

**All
Stories
New**

**THE ORIGINAL
SCIENCE
FICTION**

STORIES

Volume 10

MAY, 1959

Number 2

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SCIENCE FICTION STORIES, May, 1959, published 10 times a year (monthly, except for April and June) by COLUMBIA PUBLICATIONS, INC., 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. Editorial and executive offices at 241 Church Street, New York 13, New York. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Holyoke, Mass., under the act of March 3, 1879. 35c per copy; yearly subscriptions \$3.00. Printed in the U. S. A.

weapon master

by A. L. Caramine

The colonists wanted the shiny new weapons, and it looked like a good deal, trading in all their old ones as a down payment ...

THE LITTLE ship screamed down from the sky and passed rapidly over the bright pastel roofs of the village. It banked sharply, and retraced its route, heading for the small spaceport two miles away. With the ease of long experience, the pilot abruptly stood his ship on its tail and set it down in the center of the black blossom scoured clean by its own fire.

The ship seemed to quiver like a tuning fork as it struck ground; certainly the scars and deep pocks that nearly obliterated its original finish danced briefly in the eyes of the port watch. The gangling teen-ager stuck with the detested chore hurried from his cubbyhole office to meet the new arrival; visitors were few and far between on outlying worlds such as this. Outside of the bi-monthly trade ship, there hadn't been more than three strangers in the equal number of Earth-years the colony had been established.

The lock eased open with that infuriating slowness of being atmosphere-bound. Outward pressure being equal with inward, the tiny worm-driven

motor had to do the job all by itself. The boy waited impatiently, scuffing his feet on the discolored tarmac, but finally it was open enough to permit the appearance of a head.

And a most improbable head at that. Large saucer ears stuck straight out from a head that apparently been run through a very fine meat chopper and repaired by being drawn through a cold rolling mill. As if that weren't enough to permanently ruin any vestiges of beauty, buck teeth seemed to stick almost straight out. The whole mess was crowned by a very few straggly colorless strands, half-heartedly laid across his scalp.

The boy gulped, feeling his adam's apple surge up and down against the collar of his t-shirt. "Huh... Hi, Mister," he said, making an effort to be cheerful.

"Howdy, boy," grinned back the apparition. "Hear you're plannin' to have yourselves a little war hereabouts."

THE MAYOR inwardly shuddered everytime he looked at the visitor's face. The rest of his body seemed fairly

normal, but then he had not revealed it, so the Mayor didn't want to take any chances of putting his foot into his mouth. A wise man for such a small colony.

"Just what is your business with us, Mr. Jackman?" he asked, offering a bowl of the citrus fruit that was the main support of the colony. It was declined with a wave.

"Got something to sell you, Mr. Mayor," the visitor said, sipping at the virulent native wine. He smacked his lips in appreciation, and held his glass out for a refill. The Mayor performed the amenities of hospitality.

"What?"

"Hear you're havin' a little trouble with your next door neighbors," he said by way of reply. His pale eyes peered myopically towards the Mayor. "Kinda thought I might be able to help some."

"It's true that there has been trouble," admitted the Mayor, cautiously. "They've been poaching on our contracts, and so far we haven't been able to make them stop."

"Dealin's like that make a man mighty mad," said Jack-

man. "Sometimes can even make him shootin' mad."

"Perhaps. But you haven't answered my question; what are you selling?"

"Weapons, Mr. Mayor." He held out his glass again. The potent alcohol seemed to have little effect on his system, as he was drinking it almost like water. Already, he had consumed over three times as much as the Mayor, and the latter was very definitely beginning to feel the effects.

"**I** GOT ME the finest line of personnel weapons and field artillery in this entire section of the galaxy," continued Jackman. "My family's been in the business hundreds of years—my ten-times Great Grandad was a gunsmith back on Old America, in the days of the westward expansion. Fight any kinda war with my stuff, big or little."

