



The Mad Wizards of Mars, Ray Bradbury

## The Mad Wizards of Mars

Their eyes were fire and the breath flamed from out the witches' mouths as they bent to probe the cauldron with greasy stick and bony finger.

"When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

"When the hurly burly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won."

They danced most drunkenly on the shore of an empty sea, fouling the air with their three tongues and burning it with their cat's eyes all aglitter:

"Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poisoned entrails throw!  
Double, double, toil and trouble,  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble!"

They paused and cast their glances round. "Where's the crystal? Where the needles?" "Here!" "Good!" "Is the yellow wax thickened?" "Yes!" "Pour it in the iron mold!" "Is the wax figure done?" They shaped the stuff like molasses adrip on their green hands. "Shove the needle through the heart!" "The crystal, the crystal, fetch it from the tarot bag, dust it off, and have a look!"

They went to the crystal, their faces white.

"See, see, see—"

A ROCKET SHIP MOVED through space from the planet Earth to the planet Mars. On the rocket ship, men were dying.

The captain raised his head, tiredly, "We'll have to use the morphine."

"But, Captain—"

“You see yourself this man’s condition.” The captain lifted the wool blanket and the man restrained beneath the wet sheet moved and groaned. The air was full of sulphurous thunder.

“I saw it, I saw it!” The man opened his eyes and stared at the port where there were only black spaces, reeling stars, Earth far-removed, and the planet Mars rising large and red. “I saw it, a bat, a huge thing, a bat with a man’s face, spread over the front port. Fluttering and fluttering, fluttering and fluttering!”

“Pulse?” asked the captain.

The orderly measured it. “130.”

“He can’t go on with that. Use the morphine: Come along, Smith.”

They moved away. Suddenly the floorplates were laced with bone and white skulls that screamed. The captain did not dare look down, and over the screaming he said, “Is this where Perse is?” turning in at a hatch.

A white-smocked surgeon stepped away from a body. “I just don’t understand it.”

“How did Perse die?”

“We don’t know, captain. It wasn’t his heart, his brain, or shock. He just—died.”

The captain felt the doctor’s wrist which changed to a hissing snake and bit him. The captain did not flinch. “Take care of yourself. You’ve a pulse, too.”

The doctor nodded. “Perse complained of pains, needles, he said, in his wrists and legs. Said he felt like wax, melting. He fell. I helped him up. He cried like a child. Said he had a silver needle in his heart. He died. Here he is. Everything’s physically normal.”

“That’s impossible. He died of something.”

The captain walked to a port. He smelled of menthol and iodine and green soap on his polished and manicured hands. His white teeth were very bright, and his ears scoured to a pinkness, as were his cheeks. His uniform was the color of new salt, and his boots were black mirrors shining below him. His crisp crew-cut hair smelled of sharp alcohol. Even his breath was antiseptic and new and clean. There was no spot to

him. He was a fresh instrument, honed and ready, still hot from the surgeon's oven.

The men with him were from the same mold. One expected, but did not find, huge brass keys spiraling slowly from their backs. They were expensive, talented, well-oiled toys, obedient and quick.

The captain watched the planet Mars grow very large in space.

"We'll be landing in an hour on that blasted place. Smith, did you see any bats, or have other nightmares?"

"Yes, sir. The month before our rocket took off from New York, sir. Felt rats biting my neck, drinking my blood. I didn't tell. I was afraid you wouldn't let me come on this trip."

"Never mind," sighed the captain. "I had dreams, too. In all of my fifty years I never had a dream until that week before we took off from Earth. And then, every night, I dreamed I was a white wolf. Caught on a snowy hill. Shot with a silver bullet. Buried with a stake in my heart." He moved his head toward Mars. "Do you think, Smith, they know we're coming?"

"We don't know if there are Martian people, sir."

"Don't we? They began frightening us off, eight weeks ago, before we started. They've killed Perse and Reynolds now. Yesterday, they made Grenville go blind. How? I don't know. Bats, needles, dreams, men dying for no reason. I'd call it witchcraft in another day. But this is the year 2120, Smith. We're rational men. This all can't be happening. But it is. Whoever they are, with their needles and their bats, they'll try to finish all of us." He swung about. "Smith, fetch those books from my file. I want them when we land."

