# **History**

Isaac Asimov

Ullen’s lank arm pushed the stylus carefully and painstakingly across the paper; his near-sighted eyes blinked through thick lenses. The signal light flashed twice before he answered.

He turned a page, and called out, “Is dat you, Johnnie? Come in, please.”

He smiled gently, his thin, Martian face alight with pleasure.

“Sit down, Johnnie-but first lower de window-shade. De glare of your great Eard sun is annoying. Ah, dat’s good, and sid down and be very, very quiet for just a little while, because I am busy.”

John Brewster shifted a pile of ill-stacked papers and seated himself. He blew the dust from the edges of an open book in the next chair and looked reproachfully on the Martian historian.

“Are you still poking around these musty old things? Don’t you get tired?”

“Please, Johnnie,” Ullen did not look up, “you will lose de page. Dat book dere is William Stewart’s ‘Hitlerian Era’ and it is very hard to read. So many words he uses which he doesn’t explain.”

His expression as it focussed upon Johnnie was one of frowning petulance, “Never do dey explain deir terms. It is so unscientific. On Mars, before we even start, we say, ‘Dis is a list of all definitions of terms to be used.’ How oderwise can people talk sensibly? Hmp! You crazy Eardmen.”

“Oh, nuts, Ullen-forget it. Why don’t you look at me. Don’t you even notice anything?”

The Martian sighed, removed his glasses, cleaned them thoughtfully, and carefully replaced them. He stared impersonally at Johnnie, “Well, I think it is new clothes you are wearing. Is it not so?”

“New clothes! Is that all you can say, Ullen? This is a uniform. I’m a member of the Home Defense.” He rose to his feet, a picture of boyish exuberance.

“What is dis ‘Home Defense’?” asked Ullen languidly.

Johnnie gulped and sat down helplessly, “You know, I really think you haven’t heard that Earth and Venus have been at war for the last week. I’ll bet money you haven’t.”

“I’ve been busy.” He frowned and pursed his thin, bloodless lips, “On Mars, dere is no war-at least, dere isn’t any more. Once, we used to fight, but dat was long ago. Once we were scientists, too, and dat was long ago. Now, dere are only a few of us-and we do not fight Dere is no happiness dat way.” He seemed to shake himself, and spoke more briskly, “Tell me, Johnnie, do you know where it is I can find what it means, dis ‘national honor?’ It holds me back. I can’t go furder unless I can understand it.”

Johnnie rose to his full height and glittered in the spotless green of the Terrestrial Service. He laughed with fond indulgence, “You’re hopeless, Ullen,-you old coot. Aren’t you going to wish me luck? I’m hitting space tomorrow.”

“Oh, is dere danger?”

There was a squawk of laughter, “Danger? What do you think?”

“Well, den, to seek danger-it is foolish. Why do you do it?”

“You wouldn’t understand, Ullen. Just wish me luck and say you hope I come through whole.”

“Cer-tain-ly! I don’t want anyone to die.” He slipped his hand into the strong fist held out to him. “Take care of yourself, Johnnie-and wait, before you go, bring me Stewart’s book. Everything is so heavy here on Eard. Heavy, heavy,- and de words have no definitions.”

He sighed, and was back at his books as Johnnie slipped quietly out of the room.

“Dese barbarous people,” he muttered sleepily to himself. “War! Dey dink dat by killing—” His voice died away and merged into a slurred mumble as his eyes followed creeping finger across the page.

“‘From the very moment of the union of the Anglo-Saxon world into a single governmental entity and even as far back as the spring of 1941, it was evident that the doom of-’ “

“Dese crazy Eardmeni”

Ullen leaned heavily upon his crutches on the steps of the University library and one thin hand shielded his watering eyes from the terrible Earthly sun.

The sky was blue, cloudless,-undisturbed. Yet somewhere up above, beyond the planet’s airy blanket, steel-sided ships were veering and sparkling in vicious combat. And down upon the city were falling the tiny “Drops of Death,” the highly radioactive bombs that noiselessly and inexorably ate out a fifteen foot crater wherever they fell.

