Olympus Mons

William Walling

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And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation before the rock, and he said to them, Hear now, ye rebels, must we fetch you water out of this rock?

Numbers 20:10

prologue

If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.
Sir Isaac Newton, from a letter written in 1675

In every field of medicine "seeing farther" has enhanced numberless careers from atop equally impressive shoulders—Hippocrates, Harvey and Hooke; Vesalius, Pasteur and Koch; Jenner, Reed, Fleming—the list is endless.

The author would be remiss in failing to commemorate, in retrospect, the remarkable achievements of a recent giant, Dr. Edwin C. "Clancy" Bevvins. No medical researcher has ever been more farsighted while poised on the shoulders of his illustrious predecessors, or selflessly credited his peers, past and present, for his own singular accomplishments.

Reared on a sheep station in the shadow of New Zealand's Southern Alps, Bevvins was educated at the University of New South Wales. He became preeminent in his chosen field, cellular physiology, and devoted himself exclusively to research until losing his life in pursuit of a dream whose fulfillment, had he but known, was just over the horizon.

Bevvinase, the "miracle enzyme" developed aboard a research satellite circling mighty Jupiter, was the product of a lengthy, exhaustive quest. Unfortunately, then-unsolved problems relating to metabolic degradation—acidosis and the formation of toxic substances and byproducts within the human organism—defeated his valiant efforts to save the lives of two colleagues, as well as his own. Perfected a decade after his passing, the revolutionary process he conceived has contributed directly and dramatically to the colonization of Planet Mars.

Isolated for obscure "security" reasons among a cross-rough of physical scientists working aboard the circum-Jupiter satellite, Dr. Bevvins's diary tells us he "paid his way" by rolling pills, relieving sprains and performing physical exams, all the while conducting intensive experiments with the gibbon monkeys he colorfully described as, "Marvelously useful human analogs."

The visionary, long-range programme Bevvins pursued—adapting human beings to the hostile Martian environment *in situ*—was funded bureaucratically, then promptly forgotten by a senior medical board. In lay terms, the goal amounted to devising a viable alternative to breathing oxygen; specifically, a method of radically altering metabolic processes in order to safely convert the tenuous Martian atmosphere's major constituent—carbon dioxide—into usable oxygen *en vivo*, within the cell tissue itself.

The research satellite's random collision with a fragment of celestial debris proved disastrous, ripping through all habitation decks, as well as the zenith and nadir oxygen pressure vessels ironically installed poles apart to mitigate the likelihood of precisely such an occurrence. Unfortunately, the satellite's small size demanded that life support materiel be logistically resupplied from the icy base on Jupiter's largest moon, Ganymede. A Mayday lasercomm transmission earned a prompt if disheartening reply: the relative positions of the damaged satellite, and Ganymede, prevented a rescue vehicle from arriving for thirty-plus hours. Facing slow suffocation, with nothing whatsoever to lose, Dr. Bevvins revealed the nature of his classified programme to his surviving companions.

And was of course disbelieved.

The volume of breathable air shrank steadily, growing more contaminated. Bevvins checked on his gibbons, luckily housed in a quadrant of the satellite where fail-safe hermetic hatches had automatically closed. He found the test specimen of the moment, a gibbon waggishly named "Bess," alive and well, and continuously monitored for phrenic nerve activity, hemoglobin oxygen-versus-carbon-dioxide content, turnover rate (the enzyme's regeneration rate in the tissues), oxygen diffusion rate, the buildup of toxins in the bloodstream, and other esoteric biomedical parameters.

Enzymes are pure protein substances; hence most animal subjects were Bevvinase "factories," while Bess, the enzyme's recipient, was the latest in a succession of noble failures. The rapidly weakening physician grasped the only straw within reach. He ordered his companions to don EVA-rated pressure suits, then injected them with the experimental enzyme and watched anxiously for signs of hypernea—ultra-rapid breathing. When his companions were semi-comatose, the diary records that Bevvins felt the enzyme, "Was taking hold nicely." He scribbled instructions for the care of his companions, as well as he himself, on blank pages torn from the diary, then waited until an instant before losing consciousness to inject himself and seal the headpiece of his pressure suit.

