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Title: Dawningsburgh

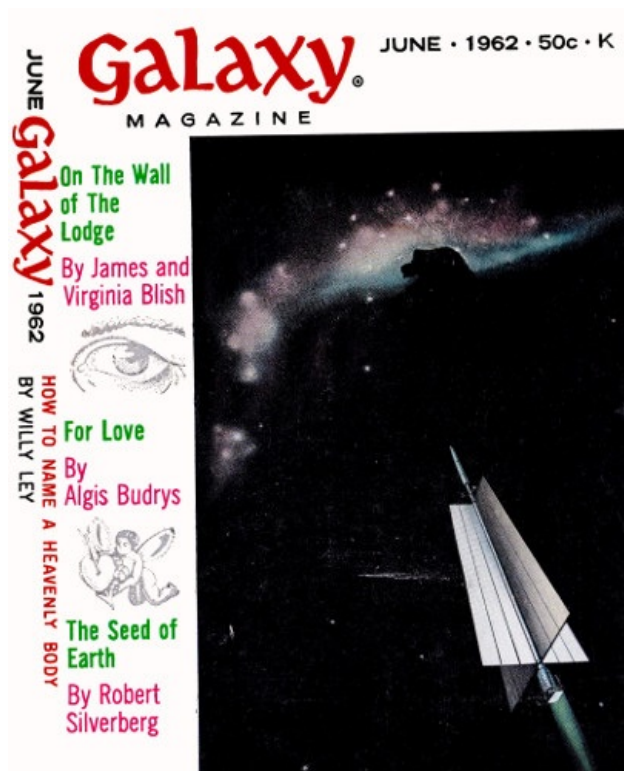
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAWNINGSBURGH ***



DAWNINGSBURGH

By WALLACE WEST

Illustrated by RUVIDICH

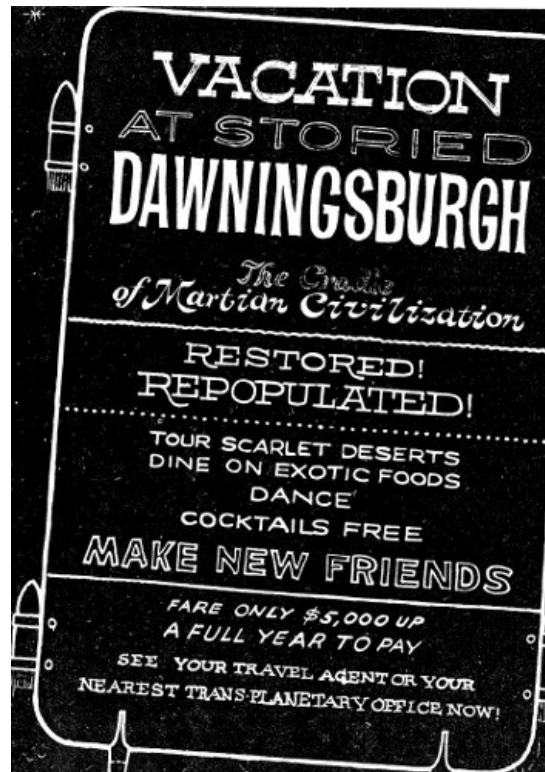
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A lean wind wails through the age-old avenues of Dawningsburgh.

Mornings, it brings sand from surrounding hills and scrubs at fresh paint, neon signs endlessly proclaiming the city's synthetic name and street markers in seven languages.

At sunrise it prepares the dunes for footprints of scurrying guided tourists.

When icy night clamps down and the intruders scamper to their hotels, the wind howls as it flings after them a day's collection of paper cups, bottle caps and other picnic offal.



"Liars! Cheats!" whimpered Betsy O'Reilly as she tossed on the lumpy bed of her third class room and recalled the sky poster that had hypnotized her.

Now, Betsy was disappointed and bored. Slim, pretty, freckled and pert, but ten years older than she wished, she had mortgaged her secretarial salary to engage once more in The Eternal Quest. And, as always, the quest was proving futile. Eligible bachelors shunned Dawningsburgh as they did other expensive tourist traps. The "new friends" she had made were either loudmouthed, hairy miners en route to or from the orichalcum diggings, or middle-aged couples on tragic second honeymoons, or self-styled emigre artists and novelists intent on cadging free meals and any other favors that lonely females might grant.

