

The background is an abstract composition of overlapping, textured ribbons in shades of blue, green, and orange. A white starburst or compass rose is visible in the upper left quadrant. The overall style is reminiscent of mid-20th-century graphic design.

REBELLS OF THE RED PLANET

CHARLES L. FONTENAY

FUTUR
1950

REBELS OF THE RED PLANET

by

CHARLES L. FONTENAY

Charles L. Fontenay has also written:

TWICE UPON A TIME (D-266)

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MARS FOR THE MARTIANS!

Dark Kensington had been dead for twenty-five years. It was a fact; everyone knew it. Then suddenly he reappeared, youthful, brilliant, ready to take over the Phoenix, the rebel group that worked to overthrow the tyranny that gripped the settlers on Mars.

The Phoenix had been destroyed not once, not twice, but three times! But this time the resurrected Dark had new plans, plans which involved dangerous experiments in mutation and psionics.

And now the rebels realized they were in double jeopardy. Not only from the government's desperate hatred of their movement, but also from the growing possibility that the new breed of mutated monsters would get out of hand and bring terrors never before known to man.

CHARLES L. FONTENAY writes: "I was born in Brazil of a father who was by birth English and by parentage German and French, and of a mother who was by birth American and by parentage American and Scottish. This mess of internationalism caused me some trouble in the army during World War II as the government couldn't decide whether I was American, British, or Brazilian; and both as an enlisted man and an officer I dealt in secret work which required citizenship by birth. On three occasions I had to dig into the lawbooks. Finally they gave up and admitted I was an American citizen...."

"I was raised on a West Tennessee farm and distinguished myself in school principally by being the youngest, smallest (and consequently the fastest-running) child in my classes ... Newspaper work has been my career since 1936. I have worked for three newspapers, including *The Nashville Tennessean* for which I am now rewrite man, and before the war for the Associated Press."

Mr. Fontenay is married, lives in Madison, Tenn., and has had one other novel published by Ace Books.

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1

It is a sea, though they call it sand.

They call it sand because it is still and red and dense with grains. They call it sand because the thin wind whips it, and whirls its dusty skim away to the tight horizons of Mars.

But only a sea could so brood with the memory of aeons. Only a sea, lying so silent beneath the high skies, could hint the mystery of life still behind its barren veil.

To practical, rational man, it is the Xanthe Desert. Whatever else he might unwittingly be, S. Nuwell Eli considered himself a practical, rational man, and it was across the bumpy sands of the Xanthe Desert that he guided his groundcar westward with that somewhat cautious proficiency that mistrusts its own mastery of the machine. Maya Cara Nome, his colleague in this mission to which he had addressed himself, was a silent companion.

Nuwell's liquid brown eyes, insistent upon their visual clarity, saw the red sand as the blowing surface of unliving solidity. Only clarity was admitted to Nuwell, and the only living clarity was man and beast and vegetation, spotted in the dome cities and dome farms of the lowlands. He and Maya scurried, transiting sparks of the only life, insecure and hastening in the absence of the net of roads which eventually would bind the Martian surface to human reality from the toeholds of the dome cities.

In that opposite world which was the other side of the groundcar's seat, Maya Cara Nome's opaque black eyes struggled against the surface. They struggled not from any rational motivation but from long stubbornness, from habit, as a fly kicks six-legged and constant against the surface tension of a trapping

pool.

Formally, Maya was allied to Newell's clarity and solidity, and she could express this alliance with complete logic if called on. But behind the casually blowing sand she sensed a depth. The shimmering atmosphere, hostile to man, which sealed the red desert was a lens that distorted and concealed by its intervention. The groundcar was a mechanical bug, an alienness with which timorous man had allied himself; allied with it against reality, she and Nuwell were hastened by it through reality, unseeing, toward the goal of a more comfortable unreality.

The groundcar bumped and slithered, and an orange dust-cloud boiled up from its broad tires and wafted away across the sculpted sand. The desert stretched away, silent and empty, to the distant horizon; the groundcar the only humming disturbance of its silence and emptiness. The steel-blue sky shimmered above, a lens capping the red surface.

The groundcar rolled westward, slashing toward its goal from the distant lowland of Solis Lacus. Far away, two men, machineless, plodded this same Xanthe Desert toward the same goal; but they plodded southward, approaching on a different radius.

They were naked. In a thin atmosphere without sufficient oxygen to support animal life or even the higher forms of terrestrial plant life, they wore no marsuits, no helmets, no oxygen tanks.