The city’s population was herding into the shelters and burying themselves inside the deep-set leaden cells. Upstaring, silent, anxious, they streamed past Ullen. Uniformed guards invested some sort of order into the gigantic flight, steering the stragglers and speeding the laggards.

The air was filled with barked orders.

“Hit the shelter, Pop, Better get going. You can’t stand there, you know.”

Ullen turned to the guard who addressed him and slowly brought his wandering thoughts to bear upon the situation.

“I am sorry, Eardman-but I cannot move very fast on your huge world.” He tapped one crutch upon the marble flags beneath. ”Dings are so heavy. If I were to crowd in wid de rest, I would be crushed.”

He smiled gently down from his lank height, and the guard rubbed a stubbly chin, “All right, pop, I can fix that. It is tough on you Marsies at that-Here, hold those crutches up out of the way.”

With a heave, he cradled the Martian, “Hold your legs” close to my body, because we’re going to travel fast.”

His bulky figure pressed through the line of Earthmen. Ullen shut his eyes as the rapid motion under supernormal gravity stirred his stomach into rebellion. He opened them once again in the dim recesses of the low-ceilinged shelter.

The guard set him down carefully and adjusted the crutches beneath Ullen’s armpits, “O.K. Pop. Take care of yourself.”

Ullen took in his surroundings and hobbled to one of the low benches at the near end of the shelter. From behind him came the sombre clang of the thick, leaden door.

The Martian historian fished a worn tablet from his pocket and scribbled slow notes. He disregarded the excited babble that arose about him and the scraps of heated talk that filled the air thickly.

And then he scratched at his furrowed forehead with the stub end of his pencil, meeting the staring eyes of the man sitting next to him. He smiled abstractedly and returned to his notes.

“You’re a Martian, aren’t you?” His neighbor spoke in quick, squeaky tones. “I don’t like foreigners much, but I’ve got nothing special against Marsies. These Veenies, now, they—”

Ullen’s soft tones interrupted him. “Hate is all wrong, I dink. Dis war is a great annoyance-a great one. It interferes wid my work and you Eardmen ought to stop it. Is it not so?”

“You can bet your hide we’re going to stop it,” came the emphatic reply. “We’re going to bash their planet inside out- and the dirty Veenies with it.”

“You mean attack deir cities like dis?” The Martian blinked owlishly in thought, “You dink dat would be best?”

“Damn it, yes. It—”

“But look.” Ullen placed a skeleton finger in one palm and continued in gentle argument. “Would it not be easier to get de ships demselves by de fall-apart weapon?-Don’t you dink so? Or is it dat de Venus people, dey have de screens?”

“What weapon, did you say?”

Ullen ruminated carefully, “I suppose dat isn’t de name you call it by-but I don’t know about weapons, anyway. We call it on Mars de ‘skellingbeg’ and dat means in English ‘fallapart weapon.’ Now you know?”

There was no direct answer unless a vague under-breath mutter could be called one. The Earthman pushed away from his companion and stared at the opposite wall in a fidget.

Ullen sensed the rebuff and shrugged one shoulder wearily, “It is not dat I care much about de whole ding. It is only dat de war is a big bodder. It should be ended.” He sighed, “But I don’t care!”

His fingers had just begun manipulating the pencil once more in its travels across the open tablet on his lap, when he looked up again.

“Tell me, please, what is de name of dat country where Hitler died. Your Eard names, dey are so complicated sometimes. I dink it begins wid an M.”

His neighbor ripped him open with a stare and walked away. Ullen’s eyes followed him with a puzzled frown.

And then the all-clear signal sounded.

“Oh, yes,” said Ullen. “Madagascar I Such a silly name!”

Johnnie Brewster’s uniform was war-worn now; a bit more wrinkled about the neck and shoulders, a trace more worn at knees and elbows.