Sometime later, elated to find themselves among the living, the three survivors revived one by one. Sequestered in an isolated, carbon dioxide environment within Ganymede's medicenter, their elation was short-lived. None survived longer than forty-eight hours.

Despite the monumental, unknown difficulties he faced, one cannot help but feel deepest appreciation for the wondrous doors Dr. Bevvins opened. Bevvinase offered humankind a permanent second home—our neighbor in the sky, the Red Planet—and perhaps one day certain extrasolar worlds which sustain carbon dioxide environments.

Yet a less heralded spinoff of his work is of equal or even greater importance to those of us who must dwell in the here and now: the laboratory duplication of photosynthesis in the form of a synthetic molecule capable of sustaining polarization long enough to react usefully with other molecules. This serendipitous achievement threw wide a second enormous door: the ability to efficiently and economically tap limitless solar energy.

An even more profound reason exists for revering Dr. Bevvins's legacy. He left us shoulders to stand on of considerably greater breadth and stature than any savant in the recent history of medical science.

Lest the scientifically unsophisticated feel they have been talked-down to, and perhaps also wonder if details of the

Bevvinase Process have been glossed over, here in vastly simplified form are the basics of mammalian electrosynthesis as opposed to natural photosynthesis as it occurs in plants, algae, fungi, and certain strains of anaerobic bacteria.

Plants photosynthesize solar energy to run mammalian oxidation "backwards;" that is, by converting carbon dioxide and water into cellulose and other compounds. Bevvinase promotes analogous yet radically different conversions and energy transfers in mammals by means of the series of catalytic reactions, reductions, and oxidations given here as an oversimplified, unbalanced formula:

$$CO_2+NADH+H_2O=HCOOH+NAD^+ +OH^-$$

$$HCOOH+NADH=HCHO+NAD^+ +OH^-$$

$$HCHO+2NADH+H_2O=CH_4+2NAD^+ +2OH^-$$

The reducing agent, NADH, a source of H^-, is a hydride ion never present in the free state, but created when a proton and an electron pair are transferred from NADH to the substance being reduced—in this case carbon dioxide. With Mars-rationalized humans (colonials quixotically refer to themselves as "Marsrats") a network of surgically implanted mini-electrodes which supply energy in the form of microvoltage drives the conversion process as a source semi-analogous to sunlight in photosynthesis. Before the formulation and introduction of specific blood-cleansing agents, compounds and processes, the byproducts of reduction and the accompanying complex processes invariably proved lethal. Methane is relatively harmless—relatively. But the build-up of formic acid, lactic acid and formaldehyde are not conducive to the health and well being of living tissue. It is both sorrowful and ironic to realize that Dr. Bevvins and his short-lived colleagues were poisoned by acidosis, while simultaneously embalming themselves.

A thesaurus of biomedical terminology, together with biochemical formulae of interest only to professionals, is appended in this volume. For the technically inclined, a second appendix describes in the symbology of organic chemistry and extensive verbal detail the complex chain of anabolic and catabolic processes, as well as the specific electro-surgical

procedures, which permit Bevvinase to act as a catalyst in the conversion of carbon dioxide to oxygen *en vivo* . . .

MODUS VIVENDI
Warren L. Beresford, M.D., Ph.D.
Hyperspace Press, Pty., 2103
Sydney, Auckland, London, &
Toronto

one
Olympic Base

The inaugural ceremony was slated to be piped sunward live for homeworld propaganda purposes. "Live," that is, if you discount the light-minutes our signal takes to bang Goldstone's lasercomm dish in the distant Mojave, or its mates in the Gobi and elsewhere. The braintrust-elect at Burroughs, two hundred klicks southeast of Olympic Base, had prepped for the whoop-de-do! transmission like it'd kick off a royal coronation.