The man who walked in front was tall, erect, powerfully muscled. His features and short-clipped hair were coarse, but self-assured intelligence shone in his smoky eyes. He moved across the loose sand, barefoot, with easy grace.

The—man?—that shambled behind him was as tall, but appeared shorter and even more muscular because his shoulders and head were hunched forward. His even coarser face was characterized by vacuously slack mouth and blue eyes empty of any expression except an occasional brief frown of puzzlement.

Toward a focal point: from the east, two people; from the north, two people. If in the efficient self-assurance of Adam Hennessey could be paralleled a variant harmony with the insistent surfaceness of S. Nuwell Eli, does any

coincidental parallelism exist between Brute Hennessey and Maya Cara Nome?

Puzzlement was the climate of Brute's mind. This surface film of things through which he ploughed his way, the swarming currents below the surface—all were chaos. He grasped vaguely at comprehension without achieving, the effective coalescence of electric ideas always falling short before reaching consciousness.

The two men plodded, naked, through the loose sand. Above them in the Mars-blue dome of day, the weak sun turned downward, warning of its eventual departure.

A two-passengered groundcar and two men, widely apart, and yet bound for the same destination....

The destination was a lone, sprawling building in the desert. It could have been a huge warehouse, or a fortress, of black, almost windowless Martian stone. The only outstanding feature of its virtually featureless hulk was a tower which struck upward from its northern side.

As the summer afternoon progressed, Dr. G. O. T. Hennessey paced the windy summit of the tower, peered frequently into the desert north beneath a sunshading hand, and waggled his goat beard in annoyance under his transparent marshelmet.

Had the helmet speaker been on or the air less thin, one might have determined that Goat Hennessey was utilizing some choice profanity, directed at those two absent personages whose names were, respectively, Adam and Brute.

The airlock to the tower elevator opened and a small creature—a child?—emerged onto the roof. Distorted, humpbacked and barrel-chested, it scuttled on reed-thin legs to Goat's side. It wore no marsuit.

"Father!" screeched this apparition, its thin voice curiously muffled by the tenuous air. "Petway fell in the laundry vat!"

"For the love of space!" muttered Goat in exasperation. "Is there water in it?"

When the newcomer gave no sign of hearing, Goat realized his helmet speaker was off. He switched it on.

"Is there water in the vat?" he repeated.

"Yes, sir. It's full of suds and clothes."

"Well, go fish him out before he soaks up all the water. The soap will make him sick."

The messenger turned, almost tripping over its own broad feet, and went back through the airlock. Goat returned to his northward vigil.

Miles away, Nuwell slowed the groundcar as it approached the lip of that precipitous slope bordering the short canal which connects Juventae Fons with the Arorae Sinus Lowland. He consulted a rough chart, and turned the groundcar southward. A drive of about a kilometer brought them to a wide descending ledge down which they were able to drive into the canal.

Here, on the flat lowland surface, the canal sage grew thick, a gray-green expanse stretching unbroken to the distant cliff that was the other side of the canal. Occasionally above its smoothness thrust the giant barrel of a canal cactus.

Nuwell headed the groundcar straight across the canal, for the chart showed that the nearest upward ledge on the other side was conveniently almost opposite. The big wheels bent and crushed the canal sage, leaving a double trail.

The canal sage brought with it the comforting feeling of surface life once more. This feeling, for no reason that he could have determined consciously, released Nuwell's tongue.

"Maya," he said, in a voice that betrayed determination behind its mildness, "I don't see any real reason for waiting. When we've cleared up this matter at Ultra Vires and get back to Mars City, I think we should get married."

She glanced at his handsome profile and smiled affectionately.

"I'm complimented by your impatience, Nuwell," she said. "But there is a good reason for waiting, for me. When we're married, I want to be your wife, completely. I want to keep your home and mother your children. Don't you understand that?"

"That's what I want, too," he said. "That's my idea of what marriage is. But, Maya, if you insist on finishing this government assignment, that could be a

long time off."

"I know, and I don't like it any better than you do, darling," said Maya. "But it's cost the Earth government a great deal of trouble and money to send me here, and you know how long it would take for them to get a replacement to Mars for me. I don't feel that I can let them down, and I don't think it would be much of a beginning to our marriage for me to be running around ferreting out rebels during the first months of it."

"That's another thing I don't like, Maya," said Nuwell. "It's dangerous, and I don't want anything to happen to you."

