I was elected a member of the club to which Jorkens belongs. The Billiards Club it is called, though they don’t play much billiards there. I went there many days before I met Jorkens again; and heard many tales after lunch, when we sat round the fire; but somehow there seemed something missing in all of them, to one who was waiting for one of Jorkens. One heard tales of many lands and of many peoples, some of them strange enough; and yet, just when the story promised to grip one, there was something that was not there. Or perhaps there was too much; too many facts, too impartial a love of truth, that led so many of them to throw everything into their tales, apart from its interest, merely because it was true. I do not mean that Jorkens’ tales were not true, as to some extent his biographer I should be the last to suggest that; it would be unfair to a man from whom I have had so much entertainment. I give the words as they fell from his lips, so far as I can remember them, and leave the reader to judge.

Well, about the fifth time I came in, to my great delight there was Jorkens. He was not very talkative at lunch, nor for some time after; and it was not till he had been awhile in his usual arm-chair, with his whisky and soda at hand on a little table, that he began to mutter. I, who had made a point of sitting beside him, was one of the few that heard him. “There’s a lot of loose talk,” he was saying “goes on in clubs. People say things. They don’t mean them. But they say things. A lot of loose talk.”

“Yes,” I said, “I suppose there is rather. There oughtn’t to be.”

“Of course there oughtn’t,” said Jorkens. “Now I’ll give you an instance. Only today; before you came in; but only today I heard a man saying to another (they’ve both gone out now, so never mind who they were) I heard him saying There’s no one tells taller tales than Jorkens.’ Merely because he hasn’t traveled, or, if he has, kept all the time to roads and paths and railways, merely because he has never been off a good wide path he thinks that things that I may have seen hundreds of times merely weren’t there.”

“Oh, he can’t really have meant it,” I said.

“No,” said Jorkens, “but he shouldn’t have said it. Now, just to prove to you, as I happen to be able to do, that his remark is definitely inaccurate, I can show you a man not a mile from here who tells very much taller stories than I do; and they happen to be perfectly true.”

“Oh, I’m sure they are,” I said, for Jorkens was distinctly annoyed.

“Care to come and see him?” said Jorkens.

“Well, I’d just as soon hear one of your own stories of things you’ve seen,” I said, “if you’d care to tell me one.”

“Not till I’ve cleared myself,” said Jorkens, “of that loose assertion.”

“Yes,” I said.

So we left the club together.

“I’d take a taxi,” said Jorkens, “only I happen to have run out of change.”

Though Jorkens was once a great traveler I was not sure what training he was in to walk a mile just then. So I hailed a taxi, Jorkens insisting that he must owe me the money, as it was he who was taking me. We went eastwards, and soon arrived at our destination, Jorkens generously placing himself in debt to me for the fare.

It was a small lodging house beyond Charing Cross Road, and we were shown upstairs by a maid to a carpetless room; and there was Jorkens’ friend Terner, a man probably still in the thirties, though he obviously smoked too much, and that made him look a bit older; and besides that he had pure-white hair, which gave a queer venerable appearance to a face that seemed somehow unsuited to it.

They greeted each other, and I was introduced.

“He has come to hear your story,” said Jorkens.

“You know I never tell it,” answered Terner.

“I know,” said Jorkens; “not to sneering fools. But he’s not one of those. He can tell when a man’s speaking the truth.”
They looked at each other, but Temer still seemed uncertain, still seemed to cling to the reticence of a man that has often been doubted.

“It’s all right,” said Jorkens. “I’ve told him lots of my tales. He’s not one of those sneering fools.”

“Told him about the Abu Laheeb?” asked Terner suddenly.

“Oh, yes,” said Jorkens.

Terner looked at me.

“A very interesting experience,” I said.

“Well,” said Terner, taking another cigarette in his stained fingers, “I don’t mind telling you. Take a chair.”

He lit his cigarette and began.

“It was in 1924; when Mars was about its nearest to the earth. I took off from Ketling aerodrome, and was away two months. Where did they think I was? I certainly hadn’t enough petrol to fly about in our atmosphere for two months. If I came down, where did I come down? It was their business to find out and to prove it; and, if not, to believe my story.”

1924 and Ketling aerodrome. I did remember now. Yes, a man had claimed to have flown to Mars; had been reluctant to say much at first, because of some horror that he had seen, would not give cheery interviews, was too grimly solemn about it, and so encouraged doubts that might otherwise not have been, and was soured by them, and overwhelmed by a rush of them.

“Why, yes, I remember, of course,” I said. “You flew to…”

“A thousand letters by one post, calling me a liar,” said Terner. “So after that I refused to tell my story. They wouldn’t have believed it in any case. Mars isn’t quite what we think it.

“Well, this is what happened. I’d thought of it ever since I realized that aeroplanes could do it. But about 1920, with Mars coming nearer and nearer, and 1924 the only year that would be possible, I began my calculations. I worked at them steadily for three years; I have the figures still: I will not ask you to read them, but the whole point of my work was this, that there was only one motive power that could possibly get me to Mars before all my provisions gave out, and that power was the pace of the world. An aeroplane can do over two hundred miles an hour, and mine got up to nearly three hundred by means of the propeller alone; and in addition to that I had a rocket attachment that gradually increased my pace to an enormous extent; but the world, which is ninety-three million miles from the Sun, goes right round it in a year; and nothing we know on its surface has any pace like that. My petrol and my rocket were merely to pull clear of the earth’s attraction, but my journey was made by the force that is moving you in that chair at this moment at something like a thousand miles a minute. One doesn’t lose that pace merely by leaving the earth; it remains with one. But my calculations were to direct it; and I found that the pace of the earth would only carry me to Mars when Mars was a bit ahead of us. Unfortunately, Mars is never straight ahead, but a bit out to the right, and I had to calculate at what angle I was to aim my plane away to the right of our orbit, in order that the combined pull of my little plane and my rockets, and the vast pace of the earth, should give me the right direction. It had to be as precise as aiming a rifle, with this slight advantage on my side, to make up for all the forces that grudged my journey, that the target would attract any missile that was going a little too wide.

