## Time to Rest

## John Wyndham

In the gentle warmth of noon Bert let his boat carry him along. It was a queer boat for he had built it himself, and without knowing anything of the building of boats. There had been a kind of plan—well, a rough idea, in his head, at first, but he had to modify that so many times that most of it had grown empirically from the plates and materials he had been able to find. The result had something of sampan, punt and rain-water tank in its ancestry, but it satisfied Bert.

He sprawled in comfortable indolence at the stern of his craft. One arm in tattered sleeve hung over the tiller, the other lay across his chest. Long legs in patchwork trousers sprawled out to end in strange boots with canvas uppers and soles contrived of woven fibers; he had made those himself, too. The reddish beard on his thin face was trimmed to a point; above it his dark eyes looked ahead with little interest from under the torn, strained brim of a felt hat.

The view was not much. In front and to his left smooth water spread like a silk sheet to the horizon. A mile or so to the right was a low embankment with yellow-red sand showing through rush-like tufts and skimpy bushes. Behind him a fan of ripples spread softly and then faded back into placidity; further back the immense silence closed in again, and nothing remained to show that he had passed that way. It had been his view for several days and for several hundred miles of gentle, chugging progress.

He listened to the phut-phutting of the old engine as he might to the purr of a friendly cat; indeed, he thought of it as an old friend, bestowing upon it a kindly care to which it responded with grunts of leisurely goodwill as it bore him along. There were times when he talked to it encouragingly or told it the things he thought: it was a habit he did not approve of and which he curbed when he noticed it, but quite often he did not notice. He felt an affection for the wheezy old thing, not only for carrying him along thousands of miles of water, but because it kept the silence at bay.

Bert disliked the silence which brooded over the desert and water like a symptom of mortification, but he did not fear it. It did not drive him, as it did most, to live in the settlements where there was neighbourliness, noise and the illusion of hope. His restlessness was stronger than his dislike of the empty lands; it carried him along when the adventurous, finding no adventure, had turned back or given in to dispair. He wanted little but, like a gipsy, to keep moving.

Bert Tasser he had been years ago, but it was so long since he had heard the surname that he had almost forgotten it: everybody else had. He was just Bert—for all he knew he was the only Bert.

“Ought to be showing up soon,” he murmured, either to the patient engine or himself, and sat up in order to see better.

A slight change was beginning to show on the bank; a weed was becoming more frequent among the scrawny bushes, a slender stalked growth with polished, metallic looking leaves, sensitive to the lightest breath of wind. He could see them shivering with little flashes in increasing numbers ahead, and he knew that if he were to stop the engine now he would hear not the dead envelope of silence, but the ringing clash of myriads of small hard leaves.

“Tinkerbells,” he said. “Yes, it won’t be far now.”

From a locker beside him he pulled a much-worn, hand-drawn map, and consulted it, from it he referred to an equally well-used notebook, and read over the list of names written on one of the pages. He was still muttering them as he returned the papers to the locker and his attention to the way ahead. Half an hour passed before a dark object became visible to break the monotonous line of the bank.

“There it is now,” he said, as if to encourage the engine over the last few miles.

The building which had appeared oddly shaped even from a distance revealed itself as a ruin on closer approach. The base was square and decorated on the sides with formal patterns in which had once been high relief, but now was so smoothed that the finer details were lost. Once it had supported some kind of tower; though exactly what kind had to be guessed, for no more than the first twenty feet of the upper structure remained. It, too bore remnants of worn carving, and, like the base, was built of a dusky red rock. Standing a hundred yards or so back from the bank, it was deceptive in its isolation. The size and the degree of misadventure which time and adaptation had brought it only became appreciable as one approached more closely.

Bert held on his course until he was opposite before he turned his clumsy craft. Then he swung over and headed ashore at low speed until he grounded gently on the shelving shore. He switched off the engine, and the indigenous sounds took charge; the tinny chime of the tinkerbells, a complaining creak from a ramshackle wheel turning slowly and unevenly a little to his left along the bank, and an intermittent thudding from the direction of the ruin.