But maybe, Betsy tried to console herself, there was something real here; something glamorous that she could find and cling to during the long months back in New York when she would have to subsist on soups and salads in order to pay her debt to Trans-Plan. Mars had been great, the guides insisted. Once, they said, it had even colonized Atlantis. Perhaps, under the sham and away from those awful conducted tours, something was still left that could make her feel a trifle less forlorn.

Betsy jumped out of bed and rummaged in a closet. There it was! A heated emergency garment equipped with plastic helmet, air pack and a searchlight. Required by law but seldom used, since tourists were told to stay off the 60° below zero streets at night.

Wriggling into the clumsy thing, she tested valves and switches as she had been instructed. Then she tiptoed out of her cubbyhole, down a corridor and into the hotel lobby.

The room clerk did not greet her with its usual trill. A robot, built on Earth as a "stand-in" for one of the vanished Martians, it had turned itself off when the last tourists left the dining room for their beds. But how lifelike it still looked, balancing on a perch behind the ornate plastic desk. And how human too, despite the obviously avian ancestry of the race it mimicked. What was it the guides had said about the way in which all intelligent lifeforms so far discovered closely resembled one another? Why, even artificial Martians made the average human look drab and

clumsy.

Betsy circled the overdecorated room like a shadow and pushed against the street door. Escaping air whistled through the crack.

"Miss!" squawked the clerk, triggered alive by the noise. "Don't...."

She was outside by then and running through the crazy half-light thrown by Mars's nearer and farther moons. Wind howled and tugged at her. Cold turned the breath from her helmet vent into snow.

When no pursuit developed she stopped, gasping, before one of the open-air shops she had toured that afternoon. Five "Martians" bent stiffly over lathes and other machines, just where they had stopped after the last visitor departed. Hoarfrost mottled their leather harness, their downy red skins and the scars on their shoulders where atrophied wings had supposedly been amputated. No breath came from their nostrils. How cold and small they looked!

On impulse, she approached briskly.

"Yes, Miss?" The robot proprietor unkinked as its automatic relays turned it on. It came forward with a grimace meant to represent a smile. "You're out very late. What may I show you?" Its voice was like a rusted bird song.

"Tell me," said she, "what the Martians really made here."

"Why, we design jewelry, Miss. I have some nice...."

"No, no!" she interrupted. "What did the real Martians make here? Surely not junk jewelry for tasteless tourists. Something beautiful, it must have been. Wind bells? Dreams? Snowflakes? Please tell me."

The robot twittered and flinched like a badly made toy.

"I d-do not understand," it ventured at last. "I am not programmed to answer such questions. Perhaps the guides can do so. Now may I show you...."

"Thank you, no." She touched the thing's cold, six-fingered hand with quick compassion. "But I'll ask the guides. Good night."

Back in the street, she began to retrace her tour of the afternoon. Here was what the guide had called a "typical home." This time she did not disturb the mother, father and one furry child with budding wings who clustered about what experts thought must have been a telepathic amplifier. It did not work any longer—none but the coarsest Martian machines did—yet the frost-rimed robots sat stiffly enchanted before it, as they would do until the sun rose and tourists resumed their endless tramp. (The day's last, she noted, had left an empty pop bottle in the mother's lap.)

Farther on she met a "policeman", resplendent in metal harness, leaning forlornly against an anachronistic lamppost. Some late-prowling jokester had stuck a cigarette between its still lips.

Surely not policemen here? She looked up at the fairy towers that laced the stars. Surely not in this grave place. It must be one of those human touches introduced by Trans-Planetary to make tourists smile and feel superior. Nevertheless, she removed the cigarette and ground it under her heel.

After walking half a mile through the sand-whipped night, Betsy paused before a structure of translucent spires and flying buttresses where a library had once been housed. No robots were on duty there and no serious attempt had been made at restoration. No Champollion had appeared in the early days of exploration to decipher some Martian Rosetta stone, and by now the historical record had been hopelessly scrambled by souvenir hunters.

