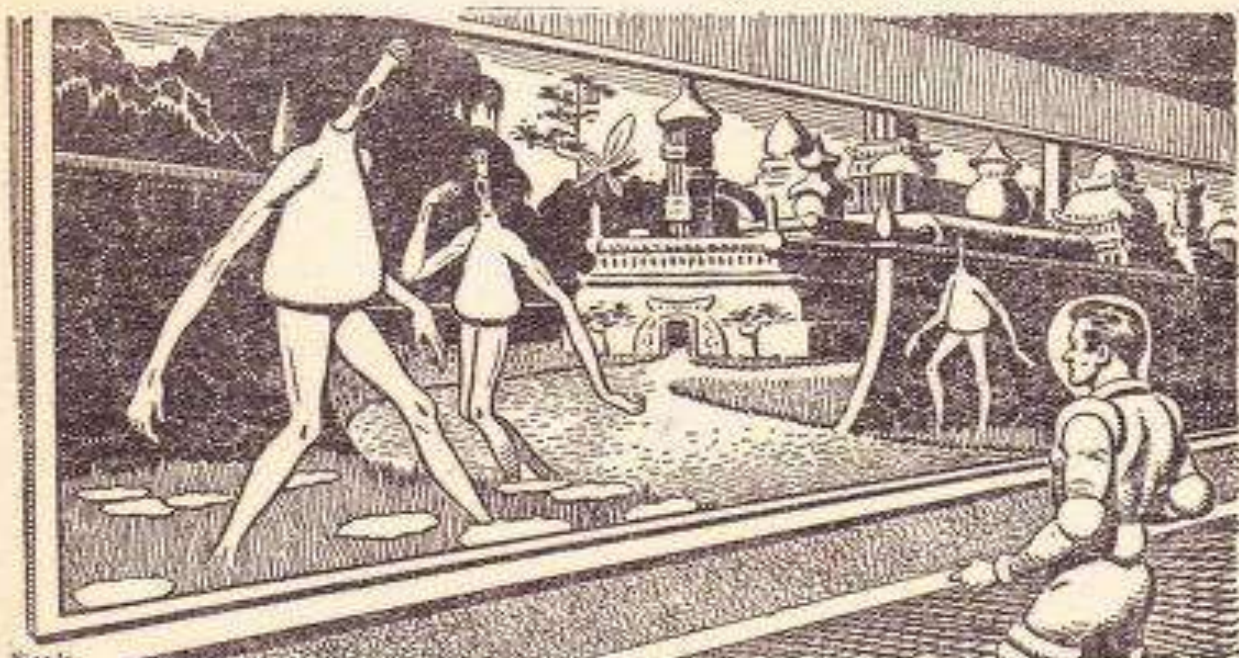


Translator's Error

By Charles Dye

It was a perfectly natural mistake
for men to make . . .



Nicola

The mural extended the full length of the hall, depicting scenes of the old Martian civilization . . .

RICHARD POTTERBOY was a beefy man with a big red face like an old-time politician's; he looked like an elephant beside the little man with the telescopic spectacles sitting next to him. They both arose as Grisby walked in.

Potterboy's face grew a shade redder as he glanced menacingly at his watch. "Good Lord, Grisby, where do you think you're at? Vacationing back on earth? We've been waiting here nearly an hour for you!" He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His uppers didn't fit well and he was inclined to sputter.

Before Grisby could reply, Potterboy was introducing him to the little man with the powerful glasses. "Philip Grisby, Mr. Theodore McGinnis, newly-appointed historian of the Martian Rehabilitation Project."

Grisby gravely shook McGinnis' limp hand, still saying nothing.

"Well, shall we go to your office?" Potterboy suggested impatiently. "You might also have coffee sent in. This was McGinnis' first trip into space; and after two weeks, I'm sure he'll enjoy drinking out of a plain, old-fashioned cup again!" The Administrator, slapping McGinnis on the back, chuckled at his own hearty humor.

"Coffee, Halstead," Grisby shouted as they walked from reception into office.