My partner was hot to see it, but I was indifferent. "Jess," I complained, "I'm bushed. What say we skip the video and listen in whilst trucking for home?"

No answer. We'd finished our chores late that breezy morning, and Jesperson was in the driver's seat, riding herd on the crawler. He held the joystick casually, steering the beast around larger boulders, letting the cleated tracks mash the smaller rocks. Two-man teams like us sashay out to the volcano once each E-month to optically inspect the aqueduct's vertical stretch of pipeline and service the windmills that power heaters in the holding tanks, where our precious water's stored. As usual, I assumed Jesperson had paid no nevermind to my suggestion. As usual, I found out I was wrong. "Got to see it, Barney," he said.

"Why? You won't learn a damn thing."

Zero response. I gave up, settled back against the headrest and closed my weary eyeballs. A quarter-hour later, the crawler plowed twin furrows in the dust, forging into the way station's walled compound. Now I doubt if any ground-pounders in Seattle, Stuttgart or Sydney have ever heard of Olympic Base. It's just a connected pair of Quonset-type shelters half-buried in

rust-colored sand two klicks southeast of Olympus Rupes, the kilometers-high escarpment surrounding the volcano's humongous foot. If we're plumb tuckered out, or it's too late in the day for the trek back to Burroughs, we overnight in the comfy, pressurized hidey hole stocked with tools, pack-batteries, pressure suit batteries, water, freeze-dried victuals, and first aid supplies. The base is a lifeboat in an emergency, which around here crop up way too often.

We went through the wriggles and contortions it takes to get into pressure suits, passed through the crawler's small lock chamber one by one, and crossed the sand to the facility's main airlock. I doffed my vacuum gear, plugged-in pack-batteries and suit batteries for recharge, and swilled water, choking down the horse-pill caplets that replenish your electrolytes.

"Show time!" said Jesperson, switching on the aged holotank. Snide by nature, my partner tabbed the broadcast, "Live from Botany Bay."

I quibbled, mentioning the signal delay.

"Sorry, make that *dead* from Botany Bay."

Why he calls our home away from home "Botany Bay" is a typical Jespersonian mystery. He hardly ever explains his smartass remarks. Pains me to say so, but an ex-high school football coach like me gets left in the dark by half the jargon that rolls off my partner's forked tongue, let alone the ditsy things he ups and does.

Burroughs opened the doings with a canned version of our new anthem—the "Mars" theme from an astrology-inspired mish-mash called *The Planets* by English composer Gustav Holst.

Or so Jesperson told me. My partner's a fountainhead of useless music, art, and literary know-how. I admit to leaning on his smarts—up to a point. "You're joshing," I said. "A Brit with a moniker like Holst?"

"Shush, Barney!" He put a finger to his lips. "Pretend you're a music lover, and listen."

Huh, some anthem! You can't hum, whistle, or sing along with the brass and thunder of Mr. Holst, but I admit it grabs you in a monotonous, grinding way. On that score, it suits Mars to a tee.

At the fadeout, the enclave's senior medic, Deputy Director-elect Hiroshi Yokomizo, nervously cleared his throat at the rostrum. Yokie is a happy troop. Even when deep in a hand-waving argument, his ranting and raving comes at you through a cherub's toothy grin. Now, facing the three-headed holovision camera's red pin light, and flushed with the dignity of his new office, he looked a touch stage-frighty.

Back-and-forth conversation is a no, no in interplanetary transmissions. Who'd want to sweat out a minutes-long lag between question and answer? Yokie tried to make believe he addressed a large audience, not just a hundred-and-ninety leathery, semi-starved Marsrats, or at least those who had bothered to stop work and turn to at the meeting hall.