Ullen ran his finger along the angry scar that ran the length of Johnnie’s right fore-arm, “It hurts no more, Johnnie?”

“Nuts! A scratch! I got the Veenie that did that. He’s chasing dreams in the moon now.”

“You were in de hospital long, Johnnie?”

“A week!” He lit a cigarette, pushed some of the mess off the Martian’s desk and seated himself. “I’ve spent the rest of the time with my family, though I did get around to visiting you, you see.”

He leaned over and poked an affectionate hand at the Martian’s leathery cheek, “Aren’t you going to say you’re glad to see me?”

Ullen removed his glasses and peered at the Earthman, “Why, Johnnie, are you so uncertain dat I am glad to see you, dat you require I should say it in words?” He paused, “I’ll make a note of dat. You silly Eardmen must always be telling each oder dese simple dings-and den you don’t believe it anyway. On Mars—”

He was rubbing his glasses methodically, as he spoke, and now he replaced them, “Johnnie, don’t you Eardmen have de ‘fall-apart’ weapon? I met a person once in de raid shelter and he didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Johnnie frowned, “I don’t either, for that matter. Why do you ask?”

“Because it seems strange dat you should have to fight so hard dese Venus men, when dey don’t seem to have de screens to stop it wid. Johnnie, I want de war should be over. It makes me all de time stop my work to go to a shelter.”

“Hold on, now, Ullen. Don’t sputter. What is this ‘fall-apart’ weapon? A disintegrator? What do you know about it?”

“I? I know nodding about it at all. I dought you knew- dat’s why I asked. Back on Mars, in our histories, dey talk about using dat kind of weapon in our old wars. But we don’t know nodding about weapons any more. Anyway, dey’re so silly, because de oder side always dinks of someding which protects against it, and den everyding is de same as always.- Johnnie, do you suppose you could go down to de desk and ask for a copy of Higginboddam’s ‘Beginnings of Space Travel?’“

The Earthman clenched his fists and shook them impotently, “Ullen, you damned Martian pedant-don’t you understand that this is important? Earth is at war! War! War! War!”

“Well, den, stop de war.” There was irritation in Ullen’s voice. “Dere is no peace and quiet anywheres on Eard. I wish I had dis library-Johnnie, be careful. Please, what are you doing? You’re hurting me.”

“I’m sorry, Ullen, but you’ve got to come with me. We’re going to see about this.” Johnny had the feebly protesting Martian wedged into the wheel-chair and was off with a rush, before he had finished the sentence.

A rocket-taxi was at the bottom of the Library steps, and together chauffeur and Spaceman lifted the chair inside. With a comet-tail of smoke, they were off.

Ullen moaned softly at the acceleration, but Johnnie ignored him. “Washington in twenty minutes, fellow,” he said to the driver, “and ignore the signal beams.”

The starched secretary spoke in a frozen monotone, “Admiral Korsakoff will see you now.”

Johnnie wheeled and stamped out the last cigarette butt. He shot a hasty glance at his watch and grunted.

At the motion of the wheel-chair, Ullen roused himself out of a troubled sleep. He adjusted his glasses, “Did dey let us in finally, Johnnie?”

“Shhh!”

Ullen’s impersonal stare swept over the rich furnishings of the room, the huge maps of Earth and Venus on the wall, the imposing desk in the center. It lingered upon the pudgy, bearded figure behind this desk and then came to rest upon the lanky, sandy-haired man at his side.

The Martian attempted to rise from the chair in sudden eagerness, “Aren’t you Dr. Doming? I saw you last year at Princeton. You remember me, don’t you? Dey gave me at dat time, my honorary degree.”

Dr. Thorning had advanced and shook hands vigorously, “Certainly. You spoke then on Martian historical methods, didn’t you?”