“But how to get back? That doubled the complexity of my calculations. If the pace of the world sent me forwards, so would the pace of Mars. Mars would be ahead of the world when I started. Where would the pace of Mars send me?”

I saw a flash of doubt even on Jorkens’ face at that.

“But it was fairly simple,” continued Terner. “Our world has the inside berth, a much shorter journey round the sun at ninety-three million miles than Mars at an average of a hundred and thirty-nine million. It consequently soon passes its neighbor, and I found that just as I was to shoot forward from Earth to Mars, so by leaving at the right hour, I could shoot forwards from Mars to Earth. As I said, these calculations took me three years, and of course my life depended on them.

“There was no difficulty in taking food for two months. Water was more cumbersome; so I took the great risk of carrying water for only a month, and trusting to find it in Mars. After all, we have seen it there. It seemed a certainty, and yet it was an anxiety all the while, and I drank so sparingly that, as it turned out, I had ten full days’ supply when I got to Mars. A far more complicated matter was my supply of compressed air in cylinders, my method of releasing it for use, and my utilization of exhaled air to the utmost that it could be utilized.”
I was about to ask some questions about those cylinders when Jorkens interrupted. “You know my theory about Jules Verne and the men in the moon?” he said.

“No,” I replied.

“So many things he describes have been done since, and have become commonplace,” said Jorkens; “Zeppelins, submarines, and one thing and another; and are described so minutely and vividly; that it’s my theory, I don’t know what you think, that he actually experienced these, especially the trip to the moon, and then told them as fiction.”

“No, I never heard that theory,” I said.

“Why not?” said Jorkens. “Why shouldn’t he? There are innumerable ways of recording events. There’s history, journalism, ballads, and many more. People don’t believe any of them very devoutly. They may disbelieve fiction too, now and then. But look how often you hear it said ‘That’s Little Dorrit’s home, that’s where Sam Weller lived, that’s Bleak House,’ and so on and so on. That shows you they believe fiction more than most things; so why shouldn’t he have left his record in that form? But I am interrupting you. I beg your pardon.”

“Never mind,” said Terner. “Another thing that perplexed me greatly, and gave rise to immense discomfort, was the loss of the atmosphere, to which we are accustomed. I shall always regard this as the greatest of all the handicaps that anyone has to face on a journey from Earth. Indeed, without the most careful and thorough binding with bandages, one’s body would be crushed, by the pressure within it working outwards when the weight of the air was gone. I should have published details of all these things if it hadn’t been for that outbreak of disbelief; which would not have occurred if I had had a publicity agent.”

“Most annoying,” said Jorkens.

Terner got up and paced about the room, still smoking as always.

There certainly had been an outbreak of disbelief. It was just one of those things that the public had turned against, like Epstein’s Rima,1 only far more so. Some men are unlucky. It was largely his own fault. It was as he had said; if he had had a good publicity agent, the outbreak would not have occurred. They would have believed him without his troubling to make the journey at all.

He paced up and down, a few long strides, in silence.

“I spent every penny I’d got,” he went on, “on the aeroplane and the outfit. I had no dependants. And if my calculations were wrong and I missed the red planet I shouldn’t want the cash. If I found it and got safely back to Earth, I imagined it wouldn’t be hard to earn all I needed. I was mistaken there. Well, one never knows. Achievement by itself is not enough. The necessary thing is for people to admit your achievement. I had not thought of that. And the bigger the achievement, the less ready people may be to admit it. Lear was recognized much quicker than Keats.”

He lit another cigarette, as he did throughout his story as soon as he had finished one.

“Well, the planet came nearer and nearer. It was quite large now every night, distinctly colored. Orange perhaps, rather than red. I used to go out and look at it at night. The awful thought occurred to me more than once that that orange glow might well come from a waste of deserts, yellow sand without a drop of water for me; but I was consoled by the thought of those vast canals that had been seen with our telescopes, for I believed like everyone else that they were canals.

“I had finished all my calculations by then, by the winter of 1923; and Mars, as I said, was coming nearer and nearer. I grew pretty calm about it as the time approached. All my calculations were done, and it seemed to me that any peril that threatened me was all decided months ago, one way or the other. The dangers seemed all behind me; they were in my calculations. If they were right, they would take me through; if they were wrong, I was doomed two or three years ago. The

1 Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) “...an American-born sculptor who worked chiefly in England, where he pioneered modern sculpture, often producing controversial works that challenged taboos concerning what public artworks appropriately depict...His larger sculpture was his most expressive and experimental, but also his most vulnerable. His depiction of Rima, one of author W. H. Hudson's most famous characters, graces a serene enclosure in Hyde Park. Even here, a visitor became so outraged as to defile it with paint.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob+Epstein
same way with those tawny deserts that I used to think I saw. I gave up worrying about them too. I had decided that the telescope could see better than I could, so that was the end of them. I wouldn't tell anyone I was going; I hate to talk about things I am going to do. Apparently one has to on a stunt like that. Anyway I didn't. There was a girl I used to see a good deal of in those days. Amely her name was. I didn't even tell her. It would have soon got out if I had. And there would have been, the silly hero of an adventure that as yet I was only talking about. I told her I was going in my 'plane on a long journey. She thought I meant to America. I said I would be away two months; and that puzzled her; but I wouldn't say more.