Whups! Make that a hundred and eighty-nine Marsrats. Late last E-month, nice Mrs. What's 'er name, a roly-poly Inuit lady who probably smiled even while she slept, had been found frozen solid outside West Tunnel. The current headcount is one-eight-nine, including Jesperson and me.

But that tote only includes the grown-ups, not the fourteen youngsters—hardy, resilient little demons Victor Gonzalez calls Mars-*ratons*. One of them's mine—mine and Lorna's. If your bag is watching a toddler try to toddle loaded down with the belt-slung pack-batteries that power his or her reworked metabolism, be sure and beat a path to the fabulous Red Planet. Inflicting Mars on one innocent babe seemed crime enough. Lorna and I have made double certain we'll never have another.

All but four of the tots were born under the roof-shield covering Burroughs's crater, out where the harsh ocher highlands of Tharsis give way to the harsh ochre plains of Amazonis Planitia. As if you could tell the difference.

According to that fount of all knowledge, Jesperson, when NASA's Mariner orbiters flashed back the first pix of the Martian surface names were assigned to prominent features—volcanoes, plains, valleys, rilles, and biggety craters like our next door neighbors, Biblis Patera, Ulysses Patera, and Jovis Tholus (cratering isn't all that common here in the northern hemisphere). Burroughs sits in a smallish dimple less than three klicks across, ringwall rim to rim. Compared to impact craters in other regions of this dustball (the enclave's pompous areographer, Doc

Franklin, calls them "astroblemes") Burroughs is a shallow "blemish" in the Tharsis highlands southeast of the volcano.

Self-interest is sure to top the list of any major business conglomerate (read cartel). The enclave's on-again, off-again sponsor, Vonex Corporation, stole the limelight from an international consortium that had poured man-years of effort and billions of new dollars into seed-populating Mars. To no one's surprise, the high rollers and fat cats making up Vonex's board of directors tried to name the prospective settlement Vonex Colony. Thirty E-years ago, the half-dozen pioneers who first set foot here nixed that notion out of hand.

Contrary to what homeworld consumers may think, our orphaned fragment of humanity lives in a complex named for Dr. Alan C. Burroughs, the sterling gent who led the original settlers, not Edgar Rice Burroughs, a scribbler of yesteryear who wrote fanciful tales about Martian canals and derring-do sword wavers. Doc Burroughs lies beneath a sculpted basalt marker out in the rubble strewn Tharsis wasteland. By all accounts, he was among the very best of the good guys. But that was long before my time.

At any rate, exit Burroughs through any of four cardinal-point access/egress tunnels and you have to wait in the big utility airlock for the pumps to scavenge pressurized, humidified air. Step outside the ringwall, not forgetting to zip a summer parka over your pressure suit, plus a hooded ultraviolet cloak over that, and you'll see the wan sun standing in a sky that shades from light salmon pink above the too-near horizon to deep sable high overhead. And if you're foolhardy enough to go out into the bone-chilling night, best wear powered thermal underwear, the heaviest insulating parka in your closet, and by all means check the charge level in your pressure suit batteries, lest you be found lying stiff and brittle under the unwinking stars, like nice Mrs. What's 'er name.

Jesperson and I hung in there, listening to Doc Yokomizo's spiel, until he began trumpeting Vonex Corporation, the giant North American business octopus semi-responsible for colonizing our brave, non-profit new world (and gleefully filing for billions in tax write-offs all the while). Yokie's pitch was wrung straight from Vonex recruitment brochures. He called our isolated enclave, "A self-sustaining bastion of humanity, a

nucleus society interdicted from overpopulation and the ever present threat of Armageddon," and so on, and so forth, et cetera.

Which earned him a flatulent raspberry from Jesperson. I echoed my partner's sentiment. We had both heard that "self-sustaining" bullshit once too often.

Other than pharmaceuticals, synthetic goodies, and an arm-long list of "luxuries" we can't produce for ourselves, the Burroughs Enclave (if you feel brave, call it a "colony" to some Marsrat's face) has been oversold as being independent of the billions of folks who live beneath blue skies, with green grass growing all around, all around.