Potterboy lighted a huge cigar, while they all sat around in strained silence until the secretary entered and left the coffee.

"Now," Potterboy said, puffing furiously on his cigar—but he didn't finish. For the first time, he noticed how ill and dejected Grisby looked.



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"Now," Potterboy said, puffing furiously on his cigar — but he didn't finish. For the first time, he noticed how ill and dejected Grisby looked. In spite of being a back-slapping extrovert, he was completely disconcerted. After years of setbacks, things had seemed to be going so well the last time he was here.

Grisby, who was known as an optimist, moistened his lips and ran a shaky hand through his thinning hair. "For a historian, Mr. McGinnis, yon have come at a most historic moment. The Martian Project has just failed;"

Except for McGinnis taking notes, there was dead silence. Potterboy felt suddenly ill. His cigar tasted like old rope. He wondered what he was going to tell the government in order to justify the billions sunk into this, as well as other planetary rehabilitation projects. To build the solar-system into one of the finest in the galaxy, had originally been his idea; and, for any failures, he would certainly be to blame.

“Let’s have the details,” Potterboy said in a whak voice.

“There’s nothing much to tell,” said Grisby, smiling wanly. “Just before you landed, both polar furnaces melted through the ice and sank into God knows where.”

Potterboy looked aghast. “But how? I thought they were designed to float, once the polar caps began to melt?”

“So did I, but they didn’t. I can’t offer any explanation. They just didn’t!”

For the first time, McGinnis opened his mouth and said in a dry voice, “I take it, then, that this was the last try to get water into the canals?”

“The last try,” Grisby and Potterboy both said, staring down into their cups of coffee.

FOR AWHILE, no one said anything. Then, Grisby, more to himself than to the others, “If only something could have been done about those damned Blotting Pads! They, alone, have apparently ruined Mars; and caused the only intelligent lifeform to atrophy into the cone-shaped things you see occasionally writhing in the sand.”

McGinnis cleared his throat. “Is it true that no one has been able to capture and analyze a Blotting Pad?”

“They’ve been captured, but the minute they are, they crumble to dust; and any liquid or moisture absorbed, remains in the form of a gooey tar — of which you see traces all over the planet.

“The only way to keep liquids is to store them in containers lined with deuterium — heavy hydrogen, that being the one material through which they cannot absorb. Of course, at

more than ten feet distance, they can't absorb through anything. When we first arrived, every one thought they would have to walk around in deuterium lined armour; but, for some peculiar reason nobody has been able to figure out, they won't absorb from men. The Blotting Pads, which resemble lichens only in the vaguest way, average two feet in diameter and can absorb up to a gallon of water, which, almost instantly, is excreted in the form of tar. That's all that's known about them. If you look out the window, McGinnis, you'll see them floating and crawling all over the sand."

McGinnis crossed over to the window and stood watching the green, rubbery disks lying on the sand and hovering a few feet in the thin morning air. He and Potterboy had arrived before dawn and this was his first glimpse of them. "There must be millions of them," he said.

"Yes. How they breed we don't know. To electrocute them is the only way to kill them. Radiation, poison, or shooting won't work; and we can't run around using atomics."

"Oh, well," said Potterboy, breaking a long silence, "if the project to completely melt the polar ice had been successful, in probably no time, the Blotting Pads would have absorbed all the water in the canals, in spite of the electrocution angle."

Grisby sighed bitterly. "No, it would have worked. The Pads can't absorb while floating, and the moment they came to rest within the ten foot area bordering either side of the canals, the high tension cables would have done the rest!"

McGinnis was peering far to his left. "I take it those are the generating plants?"

"They were the generators — I gave orders this morning to start dismantling operations."

"As I understand it," McGinnis said, "the cables and plants are bordering only two of the canals?"

“Yes, all subsidiary branches were blocked off from the two main arteries. Once the arteries became filled, and the Pads — we hoped — electrocuted, the other branches would have been opened; including the minor ones connecting directly with the polar caps.”

