

ADVENTURE

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SHORT STORIES	THE BREAKOUTJacob Hay	18
	THE INTRUDERSEvan Hunter	22
	ARMAMENTS RACEArthur C. Clarke	34
NOVEL	WE, TOO, CAN DIEPaul Le Butt	38
PICTURE FEATURES	HOW TO LASSO A LIONWalt Wiggins	14
	MARINE MAYHEM	30
IN THE NEWS	THEY WANT YOUR LANDArthur Carhart	20
TRUE ADVENTURE	DEATH IS HIS COPILOTFrank Harvey	10
	I WAS A FISH PIRATEVirgil Burford	24
	YANKEE NABOBAlexander Powell	26
FEATURES	HELL DIVER	37
	DREAM CARS (Cartoons)	28
	OUR FAR-FLUNG ADVENTURERSRussell B. Aitken	80
DEPARTMENTS	CAMPFIRE	4
	ASK ADVENTURE	6
	ASK ADVENTURE EXPERTS	8
	MEN'S MART	79

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ADVENTURE



Armaments Race

by ARTHUR C. CLARKE

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN RUGE

They demanded that Solly build bigger and better weapons. But they didn't know what kind of genius they were turning loose



There was just a great big hole which was beginning to smolder around the edges. And then the roof fell in.

THIS is the first of a series of stories told by one of the members of that fabulous London pub, The White Hart, where science and fiction do not necessarily conflict but sometimes even manage to go hand in hand.

AS I'VE remarked on previous occasions, no one has ever succeeded in pinning down Harry Purvis, prize raconteur of the White Hart, for any length of time. Of his scientific knowledge there can be no doubt—but where did he pick it up? And what justification is there for the terms of familiarity with which he speaks of so many Fellows of the Royal Society? There are, it must be admitted, many who do not believe a single word he says. That, I feel, is going a little too far, as I recently remarked somewhat forcibly to John Christopher. John is one of the most promising young novelists for at least ten years. During that time he has produced several books which I consider very well done, but hardly worth doing.

"You're always gunning for Harry," I said, "but you must

admit that he provides entertainment. And that's more than most of us can say."

"If you're being personal," retorted John, still rankling over the fact that some perfectly serious stories had just been returned by an American editor on the grounds that they hadn't made him laugh, "step outside and say that again." He glanced through the window, noticed that it was still snowing hard, and hastily added, "Not today, then, but maybe sometime in the summer, if we're both on the Wednesday that catches it. Have another of your favorite shots of straight pineapple juice?"

"Thanks," I said. "One day I'll ask for a gin with it, just to shake you. I think I must be the only guy in the White Hart who can take it or leave it—and leaves it."

That was as far as the conversation got, because the subject of the discussion then arrived. Normally, this would merely have added fuel to the controversy, but as Harry had a stranger with him we decided to be polite little boys.

"Hello, folks," said Harry. "Meet my friend Solly Blumberg.

Best special-effects man in Hollywood."

"Let's be accurate, Harry," said Mr. Blumberg sadly, in a voice that should have belonged to a whipped spaniel. "Not in Hollywood. Out of Hollywood."

Harry waved the correction aside.

"All the better for you. Sol's come over to apply his talents to the British film industry."

"There is a British film industry?" said Solly anxiously. "No one seemed very sure 'round the studio."

"Sure there is. It's in a very flourishing condition, too. The Government piles on an entertainments tax that drives it to bankruptcy, then keeps it alive with whacking big grants. That's the way we do things in this country. Hey, Drew, where's the Visitor's Book? And a double for both of us, Solly's had a terrible time."

I CANNOT say that, apart from his hangdog look, Mr. Blumberg had the appearance of a man who had suffered extreme hardships. He was neatly dressed in a Hart, Schaffner and Marx suit, and the points of his shirt collar buttoned down somewhere around the middle of his chest. That was thoughtful of them as they thus concealed things, but not enough of his tie. I wondered what the trouble was. Not Un-American activities again, I prayed. That would trigger off our pet communist, who at the moment was peaceably studying a chessboard.

We all made sympathetic noises and John said rather pointedly, "Maybe it will help to get it off your chest. It will be such a change to hear someone talking around here."

"Don't be so modest, John," cut in Harry promptly. "I'm not tired of hearing you yet. But I doubt if Solly feels much like going through it again. Do you, old man?"

"No," said Mr. Blumberg. "You tell them."

"I knew it would come to that," sighed John in my ear.

"Where shall I begin?" asked Harry. "The time Phoebe Ross came to interview you?"

"Anywhere but there," shuddered Solly. "It really started when we were making the first 'Captain Zoom' serial."

"'Captain Zoom?'" said someone ominously. "Those are two very rude words in this place. Don't say you were responsible for that unspeakable rubbish!"