Independent and self-sustaining are we? Sure, until the bolide with our name on it screams down through the skimpy atmosphere at umpteen klicks-per-second and makes a biggety crater out of our smallish one, or the gawdawful cold gets us, or we run out of precious water.

Or until Olympus Mons wakes from ancient slumber and once again blows its cloud-wreathed top.

Jess began to fidget. He wasn't alone. Yokie lectured about the remarkable strides our engineering and agronomy staffs had taken during the past year—*our* year, 686.996 E-days, to be exact. Then, after a sort of groveling preamble, he introduced Director-elect Walther Scheiermann.

"Ten-hut!" Jesperson's drill sergeant bark would've rattled the windows had there been any. "*Der Führer* speaks."

"Softly," I said. "Let's show some respect."

He snorted something foulmouthed I won't record.

Herr Doktor Walther Scheiermann is an energetic, loquacious gnome whose heart may be in the right place, but he himself is not. He belongs in an emeritus chair of philosophy at some ivied Earthside university, not here in Mars. "The pluperfect paradigm of pomposity," to quote my snotty partner, slipped into his sermon the way a landlubber eases into chilly water, by way of a folksy anecdote (invented, no doubt, since I recall no such incident) having to do with the enclave's clogged drains. Scheiermann laid it on even more thickly than Doc Yokomizo—pure Vonex party line, and a waste of breath. Nine of every ten homeworld ground-pounders think of us Marsrats as

freaks. What burns and smarts and festers is that they're probably right.

When they roll you out of the isolated processing ward at Bevvins Clinic in Christchurch, New Zealand, load your sealed capsule aboard a hypersonic jet and fly you out to the Pacific Launch Complex offshore Lahaina, Hawaii, they tell you you're about to spend your last night on Earth (has a comforting ring, doesn't it?). They stamp "Mars-rationalized" across your paperwork, except it ought to be written in blood, or better still engraved on platinum foil and glued to your forehead. They tell you a one-way street runs to Mars. They say you can never come home again.

Ever!

⧖⧖⧖

Jesperson once explained how, near the end of century twenty, NASA flew a series of unmanned probes to Mars. Among other things, the landers tried to answer a pair of questions uppermost in everyone's mind: "Is there water on Mars? And ditto, life?" What were thought to be ancient watercourses showed signs of possible water-ice beneath the surface. A little picture-taking robot cart rolled around and scooped up sand, evaluated rocks, and dangled nutrient-covered palettes in the alien breeze. But no microbes, viruses or what have you took the bait, alhough Jess mentioned a spurious signal that must've sent waves of telemetered ecstasy up the spines of homeworld scientists. Later on, what might or might not have been fossil bacteria were found in an antarctic meteorite supposedly blasted loose from Mars eons ago. Martian bugs, if any, were thought to be very few, and very far between. If any existed, they probably operated on a different wavelength from their down-home cousins, and most likely wouldn't have wanted anything to do with us. Which is probably just as well.

A few stray lichens may cling to a scratch existence here and there in cracks and crannies of deep, unexplored Valle Marineris, where sheer canyon walls give shelter from the ravening winds and the sand that flies before them; from at least some of the intense ultraviolet bath; and from the abysmal cold. That's it as far as Martian life goes.

Except for us Marsrats, or what's left of us.

Designed and executed by experts, the super-expensive manned exploratory missions didn't pan out too well. This dustball's hairy environmental miseries sent the astronauts, cosmonauts and all other kinds of nauts skittering home, tails 'tween their legs. Where humans were concerned, everything about Mars toted up on the negative side: the minus hundred-and-twenty-degree, C., winter nights; the intense ultraviolet radiation; the absence of free water on the surface, with only a skosh in the atmosphere. Our thin air blanket is mostly carbon dioxide and nitrogen, with teentsy dollops of carbon monoxide, traces of oxygen, argon and a dribble of inert gases. Turning Mars into a fit place for humans was a doozy of a problem for oxygen breathers, and solving it called for authentic, dyed-in-the-wool genius.