Two hundred books were piled on the rocket deck.

"Thank you, Smith. Have you glanced at them? Think I'm insane? Perhaps. It's a crazy hunch. At the last moment, I ordered these books from the Historical Museum. Because of my dreams. Twenty nights I was stabbed, butchered, a screaming bat pinned to a surgical mat, a thing rotting underground in a black box; bad, wicked dreams.

Our whole crew dreamed of witch-things and were-things, vampires and phantoms, things they couldn't know anything about. Why? Because books on such ghastly subjects were destroyed a century ago. By law. Forbidden for anyone to own the grisly volumes. These books you see here are the last copies, kept for historical purposes in the locked Museum vaults."

Smith bent to read the dusty titles:

Tales of Mystery and Imagination, by Edgar Allan Poe. Dracula, by Bram Stoker. Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley.

The Turn of the Screw, by Henry James. The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, by Washington Irving. Rappacini's Daughter, by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, by Ambrose Bierce. Alice in Wonderland, by Lewis Carroll. The Willows, by Algernon Blackwood. The Wizard of Oz, by L. Frank Baum. The Weird Shadow over Innsmouth, by H. P Lovecraft. And more! Books by Walter De La Mare, Wakefield, Harvey, Wells, Asquith, Huxley, all forbidden authors. All burned in the same year that Halloween was outlawed and Christmas was banned! But, sir, what good are these to us on the rocket?"

"I don't know," sighed the captain, "yet."

THE THREE HAGS LIFTED THE CRYSTAL where the captain's image flickered, tiny voice tinkling out of the glass:

"I don't know," sighed the captain, "yet."

The three witches glared redly into each other's faces.

"We haven't much time," said one.

"Better warn Them up at the House."

"They'll want to know about the books. It doesn't look good. That fool of a captain!"

"In an hour they'll land their rocket."

The three hags shuddered and blinked up at the castle by the edge of the dry Martian sea. In its highest window, a small man held a blood-red drape aside. He watched the wastelands where the three witches fed their cauldron and shaped the waxes. Farther along, ten thousand

other blue fires and laurel incenses, black tobacco smokes and fir-weeds, cinnamons and bone-dusts rose soft as moths through the Martian night. The man counted the angry magical fires. Then, as the witches stared, he turned. The crimson drape, released, fell causing the distant portal to wink, like a yellow eye.

Mr. Edgar Allan Poe stood in the tower window, a faint vapor of spirits upon his breath. "Hecate's friends are busy tonight," he said, seeing the witches, far below.

A voice behind him said, "I saw Will Shakespeare on the shore, earlier, whipping them on. All along the sea, Shakespeare's army alone, tonight, numbers thousands; the three Witches, Oberon, Hamlet's father, Othello, Lear, all of them, thousands! Good Lord, a regular sea of people."

"Good William." Poe turned. He let the crimson drape fall shut. He stood for a moment to observe the raw stone room, the black-timbered table, the candle flame, the other man, Mr. Ambrose Bierce, seated peering desolately into the flame.

"We'll have to tell Mr. Hawthorne now," said Mr. Poe. "We've put it off too long. It's a matter of hours. Will you go down to his home with me, Bierce?"

Bierce glanced up. "What will happen to us? God save us!"

"If we can't kill the rocket men off, frighten them away, then we'll have to leave, of course. We'll go on to Jupiter, and when they come to Jupiter, we'll go to Saturn, and when they come to Saturn we'll go to Uranus, or Neptune, and then on out to Pluto—"

"Where then?"

Mr. Poe's face was weary, there were coals of fire remaining, fading, in his eyes, and a sad wildness in the way he talked, and a uselessness of his hands and the way his hair fell over his amazing white brow. He was like a satan of some lost dark cause, a general arrived from a derelict invasion. His silky soft black mustache was worn away by his musing

lips. He was so small that his brow seemed to float, vast and phosphorescent by itself, in the dark room.

