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ASTONISHING

STORIES

FEB.



THE PET NEBULA

by ALFRED BESTER

A PROF. JAMESON NOVELETTE BY
NEIL R. JONES

J. HARVEY HAGGARD
RAY CUMMINGS



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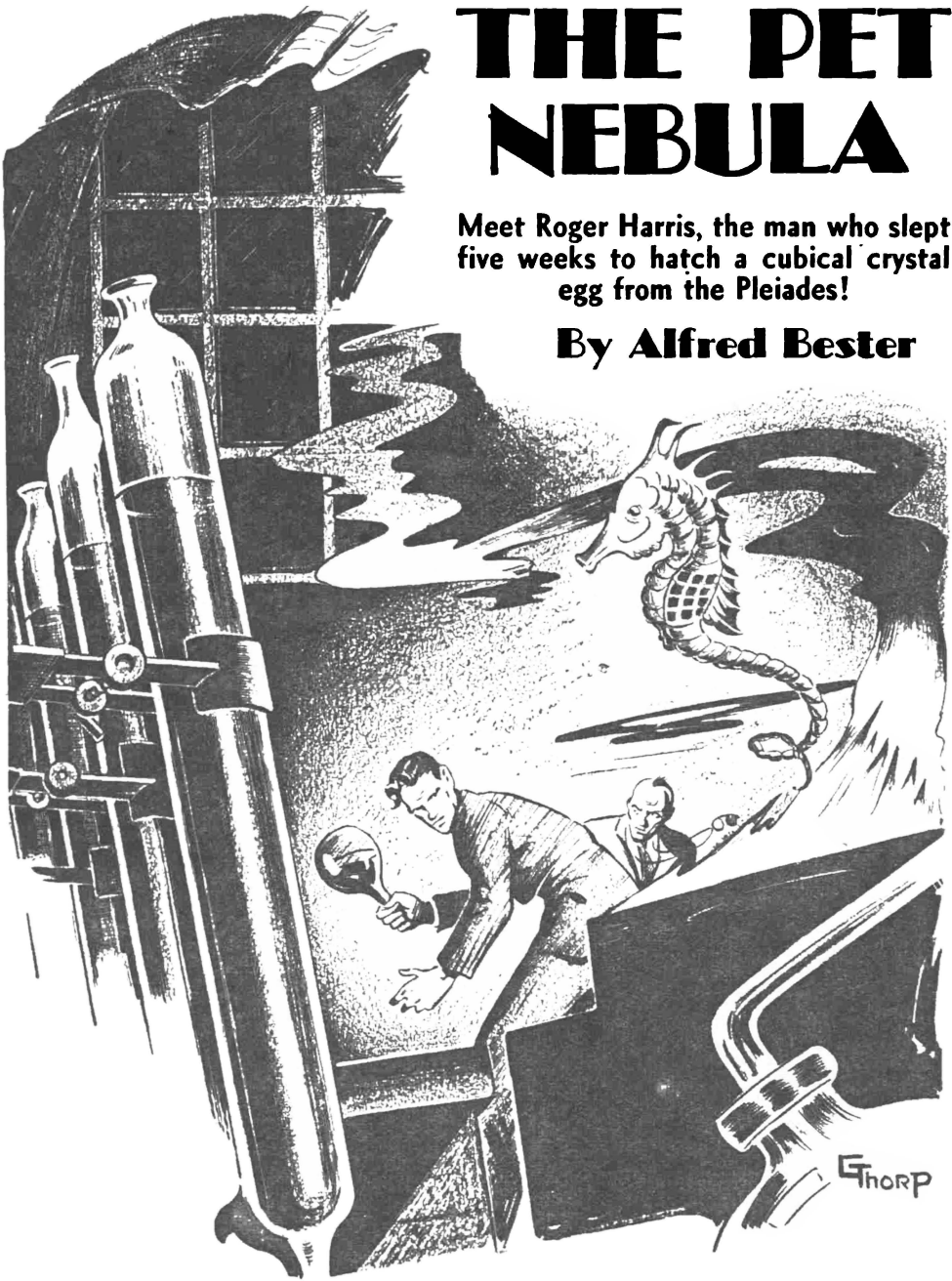
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THE PET NEBULA

Meet Roger Harris, the man who slept five weeks to hatch a cubical crystal egg from the Pleiades!

By Alfred Bester



AT LAST I said: "You ought to get out of bed for meals, at least." Harris shook his head.