But that didn't matter really, they said. Outside of the tourist trade the only really valuable things on the dying planet were extensive deposits of orichalcum, an ore rich in pure radium. Thanks to the impartial mining monopoly established by Trans-Planetary twenty years ago, orichalcum supplied the nations of Earth with sinews of war which they had not yet dared use, and fuel for ships that were questing greedily farther and farther out into the darkness of space.

So metal-paged books had long vanished from the library's stacks and its sand-strewn halls were littered with broken rolls of tape. How long would it be, she wondered as she passed on with a sigh, before the guides realized that even those mute tapes could be sold as souvenirs?

Phobos had set by now. She turned on the searchlight, checked her air tank—the gauge showed enough reserve for another hour—and defiantly opened the face plate of her helmet. The atmosphere was cold; cold as a naked blade. It had a heady tang and she stood taking in great gulps of it until a warning dizziness forced her to close the plate. The guides were wrong again! A human could learn to breathe this air!

Leaving the gutted library, Betsy breast the wind as she ploughed through shifting dunes toward a structure shimmering on the other side of the plaza. This, the guides pattered, was a cathedral. When the place now called Dawningsburgh had been alive, they said, its inhabitants gathered at the shrine each evening to sip one ceremonial drink of precious water, shed two

ceremonial tears for the days when Mars had been young and worship a flock of atavistic winged princesses who performed ceremonial flights under a pressurized, transparent dome in the rays of the setting sun.

This showplace had, of course, been restored right down to its last perch, and had been equipped with a full complement of "worshippers." At the climax of each day's final guided tour, visitors jammed themselves into the nave, sipped cocktails, "ohed", "ahed" and even shed tears along with the robots as they gawked at mannequins flying above them on invisible wires in the best Peter Pan tradition.

Ducking under the electric eye that would have started a performance, Betsy tiptoed into the structure. It was quieter than any grave. Several hundred robots huddled there on their perches, drinks in hand, ready to go into their act. At the far end of the transept a soaring mural, gleaming phosphorescently, hinted at the lakes, seas and forests of Mars's prehistory. Under the dome a single flyer dangled, its plumes trailing.

For long minutes Betsy stood in the dimness, seeking to capture the mystery and wonder of this place. In ruins, it would have swept her with ecstasy, as had her moonlit view of the Parthenon. Restored and "repopulated," it made her sick and ashamed of her race ... no, not of her race, exactly, but of the few hucksters who debased its thirst for knowledge and beauty.

Then a bird started to sing!

A bird? On Mars? This must be a tape, triggered on somehow despite her care in avoiding the electric eye. Any moment now, the robots would begin their mindless worship.

She shuddered and turned to escape. But something held her. She crept instead, step by soundless step, toward the source of that exquisite music.

An almost naked male robot had materialized before the mural. It was singing, far better than any nightingale, its strange hands outstretched to the radiance.

Such notes could not ... should not ... spring from the throat of a machine. Heart in mouth, Betsy advanced with infinite care. By the mural's light she saw that the newcomer had no hoarfrost coating. And the moisture of its breath condensed and fell to the floor like a blessing. She reached out a small hand to touch its scarred shoulder, then jerked back.

The shoulder was warm!

"Greetings, girl," Betsy's brain whispered to her. "You're out late. Just let me finish this thing and we'll have a chat."

The music soared, uninterrupted, to a climax sparkling with grace notes and glittering with chromatic trills.

"Now," fluted the creature, turning and fixing her with golden, freewheeling eyes, "what brings a tourist" (the word was a curse) "here at this hour?"

"L-love," she gulped, hardly knowing what she said. "I-I mean, I wanted to find out if anything real was left. And, well, I ran away from the hotel. They'll be coming after me, I suppose."

"Don't fret. Martians can play tricks with time. I'll return you to your room well before they get here."

"You—you're not just another, fancier, robot?"

"I'm alive enough." He bowed with a sweep that seemed to invest him with wings. "Pitaret Mura, at your service. A princeling of sorts. An iconoclast. And an atavist like you."

"There are others here?" Her eyes grew round.

"Most of the others have finished with this outgrown eyrie and are away on larger affairs. Only I return with a few friends once each year to sing of past glories and weep over present desecrations."

"Two ceremonial tears?" she asked with a return of bitterness. There was something in his attitude that she found disquieting.