“We have the advantage of superior forms of travel,” he said. “We can always hope for one of their atomic wars, dissolution, the dark ages come again. The return of superstition. We could go back then to Earth, all of us, in one night.” Mr. Poe’s black eyes brooded under his round and illuminant brow. He looked at the ceiling. “So they’re coming to ruin this world, too? They won’t leave anything undefiled, will they?” “Does a wolf pack stop until it’s killed its prey and eaten the guts?”

Poe swayed, faintly drunk with wine. “What did we do? Did we have a fair trial before a company of literary critics? No! Our books were plucked by neat, sterile surgeon’s pliers, and flung into vats, to boil!” They were interrupted by a hysterical shout from the tower stair. “Mr. Poe, Mr. Bierce!”

“Yes, yes, we’re coming!” Poe and Bierce descended to find a man gasping against the stone passage wall.

“HAVE YOU HEARD THE NEWS!” he cried, immediately, clawing at them like a man about to fall over a cliff. “In an hour they’ll land! They’re bringing books with them, old books, the witches said! What’re you doing in the tower at a time like this? Why aren’t you acting?” Poe said, “We’re doing everything we can, Blackwood. You’re new to this. Come along, we’re going to Mr. Hawthorne’s place—” “—to contemplate our doom, our black doom,” said Mr. Bierce.

They moved down the echoing throats of the castle, level after dim, green level, down into mustiness and decay and spiders and dreamlike webbing.

“Don’t worry,” said Poe, his brow like a huge white lamp before them, descending, sinking. “All along the dead sea tonight I’ve called the Others. Your friends and mine, Blackwood, Bierce. They’re all there. The animals and the old women and the tall men with the sharp white

teeth. The traps are waiting, the pits, yes, and the pendulums. The Red Death.” Here he laughed quietly.

“Yes, even the Red Death. I never thought, no, I never thought the time would come when a thing like the Red Death would actually be. But they—” he poked his finger at the sky “—asked for it, and they shall have it!”

“But are we strong enough?” wondered Blackwood. “How strong is strong? They won’t be prepared for us, at least. They haven’t the imagination. Those clean young rocket men with their antiseptic bloomers and fish-bowl helmets, with their new religion. About their necks, on gold chains, scalpels. Upon their heads, a diadem of microscopes. In their holy fingers, steaming incense urns which in reality are only germicidal ovens for steaming out superstition. The names of Poe, Bierce, Hawthorne, Blackwood blasphemy to their clean lips.”

Outside the castle, they advanced through a watery space, a tarn that was not a tarn, which misted before them like the stuff of nightmares. The air filled with wing sounds and a whirring, a motion of winds and blacknesses. Voices changed, figures swayed at campfires. Mr. Poe watched the needles knitting, knitting, knitting, in the firelight, knitting pain and misery, knitting wickedness into wax marionettes, clay puppets. The cauldron smells of wild garlicks and cayennes and saffron hissed up to fill the night with evil pungency.

“Get on with it!” cried Poe. “I’ll be back!”

All down the empty seashore black figures spindled and waned, grew up and blew into black smokes on the wind. Bells rang in mountain towers and licorice ravens spilled out with the bronze sounds and spun away to ashes.

MR. HAWTHORNE WAS THE MAN who bolted doors and looked out at you from shuttered windows. You knew he was home by the smoke in his chimney, or you saw his footprints in the paths on an autumn afternoon after a drenching rain. You saw his pale breath on the winter



windows of his house on mornings when the panes were blind with frost. Here was his house, away from the rest on Mars, in a land he had made for himself, a land where snows fell, rains cooled the hot sands, or spring and summer lingered in an instant if Mr. Nathaniel Hawthorne so much as blinked from his door.

As Mr. Poe, Mr. Bierce and Mr. Blackwood approached at a brisk pace, Mr. Hawthorne's front door, a moment before, open to a summer night's warmth and smell of red apples in distant trees, slammed shut. There was a skirl of raindrops, a flurry of snow as light as pollen; then all was still.

Mr. Poe gave a rap on the door.

"Who's there?" said a voice, at last.

