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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MARTIAN V.F.W ***

MARTIAN V. F. W.

By G. L. VANDENBURG

There's nothing like a parade, I always say. Of course, I'm a Martian.

Mr. Cruthers was a busy man. Coordinating the biggest parade in New York's history is not easy. He was maneuvering his two hundred pounds around Washington Square with the agility of a quarterback. He had his hands full organizing marchers, locating floats, placing the many brass bands in their proper order and barking commands to assistants. But Mr. Cruthers approached the job with all the zeal of an evangelist at a revival meeting.

As he approached the south-west corner of the square he saw something that jarred his already frayed nerves. He stopped abruptly. The mass of clipboards and papers he was carrying fell to the street. There before him were one hundred and fifty ants, each of them at least six feet tall. His first impulse was to turn and run for the nearest doctor. He was certain that the strain of his job was proving too much for him. But one of the ants approached him. It seemed friendly enough, so Mr. Cruthers stood his ground.

"My group is waiting for their assignment." The ant's voice seemed to be coming from the very core of its thorax which was a violent red.

"Good Lord!" Mr. Cruthers' mouth opened up as wide as an oven door.

"Mr. Cruthers, I believe the parade is about to start and my group—"

Mr. Cruthers managed to blurt out. "What the devil *are* you anyway!"

"This *is* the parade marking the International Geophysical Year, is it not?" The ant had a pleasant, friendly voice.

"Well, yes, but—"

"And you are Mr. Cruthers, the manager of the parade, is that not correct?"

Mr. Cruthers rubbed his eyes and took another look at the strange creature. Its head was a brilliant yellow. It had two large goggle eyes which rolled like itinerant marbles when it spoke. The low slung abdomen was a burnt brown. It was bad enough, Cruthers thought, that these ants were six feet tall, but it was nightmarish to see them in three colors.

"Mr. Cruthers," the ant continued, "haven't you been instructed by the National Academy of Sciences that the Martian V.F.W. is to participate in this parade?"

"The Martian—!!" Mr. Cruthers' mouth was open again. Then he realized that when the ant spoke its mouth didn't move. He picked up his clipboard and papers from the street. His voice was hostile now. "What the hell is this, some kind of a gag! What are you trying to do, scare a man half to death!"

"Oh, we're not joking, Mr. Cruthers. The National Academy—"

"They didn't say anything to me about a bunch of clowns dressed up like ants!" Mr. Cruthers' indignation became intensified. He was loathe to admit that he'd been taken in by such obviously animated costumes. "Now look here, I'm a very busy man."

"The arrangements *have* been made, Mr. Cruthers. If my group is refused a place in this parade we shall file suit immediately. As manager you'll be named co-defendant." The ant was gentle but firm.

The thought of being sued softened Mr. Cruthers' attitude. "Well, I'm very sorry, pal, but every contingent in this parade is listed on my clipboard and you're not. I know this list by heart. What did you say the name of your group was?"

"The Martian V.F.W."

Mr. Cruthers was amused. "Those sure are the craziest outfits I've ever seen," he chuckled. "Where'd you get them? Walt Disney make them for you?" He followed his own little joke with a long throaty laugh.

The ant was impatient. "About the parade, Mr. Cruthers, there isn't much time."

"Oh, yes, the parade. Well, let me see," he thumbed through the clipboard, "I guess there's always room for a few laughs. How many in your group?"

"One hundred and fifty. And we also have a float with us. Not a very large one. It measures twenty by twenty."

"Tell you what. You move your group to the corner of Thompson Street and Third Street. Get behind the Tiffany float and follow them, okay?"

The ant paused a moment to record the instructions in his mind. Then he turned to leave.

"Oh, wait a minute," Mr. Cruthers cried before the ant could rejoin his group. "Just who did you speak to at the National Academy of Sciences?"

"I believe it was a Mr. Canfield."

Mr. Cruthers' face lit up. "Well, why didn't you say so in the first place! I'd have placed you right away."