"It's your work, too, and it's not absolutely safe for you, either. I'll be sharing it with you when we're married, and for you it will go on for a long time. I have a specific mission here, to locate the rebel headquarters, and as soon as I've done that I'll be more than happy to become just a contented housewife and leave the rest of it to you."

Nuwell shrugged, a little disconsolately, and turned his attention to the task of negotiating the groundcar up the ascending slope.

She was a strange creature, this little Maya of his. She had been born on Mars and, orphaned by some unknown disaster, had been cared for during her first years by the mysterious, grotesque native Martians. When they took her at last to one of the dome cities, she was sent to Earth for rearing. And now she was back on Mars as an undercover agent of the Earth government, seeking to ferret out the rebels known to be engaging in widespread forbidden activities.

Often he did not understand her, but he wanted her, nevertheless.

Nuwell steered the groundcar slowly up the slope, over rubble and ruts, avoiding the largest rocks. At last they reached the top, and the groundcar arrowed out over the desert again, picking up speed.

Far to the left and ahead of them there was another dust-cloud drifting up, one that was not of the thin wind, but nearly stationary. Nuwell found the binoculars in the storage compartment and handed them to Maya.

"What's that over there?" he wondered. "Another groundcar? Take a look, Maya."

Maya trained the glasses in the direction indicated, through the groundcar's transparent dome. It was difficult to get them focused, for the groundcar swayed and jolted, but at last she was able to make brief identification.

"They're Martians, Nuwell," she said. "Can we drive over that way?"

"You've seen Martians before," he said.

"But I'd like to speak with them," she said. "I talk their language, you know."

"Yes, I do know, darling, but that's utterly foolish. They're only animals, after all, and we have to get to Ultra Vires before night, if we can."

He kept the groundcar on its course.

Maya lapsed into disgruntled silence. Nuwell stole a sidelong glance at her, his breath catching slightly at the curve of the petite, perfectly feminine form beneath the loose Martian tunic and baggy trousers. He reached over and patted her hand.

But Maya was offended. She kept her black head turned away from him, looking out of the groundcar dome across the desert.

At their destination, Goat Hennessey peered eagerly into the distance, searching.

This time, his watery blue eyes picked up two tiny figures on the horizon. He watched them as they approached, finally detailing themselves into two naked, pink creatures of manshape and only slightly more than mansize.

"They made it," he muttered. "Both of them. Good!"

He turned and entered the airlock. As soon as its air reached terrestrial density and composition, he removed his marshelmet.

Goat rode the elevator to the ground level, left it and hurried down a corridor, reaching the outside airlock in time to admit the two figures.

Adam entered first, easily confident, carrying his head like a king. Brute shambled behind him.

"Everything go all right?" asked Goat, his voice quavering in his anxiety.

"Fine, father," said Adam, smiling to reveal savage, even teeth.

"Nothing unusual happen?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"You forget, Adam?" mouthed Brute eagerly. "You forget you fall?"

Adam spun on him ferociously, raising a heavy hand in threat. Brute did not cringe.

"I forget nothing!" snarled Adam. "You crazy Brute, I say it is nothing!"

"But, Adam—"

"I say it is nothing!" howled Adam and sprang for him.

"Stop it!" snapped Goat, like the crack of a whip, and they froze in the moment of their grappling. Sheepishly, they parted and stood side by side before him.

"I'll listen to details after supper," said Goat. "The children are hungry, and so am I."

2

Adam and Brute followed Goat Hennessey down the corridor, towering over him like Saint Bernards on the heels of a terrier. They turned into the dining room, a big square room centered with a rude table and chairs, one wall pierced by a fireplace in which a big cauldron steamed over smouldering coals.

The dining room swarmed with a dozen small creatures, human in their pink flesh, more or less human in their twisted bodies. As soon as Goat entered with Adam and Brute in tow, the assemblage set up a high-pitched howling and twittering of anticipation and began beating utensils on the dishes, table and walls.

"Quiet!" squawked Goat over the tremendous clatter, and the noise subsided. They stood where they were, bright eyes fixed on him.

These were "the children." Some of them were humpbacked, like Evan, the one who had carried the message to the tower. Some, like Evan, were grotesquely barrel-chested, with or without the hump. Some were as thin as skeletons, with huge heads; some were hulking miniatures of Brute. One steatopygean girl was so bulky in legs and hindquarters that she could waddle only a few inches with each step, yet her head and upper torso were skinny and fragile.

