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NOVELETTES

- INVISIBLE ONE**.....By Neil R. Jones 6
Presby could rescue his wife—but then she could never see him again.
- THE GIRL IN THE BOTTLE**.....By Jack Williamson 36
The allies of the Nazi dictator were not of Earth. . . .
- VENUSIAN TRAGEDY**.....By Max C. Sheridan 78
He was willing to give up his natural body for Kaldee—but it did no good.
- THE RADIUM-BUGS**.....By Helen Weinbaum 102
They said he was unfit to live—but only he could protect their world.

SHORT STORIES

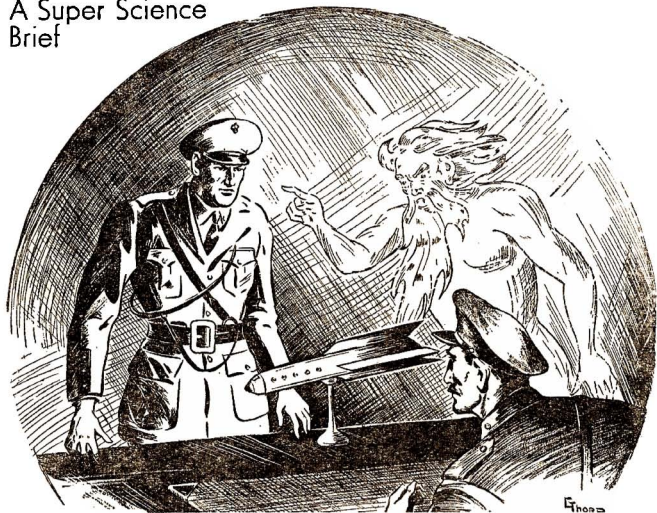
- THE INVASION**.....By Robert Willey 25
The strangers would not answer Man's signals—so they had to die.
- MEN ON THE MORNING STAR**....By Charles Henry Mackintosh 57
"Uninhabited" Venus was too populous for Captain Terran's comfort!
- STRANGE PLAYFELLOW**.....By Isaac Asimov 67
Robbie was only a machine, but he was Gloria's only friend.
- REBIRTH OF MAN**.....By Basil E. Wells 94
The Great Ones doomed themselves by the success of their own experiment.
- PHANTOM FROM NEPTUNE**.....By Henry Andrew Ackermann 121
A Super Science Brief

SPECIAL FEATURES

- MISSIVES AND MISSILES**..... 4
- FANTASY REVIEWS**..... 120
- THE PREVIEW**..... 124

PHANTOM FROM NEPTUNE

A Super Science
Brief



By HENRY ANDREW ACKERMANN

SAM SHEKEL, the producer, agreed to it at last, to Heywood's plan: to act out a scene from "Invasion of Invisible Men" as a screen test for Nat Simon, the promising young Hollywood heavy.

Sam had to give in because he couldn't afford to pass up a single prospect for the role of Kallifer, the leader of the unseen invaders from Mars.

"But," Sam warned, "this Simon better be good or else. . . ." Heywood winced as he thought of what that "or else" meant. It would be as much as his job was worth to waste his employer's time. But Heywood was one talent scout who had faith in Nat Simon.

Everything arranged for the test, Heywood left the studio. He would get Nat Simon now and tell him that Shekel had agreed to give the actor a try-out.

COMMANDER-in-Chief John Karter of the Earth Space Navy sat down heavily behind a desk and gestured young Captain Herbert to be seated opposite him.

"Because of your excellent record," said Karter, "I have selected you, Herbert, to lead a dangerous scouting expedition to Mars."

Karter went on speaking and neither he nor Herbert noticed the strange disturbance of the air directly in front of

them that was accompanied by a queer kind of humming.

Then the vague figure of a man materialized out of thin air directly in front of the conversing men. This shape was tenuous, indefinite as a morning's mist.

The ghostly visitor must have heard Karter's declaration to Herbert for the first words he said were, "Mars? You shouldn't go there. It's a dead world."

