

SPACE
TRADE MARK

GDW 1907

CANAL PRIESTS OF

1889

MARS

Marcus L. Rowland

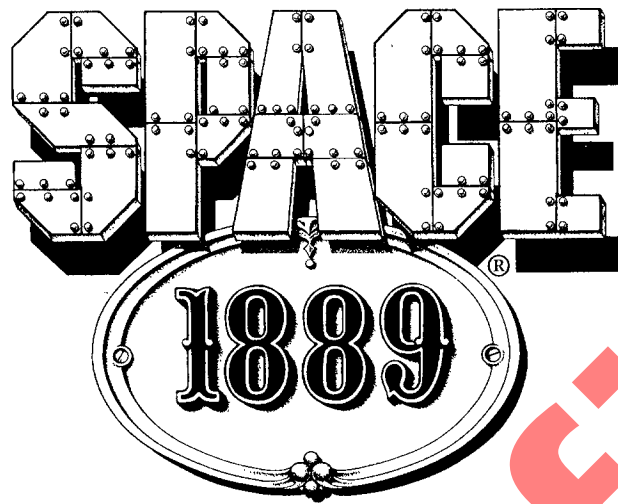


A Dying World...
A Reincarnation Cult...

GDW

And Assassinations
on 19th-Century Mars

Science-Fiction Role Playing in a More Civilized Time.



CANAL PRIESTS OF MARS

Marcus L. Rowland



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A Fistful of Dynamite (film)

A Transatlantic Tunnel, Hurrah!

Harry Harrison

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The Space Machine, Christopher Priest

W. G. Grace's Last Case, William Rushton

Diamonds are Forever, Ian Fleming

Help (film)

The Golden Child (film)

Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (film)

She, H. Rider Haggard

The Man Born to be King, Rudyard Kipling

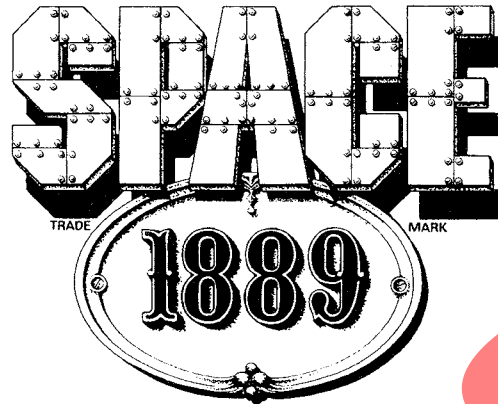
Deadly Litter, James White

An article in an old issue of *New Scientist*, which I can no longer find, kindled my interest in perpetual-motion machines and suggested this use for liftwood.

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—Marcus L. Rowland



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Sniper at the Gates of Dawn

SAND GRAINS RUSTLE under a faint dry breeze, occasionally glowing and crackling where friction has built up charges of static electricity. The glow is slowly lost as a tiny moon rises above distant hills, and the powdery sand dunes are dimly illuminated by its feeble light. Far away, the shrill cry of some small animal which has encountered a larger predator is swiftly extinguished as it dies. It is night at the edge of the Martian desert.

Two cloaked and hooded figures work their way along one of the sand ridges, making sure they are never silhouetted against the moonlight. Sand shoes muffle their footsteps and reduce their tracks to shallow depressions, quickly erased by the chilly night wind. Now and again a faint clink of metal on metal is heard. Eventually they reach their goal—a near-vertical ridge of ancient rock, about 80 feet high, that separates the desert from the canal zone. They shed their shoes and start to climb.

From the summit it is possible to smell the slightly moist air of the canal zone. One of the Martians wrinkles his nose and sniffs disappointingly. The other gestures for silence, pointing at some dim lights at the base of the slope below the ridge. Carefully they erect a small tent painted the exact color of the rock and

camouflage it with sand and shards of rock.

They freeze as they hear the thumping rhythm of a small troop of gashant-mounted cavalry patrolling lower down the hill, and wait for the patrol to ride past before completing their work and entering the tent.

Dawn. The shrill yapping of a small pack of roogies welcomes the first rays of the rising Sun, followed by the grunts and cries of various domesticated animals. The dim light reveals a walled compound containing several buildings and a luxuriant garden a hundred yards from the base of the ridge. A door bangs as an early riser starts the day's chores.

On the ridge, a flap in the side of the tent opens to reveal a long metal gun barrel, followed by the tube of a spyglass with a deep hood around the lens. Both have been carefully scoured and rusted to stop them from reflecting the light.

Time passes. As the morning gets brighter, the noise of a gong drifts out from the compound, and Martians stream into the largest building.

