

FRANK CHADWICK

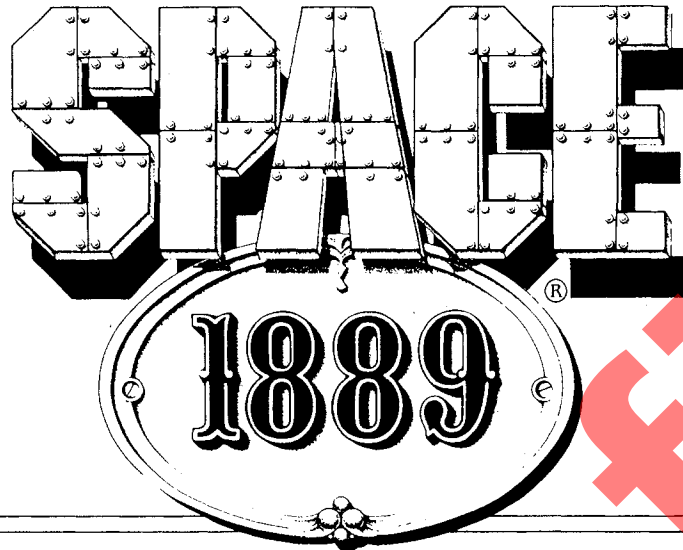
# SPACE 1889<sup>®</sup>

## TALES FROM THE ETHER



 **HELIOGRAPH  
INCORPORATED**

FRANK CHADWICK





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# The Burning Desert

## AN OLD SCHOOL CHUM

ONE OF THE player characters, preferably of Social Level 4 or 5, receives a letter from a former classmate who has now become a career civil servant in the Colonial Office. The friend is now a junior official on Mercury at Princess Christiana Station.

## TIN PRICES PLUMMET!

The price of tin has plummeted on the world market. Recent sales of high-grade tin on the Tin Market have driven the price from its normal £162 per ton to £117 per ton, with prices continuing to slide downward. Tin mines across Europe and America face bankruptcy, as do many tin brokers, who hold large stockpiles of £162-per-ton tin.

The bulk of the new sources of tin have been sold through a handful of London brokerage houses who have all identified their source as the island kingdom of Vanaluvala in the Java Sea. Never known before as a tin producer, it is widely believed that the Vanaluvala monarchy is serving as an intermediary for a supplier or suppliers unknown. The puzzle is that no one can locate the original source of the cheap metal.

Wild stories of transmutation of elements, slave mines deep in Africa, and half a dozen even more far-fetched and irresponsible explanations have sent a shock wave through all of the London metal markets. Industry requires stability in the cost of its raw materials and an assured supply. The wildly fluctuating prices in the metal markets, as well as the collapse of capital flow into the mining industry, is a matter of the gravest concern.

In the envelope with the letter is also a brief note on Colonial Of-

fice stationery to the captain of the ether flyer, HMS *Prometheus*, which instructs him to provide passage for the bearer and any associates who accompany him, along with their baggage. A newspaper column clipped from *The Times* accompanies the letter and the note. Photocopy the letter and the newspaper article on this page and present them to the player in question, then allow him to read them.

*My Old Friend,*

I hope that this letter finds you well and prosperous, and the life of adventure you have embarked upon is as exciting and rewarding as I have every reason to expect it to be. I do say it is more interesting than the life of a civil servant in so remote a posting as my own!

That notwithstanding, I have some reason to believe that our small station here on Mercury may be close to the center of a conspiracy of momentous proportions and diabolical intent which threatens the very pillars of commerce and industry upon which the empire is built. You will forgive me if I sound overly dramatic, but I am convinced that I am not overstating the magnitude of the threat. Unfortunately, I believe that there is some involvement by corrupt members of my own Service in this plot, but am unable to determine their exact identities. That being the case I cannot safely confide this intelligence to anyone here at this station and must turn elsewhere for assistance. You naturally came to mind.

If you have access to transportation I urge you to come at once. If you do not have a suitable vessel, I have arranged for your passage on the HMS *Prometheus*, a stores ship which will be leaving Venus within two weeks of your receipt of this letter. Simply present the enclosed pass to the captain, and he will see to the needs of you and your party. In the meantime, you may wish to read the enclosed newspaper article and ponder its significance.