“Oh, you remember. I’m glad! But dis is a great opportunity for me, meeting you. Tell me, as a scientist, what would be your opinion of my deory dat de social insecurity of de Hitlerian Era was de direct cause for de lag—”

Dr. Thorning smiled, “I’ll discuss it with you later, Dr. Ullen. Right now, Admiral Korsakoff wants information from you, with which we hope to end the war.”

“Exactly,” Korsakoff spoke in clipped tones as he met Ullen’s mild gaze. “Although a Martian, I presume you favor the victory of the principles of freedom and justice over the foul practices of Venusian tyranny.”

Ullen stared uncertainly, “Dat sounds familiar-but I don’t dink about it much. You mean, maybe, de war should end?”

“With victory, yes.”

“Oh, ‘victory,’ dat is just a silly word. History proves dat a war decided on military superiority only lays de groundwork for future wars of retaliation and revenge. I refer you to a very good essay on de subject by a James Calkins. It was published all de way back in 2050.”

“My dear sir!”

Ullen raised his voice in bland indifference to Johnnie’s urgent whisperings. “Now to end de war-really end it-you should say to de plain people of Venus, ‘It is unnecessary to fight. Let us just talk’—”

There was the slam of fist on desk and a muttered oath of frightful import. “For God’s sakes, Thorning, get what you want out of him. I give you five minutes.”

Thorning stifled his chuckle, “Dr. Ullen, we want you to tell us what you know about the disintegrator.”

“Disintegrator?” Ullen put a puzzled finger to his cheek.

“The one you told Lieutenant Brewster of.”

“Ummmm- Oh! You mean de ‘fall-apart’ weapon. I don’t know nodding about it De Martian historians mention it some times, but none of dem know about it-de technical side, dat is.”

The sandy-haired physicist nodded patiently, “I know, I know. But what do they say? What kind of a weapon is it?”

“Well, de way dey talk about it, it makes de metals to fall to pieces. What is it you call de ding dat holds metals togedder/now?”

“Intra-molecular forces?”

Ullen frowned and then spoke thoughtfully, “Maybe. I forgot what de Martian word is-except dat it’s long. Anyway, dis weapon, it makes dis force dat holds de metals to gedder not to exist anymore and it all falls apart in a powder. But it only works on de dree metals, Iron, cobalt, and-uh-de odder one!”

“Nickel,” prompted Johnnie, softly.

“Yes, yes, nickel!”

Thorning’s eyes glittered, “Aha, the ferromagnetic elements. There’s an oscillating magnetic field mixed up in this, or I’m a Veenie. How about it, Ullen?”

The Martian sighed, “Such crazy Eard words.-Let’s see now, most of what I know about de weapon is from de work of Hogel Beg. It was-I’m pretty sure-in his “Cultural and Social History of de Dird Empire.” It was a huge work in twenty-four volumes, but I always dought it was radder mediocre. His technique in de presentation of—”

“Please,” said Thorning, “the weapon—”

“Oh, yes, dat!” He hitched himself higher in his chair and grimaced with the effort. “He talks about electricity and it goes back and ford very fast-very fast, and its pressure—” He paused hopelessly, and regarded the scowling visage of the bearded Admiral naively, “I dink de word is pressure, but I don’t know, because it is hard to translate. De Martian word is ‘cranstard.’ Does dat help?”

“I think you mean ‘potential,’ Dr. Ullen!” Thorning sighed audibly.

“Well, if you say so. Anyway, dis ‘potential’ changes also very fast and de two changes are synchronized somehow along wid magnetism dat-uh-shifts and dat’s all I know about it.” He smiled uncertainly, “I would like to go back now. It would be all right now, wouldn’t it?”

The Admiral vouchsafed no answer, “Do you make anything out of that mess. Doctor?”

“Damned little,” admitted the physicist, “but it gives me a lead or two. We might try getting hold of this Beg’s book, but there’s not much hope. It will simply repeat what we’ve just heard. Dr. Ullen, are there any scientific works on your planet?”