Bert went forward to the cabin. It was snug enough to keep him warm in the cold nights, but ill lit, for glass was hard to come by. Groping in the dimness he found a bag of tools and an empty sack, and slung them over one shoulder. He waded ashore through the few inches of water, drove in a hook to hold his boat against the unlikely chance of disturbance in the placid water, and turned with a long easy stride toward the building.

To either side of the place and beyond it clustered a few small fields where neatly lined crops stood fresh and green among narrow irrigation ditches. Against one wall of the stone cube was an inclosure and a shed roughly built of irregular fragments which might have been part of the vanished tower. Despite its inexpert appearance it was neatly kept, and from beyond it came occasionally, the grunt of small animals. In the near face of the cube was a doorway, and to either side of it unsquare holes which, though glassless, appeared to be windows. Outside the door a woman was at work, pounding grain on a shallow worn rock with a kind of stone club which she held in both hands. Her skin was a reddish brown, her dark hair rolled high on her head, and her only garment a skirt of coarse russet cloth stencilled with a complex yellow pattern. She was middle-aged, but there was no slackening of muscles or deterioration of poise. She looked up as Bert approached, and spoke in the local patois:

“Hullo, Earthman,” she said, “we were expecting you, but you’re been a long time.”

Bert replied in the same language.

“Late am I, Annika? I never know the date, but it seemed about time I was this way again.”

He dropped the bags, and instantly a dozen little bannikuks scampered to invesigate them. Disappointed, they clustered round his feet mewing inquisitively, and turning their little marmoset-like faces up to him. He scattered a handful of nuts from his pockets for them, and sat down on a convenient stone. Recalling the list of names in the notebook he asked after the rest of the family.

They were well, it seemed. Yanff, her eldest son, was away, but Tannack, the younger was here, so were the girls Guika and Zaylo; Guika’s husband, too, and the children, and there was a new baby since he last came. Except for the baby they were all down in the far field: they would be back soon.

He looked where she pointed, and saw the dark dots moving in the distance among the neat rows.

“Your second crops are coming along nicely,” he said.

“The Great Ones remember,” she said in a matter of fact way.

He sat watching her as she worked. Her colouring and that of the setting made him think of pictures he had seen years ago,—by Gauguin, was it?—though she was not the kind of woman the Gauguin had painted. Possibly he would not have seen beauty there, as Bert himself had failed to at first. Martians, with their lighter build and delicate bones had looked frail and skinny to him when he first saw them, but he had grown used to the difference: an Earth woman would look queer and dumpy now, he guessed—if he were ever to see one.

Aware of his gaze upon her Annika stopped pounding and turned to look at him; she did not smile but there was a kindness and understanding in her dark eyes.

“You’re tired, Earthman,” she said.

“I’ve been tired a long time,” said Bert.

She nodded comprehendingly, and returned to her work.

Bert understood, and he knew that in her quiet way she understood. They were a gentle, sympathetic people, and sincere. It was a tragedy, one of a string of similar tragedies that the first Earthmen to ground on Mars had seen them as a weak effete race; the “natives”, inferiors, to be kicked about and exploited whenever convenient. It had stopped now; either they had got to know the Martian people better, as he had, or they lived in the settlements and seldom saw them, but he still felt ashamed for his own people when he thought of it.

After some minutes she said, “How long is it you’ve been going round now?”

“About seven of your years: that’s nearly fourteen of ours.”

“That’s a long time.” She shook her head. “A long time to be roaming, all by yourself. But then you Earthmen aren’t like us.” She gazed at him again as though trying to see the differences beyond his eyes. “Yet not so very different,” she added, and shook her head slowly again.

“I’m all right,” Bert told her briefly He pulled the conversation on to another course. “What have you got for me this time?” he asked, and sat half-listening while she told him of the pans that wanted mending, the new ones she was needing, how the wheel wasn’t delivering as much water as usual; how Yanff had tried to rehang the door when it came off its hinges and what a poor job he had made of it. The other half of his attention went wandering—perhaps that was one of the things that happened when you were so much alone.

