

*Forty million miles is only
a step — when the star trail
is the road that leads to —*

The Hills of Home



Illustrated by DILLON

THE boy on the riverbank was named Kimmy. He was eleven, but he looked younger. He stood as though listening to some distant sound.

There was a tarnished nickel-plated faucet in his hand and a wooden sword had been thrust through the belt of his denim shorts.

The river ran still and deep, gray and green in the eddies, with the smell of late summer rising out of the slow water. The madrone and

willow trees stood limp in the early evening quiet.

It wasn't the Russian River.

It was the Sacred Iss.

The sun had touched the gem-encrusted cliffs of the shore of the Lost Sea of Korus and had vanished, leaving only the stillness of dusk and the lonely cry of high flying waterbirds.

From downstream came the faint sound of music. It might have been a phonograph playing a Rudy

Vallee record in one of the summer cabins with names like Pollyann Roost and Stumble Inn. But to Kimmy it was the hated cry of the Father of Therns, calling the dreadful Plant Men to their feast of helpless pilgrims borne into this Valley of the Lost Sea of Korus by the mysterious Iss.

Kimmy shifted the heavy Martian radium pistol into his left hand and checked his harness. A soft smile touched his lips and he brushed a dark fall of hair out of his eyes. He was well armed.

There was nothing he had to fear from the Plant Men.

His bare feet turned upstream, away from the sound of the phonograph, toward the shallows in the river that would permit him to cross and continue his search for Tars Tarkas along the base of the Golden Cliffs . . .

THE Charge of Quarters said, "Oh three hundred, Major. Briefing in thirty minutes."

Major Kimball tried to see him in the early morning gloom. He had not been asleep. It would have been wasteful to spend these last few hours sleeping. Instead, he had been remembering —

He said, "All right, Sergeant. Coming up."

He swung his feet to the bare boards and sat for a moment wishing he hadn't given up smoking. He could almost imagine the textured

taste of the cigarette on his tongue.

Oddly enough, he wasn't tired. He wasn't nervous or excited, either. And that was odder still.

He stood up and opened the window to look out at the velvet night of the Cape. He could hear the sea. Overhead the stars were brilliant. Mars gleamed russet-colored against the sable night. He smiled, remembering again. So long a road from then to now.

He stopped smiling and turned away from the window. The road had also been hard. Combat, test flying, competition all the way. The goddam headshrinkers were the toughest, always wanting him to bug out on the deal because of their brainwave graphs and word association tests and Rorschach blots.

"You're a lonely man, Kimball."

"Too much imagination could be bad for this job."

Kimball shook his head and grinned slightly. You couldn't blame them in a way. What was it like when a man sat there with pentothal in his veins and encephalograph electrodes on his head and told you about the still waters of Korus, or the pennons flying from the twin towers of Greater Helium, or the way the tiny slanting sun gleamed at dawn through the rigging of a flyer?

Cry in the wilderness, headshrinkers! He thought of them with satisfaction. There were five picked for Project Mercury. But only one

for Project Ares. Kimmy Kimball is going to Mars. No one else.

He snapped on a light and looked at his watch. Oh three ten hours. Zero minus one fifty.

He opened his steel locker and began to dress.

THE water swirled warm and velvety around his ankles. There, behind that madrone tree, Kimmy thought with delicious horror. Was that a Plant Man? He could see the thick white trunk and the bloodsucking arms—

The radium pistol's weight made his wrist ache, but he clung to it tightly. He could not cope with a Plant Man with a sword alone. The certainty of coming battle made him smile a little, the way John Carter would smile if he were here in the Valley of Korus ready to attack the white Therns and their Plant Men.

For a moment Kimmy felt a thrill of apprehension. The deepening stillness of the riparian dusk was closing in all around him. Even the music of the phonograph was very, very faint. Above him, the great vault of the sky was changing from pink to gray to dusty blue. A bright star was breaking through the curtain of fading light. He knew it was Venus, the Evening Star. But let it be Earth, he thought. And instead of white, let it be the color of an emerald.

