

WE'RE CIVILIZED!

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WE'RE CIVILIZED!

By MARK CLIFTON and ALEX APOSTOLIDES

Naturally, the superior race should win ... but superior by which

standards ... and whose?

Illustrated by BALBALIS

[image]

The females and children worked among the lichen growth, picking off the fattest, ripest leaves for their food and moisture, completing their arc of the circle of symbiosis.

The males worked at the surface of the canals, or in open excavations. Their wide, mutated hands chipped into the rock-hard clay, opening a channel which was to be filled with sand and then sealed off with clay on all sides and surface. That water might seep through the sand without evaporation, without loss, from the poles to the equator of Mars—seep unimpeded, so that moisture might reach the lichen plants of everyone, so that none might thirst or hunger.

The seepage must flow. Not even buried in the dim racial memory had there ever been one who took more than his share, for this would be like the fingers of one hand stealing blood from the fingers of the other.

Among the Mars race there were many words for contentment, kinship of each to all. There were words to express the ecstasy of watching the eternal stars, by night and by day, through the thin blackish atmosphere. There were words to express the joy of opening slitted nostrils to breathe deeply in those protected places where the blowing sands did not swirl, of opening folds of rubbery skin to catch the weak rays of the distant Sun.

But there were no words for "mine" as separate from "yours." And there was no urge to cry out, "Why am I here? What is the purpose of it all?"

Each had his purpose, serene, unquestioning. Each repaired or extended the seepage canals so that others, unborn, might know the same joys and ecstasies as they. The work was in itself a part of the total joy, and they resisted it no more than healthy lungs resist clear, cool air.

So far back that even the concept of beginnings had been forgotten, the interwoven fabric of their symbiotic interdependence seeped through their lives as naturally as the precious water seeped through the canal sands. As far back as that, they had achieved civilization.

Their kind of civilization.

Captain Griswold maintained an impassive face. (Let that, too, be a part of the legend.) Without expression, he looked through the screen at the red land flashing below the ship. But unconsciously he squared his shoulders, breathed deeply, enjoying the virile pull of his uniform over his expanding chest. Resolutely he pushed aside the vision of countless generations of school children, yet to come, repeating the lesson dutifully to their teachers.

"Captain Thomas H. Griswold took possession of Mars, June 14, 2018."

No, he must not allow any mood of vanity to spoil his own memories of this moment. It was beside the point that his name would rank with the great names of all times. Still, the history of the moment could not be denied.

Lieutenant Atkinson's voice broke through his preoccupation, and saved

him the immodest thought of wondering if perhaps his cap visor might not be worn a little more rakishly to one side. He must father a custom, something distinctive of those who had been to Mars—

”Another canal, sir.”

Below them, a straight line of gray-green stretched to the horizon, contrasting sharply with the red ferrous oxide of the landscape. An entire planet of ferrous oxide—iron—steel for the already starving technology of the Western Alliance. The captain felt a momentary irritation that even this narrow swath displaced the precious iron ore.

Obviously these canals served no purpose. His ship had circled the planet at its equator, and again from pole to pole. Canals everywhere, but nothing else. Enough time and fuel had been wasted. They must land. Obviously there was no intelligent life. But the history of the moment must not be marred by any haste. There must be no question within the books yet to be written. There must be no accredited voice of criticism raised.

”My compliments to Mr. Berkeley,” he said harshly to Lt. Atkinson, ”and would he kindly step to the control room?” He paused and added dryly, ”At his convenience.”

Mister Berkeley, indeed. What was it they called the civilian—an ethnologist? A fellow who was supposed to be an authority on races, civilizations, mores and customs of groups. Well, the man was excess baggage. There would be no races to contact here. A good thing, too. These civilian experts with their theories—show them a tooth and they’ll dream up a monster. Show them a fingernail paring and they’ll deduce a civilization from it. Nonsense!

”You wanted to see me, Captain?” The voice was young, quiet, controlled.