“Every night I took a look at Mars. He was large and ruddy now, so that everyone noticed him. Just think of the different interests with which they were looking at Mars; admiration of his beauty glowing with that bright color, casual curiosity, apathy, scientists waiting the chance that would not come round again for years, witch-doctors making spells, astrologers working out portents, reporters making their articles, and I alone looking at that distant neighbor with lonely thoughts unshared by anyone on our planet. For, as I told you, not even Amely had the very slightest idea.

“Mars was not at his nearest on the night that I started; still over forty million miles away. The reason of this I told you: I had to shoot forwards while Mars was ahead of us. He came within thirty-five million in 1924. But I set off before that.

“I started, naturally, from the night side of the earth, as Mars was lying beyond us away from the sun, and this enabled me to aim accurately at my target. It was a far trickier job coming back. When I say I aimed at my target, I aimed of course far in front of it. That will be understood by anyone who has ever done any shooting. Well, I went to Ketling aerodrome on the night in question, where my 'plane was. There were one or two fellows there that I knew, and of course my rig-out astonished them.

“‘Going to keep warm,’ I remember one of them said.

“Well, I was. Because in addition to my system of bandages to hold me in when I lost the pressure of our atmosphere, I had to wrap up against the absolute cold of Space. I should have that inconceivable cold in my face, while on my back I should need all the clothes I could wear, to protect me from the blaze of the sun; for those clothes would be the only protection there was, when our fifty miles of air were behind me. Sunstroke and frost-bite could very easily have overcome me at the same moment. Well, they are very keen at Ketling about nobody going up if he's in the least bit biffed. You know: a bit the better for his dinner. So they started asking me questions with that in view. I wouldn't tell them where I was going. It wasn't till I actually got the ‘plane out that I told two of the mechanics, so as to have my start recorded. One of them merely thought I was making a joke, and laughed, not at me exactly, but in order to show that he appreciated my having a joke with him. He merely thought it was funny in some way that he couldn't see. The other laughed too, but at least he knew what I was talking about. ‘How much juice are you taking, sir1?’ he said.

‘Fifteen gallons,’ I said, which as a matter of fact he knew. It's good for three hundred miles, which gave me plenty to spare if I wanted to cruise a bit over Mars.

“‘Going there and back in three hours, sir?’ he said.

“He was quite right. That’s as long as you can fly on fifteen gallons.

“Tm going there,’ I said.

“Well, good-night sir,’ he answered. I told a third man too.

“To Mars are you, sir,’ he said. He was annoyed that I should, as he thought, play a joke on him.

“Then we were off. I had a system of sights that gave me a perfect aim all the time that I was in the darkness of Earth and within its atmosphere, and could still see Mars and still steer. Before I left our atmosphere, I accelerated with my system of rockets, and broke away by a dozen explosions from the pull of our planet. Then I shut off my engines and fired no more rockets, and a most enormous stillness wrapped us about. The sun shone, and Mars and all the stars went out, and there we were perfectly still in that most absolute stillness. Yet I was moving, as you are now, at a thousand miles a minute. The Boundlessness was amazing, the discomforts beyond description; the difficulties of eating alone, without being frost-bitten, and without being crushed by the awful emptiness of Space, which we are not built to inhabit, were enough to make the most resolute man turn back, except that you can neither turn nor steer without air to turn in.

“I was sure of my aim: it was accurate enough according to my calculations, the last I saw
of Mars: I was pretty sure of arriving: but I soon began to doubt my capacity to hold out for a month of it. Days and nights can go by pretty slowly sometimes even on Earth, but this was one interminable day.

“The compressed air worked all right: of course I had practiced it on Earth. But the machinery for letting out continually the exactly right quantities into a kind of metal helmet, from which I breathed it, was so complicated, that I could never sleep for more than two hours on end, without having to wake and attend to it. For this purpose I had to have an alarm clock quite close to my ear. My discomforts would, I think, be no more interesting than a record of a long and tedious illness. But, to put it briefly, a little after half-way they got the better of me and I was going to give up and die; when suddenly I saw Mars. In the broad glare of the daylight I saw a pale white circle, like the very littlest of moons, nearly ahead of me and a bit to the right. It was this that saved me. I gazed at it and forgot my great discomforts.

“It was no more visible than a small bird’s feather, high in the air, in sunlight. But it was Mars unmistakably, and just where it ought to be if I was to reach it. With nothing else to look at through that endless day, I gazed too much at Mars. That brought it no nearer; and I found that if I was to get any comfort from it in my weariness I must look away from it for a bit. That wasn’t easy with nothing else to look at, but when I did look away from it for an hour or so, and looked again, I could see a change. I noticed now that it was not entirely lit, being dark on the right hand side, and illuminated about as much as the moon on its eleventh day, three days from full. I looked away again and then looked back at it, and so I passed about two hundred hours of that long weary day. Gradually the canals, as we call them, came in view, gradually the seas. It grew to the size of our moon, and then grew larger, exhibiting a spectacle the like of which no human eye had ever seen before. From then on I forgot my discomforts. Now I saw mountains clearly, and presently rivers, and the flashing panorama widened before me, giving up secrets at which our astronomers have guessed for over a century. There came the time when after a spell of sleep I looked at Mars again, and found that it had lost the look of a planet, or any celestial body, and appeared now like a landscape. Soon after that I got the feeling that, though my course was quite unchanged, Mars was no longer ahead of me but underneath. And then I began to feel the pull of the planet. Things rocked in my ‘plane: kegs, tins and such; and began to shift, as far as their lashings would let them. I felt the pull, too, where I sat. Then I got ready for entering the atmosphere of Mars.”