"For meals," I persisted, "and to air the sheets. It isn't healthy, lying in bed for five weeks.

"Besides," I went on, "there's my repu-

tation too. I can't take a class any more. The kids all grin and whisper and I can hear them saying: 'That Prof's got a room-mate who's been sleeping for five weeks.' "

"I'm not sleeping," said Harris.

"Then what the hell are you doing? I

demand an explanation. I can stand just about so much bohemianism, and then I have the right to an explanation."

All right," said Harris, "I'm hatching."
"Hatching?"

"Yes. I'm hatching an egg.

I let out a yelp and went tearing around the room. It was covered with dust because Harris wouldn't even let in the woman to clean. Of course he's a nut anyway. Anybody who sits up all night taking pictures with a telescope is a nut. You can get paid money to do that at our University Observatory, but not Harris. He turned down their offer because he said he wanted to work by himself. Said he could do better unhindered.

"Since when have you turned chicken?" I inquired. "Why aren't you on the roof nights taking pictures? You were cuckoo then, but at least you were predictable."

"This is astronomy," said Harris, "kind of."

"Kind of?"

"Well yes. Because it's a square egg."

"Sq . . . E. !" I gasped.

"Maybe I'd better explain." He grinned. "It's like this. I was in England last year you remember? I got that fellowship to work with Breakthistle. Well, I found something there, and that's why all this year I've been working on my own hook. It's extraordinary!"

"What?"

"It has to do with Herschel. Herschel the elder. Because you and all chemists are so dumb I'll explain what everyone knows. Herschel was the first and probably the greatest of all modern astronomers. He was great for his unprecedented work on nebulae, and for the extraordinary number of perfect mirrors he made."

"So?"

"So I stole a Herschel mirror. Now listen. Herschel made thousands of mirrors, all of which were in use for decades

after he died. But a certain few he soldered down in tins and put carefully away. Everybody thought that was just to protect them, but I had a hunch, I dug around in the Breakthistle Library where most of Herschel's papers are filed, and at last I found a remarkable thesis in code. I deciphered it and it revealed some strange things about those soldered down mirrors, so I copied out the paper, stole a mirror in a tin and came home."

"And now. .?"

"Square eggs," said Harris. "Yep. Herschel didn't want those mirrors used for a certain reason especially he didn't want them used on nebulae. Not island universe nebulae, but the fiery cloud type you find in the Pleiades. He'd tried some weird curves and gotten weird results, so he wanted no more of it. I tried too. And well, look."

HE threw back the blankets for a moment. He was lying with his knees drawn up, and lodged between legs and stomach, resting on the mattress, was a tiny square crystal. It was a perfect cube and quite radiant with a fire that glittered and sparkled in a beautiful display. One thing astonished me, though; the bed looked depressed, as if it were supporting half a ton. I mentioned that to Harris at once.

"Notice it?" he said. "That's another peculiar thing. It took all my strength to get this crystal down from the roof. I think it must weigh close to two hundred pounds. It'll get heavier too, when it matures."

"Heavier! Matures! Down from the roof!"

"Yeah. I set up that Herschel mirror according to directions and then built a strong solenoid field at the focal point. Them were the instructions. I set the 'scope on the Pleiades Nebula and waited. After a couple of hours the whole instrument suddenly collapsed . . . smithereens.

Smashed the mirror, but when I hunted around in the pieces I found this. Like Herschel said. He was vague, but he mentioned 'bringing fiery stuff to earth. . . .'

"You mean recreate a nebula here on earth?"

"Could be. That mirror had some mighty peculiar curves, and his solenoid directions were like nothing I've ever seen. Anyway, he said hatch 'em like eggs, and that's what I'm doing. Only he didn't mention how long. I wish I could have got a hen, but hens won't sit on square eggs."

Then he squealed and I heard the bed begin to crackle. Harris rolled over quick and I saw him land on the floor with a smash as I dashed out to the hall for a fire extinguisher. For I'd seen something else: a thick spiral of smoke oozing up from the blankets. When I got back, Harris was on his knees rubbing his stiff frame, and a merry fire was burning in the middle of the bed. I heaved up the extinguisher to let go and Harris struck down my arm.

"Don't shoot, pard," he cried, "you might hurt 'im."

