

HOME RUN!

THERE WAS A SILENCE SURROUNDING THE ROCKET-SHIP... A MAJESTIC SILENCE THAT ECHOED OF THE VAST VACUUM OF SPACE AROUND IT. INSIDE ITS GLEAMING HULL, THE FOUR EARTHMEN STOOD IN AWE, THEIR EYES GLUED ON THE VIEW-SCREEN BEFORE THEM, WATCHING MARS SWEEP TOWARD THEM... RED MARS, MYSTERIOUS MARS. FOR A WHILE, THEY DID NOT SPEAK. THEY ONLY STOOD, AS IF LOST IN PRAYER TO THE RUST-COLORED GLOBULAR IDOL. THEN, FINALLY, ONE OF THEM WHISPERED...

IN A FEW HOURS, WE WILL BE THERE... THE FIRST HUMAN BEINGS TO REACH MARS!

... AND WE OWE IT ALL TO YOU, DOCTOR MULLER! MANKIND OWES IT ALL TO YOU!

YOU SHOULD BE VERY PROUD, DOCTOR MULLER. WITHOUT YOUR GENIUS, MAN WOULD STILL BE GROVELING BACK THERE ON EARTH... FIRING ROCKETS BUT A FEW HUNDRED MILES BEYOND THE ATMOSPHERE... TRYING AGAIN AND AGAIN... AND ALWAYS FAILING! YOU, ALONE, HAVE CONQUERED SPACE.

THERE IS A DRIVE WITHIN EACH OF US, GENTLEMEN. A DRIVE TOWARDS A DISTANT, OFTEN UNATTAINABLE GOAL. MINE WAS THIS... REACHING MARS!



DOCTOR MULLER'S VOICE WAS SOFT, ALMOST SING-SONG. HE SPOKE AS IF HE'D OFTEN REHEARSED THE WORDS THAT FLOWED FROM HIS MOUTH. HIS EYES WERE GLUED ON THE RED-SPHERE LOOMING LARGER AND LARGER ON THE VIEW-SCREEN...

TWO YEARS AGO, THE MAN YOU SEE STANDING BEFORE YOU WAS AN OBSCURE ATOMIC SCIENTIST WORKING IN ONE OF THE MANY A.E.C. LABORATORIES. HIS JOB WAS MOSTLY ROUTINE... READING GAUGES AND DIALS, RECORDING, TESTING, REPORTING. HE WAS NOTHING BUT A COG IN THE HUGE MACHINE OF ATOMIC DEVELOPMENT.



BUT SOMETHING HAPPENED TO THAT OLD DOCTOR MULLER. SOMETHING CHANGED HIM INTO THE MAN YOU SEE. IT WAS LIKE AN AWAKENING... A REBIRTH. I REMEMBER HOW, ONE MORNING, I LEFT MY STATION AT THE PILE AND WALKED INTO MY SUPERVISOR'S OFFICE...

DOCTOR CAXTON. I WOULD LIKE TO BE TRANSFERRED!

WHA...? TRANSFERRED?! BUT, MULLER! I THOUGHT YOU WERE SO HAPPY HERE!



A SCIENCE-FICTION SUSPENSORY

YOU THOUGHT **WRONG**, SIR. I AM **NOT** HAPPY HERE! I WANT TO BE TRANSFERRED TO **RESEARCH... ENGINE RESEARCH!**

MULLER! YOU **SURPRISE** ME! YOU'VE ALWAYS SEEMED **CONTENT** TO OPERATE THE PILE AND RECORD YOUR FINDINGS...

PERHAPS IT **SEEMED** THAT WAY TO YOU, SIR. BUT REGARDLESS OF HOW IT **LOOKED**, I **DESPISED** THE WORK. MY MIND WAS OUT **THERE... ON THE STARS...**

STARS? ARE YOU INTERESTED IN **SPACE TRAVEL**, MULLER?

I AM... **DESPERATELY!**

BUT **SPACE-TRAVEL** IS **YEARS OFF**. YOU **MAY NEVER LIVE** TO SEE IT.



