

ROBERT
SHECKLEY

The first science-fiction magazine was born in 1926; two years later was born a boy baby to a quiet and previously unremarkable Brooklyn family. Young Bob Sheckley was late getting into the science-fiction field; his first story appeared only one year before publication date of this collection. But what he lacked in promptness he made up in velocity, for at the conclusion of his first full year of writing he had sold more than thirty stories, to almost every major science-fiction magazine in the country and to such lesser periodicals as *Collier's* and *Today's Woman* as well. As an author resplendent with promise, then, we offer you . . .

The Last Weapon



Edsel was in a murderous mood. He, Parke, and Faxon had spent three weeks in this part of the deadlands, breaking into every mound they came across, not finding anything, and moving on to the next. The swift Martian summer was passing, and each day became a little colder. Each day Edsel's nerves, uncertain at the best of times, had frayed a little more. Little Faxon was cheerful, dreaming of all the money they would make when they found the weapons, and Parke plodded silently along, apparently made of iron, not saying a word unless he was spoken to.

But Edsel had reached his limit. They had broken into another mound, and again there had been no sign of the lost Martian weapons. The watery sun seemed to be glaring at him, and the stars were visible in an impossibly blue sky. The afternoon cold seeped into Edsel's insulated suit, stiffening his joints, knotting his big muscles.

Quite suddenly, Edsel decided to kill Parke. He had dis-

liked the silent man since they had formed the partnership on Earth. He disliked him even more than he despised Faxon.

Edsel stopped.

"Do you know where we're going?" he asked Parke, his voice ominously low.

Parke shrugged his slender shoulders negligently. His pale, hollow face showed no trace of expression.

"Do you?" Edsel asked.

Parke shrugged again.

A bullet in the head, Edsel decided, reaching for his gun.

"Wait!" Faxon pleaded, coming up between them. "Don't fly off, Edsel. Just think of all the money we can make when we find the weapons!" The little man's eyes glowed at the thought. "They're right around here somewhere, Edsel. The next mound, maybe."

Edsel hesitated, glaring at Parke. Right now he wanted to kill, more than anything else in the world. If he had known it was like this, when they formed the company on Earth . . . It had seemed so easy, then. He had the plaque, the one which told where a cache of the fabulous lost Martian weapons were. Parke was able to read the Martian script, and Faxon could finance the expedition. So, he had figured all they'd have to do would be to land on Mars and walk up to the mound where the stuff was hidden.

Edsel had never been off Earth before. He hadn't counted on the weeks of freezing, starving on concentrated rations, always dizzy from breathing thin, tired air circulating through a replenisher. He hadn't thought about the sore, aching muscles you get, dragging your way through the thick Martian brush.

All he had thought about was the price a government—any government—would pay for those legendary weapons.

"I'm sorry," Edsel said, making up his mind suddenly. "This place gets me. Sorry I blew up, Parke. Lead on."

Parke nodded, and started again. Faxon breathed a sigh of relief, and followed Parke.

After all, Edsel thought. I can kill them anytime.

They found the correct mound in mid-afternoon, just as Edsel's patience was wearing thin again. It was a strange, mas-

sive affair, just as the script had said. Under a few inches of dirt was metal. The men scraped and found a door.

"Here, I'll blast it open," Edsel said, drawing his revolver. Parke pushed him aside, turned the handle and opened the door.

Inside was a tremendous room. And there, row upon gleaming row, were the legendary lost weapons of Mars, the missing artifacts of Martian civilization.

The three men stood for a moment, just looking. Here was the treasure that men had almost given up looking for. Since man had landed on Mars, the ruins of great cities had been explored. Scattered across the plains were ruined vehicles, art-forms, tools, everything indicating the ghost of a titanic civilization, a thousand years beyond Earth's. Patiently deciphered scripts had told of the great wars ravaging the surface of Mars. The scripts stopped too soon, though, because nothing told what had happened to the Martians. There hadn't been an intelligent being on Mars for several thousand years. Somehow, all animal life on the planet had been obliterated.

And, apparently, the Martians had taken their weapons with them.

These lost weapons, Edsel knew, were worth their weight in radium. There just wasn't anything like them.

The men went inside. Edsel picked up the first thing his hand reached. It looked like a .45, only bigger. He went to the door and pointed the weapon at a shrub on the plain.

"Don't fire it," Faxon said, as Edsel took aim. "It might backfire or something. Let the government men fire them, after we sell."

Edsel squeezed the trigger. The shrub, seventy-five feet away, erupted in a bright red flash.

"Not bad," Edsel said, patting the gun. He put it down and reached for another.

"Please, Edsel," Faxon said, squinting nervously at him. "There's no need to try them out. You might set off an atomic bomb or something."

"Shut up," Edsel said, examining the weapon for a firing stud.

"Don't shoot any more," Faxon pleaded. He looked to Parke for support, but the silent man was watching Edsel.

"You know, something in this place might have been responsible for the destruction of the Martian race. You wouldn't want to set it off again, would you?"

Edsel watched a spot on the plain glow with heat as he fired at it.