Goat sat down at the head of the table, and immediately there was a tumbling rush for places. Most of the children sat, chattering, while two of the larger girls moved around the table, taking bowls to the cauldron, filling them with a brownish stew and returning them.

They ate in silence. When supper was ended, the children scattered, some to play, others to chores. Goat beckoned to Adam and Brute to follow him. He led them down the corridor and into his study.

Goat turned on the light, revealing a book-lined, paper-stacked room focused

on a huge desk. He removed his marsuit to stand in baggy trousers and loose tunic. Adam and Brute stood near the door, shifting uncomfortably, for the study was normally forbidden ground.

Goat stood by a thick double window, looking out over the desert to the west. The small sun disappeared beneath the horizon even as he looked, leaving the fast-darkening sky a dull, faint red. Almost as though released by the sunset, pale Phobos popped above the horizon and began to climb its eastward way. The desert already was dark, but a stirring above it bespoke a distant sandstorm.

Goat turned from the window and faced the pair.

"Well," he snapped harshly, "what happened?"

Adam smiled confidently.

"We did as you said, father," he answered. "We walked to the edge of the canal, and we walked back. We had no water and we had no air. We did not feel tired. We did not feel sick."

"Fine! Fine!" murmured Goat.

"Father ..." said Brute.

Goat turned his eyes to Brute, and savage irritation swept over him. With that word, at that moment, Brute gave him a feeling of guilty foreboding.

"Don't call me 'father!'" snapped Goat angrily.

"But you say call you father," protested Brute, the puzzled frown wrinkling his brow. "What I call you if I not call you father?"

"Don't call me anything. Say 'sir.' What did you want to say?"

"Father, sir," began Brute again, "Adam forget. Adam fall."

With a muted roar, Adam swept his powerful arm in a backhanded arc that caught Brute full on the side of his head. The blow would have felled an ox, but Brute was not shaken. Apparently unhurt, he stood patiently, his blue eyes on Goat with something of pleading in them.

"Adam, let him alone!" commanded Goat sharply. "Brute, what do you mean, Adam fell?"

"We come back. We not far from canal. Adam fall. Adam sick. Adam turn

blue."

"It is lies, father!" exclaimed Adam, glaring at Brute. "It is not true."

"Let him finish," instructed Goat. "I'll decide whether it's true. What did you do, Brute?"

"I find cactus, father," answered Brute. "I make hole in cactus. I put Adam inside. I put hole back. Adam stay in cactus. Then Adam break cactus and come out again. We come back."

Goat cogitated. If Adam had shown, symptoms of oxygen starvation.... The big canal cacti were hollow, and in their interiors they maintained reserves of oxygen for their own use. More than once, such a cactus had saved a Martian traveler's life when his oxygen supply ran short.

He turned to Adam.

"Well, Adam?" he asked.

"I tell you, father, it is lies! I do not fall. Brute does not put me in the cactus."

"And why should he lie?" asked Goat blandly.

This stumped Adam for a minute. Then he brightened.

"Brute wants to be bigger and stronger than Adam," he said. "Brute knows Adam is bigger and stronger than Brute, Brute does not like this. He tells you lies so you will think Brute is bigger and stronger than Adam."

"I know you are bigger brother, Adam," objected Brute, almost plaintively. "I not try to be bigger. Why you say you do not fall?"

"I do not fall!" howled Adam. "I do not fall, you stupid Brute!"

Goat held up a stern hand, enforcing silence.

"I can't certainly settle this disagreement, but I'd be inclined to accept what Brute says," said Goat thoughtfully. "You're smart enough to lie, Adam. Brute isn't. The only thing I can do is to run the experiment over. You shall go out again tomorrow, and this time I'll go with you."

"You'll see, father," said Adam confidently. "Adam will not fall."

"Perhaps not. But I must be sure. As much as I prefer your more human characteristics, Adam, it's entirely possible that Brute has some survival

qualities that you lack."

"Is true, father," said Brute eagerly. "Some things kill Adam, they not kill Brute."

"You lie!" cried Adam again, turning on him. "Why do you lie, Brute?"

"No lie," insisted Brute. "You know, is true."

"Lie! Lie!" shouted Adam. "Adam is bigger and stronger! What do you say can kill Adam that does not kill Brute?"

"This," replied Brute calmly.

With an unhurried lunge, he picked up a heavy knife from Goat's desk. In a single easy movement, he turned and slashed Adam's throat neatly.

Choking and gurgling, Adam sank to his knees, bright blood spouting from his neck, while Goat stood frozen in horror. Adam fell prone, he kicked and thrashed convulsively like a beheaded chicken, then twitched and lay still in a spreading pool of blood.