“What did you have to do?” said Jorkens.

“Had to be very careful,” said Terner. “Or I’d have burned up like a meteorite. Of course I was overtaking it, not meeting it, so that our two speeds largely neutralized each other; and luckily the atmosphere is only thin at first, like ours, so you don’t strike it bang. But the plane took some handling for all that. Once I’d steadied her, flying is much the same there as it is here. Of course I’d turned on my engines as soon as I struck Mars’ atmosphere. I came down pretty straight, not wishing to show over too wide an area, so as not to excite too much curiosity amongst whatever might be there. I may say that I expected to find men there, not through any knowledge I had or researches I’d made, but because most people do. I don’t mean that I was persuaded by that, but what vaguely persuaded them had vaguely persuaded me. I came down over a country that was considerably covered with forests, though with plenty of clearings for a landing. The spot I chose was a clearing down in a valley, as it gave the best cover for my aeroplane, and I didn’t want to show too much. I expected human beings, but thought it just as well to keep out of sight if I could: they’re not always as friendly as all that even here. In a little over ten minutes from the time I turned on my engines I landed in this valley. I had been away from Earth a month, just as I’d calculated. It wasn’t so very unlike Earth when I stepped out. All the trees were different, and of course twigs of these were the first things I had meant to bring back. I actually picked a bunch from five different ones and laid them down in my aeroplane. But the very first thing I did was to replenish my water-supply, and to have a good drink, at a stream that I had spotted before I came down, running out of the forest and down that valley. The water was all right. I had had some fear that it might be full of salt, or some wholly unknown chemical; but it was all right. And the next thing I did was to take off those infernal bandages and my breathing-helmet, and to have a bath in the stream, the first I had had for a month. I didn’t put them on again, but left them in the ‘plane, and dressed decently, as I wanted to show the inhabitants something human. After all, I would be the first one they had seen from here, and I didn’t want them to think we were like caterpillars in a cocoon. I took a .450 revolver with me too. Well, you have to do that here sometimes. Then I started off to look for these remote neighbors of ours. I passed wonderful flowers but did not stop
to pick one: I was only looking for man. I had seen no sign of buildings as I came down. Yet I had not walked a mile through the wood when I came to open land, and there by the very edge of the trees, quite close to me, I saw what was clearly a building made by some intelligent being: and a very odd building it was.

“It was a long rectangle, barely fifteen feet high, and about ten yards wide. At one end of it four windowless walls and a flat roof shut out all light for about twenty yards, but the rest of it was a stretch of quite fifty yards guarded by roof and walls of open metal-work, a stout mesh of the same material of which the whole building was made.

“And at once I saw that our scientists’ dreams were true, for walking in that enclosure so carefully protected by metal I saw a large party of the human race.”

“Human!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Terner, “human. Folk like ourselves. And not only that, but, as I had often gathered from books was likely to be the case on account of the smaller planet cooling sooner than ours and so starting life earlier, rather more refined than the best of our people. I never saw anything more graceful; ages had given them a refinement that has not yet come to us. I never saw anything more delicate than their women’s beauty. There was a stately simplicity in their walk alone that was lovelier to see than our dances.”

Then he strode on, up and down the room, in silence awhile, smoking furiously.

“Oh, it is an accursed planet,” he said once, and went on with his rapid smoking. I was going to say something to get him back to his story; but Jorkens saw me and held up his hand. He evidently knew this point of the story, and the strong effect that it had upon Terner. So we left him awhile to his pacing and to his cigarettes.

And after a bit he continued calmly, as though there had been no pause. “When I saw that mesh I got my revolver ready, for it seemed to me a pretty obvious protection against some powerful animal. Otherwise, I thought, why not walk about in the open instead of in that narrow enclosure?

“There were about thirty of them there, dressed simply and gracefully, though their dress was a bit oriental from our point of view. Everything about them was graceful except that dingy-looking flat house. I came up to the mesh and greeted them. I knew that taking my hat off would probably have no meaning to them, but I took it off with a wide sweep and bowed. It was the best I could do, and I hoped that it might convey my feelings. And it did, too. They were sympathetic and quick, and every sign that I made to them, except when too utterly clumsy, they understood at once. And when they didn’t understand they seemed to laugh at themselves, not me. They were like that. Here was I utterly crude and uncouth, half savage, compared to them; and they treated me with every courtesy that they could get my poor wits to understand. How I’d like to go back with a thousand more of us… but it’s no good, they won’t believe me. Well, I stood there with my hands on the mesh, and found it was good stout metal though much less than half an inch wide: I could easily get my thumb through the round apertures, so that we could see each other quite clearly. Well, I stood there to them, or whatever you call it, as well as I could, and remembering all the time that there must be something pretty bad in those forests for all that thick wire to be necessary. I never guessed what.

“I pointed to the sky, in the direction in which they would have seen Earth shining at night; and they understood me. Fancy understanding a thing like that just from my uncouth gestures. And they obviously did. But they won’t believe me here. And then they tried to tell me all about their world, and of course I understood nothing. And it wasn’t just being ignorant of their language that I felt as my greatest handicap: it was my awful lack of every kind of refinement, in comparison with those gracious gentle creatures, that weighed on me the most heavily all the time I was there. One thing I was able to understand from them. Would you like to hear about those canals?”

“Yes, very much,” I said.