"Where is he?" says one of the watchers on the ridge.

"Patience. It's not bright enough for a clear shot yet. He always goes into the garden after they finish their prayers. I'll get him then."

Later, as the compound dwellers

return from prayers, the duo intensify their watch.

"Is that him?"

"No. Too young, and he isn't wearing the amulet."

"That one, then?"

"Too old and fat." An old priest walks into the garden accompanied by two richly clothed handmaidens and a small boy.

"Now!"

The long gun booms, and a heavy ball whistles down to the garden. The boy staggers back and falls. He twitches and lies still.

"Perfect! He is down—you have hit him in the heart!"

"Praise to the Old Ones! The Worm shall triumph!" A fusillade of musket shots bursts forth from guards on the compound wall, aimed at the gun's smoke but falling far short. As the first troops ride from the compound towards the hill, the cultists draw their swords and prepare to die for their faith.

Afternoon. Priests lay out the body of the boy. A line of mourners waits to pay last respects. In one of the upper chambers the acting high priest talks to his acolytes.

"Did either cultist say anything before he died?"

"No. Both died in the fight."

"Have Lieutenant Wee'zuus disciplined. He should have taken them alive."

"It shall be done."

"How did they identify the high priest?"

"We suspect one of the servants, Sha'eenda Hus'aalsh. She left the temple 10 days ago to visit a sick sister in Parhoon. None of the other women had heard of this sister before."

"Find out if the story is true—if not, I doubt that we'll see her again. Check everyone; there is obviously a spy in the temple. Report to me if you learn anything. I'll be with the astrologer."

"Let us hope that he died at an auspicious moment."

"We'll soon know. Somehow I doubt it. This assassination was carefully planned. They wouldn't make such a simple mistake."

In one of the towers of the temple, an aging priest pores over a huge sheet of parchment covered with complex signs and formulas. He studies an orrery, thumbs an abacus, then consults a thick scroll. He frowns in disbelief, crumples the parchment, and starts his calculations again.

Behind him, the acting high priest coughs and asks, "Do you have anything for me yet?"

"I must have made a mistake. There's no way that this can be right. Come back in the evening. I should have finished by then."

Evening. The astrologer completes his fifth series of equations and studies the result again. He turns to the acting high priest.

"I've checked this by three different methods, and I get the same thing every time."

"Go on. Where will he be born? Parhoon? Umbra?"

"If only it were as simple as that."

"One of the kraags? You don't mean that he will be born a savage!"

"It's worse than that. I can't explain this result at all. By every test I can make, he will not be born anywhere on Mars! The high priest will be reborn *in the skies!*"

"How can that be possible?"

"See here, and here. Again and again, the sky symbol, linked to this planet. There is no doubt. He will be reincarnated in the heavens."

"Which planet is that?"

"One of the inner ones. Does it matter?"

"No. This is madness. How can you explain it?"

"I don't know. I just don't know."

When Edison crash-landed on Mars, the acting high priest got his answer....



Unto Us a Child is Born



THE EVENTS OF the prologue took place several years before Edison's historic flight.

Most Martians are apathetic about the gradual decay of their planet, but there are some exceptions. Much of the work of reclamation and canal repair is coordinated by the Canal Keepers of Gaaryan, a religion reputedly founded by Seldon II which is possibly the most widespread religion on Mars. The priests consider it their sacred duty to repair the entire canal system. The high priest of the cult is

believed to be Seldon reincarnated. If he dies, his soul enters another child who is conceived at the exact moment of the previous priest's death. The birthplace of the new high priest is found by a complicated astrological process which narrows down the search to a small area. Patient investigation then finds a child who was conceived at the exact moment the high priest died. All cult activities, other than routine operation of locks and other canal facilities, are suspended during the search for the new high priest.

THE WORM CULTISTS

FOLLOWERS OF THE Cult of the Worm believe that Mars is doomed. Any attempt to stop the inevitable decline of the Martian race is treated as darkest heresy. Naturally, they are opposed to groups like the Canal Keepers who try to fight the decay of civilization. Although the Worm Cult originated with the High Martians, there are adherents amongst all three Martian races, and many subcults exist with little or no connection to the original cult (whose nature is revealed in **Beastmen of Mars**).

ASSASSINATION PLAN

A HIGH PRIEST of the Canal Keepers died three Martian years before the events of the prologue, and the

search for a replacement took almost a year. Canal transport was badly disrupted for much of that time. Members of one of the Canal Martian subcults of the Worm realized that they could paralyze the Canal Keepers by making them repeat the process in circumstances which would make it almost impossible to find an heir.