*Your Most Sincere Friend,*  
*Randolph Forbes-Lannington*

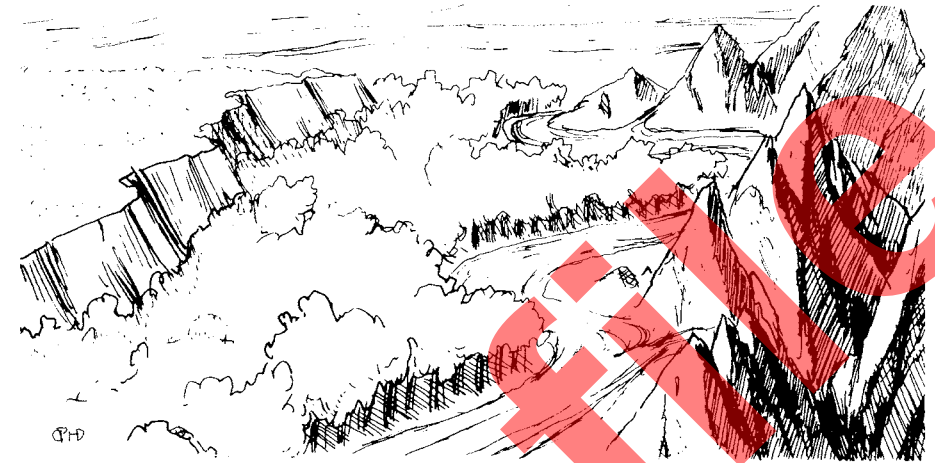
*Randolph Forbes-Lannington, Esq.*  
Princess Christiana Station (Mercury)

## A VOYAGE TO MERCURY

WHETHER BY MEANS of their own ether flyer or by passage on the HMS *Prometheus*, the player characters will make their way to Mercury to land at Princess Christiana Station. While en route they may wish to find out a bit more about their destination, and the following brief excerpt from a popular travel guide can be photocopied and given to them or read aloud.

### Mercury

ONLY AFTER the ether pioneers had sent their expeditions to Mars, Venus, and Luna did they turn their attention to the innermost of planets: Mercury. The British Royal Society underwrote Sir Basil Throckmorton's Expedition of 1876 which first placed the British flag on Mercurian soil. Three subsequent expeditions through the rest of the '70s explored the burning deserts and pools of molten metal of the Bright Side, the glaciers and exotic ammonia snows of the Dark Side, and the 10,000-mile-long World River which completely encircles the planet in the temperate Twilight Zone which separates the Dark Side from the Bright Side. Throckmorton's Second Expedition (1877) drove deep into the Forbidding Desert on a specially insulated Mercurian exploratory aerial flyer, claiming vast tracts of land along the equator for the British Empire. A German expedition spent six months on the World River in 1878. Throckmorton's Third Expedition (1879) circumnavigated Mercury by following the course of the World River in his aerial flyer; he also undertook several side trips into the fridity of the Dark Side. But the at-



tractions of Mercury pale when compared to Mars and Venus, and as a result, the planet closest to the Sun has been ignored by most explorers.

Mercury is a world of extremes. It is the smallest of the planets—only about 40 percent larger than Luna. The immense gravitational pull of the Sun has locked one face of Mercury toward the Sun, much as Luna has one face locked eternally toward Earth. As a result, Mercury is divided into two hemispheres: the Bright Side in eternal day and the Dark Side in eternal night. Sandwiched between the two is the Twilight Zone in constant dusk (or dawn, depending on point of view). The Dark Side and the Bright Side are barren wastes, but the Twilight Zone is a flourishing paradise.

Mercury boasts raw materials (such as lead and tin on its Bright Side; dry ice and ammonia on the Dark Side) in abundance, but only if considerable hazards can be overcome. Scooping molten tin from a 600-degree F desert on the Bright Side poses problems which have proven impossible to overcome thus far. Dredging dry ice and ammonia snow from the darkness and -200-degree F cold of the Dark Side is nearly as dangerous.