"It's Mr. Poe."

"What do you want?" much later.

"We've come to tell you the latest."

"I know, I know. I saw it on the sky. The red mark."

"Open up, we need your help. We want you to meet the rocket."

"I don't like to meet people," said Hawthorne, hidden away. "I don't belong here, anyway. I'm not like you out there, you Poe, you Bierce!" At last the door creaked wide and Hawthorne stood revealed, his mass of blowing white hair and his full animal-like mustache, and his deep, enquiring and lonely eyes.

"You'll be a delegate to greet the rocket men," said Poe. "When they're lulled and unsuspecting, we'll take care of them."

Mr. Hawthorne eyed the folds of the black cape which hid Poe's hands. From it, smiling, Mr. Poe drew forth a trowel.

"The Amontillado?" Hawthorne drew back.

"For one of our visitors." In his other hand now, Poe brought forth a cap and bells, which jingled softly and suggestively.

"And for the others?"

Poe smiled again, well pleased. "We finished digging the Pit this morning."

“And the Pendulum?”

“Is being installed.”

“The Premature Burial?”

“That, too.”

“You are a grim man, Mr. Poe.”

“I am a frightened and an angry man. I am a god, Mr. Hawthorne, even as you are a god, even as we all are gods, and our inventions, our people, if you wish, have been not only threatened, but banished and burned, torn up and censored, ruined and done away with. The worlds we created are falling to ruin! Even gods must fight!”

“So.” Hawthorne tilted his head a little. “Yes. Perhaps that explains why we are here. How did we come here?”

“War begets war. Destruction begets destruction. On Earth, a century ago, in the year 2067, they outlawed our books. Oh, what a horrible thing, to destroy our literary creations that way. It summoned us out of—what? Death? The Beyond? I don’t like abstract things. I don’t know.

I only know that our worlds and our creations called us and we tried to save them and the only saving thing we could do was wait out the century here on Mars, hoping that Earth might overweight itself with these scientists and their doubtings, but now they’re coming to clean us out of here, us and our dark thing, and all the alchemists, witches, vampires, and were-things that, one by one, retreated across space as science made inroads through every country on Earth and finally left no alternative at all but exodus. You must help us. You have a good speaking manner. We need you.”

“But I’m not of you, I don’t approve of you and the others,” cried Hawthorne, indignantly. “I was no fantasist, no player with witches and vampires and midnight things.”

“What of ‘Rappacini’s Daughter’?”

“Ridiculous! One story. Oh, I wrote a few others, perhaps, but what of that? My basic works had none of that nonsense!”

“Mistaken or not, they grouped you with us. They destroyed your works, too. You must hate them, Mr. Hawthorne.”

“They are stupid and rude,” reflected Mr. Hawthorne. He looked at the immense crimson symbol on the sky where the rocket burned. “Yes,” he said, finally, “I will help you.”

THEY HURRIED ALONG the midnight shore of the dry sea. By fires and smokes, Mr. Poe hesitated, to shout orders, to check the bubbling poisons and chalked pentagrams. “Good!” He ran on. “Fine!” And he ran again, past shadowed armies, the armies of Oberon and Othello, the armies of Arthur and Macbeth, waiting in full armor. And there were serpents and angry demons and fiery bronze dragons and spitting vipers and trembling witches like the barbs and nettles and thorns and all the vile flotsams and jetsams of the retreating sea of imagination, left on the melancholy shore, whining and frothing and spitting.

Bierce stopped. He sat like a child on the cold sand. He began to sob. They tried to soothe him, but he would not listen. “I just thought,” he said, “what happens to us on the day when the last copies of our books are destroyed?”

The air whirled.

“Don’t speak of it!”

“We must,” wailed Bierce. “Now, now as the rocket comes down, you, Hawthorne, Poe, Coppard, all of you, grow faint. Like wood smoke. Blowing away. Your faces thin and melt—”

“Death. Real death for all of us.”

“We exist only through Earth’s sufferance. If a final edict tonight destroyed our last few works we’d be like lights put out.”