“What do you say to taking McGinnis over to the ruins?” Potterboy asked. “Since I’m leaving tonight, and probably never visiting Mars again, I would like to gaze, cynically, on the business that started this whole dammed white elephant project rolling!”

“Since you’re going to be here for a year or two, McGinnis,” Grisby said, “you can wait and go out later, when you have more chronological data concerning the project?”

“No, I might as well go out now. I’m feeling rather restless and depressed — I always do, at the end of some big dream like the Martian Project.”

THE ADMINISTRATION buildings towered like mountains against the flat, Two-dimensional sandiness of Syritis Major. The three men in sun goggles and chemically cooled clothing looked like insects as they trudged across the reddish, iron-oxide nightmare. Heat waves rolled up into the pale sky like breakers from some gigantic ocean. Slotting Pads, resembling shiny, green fish, darted swiftly as they moved out of the pathway of the men.

“We could have taken a jet out,” Grisby was saying, “but I wanted McGinnis to see the desert, Cones, and Pads first hand. Incidentally, there’s approximately one Pad to every twenty square feet of Mars. They slowly, but constantly, rotate counter-clockwise around the planet. That way, they all get a crack at what little water forms around the polar cap edges.”

In spite of the intense heat, Potterboy had another cigar going, on which he would puff heavily before speaking. “Sabotage, of one sort or another, seems to be the only answer to these polar furnaces. The first two explode, and the second two sink! I can’t help feeling that someone doesn’t want Mars resurrected from its sandy grave.”

“Yes,” Grisby said, with a sarcastic laugh, “the Blotting Pads don’t! But, then, I doubt if they know that tliejr don’t. They’re completely unintelligent — just a couple of instincts in

a rubbery bag, absorbing water and transmuting it into tar. And, as you know, Potterboy, all men and technicians were given a six month psycho before being allowed to work on the project; then carefully watched for any sign of dangerous neuroses.”

For awhile, they walked along listening to the crunch of their feet on the sand, saying nothing. The ruins loomed steadily larger through the rippling heat waves.

Finally, Grisby said, “There is one puzzling tiling — not a single man in the eighteen years we’ve been here, has lost his life or met with an accident.”

“How do you account for that?” McGinnis asked.

“I don’t. Nor can anyone else. Our equipment seems to have been the only thing meeting with disasters.”

“Well,” interrupted Potterboy, thinking of what he was going to have to say back on earth, “we’ll just have to put it down to not understanding the alien laws of chance, or the undetected forces working on Mars — if there are any? But, outside of the ruins, the sand, and the ice caps, the only two remaining things are the Pads and the Cones. The Pads run around absorbing water, and the Cones bake in the sand, occasionally sending up head-splitting telepathic squawks that no linguist can decipher or begin to comprehend. Establishing communication has proved impossible, in spite of their telepathic powers. And the only motion they appear capable of is sluggishly burrowing up and down in the sand.”

“Yes, gentlemen,” Grisby said, gravely, “we’ve failed in resurrecting the one seemingly-intelligent life-form on Mars.”

“How do you know they’re any more intelligent than the Pads?” questioned McGinnis.

“Oh, well,” said Potterboy, “the ruins show, as you shall presently see, that they’ve developed telepathy. And they have tried communicating with us.”

“Also,” Grisby added, “when the first party landed to establish a base, and started bringing water from the ships, the Cones set up shrill mental vibrations, attempting to warn us before the Blotting Pads could come within range and start absorbing.”

As they came within a hundred yards of the ruins, McGinnis halted. “Are these the ruins? Just two metal walls?”

“The only bit of Martian culture left on the whole planet,” Potterboy said, lighting another cigar. How he stood them in the heat, was beyond both Grisby and McGinnis. But, then, the government official was eccentric in many ways.

I’M ANOTHER five minutes, McGinnis was touching the strange, glassy surface of one of the walls; both of which, ran parallel to one another and towered twenty-five feet into the air.

Grisby, noticing, said, “Another indication of how advanced the Martians were. We’ve tried everything, including atomics, on these walls in order to get a piece for analysis — no luck. We drilled down five thousand feet and couldn’t even find the bottom of either wall.