"Many more than two. But..." he shrugged angrily, "I grow tired of weeping. On this visit I plan to wipe out you little humans who foul the nest of my ancestors."

"How?" She gripped his arm, fear racing through her.

"Tomorrow all this junk—" he nodded his handsome head at the robots—"will have been replaced by real Martians ... youngsters out for a lark with me. We'll tend shop, make jewelry and all that until I give a signal. Perhaps this shrine would be the best place. When it's crowded, just at sunset. Then we pounce!"

Mura ruffled himself up and sprang at her so convincingly that she shrieked.

"How juvenile!" she managed to laugh shakily.

"What did you say, human?" The Pitaret was taken aback by this unexpected thrust.

"I said your plan is childish!" She stamped her foot. "So you cut the throats of a few stupid people. Then Earth sends up cobalt bombs and blows this cradle of Martian civilization to

smithereens. The others won't like that, even if they are occupied with larger affairs. You would be in real trouble."

"Hmmm!" He looked at her with new respect and a faint tinge of uncertainty. "But some punishment is justified. Even you can see that."

"Yes," she admitted, wrinkling her nose at him, now that the worst was over. "This place is a horror. And we tourists are horrors too, for having let ourselves be taken in by it. But death isn't punishment, just an ending."

"I hadn't thought of it that way." Mura slipped an arm around her shoulders and looked down at her impishly. "*You* suggest a fitting punishment then."

Here was the final test. If she could keep the hold that she had somehow gained over this immature superman, horrible things might be averted. Her thoughts raced in circles.

"Martians can play tricks with time?" she asked at last.

"Oh, yes. Time is like this mural. Let me show you: Aim your light at the left-hand corner of the picture. See the sun and its planets forming out of cosmic dust? Now move the beam toward the right. Slowly.... Slowly! Notice how Martian oceans form and living things crawl out of them.

"Now continue. There you see the winged Martians with their cities that long have crumbled to dust. Next, water grows scarce and canals are built. Here all but a few of us have lost our wings.

"Here we colonize Earth ... to our eternal regret. Finally, you see us abandon Mars rather than risk another test of strength with you pushing troglodytes."

"I-I don't understand," she whispered, strangely moved.

"That searchlight beam represents the living present. Where it shines, life pulses briefly on a vast mural that is painted across time, from its beginning to its end. Martians manipulate the light of the present as we please, living when we please, so long as we please."

"How dreadful.... Wonderful, I mean." She gazed at him worshipfully. "And you can do this for humans too?"

"For short periods, yes. But stop fluttering your lovely eyelashes at me. Punished you are going to be. If you can suggest nothing better than my plan, I'll go back to it and take the consequences. Otherwise I'll be the laughing stock of my friends."

"And you couldn't stand that, could you, poor boy?" She patted his hand before he snatched it away. "How is this, then, for an alternative? Tonight, when I couldn't sleep, I got to thinking that there could be no more fitting punishment for tourists than to be forced to live, for years and years, in a plush hotel at Atlantic City, Las Vegas ... or Dawningsburgh. Think how miserable they would become if they had to take the same tours over and over with the same guides; stuff themselves on the same meals; dance to the same orchestras with the same new friends. Can you hold your time spotlight still here for, say, ten years?"

"Of course," Mura crowed as he swept her into his downy arms and danced her about among the robot perches. "A wonderful idea. You're a genius. Even the others may come back, now, to watch humans squirm, yawn—and perhaps learn to respect their elders. How can I repay you?"

"Let me go back to New York," she said, feeling like a traitor.

"That wouldn't be fair. You're a tourist. You came here to prove to yourself that, as your Bible puts it, 'a living dog is better than a dead lion.' You must learn your lessons along with others."

"I suppose you're right." She felt cleaner now, even though the prospect of a decade at Dawningsburgh, with *The Quest* unfinished, appalled her. To be forty-one and still single when she returned to Earth! Two tears trickled down her freckled nose.

"That's better," the Pitaret sang happily. "You're already beginning to understand the meaning of our ancient ceremonial. Give me ten years and I'll make a real Martian of you!"

Outside, the lean wind echoed his glee as it tossed a hatful of Good Humor sticks and sand-coated lollipops against the cathedral wall.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAWNINGSBURGH ***

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