Hawthorne brooded gently. “I wonder who I am. In what Earth mind tonight do I exist? In some African hut? Some hermit, reading my tales? Is he the lonely candle in the wind of time and science? The flickering orb sustaining me here in rebellious exile? Is it he?

Or some boy in a discarded attic, finding me, only just in time! Oh, last night I felt ill, ill to the marrows of me, for there is a body of the soul

as well as a body of the body, and this soul-body ached in all of its glowing parts, and last night I felt myself a candle, guttering. When suddenly I sprang up, given new light! As some child in some yellow garret on Earth once more found a worn, time-specked copy of me, sneezing with dust! And so I'm given a short respite."

A DOOR BANGED WIDE in a little hut by the shore. A thin short man, with flesh hanging from him in folds, stepped out and, paying no attention to the others, sat down and stared into his clenched hands.

"There's the one I'm sorry for," whispered Blackwood. "Look at him, dying away. He was once more real than we, who were men. They took him, a skeleton thought, and clothed him in centuries of pink flesh and snow-beard and red velvet suit and black boot, made him reindeers, tinsel, holly. And after centuries of manufacturing him they drowned him in a vat of Lysol, you might say."

The men were silent.

"What must it be on Earth," wondered Hawthorns, "without Christmas? No hot chestnuts, no tree, nor ornaments or drums or candies, nothing; nothing but the snow and the wind and the lonely, factual people—"

They all looked at the thin little old man with the scraggly beard and faded red velvet suit.

"Have you heard his story?"

"I can imagine it. The glitter-eyed psychologist, the clever sociologist, the resentful, froth-mouthed educationist, the antiseptic parents—"

"Has Dickens seen him?"

"Dickens!" Mr. Poe spat. "Him! He came for a visit! A visit, understand! How are you? he cried! A cozy place you have here! Dickens popped in and out of here. Why? Because the only book of his burned in the Great Fire was 'A Christmas Carol' and a few other of his ghost stories. He'll live forever on Earth. He wrote such a wealth of uncensorable material."

"It's not fair," protested Hawthorne. "For him to stay and me to be here."

"A dreadful mistake," agreed everyone.

"A man's remembered for his sensational things," observed Mr. Bierce. "Me for 'Owl-Creek Bridge,' Mr. Poe for his corpses and terrors instead of his serious essays. And—"

Bierce did not continue. He fell forward with a sigh. And as all watched, horrified, his body burned into blue dust and charred bone, the ashes of which fled through the air in black tatters, settling about their shocked faces like terrible snow.

"Bierce, Bierce!"

"Gone."

They looked up at the cold high clusters of stars.

"His last book gone. Someone, somewhere on Earth, just now, burned it."

"God rest him, nothing of him left now. For what are we but books, and when those are gone, nothing's to be seen."

A rushing sound filled the sky.

They cried out wildly and looked up. In the sky, dazzling it with sizzling fire-clouds, was the Rocket! Around the men on the seashore, lanterns bobbed, there was a squealing and a bubbling and an odor of cooking smells. Candle-eyed pumpkins lifted into the cold clear air. Thin fingers clenched into fists and a witch screamed from her withered mouth:

"Ship, ship, break, fall!

Ship, ship, burn all!

Crack, flake, shake, melt!

Mummy-dust, cat-pelt!"

"Time to go," murmured Hawthorne. "On to Jupiter, on to Saturn or Pluto."

"Run away?" shouted Poe in the wind. "Never!"

"I'm a tired old man."

Poe gazed into the old man's face and believed him. He climbed atop a huge boulder and faced the ten thousand grey shadows and green lights and yellow eyes on the hissing wind.

"The needles!" he cried.

The rocket flashed over.

"The powders!" he shouted.

A thick hot smell of bitter almond, civet, cumin, wormseed and orris!

The rocket came down—steadily down, with the shriek of a damned spirit! Poe raged at it! He flung his fists up and the orchestra of heat and smell and hatred answered in symphony! Like stripped tree fragments, bats flew upward! Burning hearts, flung like missiles, burst in bloody fireworks on the singed air. Down, down, relentlessly down, like a pendulum the rocket came! And Poe howled furiously and shrank back with every sweep and sweep of the rocket cutting and ravaging the air! All the dead sea seemed a pit in which, trapped, they waited the sinking of the dread machinery, the glistening axe; they were people under the avalanche!