He paused in midstream, letting

the warm water riffle around his feet. Looking up at the green beacon of the planet of his birth, he thought: I've left all that behind me. I'm sorry about leaving mother and dad, but it was never really what I wanted. Mars is where I belong. With my friends, John Carter the Warlord, Tars Tarkas the Great Green Jeddak, and all the beautiful brave people.

The hated Father of Therns sang with Vallee's voice: *Come with me where southern skies will watch you with a million eyes*—

Kimmy's eyes narrowed.

He waded stealthily across the shallows of the Sacred Iss. He could see Matai Shang, the Thern Father, resplendent in his jeweled harness and his yellow wig and Holy Diadem, spreading his arms out to the sunset. He stood safely in his balcony above the river while the Plant Men responded to his call. Were they gathering to attack Tars Tarkas or another band of helpless pilgrims?

Matai Shang looked a little like Mr. Grossman standing on the verandah of his cottage. But that was all right. The dreadful Valley of Korus was wonderfully alive with adventure. It didn't matter that Matai Shang looked like Mr. Grossman and sang like Rudy Vallee.

Kimmy stepped cautiously ashore and moved into the cover of a clump of willows. The sky was

darkening fast and soon someone was sure to start calling him. There wasn't much time left.

MAJOR Kimball stood now in the bright glare of the briefing bunker's lights, a strange figure in G-suit and helmet. The representatives of the press had been handed their mimeographed releases by the PIO. Now they sat listening to the briefing being delivered by General Hazel, the Project Officer. Occasionally Kimball would surprise one of the newsmen looking at him with mixed admiration and doubt. Kimball knew what they were thinking. Why him? Out of all the applicants—and there are always applicants for a nearly-sure-death job — why this particular one?

Well, Kimball thought, why not? Maybe Project Ares was meant to be mine from the beginning.

General Hazel talked, reading from the mimeographed sheet. He was skirting some highly sensitive areas. He spoke carefully and without expression, wishing he didn't have to talk at all to these civilians.

Kimball listened, only half aware of what was being said. He watched the faces of the men sitting on the rows of folding chairs, saw their eyes like wounds, red with sleeplessness and the celebration last night at the Officers' Club — the celebration in his honor that, of course, he hadn't attended.

On the dais nearby, listening to General Hazel but watching Kimball, sat Colonel Steinhart, the Project Psychiatrist. Kimball returned his steady gaze without flinching, inwardly amused. If look away, he thought, Steinhart will write it down. The accumulation of trivia was the good doctor's life work. Kimball felt sorry for him. It must be a bitter thing, he thought, to wish to know the human mind and find only shadows. Stephen Crane once wrote: There is nothing but opinion — and opinion be damned.

It was like that.

The big clock on the wall of the bunker said oh three fifty-five. Zero minus one hour and five minutes. The countdown on the rocket had begun twenty-five minutes ago. No hold so far; none expected.

Kimball looked around at the red eyes and open mouths. What have I to do with you now? There are worse things than being alone.

Outside the bunker, the night lay warm and still over the base. Floodlights spilled brilliance over the dunes and the scrubby palms, high fences casting laced shadows across the burning white expanses of ferroconcrete.

As the men filed out of the briefing room, Dr. Steinhart climbed into the command car with Kimball. Was it chance or design? The pilot wondered. The others were leaving them alone.



"We haven't gotten on too well, have we, Major?" Steinhart said in a quiet voice.

Kimball thought: He's pale skinned and very blond. What is it that he reminds me of? Shouldn't there be a diadem on his forehead?

He smiled vaguely into the whispering night. That's what it was. Odd that he should have forgotten. How many of my generation, he wondered, were raised on those Edgar Rice Burroughs books anyway? And how many remembered now that all the Thern priests wore yellow wigs and a circlet of gold with some fantastic jewel on their foreheads?

"We've done as well as could be expected," he said.

STEINHART reached for a cigarette and then stopped, remembering that Kimball had given them up because of the Project. Kimball caught the doctor's movement and half smiled. He's good, the pilot thought. He's very good. Friendly, compassionate, concerned. They probably taught him that in medical school.

"I didn't try to kill the assignment for you, Kim," the doctor said.

"Well, it doesn't matter now."

"No, I suppose not. I just don't want you to think of me as an enemy."

Kimball shrugged. The bindings of his pressure suit creaked slightly.