"Now boys!" put in Harry in his best

oil-on-troubled-waters voice. "Don't be too harsh. We can't be too harsh. We can't apply our own high standards of criticism to everything. And people have got to earn a living. Besides, millions of kids like 'Captain Zoom.' Surely you wouldn't want to break their little hearts—and so near Christmas, too!"

"If they really liked 'Captain Zoom,' I'd rather break their little necks."

"Such unseasonable sentiments! I really must apologize for some of my compatriots, Solly. Let's see, what was the name of the first serial?"

"'Captain Zoom and the Menace from Mars.'"

"Ah, yes, that's right. Incidentally, I wonder why we always are menaced by Mars? I suppose that man Wells started it. One day we may have a big interplanetary libel action on our hands—unless we can prove that the Martians have been equally rude about us.

"I'm very glad to say that I never saw 'Menace from Mars'—but we are not concerned with the story, such as it was. That was written by three men in a bar on Wilshire Boulevard. No one is sure whether the Menace came out the way it did, because the script writers were drunk, or whether they had to keep drunk in order to face the Menace. If that's confusing, don't bother. All that Solly was concerned with were the special effects that the director demanded.

"First of all, he had to build Mars. To do this he spent half an hour with 'The Conquest of Space,' and then emerged with a sketch which the carpenters turned into an over-ripe orange floating in nothingness, with an improbable number of stars around it. That was easy. The Martian cities weren't so simple. You try and think of completely alien architecture that still makes sense. I doubt if it's possible—if it will work at all, someone's already used it here on Earth. What the studio finally built was vaguely Byzantine with touches of Frank Lloyd Wright. The fact that none of the doors led anywhere didn't really matter, as long as there was enough room on the sets for the sword play and general acrobatics that the script demanded.

"Yes—sword play. Here was a civilization which had atomic power, death rays, space ships, television and such modern conveniences, but when it came to a fight between Captain Zoom and the evil Emperor Klugg, the clock went back a couple of centuries. A lot of

soldiers stood round holding deadly looking ray guns, but they never did anything with them. Well, hardly ever. Sometimes a shower of sparks would chase Captain Zoom and singe his pants, but that was all. I suppose that as the rays couldn't very well move faster than light, he could always outrun them.

"Still, those ornamental ray guns gave everyone quite a few headaches. It's funny how Hollywood will spend endless trouble on some minute detail in a film which is complete rubbish. The director of 'Captain Zoom' had a thing about ray guns. Solly designed the Mark I, that looked like a cross between a bazooka and a blunderbuss. He was quite satisfied with it, and so was the director—for about a day. And then the great man came raging into the studio carrying a revolting creation of purple plastic, covered with knobs and lenses and levers.

"'Lookit this, Solly!' he puffed. 'Junior got it down at the supermarket—they're being given away with packets of Crunch. Collect ten box tops, and get one. Hell, they're better than ours!'

"He pressed a lever, and a thin stream of water shot across the set and disappeared behind Captain Zoom's space ship, where it promptly extinguished a cigarette that had no right to be burning there. An angry stage hand emerged through the airlock, saw who it was had drenched him and swiftly retreated.

"Solly examined the ray gun with annoyance and yet with an expert's discrimination. Yes, it was certainly much more impressive than anything he'd put out. He retired into his office and promised to see what he could do about it.

THE MARK II had everything built into it, including a television screen. If Captain Zoom was suddenly confronted by a charging hickoderm, all he had to do was to switch on the set, wait for the tubes to warm up, check the channel selector, adjust the fine tuning, touch up the focus, twiddle with the line and frame holds—and then press the trigger. He was, fortunately, a man of unbelievably swift reactions.

"The director was impressed, and the Mark II went into production. A slightly different model, the Mark IIa, was built for the Emperor Klugg's diabolical cohorts. It would never do, of course, if both sides had the same weapon. I told you that (Continued on page 57)



ARMAMENTS RACE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 36

Pandemic Productions were sticklers for accuracy.

"All went well until the first rushes, and even beyond. While the cast was acting, if you can use that word, they had to point the guns and press the triggers as if something was really happening. The sparks and flashes, however, were put on the negative later by two little men in a darkroom about as well guarded as Fort Knox. They did a good job, but after a while the producer again felt twinges in his overdeveloped artistic conscience.

"Solly," he said, toying with the plastic horror which had reached Junior by courtesy of Crunch, the Succulent Cereal—Not a Burp in a Barrel—"Solly, I still want a gun that *does* something."

"Solly ducked in time, so the jet went over his head and baptised a photograph of Letitia Parsons.

"You're not going to start shooting all over again!" he wailed.

"Nooo," replied the producer, with obvious reluctance. "We'll have to use what we've got. But it *looks* faked, somehow." He ruffled through the script on his desk, then brightened up.

