fantastic

MAY

6 Number 4

1957

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY William B. Ziff (1898-1953) Founder Editorial and Executive Offices 366 Madison Avenue New York 17, New York

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THE METAL MARTYR

By HENRY SLESAR

Here was the strangest emergency operation ever performed in deep space. It required the hand of a master surgeon, and in order to forestall disaster, the patient had to die!

ONCE they named it Poscidon. Now, the planet spun like a black cinder in the cosmos, and the colonists of the New World system wryly dubbed it Ashes. It was a dead world, murdered by a wrathful god with a weapon called cobalt. But now and then, Life flickered; faintly, feebly. And one day a voice sounded in the radarphones of the planet Quicksilver, calling pitifully for help.

'Come kill me. Please.

Come kill me!"

The Space Ambulance was

busy.

The internes, in their cool white smocks, moved briskly around the loading platform. They snapped orders at the corpsmen bearing the stretcher cases. They offered pat

words of sympathy to tearful relatives. They ministered briefly to critical patients, assuaging their fears of what acceleration might do to their overworked hearts, their broken bones, their tortured lungs.

"You-corpsman!"

The interne's hand fell on Russ Fairchild's shoulder. The corpsman shrugged it off, trying to conceal his vexation.

"Check the g-straps in Section 3," said the interne, commandingly. "And don't miss any!"

"Yes, sir!"

Fairchild strode off and went into the spaceship. At the doorway, he almost collided with Wetzel. The other corpsman gave him a rueful grin and jerked his head back in the direction of the interior.



Death in any torm was not allowed.

"Full house," he said. "Thirty pieces of meat already. One patient more, and we'll have to double 'em up."

"Then start doubling," said Fairchild curtly. "Control just told us to hold up for another victim."

Wetzel leered. "Well, there is a redhead in Section 3 I wouldn't mind doubling with. Take a look when you go in."

"I'm checking g-straps," said Fairchild. He brushed by Wetzel, who gave him a mock salute and stepped out on the platform.

Inside the ship, an old man with a bandaged rib cage reached out for Fairchild with a withered arm and stopped him in his path.

"Doctor!" he said weakly. "Doctor, can I talk to you?"

Fairchild looked down at the wrinkled hand that clutched his gray sleeve. He noted the bulging veins, and the green discoloration of the fingernails. "Silicontoxis," he thought. "Green Fever." It was the fungoid killer of the planet Quicksilver.

He pushed the hand away. "Sorry," he said tersely. "I'm not a doctor. I'm a corpsman. Ask one of the men in white."

"It's the pain—" the old man gasped.

Fairchild hesitated. "Where does it hurt?" he asked.

The old man groaned and clutched his bandaged ribs. "In here. Bad. Can't you do something?"

Fairchild looked around him, then he put his strong brown fingers on the old man's ribs. With professional deftness, he examined the bandages.

"These are not tight enough," he said. "I'll get an interne to fix you up. Lie back and take it easy."

With a sigh, the old man relaxed. "All right, doctor," he said. "Thank you."

"I'm not a doctor!" Fairchild snapped. He grabbed a fold of his gray uniform and tugged. "See?" he said. "Gray. Gray!" But the old man had already closed his eyes.

The corpsman continued on his way. A young interne was reading fever charts in Section 3 when he got there, and Fairchild interrupted him.

"Silicontoxis in Section 1," he said. "Bandages coming loose. Maybe you can fix him up on your way back."

The interne looked up. "Russ!" he said. "I didn't know you were aboard." He looked embarrassed.

"Where else would I go? Fix him up, will you, Paul? The old man's in a lot of pain.

I would have done it myself, but you know the rules—"

The young face flushed. "Sure, of course. I'll see him. Listen, Russ—"

"What?"

"I—just wanted to tell you—"

"Tell me what?" said the corpsman. "How sorry you are?"

"Something like that." The interne swallowed hard. "Anyway, I'm glad you're aboard. Even if—"

"Even if I'm wearing gray instead of white," Fairchild finished. "I know."

"It was a tough operation. I don't think I could have done better, Russ. It was just the breaks."

"Save it, Paul." Fairchild touched him on the back familiarly. "You've got work to do, and so have I. Doctor," he added.

He walked off stiffly.

"Corpsman!"