“Step around to the inside here. This is where the chronological line drawings begin, as well as the hieroglyphics, which, I’m told, the archeologists have pretty well deciphered,”

“We’ll have to skim rather rapidly,” Grisby continued, “in order to get back before our helmet and suit chemicals give out.”

McGinnis peered myopically at the huge scene pictured on the wall. It showed several large cone-shaped creatures with long legs and arms, similar to those of a human. In place of heads, they had stalks on which a single eye rested, while, underneath, gaped what appeared to be a mouth. The Cones were standing near a wall which was in front of a city of fantastically complex achitecture — yet, breath-takingly beautiful! The surrounding landscape was a jungle of weird, luxuriant foliage; trees and plants alike, towering hundreds

of feet into the air — almost as high as the city itself. In, and around the picture's foreground, several Blotting Pads were shown lying on, and hovering over the tall grass. The wall in the drawing had the same picture on it as the actual one McGinnis and the others were staring at. Underneath the scene, were several rows of complex hen-scratchings.

“From the hieroglyphics and picture,” Grisby said, “one must conclude that this was the height of Martian culture. Hereafter, as we walk along, you'll notice, not only the physical and cultural characteristics changing, but the sharp delitietar tion of the murals themselves becoming vague and incomprehensible.”

They walked down the long expanse of the first wall in silence; McGinnis with his note book, Potterboy, his cigar, and Grisby, his shattered dreams of turning the sandy grave of Mars into the once fertile paradise depicted in the first mural.

EACH SCENE showed an increasing number of Blotting Pads, and a decreasing amount of foliage. Whole gardens were shown withering away; and huge cities being deserted, as the Pads increased, and the greenery and water disappeared. The last scene on the wall show'ed the fantastically beautiful city of the first mural, crumbling to dust with Blotting Pads resting on the sandy waste they had created around it.

The second wall shelved the elongated legs and arms of the Cones, shrivelling and withering. Later, the stalk with eye and mouth vanished. Then the Cones began to shrink until they were only an eighth their original size. The final, comprehensible scene showed the Cones buried in sand with Blotting Pads all around them. Strange dotted and wavering lines — telepathic symbols — connected the apex of each Cone with that of its neighbor. After that, the remaining scenes fell sharply off into incomprehensibility, leaving the later portion of the wall completely blank.

As the three men reached the Second wall's end, several Cones came into view, being grouped more closely than the thousands of others scattered willy-nilly over the planet.

McGinnis stopped short. “So these are what they atrophied into from lack of water,” he said, sadly. Shifting his gaze, he glared bitterly at the Blotting Pads, covering most of the desert as far as the eye could see.

Potterboy and Grisby followed suit, staring off into the approaching dusk at the one big stumbling block which had prevented them from resurrecting Mars.

The humans had left.

All traces of their coming had been obliterated by the sea of restless sand, except one thing — a spherical deuterium water-container; which, during the windy season, would be buffeted about the planet this way and that, the law of averages occasionally causing it to crack into the timeless Martian wall. At such times, the Cones would philosophically cointemplate it and the peculiar, yet likeable, creatures that had brought it.

One Cone, who was considered a little strange by his brothers because he lacked the philosophic intensity for complete introverted comtemplation, one day, broke the telepathic silence; a thing considered still stranger by his brothers, since it was thought very rude to disturb one another, except in times of extreme importance.

“A shame we could not communicate... strain incurred destroying furnaces... thousands of years to erase...”

Weakened by many buffetings, the water sphere hit the wall for the last time. With a crack it split in half, splashing gallons of water far up the wall. The nearest Cones shrieked in telepathic unison as the Life-Destroyer splashed nearby! Almost immediately, directed by the urgency of their commands, their organic-robots — the Blotting Pads — were hurling themselves upon the death giving liquid!

The Cones, at the height of their evolutionary ascent, one by one, returned to the contemplation of eternity. Once and for all time, the danger was past.