"The snakes!" screamed Poe.

And luminous serpentines of undulant green hurtled toward the rocket. But it came down, a sweep, a fire, a motion, and it lay panting out exhaustions of red plumage on the sand, a mile away.

"At it!" shrieked Poe. "The plan's changed! Only one chance! Run! At it! At it! Drown them with our bodies! Kill them!"

And as if he had commanded a violent sea to change its course, to suck itself free from primeval beds, the whirls and savage gouts of fire spread and ran like wind and rain and stark lightning over the sea sands, down the empty river deltas, shadowing and screaming, whistling and whining, sputtering and coalescing toward the rocket which, extinguished, lay like a clean metal torch in the furthest hollow. As if a great charred cauldron of sparkling lava had been overturned, the boiling people and snapping animals churned down the dry fathoms!

"Kill them!" screamed Poe, running. "Perhaps," murmured Mr. Hawthorne, left behind, alone, at the edge of the ancient sea.

THE ROCKET MEN LEAPED OUT of their ship, guns ready. They stalked about, sniffing the air like hounds. They saw nothing. They relaxed. The captain stepped forth last. He gave sharp commands. Wood was gathered, kindled, and a fire leapt up in an instant. The captain beckoned his men into a half circle about him.

“A new world,” he said, forcing himself to speak deliberately, though he glanced nervously, now and again, over his shoulder at the empty sea. “The old world left behind. A new start. What more symbolic than that we here dedicate ourselves all the more firmly to science and progress.” He nodded crisply to his lieutenant. “The books.” The ancient books were brought forth.

Firelight limned the faded gilt titles: The Willows, The Outsider, Behold the Dreamer, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Land of Oz, Pellucidar, The Land That Time Forgot, A Midsummer Night’s Dream and the monstrous names of Machen and Edgar Allan Poe and Cabell and Dunsany and Blackwood and Lewis Carroll; the names, the old names, the evil names, the black names, the blasphemous names.

“A new world. With a gesture, we burn the last of the old!” The captain ripped pages from the books. Leaf by seared leaf, he fed them into the fire.  
A scream!

Leaping back, the men stared beyond the firelight at the edges of the encroaching and uninhabited sea. Another scream! A high and wailing thing, like the death of a dragon and the thrashing of a bronzed whale left gasping when the waters of a leviathan’s sea drain down the shingles and evaporate.

It was the sound of air rushing in to fill a vacuum, where, a moment before, was something. The clean rocket men faced the directions from which the scream had come rushing forward like a tide. The captain neatly disposed of the last book.

The air stopped quivering.  
Silence.

The rocket men leaned and listened.

“Captain, did you hear it?”

“No.”

“Like a wave, sir. On the sea bottom! I thought I saw something. Over there. A black wave. Big. Running at us.”

“You were mistaken.”

“But the sound?”

“I say you heard nothing.”

“There, sir!”

“What!”

“See it? There! The castle! Way over! That black castle, near that lake! It’s splitting in half. It’s falling!”

The men stared. “I don’t see it.”

“Yes, it’s falling! It’s all fire and rock.”

The men squinted and shuffled forward.

Smith stood trembling among them. He put his hand to his head as if to find a thought there. “I remember. Yes, now I do. A long time back. When I was a child. A book I read. A story. Usher, I think it was. Yes, Usher. ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ —”

“By whom?”

“I—I can’t remember.”

“Usher? Never heard of it.”

“Yes, Usher, that’s what it was. I saw it fall again, just now, like in the story.”

“Smith!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Report for psychoanalysis tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir!” A brisk salute.

“Be careful.”



The men tiptoed, guns alert, beyond the ship's aseptic light to gaze at the long sea and the low hills.

"Why," whispered Smith, disappointed, "there's no one here at all, is there? No one here at all."

The wind blew sand over his shoes, whining.

The End