“Well, they aren’t canals at all,” he replied. “There was one in sight of where we stood, a huge expanse of water with a straight edge to it, going through flat plains. I pointed and asked them about it. And they all pointed up, and there I saw a little moon of Mars, lit up and shining like ours. Well that conveyed nothing to me. I knew Mars had two moons, but I saw no connection with canals. So I pointed to the water again, and again they all pointed up. This still conveyed absolutely nothing, so they pointed then to the far end of the great canal out in the plains; and at length after a great while I was able to see that the water was moving, which is what they were trying to explain
by signs to me. Then they pointed up to their moon again. And in the end I was able to understand
them. That moon passes so close over plains of mud that its attraction drags the mud along after it,
and the water pours in behind. Once I had seen it, it seemed simple enough. No one would dig a
channel fifty miles wide, and they are at least that. Whereas pulling water along is just the job for a
moon.”

“But are the canals as wide as that?” I said.

“You’d never see them from Earth if they weren’t,” said Terner.

I’d never thought of that.

“There was one girl there that was extraordinarily lovely,” said Terner. “But to describe
any of them you’d need the language of a lover, and then turn that into poetry. No one will believe
me. Not a soul will believe me. I talked to her, though of course my words meant nothing; I trusted
so much to her bright intelligence that I almost expected her to understand every word; and so she
often did. Strange bright birds flew often over us going to and from the forest, and she told me the
names of them in the queer Martial language. Mpah and Nto are two that I can remember, as far as
I can spell it; and then there was Ingu, bright orange and black, with a long tail like our magpie.
She was trying to tell me something about Ingu, who was just then flying over us, squawking, away
from the trees; when suddenly she pointed. I looked, and sure enough something was coming out
of the forest.”

For a while he puffed rapidly in silence.

“I can’t describe it to you. We have nothing like it here. At any rate not on land. An octopus
has some slight resemblance to it in its obese body and thin long legs, though this had only two,
and two long thin arms. But the head and the huge mouth were like nothing one knows. I have
never seen anything so horrible. It came straight to the wire netting. I slipped away at once before
it saw me, as that lovely girl was warning me to do. I had no idea that the thick wire had not been
woven as a protection against this very beast. I hid amongst some sort of flowering scrub. I can
smell the scent of it to this day; a sweet aroma unlike any on Earth. I had no idea that they were
not perfectly safe from it. And then it came straight towards them, and up to the wire. I saw it
close, all nude and flabby, except for those wiry limbs. It lifted a lid in the roof before I knew what
it was doing, and put in a long horrible arm. It groped about with extraordinary rapidity, and
seized a girl and drew her up through the lid. I was on the far side of the wire from it and couldn’t
shoot. It wrung her neck in a moment and threw her down, and slipped in that arm again. I ran out
from my covert, but before I got near it had caught a young man and drawn him up, and was
wringing his neck as I came round the corner.

They had made little effort to avoid that gruesome hand, just dodging as it swept by them;
though when it singled one out there was little chance to dodge, as they seemed to know. And they
were all standing together now in the corner as I came by them, with a dignified resignation in
their faces.”

“Couldn’t they have done anything?” I asked. For the idea of a branch of the human race
quite helpless before such a horror was too new for me to accept it. But he had seen it, and under-
stood.

“It was nothing more than a chicken-run,” he said. “What could they do? They belonged to
this beast.”

“Belonged to it!” I exclaimed.

“You see,” said Jorkens, “you don’t understand. Man isn’t top dog there.”

“What!” I gasped.

“No,” said Terner, “that’s it.”

“Another race, you see,” said Jorkens.

“Yes,” said Terner. “It’s an older planet, you know. And somehow in all that time it’s got
ahead of them.”

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Ran up to the beast,” he answered. “I somehow thought he wouldn’t be afraid of a man,
from the way he treated them, so I didn’t trouble to stalk him, but just ran after him as he was
moving off and swinging those two young bodies by their ankles. Then he turned round on me and
reached out an arm and I let him have one from the four-fifty. He spun round and dropped the
bodies and stumbled away, waving his arms above him and bleating out of his great mouth. He
was evidently not accustomed to being hurt. He went bleating away and I went after him and gave
him two or three more, and left him dead or dying, I didn’t care which.
“At the sound of my shots the whole wood had awoken. Birds soared up piping and whistling, and animals I had not seen began to hoot in the shadows. And amongst the general clamor I thought I detected some sounds that might have come from mouths like that of the beast I had killed. It was clearly time to go.

“I turned back to the cage, and there they were all gazing at the dead creature in silence and curiosity. I went up to them but they continued to gaze at it. None of them spoke to me. I saw then that I had done the wrong thing. It seemed that one did not kill these beasts. Only the girl I had spoken with about the birds turned to me, and she pointed swiftly up to the sky, towards Earth. The clamor was increasing in the forest. She was right; it was time to go. I said farewell to her. I wonder what my eyes told her. I said farewell more sadly than I have ever said it before. I nearly stayed. If it hadn’t been for what I had to tell our own people I would have stayed, and shared out my two dozen cartridges amongst those hideous beasts; but I thought I owed it to Earth to bring home the news. And in the end they never believed me!

“I heaved a rock at that horrible body as I went by, not liking to spare another cartridge, an account of the clamor in the forest. But those poor people in the chicken-run didn’t approve. One could see that in a moment. To be eaten by that beast was their fate, and no interference with that seemed right to them.