The “I’m all right” had been a bluff; he knew it and he knew she knew it. None of the Earthmen was “all right”. Some of them put up a show, others did not, but there was the same trouble underneath. A number wandered restlessly as he did; most of them preferred to rot slowly and alcoholically in the settlements. A few, grasping at shadows while they dreamed, had taken Martian girls and tried to go native. Bert felt sorry for them. He was used to seeing their faces light up and he knew their eagerness to talk when he met them; and always of reminiscences, nostalgic rememberings.

Bert had chosen the wandering life. The stagnation had shown its effect in the settlement quite soon, and it took no great power of perception to see what was going to happen there. He had spent a whole Martian year in building his boat, equipping her, making pots and pans for trade purposes, and stocking her with tools and supplies; and once he had set out upon a tinker’s life restlessness kept him moving. The settlements saw little of him save when he called in for fuel for his engine or stayed awhile in the winter working on pans and other useful trade goods, and at the end of it he was glad to leave. Each time he called the deterioration seemed more noticeable, and a few more of those he had known had sought relief by drinking themselves to death.

But recently he had felt a change in himself. The restlessness still kept him from lingering longer than necessary in the settlements, but it did not drive him as it used to, nor was there the old satisfaction in the rounds and journeys that he planned for himself. He felt no temptation to join the men in the settlements, but he had begun to understand the gregariousness which held them there, and to understand, too, why they found it necessary to drink so much. It made him uneasy at times to realize that he had changed enough to be able to sympathize with them.

Mostly it was age, he supposed. He had been barely twenty-one when he had completed his first and last rocket flight; most of the others had been ten, fifteen, twenty years older: he was catching up now with the feelings they had had years ago, aimlesness, hopelessness and a longing for things that had vanished forever.

Exactly what had taken place on Earth, none of them knew, nor ever would know. His ship had been four days out of the Lunar Station, bound for Mars, when it happened. One of his mates, a man little older than himself had roused him from his bunk and dragged him to the porthole. Together they had gazed at a sight which was printed forever on his memory: the Earth split open, with white-hot fire pouring from the widening cracks.

Some had said that one of the atomic piles must have gone over the critical mass and touched off a chain reaction; others objected that if that were so the Earth would not have split, but have flared into something like a nebula followed by nonexistence. Much ill-informed argument regarding the possibility of a chain reaction limited to certain elements had followed, and occasionally recurred. The truth was that nobody knew. All that was certain was that it had broken up, disintegrating into a belt of innumerable astroids which continued to scurry round the sun like a shower of cosmic pebbles.

Some of the men had taken a long time to believe what they had actually seen; they were the worst affected when they did understand. Some found that their minds would not grasp and hold it as a fact; for them the Earth went on, ever unattainable, yet somewhere existent. Demoralisation had spread through the ship, a few were for turning back, unreasonably convinced that they should be there, and in some way giving help afterwards it had continually been their grudge that they had not been allowed to, even if it were useless. The skipper had decided that there was nothing to be done but hold on their course for Mars.

The navigators had looked more and more worried as their tables became increasingly inaccurate with orbits changing about them; they had watched with wonder the freed moon leave her path and sail through space guided by incalculable forces until she came eventually within the clutch of the giant Jupiter; but long before that happened the ship had, by a combination of calculation and guesswork, made her successful drop to Mars.

Other ships, too, had come in; research vessels from the Asteroid Belt and beyond, traders from the Jovian moons diverted from the homeward course. Some that were expected never arrived, but in the end there were a couple of dozen lying idle on Mars with no home port to seek. Several hundreds of men idled with them. As well as crews, there were miners, drillers, refiners, prospectors, explorers, station maintenance men, settlement staff and the rest, all thrown together on an alien world to make the best of it.

There had also been two women, hostesses or stewardesses. Good enough girls, amiable at first, though no great beauties. But circumstances were against them, and the pressure was great. They had gone quickly to the astonishing depths of badness good women can reach once they start. It was reckoned they had caused a score of murders each before they were found to be susceptible to the same methods of disposal. Thing were quieter after that; with drinking as the main amusement.