Without haste, Captain Griswold turned and faced Berkeley. Not only a theorist, but a young theorist. These super-bright young men with their sharp blue eyes. A lot of learning and no knowledge. A lot of wisdom and no common sense. He carefully controlled his voice, concealing his lack of respect for the civilian.

”Well, Mr. Berkeley, we have quartered the globe. We have seen no evidence of civilization.”

”You discount the canals, Captain?” Berkeley asked, as if more from curiosity than refutation.

”I must discount them,” the captain answered decisively. ”Over all the planet we have seen no buildings, not even ruins, no evidence at all that intelligence exists here.”

”I consider straight lines, running half the length of a world, to be evidence

of something, sir." It was a flat statement, given without emphasis.

Arguments! Arguments! Little men who have to inflate themselves into a stature of importance—destroy the sacred history of the moment. But quietly now. There must be no memory of petty conflict.

"Where are their buildings, Mr. Berkeley?" he asked with patient tolerance. "Where are their factories? The smoke from their factories? The highways? The transportation facilities? Where are the airplanes? Even this thin air would support a fast jet. I do not require they have spaceships, Mr. Berkeley, to concede them intelligence. I do not require they be the equal of Man. I also have some scientific training. And my training tells me I cannot recognize the existence of something where there is no evidence at all."

"The canals," Berkeley answered. His voice also was controlled, for he, too, knew the history of this moment. But his concern was not for his own name in the history books. He knew only too well what its writers did to individuals for the sake of expediency. His concern was that this moment never be one of deep shame for Man. "Perhaps they have no buildings, no factory smoke, because they don't need them. Perhaps they don't have highways because they don't want to go anywhere. Perhaps their concept of living is completely unlike ours."

Griswold shrugged his shoulders. "We speak an entirely different language, Mr. Berkeley."

"I'm afraid you're right, Captain," Berkeley sighed. "And it might be a tragic thing that we do. Remember, European man spoke a different language from that of the American Indian, the Mayan, Polynesian, African, Indonesian—" He broke off as if the list were endless. "I ask only that we don't hasten into the same errors all over again."

"We can't hover here above the surface forever," Griswold said irritably. "We have quartered the globe. The other experts are anxious to land, so they can get to their work. We have made a search for your civilization and we have not found it."

"I withdraw all objections to landing, Captain. You are entirely correct. We must land."

The intercom on the wall squawked into life.

"Observation to Control. Observation to Control. Network of canals forming a junction ahead."

"Prepare for landing, Lieutenant Atkinson," Griswold commanded sharply. "At the junction." He turned and watched the screen. "There, Mr. Berkeley, dead ahead. A dozen—at least a dozen of your canals joining at one spot. Surely,

if there were a civilization at all, you would find it at such a spot." Slowly and carefully, he constructed the pages of history. "I do not wish the implication ever to arise that this ship's commander, or any of its personnel, failed to cooperate in every way with the scientific authorities aboard."

"I know that, Captain," Berkeley answered. "And I agree. The junction, then."

The sigh of servo-mechanism, the flare of intolerably hot blue flame, and the ship stood motionless above the junction of canals. Ponderously, slowly, she settled; held aloft by the pillars of flame beneath her, directly above the junction, fusing the sand in the canals to glass, exploding their walls with steam. Within their warm and protected burrows beside the canals, slitted nostrils closed, iris of eyes contracted, fluted layers of skin opened and pulled tight, and opened again convulsively in the reflexes of death.

There was a slight jar only as the ship settled to the ground, bathed in the mushrooming flame.

"A good landing, Lieutenant," Captain Griswold complimented. "A good landing, indeed."

His head came up and he watched the screen to see the landscape reappear through the dust and steam.

"Prepare to disembark in approximately six hours, Lieutenant. The heat should have subsided sufficiently by then. The ship's officers, the civ—er—scientific party, a complement of men. I will lead the way. You, Lieutenant, will carry the flag and the necessary appurtenances to the ceremony. We will hold it without delay."

