go back to separate lives again. Why, this in almost the same thing on a larger scale!"

"Huh ?" said Willie. He gulped. "I'm afraid I don't get you, sir."

Lieutenant Joliffe looked surprised, then grinned. "Sorry, Thorgess. I forgot where I was for a minute. I'm just beginning to understand the tiger-bugs a little—to classify them, that is. But how do they see to run so fast and straight? Where do they march to after they make a kill?"

"Why, I dunno, sir," answered Willie. "I just sort of thought they had a nest over there somewhere with maybe a queen in it."

The Lieutenant looked doubtful and said, "Could be." He turned to look at Kruts. "How is it with you now?" he asked.

The big man pressed his lips tight together and frowned. "The bites have stopped stinging but how long must we stay here? It will be damned cold when the sun sets."

"Let's hope the Captain gets us out of here before dark."

"He could make flame-throwers out of welding torches," grunted Kruts. "It would be easy to rig them up. Then burn every tiger-bug in the valley!"

The Lieutenant shook his head. "He'd never authorize that much oxygen. There is barely enough for the crew to breathe on the way home. There are some hand grenades though and a rocket mortar."

"The target is too swift," said Kruts. "They'd be useless, sir."

"But what," asked Willie, "what *can* the Captain do, then? If flame-throwers are the only things that will work. He'll just *have* to use some oxygen."

The Lieutenant looked at him thoughtfully. "Getting the ship back to earth is a bit more important than getting us back to the ship, Thorgess. This is your first voyage. You've never seen a space crew on oxygen rations, half of them unconscious, all with splitting headaches. It's quite an experience."

"It went to eighty below zero last night," said Kruts. "We have no shelter, no blankets. We can't stay here and live, sir."

ALL three men were silent. Willie felt an icy lump forming in his stomach though the afternoon sun was still warm.

"Get the ship on the radio," snapped the Lieutenant.

DeVoe's voice answered. Willie felt almost homesick as he pictured the radio room with its gleaming metal walls and the warm hum of the dynamo behind the cagework. He asked for the Captain and handed over the radio.

"Lieutenant Joliffe reporting, air." Willie strained his ears to catch a few words of the Captain's answer.

"You are valuable members of this crew but your value is not infinite ... I may fail to colonize—I shall not fail to return my ship safely . . . Good luck, Joliffe."

The lump of ice in Willie's stomach grew heavier and colder.

The Lieutenant cleared his throat. "We are on our own, men. Return to the ship as best we can—those are the orders. We will make a dash for it, each man for himself. No rescues, mind! Everyone will have an equal chance to get across."

"But we have no chance at all," Willie blurted out. "Surely they can do *something*, sir! Why wouldn't space-suite keep the bugs out?"

The Lieutenant studied him sternly but when he spoke his voice was gentle. "You have not been bitten, Thorgess. The rubber is too thin. They would bite right through it, probably get inside ..." He frowned and stopped talking abruptly.

"Besides," put in Kruts, "you can't run in a space-suit." He turned to the Lieutenant. "Now?" he asked.

"Hm'm ! The bugs are probably too torpid to move when it gets cold. At a guess we might be perfectly safe after dark."

Kruts said, "Who has a flashlight?" Nobody answered. He continued, "So we have no light. We won't find our way among the thickets. We'll slip and stumble—fall into holes or maybe walk right into one of those cattle things. Their horns could be very bad in the dark. Even if we reach the other side—how'll we climb up? There will be an inch of frost over everything."

"Yes," said the Lieutenant. "Well, those creatures must have some reaction to cold. They must associate it with darkness. Just possibly they get under cover at the first hint of sunset—there's no dusk here, of course. Our best chance may be—say 17:30 Mars time. An hour and a half from now." He turned calmly to his binoculars and notebook.

Willie looked at him in a daze, then at Keats, who was calming sleeping again. Didn't they realize that they would all be killed before the day ended? What real chance had even one man to get through those tireless circles's? The Lieutenant was taking notes for his book, eh? Well, some other biologist would write it! Some other men would go down in history as the first to settle Mars.

History! Why, there wouldn't have been any if a deadly thing like this had lived back on earth. It was bullet-proof—you couldn't even heat one to death with a club! He pictured himself trying to and shuddered. He looked at the distant valley, like a green mirage in the sunlight. Even if it could be settled there was no thrill left there now.

Men would work only behind safe walls with no exciting explorations around the countryside. But

they would be other men, this expedition would return to earths—a failure—three men short. Then to his horror Willie felt a tear begin to run down his nose.

The others must not see that, he thought desperately. He bent over his radio set, hurriedly Wiping as he stooped. For something to do he dialed in the ultra-high frequency band where he and DeVoe had noticed queer static ever since the ship lauded on Mars. Not everyone could hold it for the band was narrow and kept shifting frequency in a rising-and-falling pattern.

His sensitive fingers caught and held it now. To his surprise it was much louder down here in the canyon. His mind became a blessed blank as it always did when he was receiving. He listened to the thin, high whisper in his ear—bub-bub-squee-bubble-quee-bub. His eyes wandered unseeingly.

In a vague way they noticed the black runner circling the rocks—round and round. The wavering sound had to be followed up and dower the dial in a repeating rhythm. Up and down—'round and 'round—it was several minutes before his tired brain put eye and ear together.