Luckily, one such came along. I'll skip the apology and again lean on my know-it-all partner's wisdom. Jesperson named a research medic called Bevvins as the guilty party who opened Mars to what passes for, ahem!, colonization. Nearly a century ago, the doc gambled the highest stakes there are, betting on a wild and crazy enzyme he'd developed. Smart as he was, he missed a few strokes along the way.

Had Bevvins known then what the witchdoctors know now, he and two bo's he "saved" might've lived to a ripe old age. It seems a hefty slug of bad news stuff builds up in the bloodstreams of us carbon dioxide breathers. If the poisons aren't scrubbed out, end of story. There was also a question of where to get the energy needed to drive the internal swap of carbon dioxide for oxygen. Plants use sunlight, but people obviously can't.

Anyhow, I started partnering with Jesperson, turned into his captive audience and got lectured about a hoity-toity medical term: Mars-rationalization. I learned how the Bevvinase enzyme drives the process arsey-versy from the way plants do it, but with a whale of a difference. Textbooks call it electrosynthesis, or anti-photosynthesis, with conversion powered by the pack-batteries we have to wear day and night, awake or sleeping. Mars-rationalized fruit trees and certain adaptable veggies are also grown in the crater (plants inhale CO_2, so this worked out fine). Marsrats are vegetarians by default. Forever!

Helluva long time, forever, any way you look at it.

"Had enough?" Jesperson glanced at me, a forefinger ready to stab the remote controller.

"Yeah, and then some. Go ahead, kill it."

"Think it over," he said, tongue in both cheeks—a tough maneuver even for him. "It's the only pomp and circumstance you're liable to see for the rest of your unnatural life."

I told him what the gypsy told the po-liceman.

He clicked his tongue and pretended hurt feelings. "You're uncouth, Barnes! Vonex Board Chairman Armin Korasek is about to hand us over to UN stewardship. The UN's high and mighty Secretary-General is going to swear in Scheiermann and Yokomizo by proxy. Sure you want to miss all that hoopla?"

"The deed'll get done without my help. Knock off the chatter and let's get trucking for home." I was tired of Scheiermann's version of Hearts and Flowers.

Jess took me at my word. He tapped the off switch, but lolled where he was, stroking his stubbled jaw and stewing about something. He switched the holotank on again, diddled with the view selector until the basalt curtain wall of the lower escarpment swelled to fill the tank.

Olympic Base is too close to the volcano for the roof camera to pick up more than a smidgen of a piece of a tiny chunk of the monster's soaring flank. I could see the downfall section of pipeline we'd checked out that morning using a telescope. The steady trickle of water we get from the still running down from the heights is what keeps Burroughs alive (the aqueduct isn't a "still," of course, but for whatever reason folks have taken to calling it that).

"One of these days," my partner said, sounding wistful, "I'm going to climb that mother. I swear I will, right to the tippy top."

"Uh-huh. Should be a cinch once you sprout wings."

He took no offense; we'd had the same conversation before. My zinger rolled off his back like a Ping-Pong ball.

"I mean it," he said, studying the holotank intently as if willing the scarp's awesome perspective to change. He was out of luck. Experts say the volcano hasn't done any kind of turn for

millions of E-years, or longer. The holographic image of Olympus Rupes reared in the tank like a collage of landscapes from some grainy old black-and-white King Kong movie—furled, ruggedly convoluted ropes of lava drip that'd serpentined down long, long ago from way high up. *Way* high up. In places, the escarpment rears up six kilometers above a layered pediment—roughly three and three-quarter *miles*. Even so, it's only the first baby step in a truly awesome rise.