"Now next we start on Episode Fifty-Four—"Slaves of the Slug Men." Well, the Slug Men gotta have guns, so what I'd like you to do is this—

"The Mark III gave Solly a lot of trouble. (I haven't missed out one yet, have I? Good.) Not only had it to be a completely new design, but as you'll have gathered it had to 'do something.' This was a challenge to Solly's ingenuity; however, if I may borrow from Professor Toynbee, it was a challenge that evoked the appropriate response.

"Some high-powered engineering went into the Mark III. Luckily, Solly knew an ingenious technician who'd helped him out on similar occasions before, and he was really the man behind it. The principle was to use a jet of air, produced by a small but extremely powerful electric fan, and then to spray finely divided powder into it. When the thing was adjusted correctly, it shot out a most impressive beam, and made a still more impressive noise. The actors were so scared of it that their performances became most realistic.

THE producer was delighted—for a full three days. Then a dreadful doubt assailed him.

"Solly," he said. "Those damn guns are *too* good. The Slug Men can beat the pants off Captain Zoom. We'll have to give him something better."

"It was at this point that Solly re-

alized what had happened. He had become involved in an armaments race.

"Let's see, this brings us to the Mark IV, doesn't it? How did *that* work? Oh, yes, I remember. It was a glorified oxy-acetylene burner, with various chemicals injected into it to produce the most beautiful flames. I should have mentioned that from Episode Fifty—"Doom on Deimos"—the studio had switched over from black and white to Murkicolor, and great possibilities were thus opened up. By squirting copper or strontium or barium into the jet, you could get any color you wanted.

"If you think that by this time the producer was satisfied, you don't know Hollywood. Some cynics may still laugh when the motto '*Ars Gratia Artis*' flashes on the screen, but this attitude, I submit, is not in accordance with the facts. Would such old fossils as Michelangelo Rembrandt or Titian have spent so much time, effort and money on the quest for perfection as did Pandemic Productions? I think not.

"I don't pretend to remember all the Marks that Solly and his ingenious engineer friend produced during the course of the serial. There was one that shot out a stream of colored smoke rings. There was the high-frequency generator that produced enormous but quite harmless sparks. There was a particularly ingenious *curved* beam produced by a jet of water with light reflected along inside it, which looked most spectacular in the dark. And finally, there was the Mark XII."

"Mark XIII," said Mr. Blumberg.

"Of course—how stupid of me! What other number *could* it have been! The Mark XIII was not actually a portable weapon—though some of the others were portable only by a considerable stretch of the imagination. It was the diabolical device to be installed on Phobos in order to subjugate Earth. Though Solly had explained them to me once, the scientific principles involved escape my simple mind. However, who am I to match my brains against the intellects responsible for 'Captain Zoom?' I can only report what the ray was supposed to do, not how it did it. It was to start a chain reaction in the atmosphere of our unfortunate planet, making the nitrogen and the oxygen in the air combine—with deleterious effects to terrestrial life.

"I'm not sure whether to be sorry or glad that Solly left all the details of the fabulous Mark XIII to his talented assistant. Though I've questioned him at some length, all he can tell me is that the thing was about six feet high and looked like a cross between the two-hundred-inch telescope and an anti-air-

craft gun. That's not very helpful, is it?

"He also says that there were a lot of radio tubes in the brute, as well as a thundering great magnet. And it was definitely supposed to produce a harmless but impressive electric arc, which could be distorted into all sorts of interesting shapes by the magnet. *That* was what the inventor said, and, despite everything, there is still no reason to disbelieve him.

"By one of those mischances that later turns out to be providential, Solly wasn't at the studio when they tried out the Mark XIII. To his great annoyance, he had to be down in Mexico that day. And wasn't that lucky for you, Solly! He was expecting a long-distance call from one of his friends in the afternoon, but when

it came through it wasn't at all the kind of message he'd anticipated.

"The Mark XIII had been, to put it mildly, a success. No one knew exactly what had happened, but by a miracle, no lives had been lost and the fire department had been able to save the adjoining studios. It was incredible, yet the facts were beyond dispute. The Mark XIII was supposed to be a phony death ray—and it had turned out to be a real one. *Something* had emerged from the projector and gone through the studio wall as if it wasn't there. Indeed, a moment later it wasn't. There was just a great big hole, beginning to smoulder round the edges. And then the roof fell in. . . .

"Unless Solly could convince the FBI

that it was all a mistake, he'd better stay the other side of the border. Even now the Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission were converging on the wreckage. . . .

"What would you have done in Solly's shoes? He was innocent, but how could he prove it? Perhaps he would have gone back to face the music if he hadn't remembered that he'd once hired a man who'd campaigned for Henry Wallace, back in '48. *That* might take some explaining away: besides, Solly was a little of Captain Zoom. So here he is. Anyone know of a British film company that might have an opening for him? But historical films only, please. He won't touch anything more up-to-date than crossbows." ■ ■