Then he sat up and said, "Jeepers!" The how and why did not bother Willie—he *knew*. He had worked too long with guided missile controls to be mistaken. If the rhythm were the same for signal and beast it meant a direction control—it must mean that. Each change of frequency ordered a change in direction—of course! And what was more ...

The Lieutenant was looking at him strangely. Willie burst out with, "What's more, we can walk away from here whenever we like! You remember that IIF squeal we've been getting on Mars—DeVoe reported it yesterday? Well, I know what it is now. It's the tiger-bugs' direction control—tells 'em which way to run. Here, try it yourself, sir."

Joliffe looked puzzled but his fingers tried to follow the rise and fall of the signal—lost it, found it again, lost it. "Just what am I supposed to listen for?" he asked.

"The signal goes up and down the frequencies. Well, that tiger-bug thing circles in exact time to it—don't you get it?"

He looked sharply at Willie and tried again. Then he grunted and a faint excitement showed on his face. His fingers were twisting away, his eyes intent, when suddenly the signal rose in volume until Willie could hear it buzzing angrily out of the earpiece. The small black beast was racing after one of the horned browsers. The buzzing held a fixed frequency, grew even louder, then ceased altogether. So, Willie noticed, did the chase.

Lieutenant Joliffe rubbed his ear. "It simply *can't* be coincidence," he said. "I'll be damned! But why do you say we can walk away when we like?"

"Oh that. I think that will work. We can send out interference on the same frequencies. The set sends and receives at the same time with the same controls."

"By God, I suppose we could, Thorgess! Jam its sending station, so to speak. But what is its sending station?"

"Dunno, sir. Don't care much if it works all right."

"Well, let's try. See that one over there? Find his frequency and see what happens. Wait 'til I get these glasses focused. Now, go ahead!"

But after a minute or two Willie shook his head. "The rhythm's not the same at all," he said.

"Hunt for another signal," snapped the Lieutenant. "The frequency is probably different for each one—must be or they'd get mixed up."

WILLIE searched up and down the VP scale, found another and after a minute of listening he nodded. "Ready," he said and flicked the sending switch. The distant runner fell apart in full, stride, melted to a black puddle on the gray dust.

"Stop sending. Let's see what they do then, Thorgess."

Willie flicked the switch. Their aimless wandering ceased and the tiger-bugs began to group themselves again into legs, the legs began to join together. The Lieutenant nodded, Willie flicked the switch once more and the legs fell apart again.

"Very good indeed, Thorgess," said the Lieutenant. "You'll get a promotion out of this even if it is your first voyage. I wish I knew how it worked though, or why. Something directs their running."

Whatever it is, it must be where it can see over the shrubbery. Partway up the canyon wall, perhaps."

"Could be a boss bug with maybe extra-big antennae for sending," suggested Willie. "There'd be a different one for each of these bug-beasts. If we could find them all and smash 'em this valley would be a swell place to live in." They both had their glasses focused on the far slope and spent ten minutes searching it foot by foot. Twice they saw things that looked like insect antennae; once there was something that Willie said was a long stalk with two eyes on it. The Lieutenant pointed out that they might all be just oddly-shaped leaves.

"If you'll let me bring a party out tomorrow with two or three radios, I can get a fix on each sending station by cross angles," said Willie at last.

The Lieutenant said, "Yes, there *is* going to be a tomorrow after all, isn't there? A whole blessed string of them, thank God!" He grinned happily at Willie, who grinned back. Then they woke up Kruts and told him the news.

"*What!*" he yelled. "That damn little box knocks 'em down when my rifle can't! Show me—just *show me!*"

Willie made the nearest runner fall apart. Kruts sat staring at the radio. Then he asked if he could try it himself, so Willie showed him how, but Kruts could not keep the frequency tuned in.

Willie was patient but after a few minutes of it he said, "Look, Kruts, let's practise after we get back, eh? You don't seem to get the feel of the radio, somehow. Anyway I don't see why you want to learn. You can come along tomorrow if you want to, but bring your rifle—you sure handle *that* like an expert."

The Lieutenant said, "All right, let's go."

But down on the ground Willie found a complication. He couldn't see over the shrubbery. "It's no use if I can't see them," he groaned. "I'd have to be eight feet high to do it."

"Get up on my shoulders and you will be," said Kruts. "Only for tripe's sake sit easy on those bites."

Willie mounted, gripped hard with his knees to leave both hands free and they started. He was nervous, keyed to a high pitch. It was all up to him and this was it!

There were five of the deadly things to watch for. He knew the general direction of each and exactly where to find its frequency on the radio controls. There was one now.

His fingers flew. He flicked the switch. Down it went.

There was another—and that fixed

He suddenly felt invincible. He had a dozen, hands, eyes all around his head: The instant any small black shape showed, he knocked it down—it was as easy as that. Why, they were almost across! The Lieutenant was grinning and waving at the men waiting there, men who shouted and stared as if they could hardly believe their eyes.

Kruts began chanting as he marched along, "*Hup*, two, three, four. *Hup*, two, three, four!"

Willie wanted to shout and chant too but his throat was all tightened up. His head seemed to soar through the sky as he rode along. It felt wonderful!