“I got back to my ‘plane as fast as I could. Nothing had found it. It was still safe in the valley. Perhaps I felt a moment of regret when I found my retreat to Earth was not cut off. It would have made things so simple. And yet it would never have done. Well, there was my ‘plane, and I jumped in and began to wrap on those bindings, without which it is impossible to keep together in the bleak emptiness between our atmosphere and theirs. Something peered out of the woods at me as it heard me get into the ‘plane. It looked to me like some sort of a fox, and I went on with my wrappings. All the noises in the wood seemed coming nearer. Then all of a sudden I thought: what if it was a dog, and not a fox at all! Whose side would a dog be on in Mars? I could hardly imagine a dog on anyone’s side but man’s. But I had seen such horrible things, that I wondered. What if it belonged to those beasts? As man did, for that matter. It would go and tell them I was here. I hurried with my wrappings. But the brushwood was being trodden quite close. Then I saw branches waving. And a lot of them came pouring out of the forest, hurrying towards their chicken-run. They were not a hundred yards away, and they all saw me. Then the filthy things turned to their left and came towards me. I gave them one shot, and started my engines. One seemed to hit, but I couldn’t hear its noises on account of the sound of my engines. They seemed puzzled by the shot for a moment, then came towards me, with a queer look on their hideous faces, hands stretched out. I only just cleared them. With their great height they could almost have gripped my ‘plane as I went over them. And away I went with all my bindings flapping. Of course I couldn’t face Space like that. And I couldn’t dress myself and steer at the same time, with such steering as I had to do. One degree out and I should have missed Earth. I hadn’t much petrol either. It is petrol that I had economized on. Obviously. As it was of no use to me except for about one millionth part of my journey at each end. You can’t churn up Space. Well, I went about twenty miles, and lit down in the wide plain through which that moon was dragging its fifty-mile groove of mud, for us to look at through telescopes. And I had to fly up and down a good deal before I was sure of a landing in which I wouldn’t be bogged; as happened to me later. Well, I lit down and got on with my dressing. And all the while I had the idea that Mars knew a lot more about my presence there than I had hoped for. Birds seemed ill at ease, and there seemed too much scurrying. At any rate I was in the open and could see what was coming. Yet I should have liked to have gone a hundred miles or so further, except for the uneasy feeling it gave me to be left without any reserve of petrol beyond what I knew I should want. So I stayed there and saved up my petrol; and it was lucky I did. Well, I got my bandages on, but I still had my observations to make from the sun in order to find my way home, when I saw some of those foul creatures a long way off. Whether they were coming after me or not I never knew, but they hurried my calculations, and did not encourage me to go gathering Martial rocks and flora, which of course would have made all this vehement disbelief impossible. And the samples from five different trees that I had got in the wood of course all blown away when I went off in a hurry the first time.”

“And you brought back nothing at all?” I asked. For there was the ring of truth in his story and I was hoping it could be proved.

“Nothing except an old match-box broken in a very peculiar way. And, if you can’t see what broke it, that will prove nothing to you either. I’ll show it you later.”
“What broke it?” I asked.

“When we come to it,” he said, “you shall tell me. I’ll show it you and you shall see for yourself.”

Jorkens nodded his head.

“Well, I didn’t go gathering flowers or anything else, except for those twigs that I lost. I ought to have, I know. And perhaps I was in too much of a hurry to get away when I saw that second lot in the distance. But I had seen the faces of the beasts, and they were all I was thinking of. I had a large camera and took a few shots at the landscape, which ought to have been conclusive. But I didn’t get it home. I’ll tell you what happened to that afterwards.

“Well, all that incredulity here was the last thing that I thought of; and the mouths of those loathsome beasts were filling all my imagination. I hurried my calculations and was off, homewards towards the sun. I saw several more of those chicken-runs as I went; but little else besides forest, and plains of mud. I might have seen more if the sun had not been in my eyes. Very soon Mars turned a lovely cobalt blue, and the beauty of it made me even sadder.

“Then began again that long weary day, with sun and ‘plane apparently motionless. Engines shut off, no sound, no movement, no weather; and the weeks dragging by with no sign that time was passing at all. It is an awful place; time seems dead there.

“Again I began to despair, nearly to death; when suddenly I saw ahead of me, like a swan’s feather all alone in Space, the familiar curved shape of a world, a quarter lit by the sun. There is no mistaking a planet. And yet, rejoiced as I was to be nearing home, one thing strangely perplexed me: I seemed to be ten days ahead of my time. What amazing luck, I thought, that part of my calculations must have been wrong, and yet I had not missed Earth.

“I had not seen it as soon as I had seen Mars, on account of its being so near to the line of the Sun. Consequently, it was large when I did see it. As it grew larger and larger I tried to work out what continent I was approaching, not that it greatly mattered, as I had petrol enough to make a good landing unless I was very unlucky. Though it couldn’t be where I had expected to land, as I was so much ahead of my time. Well, I couldn’t make out anything, as most of the orb was in darkness. And when I got into that darkness it was a blessed thing, after the glare of the sun in that endless lonely day. For there is no light there really, only glare. In that awful loneliness there is nowhere for light to fall; it just goes by you in a glare. I got into the darkness at last and switched on my engines, and flew till I came to the very first edge of twilight that gave light enough for me to land, for I was tired of staring at the sun. And that was how I came to make a bad landing, with my wheels deep down in a marsh. It was not that that whitened my hair. I felt my scalp go cold, and my hair whitened; but it was not being stuck in a marsh that whitened it. It was the knowledge I had, the very moment I landed, that I was on the wrong planet. I should have seen it before, coming down, although in the dark: the whole thing was much too small. But I saw it now: I was on the wrong planet and didn’t even know which. The awful concentrated loneliness of the accident at first froze my thoughts. And, when I did begin to think, all was bewilderment. What lay inside of Mars? Only Earth, Venus and Mercury. The size pointed at Mercury. But I was ahead of my time, not behind it. Or was my chronometer all wrong? But the sun had appeared no larger, five minutes ago than it appears from Earth. In fact rather smaller. Perhaps, I thought, it was Venus in spite of this; though it was too small even for Venus. And the asteroids were behind me, outside Mars.