He crawled over to the bed and began yanking away the burning cloth and heaving it on the floor. I sprayed it hurriedly, with one eye peeled for developments. Then we heard 'chunk' and the sound of something landing on the floor. It seemed to me that the square egg had dropped through the mattress and was lying somewhere under the bed. It also seemed to me that the floor underfoot was buckling precariously. It hit Harris that was too.

"Heavy!" he muttered, shaking his head. "Damned heavy. And hot too. Herschel didn't say anything about that."

The floor joists began to creak and the flooring to slope as though we were having an earthquake. We got hold of the bed after everything was thoroughly quenched and pull it away to get a look

at the egg. It lay in the center of a distinct crater and a cloud of smoking, charring carpet, glowing like a white-hot piece of glass. The acrid stench was blinding.

"Two more minutes," I yelled, "and we'll be on the floor below."

I grabbed Harris by the shoulder and tried to drag him out of the room. The floor was squealing in little cries, sagging with little heaves. The walls must have been reeling too, because plaster started to tinkle down and smudge everything with white. Tendrils of flame ran along the carpet from the blazing nucleus until the floor was a fiery star.

"Let's get," I shouted.

"No . . . wait!" answered Harris. "Watch it!"

Above the crackle of flame and the grind of beams, I heard a high-pitched whine. It swelled until it was almost deafening, then took on a lovely overtone as though a thousand violins were sounding the same harmonic. The blazing crystal egg split sharply in two. The floor ceased sagging. From the broken halves of the crystal I could see a flaming figurine arise.

IT WAS, perhaps, half an inch long; and shaped very much like a sea-horse. Arched neck, protruding eyes, flaring nostrils, and a tiny body that dwindled to a tendril. Most amazing of all was the way it blazed. It seemed to be made of pure blue-white flame, and it floated in the air like a tiny, brilliant sun that hurt our eyes.

"That's it," sighed Harris. "That's my nebula."

Then curious things began to happen. Every small object in the room left its place and drifted slowly through the air toward the flaming sea-horse. And as they approached . . . a comb, a toothbrush, a bunch of keys, two half dollars and a pack of cigarettes . . . the tiny thing veered around and snapped them up, one by one,

with its tiny mouth. It blazed even more brightly.

"Nebula!" I said. "That's no nebula

It's a thing! A living, intelligent thing."

"A nebula-thing," broke in Harris. "He's of the stuff suns are made of . . . perhaps a creature that lives in suns and fiery nebulae. Why not?"

But he couldn't say any more, in fact he couldn't even answer himself. The tiny nebula had finished its gobbling and apparently noticed Harris. I won't say recognized, although that's what it looked like. Certainly after lying in its egg alongside him for five weeks it should have known him. It flickered through the air toward Harris and made an inquisitive circle over his head. I saw Harris go up on his toes and then, with a violent effort, try to bat it away with his hand. Red welts puffed up on his face and hand.

"Hot" he gasped. "Like an arc-lamp . . . a million arc-lamps. And he pulls."

I backed through the door, for I'd felt the tug myself. Harris scrambled behind me, and together we watched the nebula's serene progress around the room. Every time it came within a foot of anything, a great black scorch appeared, and the remaining small things that were lying around continued to float up, as though to a magnet, and be devoured. Each time something went down that hatch, the tiny nebula blazed brighter.

"With that heat," I hissed, "you didn't have to hatch him. He would have popped all by himself. Herschel must have been exaggerating."

"Yeah . . . old-fashioned guy," gulped Harris. He gave me a helpless look and I realized that I was probably half out of my mind with fear, talking about exaggeration with a thing like that floating around.

"Listen," I said, "this is no joke. We've got to do something before he burns down the city."

HARRIS managed to dash to his closet and then get out of the room with an armful of clothes. It was a close call, for the little nebula made an excited zoom for him. I slammed the door and peeked through a crack while Harris was dressing. Every time a fire started . . . which was about once a minute . . . I stuck the extinguisher nozzle through and sprayed it down.

At last Harris was ready.

"For what?" I wanted to know.

"You got me," he said. "Herschel may have been mixed up about that hatching business, but his general idea was right. You better give the horse a dressing down with the extinguisher. It might put him out."

We flung open the door and I let him have it full blast. The room was practically ruined anyway, so it didn't matter. But when the pump was exhausted, and most of the mist had settled down, there was the confounded thing sailing around as though it'd just had a bath. I could swear it winked malevolently.

"Listen, Harris," I said. "He's smart. Too damned smart and nasty for me. He's your baby *You* handle him."

