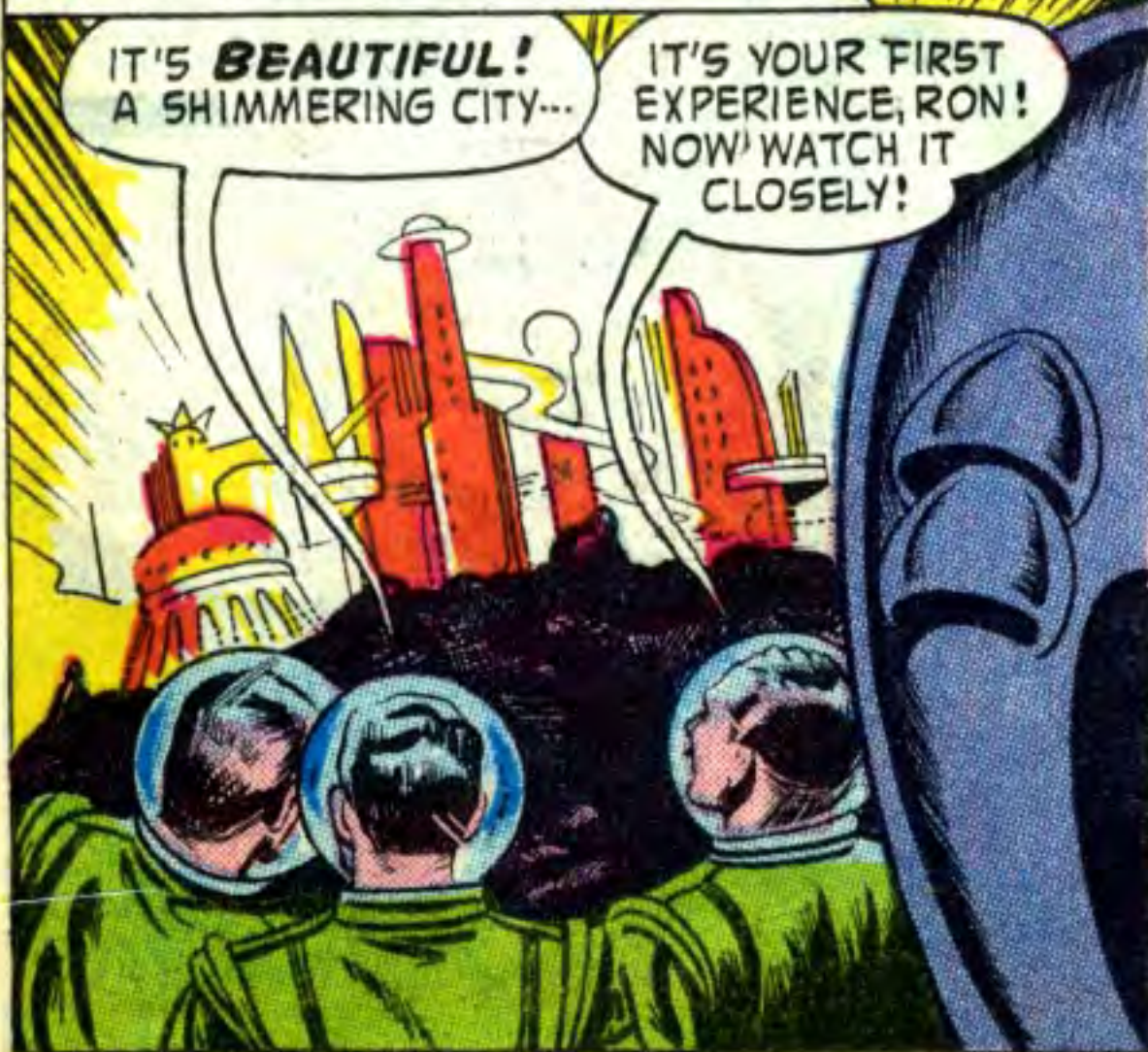


The GLORY THAT HAD ONCE BEEN MARS HAD LONG SINCE PASSED INTO OBLIVION, AND ALL THAT REMAINED ON THE DEAD, LIFELESS PLANET WAS THE STRANGE, UNEXPLAINABLE PHENOMENON KNOWN AS ...

The MARTIAN MIRAGE



As THE IMAGE SHARPENED IN DETAIL...



IT'S FADING OUT! RIGHT BEFORE OUR EYES!