"Your record is good all the way.

You know that," Steinhart said. "It's just some of the things—"

Kimball said, "I talked too much."

"You had to."

"You wouldn't think my secret life was so dangerous, would you?" Kimball said, smiling.

The doctor made an impatient gesture. "You won't try to understand."

Kimball shrugged. He didn't really care now.

"I know you were married and divorced, Kim," the doctor said. "Would you tell me what happened now?"

"For the record? More therapy?"

"No. This is for me. I'd like to know."

The pilot shrugged again. "It just didn't work. She was a fine girl, but she finally told me it was no go." And he remembered what she said. "You don't live here, Kim." That was a strange thing for a wife to say. But there was no point in telling Steinhart. He'd make something significant out of it.

"She didn't like the life," Kimball said with finality.

The doctor frowned. "She knew you were a career officer. What did she expect?"

Kimball didn't answer. He had forgotten Steinhart already. He was looking out across the ramp at the Project Ares launching pad.

Dr. Steinhart sighed and said, "I wish you luck, Kim. I mean that."

"Thanks." Kimball answered him across a widening gulf.

"You'll have a long, lonely wait for the next shoot," Steinhart said.

"I've got my instructions," Kimball said.

"Two years alone—"

They are all so sure I'll be alone, Kimball thought. He glanced up at the red planet low on the horizon and smiled. Amber smoke was rising from the control bunker. It was now zero minus fifty-six minutes.

"KIM," Steinhart said slowly. "There is something you should know about. Something you should be prepared for."

"Yes?"

Disinterest in his voice, Steinhart noted clinically. Natural under the circumstances? Or incipient neurosis already? If they had only listened to me, Steinhart thought.

Steinhart continued, "Our tests showed you to be a schizoid — well compensated, of course. You know there is no such thing as an absolutely *normal* human being. We all have tendencies toward one or more types of aberration. In your case, the symptoms are an over-active imagination and sometimes an inability to distinguish reality from — well, fancy."

"You headshrinkers see a looney under every bush," Kimball said vaguely.

Steinhart felt futile and out of his depth. "No one is saying any-

thing about loonies, Kim. It's just that we have so little data on the psychology of spaceflight."

"That's what I'm supposed to provide, isn't it, Colonel?" Kimball was looking up at the sky.

"What I'm trying to say, Kim, is that a man of your type sometimes regresses—"

"Doctor," Kimball said patiently, "I passed all the tests."

Steinhart nodded reluctantly. "Yes. Yes, you did."

"Then let's drop it, please."

Steinhart subsided into uncomfortable silence. He listened to the rumble of the tires on the concrete, the murmur of the motor. I could be wrong, he thought. After all, what is reality?

Reality was the rocket, towering in the floodlights, garishly painted in black and orange, against the first flickerings of the false dawn.

KIMMY saw the girls before they saw him. In their new, low-waisted middies and skirts, they looked strange and out of place standing by the pebbled shore of the Sacred Iss.

They were his sisters, Rose and Margaret, older than he at fifteen and seventeen. But they were walking into the Valley of Korus and into danger. Behind him he could hear the rustle of the Plant Men as the evening breeze came up and touched the willows.

"Kimm-eee—"

They were calling him. In the deepening dusk their voices carried far down the river.

"Mr. Grossman, have you seen Kimmy?"

The hated Father of Therns shrugged and pulled on his galluses.

"Kimm-eeee—!"

Kimmy knew he should answer then, but he did not. Behind him he could hear the Plant Men approaching. He shivered with delicious horror. He stood very still and listened to his sisters talking, letting their voices carry into the clump of willows where he hid from the dangers of the Valley of the Lost Sea of Korus.

"Where is that little brat, anyway?"

"He *always* wanders off *just* at *dinnertime* and then we have to find him. It isn't *fair*!"

"Playing with that silly old *faucet*!" Cruel mimicry now. "My ray-dee-yum pistol—"

"Oh, where *is* he *anyway*? Kimm-eee, you *answer*!"

Something died in him. He tried hard to keep it alive. It wasn't a faucet. It was a radium pistol! Tars Tarkas the Great Green Jeddak had given it to him himself!

