

DARK THEY WERE AND GOLDEN-EYED

BY RAY BRADBURY

THE rocket's metal cooled in the meadow winds. Its lid gave a bulging pop. From its clock interior stepped a man, a woman, and three children. The other passengers whispered away across the Martian meadow, leaving the man alone among his family.

The man felt his hair flutter and the tissues of his body draw tight as if he were standing at the centre of a vacuum. His wife, before him, trembled. The children, small seeds, might at any instant be sown to all the Martian climes.

The children looked up at him. His face was cold.

'What's wrong?' asked his wife.

'Let's get back on the rocket.'

'Go back to Earth?'

'Yes! Listen!'

The wind blew, whining. At any moment the Martian air might draw his soul from him, as marrow comes from a white bone.

He looked at Martian hills that time had worn with a crushing pressure of years. He saw the old cities, lost and lying like children's delicate bones among the blowing lakes of grass.

'Chin up, Harry,' said his wife. 'It's too late. We've come at least sixty-five million miles or more.'

The children with their yellow hair hollered at the deep dome of Martian sky. There was no answer but the racing hiss of wind through the stiff grass.

He picked up the luggage in his cold hands. 'Here we go,' he said – a man standing on the edge of a sea, ready to wade in and be drowned.

They walked into town.

Their name was Bittering. Harry and his wife Cora; Tim, Laura, and David. They built a small white cottage and ate good breakfasts there, but the fear was never gone. It

lay with Mr Bittering and Mrs Bittering, a third unbidden partner at every midnight talk, at every dawn awakening.

'I feel like a salt crystal,' he often said, 'in a mountain stream, being washed away. We don't belong here. We're Earth people. This is Mars. It was meant for Martians. For heaven's sake, Cora, let's buy tickets for home!'

But she only shook her head. 'One day the atom bomb will fix Earth. Then we'll be safe here.'

'Safe and insane!'

Tick-tock, seven o'clock sang the voice clock; time to get up. And they did.

Something made him check everything each morning – warm hearth, potted blood-geraniums - precisely as if he expected something to be amiss. The morning paper was toast-warm from the six a.m. Earth rocket. He broke its seal and tilted it at his breakfast plate. He forced himself to be convivial.

'Colonial days all over again,' he declared. 'Why, in another year there'll be a million Earthmen on Mars. Big cities, everything! They said we'd fail. Said the Martians would resent our invasion. But did we, find any Martians! Not a living soul! Oh, we found their empty cities, but no one in them. Right?'

A river of wind submerged the house. When the windows ceased rattling, Mr Bittering swallowed and looked at the children.

'I don't know,' said David. 'Maybe there're Martians around we don't see. Sometimes nights I think I hear 'em. I hear the wind. The sand hits my window. I get scared. And I see those towns way up in the mountains where the Martians lived a long time ago. And I think I see things moving around those towns, Papa. And I wonder if those Martians mind us living here. I wonder if they won't do something to us for coming here.'

'Nonsense!' Mr Bittering looked out of the windows. 'We're clean, decent people.' He looked at his children. 'All dead cities have some kind of ghosts in them. Memories, I mean.' He stared at the hills. 'You see a staircase and wonder what Martians looked like climbing it. You see Martian paintings and you wonder what the painter was like. You make a little ghost in your mind, a memory. It's quite natural. Imagination.' He stopped. 'You haven't been prowling up in those ruins, have you?'

'No, Papa.' David looked at his shoes.

'See that you stay away from them. Pass the jam.'

'Just the same,' said little David, 'I bet something happens.'

Something happened that afternoon.

Laura stumbled through the settlement, crying. She dashed blindly on to the porch.

'Mother, Father - the war, Earth!' she sobbed. 'A radio flash just came. Atom bombs hit New York! All the space rockets blown up. No more rockets to Mars, ever!'

'Oh, Harry!' The mother held on to her husband and daughter.

'Are you sure, Laura?' asked the father quietly.

Laura wept. 'We're stranded on Mars, for ever and ever!'

For a long time there was only the sound of the wind in the late afternoon.