The cultists knew that the new high priest was selected by astrological divination. They gave their own astrologer all the information they could find on the birth of the current high priest and instructed him to find a moment of death that would cause the maximum amount of confusion. He succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Once every nine years the system produced an extraordinary result, a period of a few hours in which no possible birthplace existed on Mars! By that time the child high priest would be three years old, roughly five in Earth years.

The Worm Cultists contacted Sha'eenda Hus'aalsh, a temple servant who was their principal spy at the Canal Keepers' main temple near Gaaryan. She wasn't in a position to assassinate the child, but she could describe him and draw his picture. He could also be identified by the Amulet of Seldon, a medallion that is worn by the high priest.

After the child was killed, events proceeded as the Worm Cultists expected. The Canal Keepers lost much of their drive, and the condition of many canals deteriorated. No new reclamation works have been undertaken by the Keepers, though some local governments run their own repair projects on a smaller scale.

Most European colonists don't know of the cult's former importance. The knowledgeable minority think that it has died out. No Earthman is aware of the importance of Seldon's reincarnation in this religion; it is one of the most sacred secrets of the faith, never discussed with outsiders.

SELDON REBORN

WHEN EDISON LANDED, the Canal Keepers decided there could only be one explanation for the mystery; the reincarnated high priest had been conceived (and presumably born) as an Earthman. Unfortunately it took them many years to learn more of Earth and refine their astrological techniques to deal with conditions on another planet. Eventually they were able to calculate the exact place of birth. Careful investigation has narrowed the search down to one man: one of the player characters!

The Canal Keepers have decided to lure the reincarnation of Seldon to Mars and enthrone him as their new high priest. When this has been done, they want to ensure that the next high priest will be born on Mars. Accordingly, he must spend the rest of his life in their temple. To stop him from feeling lonely, he must be accompanied by a few friends. The acting high priest is now on Earth, arranging the final details of a complex plot to lure "Seldon" to Mars.

Naturally the Worm Cultists know that something is going on, but they don't have many details. The Keepers weeded out most of their agents after the assassination, and the Worm Cultists have no one in the inner circle of the faith. They have guessed that the Keepers are looking for the new high priest on Earth and are outraged

at the thought of such a blasphemous succession. Although their religion does not stress reincarnation, the Worm Cultists are not free of superstition. They won't frustrate the Canal Keepers' plan by revealing the truth to "Seldon," in case this information somehow reactivates his memories of previous incarnations. After all, Seldon would be their most deadly enemy if he were reborn, and it's best to take no chances.

Sha'eenda Hus'aalsh is now the Worm Cult's agent on Earth and has recruited several helpers in the Martian quarter of London's Whitechapel. Knowing that most Martians loathe the Worm Cult, she has tricked her recruits into believing that she is a priestess of the Ground Cleanser Cult, whose main aim is to end Terran colonialism on Mars. She disguises ritual killings as assassinations and initiation ceremonies, and she has ensnared many young Martians in her web of deceit. She is poised to strike as soon as she learns the identity of the new high priest.

Naturally the characters know nothing of these events. As the adventure opens, they are in London dealing with an entirely different matter.

CHOOSING SELDON

ASK ALL THE PLAYERS to choose birth dates for their characters. Don't explain why you are doing this.

Any character who was born before 1870 (age 19 or older in 1889) could be the reincarnated high priest of the Canal Keepers. Although the high priest is traditionally male, the Canal Keepers believe that it is possible for a male spirit to reincarnate in a female body, so female player characters need not be totally ruled out of con-

sideration as the possible reborn high priest.

Martian player characters should not be Seldon reincarnated, since the Canal Keepers would find them, and the problems described previously would not have even occurred. Martian player characters should not be members of the Canal Keeper cult. They should know that the religion exists and that it used to do a lot to keep the canals navigable, but the players should not know any other details of the faith.

Other nonhumans may be Seldon reborn; however, you will need to change the details of the way the priests find the character to reflect his racial origin.

It isn't necessary to make a final choice until the team arrives at the Canal Keepers' temple at Gaaryan. Problems might occur if you select a character who is killed early in the adventure or one run by a player who later drops out of the campaign. It is probably best to make a final selection later in the adventure and to choose a character who has acted in a suitably heroic manner.

Any character volunteering to carry the Amulet of Seldon for unselfish reasons, and without prompting, should be preferred in the role of Seldon reborn.

PRELIMINARY EVENTS

THIS ADVENTURE contains a large number of incidents which usually have several possible results. It isn't possible to predict all the ways in which the PCs might behave, so be prepared to treat the text as a springboard for your own improvisation. If the plot doesn't seem to be working as written, change the order of events.