He looked at his sisters with dismay. They weren't really his sisters. They were Therns with their yellow hair and pale skins. He and John Carter and Tars Tarkas had fought them many times, piling their bodies for barricades and

weaving a pattern of skillful sword-points in the shifting light of the two moons.

"Kimm-eee! We know you can hear us! Mom is going to be mad at you! Answer us, you hear?"

If only Tars Tarkas would come now! If only the Great Green Jeddak would come splashing across the stream on his huge thoat, his two swords clashing—

"I see him! He's hiding in that clump of willows!"

"Kimmy, you come here this instant!"

The Valley of Korus was fading, blurring. The Golden Cliffs were turning into sandy, worn riverbanks and the battlements and balconies were the verandahs of summer cottages.

The faucet felt heavy in Kimmy's grimy hand. He shivered—not with wonder now, with cold.

He walked out of the willows, stumbling on the rocks.

MAJOR Kimball lay like an embryo in the nose cone. Time was not. Time became the ticking of the timers and immense speed.

He was thinking of that summer when the river lay still and deep under the hanging willows. Never before and never afterward had it held that same evocative magic. He remembered his sisters, thin and angular creatures as he recalled them through the eyes of an eleven-

year-old. And his mother, tall and shadowy, standing on the screen-porch of the rented cottage and saying exasperatedly: "You worry us so running off like that, Kimmy!"

He thought with vague amusement: "I've really run off now."

It was good to dream of the low, beamed ceiling of the cottage and the thick close darkness of the summer nights. Oh, there had been such longing. For something.

What was it? A place, a time?

Perhaps that. The place was a world of low red hills and a sky that burned deep blue through long, long days. And canals — yes, canals that were clear and still. And the time, what was the time? The time was youth. The time was tomorrow and yesterday. The time never was.

But the place?

Kimball thought with sudden wonder: I'm going to Mars!

There were routine duties in the tiny cone. That way time slipped by as all around the missile spread the stunning, star-dusted night.

HE had been confined for nearly a hundred days when the descending orbital spiral began. The great ribbon parachute burst from the nose cone.

Heat. Terrible heat and tumbling blows. Kimball never knew when the cone landed. He lay for a long while, shocked and injured, but alive.

In time he opened the shielded ports.

He shrank from what he saw.

Desolation! An eternity of wasteland.

Red sands blowing across a sere and sterile plain. Emptiness.

"I'm alone," he murmured.

The dry, icy wind plucked at the scored surfaces of the cone.

He could feel panic clutching at him. The protective suit he wore seemed to press in on him, suffocatingly.

The wasteland beyond the port had been a wasteland for ten times ten million years. Kimball felt the weight of these years pressing on his sanity.

He began to whimper softly.

"Help me," he said pleadingly. "Help me, Kimmy—"

Something began to move on the great empty desert.

Kimball cried out with joy and clawed desperately at the hatch.

Suddenly the inner pressure jerked the valve from his hand and he plunged to the rusty sand, his ears cracking and his lungs gasping for air in the thin Martian atmosphere. His vision was cloudy and his head felt light.

Something was moving on the plain.

A shadowy cavalcade.

Strange, monstrous men on fantastic war-mounts, long spears and fluttering pennons. Huge golden chariots with scythes flashing on

the circling hubs, and armored giants —

The figments of a long-remembered dream.

He dropped to the sand and dug his hands into the dry, rusty soil. He fought to suck air into his laboring lungs.

"Kimm-eeee!"

A huge green warrior on a gray monster of a thot was beckoning to him, pointing toward the low hills on the oddly near horizon.

"Kimm-eeee!"

The voice was thin and distant on the icy wind. Kimball knew that voice.

He knew it from long ago in the Valley of Korus, by the shores of the mysterious sacred river.

He came to his knees and then his feet, stumbling happily across the empty, lifeless plain.

He knew the voice, he knew the man, and he knew the hills that he must reach before he died.

They were the hills of home.

— ALFRED COPPEL

R.S.V.P.

You are most cordially invited to the 18th World Science Fiction Convention, to be held at the Penn-Sheraton Hotel, Pittsburgh, Pa., Labor Day weekend, September 3, 4 and 5, 1960.

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