"Good stuff." He picked up another, rod-shaped instrument. The cold was forgotten. Edsel was perfectly happy now, playing with all the shiny things.

"Let's get started," Faxon said, moving toward the door.

"Started? Where?" Edsel demanded. He picked up another glittering weapon, curved to fit his wrist and hand.

"Back to the port," Faxon said. "Back to sell this stuff, like we planned. I figure we can ask just about any price, any price at all. A government would give billions for weapons like these."

"I've changed my mind," Edsel said. Out of the corner of his eye he was watching Parke. The slender man was walking between the stacks of weapons, but so far he hadn't touched any.

"Now listen," Faxon said, glaring at Edsel. "I financed this expedition. We planned on selling the stuff. I have a right to—well, perhaps not."

The untried weapon was pointed squarely at his stomach.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, trying not to look at the gun.

"To hell with selling it," Edsel said, leaning against the cave wall where he could also watch Parke. "I figure I can use this stuff myself." He grinned broadly, still watching both men.

"I can outfit some of the boys back home. With the stuff that's here, we can knock over one of those little governments in Central America easy. I figure, we could hold it forever."

"Well," Faxon said, watching the gun, "I don't want to be a party to that sort of thing. Just count me out."

"All right," Edsel said.

"Don't worry about me talking," Faxon said quickly. "I won't. I just don't want to be in on any shooting or killing. So I think I'll go back."

"Sure," Edsel said. Parke was standing to one side, examining his fingernails.

"If you get that kingdom set up, I'll come down," Faxon

said, grinning weakly. "Maybe you can make me a duke or something."

"I think I can arrange that."

"Swell. Good luck." Faxon waved his hand and started to walk away. Edsel let him get twenty feet, then aimed the new weapon and pressed the stud.

The gun didn't make any noise; there was no flash, but Faxon's arm was neatly severed. Quickly, Edsel pressed the stud again and swung the gun down on Faxon. The little man was chopped in half, and the ground on either side of him was slashed, also.

Edsel turned, realizing suddenly that he had left his back exposed to Parke. All the man had to do was pick up the nearest gun and blaze away. But Parke was just standing there, his arms folded over his chest.

"That beam will probably cut through anything," Parke said. "Very useful."

Edsel had a wonderful half hour, running back and forth to the door with different weapons. Parke made no move to touch anything, but watched with interest. The ancient Martian arms were as good as new, apparently unaffected by their thousands of years of disuse. There were many blasting weapons, of various designs and capabilities. Then heat and radiation guns, marvelously compact things. There were weapons which would freeze, and weapons which would burn; others which would crumble, cut, coagulate, paralyze, and any of the other ways of snuffing out life.

"Let's try this one," Parke said. Edsel, who had been on the verge of testing an interesting-looking three-barreled rifle, stopped.

"I'm busy," he said.

"Stop playing with those toys. Let's have a look at some real stuff."

Parke was standing near a squat black machine on wheels. Together they tugged it outside. Parke watched while Edsel moved the controls. A faint hum started, deep in the machine. Then a blue haze formed around it. The haze spread as Edsel manipulated the controls, until it surrounded the two men.

"Try a blaster on it," Parke said. Edsel picked up one of the

explosive pistols and fired. The charge was absorbed by the haze. Quickly he tested three others. They couldn't pierce the blue glow.

"I believe," Parke said softly, "this will stop an atomic bomb. This is a force-field."

Edsel turned it off and they went back inside. It was growing dark in the cave as the sun neared the horizon.

"You know," Edsel said, "You're a pretty good guy, Parke. You're O.K."

"Thanks," Parke said, looking over the mass of weapons.

"You don't mind my cutting down Faxon, do you? He was going straight to the government."

"On the contrary. I approve."

"Swell. I figure you must be O.K. You could have killed me when I was killing Faxon." Edsel didn't add that it was what he would have done.

Parke shrugged his shoulders.

"How would you like to work on this kingdom deal with me?" Edsel asked, grinning. "I think we could swing it. Get ourselves a nice place, plenty of girls, lots of laughs. What do you think?"

"Sure," Parke said. "Count me in." Edsel slapped him on the shoulder, and they went through the ranks of weapons.

"All these are pretty obvious," Parke said, as they reached the end of the room. "Variations on the others."

At the end of the room was a door. There were letters in Martian script engraved on it.

"What's that stuff say?" Edsel asked.

"Something about 'final weapons,'" Parke told him, squinting at the delicate tracery. "A warning to stay out." He opened the door. Both men started to step inside, then recoiled suddenly.

Inside was a chamber, fully three times the size of the room they had just left. And filling the great room, as far as they could see, were soldiers. Gorgeously dressed, fully armed, the soldiers were motionless, statue-like.

They were not alive.

There was a table by the door, and on it were three things. First there was a sphere about the size of a man's fist, with a

calibrated dial set in it. Beside that was a shining helmet. And next was a small, black box with Martian script on it.

"Is it a burial place?" Edsel whispered, looking with awe at the strong unearthly faces of the Martian soldiery. Parke, behind him, didn't answer.