SPACE TRAVEL COULD BE HERE **TOMORROW** WITH THE PROPER ENGINE. AND I THINK I CAN **DEVELOP** THAT ENGINE. I WANT THAT **CHANGE...**

ALL RIGHT, MULLER. I'M **SORRY** TO SEE YOU **GO!** HEAVEN KNOWS YOU'VE BEEN A **DEVOTED WORKER**. AND, QUITE **FRANKLY**, I DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD IT **IN** YOU TO DO **RESEARCH**, BUT IF IT'S WHAT YOU **WANT...**

'AND SO, A WEEK LATER I WAS TRANSFERRED, AS PER MY REQUEST, TO THE RESEARCH DIVISION OF THE ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION, ATOMIC ENGINE DEVELOPMENT SECTION ...'

GLAD TO HAVE YOU **WITH** US, DOCTOR MULLER. THE **FACILITIES** OF THE **LABORATORY** ARE **ALL YOURS**. IS THERE ANY **PARTICULAR** PHASE OF OUR WORK THAT YOU ARE **INTERESTED** IN?

I AM INTERESTED IN DEVELOPING AN **EFFICIENT ATOMIC ENGINE** CAPABLE OF POWERING A **ROCKET-SHIP**, SIR!



'I REMEMBER HOW MY NEW SUPERIOR LAUGHED...'

A **ROCKET-SHIP ENGINE!** **REALLY**, DOCTOR MULLER! LET US BE **PRACTICAL!** WE **HAVE** DEVELOPED AN ATOMIC-ENGINE FOR AN **AIRPLANE**, AND WE HAVE DONE THE SAME FOR A **SUBMARINE**, BUT THE AMOUNT OF **ENERGY** NEEDED IS **SMALL** COMPARED TO THAT NEEDED FOR A **ROCKET-SHIP**.

I AM AWARE OF THAT, SIR. BUT I HAVE **SOME THEORIES...** AND I WOULD LIKE TO **TRY**.

'...HOW HE SHRUGGED...'

ALL RIGHT. BUT I'M AFRAID OUR ATOMIC KNOW-HOW AT THE PRESENT TIME PROHIBITS SUCH A PROJECT. HOWEVER... IF YOUR HEART IS SET ON IT...GO AHEAD AND **TRY!**

THANK YOU, SIR.



'AND SO I SET TO WORK. IN LESS THAN TWO MONTHS, I HAD COMPLETED MY DESIGNS...'

YOU ASKED TO SEE ME, MULLER. YES, SIR, I HAVE SOMETHING I WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOU...



'I SPREAD MY BLUE-PRINT DESIGNS BEFORE MY SUPERIOR...'

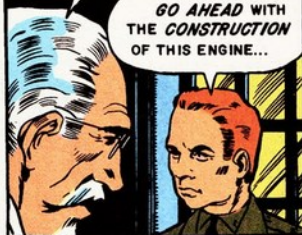
IF MY CALCULATIONS ARE CORRECT, SIR, THIS ENGINE WILL DELIVER A THRUST-FORCE CAPABLE OF DRIVING SIX TIMES ITS WEIGHT TO A SPEED OF SEVEN MILES PER SECOND...
GOOD LORD. THAT'S... ESCAPE VELOCITY!



'I NODDED...'

YES SIR, ESCAPE VELOCITY... THE SPEED NEEDED TO BREAK AWAY FROM EARTH'S GRAVITATIONAL FIELD...

I... I'M SPEECHLESS, MULLER. YOU... YOU HAVE MY PERMISSION TO GO AHEAD WITH THE CONSTRUCTION OF THIS ENGINE...



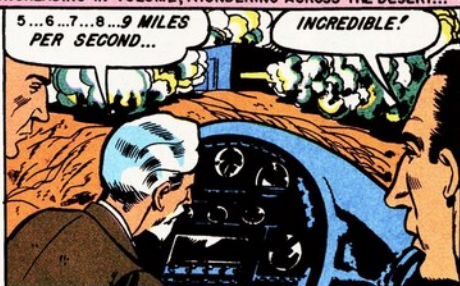
'WORK ON THE ENGINE BEGAN. AT THE END OF ONE YEAR, IT WAS COMPLETED. THE DAY WE WERE TO TEST MY ENGINE ARRIVED. IT HAD BEEN SET UP IN A DESERTED SECTION OF THE ARMY PROVING GROUNDS AT WHITE SANDS. A SMALL CROWD OF HIGH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND ARMY BRASS WERE PRESENT...'

