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the
mech
fighter

by . . . *Stuart McIver*

There was blood and sand, fire and fury in man's hatred of the machine. And often—death as well.

CARK STRETCHED out on the long wooden bench in front of the lockers and yawned luxuriously.

"You always could relax when you had to," said Shell, the locker room attendant. He was a small, compactly-built man, and he spoke with a slightly clipped accent.

"You learn things, Shell," Cark replied. "When your reflexes slow down and your stamina starts to go, believe me, you learn all the shortcuts. You get to know how important it is to relax up to the time of the fight."

"Like a pressure bath today?" Shell asked.

Cark nodded. "I think I'd better. Shell. It's getting more difficult to get myself ready for these fights. One fight real soon the great man's going to have to call it quits."

"Cark, you'll go on forever," said Shell. "I can't even picture Mech fighting without you."

Cark smiled and thought, *I don't hate the machine any more and when you stop hating the machine you stop being a good Mech fighter.*

"You were one of Rigg's original group and you're the only one that's

So vigorously executed, so novel and exciting is Stuart McIver's handling of an audacious science-fantasy theme that you may be surprised to learn, as we were, that THE MECH FIGHTER is his first science-fiction story and his first science-fiction sale. Mr. McIver has spent most of his twelve years in the newspaper business as a sportswriter, but that, we suspect, will surprise no one coming under the spell of this wholly breathtaking yarn.

left. The only man in the game today that goes all the way back to that first year," Shell said admiringly.

"And now I'm forty-seven years old, Shell, and I think I need a pressure bath."

The vast arena was built of white sun-mirroring plastic as spotless as a mausoleum. It could handle comfortably crowds up to a quarter of a million, and had once even drawn a throng of three hundred thousand shrieking spectators to watch the battle of man versus the machine on the sand below.

But as a merciless sun filtered through an overcast of leaden gray clouds, Galber, manager of Plastic Stadium, Inc., gazed grimly out his office window at the meagre gathering of eighty-seven thousand men and women who sat in the comfortably upholstered seats. He was a dark-browed man with massive shoulders and a bulging waistline that forced his tunic out so far in front that it caught a steady stream of ashes from his cigar.

"The mech business is going to hell, Rango," he said to a thin, gimlet-eyed man beside him. "We can't stand it off much longer at this rate."

"It's mean, Chief," the other agreed. "We're caught in the middle. I can't get anybody around at National Sports to admit it but I think they deliberately changed the specifications, slowed 'em down just a fraction."

"It figures," Galber said. "They

were over-capitalized, and they needed dough. So they've turned out a whole crop of watered-down Mechs. The way we're going our whole supply will be smashed in another three weeks. In three weeks —maybe two—we'll have to buy up another batch. And what do we use for credit?"

"Chief, I think we both know what we've got to do."

Galber relit his long, fat cigar and smiled knowingly. "You have a suggestion?"

"It's no suggestion, Chief. Look, the Mechs have lost thirty-one straight fights. That means the fans have sat and cheered while thirty-one Mechs were hammered to pieces. But it also means a week has passed without a man being killed by a Mech. They're wild, that mob out there. They come to see the Mechs smashed. But ever so often they like to see a little human blood. And they haven't seen any in over a week."

"Sure, I know. There ought to be at least one man killed every day for a good gate," agreed Galber. "But I'm still waiting to hear your suggestion. We could, of course, dope one of the fighters."

"Too risky, Galber. You never know when somebody's going to call for a blood test—some member of the family, some old friend."

"So?"

"We've got a man fighting here this meeting who's over the hill," said Rango. "A man who's not going to be around much longer

anyway. But he's a great name, maybe the greatest ever in Mech fighting."

"Cark?"

"Cark. He's slipped down to Double A Mechs now. Everybody knows he's slowing down. If he got it nobody would ever suspect anything fishy. And if he got it this afternoon it would be the talk of the whole world. Think of the publicity. We'd pack 'em in for the rest of the meet."

"Cark's a shrewd cookie. How would you go about it?"

"Simple," said Rango. "Cark has been fighting Double A for three years now. It's been so long since he faced Triple A Mechs that he couldn't handle one."

Galber stared at him.

"So you're going to slip in a Triple A Mech."

"No, a Triple A would be too easy to trace. The Commission would catch that. I'm going to step up the voltage on a Double A Mech. I've got one here with a faulty rear plate. I spotted it last week. I tinkered with it a little and I know how to handle it."

"What about the Commission?" asked Galber.

"They're a bunch of political flunkies. They'd never spot anything. I'll get 'em drunk anyway, just to play it safe."

"I don't think that particular way of sending a fighter to his death has ever been tried before, Rango."