It was a woman's voice, the kind that evoked a sultry image. Fairchild turned towards it, and remembered what Wetzel had said. Wetzel was a vulgar clod, but his appraisals of women were often reliable.

Her red hair was spilled on the pillow like a burst of flame. Her lips were equally fiery, and they were parted now in a smile that was much too seductive for an Ambulance patient.

"Corpsman, could I get something to drink?"

Fairchild's face relaxed for the first time that day. "I'll send a nurse around, Miss. I've got things to do."

"Can't it wait?" The woman stretched out a well-molded arm. "I thought the patients always came first." Her smugness was a bit annoying.

"They do." Without thinking, Fairchild picked up the chart at the end of her cot and examined it. Her temperature was on a normal plateau. The bottom sheet described her condition as "fatigue." He looked at her curiously.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Awful," she said. "I'm a complete wreck."

The corpsman looked at the first page again. The name read: ALLINGHAM, DEE. He hooked the chart back on the cot.

"Lie back and rest," he told her. "You'll get your water in a little while. We'll be blasting away in fifteen minutes."

"What's all the delay?" Her eyes met his, and said a few things. Fairchild looked away.

"Another patient coming,"

he said. "Be here any minute."

How long will it take to get to Home?"

"Six, seven days." He started to go, but something compelled him to linger by the girl's bedside. He told himself that it was medical curiosity, and to justify it, he reached across the blanket and took her pulse. Her wrist was cool.

"How'm I doing?" she asked coyly.

"Fairchild!"

The corpsman dropped the wrist and wheeled around. A tall man with iron-gray hair, wearing a military uniform, was standing behind him. His face was leathered, and so deeply scarred around the mouth and brow that he seemed to be wearing a perpetual frown. But now, Captain Ball of the Ambulance was grimacing as well.

"What do you think you're

doing?"

Fairchild straightened his back. "Nothing, sir," he said. "Taking a pulse."

"Maybe that was nothing last year," said the captain. "You know different now, don't you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You know what corpsman duties are?"

"I do, sir."

"Then stick to them!" The captain looked stormily at the pretty girl. "Sorry, Miss Allingham," he said. "If you require medical attention, call the interne." He glared at Fairchild. "Since you don't seem to be busy," he said, "you can go up forward and help Wetzel. He's bringing in the last patient."

"Sir, I was supposed to check the g-straps—"

"Then why haven't you?" said the captain.

Fairchild's face darkened. "I was just about to."

"Do it on your way back, corpsman." The captain turned on his heel. "But bring that patient in first."

"Yes. sir."

Wetzel said: "Wait 'til you see this one!"

Fairchild, about to lift his end of the stretcher, paused. He looked more closely at the unconscious figure.

"Android!" he said.

"Now we're a bunch of mechanics," said Wetzel cheerfully. "Pretty soon we'll be ferrying sick computors and broken rockets."

Fairchild studied the placid, smooth-planed face in wonderment. It was blank, expressionless, without benefit of the color that pumping blood gave to the human countenance. He winced slightly, then he picked up the stretcher handles.

"That's not the whole story, either," said Wetzel. "Wait 'til you see his chart. I sneaked a look on the loading platform."

"What ails him?"

"I dunno." Wetzel grunted as they moved through the ship's narrow passageway. "But I know where he comes from. Guess."

"Let's not play games, Wetzel."

"Okay, professor!" Wetzel's tone was light, but there was a barbed edge. "Find out for yourself."

But as they entered Section 3 of the Space Ambulance, Wetzel couldn't keep the secret any longer.

"He's from Ashes!" he an-

nounced.

"What?"

"So help me. Says so on the chart. 'Patient removed from planet Poseidon in state of shock.'"

They strapped the android in the one remaining cot of Section 3, only two beds away from the red-headed "fatigue" case. Wetzel nudged the other corpsman when he spotted her.

"Did you see her?" he whispered. "How about that?"

Fairchild shrugged. "Very

nice," he said dryly. "She's Dee Allingham. Mean anything to you?"

"Depends. That babe could mean plenty to me." He chuckled lasciviously.

"Allingham's a big man on Quicksilver. Head of a mining company."

Wetzel grinned. "Well," he said, "my Pop used to tell me, 'Leo, it's just as easy to love a rich girl as a poor girl.'" But he didn't say "love." "Listen to Pop I say!"