Edsel walked to the table and picked up the sphere. Carefully he turned the dial a single notch.

"What do you think it's supposed to do?" He asked Parke. "Do you think—" Both men gasped, and moved back.

The lines of fighting men had moved. Men in ranks swayed, then came back to attention. But they no longer held the rigid posture of death. The ancient fighting men were alive.

One of them, in an amazing uniform of purple and silver, came forward and bowed to Edsel.

"Sir, your troops are ready." Edsel was too amazed to speak.

"How can you live after thousands of years?" Parke asked. "Are you Martians?"

"We are the servants of the Martians," the soldier said. Parke noticed that the soldier's lips hadn't moved. The man was telepathic. "Sir, we are Synthetics."

"Whom do you obey?" Parke asked.

"The Activator, sir." The Synthetic was speaking directly to Edsel, looking at the sphere in his hand. "We require no food or sleep, sir. Our only desire is to serve you, and to fight." The soldiers in the ranks nodded approvingly.

"Lead us into battle, sir!"

"I sure will!" Edsel said, finally regaining his senses. "I'll show you boys some fighting, you can bank on that!"

The soldiers cheered him, solemnly, three times. Edsel grinned, looking at Parke.

"What do the rest of these numbers do?" Edsel asked. But the soldier was silent. The question was evidently beyond his built-in knowledge.

"It might activate other Synthetics," Parke said. "There are probably more chambers underground."

"Brother!" Edsel shouted. "Will I lead you into battle!" Again the soldiers cheered, three solemn cheers.

"Put them to sleep and let's make some plans," Parke said. Dazed, Edsel turned the switch back. The soldiers froze again into immobility.

"Come on outside."

"Right."

"And bring that stuff with you." Edsel picked up the shining helmet and the black box and followed Parke outside. The sun had almost disappeared now, and there were black shadows over the red land. It was bitterly cold, but neither man noticed.

"Did you hear what they said, Parke? Did you hear it? They said I was their leader! With men like those—" He laughed at the sky. With those soldiers, those weapons, nothing could stop him. He'd really stock his land—prettiest girls in the world, and would he have a time!

"I'm a general!" Edsel shouted, and slipped the helmet over his head. "How do I look, Parke? Don't I look like a—" He stopped. He was hearing a voice in his ears, whispering, muttering. What was it saying?

"... damned idiot, with his little dream of a kingdom. Power like this is for a man of genius, a man who can remake history. Myself!"

"Who's talking? That's you, isn't it Parke?" Edsel realized, suddenly, that the helmet allowed him to listen in on thoughts. He didn't have time to consider what a weapon this would be for a ruler.

Parke shot him neatly through the back with a gun he had been holding all the time.

"What an idiot," Parke told himself, slipping the helmet on his head. "A kingdom! All the power in the world, and he dreamed of a little kingdom!" He glanced back at the cave.

"With those troops—the force-field—and the weapons—I can take over the world." He said it coldly, knowing it was a fact. He turned to go back to the cave, to activate the Synthetics, but stopped first to pick up the little black box Edsel had carried.

Engraved on it, in flowing Martian script, was, "The Last Weapon."

I wonder what it could be, Parke asked himself. He had let Edsel live long enough to try out all the others; no use changing a misfire himself. It was too bad he hadn't lived long enough to try out this one, too.

Of course, I really don't need it, he told himself. He had

plenty. But this might make the job a lot easier, a lot safer. Whatever it was, it was bound to be good.

Well, he told himself, let's see what the Martians considered their last weapon. He opened the box.

A vapor drifted out, and Parke threw the box from him, thinking about poison gas.

The vapor mounted, drifted haphazardly for a while, then began to coalesce. It spread, grew, and took shape.

In a few seconds, it was complete, hovering over the box. It glimmered white in the dying light, and Parke saw that it was just a tremendous mouth, topped by a pair of unblinking eyes.

"Ho ho," the mouth said. "Protoplasm!" It drifted to the body of Edsel. Parke lifted a blaster and took careful aim.

"Quiet protoplasm," the thing said, nuzzling Edsel's body. "I like quiet protoplasm." It took down the body in a single gulp.

Parke fired, blasting a ten-foot hole in the ground. The giant mouth drifted out of it, chuckling.

"It's been so long," it said.

Parke was clenching his nerves in a forged grip. He refused to let himself become panicked. Calmly he activated the force-field, forming a blue sphere around himself.

Still chuckling, the thing drifted through the blue haze.

Parke picked up the weapon Edsel had used on Faxon, feeling the well-balanced piece swing up in his hand. He backed to one side of the force-field as the thing approached, and turned on the beam.

The thing kept coming.

"Die, die!" Parke screamed, his nerves breaking.

But the thing came on, grinning broadly.

"I like quiet protoplasm," the thing said as its gigantic mouth converged on Parke.

"But I also like lively protoplasm."

It gulped once, then drifted out the other side of the field, looking anxiously around for the millions of units of protoplasm, as there had been in the old days.