"I do mean it," said Jesperson, repeating himself—something I've learned is a bad sign.

He sure enough did mean it, too. I know my partner backwards and forwards and inside out. He may say and do lots of off-the-wall stuff, but he always speaks his mind, and always minds what he says when he speaks. A hard gent to get acquainted with, Jesperson is a moody, overeducated Marsrat, lean and UV-irradiated and parchment dry as every other bo who's stuck in this dustball. His conversation, what there is of it, tends to be laced with acid.

Like me my ownself, Jesperson had had an unpleasant Earthside experience. He would righteously deny ever confiding the details to a living soul, but he'd be wrong. One night a few E-years ago, while deep in his cups in Art the Barkeep's sleazy watering hole, he'd babbled the tale to me. Seems he was once on the payroll of a major government spook show—the kind that's real shy of publicity—and somehow came to do less than was expected of him. A mysterious Asian femme fatale was involved (aren't they always?), and a microfilm dot he'd let stray into the wrong hands. The half-told tale was spun out all fuzzy, cloak-and-daggery and half-explained. He never came right out and said as much, but I caught the drift. His big boss had offered simple alternatives: termination with extreme prejudice, or Mars.

I know exactly how Jess must've felt. Still and all, I think he may've decided wrong. Once upon a time a stone-faced, white bread judge looked down his long nose and offered me what Jesperson calls "Hobson's Choice," whatever that means. The rambunctious bo I tangled with had been chug-a-lugging white lightning in an after-hours San Berdoo gin palace. He went out of his way to provoke the scuffle. What lit his fuse, I found out

later, was that his kid, a defensive tackle with two left feet, had screwed-up during a losing game. I'd yanked him, sat him down on the bench to reflect on his sins.

The bo swung and I ducked. We went at it hot and heavy for a few heartbeats, except when the chips were down the tackle's proud papa was handier with his mouth than his dukes. My right fist hit his mouth, and the back of his head hit the edge of the bar, in that order.

The assistant DA knew a Murder Two indictment wouldn't get to first base. She argued and waffled and beat her gums, then grudged a simple manslaughter plea-bargain deal, which gratified the young legal eagle standing up for me. Unlike Jesperson, I'd had no "termination" worries. But thoughts of five-to-ten in the slam when you're young are . . . I was a lot younger then, and black, and more arrogant than I am now. Hizzoner didn't care for arrogance. He cared even less for Afro-American football coaches. It's a dull story.

Anyhow, after the fallout fell out Jesperson and I each opted for the one-way ticket to Mars. I found Lorna here, fell for her big time, and managed to earn a living (not to mention an aching back) by virtue of my dexterity and industry in picking up, carting hither and thither, and setting down objects of various sizes, shapes and weights.

Jesperson wasn't that lucky; he found Olympus Mons. Now no one in his right mind—underscore *no one*, taking it for granted that "right mind" applies to my partner—had ever given serious thought to *climbing* the mother of all volcanoes. But I guess mountaineering gets in your blood. Jess had been an experienced climber long before his misadventure; according to Doc Franklin, our self-styled areographer, he'd once ranked among the world's top alpinists, if that's the right word. When prodded extra-hard, Jess would now and then open up part way and spin tall tales about climbing some "hill" in the Dolomites, the Alps, California's Sierra Nevada, or the Canadian Rockies. He told me he and another pair of crazies had once hitched their carefree bods up the sheer granite face of Yosemite Valley's El Capitan. They had climbed the wall "clean," he'd proudly announced, by anchoring their carabiners with chocks and hand-set aluminum wedges instead of hammered pitons.

Why do a super-tough climb the super-tough way? Not just "because it's there," for the love of God! That's the lamest excuse I ever did hear. No, those clucks did it the hard way so as not to "spoil" the rock face for any head cases dumb enough to follow them up a few thousand meters of vertical granite.

If and when you get to know him, I think that climb explains my wild and crazy partner better than anything else I could say.