"Nope, but this just happens to be one of those rare Mechs with

a faulty plate, the first I've ever seen. It gave me the idea."

II

The warm bubbles bouncing off his tired body were tingling, exciting and at the same time relaxing. But Cark was not at ease. His muscles had slackened beneath the gentle pounding, but his mind was moving much too rapidly.

He was finding it difficult to relax in the pressure bath, to give himself up to the dreamy haze that conserved a fighter's energy until he was summoned to the Mech battle. And once that summons came, once out on the sand he was finding it harder and harder to drive himself to the mental alertness a man needed to survive. When you quit hating the machine, it was time to quit Mech fighting, he told himself grimly.

The warm bubbles kept bombarding him and finally drowsiness crept upon him, and with it the rest he needed so badly. He drifted off in a deep sleep that carried with it only fleeting memories of the virile international sport of Mech fighting.

Mech fighting had its origin during the administration of the Coalition group, a moderate political amalgamation which backed continued technological progress but at the same time sought improved relations between man and the machine. The Coalition group was the first to face up squarely to the stark fact that man hated

the machine with all his heart and soul. He worked with the machine, he took the machine forward and went forward with it. But in his secret thoughts man hated the machine, every intricately moving part, every nut, every bolt.

Ankak, deputy secretary of the newly-organized Department of H-M Relations, was the official who first realized the social gains which would inevitably follow actual combat between man and the machine. For the man who fought and the crowd that watched, he reasoned, such an event would have a decided therapeutic value. It would release stored-up tensions and bring improved mental health to the empire.

A student of antiquity, Ankak patterned the new sport after the Spanish bull fight, with many variations, of course. In fact, the first fights were billed as *Man versus the Mechanized Bull*, later called simply the Mech. And in the popular mind antiquity paid off.

The original Mech was a rectangular metal box five feet long with two wheels in front, and one in back and with razor-sharp horns protruding from what mechanically corresponded to its head. It moved at thirty-five miles an hour, but had little maneuverability. After its first lunge missed, it was an easy mark for a fighter as it went by. A good fighter could hit the rear end of the Mech with his mace and gradually jar the mechanism out of order. That meant an easy kill, which took

the form of smashing the Mech to pieces with the mace.

Man won virtually all the early Mech fights, due to the inferior design of the machines. The Mech II proved a "beast" of another color. He was stepped up to forty miles per hour, and his maneuverability was so great and his horns so sharp that he killed thirty-three of the first thirty-five fighters he faced.

Cark had been the first man to discover the weakness of Mech II and render it a relatively impotent foe. The Mech's initial charge was fast, its pursuit unrelenting. But Cark reasoned that the Mech could be beaten if he ducked away just as it reached him and knocked off first one horn and then the other. That bold new strategy not only took away the Mech's slashing power but threw the mechanism's timing off badly.

At this point Rodek, who had succeeded Ankak, tried an innovation that almost wrecked the sport. He went all out for the Machine Age and replaced the sharp cutting horns with radioactive rods. Thus any attempt to destroy the Mech by hitting the horns meant death to the fighter. This gave the machine an overwhelming advantage since it restricted a fighter's hitting area. Over two thousand men were killed in four months.

The public finally forced the government to abandon the Atomic Mech and in so doing crystallized the sport into the classic pattern

it had followed ever since. A man who has been hooked by an atomic rod does not bleed. He may faint or he may just grow weak and have to grope his way back to shelter, which was possible since Atomic Mech was slow in pursuit. The fighters invariably died in the stadium infirmary before a small gathering of doctors and nurses, never in the arena before a quarter of a million spectators. There was no real drama, nor any dignity, to death at the horns of an Atomic Mech.

It was then that the government realized for the first time that for maximum pleasure at a Mech fight the human being had to die on the spot with a maximum of blood. So the horns of the Mech were sharpened with bludinium and coated with acidol paint. All fighters were forced to appear wearing only skin-tight shorts and were smeared with a sheen of glossy white paint to afford a striking background when blood began to flow from their almost invariably fatal wounds.

Thus was ushered in the Golden Era of Mech fighting. The balance became perfect. A good fighter figured to win but a spectator could count on at least one sanguinary death each day. He could also count on seeing a human being like himself destroy machines every day, smashing them to bits with his mace until all that was left was a rubble of metal and plastic parts, oil and a few battered electronic fuses.

To a spectator the two supreme moments were the final destruction of a Mech and the bleeding to death of a man on the white sand.

Cark won his reputation as the greatest artist of his generation solely because of his skill in smashing Mechs. Others were more adroit than he in outmaneuvering the formidable mechanical killer and disabling it. But Cark was a master at reducing it to rubble with powerful, perfectly-conceived strokes. No other man smashed with the force and abandon of Cark.

