



The Eve of the War

IN the last years of the nineteenth century, no one believed that our world was being watched by alien beings with intelligence greater than man's. And even if we knew of the alien's superior intelligence, no one would have believed that they were as mortal as man. As men busied themselves with their various concerns, they were being watched and studied, perhaps almost like a man with a microscope might study the tiny creatures that swarm in a drop of water.

No one gave a thought to the older worlds of space as sources of human danger, or thought that these worlds might contain life. Yet across the gulf of space, alien minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the savage beasts—intellects vast and unsympathetic—regarded our Earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew up their plans against us. And early in the twentieth century came the great invasion.

The planet Mars, if I may remind the reader,

revolves about the sun at a distance of 140,000,000 miles, and the light and heat it receives from the sun are barely half of the amount received by our world. It is older than Earth, and life on its surface must have begun long before life started on Earth.

The cooling that will someday occur on our planet has already started on this neighboring planet. Its physical condition is largely a mystery, but we know that even in its equatorial region the midday temperature barely approaches that of our coldest winter. Its atmosphere is more diluted than ours, its oceans have almost disappeared, and as its seasons change, huge snowcaps gather and melt at both its north and south poles and occasionally expand to cover its temperate zones.

The last stage of existence, which for our world is still incredibly far in the future, has become a present day situation for the inhabitants of Mars. Their immediate problem of survival has brightened their intellects, enlarged their powers, and hardened their hearts. And as they look across space with instruments and intelligence such as we have scarcely dreamed of, they see, only 35,000,000 miles away, a morning star of hope. They see our warmer planet, green with vegetation and blue with water. They see a world bursting with fertility, with glimpses through its drifting clouds of broad stretches of populous

country, green farms and forests, and deep blue seas.

And we men, the dominant creatures who inhabit this Earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as the monkeys and apes are to us. The intellectual side of man already admits that life is a struggle for existence, and it would seem that this is also the belief on Mars. Their world is at its last stage, and our world is still crowded with life, but crowded only with what they regard as inferior animals. To carry warfare to us is their only escape from the destruction that, generation after generation, is creeping over them.

Before we judge them too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has brought to its fellow human beings as well as any animal species that got in its way. Can we complain if the Martians make war in the same spirit?

The Martians seem to have carried out their preparations with almost perfect precision. Had our primitive telescopes and other instruments permitted it, we might have seen the gathering trouble. Men have studied the red planet for the last hundred years but failed to correctly interpret the changes that they documented so well. All that time, the Martians must have been getting ready.

As our two planets came close to each other a few years ago, a bright light was seen on Mars

by several astronomical observatories. We know now that this light occurred as they manufactured a huge gun barrel. They positioned the gun in a large pit and used it to fire immense projectiles, crammed full of equipment, machines, and Martian warriors, at our planet.

The invasion storm rained down on us just a short time later. Astronomers exchanged exciting news about a huge outbreak of flaming gas from the red planet. Examination by spectroscope indicated a mass of gas, mainly hydrogen, moving with enormous speed toward Earth. This jet of fire disappeared almost immediately. One scientist compared it to a colossal puff of flame suddenly and violently squirted out “like flaming gases blasting out of a gun.”

It proved to be an appropriate phrase. Yet the next day there was little in the papers, and the world went on in ignorance of the gravest danger that ever threatened the human race. I might not have heard of the eruption at all had I not bumped into a well-known astronomer at my university. He was immensely excited at the news, and invited me up to his observatory for a look at the red planet.

In spite of all that has happened since, I still remember that vigil very distinctly: the black and silent observatory, the shadowed lantern throwing a feeble glow on the floor in the corner, the little slit in the roof with the starlight twinkling

above. Looking through the telescope, one saw a circle of deep black and the little red planet floating in the center. It seemed like such a little thing, so bright and small and still.

Invisible to us because it was so remote, flying swiftly and steadily toward us across that incredible distance, drawing nearer every minute by so many thousands of miles, came the thing they were sending us. That thing, and the others that followed, would soon bring incredible struggle and calamity and death to Earth. I never dreamed of it then as I watched; no one on Earth dreamed of that unerring missile.

That night, too, there was another jet of gas streaming out from the distant planet. I saw it. It was a reddish flash—the slightest projection out from the planet's surface. I called my friend to look, and then listened while he excitedly described the explosion of gas that came out toward us.

That night another invisible missile started on its way to the Earth, just twenty-four hours after the first one. I remember how I stood there, little suspecting the meaning of what I had seen and all that it would soon bring to me. We watched until one o'clock, and then gave up and walked toward his house. Down below in the darkness was the peaceful village where we lived and its hundreds of people, sleeping in peace.

That night my friend was full of speculation

about Mars but scoffed at my idea that its inhabitants were signaling us. His idea was that meteorites might be falling on the distant planet, or that a huge volcanic explosion was in progress. He pointed out how unlikely it was that organic evolution had taken the same direction in the two different planets.

“The chances against anything manlike on Mars are a million to one,” he said.

Hundreds of observers saw the puff of flame that night and the night after, and again the night after; and so on for ten nights, a flame each night. Why the eruptions stopped after the tenth, no one has attempted to explain. Dense clouds of smoke, visible through a powerful telescope on Earth as little gray, fluctuating patches, spread through the clearness of the red planet’s atmosphere and obscured its more familiar features.

Even the daily papers woke up to the disturbances at last, and stories appeared here, there, and everywhere concerning the volcanoes on Mars. And, unsuspected, those missiles the Martians had fired at us came closer, rushing many miles a second through the empty gulf of space, hour by hour and day by day, nearer and nearer.

It seems incredible to me now that men could continue with their petty concerns while that fate was hanging over us. For my own part, I was busy writing a series of philosophical papers

discussing the development of moral ideas as civilization progressed.

One night (the first missile was probably only 10,000,000 miles away) I went for a walk with my wife. It was a cloudless night with bright starlight, and I explained the Signs of the Zodiac to her, and pointed out Mars, a bright dot of red light just above the horizon. There were lights in the upper windows of the houses as the people went to bed. From the railway station in the distance came the sounds of trains, ringing and rumbling, softened almost into melody by the distance. My wife pointed out the brightness of the red, green, and yellow signal lights hanging in a framework against the sky. It seemed so safe and tranquil.