It might, Bert told himself, have been worse. It was worse for those who had had wives and families. He had less personal loss: his mother had died some years before, his father had been an old man, there had been a girl, a sweetly pretty girl with hair like red gold and who grew prettier in his memory as time went by: Elsa her name was, but there had not really been a lot to it; and though it was pleasant to recall that she might have married him, he had never in point of fact seriously tried to find out whether she would or would not. Then, too, there was a slender consolation that he was on Mars and at least better off than those who must have been trapped in the steamy heat of Venus, or on the cold Jovian moons. Life offered something beyond perpetual battle to survive, and though it might not be very much, it had been better to go out and see what there was rather than soak away youth and strength with the rest. So he had started to build his boat.

Bert still thought that the best and wisest thing he had ever done. The work had kept him too busy to mope, and then when he had set off it had been as an explorer, a pioneer along many of the thousands of miles of canals that he travelled. There had been the business of getting to know the Martians, and of finding them quite unlike what he had been told. That had involved learning languages completely different in structure from his own, and the local variations of them, and he had kept at it until he spoke four patois better than any other Earthman he knew, and could get along comfortably in several more. He found that he usually thought in one of them nowadays. Along canals which were sometimes like calm seas sixty or eighty miles wide, and sometimes less than a single mile he chugged slowly from one cultivated site to another. The more he saw of the huge waterways and their multiplicity, the greater had grown his first amazement at them; nor after years of travelling them was he nearer an understanding of how they had been built than when he first set out. The Martians could tell him nothing when he asked: it was something which had been done by the Great Ones long, long ago. He came to accept the canals with the rest and was grateful to the Great Ones, whoever they might have been, for providing the smooth lanes all over their planet.

He grew fond of the Martian people. Their quietness, their lack of hurry and their calm, philosophic ways were a soothing antidote to his sense of drive and thrust. He found out quite soon that what his companions had called their laziness and effeteness was a misunderstanding of minds that worked differently in some ways, and certainly saw life differently; whose conception of the virtues was altogether alien, and he found out how his abilities could help their deficiencies in exchange for the foods they knew how to grow.

Thus he had wandered back and forth mending and making in exchange for his keep, never staying long anywhere. It had only been recently that he had gradually become aware that the restlessness which still possessed him was no longer to be assuaged by wandering alone—if by wandering at all.

Bert had not noticed that Annika had ceased to talk when his thoughts went astray. He had no idea how much time passed before she ceased pounding to look up and say, “They’re coming now.”

The two men came first, heads down and deep in conversation. They were lightly, almost weakly, built to Earth judgment, but Bert had long ceased to apply alien standards; he saw them as well set up and capable. The women followed. Guika was carrying the smallest of three children while the others held on to the hands of her sister who laughed down at them. Guika was now, he thought, about twenty-five by Earth reckoning, her sister Zaylo about four years younger. Like their mother they wore roughly woven bright patterned skirts and their hair was held in its high dressing by silver pins; like her too, they were smoothly rhythmic in their movements. He scarcely recognized Zaylo at first; she had not been at home on his last two visits and there was change enough for him to be uncertain.

Tannack, the son, saw him and came hurrying forward. His greeting was glad and kindly. The others came up and surrounded him as they always did, looking rather as if they were reassuring their memories about the appearance of an Earthman.

Annika gathered up her flour, and disappeared into the stone pediment of the tower which was their home. The rest of them followed chattering and laughing with Bert, plainly pleased to see him again.

During the meal Tannack told him all over again of all the things that had worn out, got broken and gone wrong. They didn’t sound very serious, nothing that the ordinarily handy man could not soon have put right, yet that was one of the directions where his value lay; a fault and its remedy which took him five minutes to perceive and could cost them many weeks of careful cogitation and then, as likely as not, they would fail in its application. The utterly unmechanical quality in them astonished him yet. It was something they had never developed beyond absolute necessity. He had wondered if it and the passiveness which was also so different a characteristic from the nature of Earthmen might be due to their never having been the dominant race on the planet until there was little left to dominate. The mysterious Great Ones who had built the canals, the now fallen buildings and cities, and who had in some way vanished centuries or perhaps thousands of years ago, had been the rulers: it seemed as if under them the idea of warring and fighting had had no chance to develop, and the mechanical sense no need. If so, it was a tradition planted firmly enough never to be lost. At times he felt that there was a lingering subconscious sense of taboo about such things. They still looked for their blessings to the Great Ones who “remembered”. Bert would have very much liked to know what those Great Ones were and even how they had looked, but no one could tell him.