Brute calmly wiped the knife on his naked thigh and laid it back on the desk.

"Adam dead," he said without emotion. "Brute not lie."

Dismayed fury erupted through Goat's veins and a red haze swept over his eyes.

"You idiot!" he squawked. "So that won't kill you?"

Goaded beyond endurance, Goat seized the knife and swung it as hard as he could against Brute's neck. It thunked like an ax biting into a tree trunk, biting halfway through the flesh. Brute recoiled at the impact, tearing the handle from Goat's feeble hands and leaving the knife blade stuck in his throat.

Brute staggered momentarily. Then he reached up and jerked the knife away. Blood spurted through his severed throat. Brute clapped a hand to the wound, tightly.

For a moment, blood oozed through his fingers. Then, pale but steady, Brute dropped his hand.

The wound had closed! Its edges already were sealed, leaving a raw, red scar that no longer bled.

"Brute not lie," said Brute, the words forced out with some difficulty. "It not kill Brute."

Stunned by astonishment and disbelief, Goat stared at him, his mouth moving soundlessly.

"Go away," he whispered hoarsely at last. "Go out of here, monster!"

Obediently, Brute shambled out of the study. As he passed through the door, Goat regained his voice and called after him:

"Tell the children to come and take away Adam's body."

Kilometers away, Maya Cara Nome and S. Nuwell Eli rode a groundcar that moved swiftly across the interminable waves of the red sand. It swayed through hollows and jounced over multiple ridges, Nuwell steering it with some difficulty. In the steely sky, the small sun moved downward, its brightness unimpaired by the occasional thin clouds which moved before it.

The sun touched the western horizon, seemed to hesitate, dropped with breathtaking suddenness, and the stars immediately began to appear in the deepening twilight sky.

They stopped and had a compact meal, heated in the groundcar's short-wave cooker. Then Nuwell switched on the headlights and they went on again.

Soon afterward, a faint spot of light appeared in the desert far ahead of them. As they approached it, it became a yellow-lighted window in a huge black mass rearing up against the night sky. They had reached Ultra Vires.

Nuwell announced their arrival over the groundcar radio and swung the groundcar up beside the building's main entrance. He sealed the groundcar's door to the building air-lock so they would not have to don marsuits.

After a few moments, the airlock opened. They passed through it and were greeted by a skinny, shriveled little man with watery blue eyes and a goatee.

"I was expecting you, but not tonight," said this person, rather sourly. "Well, come on in and I'll have the children fix you something to eat if you haven't eaten."

"I'm S. Nuwell Eli," said Nuwell, holding out a hand which the other ignored. "This is the terrestrial agent, Miss Maya Cara Nome. You are Dr. Hennessey,

I assume."

"That's right," said Goat. "Do you want supper?"

"No, thank you, we ate on the way," said Nuwell. "I'd like to get started with the inspection as soon as possible."

"Inspection or investigation?" suggested Goat, sniffing. "Well, no matter. I have nothing to hide."

He led them down a dim, dusty corridor, stretching deep into the dark bowels of the building, and turned aside into a paper-stacked room which evidently was his study. He went straight to a big desk, sat down, swivelled his chair around and waved them to seats. Nuwell shuffled a little uncomfortably, then sank into a chair, but Maya remained standing by the door, her small traveling bag in her hand, indignation rising in her.

"Before you settle down to charts and questions, Dr. Hennessey, do you mind showing us to our rooms so we may wash away some of the travel dust?" she asked icily, black eyes snapping.

At this, Goat jumped to his feet, sincere contrition in his face wiping out all traces of his irritated gruffness.

"I'm very sorry!" he exclaimed. "I hope you will forgive my manners, but I've lived and worked here alone in the desert so long that I had forgotten the niceties of civilization."

This apology cleared the air. Goat showed them their overnight quarters, adjoining rooms which were not luxurious but were reasonably comfortable, and after a time the three of them congregated once more in Goat's study, all of them in better humor.

"Let us have some wine first," suggested Goat. "This is very good red wine, imported from Earth."

He went to the door and shouted into the corridor.

"Petway!"

Goat returned to his chair. A few moments later, a twittering noise sounded in the corridor, then a horrible little apparition appeared in the door. It was a child-sized creature, naked, grotesquely barrel-chested and teetering on thin, twisted legs. Its hairless head was skull-like, with gaping mouth and huge,