Berkeley was watching the screen also. He wondered what the effect of the landing heat would be on the canals. He wondered why it had been considered necessary to land squarely on the junction; why Man always, as if instinctively, does the most destructive thing he can.

He shrugged it away. Wherever they landed might have been the wrong place.

Farther along the canals, where the heat had not reached, the Mars race began to emerge from their protecting burrows. They had seen the meteor hurtling downward, and it was part of their conditioning to seek their burrows when any threatening phenomenon occurred.

Flaming meteors had fallen before, but never in the interlocked racial mind was there memory of one which had fallen directly on a canal junction. Within the fabric of their instinct, they sensed the fused sand, the broken clay walls, the water boiling through the broken walls, wasted. They sensed the waters on the other side of the barrier seeping onward, leaving sand unfilled. Within the nerves of their own bodies they felt the anticipated pangs of tendril roots searching down into the sand for water, and not finding it.

The urgency came upon them, all within the region, to remove this meteor; restore the canals as soon as the heat would permit. They began to gather, circling the meteor, circling the scorched ground around it. The urgency of getting at it before there was too much water lost drove them in upon the hot ground.

The unaccustomed heat held them back. They milled uncertainly, in increasing numbers, around the meteor.

Since Captain Griswold had not asked him to leave the control room during landing operations, Berkeley still stood and watched the screen. At the first appearance of the Mars race emerging from the soil, he exclaimed in great excitement:

"There they are! There they are, Captain!"

Griswold came over and stood beside him, watching the screen. His eyes widened.

"Horrible," he muttered in revulsion. The gorge arose in his throat and stopped his speech for a moment. But history took possession of him again. "I suppose we will get accustomed to their appearance in time," he conceded.

"They're the builders, Captain. Wonderful!" Berkeley exulted. "Those shovel-shaped forelimbs—they're the builders!"

"Perhaps," Griswold agreed. "But in the way a mole or gopher—still, if they were intelligent enough to be trained for mining operations—but then you certainly cannot call these things intelligent, Mr. Berkeley."

"How do we know, Captain?"

But the Captain was looking about vainly for buildings, for factory smoke, for highways.

"Lieutenant Atkinson!" he called.

"Yes, sir."

"Send an immediate order throughout the ship. The Mars things are not to be molested." He glanced at Berkeley as he gave the order, and then glanced away. "Double the complement of men on the landing party and see that they are fully armed." Then back to Berkeley, "A good leader guards against every contingency. But there will be no indiscriminate slaughter. You may be assured of that. I am

as anxious as you that Man—”

”Thank you, Captain,” Berkeley answered. ”And the planting of the flag? The taking possession?”

”Well, now, Mr. Berkeley, what shall we do, now that we have seen some—things? Go away? Leave an entire planet of iron ore to be claimed later by Eastern Alliance? The enemy is not far behind us in their technology, Mr. Berkeley.”

He warmed to his theme, his head came up, his shoulders back.

”Suppose these things are intelligent. Suppose they do have feelings of one kind or another. What would happen to them if the Eastern Alliance laid claim to this planet? Under us, at least, they will have protection. We will set aside reservations where they may live in peace. Obviously they live in burrows in the ground; I see no buildings. Their total food supply must be these miserable plants. What a miserable existence they have now!

”We will change that. We will provide them with adequate food, the food to fill their empty stomachs—if they have stomachs. We will clothe their repulsive nakedness. If they have enough sense to learn, we will give them the pride of self-employment in our mines and factories. We would be less than human, Mr. Berkeley, if we did not acknowledge our duty.”

The light of noble intention shone in his face. He was swept away with his own eloquence.

”If,” he finished, ”we take care of the duty, the destiny will take care of itself!”

That was very good. He hoped they would have the grace to quote him on that. It was a fine summing up of his entire character.

Berkeley smiled a rueful smile. There was no stopping it. It was not a matter of not planting the flag, not taking possession. The captain was right. If not the Western Alliance, then certainly the Eastern Alliance. His quarrel was not with the captain nor with the duty, but with the destiny. The issue was not to be decided now. It had already been decided—decided when the first apeman had crept into the tree nest of another and stolen his mate.