After they had eaten he went outside to build himself a little fire and lay out his tools. They brought him pans, hoes and other things to mend, and then disappeared about various jobs. The three children stayed to watch, sitting on the ground playing with the scampering little bannikuks and chattering to him as he worked. They wanted to know why he was different from Tannack and the others, why he wore a jacket and trousers, what use his beard was. Bert began to tell them about Earth; about great forests and soft green hills, of the huge clouds which floated in summer in skies that were bright blue, of great green waves with white tops, of mountain streams, of countries where there were no deserts, and flowers grew wild everywhere in the Spring, of old towns and little villages. They did not understand most of what he said, and perhaps they believed less, but they went on listening and he went on talking, forgetting they were there until Annika interrupted to send them off to their mother. She sat down near him when they had gone.

The sun would soon be down, and he could feel the chill already in the thin air. She seemed not to notice it.

“It is not good to be lonely, Earthman,” she said. “For a time, when one is young and there is much to see, it seems so, though it is better shared. Later it is not good.”

Bert grunted. Fie did not look up from the iron pot he was mending.

“It suits me to be on my own. I ought to know,” he told her.

She sat looking far away; beyond the twinkling tinkerbells, and beyond the smooth water behind them.

“When Guika and Zaylo were children you used to tell them tales of the Earth—but they weren’t the tales you were telling just now In those days you talked about huge cities where millions of your people lived, of great ships that were like lighted castles by night, of machines travelling on the ground at unbelievable speeds and others that flew above, even faster; of voices that could speak through the air to the whole Earth, and many other marvellous things. And sometimes you sang queer, jerky Earth songs to make them laugh. You did not talk of any of those things tonight.”

“There are plenty of things to talk about. I don’t need to go on telling of the same things each time,” he said. “Why should I?”

“What you should say matters less than what you do say, but why you say it matters more than either,” she murmured.

Bert blew on his glowing little fire and turned the iron in it. He made no reply.

“Yesterday was never the future. One cannot live backwards,” she told him.

“Future! What future has Mars? It is senile, dying. One just waits with it for death,” he said, with impatience.

“Was not Earth, too, beginning to die from the moment it started to cool?” she asked. “Yet it was worth building upon, worth raising civilizations there, wasn’t it?”

“Well—was it?” he inquired bitterly. “For what?”

“If it were not, it would be better if we had never been.”

“Well?” he said again, challengingly.

She turned to look at him.

“You don’t think that.”

“What else am I to think?” he asked.

The light was growing poor. He covered the fire with a stone and began to pack up his tools.

Annika said, “Why don’t you stay here with us, Earthman? It’s time for you to rest.”

He looked up at her in astonishment, and started to shake his head automatically, without consideration. He had planted it in his mind that he was a wanderer, and he had no wish to examine the strength of the setting.

But Annika went on: “You could help a lot here,” she said. “You find things easy that are difficult for us. You are strong—with the strength of two of our men.” She looked beyond the ruin at the neat small fields. “This is a good place. With your help it could be better. There could be more fields and more stock. You like us, don’t you?”

He sat looking into the twilight, so still that an inquisitive bannikuk climbed up to explore his pocket. He brushed the little creature away.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ve always liked coming here, but—”

“But what, Earthman?”

“That’s just it—‘Earthman’. I don’t belong here with you. I don’t belong anywhere. So I just keep visiting, and moving on.”

“You could belong here—if you would. If Earth were recreated now, it would be stranger to you than Mars.”

That he could not believe. He shook his head.

“You feel it would be disloyal to think that—but it is true, nevertheless,” Annika said.

“It can’t be.” He shook his head again. “Anyway, what does it matter?”

“It matters this much,” Annika told him, “that you are on the verge of finding out that life is not something which can be stopped just because you don’t like it. You are not apart from life: you are a part of it.”

“What has all that to do with it?” Bert asked.

“Just that mere existence is not enough. One exists by barter. One lives by giving—and taking.”

“I see,” said Bert, but doubtfully.

“I don’t think you do—yet. But it would be better for you to, and better for us if you were to stay. And there is Zaylo.”