As though he had not spoken the two officers went on talking as before. Quickly the man drew nearer and asked, "Why do you want to go to Mars?"

"Good God! What's that?" Karter asked Strongheart.

"What's what?" asked Captain Herbert Strongheart.

Softly the Commander-in-Chief replied: "I could have sworn that a minute ago I heard someone else besides us speak.

The semi-transparent man angrily said, "I did speak, and I'll speak some more! I want to know why you want to go to Mars!"

But without a sign of noticing him, the other two men talked right on. Into the ghostly apparition's eyes crept a look as though he were saying to himself: "What is this? Are these men deaf? Am I dreaming?"

Karter was saying, "The situation with Mars grows worse every day. The Martians are making demands on us which, if we accepted them, would destroy the sovereign independence of the United Terrestrial Federation."

The unheard and evidently unseen visitor made a quick move toward Karter. "Martians? What Martians? There aren't any!" His voice was excited and high-pitched. "I know this is some form of Terrestrial joke, but I'm . . . I'm all in. The trip from Neptune has exhausted me. I can't take your humor, at least not now. Speak to me! I'm right here!" But Karter went quietly on: "But if we

don't accept their demands, we are liable to sudden attack from them which we could not withstand. They have us beat in both the military and scientific fields and they know it." Karter's voice held a slight note of awe as he leaned close to the young officer and whispered, "It is even hinted that they have the secret of invisibility!"

"Is that right!" gasped Captain Strongheart. "Something must be done!"

"Something *will* be done about it," answered Karter. "That's where you come in. You will take the latest, fastest cruiser. You will have complete control of a well-equipped expedition. The best men in the space navy will be under your command. You will have all this, that is, if you decide to take the assignment. It is voluntary, of course, and no blame will be attached to you if you refuse to go. It is dangerous and your chance of returning is one in a thousand. Do you accept the assignment?"

"Yes, sir," said Strongheart unhesitatingly, "I accept."

It was at this moment that the invisible listener started forward as though to say: "For heaven's sake, men, look at me! Speak to me!" Actually, he did cry out: "Are these Earthlings mad! They talk of life on Mars where there is no life; they talk of sending an expedition there and they do not seem to hear or see me. Yet I *know* their optic nerves are capable of transmitting the image of myself to their brains. These poor, deluded creatures *must* be mad. Too bad! I had such hopes of bringing Utopia to them. But Utopia on a planet of insanity? Never!"

Sadly the dim figure turned away from the two men. He pressed something that appeared to be a button on a box strapped around his waist and the air around his body began to vibrate. His body outline grew fainter, more elusive; then with disconcerting suddenness he was not there.

FIVE minutes later, Heywood re-entered the barn-like studio. He seemed worried and approached his boss warily. "Say," he began, "I'm awfully sorry that. . ."

But the producer gave him no chance to finish. "Heywood," he beamed, "you're a genius! Where did you *ever* find that actor? He was marvelous! Such feeling, such histrionics! And can he ad lib! In fact, he junked the script and went out on his own all during the test. He has great imagination; talked about Neptune and Utopia and all them stupendous things!"

The producer's broad face took on a puzzled expression. "But I never knew Colossal Pictures, Inc. had such fine technical tricks. The way Nat Simon suddenly appeared and disappeared! It was uncanny!"

"Say, chief," Heywood's voice lacked its usual enthusiasm, was very small now. "can't I talk, now?"

"Why, of course, certainly you can," boomed his pleased superior. "What is it you wanted to say?"

"Only that I'm terrible sorry that he didn't show up, honest I am, boss," quavered Heywood.

"What? Who? Who didn't show up? Make yourself clear, man."

"Nat Simon, I mean. He was taken sick on his way to the studio. The ambulance men are working on him right now."

"WHAT? Nat Simon wasn't here? Then *who* was it that played the part of the invisible man? My God!" The producer's voice rose to a nervous pitch; then he suddenly shook all over.

Heywood caught him as he collapsed to the floor.

"Quick, somebody!" Heywood yelled. "Get another ambulance! Mr. Shekel has fainted!"

THE END