

PREFACE

There was a mouse in the house; I had heard small squeaks and rustlings in the night, and my lifetime supply of Velveeta had been nibbled (and rejected). But just as I was baiting a trap with a piece of saturated fat, I discovered the very mouse, lounging atop the TV, wearing white gloves and red pants. "Listen, you dweeb," the mouse said in a shrill small voice, "let's not start a war here. We can live together in happy harmony, despite your execrable taste in foods. You play Mozart on the boombox and show Garbo films on the VCR. What else can a mouse ask? If you lay in a supply of imported cheeses -- no more Velveeta, for the godsake! -- I'll tell you some amazing stories!"

"Amazing Stories just bit the dust," I said. "Here! Sample this bit of bacon I'm putting on the little dingus of this wood and copper gizmo."

"You're an unfeeling monster, to be sure," the mouse said. "Really, I can give you lots of better stories than those in the science fiction volumes I see on your shelves. Except that collection of Silverberg short stories, maybe, if it has 'Bedtime Story' in it. After all, the mouse has been around throughout human history, and as a member of that ancient tribe I can see the past, present, and future unwinding as a vast scroll, or roll. Here, take a look at this manuscript. It's a story of the near future. Actually I'm faunching to have it published, old bean. Maybe you will do it for me."

"As a mouse you're microsoft in the head," I grumbled. "Paper copy! Little mouse scratchings! From a mouse of your sort I would expect at least the video of a TV drama or the screenplay of a family movie. Oh well, let me see it. Is it about mice infesting a spaceship? That's been done already. Maybe I can get Gafia press to publish the thing in FAPA. Have a taste of this morsel of bacon fat I've put on this little machine while I read your precious manuscript."

— FRANK ARGENBRIGHT



THE MARTIAN CROCODILES

Commander Murdock hurried out of the radio room when he heard the noises from the airlock and watched them clank in, one by one, out of the Martian twilight. He glared at them, still only half-recognizable in their planet-rover gear: Hopkins, Rosenthal, Seymour, Stepanovitch, Guzman, Watanabe, Briggs... "You bastards!" he said. "I just sent a message to Earth reporting your disappearance, and now you turn up at last! I had heard nothing from you for the last 48 hours and had given you up for lost. When I went off the air the President was about to lead the nation in prayer. What happened?" He looked them over, seven of them, as they shed helmets and breathing apparatus. "Wait -- where's the black guy? You know... Abdul...?"

"That's the bad news, George," Yevgeny Stepanovitch said sadly. "The good news is that we've discovered life on Mars! We stumbled on an aperture in the ice of the north pole, and inside the planet, a sort of Pellucidar! The great science fiction writer Edgar Rice Burroughs was right, in a way, but wrong in where Pellucidar is located. It's here on Mars, not on Earth. And the caverns are teeming with life -- it's a vast swamp, absolutely crammed with tropical plants and animals. There aren't any Martians, but there are lots of crocodiles down there, very hungry crocodiles, crocodiles all over the place!"

"In abundance," Janice Watanabe summed up succinctly. "We took a lot of videos we want to show you and send back to Earth. What a story this will make -- crocodiles on Mars! That's what happened to poor Abdul. He got eaten alive!"

Murdock looked stunned for a moment. "This is unbelievable! I guess I had better radio the big news back to Earth immediately. Maybe they'll forgive me for the report about your disappearance. This will be the biggest story of the twenty-first century. We've discovered life on Mars at last! And of course there's the matter of Abdul getting eaten by the Martian crocodiles. First I'll get on the radio to NASA. Then you can show me the videos."

When he came back into the room he found they had gotten out of their cumbersome gear and were standing around eagerly, waiting for him. "I sent off the big news," he said. "The story of your disappearance had just broken on the TV news, and they were a bit annoyed that it turned out to be a false report. But after all, this is even bigger news than your apparent demise. They're even interrupting the Super Bowl to put it on the air without delay. They want pictures, though. Let me see the videos."

A few minutes later he turned away from the VCR and confronted them angrily. "You clowns are eager to show me up, aren't you! You're hellbent on giving me the wrong data. Some keen observers you guys are with all your damn science degrees! I told Earth that there were crocodiles on Mars, and what do you show me? I'm just a military man, but I've lived in Florida and Zimbabwe, and I know a crocodile when I see one. Among those damn reptiles you've photographed I don't see a single solitary long lower tooth protruding from the mouth even when it's closed, and all those beasts have broad snouts and triangular heads, as any fool could plainly see. You've got me in bad with the big boys at NASA again. Those aren't crocodiles, you idiots. Those are alligators!"