“Zaylo?” Bert repeated, wonderingly.

### Zaylo came to the bank while he was repairing the wheel the next morning. She settled down a few feet away on the slope, and sat with her chin on her knees watching. He looked up and their eyes met. Something entirely unexpected happened to Bert. Yesterday he had seen her as a child grown up, today it was diffrent. There was a pain in his chest and a hammering, the skin on his temples felt oddly tight, his hand trembled so that he almost dropped the bar he was holding. He leant back against the wheel, staring at her but unable to speak. A long time seemed to pass before he could say anything, and the words sounded clumsy in his own ears.

What they talked about he could never afterwards remember. He could only recall the sight of her: her expression, the depth of her dark eyes, the gentle movements of her mouth, the way the sun shone on her skin as though there were a mist over polished copper, the lovely line of her breasts, the slim feet in the sand beneath the brightly patterned skirt. There were a host of things he had never noticed before; the modelling of her ears, the way her hair grew, and the ingenuity of coils which could be held firmly on top of her head by the three silver pins, the slenderness of her hands and fingers, the pearled translucence of her teeth, and on through a catalog of wonders hitherto incredibly unobserved.

It was a day of which Bert recalled very little else but that there seemed to be sections of him being torn slowly and painfully apart, yet still so close that sometimes he looked out from one section, and sometimes from the other. He would see himself in his boat, sliding along the endless canals in the sunlight with vastnesses of desert stretching out on either side, sitting out the sudden duststorms in his small cabin where the throat-drying sand managed still to penetrate every ingenuity, and then going on as usual to do tinker’s work at the next inhabited area. That was the life he had got used to, the life he had chosen—he could go on with it as before and forget Zaylo—yet he knew it would not be quite as before because it was not going to be easy to forget her. There were pictures which he would not be able to leave behind; Zaylo smiling as she played with her sister’s babies, Zaylo walking, sitting, standing; Zaylo herself. There were dreams rising inadvertent and beneath his guard, imaginings which swam into his mind in spite of his intention to keep them out; the warmth of Zaylo lying beside him, the light weight of her on his arm, the firmness, the lovely colour of her, the relaxation there would be in having a place to lay one’s heart, and a hand to cherish it. It all hurt like a hardened dressing drawing from a wound.

After the evening meal he went away from the rest, and hid himself in his boat. Looking across the table at her it had seemed to him that she saw all that was going on inside him, and knew more about it than he did himself. She made no gesture, no sign, but she was aware of everything with a calmness somehow alarming. He did not know whether he hoped or feared that she might follow him to the boat—but she did not come.

The sun set while he sat unconscious that he had begun to shiver with the chill of the Martian night. After a time he moved stiffly, and roused himself. He paddled through the few inches of water and climbed the bank. Phobos was shedding a dim light across the fields and the arid land beyond. The ruined tower was a misshapen black shadow.

Bert stood looking out into the great darkness where his home had been. Mars was a trap to hold him alive, but he would not let it pet and tame him. He was not to be wheedled by softness from the harsh grudge he owed Providence. His allegiance was to Earth, the things of Earth, the memory of Earth. It would have been better to have died when the mountains and oceans of Earth were burst open; to have become one more mote among the millions memorially circling in the dark. Existence now was not life to be lived; it was a token of protest against the ways of fate.

He peered along into the sky hoping to see one of the asteroids which once was some corner of the loved, maternal Earth: perhaps, among the myriad points that shone, he did.

A wave of desolation swept through him; a hungry abyss of loneliness opened inside him. Bert raised his clenched fists high above his head. He shook them at the uncaring stars, and cursed them while the tears ran down his cheeks.

### As the far off chugging of the engine faded into silence there was only the clinking of the tinkerbells to disturb the night. Zaylo looked at her mother with misty eyes.

“He has gone,” she whispered, forlornly.

Annika took her hand, and pressed it comfortingly. “He is strong, but strength comes from life—he cannot be stronger than life. He will be back soon, I think.” She put up her hand and stroked her daughter’s hair. After a pause she added, “When he comes, my Zaylo, be gentle with him. These Earthmen have big bodies, but inside, they are lost children.