The reason was simply that Cark hated the machine more relentlessly and consumingly than did the others. Cark's mother had been mangled to death on the atomic-rocket assembly line and his sister and brother had been run over when only children by a transcontinental landplane. And his wife, the beautiful Rhoda, had been rendered sterile by working with a food radiation machine. Now there could be no children for Cark and Rhoda, only an empty loneliness in the years ahead.

Two thousand, three hundred and forty-two Mechs had paid for the sorrow which the machine had brought to the family of Cark. But now as he grew older, and softer, his hatred had begun to wane.

Cark stirred from uneasy dreams, and signalled Shell to release him from the bath. He felt rested as he slipped on his tunic and his robe, and stretched again to bring back

the muscle tone. From the locker room he walked up the stairs to the section of the stadium reserved for the fighters' wives. Rhoda, still beautiful despite her prematurely gray hair, occupied a place of honor on the front row. She smiled as she turned to greet him.

"How's the champ feeling today?" she asked, a tender solicitude in her voice.

"Old, Rhoda, old," he replied.

"Yes, an old man like you," she said, in feigned mockery. "I just don't see how you can hold the love of a really beautiful woman."

He grinned at her. "I'm not that old, Rhoda—just slowing up a little."

Her lips tightened and the levity went out of her eyes. "Cark, I've got news for you, the most wonderful news in the world. The food radiation people have—"

"Yes?"

"They've developed a treatment to cure every single person who was sterilized by contact with the radiation machine. It's a new X-3 machine and I can start treatments next week. We can have children, Cark."

He looked at the light shining in her eyes. As they glazed over with tears the thought that had been turning over and over finally meshed within his brain.

He bent suddenly and kissed her. "Rhoda, this is no sport for a family man," he whispered. "I'm giving it up. Today is my last Mech fight."

"Giving it up?" his wife asked.

"Yeah, I'll get a job coaching Mech, or maybe hook up with a big sporting goods house. We'll get along. I owe it to you—and to the kids."

"Oh, Cark, I'm so happy," she cried, her arms tightening about his shoulders.

She has been all along. That's why she's gray at thirty-two. I should have got out long ago. And then suddenly her fear came through to him, more overpowering than when he had faced his first Mech as a green kid of seventeen. The last day, he thought, the last Mech fight. What if I lose? What if this is the day the Mech finally makes me pay as I've made it pay down through the years? Will I meet death without flinching?

He kissed her again, firmly and reassuringly and went back to the locker room. His stomach felt tight and hollow and sweat was beading his forehead as he groped his way to the bench.

"Shell, I've got the shakes. What can you do for me? I can't get weak now."

The small, wiry locker room attendant walked over to the champion and vigorously slapped his face. "I don't like fighters that are scared. I hate like hell to associate with fighters that go yellow."

Cark stiffened and leaped to his feet.

Shell smiled. "You're all right now. You just needed a kick in the

tail. I'll give you some salt tablets before you go on."

Cark looked at his watch. He had twenty-five minutes left. He opened his locker and started to dress for the fight—his last big fight.

III

Walsch, the Mech writer for the *INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER*, looked profoundly bored as he talked into his recorder from high in the spacious press box. He glanced down again at his notes as the recorder rephrased his observations and returned the printed comments to him for approval.

First bout, Hesk versus Double A Mech, the notes read. *Mech seems slow, poor reflexes. Hesk, promising young fighter, performs some acceptable leads while drawing Mech into well-planned traps. Hits Mech nicely with mace while going to left. Can't seem to go to his right. Won't be ready for Triple A till he corrects this. Polishes off Mech in fourteen minutes and twenty-five seconds with good looping right hand power. Broke off right horn of Mech and then jarred inner mechanism out of line, thus permitting final smashup. Good, workmanlike fighter but there's no art in his work. Worth keeping an eye on, though.*

Sometimes they improve fast.

Walsch took a sip of the warm beer Plastic Stadium, Inc., provided for the gentlemen of the press. "What a scorcher," he said aloud.

"I'd hate to be down there fighting."

He took another sip of beer and then turned on his microphone to start a new series of notes.

Second bout, Cark versus Double A Mech. Cark now coming onto field, looks remarkably trim, still erect, slender, graceful as a cat. Slowing down now but still carries himself with the class the younger fighters just don't have. Shame he had to drop back to Double A but his reflex tests show he can no longer handle Triple A. Cark salutes judge with mace, bows toward the box of the Athletic Commission and walks toward the fighting zone. The old-time graciousness still there. Mech released from far gateway, needs long trip to this side of arena. Highly irregular, should always come from nearest gateway. Doesn't really matter, though. Mech seems to be moving fast, very fast. Cark leads, then draws away and spins out. Cark seems afraid of Mech's speed, wasn't bold at all.