Alone, thought Bittering. Only a thousand of us here. No way back. No way. No way. Sweat poured from his face and his hands and his body; he was drenched in the hotness of his fear. He wanted to strike Laura, cry, 'No, you're lying! The rockets will come back!' Instead, he stroked Laura's head against him and said, 'The rockets will get through, some day.'

'In five years maybe. It takes that long to build one. Father, Father, what will we do?'

'Go about our business, of course. Raise crops and children. Wait. Keep things going until the war ends and the rockets come again.'

The two boys stepped out on to the porch.

'Children,' he said, sitting there, looking beyond them, 'I've something to tell you.'

'We know,' they said.

Bittering wandered into the garden to stand alone in his fear. As long as the rockets had spun a silver web across space, he had been able to accept Mars. For he had always told himself: Tomorrow, if I want, I can buy a ticket and go back to Earth.

But now: the web gone, the rockets lying in jigsaw heaps of molten girder and unsnaked wire. Earth people left to the strangeness of Mars, the cinnamon dusts and wine airs, to be baked like gingerbread shapes in Martian summers, put into harvested storage by Martian winters.

What would happen to him, the others? This was the moment Mars had waited for. Now it would eat them.

He got down on his knees in the flower-bed, a spade in his nervous hands. Work, he thought, work and forget.

He glanced up from the garden to the Martian mountains. He thought of the proud old Martian names that had once been on those peaks. Earthmen, dropping from the sky, had g He glanced up from the garden to the Martian mountains. He thought of the proud old Martian names that had once been on those peaks. Earthmen, dropping from the sky, had gazed Laura stumbled through the settlement, crying. She dashed blindly on to the porch.

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The fear would not be stopped. It had his throat and heart. It dripped in a wetness of the arm and the temple and the trembling palm.

A green star rose in the east.

A strange word emerged from Mr Bittering's lips.

'Iorrt. Iorrt.' He repeated it.

It was a Martian word. He knew no Martian.

In the middle of the night he arose and dialled a call through to Simpson, the archaeologist.

'Simpson, what does the word "Iorrt" mean?'

'Why that's the old Martian word for our planet Earth. Why?'

'No special reason.'

The telephone slipped from his hand.

'Hello, hello, hello, hello,' it kept saying while he sat gazing out at the green star. 'Bittering? Harry, are you there?'

The days were full of metal sound. He laid the frame of the rocket with the reluctant help of three indifferent men. He grew very tired in an hour or so and had to sit down.

'The altitude,' laughed a man.

'Are you eating, Harry?' asked another.

'I'm eating,' he said, angrily.

'From your deep-freeze?'

'Yes!'

'You're getting thinner, Harry.'

'I'm not!'

'And taller.'

'Liar!'

His wife took him aside a few days later. 'Harry, I've used up all the food in the deep-freeze. There's nothing left. I'll have to make sandwiches using food grown on Mars.'

He sat down heavily.

'You must eat,' she said. 'You're weak.'

'Yes,' he said.

He took a sandwich, opened it, looked at it, and began to nibble at it.

'And take the rest of the day off,' she said. 'It's hot. The children want to swim in the canals and hike. Please come along.'

'I can't waste time. This is a crisis!'

Just for an hour,' she urged. 'A swim'll do you good.'

He rose, sweating. 'All right, all right. Leave me alone. I'll come.'

'Good for you, Harry.'

The sun was hot, the day quiet. There was only an immense staring burn upon the land. They moved along the canal, the father, the mother, the racing children in their

swimsuits. They stopped and ate meat sandwiches. He saw their skin baking brown. And he saw the yellow eyes of his wife and his children, their eyes that were never yellow before. A few tremblings shook him, but were carried off in waves of pleasant heat as he lay in the sun. He was too tired to be afraid.

'Cora, how long have your eyes been yellow?'

She was bewildered. 'Always, I guess.'

'They didn't change from brown in the last three months?'

She bit her lips. 'No. Why do you ask?'

'Never mind.'

They sat there.

'The children's eyes,' he said. 'They're yellow, too.'