The Martian saddened, “No, Dr. Doming, dey were all destroyed during de Kalynian reaction. On Mars, we doroughly disbelieve in science. History has shown dat it comes from science no happiness.” He turned to the young Earthman at his side, “Johnnie, let us go now, please.”

Korsakoff dismissed the two with a wave of the hand.

Ullen bent carefully over the closely-typed manuscript and inserted a word. He glanced up brightly at Johnnie Brewster, who shook his head and placed a hand on the Martian’s arm. His brow furrowed more deeply.

Ullen,” he said harshly, “you’re in trouble.”

“Eh? I? In trouble? Why, Johnnie, dat is not so. My book is coming along famously. De whole first volume, it is completed and, but for a bit of polishing, is ready for de printers.”

“Ullen, if you can’t give the government definite information on the disintegrator, I won’t answer for the consequences.”

“But I told all I knew—”

“It won’t do. Ifs not enough. You’ve got to remember more, Ullen, you’ve got to.”

“But knowledge where dere is none is impossible to have- dat is an axiom.” Ullen sat upright in his seat, propping himself on a crutch.

“I know it,” Johnnie’s mouth twisted in misery, “but you’ve got to understand.

“The Venusians have control of space; our Asteroid garrisons have been wiped out, and last week Phobos and Deimos fell. Communications between Earth and Luna are broken and God knows how long the Lunar squadron can hold out. Earth itself is scarcely secure and their bombings are becoming more serious-.Oh, Ullen, don’t you understand?”

The Martian’s look of confusion deepened, “Eard is losing?”

“God, yes!”

“Den give up. Dat is de logical ding to do. Why did you start at all-you stupid Eardmen.”

Johnnie ground his teeth, “But if we have the disintegrator, we won’t lose.”

Ullen shrugged, “Oh, Johnnie, it gets wearisome to listen to de same old story. You Eardmen have one-track minds. Look, wouldn’t it make you feel better to have me read you some of my manuscript? It would do your intellect good.”

“All right, Ullen, you’ve asked for it, and here’s everything right out If you don’t tell Thorning what he wants to know, you’re going to be arrested and tried for treason.”

There was a short silence, and then a confused stutter, “T- treason. You mean dat I betray—” The historian removed his glasses and wiped them with shaking hand, “It’s not true. You’re trying to frighten me.”

“Oh, no, I’m not Korsakoff thinks you know more than you’re telling. He’s sure that you’re either holding out for a price or, more likely, that you’ve sold out to the Veenies.”

“But Doming—”

“Thorning isn’t any too secure himself. He has his own skin to think of. Earth governments in moments of stress are not famous for being reasonable.” There were sudden tears in his -eyes, “Ullen, there must be something you can do. It’s not only you-it’s for Earth.”

Ullen’s breathing whistled harshly, “Dey tink I would sell my scientific knowledge. Is dat de kind of insult dey pay my sense of eddies; my scientific integrity?” His voice was thick with fury and for the first time since Johnnie knew him, he lapsed into guttural Martian. “For dat, I say not a word,” he finished. “Let dem put me in prison or shoot me, but dis insult I cannot forget.”

There was no mistaking the firmness in his eyes, and Johnnie’s shoulders sagged. The Earthman didn’t move at the glare of the signal light.

“Answer de light, Johnnie,” said the Martian, softly. “Dey are coming for me.”

In a moment, the room was crowded with green uniforms. Dr. Thorning and the two with him were the only ones present in civilian clothes.

Ullen struggled to his feet, “Gentlemen, say nodding. I have heard dat it is dought dat I am selling what I know- selling for money.” He spat the words. “It is a ding never before said of me-a ding-F-bave not deserved. If you wish you can imprison me immediately, but I shall say nodding more- nor have anyding furder to do wid de Eard government.”

A green-garbed official stepped forward immediately, but Dr. Thorning waved him back.