AND THERE YOU HAVE IT, THE MARTIAN MIRAGE! FOR 200 YEARS OUR SPACE EXPEDITIONS HAVE WITNESSED THIS SPECTACLE, AND STILL IT HAS US GUESSING!



BUT AS THE WEEKS PASSED AND THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE EXPEDITION WENT ABOUT COLLECTING THEIR DATA, RON STUDIED THE STRANGE SIGHT...

IT COMES AND IT GOES! BUT WHERE, WHY, HOW?

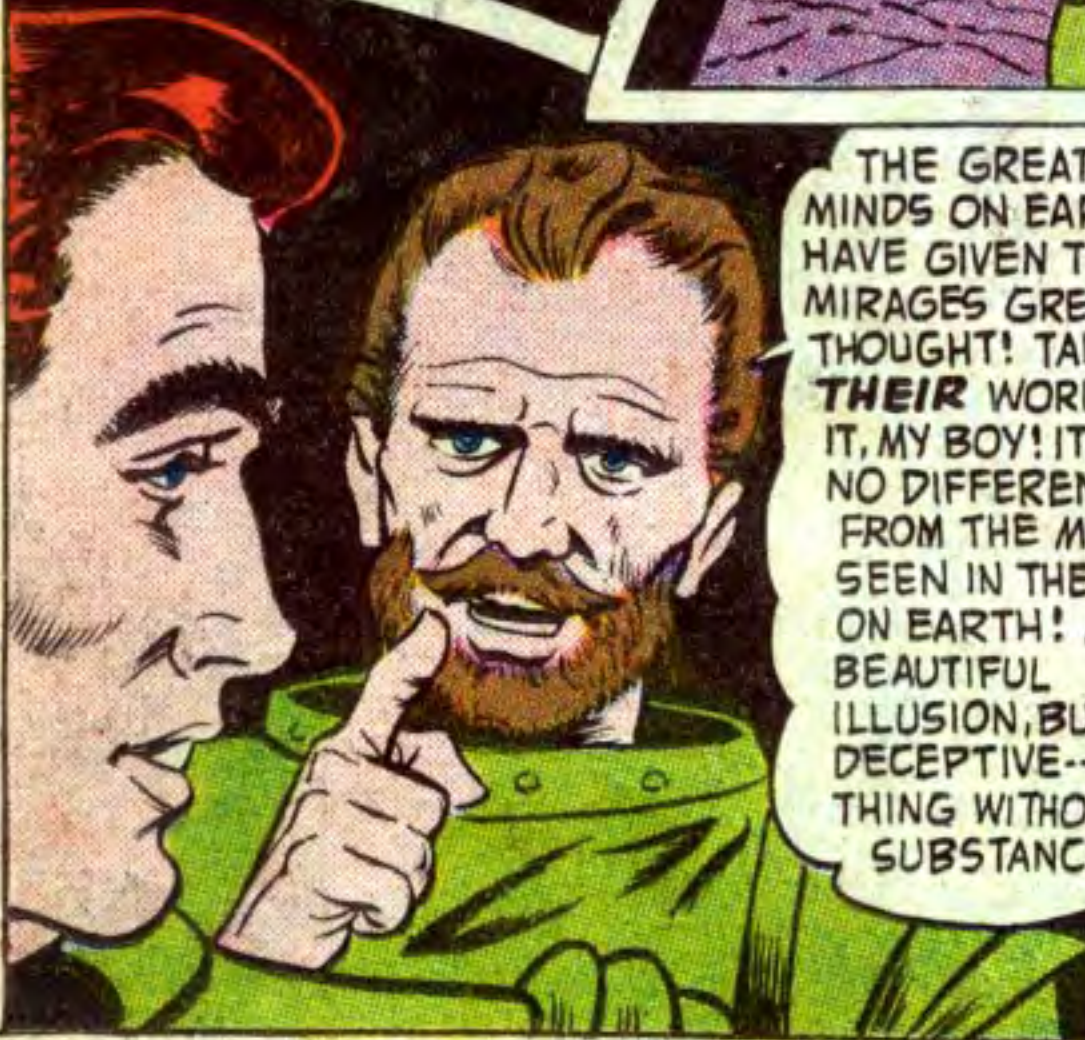