'THE ENGINE HAD BEEN ENCLOSED IN A SMALL SQUARE CONCRETE BUILDING LINED WITH SEVEN-INCH WALLS TO PROTECT THE OBSERVING PARTY FROM RADIATION. WE STOOD AT A SAFE DISTANCE, WHERE A CONTROL PANEL HAD BEEN SET UP. I THREW THE SWITCH. A DULL ROAR, INCREASING IN VOLUME, THUNDERING ACROSS THE DESERT...'



READY, MULLER?

READY, SIR!



5...6...7...8...9 MILES PER SECOND...

INCREDIBLE!

'I TURNED THE ENGINE OFF. THE GROUND BELOW OUR FEET STOPPED VIBRATING. THE THUNDER ECHOED AWAY INTO SILENCE. THE GATHERED OBSERVERS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER...'

I WOULD LIKE TO BE GIVEN PERMISSION TO HELP WITH THE DESIGNING OF THE ROCKET-SHIP WHICH MY ENGINE WILL POWER.

OF COURSE, MULLER. OF COURSE.

A ROCKET-SHIP, DRIVEN BY THAT ENGINE, WOULD BE CAPABLE OF REACHING THE MOON, GENTLEMEN!

MULLER, YOU'RE TO BE CONGRATULATED. YOU'VE DONE YOUR COUNTRY A GREAT SERVICE. I HAVE A REQUEST, SIR!



'AND SO, AGAIN I WAS TRANSFERRED... THIS TIME TO THE ARMY AIR FORCE ROCKET AND GUIDED MISSILE DIVISION. THERE, FOR THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, ENGINEERS AND DRAFTSMEN WORKED ON THE DESIGNS AND SPECIFICATIONS OF THE FIRST ATOMIC-POWERED ROCKET-SHIP...

MAY I MAKE A SUGGESTION, SIR. DON'T YOU THINK THE EXHAUST BAFFLES WOULD OPERATE MORE EFFICIENTLY AT A GREATER ANGLE?

HMMMM. WHY, I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT, MULLER. YES! YOU ARE RIGHT!



'I HELPED WHEREVER I COULD... MAKING SUGGESTIONS... REDESIGNING... CHANGING. FINALLY, ACTUAL CONSTRUCTION BEGAN...

WELL, MULLER... YOUR DREAM IS ALMOST COMPLETED. IN ANOTHER MONTH, THAT SHIP WITH YOUR ENGINE WILL BE ON ITS WAY TO THE MOON...

AND, I HOPE, I WILL BE ABOARD. YOU WILL SEE TO IT, SIR, THAT I AM INCLUDED IN ITS CREW...?



IF YOU INSIST UPON GOING, I WON'T STAND IN YOUR WAY, MULLER!

THANK YOU, SIR!

'IN A MONTH, EVERYTHING WAS READY. BUT I STILL WASN'T SATISFIED. I HAD ONE MORE THING TO DO...

YOU ASKED TO SEE ME, MULLER.

YES, SIR. I WOULD LIKE TO REQUEST A CHANGE OF DESTINATION FOR MAN'S FIRST SPACE TRIP...



CHANGE, MULLER? WHY?

OUR SHIP IS CAPABLE OF GOING TO MARS, SIR. WE KNOW THERE'S NO LIFE ON THE MOON, BUT MARS... WELL, WE COULD FIND OUT...



'YOU KNOW THE REST, GENTLEMEN... THE ARGUMENTS AND DEBATES, I FOUGHT DESPERATELY FOR THE MARS OBJECTIVE. AND I WON...'

'THE SECONDS TICKED OFF. I THREW THE SWITCH. MY ENGINE ROARED. OUR MARS BOUND SHIP SHUDDERED. THEN LEAPED INTO THE STAR-STUDDED SKY...'



STAND BY FOR TAKE-OFF...

CLEAR THE LAUNCHING SITE...



... AND WE WERE ON OUR WAY...'

THERE WAS A SILENCE SURROUNDING THE ROCKET-SHIP... A MAJESTIC SILENCE THAT ECHOED OF THE VAST VACUUM OF SPACE AROUND IT. DOCTOR MULLER STARED AT THE NEARING RED SPHERE...

YES, GENTLEMEN. THERE IS A DRIVE WITHIN EACH OF US. MINE WAS TO REACH MARS!

WHEN DID YOU FIRST FEEL THIS COMPULSION, DOCTOR?



DOCTOR MULLER TURNED AND SMILED...