"No," said Harris. "I'll take him across the Quad to old Gobblewurst's laboratory. Gobblewurst could handle him, I bet."

"And how," I asked, throwing a book at the advancing nebula, "are you going to get Mister Arson across the Quad?"

"Like this," said Harris. He advanced a step and brandished his arms. Then he yelled: "Hey, come on!" a couple of times and backed away. The little thing twinkled like a Cepheid and followed him. Harris and I trotted on ahead of the heat wave.

"Affectionate little beast, isn't he?" said Harris.

We managed to get it out into the Quad and Harris kept it there, batting it away from his head with an old foil he'd picked

up on the way down. I ran back into the building and put out the dozen fires that'd been started. When I got down again, Harris was running around like a madman.

"Every time I hit it," he gasped, "a hunk of foil fuses off and I feel like I've hit a dam. And now look what he's up to!"

I heard the pop and tinkle of glass and I saw that lights were going out all over the Quad. The little nebula was floating up to one lamp after another, and one by one they'd fuse and blow out. The light of that fiery sea-horse flickered and blazed through the Quad like six thousand colored searchlights. It was weird. People were shoving their heads out of windows and yelling.

"He's looking for a friend," I said. "Must be lonesome, but I'll bet he's also hunting for reinforcements. He's mean. Come on, put a leash on him and let's get over to Gobblewurst before the Insurance company gets us."

Harris ran down the Quad and waved his arms some more. After a while that is, after all the lights were out the sea-horse floated toward him, and Harris and I ran across the lawn and hammered on old Gobblewurst's door. We tried to explain everything at once, but G. took one look at the nebula and motioned us in. It sailed in too as if it owned the place.

HALF the laboratory was wrecked by the time we got our story out, but Gobblewurst didn't seem to mind. That was surprising because although G. doesn't care about living on salami and iced tea and sleeping with salamanders, he throws a fit if you so much as look at one of his thermocouples.

"Ah?" he said. "Ah! So! Indeed! Really! My-my! Tsk-tsk!"

He didn't even bat an eyelash when six platinum crucibles floated up and were chewed down with relish. I could almost hear those fiery lips smack with gusto. Gobblewurst just sat there and clucked like a pig, and at last he told Harris to maneuver his child into a certain corner. When the thing was there, Gobblewurst put his hand in front of a greenish glass screen that was just below and motioned me to look.

"Bones," I said, looking at the under side. "Looks like an X-ray."

"It is," smiled Gobblewurst happily. "Very odd creature you have there. I'm obliged to you for letting me see him. Pure Proton, he is. Atomic nuclei. That's why he's so heavy. Exerts a tremendous gravitational force for all his size. My goodness, he must weigh tons and tons and tons.

"Then why didn't he when he was in bed with Harris? And why wasn't he so hot?"

"Well," explained Gobblewurst, "he

was in embryo then. So naturally he wouldn't start getting heavy until the life-process began. Now that he's alive he'll just grow heavier and hotter. You see he feeds on atoms in any form. Splits off the electrons and digests the nuclei or protons into his body. The electrons are egested and they're what make him glow and cast X-ray shadows. Just alpha, beta and gamma radiations. . . ."

"Wait a minute!" I yelped. "What was that about growing?"

"He'll grow," repeated Gobblewurst irritably. "Grow and grow and grow. Like a hot sun. The sun's pure proton too, you know."

"But what happens to us? To the earth?"

"We'll be destroyed, no doubt . . . but that's not important just now."

Now I'm a chemist, and I pride myself that I'm as objective as any man on the faculty. I wouldn't care if the earth turned inside-out and Boogie-Woogied, only I'd already paid seventy dollars to have my doctorate thesis typed and I hated to see the money go to waste. I shoved Gobblewurst back and ran for his shelves. I grabbed a beaker of Nitric and let go for the sea-horse . . . just as a trial toss. The acid caught him full. He blinked and wiggled, and that was all.

I went down the length of the shelves and tried every corrosive I could think of off-hand . . . and I could think of plenty . . . but no soap. Gobblewurst and Harris danced around and tried to hold me back, but we were all too busy trying to dodge the vicious attacks of the nebula to do much with each other.

After an hour the lab looked as though it'd been put through a mangle saturated with aqua fortis.

FINALLY they hit me in the head with a five litre Erlemeyer and I went down in a haze of pyrex. When I came to, the first thing I saw was the nebula floating

around looking bigger and hungrier than ever. Worse still, he was budding on the side like a hydra. I wondered how long it would be before there was an army. Then I realized old Gobblewurst was howling in my ear.