'Sometimes growing children's eyes change colour.'

'Maybe *we're* children, too. At least to Mars. That's a thought.' He laughed. 'Think I'll swim.'

They leaped into the canal water, and he let himself sink down and down to the bottom like a golden statue and lie there in green silence.

All was water, quiet and deep, all was peace. He felt the steady, slow current drift him easily.

If I lie here long enough, he thought, the water will work and eat away my flesh until the bones show like coral. Just my skeleton left. And then the water can build on that skeleton - green things, deep-water things, red things, yellow things. Change. Change. Slow, deep, silent change. And isn't that what it is up there?

He saw the sky submerged above him, the sun made Martian by atmosphere and time and space.

Up there, a big river, he thought, a Martian river, all of us lying deep in it, in our pebble houses, in our sunken boulder houses, like crayfish hidden, and the water washing away our old bodies and lengthening the bones and -

He let himself drift up through the soft light.

Tim sat on the edge of the canal, regarding his father seriously.

'Utha,' he said.

'What?' asked his father.

The boy smiled. 'You know. Utha's the Martian word for "father".'

'Where did you learn it?'

'I don't know. Around. Utha!'

'What do you want?'

The boy hesitated. 'I - I want to change my name.'

'Change it?'

'Yes.'

His mother swam over. 'What's wrong with Tim for a name?'

Tim fidgeted. 'The other day you called Tim, Tim, Tim. I didn't even hear. I said to myself, That's not my name. I've a new name I want to use.'

Mr Bittering held to the side of the canal, his body cold and his heart pounding slowly. 'What is this new name?'

'Linnl. Isn't that a good name? Can I use it? Can I, please?'

Mr Bittering put his hand to his head. He thought of the rocket, himself working alone, himself alone even among his family, so alone.

He heard his wife say, 'Why not?'

He heard himself say, 'Yes, you can use it.'

'Yaaa!' screamed the boy. 'I'm Linnl, Linnl!'

Racing down the meadowlands, he danced and shouted.

Mr Bittering looked at his wife. 'Why did we do that?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'It just seemed like a good idea.'

They walked into the hills. They strolled on old mosaic paths, beside still-pumping fountains. The paths were covered with a thin film of cool water all summer long. You kept your bare feet cool all the day, splashing as in a creek, wading.

They came to a small deserted Martian villa with a good view of the valley. It was on top of a hill. Blue marble halls, large murals, a swimming pool. It was refreshing in this hot summertime. The Martians hadn't believed in large cities.

'How nice,' said Mrs Bittering, 'if you could move up here to this villa for the summer.'

'Come on,' he said. 'We're going back to town. There's work to be done on the rocket.'

But as he worked that night, the thought of the cool blue marble villa entered his mind. As the hours passed, the rocket seemed less important.

In the flow of days and weeks, the rocket receded and dwindled. The old fever was gone. It frightened him to think he had let it slip this way. But somehow the heat, the air, the working conditions -

He heard the men murmuring on the porch of his metal shop.

'Everyone's going. You heard?'

'All right. That's right.'

Bittering came out. 'Going where?' He saw a couple of trucks, loaded with children and furniture, drive down the dusty street.

'Up to the villa,' said the man.

'Yeah, Harry. I'm going. So is Sam. Aren't you, Sam?'

'That's right, Harry. What about you?'

'I've got work to do here.'

'Work! You can finish that rocket in the autumn, when it's cooler.'

He took a breath. 'I got the frame all set up.'

'In the autumn is better.' Their voices were lazy in the heat.

'Got to work,' he said.

'Autumn,' they reasoned. And they sounded so sensible, so right.

'Autumn would be best,' he thought. 'Plenty of time, then.'

No! cried part of himself, deep down, put away, locked tight, suffocating. No!
No!

'In the autumn,' he said.

'Come on, Harry,' they all said.

'Yes,' he said, feeling his flesh melt in the hot liquid air. 'Yes, in the autumn. I'll begin work again then.'

'I got a villa near the Tirra Canal,' said someone.

