

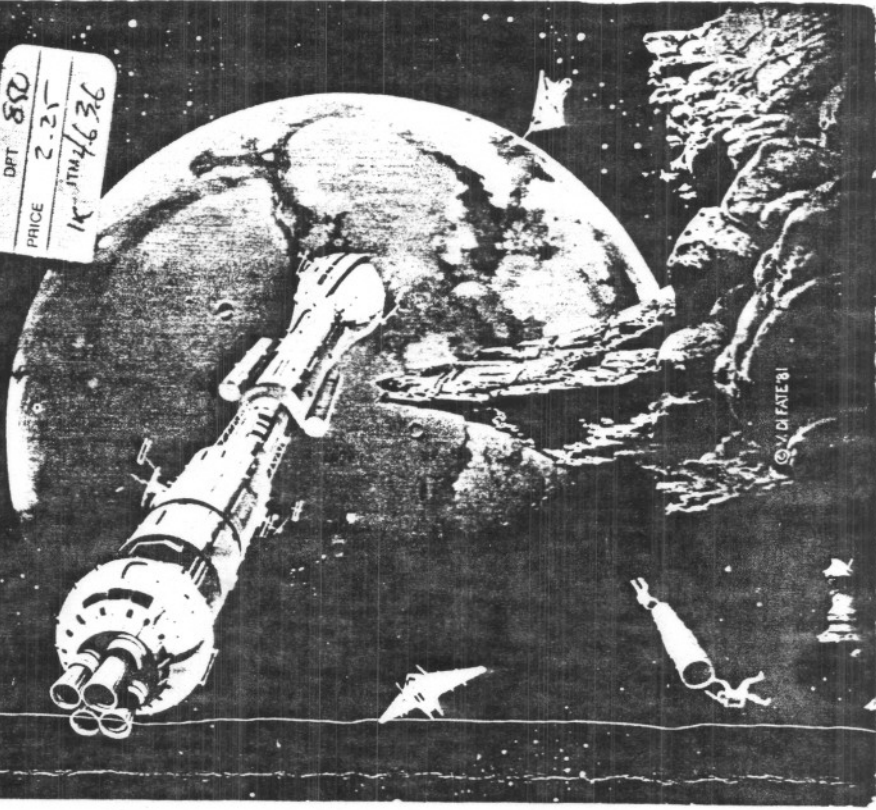
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A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY

ARTHUR C. CLARKE THE SANDS OF MARS

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planet. Apart from a few oases, the open desert now lay ahead for thousands of kilometres.

The pilot switched his controls to automatic and came amidships to talk to his passengers.

"We'll be at Charontis in about four hours," he said. "I'm afraid there isn't much to look at on the way, though you'll see some fine colour effects when we go over Euphrates. After that it's more or less uniform desert until we hit the Syrtis Major."

Gibson did some rapid mental arithmetic.

"Let's see—we're flying east and we started rather late—it'll be dark when we get there."

"Don't worry about that—we'll pick up the Charontis beacon when we're a couple of hundred kilometres away. Mars is so small that you don't often do a long-distance trip in daylight all the way."

"How long have you been on Mars?" asked Gibson, who had now ceased taking photos through the observation ports.

"Oh, five years."

"Flying all the time?"

"Most of it."

"Wouldn't you prefer being in spaceships?"

"Not likely. No excitement in it—just floating around in nothing for months." He grinned at Hilton, who smiled amiably but showed no inclination to argue.

"Just what do you mean by 'excitement'?" said Gibson anxiously.

"Well, you've got some scenery to look at, you're not away from home for very long, and there's always the chance you may find something new. I've done half a dozen trips over the poles, you know—most of them in summer, but I went across the Mare Boreum last winter. A hundred and fifty degrees below outside! That's the record so far for Mars."

"I can beat that pretty easily," said Hilton. "At night it reaches two hundred below on Titan." It was the first time Gibson had ever heard him refer to the Saturnia expedition.

"By the way, Fred," he asked, "is this rumour true?"

"What rumour?"

"You know—that you're going to have another shot at Saturn."

Hilton shrugged his shoulders.

"It isn't decided—there are a lot of difficulties. But I think it will come off; it would be a pity to miss the chance. You see, if we can leave next year we can go past Jupiter on the way, and have our first really good look at him. Mac's worked out a very interesting orbit for us. We go rather close to Jupiter—right inside *all* the satellites—and let his gravitational field swing us round so that we head out in the right direction for Saturn. It'll need rather accurate navigation to give us just the orbit we want, but it can be done."

"Then what's holding it up?"

"Money, as usual. The trip will last two and a half years and will cost about fifty million. Mars can't afford it—it would mean doubling the usual deficit! At the moment we're trying to get Earth to foot the bill."

"It would come to that anyway in the long run," said Gibson. "But give me all the facts when we get home and I'll write a blistering exposé about cheeseparing terrestrial politicians. You mustn't underestimate the power of the press."

The talk then drifted from planet to planet, until Gibson suddenly remembered that he was wasting a magnificent chance of seeing Mars at first hand. Obtaining permission to occupy the pilot's seat—after promising not to touch anything—he went forward and settled himself comfortably behind the controls.

Five kilometres below, the coloured desert was streaking past him to the west. They were flying at what, on Earth, would have been a very low altitude, for the thinness of the Martian air made it essential to keep as near the surface as safety allowed. Gibson had never before received such an impression of sheer speed, for though he had flown in much faster machines on Earth, that had always been at heights where the ground was invisible. The nearness of the horizon added to the effect, for an object which appeared over the edge of the planet would be passing beneath a few minutes later.

From time to time the pilot came forward to check the course, though it was a pure formality, as there was nothing he need do until the voyage was nearly over. At mid-point some coffee and light refreshments were produced, and Gibson rejoined his companions in the cabin. Hilton and the pilot were now arguing briskly about Venus—quite a sore point with the Martian colonists, who re-