Fairchild tugged at the g-strap that secured the android into position. As the buckle tightened around the synthetic man's chest, he suddenly groaned and stirred. The perfectly-shaped head rolled from side to side, and the modelled lips parted.

"Our boy's moving," said Wetzel.

"I think he's trying to say something." Fairchild leaned over him.

"Corpsman!"

It was the girl again. Wetzel came to attention when she spoke, and dug Fairchild's side with his elbow. "Hey," he said. "Miss Millions wants us."

The other didn't budge. "Probably wants a cocktail," he said acidly. "You handle it."

"With pleasure!" Wetzel

moved off rapidly.

The android had become still. Fairchild put his hand on its chest and then drew it away with something like squeamishness. There was no heartbeat; only the unpleasant murmer of some internal apparatus.

Then the android opened its

eyes.

"Kill me," he said, staring at the corpsman. "Please. Please! KILL ME!"

The blast-off horn moaned throughout the ship. Captain Ball saluted the young interne, and gave his hand one peremptory shake. The two corpsmen and three nurses stood at attention as the leathery-faced man gave them final inspection. Finally he was satisfied, and went forward to the pilot's cabin.

The journey was under

way.

Ten minutes after blast-off, the young interne made a hurried accounting of the effects of the acceleration on his passengers.

Three of them were short of breath, and needed an

oxygen booster.

Two of them were bleeding badly from the nose, mouth, and ears.

One of them, an old man in

Section 1, had been spared the misery of lingering silicontoxis. He was dead.

The crew had survived the blast without il! effects. But Wetzel still had a complaint.

"It makes me sick," he said to Fairchild. "Wet-nursing a machine! Now, I get a better idea. Maybe that little redhead in 3 could use a nice sponge-bath. That would be my idea of service."

"Sure," sneered Fairchild. "She's real sick. 'Fatigue.'"

"Oh, I know the poop on that," said the other confidentially. "Seems she wants to get to Home in the worst way. But the next spacer out of Quicksilver doesn't leave for at least two weeks."

"What?" said Fairchild,

unbelievingly.

"It's straight," Wetzel assured him. "So she pulls the big sick act, and gets a berth on the Ambulance. Pretty clever, huh?"

Fairchild frowned. "Yeah. Clever, like robbing orphans. Doesn't that spoiled bitch know that beds are precious?"

"Come off it, professor! We had the room. We even had room enough for an android, didn't we?"

"But if we didn't," insisted Fairchild, "she'd have got on board anyway. Her old man could pull enough strings."

Wetzel stood up from the coffee-room table. His fleshv. red-cheeked face was set in displeasure.

"Still got stars in your eyes, huh, professor? Good clean-living boy, huh? You weren't so clean when you got a faceful of floating blood, were you? I'll bet you were a mess then!"

"Can it, Wetzel!"

Wetzel grinned humorlessly. "Sore spot, huh, Russ? You were gonna be a big-shot surgeon. But you couldn't handle a little zero-g operation, could you?"

Fairchild got up angrily, his hands clenched in two hard fists. "I said can it!" he

shouted.

"You scare me!" Wetzel jeered. "You frighten me to death! I heard about you. professor. One little incision and you lost your head. Blubbered like a goddam kid!"

Fairchild rearched across and seized V'etzel's tunic by the chest. He shoved the corpsman backwards.

"Go on!" said Wetzel. "Take a poke! Let me have it, doc! I'm only a lousy corpsman, remember? I got no right to push you around!"

Fairchild shook with his rage. Then he made a growling noise in his throat and let go. Wetzel brushed off his uniform, and grinned widely. He watched Fairchild re-seat himself and wrap his hands around a mug of coffee, staring into the black depths.

"That's it," said Wetzel. "Save your strength, professor. How long will it take to get another chance? Two years? Three? You got a lot of studying to do."

Fairchild wouldn't answer. Then Wetzel's good humor seemed to be restored. He clapped his hand on the other's back.

"Ah, what the hell," he said. "No good us bein' at each other's throats. What do you say, Russ? Pals?"

Fairchild looked up at him blankly. "Okay, Wetzel. Let's forget it." But he didn't shake hands

"Hi, doc!"

Fairchild looked around. Dee Allingham was standing at the foot of her cot, clutching the rail to keep from floating off.