### Princess Christiana Station

GREAT BRITAIN established its predominantly scientific outpost on Mercury—Princess Christiana Station—in 1880. Situated at the Mercurian North Pole, its scientists study the Sun and the local Mercurian environment. The small community is home to a faculty of 20 scientists, 50 servants and workers, six government officials, and a score of Royal Marines. Royal Navy ether flyers call on the outpost at irregular intervals, and a supply ship delivers equipment, provisions, and mail every six months. The panoramic beauty of the twilight setting of Princess Christiana Station was featured in an extensive article, replete with engravings and interviews, in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* for October 1883. In the words of the editor, "Truly, and at last, the Sun never sets on the British Empire!"

No other permanent national bases are located on Mercury. Since the establishment of Princess Christiana Station in 1880, the British Royal Society has supported a number of small expeditions of scientific and economic importance within 1000 miles of the Mercurian North Pole.

WITH ONE FACE turned perpetually toward the sun and the other face in endless night, only a relatively thin strip of Mercury's surface, called the Twilight Zone, is inhabitable. The following section gives a general description of the surface of the planet and its many unique areas and features.

### THE HOT SIDE

MERCURY'S HOT SIDE is forever under the steady rays of the Sun. It technically begins at the edge of the Twilight Zone as a desert with temperatures around 100 degrees F. With distance, these temperatures increase (at about one degree every three miles). The Hot Side is roughly broken into four zones: the Forbidding Desert, the Boiling Wasteland, the Tin Zone, and the Lead Zone.

**The Forbidding Desert:** This region extends from the edge of the Twilight Zone out to the point at which water boils. The zone is about 300 miles deep, and temperatures range from 100 to 212 degrees F. However, the Forbidding Desert is studded with what some explorers have called "stepping stones": the shaded sides of hills, and the shadows of great rocks and mountain ranges. These stepping stone shadows, never in the light of the Sun, are warmed only by the air around them, and are much cooler than the surrounding territories. Expeditions have found that it is possible to venture deep into the Forbidding Desert by dashing through the unremitting heat of the Sun to new shaded lands.

Ultimately, however, shadows can cut the heat by only so much. Beyond the boundary of the Forbidding Desert, the shadows become shorter and shorter.

**The Wasteland:** Extending from the border of the Forbidding Desert out to the point where tin melts, this zone is about 600 miles deep and has temperatures ranging from 212 degrees F at the edge of the Forbidding Desert to 450 degrees F at the edge of the Tin Zone. Probably the only interesting features are the occasional hot springs: Underground water channels broach the desert surface, whereupon their water instantly bursts into steam.

**The Tin Zone:** Named for the shallow surface pools of molten tin which speckle its surface, this zone is about 600 miles deep and has temperatures ranging from 450 degrees F at the edge of the Wasteland to 670 degrees F at the edge of the Lead Zone. Over geologic eons, the heat of the Sun has brought the surface temperature of the entire Tin Zone to an average of 550 degrees F. Basic elemental metals have been liquefied by the heat and have flowed (like water) to low-lying areas. The predominant metal is tin; a variety of other elements are present as contaminants and slag. Tin accumulates in many scattered pools, often covered with their crust of slag. Slight temperature variations—caused by the movement of the atmosphere, by solar fluctuations, and by actions within the planetary crust—shift these pools, allowing some of the metals to vaporize and then condense on mountain peaks or crystallize on chance rock outcroppings. In some regions, rocks are plated with tin, covered with accumulations of tin crystals, or soldered together by natural action.

**The Lead Zone:** This zone is so named because its average temperature is sufficient to melt lead as well

as tin. The pools of liquid metal contain both lead and tin. The Lead Zone is a circular region centered on the Subsolar (where the Sun stands directly overhead) and is about 600 miles in radius. Like the Tin Zone, it has its own characteristic terrain features: metal crystals, plains of solidified metal in the slightly cooler areas of the few shadows in the region, soldered rocks, and metal-plated rocks.

### THE DARK SIDE

MERCURY'S DARK SIDE is forever in the planet's own shadow, and without the Sun's warming rays, its temperature gradually decreases from 32 degrees F to -350 degrees F at its coldest point. The formal cold edge boundary of the Dark Side is the point where atmospheric temperature is 32 degrees F (the freezing point of water).

Like the Bright Side, the Dark Side is divided into zones based on temperature. Each zone is characterized by the various gases which condense out of the atmosphere to form a layer of snow on the ground.