WHEN I CRASHED ON EARTH, GENTLEMEN.

G-CRASHED? OH, COME, MULLER. DON'T JOKE WITH US!



THE GUN THAT SUDDENLY APPEARED IN DOCTOR MULLER'S HAND UNDERLINED EMPHATICALLY HIS STATEMENT...

I'M NOT JOKING, GENTLEMEN! I CRASHED ON EARTH OVER TWO YEARS AGO! I TOLD YOU THAT THE MAN STANDING BEFORE YOU WAS AN OBSCURE ATOMIC SCIENTIST. WELL, HE WAS!



'AND I... I AM A MARTIAN. MY TRUE SHAPE IS THAT OF AN EVER-CHANGING PROTOPLASMIC MASS CAPABLE OF ASSUMING THE SHAPE OF WHATEVER I ABSORB. I SLITHERED FROM MY WRECKED SCOUT-SHIP UNHURT...'



'AND I KNEW THAT I HAD TO GET BACK TO MARS... MY HOME... AT ALL COSTS. BUT YOU... YOU EARTHLINGS... HAD NOT DEVELOPED SPACE-FLIGHT. AND THEN I HIT UPON MY PLAN. I DESTROYED THE REMAINS OF MY SHIP...'



'I MOVED ACROSS YOUR WORLD BY NIGHT, KEEPING HIDDEN, UNTIL I FOUND WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR. DOCTOR MULLER...'

'YES, GENTLEMEN. I PICKED ON DOCTOR MULLER. I ABSORBED HIM... ASSIMILATED HIM...'

THAT SUCKING, GULPING SOUND! WHO... WHO'S THERE? GOOD LORD!



... I BECAME HIM... ASSUMED HIS SHAPE...'

THE FIGURE BEFORE THEM, BRANDING THE GUN, CONTINUED...

WHAT BETTER METHOD COULD I HAVE USED TO RETURN TO MARS THAN TO HELP YOU EARTHLINGS DEVELOP THE MEANS...SPACE-TRAVEL. THIS WAS LIKE CHILD'S PLAY FOR ME, COMPARING THIS TO THE SPACE-SHIPS WE HAVE IS LIKE COMPARING YOUR BICYCLES TO YOUR JET-PLANES! BUT I HAD TO BE CAREFUL! I COULDN'T AFFORD TO AROUSE SUSPICION!



THE FIGURE POINTED TO THE VIEW-SCREEN...

IN A FEW MINUTES WE ARE GOING TO LAND. OTHERS LIKE ME WILL BE WAITING... READY TO ASSIMILATE AND ABSORB YOU JUST AS I HAVE ABSORBED DOCTOR MULLER, AND WE WILL RETURN AGAIN TO EARTH. IT IS THE BEGINNING...



HE... HE'S OUT OF HIS MIND. HE'LL KILL US!

THE STRAIN HAS BEEN TOO MUCH FOR HIM...

IT WILL CONTINUE! THERE WILL BE MORE TRIPS... MORE ABSORPTIONS... UNTIL ENOUGH OF US ARE ON EARTH TO CONQUER IT, YOU...

GET HIM!



THEY STRUGGLED. A SHOT RANG OUT...



DOCTOR MULLER FELL TO THE ALLOY DECK FLOOR... A BULLET HOLE IN HIS CHEST...



HE'S DEAD! A GREAT SCIENTIST!

HE... HE WAS LIVING! QUICKLY! INTO YOUR SHOCK-COUCHES!

THE SHIP CAME DOWN... KICKING UP THE RED DUST, IT CAME TO REST ON THE RED-PLANET'S SURFACE. THE THREE EARTHMEN ROSE FROM THEIR SHOCK-COUCHES...

MARS! WE'VE REACHED MARS!

TOO BAD MULLER DIDN'T LIVE TO SEE IT!

MULLER...? HE... HE... LOOK!



ON THE DECK, WHERE MULLER'S BODY HAD BEEN, THERE NOW LAY A SHAPELESS QUIVERING PROTOPLASMIC MASS...

GOOD LORD!

HE... HE...

LISTEN!



BELOW, THE THREE EARTHLINGS HEARD THE UNMISTAKABLE CLANG OF THE SHIP'S PORT. AND THEN, ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY, THE SOUNDS...THE SLITHERING, SUCKING, GULPING SOUNDS...