“What I did not know then was how Eros (and perhaps others too), on account of the tilt of the planes of some of the asteroids, comes at certain times within fourteen million miles of us. So that though his path round the run lies outside Mars, whose nearest is thirty-five million, Eros at certain times is Earth’s nearest neighbor. Of this I knew nothing; and yet, when I began to think reasonably, the facts at last spoke for themselves: I was on a strayed or an unknown asteroid. It should be easier to examine such a body when one is actually on it, with its continents all spread round one, than when it appears no more than a small pin’s head in a telescope. But the calm, the safety, above all that feeling of Home, which lie about the astronomer, are aids to accurate thought which cannot be estimated.

“I saw that I had blundered when leaving Mars, making some wrong calculation in my hurry, and was very lucky to have got anywhere. Who can say when he thinks of all the things he might have become, who can say as I can that I nearly became a comet?”

“Very true,” said Jorkens.

Terner said this with the utmost seriousness. The danger had evidently been near to him.

“When I realized where I must be,” continued Terner, “I set to work to pull my ‘plane out
of the marsh, standing up to my knees in it. It was easier than I thought. And, when I had got it up I lifted it over my head and carried it about nine miles on to good dry land.”

“But an aeroplane?” I said. “What does it weigh?”

“Over a ton,” said Terner.

“And you carried it?”

“With one hand,” he said. “The pull of those asteroids is a weak and puny thing to anyone accustomed to Earth. I felt pretty strong on Mars, but that’s nothing to what one could do here, in Eros, or whichever it was.

“I got out at the edge of a forest of minute scrub-oak, the size of the ones that are dwarfed by the Japanese. I looked out for any disgusting beasts such as those foul things on Mars, but saw nothing of any sort. A few small moths, as I thought them, flew by me out of the trees; though, looking back on it, I think they were birds. Well, then I settled down to work out my new calculations. I was so near Earth now that I might get it if I could pull away from the asteroid, and if only I was close in my guess (and it could be no more), at the pace that the asteroid was doing. More than a guess I could not make, for I did not even know on what little planet I was, and guesses are bad things for calculations. But you must use them when you’ve got nothing else. I knew at least where the path of these asteroids lay, so I knew how far they had to go, but the time that they took to do it I could only guess from the time that I knew their neighbors took. Had I been further from Earth these guesses would have ruined my calculations, and I should never have found my way home.

“Well, I sat there undisturbed by anything except my own rapid breathing, and worked out those calculations as near as I could. I had to breathe three or four times as fast as one does on Earth, for there didn’t seem as much air as there is here. And of course there wouldn’t be in a little place like Eros. What troubled me far more than the breathing was the thought that I had only my engines to pull me clear of the planet, having used the last of my rockets in leaving Mars, and never guessing I should need them again. Imagine a passenger from Southampton to New York being suddenly landed at an island in the Atlantic. He would be far less surprised than I was at landing here, and I was not prepared for it. The pull of Eros, or whatever small world it was, was not much to get away from; but the amount of atmosphere I should have in which to pull away from it, was bound to be diminutive also, like the planet round which it was wrapped. I knew I could get up enough speed to pull clear of Eros, if only I had long enough to do it, if only the air went far enough. I knew roughly how far it went, as I had felt it in the wings of my ‘plane on the way down. But would it go far enough? That was the thought that was troubling me as I worked at my figures, and breathed as men breathe in high fevers. I wouldn’t use my compressed air while I had air of any kind to breathe outside. For the hours that I could live before I reached Earth were numbered by my supply of compressed air. Well, I made my plans, and arranged my aim at the Earth, in leisure, such as I had not had on Mars, while the little planet spun towards the sun, and its day was dawning where I had landed in twilight. Then I had time to look round at the oak-forest, whose billowy tops were rolling away below me. Take a look now at this match-box. Handle it gently. Now what would you say made that hole in it?” I took from his hand a Bryant and May’s match-box, considerably shattered; shattered from the inside; leaving a hole large enough for a mouse to run through.

“It looks as if something had gone through it pretty hard,” I said.

“Not through it,” he answered. “There’s only a hole on one side.”

“Well into it,” I said.

“Nor into it. Look again,” said Terner.

Sure enough it was all burst outwards. But what had done it was more than I could see. And so I told Terner.

Then he took it over to the mantelpiece, where he had two little cottages made of china, and put it between the two, and put a little thatch over the match-box, that he had made to fit it. The little cottages on each side of it were just about the same size.

“Now what do you make of it?” he asked.

I didn’t know, and I had told him so, but I had to say something.

“It looks as if an elephant had broken out of a cottage,” I said.

Terner looked round at Jorkens who was nodding an approving head, almost benevolent except for a certain slyness.

I didn’t understand this vehement exchange of glances.
“What?” I said.
“The very thing,” said Terner.
“An elephant?” I said.
“There were herds of them in the oak-forest,” said Terner. “I was stooping down to pick a branch of a tree to bring back, when I suddenly saw them in the dawn. They stampeded and I caught one, a magnificent tusker, and none of them bigger than mice. This I knew must be absolute proof. I threw away the branch; after all, they were only small oak-leaves; and I put the elephant into that match-box and put an elastic band round it to keep it shut. The matchbox I threw into a haversack that I wore over my bandages.

“Well, I might have collected lots more things; but, as I said, I had absolute proof, and I had hanging over me all the while, and oppressing me with its weight, that feeling that I was on the wrong planet. It is a feeling that no one who experiences it can shake off for a single moment. You Jorkens, you have traveled a good deal too; you’ve been in deserts and queer places.”