**The Ice Sheath:** The first band, immediately adjacent to the Twilight Zone (and extending for some 300 miles into the darkness) is the Ice Sheath. Virtually all water in the atmosphere passing through this region precipitates as freezing rain or snow. The zone has temperatures ranging from 32 degrees F at the edge of the Twilight Zone to -100 degrees F at the edge of the Dry Ice Zone.

**The Dry Ice Zone:** Beyond the Ice Sheath is the Dry Ice Zone, another band about 300 miles deep in which atmospheric ammonia and carbon dioxide have fallen as their own peculiar type of snow.

**Kelvin's Land:** The remainder of the Dark Side (a circular area about 1800 miles in radius) reaches temperatures as low as  $-300$  degrees F (not low enough to condense out the basic atmospheric components such as oxygen, nitrogen, and hydrogen).

### THE TWILIGHT ZONE

THE HOSPITABLE Twilight Zone is Mercury's fabulous treasure trove. It is bounded on one side by the Ice Sheath (the edge of which is technically established by a temperature of  $32$  degrees F) and on the other by the Forbidding Desert (whose edge has a temperature of  $100$  degrees F). Between these two temperature extremes lie 300 miles of habitable, temperate territory, teeming with life.

The center of the Twilight Zone is the World River. This watercourse circles the globe, its flow driven by Coriolis effects rather than gravity. The World River is fed by rains and drainage from its watershed. In addition, when the World River winds near the Ice Sheath, it is fed by continuously crumbling glaciers which place icebergs into the mainstream.

The World River flows in one direction. To a person standing and facing the direction of flow, the right bank leads to the Dark Side and the Ice Sheath; the left bank leads to the Bright Side and the Forbidding Desert. Using these visual clues, it is possible to determine directions on the world with relative ease. Magnetic compasses do not work.

Mercurian life is in many ways very primitive, equivalent to Terran life in the Paleozoic Age. This period was characterized by plentiful sea life and limited land life. The World River is filled with massive sea crea-

tures—fish, tentacled swimmers, shelled snatchers, serpentine monsters, and exotic jellyfish. But the restricted size of the World River has also brought much of this life out onto the land, and the shores of the river are lush swamps, jungles, forests, and grasslands. Nearly all animals are aquatic or semi-aquatic—at home in the river and ready to dash into its waters for safety. Web-winged, air-breathing fish swoop overhead. Short-legged, alligator-like fish crawl the river's beaches. Gigantic, multilegged centipedes crash through the forests. And unwary people who get in these creatures' way sometimes get killed.

The left bank, lying between the river and the Forbidding Desert, is

a lush tropical region which stretches for miles. Many low-lying areas within it are swamp or marsh. The exotic plants and trees that cover its land are home to thousands of animal species. In many ways, the left bank is similar to the jungles of South America.

The right bank, between the river and the Ice Sheath, is a temperate region covered with forest and grassland. It is similar to North American forests and plains.

The character of the World River varies with location. In places, it is a mile-wide watercourse, sometimes opening up to become a vast lake. In others it takes the form of rapids, falls, swamps, or deep canyons on its journey around the world.

### THE BRIGHT SIDE

| Area                  | Temperatures (F)  | Size             |
|-----------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| The Lead Zone         | $670-900^{\circ}$ | 600 miles radius |
| The Tin Zone          | $450-670^{\circ}$ | 600 miles deep   |
| The Wasteland         | $212-450^{\circ}$ | 600 miles deep   |
| The Forbidding Desert | $100-212^{\circ}$ | 300 miles deep   |

### THE TWILIGHT ZONE

| Area            | Temperatures (F) | Size             |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| The Left Bank   | $50-100^{\circ}$ | 150 miles wide   |
| The World River | $50^{\circ}$     | 0.25-1 mile wide |
| The Right Bank  | $32-50^{\circ}$  | 150 miles wide   |

### THE DARK SIDE

| Area             | Temperatures (F)   | Size              |
|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| The Ice Sheath   | $32-100^{\circ}$   | 300 miles deep    |
| The Dry Ice Zone | $-100-200^{\circ}$ | 300 miles deep    |
| Kelvin's Land    | $-200-300^{\circ}$ | 1800 miles radius |