"That's perfectly all right, Mr. Cruthers."

"Listen, I don't know what you guys do but those costumes should certainly bring the house down. There's going to be four million people watching this parade. I bet that's the biggest audience you've ever seen."

"It certainly is." With that the ant strode away.

"Good luck!" Mr. Cruthers shouted after him.

"Daddy! Daddy, look! Look at the big rocket!" The little boy jumped up and down gleefully. "It must be a whole mile long, Daddy! What kind is it?"

"That's the Vanguard, son."

An autumn breeze from the East River chilled their vantage point at Sixty-First Street and Fifth Avenue.

"The Vanguard?" The name meant nothing to the boy. "Gee, I'll bet it can fly all the way to the stars!"

"It's the rocket that carried the first artificial satellite into space."

The parade, now three hours old, continued past the reviewing stand.

"I wanna get a better look at the Vanguard!" the boy shouted.

The father lifted the boy onto his shoulders. The little fellow laughed and whooped it up, firing several shots from his Captain Video Ray gun at the passing missile.

The rocket moved on and the noise of the crowd diminished slightly.

A one-hundred piece brass band was passing in front of them. They were playing "The Stars and Stripes Forever." They were followed by the Sak's Fifth Avenue display; nine small floats, each depicting life on another planet. The National Academy of Sciences had a success on its hands.

"Wow! Daddy, I wanna ride on it! I wanna ride on that float and visit all those planets! Can I, Daddy!" The boy became all limbs trying to squirm down from his father's shoulders.

"You stay right where you are, young man," the father struggled to hold his balance.

"But I wanna go to the stars. I can watch the rest of the parade from Venus or Mercury! Please,

Daddy!"

The father grinned. "Not just yet, son, but it won't be long before man will go to the stars."

"Who lives up there, Daddy?"

"Oh, there isn't any life up there yet."

"If no one's living up there why does anyone want to go there?"

"Well, maybe there'll be too many people on earth someday and then we'll have to find other planets with more room."

Another monstrous brass band was going by. The boy became restless. He began to toy with his ray gun, half interested in seeing if there were any sparks left in it. "Why can't there be something besides so many bands in a parade? I wanna see another float."

The father tried to interest the boy by pointing out all the famous people who were also there: a variety of statesmen the world's leading scientists and religious and cultural leaders, the president of the United States.

The boy was interested but not in what his elder was saying to him. He was looking downtown, his eyes squinting, trying to make out figures as far away as Fifty-sixth Street. Then his mouth opened, not uttering a sound yet, just waiting to burst with joy at what was coming toward them.

His father looked up at him. "I wish you'd tell me what you are looking at. I'm all the way down here on street level, remember?"

"Daddy, they look like ants!"

"What?"

"Ants, Daddy, ants! A whole army of them. Ain't it exciting?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"They're doing somersaults and back flips and everything! They're coming right this way! Gee, there's hundreds of them. And they got a float behind them, Daddy! A great big float with something burning on it."

The child sitting on his shoulders made mobility impossible for the father. And he couldn't see around the spectators. He resigned himself to stand and wait for this new spectacle to overtake them. The reaction to this new sight had already begun to work its way uptown. In the distance, but getting closer every second, he could hear unrestrained laughter and rejoicing.

"Hey, take it easy!" The boy was beginning to ride the shoulders like a bronco buster. "By the time they get here I won't have any shoulders left. Where are they now?"

"They're almost here, Daddy! And they aren't ants at all. They're just a bunch of clowns dressed up like it." He began to giggle hysterically. "Golly, they're funny. Can you see them yet, Daddy?"

Before the father could produce an answer the ants were in view. They were a sight that couldn't fail to stimulate the funny bone. By comparison with real ants everything about them had been grossly exaggerated to achieve the proper effect. They walked on their two back legs but the four front apertures were far from idle. Some of them turned somersaults, others did complicated flips consisting of two or three spins in mid-air. Still others, doing a kind of animated cakewalk, carried toy ray guns which they fired at random into the crowd. The guns were something like the little boy's Captain Video ray gun, only larger. They emitted little streaks of blue sparks which shone brightly but disappeared when contact was made with air.