Mech coming back fast. Cark, why Cark runs, doesn't even offer with his mace. Crowd booing now. Cark is scared. Something's wrong for Cark to be scared. Mech gets up speed again. Extremely fast Mech, but no excuse for Cark putting on bad show like this. After all, he owes something to the public that made him . . .

The Mech was coming back very fast, and Cark whirled away too soon for a good blow with his

mace. The boos were loud now, the first really loud shouts of anger and disapproval he had ever known. Cark, the champion of champions, bowing out now to a chorus of boos, bowing out to a hopped up Mech with razor-sharp horns!

With a roar the Mech came back again and Cark finally made a play for it. After a fast lead he spun away quickly and on the pivot swung hard with his mace. The blow was a solid one to the upper left plate, but unfortunately this was not a vital area. The Mech was back on him instantly, and Cark's second desperate swing caught the charging machine in almost the same place.

It's no good. I've got to hit him where it hurts, he thought. He's too fast for me! I can't connect.

Mustn't think about it.

The Mech's last charge had been so strong that its overrun carried it nearly twenty yards past Cark. It had to turn around and gather new speed for the trip back.

"This is a Triple-A Mech," Cark screamed his discovery aloud but not a voice could hear him as the gears meshed, and the motor rumbled.

The Mech bore down on him with a deafening roar. Cark moved boldly in and swung viciously but the blow glanced harmlessly off the tip of the Mech's right horn. Then the horn caught him in the thigh, stinging him with a blinding pain as the acid began to work.

Cark's blood showed instantly against the white gloss and the

crowd screamed. Most of them had never before seen Cark's blood and they leaped to their feet for the kill they sensed was coming.

"Kill him, kill him, kill him!
Kill, kill, kill, kill!"

Cark could hear the crowd brutally and mercilessly clamoring for the machine to kill him, but he gritted his teeth and braced himself for the next charge. The searing pain in his leg was already dangerously curtailing his mobility. The Mech rumbled toward him again, spurting forward with renewed speed. Cark, his reflexes slowing now, his wounded leg rapidly losing its strength, made one last great slash at the untiring metal horror.

He caught it squarely above the control center. The crowd cheered wildly, knowing they could count on Cark to drag out the delicious last moments of the conflict. The Mech turned abruptly and roared back down on him again, its chrome flashing blindingly, its acid-coated cutting edges itching for his flesh.

Cark faked his lead and then stepped in for another blow at the control center. Again he hit his mark and spun away.

Then he felt it, suddenly, searingly, like the end of time coming upon him in a lightning flash. He knew the burning pain across the belly meant the Mech had gotten him. His legs gave way and he fell to the sand and lay there bleeding his life away while the crowd above him pleaded with the ma-

chine to come back and finish off the human being.

Blood they had hoped for and now they were seeing the blood of the great Cark. The machine was turning now, its gears shifting the horns for the rotary motion that would destroy the helpless man on the sand.

Cark lifted his head, and waited for the last charge of all . . .

In the wives' box Rhoda lay slumped over the rail, motionless.

In the press box Walsch of the INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER barked excitedly, "And now the Mech has its gears ready, it's maneuvering for position, it's getting up speed, it's making the final charge."

Cark saw death coming in a gleam of chromium and heard it in the mesh of gears and the grinding of a motor. And then the grinding became a skipping and then a whimpering and powerful knives hovered just over him as, suddenly, the motor blew up and the Mech sputtered to a smoking halt.

Cark's eyes closed behind a red shadow. The Mech stood its ground, steaming and spitting.

The stretchers bore Cark into

the infirmary. The stitching of the damaged organs started at once and new blood was pumped into his veins as he lay on the table.

When he finally opened his eyes, Rhoda was there.

"Cark, honey," she said and then was silent as he took her hand.

"You're great, champ," said Walsch of the INTERNATIONAL OBSERVER. "You won a couple of big battles."

"I wasn't great. But then that wasn't a Double A Mech I was fighting," said Cark.

"Don't worry about that," said the Mech writer. "Rango and Galber are already in jail. When the Mech blew up, it didn't blow up because you hit it in a sensitive spot. It just blew up because a Double A Mech can't stand Triple A voltage. That's how the men from the National Sports Commission found out it had been tampered with."

"I used to think the machine was my enemy," said Cark.

"Don't talk, honey, you're going to be all right," said Rhoda. "Old family man," she chided, gently, and kissed him on the brow.