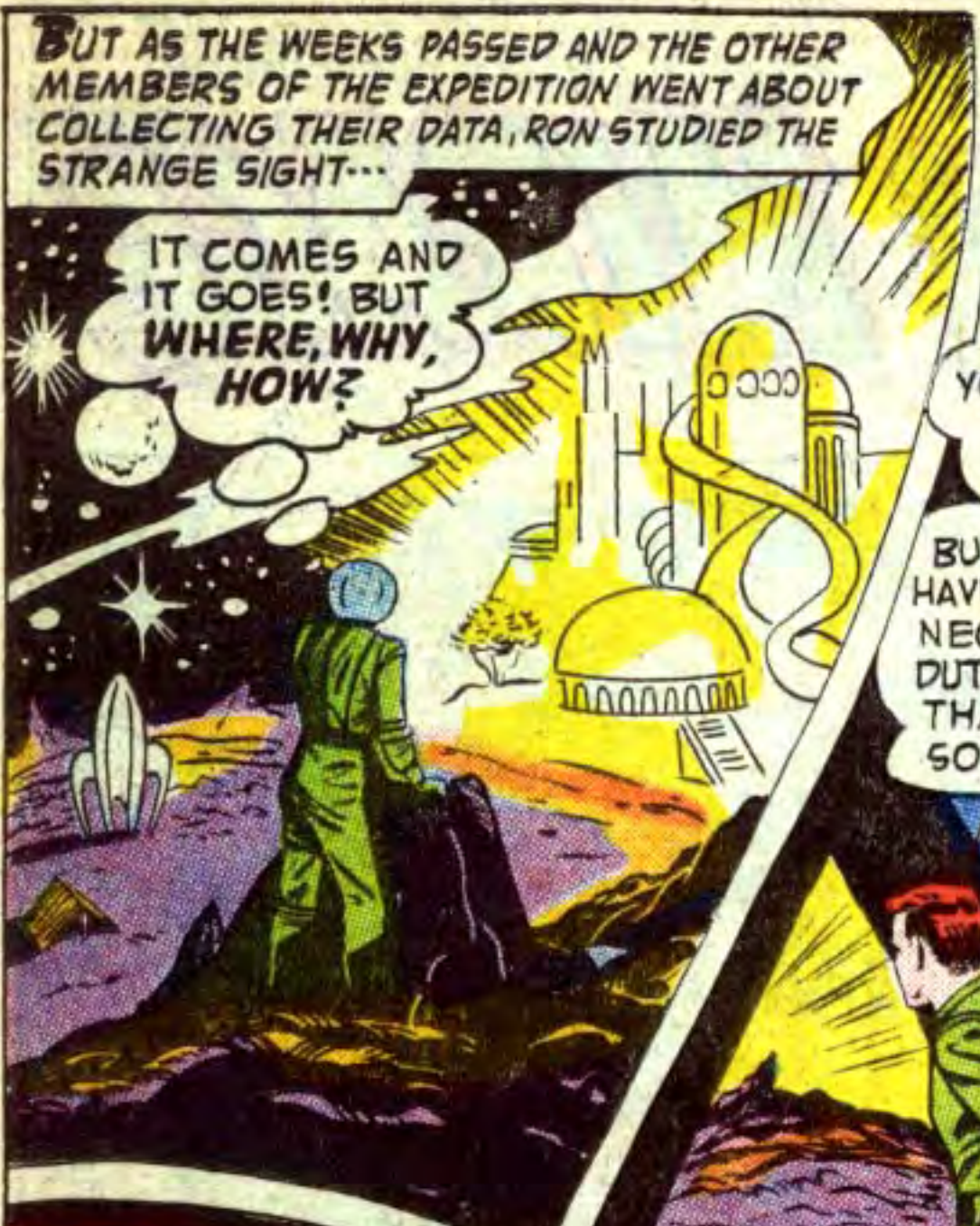
GROTZ, THE EXPEDITION LEADER, HAD NOTED HIS INTEREST...

YOU'RE BECOMING TOO ENGROSSED WITH THE MIRAGE! I CAN UNDERSTAND YOUR ENTHUSIASM, THIS BEING YOUR FIRST TRIP TO MARS, BUT...

I KNOW IT ISN'T REAL! TWICE NOW I TRIED TO STEAL UP ON IT! EACH TIME, JUST AS I APPROACHED, IT WOULD FADE... LEAVING ONLY THE DRY, GRITTY SAND! AND STILL... I FIND MYSELF WONDERING...