"What are you doing?" he said. "Why are you out of bed?"

She smiled. "I got tired of staying in bed. And besides-I can't just lie here and listen to that—that Thing over there."

Fairchild looked in the direction of her eyes. The android was lying on his back, eyes opened.

"What's he been saying?"

"You know what. Same old business. He wants to die."

"You better get back to bed."

She ignored his admonition. "What's wrong with him, anyway? What kind of android do they make on Ashes?"

"How did you know about Ashes?" Fairchild said sharply. Then he realized that Wetzel must have been talking. "We don't know much about it," he told her. "They built their robots and androids for military purposes. The population was small."

"But fierce," said the girl, her eyes glowing. "Fierce and brave."

Fairchild felt disgust for the look of excitement on her face. "They were throwbacks," he said. "Hot-headed belligerents. They weren't smart enough or strong enough to make a peaceful existence, so they blew up their whole world."

"But they were alive," said Dee. "You have to admit that!"

"And now they're dead," Fairchild replied abruptly. "All that's left are poor helpless things like that—" He gestured towards the synthetic man.

"Kill me!" it moaned.

"Why don't you do something for it? Why don't you put it out of its misery?"

"That's not my job. We'll let the Home doctors do it. And besides—hey!" He cried out as the girl suddenly vaulted herself away from the cot and drifted rapidly towards him with weightless speed.

"Catch me, corpsman!" she said.

Fairchild had no choice. His arms reached out and caught her in mid-flight, around her trim waist. She laughed loudly as he held her.

"You damned fool!" he

said.

"Good catch, doc! Don't let me go!"

"Where do you think you are-"

She giggled. "Don't you like it?"

Viciously, he carried her back to the cot and put her down. He fumbled with the g-strap, trying to hold her squirming figure on the cot.

"Kill me! Kill me!" said the

android loudly.

At the sound of his flat, metallic, mournful voice, the girl ceased her struggling. She lay quietly as the corpsman completed the strapping job. Fairchild looked fluster-

ed, but she was no longer enjoying his confusion.

"Behave yourself!" he said.
"Quit acting like a spoiled child.'"

"Why can't you do something about that damned thing?" she said. "'Kill me! Kill me! It's driving me crazy!"

"He has more right to be here than you do, Miss Allingham."

She pouted. "You're pretty high-and-mighty for a man who—" She stopped.

"Yes?" said Fairchild.

"Oh, nothing. Go away, corpsman." She turned her head to the wall. "You bore me to death."

"Kill me!" said the android.

On the fourth day in space, Fairchild got to know his passengers better.

There were two space-tug pilots, both with collapsed lungs resulting from a meteor strike on their ship.

There was a case of space blindness, and a sad one, because the victim was a child of nine.

There were three cases of Mott's Disease, the strange, strangling illness that the colonists had to fight on every planet in the New World system.

There were half a dozen radiation cases.

The rest were assorted, including old standby aliments that the settlers couldn't seem to leave behind them on Earth.

But as it turned out, the deadliest disease aboard wasn't even listed in standard pathological textbooks. It was the same pernicious disease that had plagued mankind since the first selfish act took place in the Garden of Eden.

"What do you think of our android?"

Paul, the young interne, sat back on his bunk and put a cold pipe between his teeth. Fairchild, who had reluctantly accepted the invitation to the interne's quarters, considered the question. All was quiet for a moment.

"I've got one theory," he said tentatively. "But no proof."

"What is it?"

"I don't think he wants to die out of pure misery."

The interne, thwarted by the No Smoking rule aboard the Ambulance, sucked on his empty pipe. "How do you mean, Russ?"

"I mean this. I think our android friend wants to die because he has to. I think he was built for suicide."

Paul shivered. "That's a horrible thought."

"Remember," the corpsman said. "The people on Ashes built androids for war. They were creating soldiers, to spare them from bloodshed."

"Yes, but android soldiers would accept death. They wouldn't seek it. That would be wasteful."

"Of course," Fairchild agreed. "But I think they resorted to building specialpurpose androids, designed to do nothing but kill themselves for the cause."

"Like the Kamikazies of World War Two-"

"Exactly. Resembling humans as much as they do, these suicidal androids could infiltrate a position and then knock themselves off."

"But why?" Paul took the pipe out of his mouth. "What would they gain?"