Man takes. Whether it be by barbaric rapine, or reluctant acceptance of duty through carefully contrived diplomacy, Man takes.

Berkeley turned and made his way out of the control room.

Outside, the soil shifted in its contortions of cooling. The wind whispered dryly over the red landscape, sending up little swirls of dust, eternally shifting it from one place to another. The soil was less hot, and as it cooled, the Mars race pressed inward. Theirs was the urgency to get at this meteor as quickly as possible,

remove it, start the water flowing once more.

"Observation reports ground cool enough for landing!" The magic words seemed to sing into the control cabin.

"Summon all landing party," Captain Griswold commanded immediately.

The signal bells rang throughout the ship. The bell in the supercargo cabin rang also. With the other scientists, Berkeley dressed in his protecting suit, fitted the clear glassite oxygen helmet over his head, fastened it. Together with the rest, he stood at the designated airlock to await the captain's coming.

And the captain did not keep them waiting. At precisely the right moment, with only a flicker of a side glance at the photographic equipment, the captain strode ahead of his officers to the airlock. The sealing doors of the corridor behind them closed, shutting off the entire party, making the corridor itself into a great airlock.

There was a long sigh, and the great beams of the locks moved ponderously against their weight. There was the rush of air from the corridor as the heavier pressure rushed out through the opening locks, to equalize with the thin air of Mars. With the air rushed outward fungus spores, virus, microbes; most of them to perish under the alien conditions, but some to survive—and thrive.

The red light above the lock was blinking on-off-on-off. The officers, the scientists, the armed men, watched the light intently. It blinked off for the last time. The locks were open. The great ramp settled to the ground.

In ordered, military file, the captain at their head, the landing party passed down the corridor, through the locks, out upon the ramp beneath the blue-black sky; and down to the red soil. Captain Griswold was the first man to set foot on Mars, June 14, 2018. The photographers were second.

Now the Mars race was moving closer to the ship, but the ground was still too hot for their unprotected feet. The pressing need for removing the meteor possessed them. The movement of the men disembarking from the ship was to them no more than another unintelligible aspect of this incredible meteor.

The sound of a bugle pierced the thin air, picked up by the loudspeaker from the ship, reverberating through their helmets. The landing party formed a semi-circle at the foot of the ramp.

Captain Griswold, his face as rigidly set as the marble statuary of him to follow, reached out and took the flag from Lieutenant Atkinson. He planted it firmly, without false motion, in the framework one of the men had set upon the baked ground to receive it.

He pointed to the north, the south, the east, the west. He brought his hands

together, palms downward, arms fully out-stretched in front of him. He spread his arms wide open and down, then back together and up; completing a circle which encompassed all the planet. He held out his right hand and received the scroll from Lieutenant Atkinson.

With a decisive gesture, not quite theatrical, he unfurled the scroll. He read in a voice firm enough to impress all posterity:

"By virtue of authority invested in me from the Supreme Council of the Western Alliance, the only true representatives of Earth and Man, I take possession of all this planet in the name of our President, the Supreme Council, the Western Alliance, Earth, and in the name of God."

The ground was cool enough now that their feet might bear it. The pain was great, but it was lost in the greater pain of feeling the killing obstruction the great meteor had brought to their canals. The Mars race began to press inward, inexorably.

It was in the anticlimactic moment, following the possession ceremony, when men milled around in uncertainty, that Lt. Atkinson saw the Mars race had come closer and were still moving.

"The monsters!" he exclaimed in horror. "They're attacking!"

Berkeley looked, and from the little gestures of movement out of his long training he deduced their true motive.

"Not against us!" he cried. "The ship."

Perhaps his words were more unfortunate than his silence might have been; for the ship was of greater concern to Captain Griswold than his own person.

"Halt!" Griswold shouted toward the approaching Mars race. "Halt or I'll fire!"