“Yes, the papyrus-marshes,” muttered Jorkens.
“But,” continued Terner, “not even there, nor far out with the Sahara all round you, can you have had so irresistibly, so unremittingly, that feeling I spoke of. It is no mere homesickness, it is an always-present overwhelming knowledge that you are in the wrong place, so strong that it amounts to a menacing warning that your very spirit repeats to you with every beat of the pulse. It is a thing I cannot explain to anyone who has not been lost outside Earth, an emotion I can share with no one.”

“Very natural,” said Jorkens.

“Well, so I got everything ready,” Terner went on, “not only for myself but for the little elephant. I had a tin into which I meant to drop him before we left the atmosphere of Eros, and I had found a way of renewing the air in it from my own breathing supply often enough to keep the little beast alive. I had a handful of green stuff, branches of oak-trees, just as one does with a caterpillar. And water and all for him. Then I threw over everything that I could do without, in order to lighten the ‘plane for the dash away from Eros. My revolver and cartridges I threw into the marsh, and that is where my camera went too. Then I started off and flew back into night, to the one part of Eros from which I could just see Earth, hanging low above her little neighbor’s horizon. It shone in the night of Eros like a small moon, like a cricket ball of pale turquoise set in silver. I aimed exactly, with all the allowances that I had calculated, and shot homewards flying low where the air of Eros was densest. At that low level I merely got my speed. Then came the crucial moment when I tilted upward to my aim. Would the air be heavy enough for my wings to work on? It was: I was heading in exactly the right direction, just as I got clear of night and Earth paled away. Now would the speed I had last? I couldn’t make much more in that thin air. I wondered if someone from Earth would ever find my bones, if Eros pulled me back, and my ‘plane beside them. But I did not forget my elephant, and reached for the match-box to drop it into the tin; when I found what I’ve shown you.”

“Gone?” I said.
“Charged out, as an elephant would,” said Terner. “He must have gone before I left Eros. You see for yourself, now that you get the proper proportions, that that match-box would be to him no more than a hut of laths to one of our own elephants. And he had magnificent tusks. You wouldn’t try to shut up an elephant here in a hut of the very thinnest boards. But I never thought of that. You saw it at once. But then I had put those cottages just beside it so as to give you the right scale. Well, I didn’t grudge him his liberty at the time. I had no idea of the bitter incredulity that I should have to face. I was thinking more of the tug-of-war on which my life depended, the speed of my ‘plane against the pull of Eros.

“And all of a sudden we did it. There was a slight rocking of all my kegs and tins as Eros let go. Then the long day started once more. I spent it mostly thinking over all the things that I was to tell our learned societies about Mars, and that asteroid which I believe to have been Eros. But they were too busy with their learning to look at a new truth. Their ears were turned to the past: they were deaf to the present. Well, well.” And he smoked in silence.

“Your aim was all right,” said Jorkens.

“Good enough,” said Terner. “Of course the pull of the Earth helped me. I suddenly saw it shining in the day, and I didn’t seem much out. Oh, what a feeling it is to be coming home. Earth pale at first, then slowly turning to silver; and growing larger and larger. Then it takes a faint touch of gold, an enormous pale-gold crescent in the sky; to the mere eye a sight of the utmost beauty,
but saying something more to the whole being, which the understanding fails to grip. Perhaps one
does take it in after all, but if one does one can never pass it on, never tell a soul of all that golden
beauty. Words cannot do it. Music might, but I can't play. I'd like to make a tune, you know, about
Earth calling one home with all that changing light; only it would be so damned unpopular,
because it is nothing like what they experience every day.

“Well, I hit it. With the help of that great pull that Earth flings out so far, I got home again.
The Atlantic was the only thing I was afraid of, and I missed that by a good deal. I came down in
the Sahara, which might have been little better than the Atlantic. But I got out and walked about,
and hadn't been looking round for five minutes when I came on a copper coin the size of a
sixpence, and on it the head of Constantine. I had recognized the Sahara at once, but I knew then
that I was in the north of it, where the old Roman Empire had been, and knew I had petrol enough
to get to the towns. I started off again northwords, and flew till I saw some Arabs with a flock of
sheep or goats: you can't tell which till you are quite close. I landed near them and said I had come
from England. I had no vulgar wish to astonish, as the bare truth would have done, so I said I had
flown from England. And I saw that they did not believe me. I had a foretaste then of the world's
incredulity.

“Well, I got home, and I told my tale. The press weren't hostile at first. They interviewed
me. But they wanted cheery interviews. They wanted a photograph of me waving my handkerchief
up towards Mars, to friends I had left there. But how could I be cheery after seeing what I had
seen? My blood grows colder even now when I think of it. And I think of it always. How could I
wave my handkerchief towards those poor people, when I knew that one by one they were being
eaten by a beast more foul than our imaginations can picture? I would not even smile when they
photographed me. I insisted on deleting little jokes from the interviews. I became irritated.
Morose, they said. Well, I was. And after that they turned against me. Bitterest of all, Amely would
not believe me. When I think what we were to each other! She might have.”

“In common politeness,” said Jorkens.

“Oh, she was polite enough,” said Terner. “I asked her straight out if she believed me; and
she said ‘I believe you absolutely.’”

“Well, there you are,” said Jorkens cheerfully. “Of course she believes you.”

“No, no,” said Terner, smoking harder than ever. “No, she didn't. When I told her about
that lovely girl in Mars, she never asked me a single question. That wasn't like Amely. Never a
word about her.”

For a long time then he went up and down that room, smoking with rapid puffs. For so
long he was silent and quite unobservant of us that Jorkens caught my eye, and we left him alone
and walked away from the house.