“Whoa, there. Dr. Ullen,” he said jovially, “don’t jump too soon. I’ve just come to ask if there isn’t a single additional fact that you remember. Anything, no matter how insignificant—”

There was stony silence. Ullen leant heavily on his crutches but remained stolidly erect.

Dr. Thorning seated himself imperturably upon the historian’s desk, picked up the high stack of type-written pages, “Ah, is this the manuscript young Brewster was telling me about.” He gazed at it curiously, “Well, of course, you realize that your attitude will force the government to confiscate all this.”

“Eh?” Ullen’s stern expression melted into dismay. His crutch slipped and he dropped heavily into his seat.

The physicist warded off the other’s feeble clutch, “Keep your hands off. Dr. Ullen, I’m taking care of this.” He leafed through the pages with a rustling noise. “You see, if you are arrested for treason, your writings become subversive.”

“Subversive!” Ullen’s voice was hoarse, “Dr. Doming, you don’t know what you are saying. It is my-my great labor.” His voice caught huskily, “Please, Dr. Doming, give me my manuscript.”

The other held it just beyond the Martian’s shaking fingers.

“If—” he said.

“But I don’t know!”

The sweat stood out on the historian’s pale face. His voice came thickly. “Time! Give me time! But let me dink-and don’t, please don’t harm dis manuscript”

The other’s fingers sank painfully into Ullen’s shoulder, “So help me, I burn your manuscript in five minutes, if—”

“Wait, I’ll tell you. Somewhere-I don’t know where-it was said dat in de weapon dey used a special metal for some of de wiring. I don’t know what metal, but water spoiled it and had to be kept away-also air. It—”

“Holy jumping Jupiter,” came the sudden shout from one of Thorning’s companions. “Chief, don’t you remember Aspartier’s work on sodium wiring in argon atmosphere five years ago—”

Dr. Thorning’s eyes were deep with thought, “Wait-wait- wait-Damn! It was staring us in the face—”

“I know,” shrieked Ullen suddenly. “It was in Karlsto. He was discussing de fall of Gallonie and dat was one of de minor causes-de lack of dat metal-and den he mentioned—”

He was talking to an empty room, and for a while he was silent in puzzled astonishment.

And then, “My manuscript!” He salvaged it from where it lay scattered over the floor, hobbling painfully about, smoothing each wrinkled sheet with care.

“De barbarians-to treat a great scientific work so!”

Ullen opened still another drawer and scrabbled through its contents. He closed it and looked about peevishly, “Johnnie, where did I put dat bibliography? Did you see it?”

He looked toward the window, “Johnniel”

Johnnie Brewster said, “Wait a while, Ullen. Here they come now.”

The streets below were a burst of color. In a long, stiffly-moving line the Green of the Navy paraded down the avenue, the air above them snow-thick with confetti, hail-thick with ticker-tape. The roar of the crowd was dull, muted.

“Ah, de foolish people,” mused Ullen. “Dey were happy just like dis when de war started and dere was a parade just like dis-and now anodder one. Silly!” He stumped back to his chair.

Johnnie followed, “The government is naming a new museum after you, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” was the dry reply. He peered helplessly about under the desk, “De Ullen War Museum-and it will be filled wid ancient weapons, from stone knife to anti-aircraft gun. Dat is your queer Eard sense of de fitness of dings. Where in dunderation is dat bibliography?”

“Here,” said Johnnie, withdrawing the document from Ullen’s vest pocket. “Our victory was due to your weapon, ancient to you, so it is fit in a way.”

“Victory! Sure! Until Venus rearms and reprepares and refights for revenge. All history shows-but never mind. It is useless, dis talk.” He settled himself deeply in his chair, “Here, let me show you a real victory. Let me read you some of de first volume of my work. It’s already in print, you know.”

Johnnie laughed, “Go ahead, Ullen. Right now I’m even willing to listen to you read your entire twelve volumes- word for word.”

And Ullen smiled gently. “It would be good for your intellect,” he said.