

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the
far-off
stars

by . . . Ruth Sterling

The old man waited just a split second too long. But every new Eden must start with a mistake.

THE GREAT day was at hand. The old man watched the gyro-mobile hover above him and sink to the ground near the white pasture rail. His son leaped out and ran into the house shouting, "Let's go—everybody. We're ready to leave!"

The old man sighed. He had lived so long that he could never quite forget that he would soon die. Could he believe what they had told him? Was it really true that he would not die on Earth? With his gnarled hands resting on his knees, he continued to sit on the rock peering at the strange sight in the valley below.

From everywhere they came, out of the sky, along the distant roads—a countryside alive with men, women, children, rushing as if magnetized to the great shape of glittering steel rising like a giant bullet on the flat, dead meadows. The world over humanity was packing the silver ships with food, clothing, books, medicines, plant seed, smuggling in photographs, souvenirs, all the little foolish possessions they could not bear to leave behind.

"Father," the old man's daugh-

It is not easy for a young man to forsake his home and fireside for the spinning immensities of space. But to an old man the emotional shock may be far more profound, and he may hesitate and draw back. There's a newness of approach, a lyrical intensity in this fine little story which we think you'll like.

ter-in-law called from the doorway, "John wants you in this minute. You've got to change your clothes."

"I am coming," he answered.

But he did not rise. A light wind fanned across his weathered face. He looked up, blinking in bewilderment. At this time of the year the breeze should have played fitfully with a flock of leaves, sending them scurrying into the hollows and windy places. Why were the trees so unmoving?

"Grandfather, look at us!" Two children rushed out. They both wore plastic green coveralls, the voyage clothes. They clamped steel-blue helmets to their small heads and the old man could no longer tell which was the boy, and which the girl. They danced about, chanting:

We're going to Mars
We'll live near the stars
We'll zoom through the sky
We'll zoom very high.

I do not like that song, the old man thought.

"Father," his daughter-in-law called again, "aren't you *ever* coming in? There isn't much time."

Time, the old man wondered. What did time mean now? Time had meant pale buds deepening, a sapling grown sturdy and tall, the scent of blossoms, leaves turning from green to russet and withering to fall and grow again. Time was not the pall which lay over the **land**. The Earth still turned, but

it was as barren and as useless as the old man himself.

Today, time meant only an eternity of patience, shared by the scientists as they waited for Mars to move its closest to Earth. It happened every sixteen years and it was happening now and all men thanked their gods in secret. They could not have waited another year.

Already the stores of food were dangerously low and death by starvation had thinned out half of humanity. And so they waited and prayed, the ones who survived. They waited until each government announced, "It is time. Now we can leave."

From what inner flame had that kindling of determination arisen? A dream—a desperate prayer that life would continue, that seeds which could not germinate on Earth would blossom on the strange, distant planet Mars.

The old man shook his gray head as he walked toward the house. For himself, it did not matter too much. But what of his grandchildren and the generations still unborn? Their future must be made secure.

What madness had possessed the scientists to create so destructive a chemical? He remembered the newspaper articles, of five years before, explaining how the dreadful substance worked. It destroyed chlorophyll. No photosynthesis was possible. It was a weapon more deadly than any atomic bomb.

Then had come the Universal War and the frightening discovery that the enemy possessed the chemical too. So the earth was sprayed from pole to pole and as the scientists had predicted, all vegetable life withered and died.

Too late the warmakers cried: "Enough! Enough!"

And when the farmers went back to plow their fields they found that the earth was so poisoned that not a seedling would grow. Grazing animals became bony and died. Frantically, the farmers plowed and hoed and cursed the land while the scientists ate and slept in the laboratories, searching in vain for some way to create a living cell. The gardens of the oceans were brought to land and planted. But whatever was put into the ground, remained there, buried. And so at last the World Council met and decided the human race must leave the Earth.

When he was young, the old man recalled how people would say, "We can split the atom but we cannot cure the common cold." These days they said, "We can travel to Mars, but we cannot create food."

He stood up and walked inside, to quarreling and tears.

His son was tossing things out of suitcases and boxes while his daughter-in-law wept. "You're cruel, cruel. The patchwork quilt ... it was my mother's. And

our wedding silver, John! Oh, John..."

"My dolly," the little girl screamed. "I want my singing dolly!"

"My space gun, my telescope, my flying horse! Daddy, please..."

"No, no, no. There is no room. I am not heartless..." He turned white-faced to his father. "And you? What is it you want to drag along?"

"Nothing."

"Fine. Would you please put on your coveralls?" He looked at his wristwatch. "My God, do you realize we've got to be out of here in five minutes? We've got to be fingerprinted and checked in, hundreds of us, all in the next hour. The take-off has been timed down to the second. *Hurry!*"

He began slamming shut the luggage, rushing back and forth from the gyromobile, shouting orders to his distraught wife and children.

No one noticed the old man slip out the back door. He wandered among the sapless, decayed trees, remembering orchards of apples, pears, cherries, the smell of lilacs, of mint. And as he wandered on, a strangeness overcame him, leading him, tempting him back to the days of his youth. Voices came to his ears, real, more real than the voices calling him now.

He heard the young, sweet voice of his wife. "Andrew, where are you?" And he saw her running

toward him with the sunlight on her hair. He swung about, hearing also the cry of his first-born who had died in the Universal War.

"Father, father, come quickly!"

Suddenly the old man looked up, bewildered. The cemetery. Had he wandered this far? Trembling, leaning against the grilled iron gate, his body shook with sobs, and as he wept the pain in his heart was cleansed from him. This was where he belonged—here, beyond the gate where his ancestors, his wife, his friends rested. It was blasphemy to think of leaving them behind. Blasphemy . . .

He heard a great roar, an explosion that rocked the ground and thundered against his ear drums. Startled, he looked up, then remembered. The ship! It was leaving without him.

No matter. He had not wanted to go. There was too much of his life buried here, calling to him. His wife had called. He turned and found her grave and knelt beside it, his eyes closed as he whispered to her.

He opened his eyes and was about to rise when he saw the delicate, green tendril pushing upward from the mound of her grave. For an instant the old man stared at it. Then with trembling fingers he reached out and touched it. It was real—real.

He sprang to his feet and shouted to the sky where the silver ship

grew smaller and smaller, "Wait! Wait! Don't leave! The earth . . ." His body slackened. "The earth," he said softly, "has given birth again."

Was it a miracle? But there were growing things bursting from the ground everywhere. He ran out of the cemetery, over greenness, back to the empty house and gazed down into the valley now so empty of people but dotted here and there with little islands of grass.

What had done it? The special gases from the fuel of the spaceship? Was it happening all over the world? And were there others, someone in China, in Africa, who had stayed behind?

Tears rolled down the old man's cheeks, but these were tears of joy. He raised himself to his full height, feeling the strength of his youth flow through his veins again. For sheer joy, he laughed aloud, breathing in the new sweetness of the air. He was no longer useless. For as long as he continued to live—a day, a month—he would work, he would plow, he would plant.

This was his destiny. This was why he had remained behind.

And someday, when those who survived on Mars looked longingly into the sky, maybe . . . maybe they would see a star glittering sapphire once again and know it was time to go home.