"I haven't figured that out yet." Fairchild stood up and looked at the books strapped to the interne's cot. They were all medical volumes: Space Medicine, Cosmic Radiation Pathology, Diseases of the Outer Planets. He thumbed their bindings sadly.

"Well, maybe I'll figure it out before the trip's over." He started for the doorway. but froze when the unexpect-

ed happened.

BOOM!

"What was that?"

"Are we hit?" Paul jumped to his feet.

"It was an explosion! Aft, someplace."

"Let's go!"

They went through the doorway in a hurry. As they raced through the ship, those passengers who could their heads were doing so, curiously.

"What's happened?" one of the space-tug pilots called to Fairchild as he rushed past.

"Don't know!"

"Fairchild! Williams! Wetzel! What's happening back there?" It was Captain Ball, following closely on heels.

"We're going to find out, sir," said Paul.

The three men continued down the length of the Ambulance. When they reached Section 3, Wetzel joined them. On first glance, everything looked normal. Then Fairchild's gaze went to strange patient from planet Ashes.

"The android!" he gasped. They rushed to the cot. The synthetic man lay on his back, eyes still open. The even features were still placid and expressionless, but somehow. even more peaceful than before.

There was a gaping hole in its chest.

"Someone's shot him!" said Paul.

They looked in horror at the mock human mechanism, exposed by the still smoking chasm that a heat-bullet had created. The revelation was extraordinary.

Captain Ball exploded. "Wetzel! Fairchild! I hold you strictly accountable for this!"

Paul said: "Sir, Mr. Fairchild was off duty. He was in my cabin."

"You can't blame me!" Wetzel whined. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

Fairchild bent over the android.

"Is it—is he still alive?" Paul asked uneasily.

"I think so. Hard to tell, without a pulse or breathing. But I think his lips are moving."

"Who would want to do such a thing?" said Ball, looking around at the bed-ridden passengers helplessly. His mind filled with thoughts of triplicate forms, and investigations, and senatorial subpoenas.

"But he's not human," Wetzel protested. "I mean, he's really just a machine. Does it even matter?"

"He was our responsibility," Paul said harshly.

"Quiet!" Fairchild bent closer to the moving lips. "I think he's going to say something."

They stared silently.

The android's mouth trembled, its perfect lips struggling to form a word.

"Th—th—"

"What's he saying?" asked the captain.

"Quiet, you damn fool!" Fairchild forgot his rank for a moment, but fortunately, Ball did, too.

"Th—th—thanks . . ." the android said. "Thanks mmm . . . Miss . . ."

Fairchild looked up.

"Did you hear that?" he said grimly.

The three men looked blank. Fairchild got to his feet and pushed past them. He went over to the cot twice removed from the android's and said:

"Where's the gun, Miss Allingham?"

The redhead stuck out her lower lip. "What gun?" she said.

"Don't give me that!" said Fairchild savagely. "The heat-gun you shot the android with!"

The pretty mouth opened in surprise. "What? Me?"

Fairchild moved quickly.

He reached down and gripped the girl's shoulder. His strong hand pushed her head away from the pillow before she could prevent it. It came out with a small, jewel-encrusted revolver.

The corpsman examined it. It bore the initials D. A., and had obviously been fired.

Tight-lipped, he turned to the commanding officer. "Captain Ball," he said, "I suggest that this woman be placed under arrest."

"Miss Allingham!" The captain looked unhappier than ever, thinking of her father's widespread influence. "Why did you do it?"

The girl glared at him and then began to sulk. "Don't look at me as if I were a murderer," she said. "It's only an android. It's not a real person. It's a machine!"

Paul said quietly: "But you still had no right . . ."

"No right?" Dee's nostrils dilated with wrath. "That thing wanted to die. It kept begging for it. It was driving me crazy!"

Fairchild went back to the android's cot.

"I did him a favor!" she shouted after him. "I did more for him than you could, you phoney doctor! At least I had the guts!"

"He's still alive," said the corpsman.

Wetzel said: "What's that funny noise?"

The captain and the interne came over.

"Some piece of machinery's going," said Ball.

Fairchild looked at them.

"I've got a horrible idea," he said. "Paul—remember what we were talking about? About the android, and the suicide impulse?"

"Yes?" The interne looked puzzled.