'You mean the Roosevelt Canal, don't you?'

'Tirra. The old Martian name.'

'But on the map - '

'Forget the map. It's Tirra now. Now I found a place in the Pillan mountains - '

'You mean the Rockefeller range,' said Bittering.

'I mean the Pillan mountains,' said Sam.

'Yes,' said Bittering, buried in the hot, swarming air. 'The Pillan mountains. '

Everyone worked at loading the truck in the hot, still afternoon of the next day.

Laura, Tim, and David carried packages. Or, as they preferred to be known, Ttil, Linnl, and Werr carried packages.

The furniture was abandoned in the little white cottage.

'It looked just fine in Boston,' said the mother. 'And here in the cottage. But up at the villa? No. We'll get it when we come back in the autumn. '

Bittering himself was quiet.

'I've some ideas on furniture for the villa,' he said, after a time. 'Big, lazy furniture.'

'What about your Encyclopaedia? You're taking it along, surely?'

Mr Bittering glanced away. 'I'll come and get it next week.'

They turned to their daughter. 'What about your New York dresses?'

The bewildered girl stared. 'Why, I don't want them any more.'

They shut off the gas, the water, they locked the doors and walked away. Father peered into the truck.

'Gosh, we're not taking much,' he said. 'Considering all we brought to Mars, this is only a handful!'

He started the truck.

Looking at the small white cottage for a long moment, he was filled with a desire to rush to it, touch it, say goodbye to it, for he felt as if he were going away on a long journey, leaving something to which he could never quite return, never understand again.

'Where did they go?' he wondered. He glanced at his wife. She was golden and slender as his daughter. She looked at him, and he seemed almost as young as their eldest son.

'I don't know,' she said.

'We'll go back to town maybe next year, or the year after, or the year after that,' he said, calmly. 'Now - I'm warm. How about taking a swim?'

They turned their backs to the valley. Arm in arm they walked silently down a path of clear running spring water.

Five years later, a rocket fell out of the sky. It lay steaming in the valley. Men leaped out of it, shouting.

'We won the war on Earth! We're here to rescue you! Hey!'

But the American-built town of cottages, peach trees, and theatres was silent. They found a half-finished rocket frame, rusting in an empty shop.

The rocket men searched the hills. The captain established head-quarters in an abandoned bar. His lieutenant came back to report.

'The town's empty, but we found native life in the hills, sir. Dark people. Yellow eyes. Martians. Very friendly. We talked a bit, not much. They learn English fast. I'm sure our relations will be most friendly with them, sir.'

'Dark, eh?' mused the captain. 'How many?'

'Six, eight hundred, I'd say, living in those marble ruins in the hills, sir. Tall, healthy. Beautiful women.'

'Did they tell you what became of the men and women who built this Earth settlement, Lieutenant?'

'They hadn't the foggiest notion of what happened to this town or its people.'

'Strange. You think those Martians killed them?'

'They look surprisingly peaceful. Chances are a plague did this town in, sir.'

'Perhaps. I suppose this is one of those mysteries we'll never solve. One of those mysteries you read about.'

The captain looked at the room, the dusty windows, the blue mountains rising beyond, the canals moving in the light, and he heard the soft wind in the air. He shivered. Then, recovering, he tapped a large fresh map he had thumb-tacked to the top of an empty table.

'Lots to be done, Lieutenant.' His voice droned on and quietly on as the sun sank behind the blue hills. 'New settlements. Mining sites, minerals to be looked for. Bacteriological specimens taken. The work, all the work. And the old records were lost. We'll have a job of remapping to do, renaming the mountains and rivers and such. Calls for a little imagination.'

'What do you think of naming those mountains the Lincoln Mountains, this canal the Washington Canal, those hills - we can name those hills for you, Lieutenant. Diplomacy. And you, for a favour, might name a town for me. Polishing the apple. And why not make this the Einstein Valley, and further over ... are you listening, Lieutenant?'

The lieutenant snapped his gaze from the blue colour and the quiet mist of the hills far beyond the town.

'What? Oh, yes, Sir.'