

∞ **Infinity**

SCIENCE FICTION

FEBRUARY, 1956

Vol. 1, No. 2

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COVER, illustrating Kenneth Bulmer's *Quarry*, by Ed Emsh.

ILLUSTRATIONS by Emsh, Engle, Remington, Stallman and Wilimczyk

Publisher—IRWIN STEIN

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INFINITY SCIENCE FICTION, published bi-monthly by Royal Publications, Inc., 47 East 44th St., New York 17, N. Y. Single copy, 35¢; subscription (12 issues) for the U. S., its territories and possessions, and Canada, \$3.50; elsewhere, \$4.50. Copyright 1955 by Royal Publications, Inc. Application for second class entry pending at the Post Office at New York, N. Y. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between the characters and actual persons is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.



*Mars' sands are red;
Earth's face is too:
We were too green,
And now we're blue!*

Illustrated by STALLMAN

COURSE OF EMPIRE

by RICHARD WILSON

THE OLDER MAN sat down on the grassy bank on the hill overlooking the orchard. The autumn sun was bright but the humidity was low and there was a breeze.

The younger man sprawled next to him.

"Cigarette?" he asked.

"Thanks," said Roger Boynton. He looked across the valley, past the apple trees, to the fine white-columned house on the hill beyond. He

smiled reminiscently. "A friend of mine once owned that house. A fellow commissioner in World Government. He and I used to sit on this very hill, sometimes. We'd munch on an apple or two that we'd picked on our way through the orchard. Wine-saps, they're called."

"You were telling me about the colonizing," said Allister gently, after a pause.

The older man sighed. "Yes." He put out the cigarette carefully, stripped it, scattered the tobacco and wadded the paper into a tiny ball. "I was commissioner of colonies. I had to decide, after my staff had gathered all the data, who would be the best man to put in charge. It was no easy decision."

"I can imagine."

"You can't really. There were so many factors, and the data were actually quite skimpy. The way it worked out, to be candid with you, was on the basis of the best guess. And some of the guesses were pretty wild. We knew Mars was sandy, for instance, and so we put a Bedouin in charge. That pleased the Middle East, in general, and Jordan in particular. Jordan donated a thousand camels under Point Four point four."

"I beg your pardon?" said Allister.

"That's not double-talk. Point Four was the old terrestrial program for underdeveloped countries. World Government adopted it and broadened it. Mars is the fourth planet, so—" he traced 4.4 in the air, stabbing a finger at the imaginary point "—Point Four point four. It was undoubtedly somebody's little whimsy in the beginning, but then it became accepted for the descriptive term that it was."

"I see." The young man looked vague. He stubbed out his cigarette carelessly, so that it continued to smolder in the grass.

"Venus was the rainy planet," Boynton said, looking with disapproval at the smoking butt, though he did nothing about it, "so we put an Englishman in charge. England sent a crate of Alligators."

The young man looked startled.

"Alligator raincoats," Boynton said. "Things weren't very well organized. Too many things were happening too fast. There was a lot of confusion and although the countries wanted to do what was best, no one knew exactly what that was. So they impro-

vised as best they could on the basis of their little knowledge."

"Was it a dangerous thing?"

"The little knowledge? No, not dangerous. Just inefficient. Then there was Jupiter. We didn't bother about Mercury, although for a time there was some uninformed talk about sending an Equatorial African to do what he could."

"Who went to Jupiter?" Allister asked.

"The United States clamored for Jupiter and got it. The argument was that the other planets would be a cinch to colonize because of their similarity to Earth but that Jupiter needed a real expert because it had only its surface of liquid gas and the Red Spot."

"What's that?"

"I'm sorry. I'd forgotten you were just a youngster when all this was going on. The Red Spot is the Jovians' space platform. They built it a long time ago and then they retrogressed, the way people do, and forgot how they'd done it. Earth sent an engineer to see if it could be done again. The Spot was pretty overpopulated and no real job of colonization could be done until we built one more."

"And did you?"

"Well, we started to. Before we could really go to work anywhere, though, we had to solve the language problem. An Australian went to work on that. He'd had a background of Melanesian pidgin, and if anyone was suited to the job of cross-breeding four languages into one, he was."

"Four languages?"

"Yes. English was the official language of Earth. Then there was Martian, Venusian *chat-chat*, and Spotian. It was a queer amalgam, but it could be understood by everyone, more or less."

"So that's where it came from. *Chikker-im-up-im chat-chat too-much*, eh? Interplanetary *bêche de mer*."

"Exactly. Only of course it was called *bêche d'espace*. *Me two-fellah vimb' kitch-im pjoug by'm by*. But even after the language difficulty was solved, we had our troubles. They already had camels on Mars, for instance, and the Martians were amazed when we brought in more. Particularly because theirs were wild and semi-intelligent and the first thing the Martian camels did was come over and liberate their brothers from Earth. They never did come back.

"Same sort of thing with

the raincoats on Venus. It doesn't rain *down* there, as we know now. It sort of mists *up*. From the ground. Soaks up under a raincoat in no time. These were just petty annoyances, of course, but they were symptomatic of the way our half-baked planning operated."

"You didn't know about the people of Ganymede then?"

"No. We were so busy trying to build another Red Spot that we never did get to Jupiter's satellites. Oh, it was partly a matter of appropriations, too. The budget commission kept explaining to us that there was only so much money and that we'd better show a profit on what we had before we put in a request to go tooling off to colonize some new place. I guess the 'Medeans first came when you were about ten?"

"Eleven," the younger man said.

"They scouted our colonies and came directly to Earth.

They took right over and colonized *us*."

A 'Medean overseer climbed the hill effortlessly. He was tall and tentacled and the breathing apparatus over his head gave him the appearance of a mechanical man.

"*Kigh-kigh pinis*," the 'Medean said. "*You two-fella all-same chat-chat too-much. B'phava b'long work he-stop 'long orchard pick-im apple.*"

The two men stood up and obediently walked down the hill toward the apple orchard.

"Why does he have to talk to us in that pidgin?" the young man asked. "They all speak English as well as you and me. It's insulting."

"That's why they do it, I think," said Boynton, the former commissioner of colonies. "They're so much better at colonizing than we were that I guess they feel they have a right to rub it in."

The 'Medean had overheard them.

"Damn right," he said.

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