The Mars race paid no heed. Slowly they came forward, each step on the hot ground a torture, but a pain which could be borne. The greater torture, the one they could not bear, was the ache to press against this meteor, push it away, that they might dig the juncture clean again. As a man whose breath is stopped fights frantically for air, concerned with nothing else, so they felt the desperation of drying sands.

They came on.

"For the last time," Griswold shouted, "halt!" He made a motion with his hands, as if to push them back, as if to convey his meaning by signs. Involuntarily, then, his eyes sought those of Berkeley. A look of pleading, helplessness. Berkeley met the glance and read the anxiety there, the tragic unwillingness of the man to arouse posterity's rage or contempt.

It was a brief glance only from both men and it was over. Captain Griswold's head came up; his shoulders straightened in the face of the oncoming monsters. They were close now, and coming closer. As always, the experts were free with their advice when it was not needed. When the chips were down, they could do no more than smirk and shrug a helpless shoulder.

He gave the command, and now there was no uncertainty.
"Fire!"

The celebration was being held in the Great Stadium, the largest, most costly structure that Man had ever built. It was a fitting structure for the more important football games; and used on occasion, if they could be fitted in without upsetting the schedule, for State affairs. Now the stadium was filled to capacity, its floor churned by the careless feet of the thousands upon thousands who had managed to obtain an entrance.

From the quarter-mile-high tiers of seats, from the floor of the stadium, the shouts welled up, washing over the platform at the North end.

"Griswold! Griswold!"

It was not yet time for history to assess the justice of the massacre.

The President raised his hand. The battery of video cameras picked up each move.

"Our hopes, our fears, our hearts, our prayers rode through every space-dark, star-flecked mile with these glorious pioneers." He turned then to the captain. "For the people of Earth, *Admiral* Griswold, this medal. A new medal for a Guider of Destiny, Maker of Empire, Son of Man!"

The voice faltered, stopped.

The crowd on the floor of the stadium was pressing outward from the center, screaming in pain and terror. At the moment when the people should be quiet, rapt in reverence, they were emptying the floor of the stadium. But not willingly. They were being pressed back and out, as a great weight pushes its way through water. Those who could move outward no farther were crushed where they stood.

And then the ship appeared.

Hazy of outline, shimmering with impossible angles, seen by its glinting fire of light rather than by its solid form, as if its reality were in some other dimension and this only a projection, the ship appeared.

The President's hand reached out and gripped Griswold's shoulder as he leaned back and back, trying to determine its vast height. A silence then clutched the crowd—a terrified silence.

A full minute passed. Even on the platform, where all the pioneers of Mars were assembled with Earth's dignitaries, even there the people cowered back away from this unseeable, unknowable horror.

But one man leaned forward instead, frantically studying the shimmering outline of the ship. One man—Berkeley.

With the training of the ethnologist, a man who really can deduce an entire civilization from mystifying data, he recognized the tremendous import.

At the end of that minute, without warning, a group of figures hovered in the air near the floor of the stadium.

Quickly, Berkeley's eyes assessed their form, their color, the increasing solidity of the humanoids. There are some movements, some gestures, common to all things of intelligence—the pause, the resolution, the lift of pride.

"No!" he screamed and started forward. "Oh, no! We're civilized. We're intelligent!" He was pulled back, as in his terror he tried to leap from the platform to get at the humanoids.

Held there, unable to move, he read the meaning of the actions of the group hovering near the ship. One flashed a shining tentacle around, as if to point to the stadium, the pitifully small spaceship on display, the crowds of people.

The leader manifestly ignored him. He flowed forward a pace, his ovoid head held high in pride and arrogance. He pointed a tentacle toward the south end of the stadium, and a pillar of leaping flame arose; fed with no fuel, never to cease its fire, the symbol of possession.

He pointed his tentacles to the north, the south, the east, the west. He motioned with his tentacles, as if to encircle all of Earth.

He unfurled a scroll and began to read.

—MARK CLIFTON & ALEX APOSTOLIDES

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