AND I SAY PUT IT OUT OF YOUR THOUGHTS!

BUT I HAVEN'T BEEN NEGLECTING MY DUTIES! IT'S JUST THAT I FIND IT SO FASCINATING!



THE GREATEST MINDS ON EARTH HAVE GIVEN THESE MIRAGES GREAT THOUGHT! TAKE THEIR WORD FOR IT, MY BOY! IT'S NO DIFFERENT FROM THE MIRAGES SEEN IN THE DESERTS ON EARTH! A BEAUTIFUL ILLUSION, BUT DECEPTIVE... A THING WITHOUT SUBSTANCE!

TIME AND AGAIN RON WOULD APPROACH THE STRANGE MIRAGE, AND EACH TIME...

THERE IT GOES! THE MOMENT ANYONE APPROACHES... IT BEGINS TO FADE!



ON THE NIGHT BEFORE THEIR RETURN TO EARTH...

I CAN'T BELIEVE WHAT GROTZ SAYS! THAT MIRAGE IS MORE THAN A DECEPTIVE ILLUSION! WE KNOW THAT MARS ONCE HAD A CULTURE, LONG AGO, LONG BEFORE OUR FIRST SPACE SHIPS EVER CAME HERE! PERHAPS IT **HASN'T** DIED... COULD THE **MIRAGE** BE THE ANSWER?



SLEEP PRESSED DOWN UPON HIM... A FACE OF HAUNTING BEAUTY FILLED HIS DREAM...

I AM **OLANNI**, AND IT IS AS YOU THINK! THE MIRAGE IS BUT A SECOND APPEARANCE OF A REALITY THAT **EXISTS!** YOU BELIEVE BEYOND THE SENSE OF SIGHT OR TOUCH, AND THAT MAKES YOU **ONE OF US!**





YOU WILL JOIN US!
YOU WILL STAY WITH
US ALWAYS!

I WILL...



I WILL
JOIN YOU,
OLANNI!
I WILL!

HEY, HE'S
TALKING IN
HIS SLEEP!



SNAP OUT OF IT, BOY!
YOU'VE BEEN DREAMING!

I WAS **THERE**, GROTZ! IT'S
REAL! IT'S OUT THERE, I
TELL YOU! I CAN JOIN
THEM, AND YOU **CAN'T**
STOP ME!



ALL RIGHT, RON! I SEE YOU'RE DETER-
MINED! OF COURSE, IT WON'T
BE EASY LEAVING YOU HERE...
ALL BY YOURSELF... ON A
LIFELESS PLANET!

THAT'S
JUST IT, GROTZ!
IT **ISN'T**...



SORRY TO PLAY THIS TRICK...
BUT YOU'RE COMING ALONG
WITH US!

OH-HH!



ONE OF YOU KEEP AN EYE ON
HIM! I'M MOVING BACK THE BLAST-
OFF TIME... WE'LL HEAD BACK FOR
EARTH IN TWO HOURS!



AS THE BLAST-OFF
TIME NEARED...

GROTZ!
THERE'S
TROUBLE!



IT'S **RON!** HE KNOCKED ME DOWN AND MADE OFF!

THE **YOUNG IDIOT!** AFTER HIM!



THERE HE GOES! UP THAT SLOPE!

HE'S A SICK MAN... OUT OF HIS MIND! WE'VE GOT TO GET HIM...



COME BACK, RON! WE WANT TO HELP YOU!

I DON'T **NEED** HELP! I'M NOT GOING BACK!



EITHER YOU COME BACK OR WE LEAVE WITHOUT YOU! WHAT'S IT GOING TO BE?

LOOK!

SOON NOT A TRACE REMAINED... ONLY THE DRIFTING, ENDLESS SAND...

HE'S GONE, GROTZ! LOST FOREVER!

NO... NOT LOST! HE'S HAPPY... HAPPY FOREVER... IN THE **MARTIAN MIRAGE!**

IT'S THE **MARTIAN MIRAGE!** IT'S FORMING ALL AROUND HIM!

SLOWLY, AS IT HAD ALWAYS DONE IN THE PAST, THE MIRAGE BEGAN TO FADE! ONLY THIS TIME...

HE'S **FADING** WITH IT! HE'S PART OF IT!

THEN HE'S NOT SICK... AND IT **WASN'T** A DREAM HE HAD!



The **END!**