They were easily the hit of the parade, a three ring circus all by themselves, as they pranced and clowned their way up Fifth Avenue giving the spectators a whale of a show that was completely new.

The guests on the reviewing stand refrained from any hilarity until they saw the float that four of the ants were pulling behind them. It was in keeping with the rest of the nonsense they were perpetrating. The float boasted eight larger ray guns, three on either side and two in the rear, that fired the same fascinating blue sparks. Behind each gun an ant stood on its head, wildly waving six legs in the breeze, begging to be noticed and laughed at. Above the guns, emblazoned in fiery orange letters, were the words: "MARTIAN V.F.W." This was interpreted by one and all as a punch line and was treated accordingly.

It was heartwarming to be able to see the president and so many other dignitaries abandon composure in favor of a good old fashioned belly laugh.

"Daddy, I can't laugh any more," the boy had to pause between every other word. "My stomach hurts. Aren't they the funniest things you ever saw?"

The father was too convulsed to be able to answer him.

"Daddy, one of them is coming this way! He's firing his Captain Video ray gun at us!" They boy

squeezed his father and held on tight.

The father took a deep breath in order to be able to speak. "Take your gun and fire back at him, son. Fire away! Go on, he's just being playful!" He broke forth with another gust of laughter. "I won't see anything as funny as this again if I live to be a hundred!"

The ant pranced over to where they were standing, firing its gun in every direction. The boy fired back. The ant took one look at the lad's gun and let out a long cackling sound which built to a crescendo and then stopped as though it had been turned off. The ant rejoined the group and they continued on their merry way.

The boy fired several shots into the float as it passed. He wanted to see if he could knock out those blazing orange letters: MARTIAN V.F.W. The letters continued to burn, but in the boy's mind he was certain he had made several direct hits.

The boy and his father watched the float until it was out of sight. They knew there wouldn't be another attraction like those ants. They must have been real professionals, the father thought. Such teamwork! Such precision! Each one of them having a specific job to do and each doing it to perfection. After them everything was bound to be anticlimactic.

More marchers, more bands, a few more floats. The boy was beginning to tire. It had been a long day. Now everything was dull. "Daddy, I don't want to see any more. Let's go home."

"We'll stay another five minutes."

The parade somehow seemed to be slowing down. The father yawned and let his son down from his shoulders. He looked across the street at the president and the other dignitaries on the reviewing stand. All were slowly raising their hands in salute as another color guard drowsily made its way by.

Soon the last group in the parade was passing the reviewing stand. Another brass band. They were moving with the speed of a glacier. A full five seconds elapsed between each note of music. Everything was happening in slow motion. On the reviewing stand the dignified hands went up, agonizingly slow, to a final salute and they stayed there. The greatest minds in the world stood motionless, unalterably still. Just as each wave of pandemonium had unfurled itself up Fifth Avenue during the parade, so now did silence take command.

The little boy tugged at his father's coat. "Daddy! Daddy," he pleaded, "why has the parade stopped? I wan-na-go-home—" His words came more slowly with each passing second, like a high speed phonograph playing at thirty-three and a third r.p.m. "Dad-dy—why—don't—you—an—swer—me—Da—ddy—why—don't—" His father never heard him.

Fifty miles above the Atlantic the fleet of spaceships hung suspended like lanterns. In the lead ship the ant in charge of communications reported to the commander.

"We've just received the first communique from the advance guard, sir."

"Read it to me."

The communications chief read from a large perforated paper. "Time—0600—mission accomplished. Manhattan island cut down the middle—immediate result of super-sonic rays; four million dead—rays spreading east and west—estimated time of rays' full effect; 0800— island will then be neutralized—awaiting further orders." The ant folded the paper and looked up at the commander. "Shall I relay further orders, sir?"

"No." The commander of the ants paused and stroked his chin. "We're moving in."

THE END

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