"Listen," he said. "There isn't anything that can stop it. I tell you it lives on atoms, any kind of atoms . . . it *loves* them like a double Kiss-Me frappe with tutti-frutti."

I lurched to my feet and gave him a cock-eyed look.

"Tutti-frutti to you, Gobblewurst," I gasped. I staggered around the demolished lab for a couple of minutes until my head cleared. Harris, I saw, was having real trouble. The little nebula was feeling his strength now, and wasn't playing games any more. He was systematically devouring everything that came close. He was getting bigger and more dangerous by the minute, and the bud on his side was becoming increasingly distinct. I knew we'd never be able to handle two . . . But how to handle even one?

"Radium burns!" called Gobblewurst. "We'll have to get out. Those radiations will kill us."

"Right!" I said, "and that's the answer. . . ."

I shrieked my plans while we ducked around the sides of the lab, and at last Gobblewurst and Harris got the idea. We left Harris on guard and G. and I hot-footed it down to the roentgenology department. It took us half an hour to get the equipment together and convince the University powerhouse we weren't kidding. Then we tore back to the Quad.

Harris was practically out on his feet, his face and clothes seared with savage burns. The nebula was almost two inches long, and dragging real heavy stuff up to him. The stone walls were cracked and blistered, things were burning all over, and Harris was actually drifting up on his toes when we got to him and carried

him outside. Then we laid the wires to the main cables and prayed the powerhouse had sent us the current. We connected the Coolidge tubes . . . a dozen of them . . . set up the tubes in a ring around the room, weighted them with lead scraps so they wouldn't float, and switched on the power. It was there.

The lab was instantly drenched with a perfect crossfire of radiation. The nebula rocked in the center of the room, flared angrily and swept forward toward a tube. I held my breath and I heard Gobblewurst swear. If the thing got close enough to smash a Coolidge it would have a chink through which to escape, and then we'd really be finished . . . along with everything else.

It struggled forward with a violent effort, and to my dismay I saw that the bud at its side was wriggling, fully formed, in an effort to break loose. It inched up while we waited tensely. I heard the power screaming in the tubes . . . and then the nebula sagged under the barrage. The flaming color drained away . . . and as the deadly discharges pounded, it began to blow up. Swell, I mean. It puffed like a sponge in water, and we ran around the lab like nuts, yanking the Coolidges back so that they still covered the nebula.

Only it wasn't a nebula any more.

THE bottom edge hit the floor and went through like a knife through butter. The concrete gave and everything in the lab rocked and shuddered. The tubes clattered and crashed to the ground while the power cables spluttered and lashed out. Half the ceiling thundered down as the walls burst, and I saw the night sky through the rent roof. Gobblewurst darted forward to redirect the remaining tubes, and I caught his arm.

"Never mind," I shouted, "there he goes!"

The great mass of dulled matter had swelled until it pressed against the remaining lab walls. It spread them back, and as we all ran stumbling backwards, everything crushed downward and slid rumbling into the bowels of the earth. Then there was no more heat, no more radiation . . . nothing but a giant bottomless crater yawning where Gobblewurst's lab had been. Harris tottered to a halt, turned and stared.

"What happened?" he asked. As if he hadn't seen for himself!

"Dead," I sighed. "We've gone and killed your little playmate, thank God!"

He wanted to know how.

"Simple," spoke up Gobblewurst as though he'd planned the whole thing. "The nebula was pure proton. We submitted him to a barrage of Coolidge tube emanations, which are pure electrons. His body sopped up the free electrons, each proton acquired enough to reform it into an atom again. The heat and radiation were transformed into the energy of electronic orbits; he swelled until he was a mass of atoms once more, and sank. That's all."

"Huh?" said Harris.

"Look, stupid," I said. "Your pal ate protons and the waste product of his metabolism was electrons. We surrounded him with nothing but free electrons so he had nothing to ingest but his own waste. Get it? He died from auto-intoxication. They call it constipation in the ads. . . ."

"No, no," cried Gobblewurst. "The free electrons were attracted by the protons and set up into orbits. Atoms were reformed and . . ."

But Harris and I were already headed home across the Quad.

"Well," croaked Harris. "It just goes to show you. Crime doesn't pay."

"Never mind," I said. "At least it got you out of bed."