"Well, there could be an advantage to such an android in war." Fairchild stood up, and stared down at the gaping wound.

"If he carried a bomb," he said.

"A bomb?" The captain took a hesitant step backwards.

"Russ, you don't think—"
"Well, figure it out. The android wants to die. The men who made him wanted him to die. Because they knew that wherever he was would be destroyed with him."

Dee Allingham shrieked. "Oh, my God! My God! We'll all be killed!"

"Shut up!" Wetzel left the redhead's side and came over to the other corpsman. He was sweating. "Russ—we gotta do something!"

"If it's true," said Paul, "then we can't let him die. We can't!"

"How do we stop him?" Fairchild examined their faces, but no one seemed to have an answer. Then Wetzel said:

"We can throw him out! We can ditch him!"

"But he'll just follow the ship!" said Paul.

Captain Ball licked his lips. "We can strap a rocket exhaust to him. We can shoot him out into space!"

"But how far?" asked Fairchild. "If there's a bomb in his body, it's sure to be a cobalt. Even if we shot away a thousand miles, the concussion could rip us apart. Anyway," he said, turning his gaze once more to the dying synthetic man, "I don't think we'll have the time."

"Talk! Talk!" the girl shrieked, and this time the other passengers broke their stunned silence and began to wail in fear. "Why don't you do something?" She began to sob hysterically.

"We will," said Fairchild. He spoke to Paul. "We can operate," he said.

"Operate?" Paul stared back. "But how—on what—?"

"Can you do it, Williams?" asked the captain, his voice unsteady.

"No!" Paul shook his head violently. "I wouldn't know where to begin—" He clutched Fairchild's sleeve. "Russ! You do it! You've got a steadier hand! Please—"

They all turned to Fairehild. Suddenly, the corpsman seemed calm.

"I'll try it," he said. His tone seemed confident.

They put the android on the table.

With his bare hand, Fairchild explored the artificial rib cage.

"Be careful," Paul breathed. "Be careful, Russ."

"Quiet!"

His hand touched the sharp edge of some metallic box. It felt hot, as if it contained high-voltage current. He jerked his fingers away.

"Rubber glove!" he snapped.

Paul helped him on with it. Quickly, he returned to his exploration.

"Seems like ten thousand wires," he said. "All of them ripped apart by the bullet." His hand touched something else. "But there's some kind of cable—"

"I think it's hopeless," Paul said. "We don't know the mechanics of this thing—"

"Then we have to figure them out! We have to find out what's unnecessary in its body?"

"Unnecessary?"

"Don't you see? The android has parts resembling streamlined human organs. A lot of parts have been built out. But if we find something extra, something we can't explain—something that doesn't belong in the anatomical system—"

"Then it will be the bomb!"
Fairchild nodded. "The cable must correspond to the spine, or the ganglia. It's the nerve center of the android. The box probably performs a heart function, and—wait a minute!"

"What is it?"

"This box is thick. Much too thick."

"What do you mean, Russ?"
"They wouldn't require this
much thickness for strength.
There are plenty of alloys
that would have done the job.

and be a lot more practical."
Paul shook his head. "I

don't get you, Russ."

"Don't you see? It's lead, Paul. They're sheilding something in there, not just protecting it!"

"The bomb!"

"The cable must be attached to it. The trigger must react when the nerves of the android go dead."

"Then if he dies-"

"He will die, Paul." Fairchild yanked his hand out as the hot box began to burn through the glove. "Nothing can save him now."

Paul swallowed. "Then that's it. We're done for."

"Maybe not," said Fairchild. "If I can disconnect the box before the android dies, and substitute an electrical charge for the nerve impulses—" he looked hopefully at the interne.

He began to unpack the instruments from Paul's case.

"Call the ship's power man. Get him here right away, with a portable generator."

Captain Ball's face was as white as an official paper.

When Fairchild came out of the emergency operating room, he stared at him wordlessly.

Wetzel left the sobbing, red-haired woman and came up to the corpsman.

Paul came out of the room, his face drawn with the tension of the last few minutes.

"Well?" said the captain. Fairchild smiled wanly.

"The operation was a success," he said. "But the patient died."

Paul put his hand on the sleeve of Fairchild's gray uniform.

"Thanks, doc," he said.

THE END FANTASTIC