"You can't be carrying anything like that in that little ship," said the Mayor, incredulously.

"Got samples of the more portable stuff," he answered. "You decide you want to buy, I'll have two warehouse ships

here in three days at the outside. Got 'em cruisin' this sector right now, waitin' my call."

"I see." The Mayor leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands on his over-obvious paunch, his eyebrows raising as his forehead furrowed with concentration. Several moments of silence followed, during which Jackman refilled his glass twice. At last the Mayor spoke again.

"Our world of Newcastle is not overly rich, Mr. Jackman," he said. "I think I can safely say that the Council would most definitely be interested in purchasing some of your weapons. But enough to equip an army. . . ?" He shook his head. "I don't know where the money would come from."

"How many people you got here, Mr. Mayor?" asked Jackman. "Mebbe twenty, thirty thousand?"

"Slightly over twenty-seven thousand at the annual census," he replied. "Why?"

"Then you must have something like six, eight thousand producing adult males, right?"

"Something like that; I don't recall the exact figures. Just what are you getting at, Mr.

Jackman?" He leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table, steeping his fingers.

"**W**ORLDS like this, based on a farm economy, usually have seventy or eighty percent of the producing population employed in the basic industry—in your case, as farmers. Now farmers, the galaxy over, are a hard-workin' breed of men. When they relax, they usually do it in the environment they know best, namely outdoors. The two most popular relaxations are fishin' and huntin'. Do you follow me?"

"I'm not sure," said the Mayor, slowly. "If you mean that most of our men already have weapons, I suppose you're right. I have a Marlin .004 needle rifle myself. But we can't wage war with hunting weapons! We need cannon, anti-personnel atomics and the like. Besides, Jordan's Delight—the colony we are fighting—is just as well armed as we, so we're more or less at a stalemate."

"That's where I come in. I'll sell you the new stuff." He leaned back and grinned, his teeth looking ridiculously like an open trapdoor.

"But I've already said we don't have enough money..."

"Hell's bells, man, ain't you got any sense?" The Mayor sniffed audibly, but Jackman ignored him. "Trade your small stuff in!"

"Trade...?"

"Sure. They'll easy cover the down payment on the new stuff; and for the rest, I'll accept your contract for ten percent of your credits with whichever of the banks you use, to run for a period of years sufficient to pay off the remaining cost. What better deal could you get?"

"I... I don't know. I'll have to call a special session of the Council."

"Fine!" Jackman stood up and stretched. "You want demonstrations, come on out to the spaceport in the mornin'." He held out his hand. "I think we're gonna be able to do business, Mr. Mayor."

THE LAST load of traded-in weapons swung up in the cargo hoist and disappeared into the gaping maw of the cargo ship. A moment later, the giant loading doors swung shut,

and towering giant shivered with the pre-take-off check.

Jackman held out his hand to the Mayor and the half a dozen members of the ruling council in turn, shaking each one vigorously. He grinned widely, and his face suddenly didn't seem so repulsive anymore.

"Thank you, Mr. Jackman," said the Mayor. "More than we can ever say, we thank you. If it hadn't been for you, those criminals on Jordan's Delight might have driven us to the verge of bankruptcy."

"Well, thanks yourself, Mr. Mayor," he said. "I owe you more than you owe me, even if those figures on my contract don't make you think so at the present." He patted his breast pocket, from which the gleam of official papers shyly peeped. "After all, I'm a business man, and I can't exist without people like you for customers."

AT THE FAR end of the tarmac, a thousand yards away, a man used his crowbar to open one of the long stacks of cases. Reverently, he lifted out one of the gleaming atomic rifles. Carefully, he inserted an

energy source in the weapon's magazine, being doubly sure that it was locked in place. He hefted it for a moment, marvelling at the perfection of his balance. Then, with the careful ease of an accomplished hunter, he lifted the butt to his shoulder and sighted towards a distant tree.

"Are you sure you can't stay over a few more days?" asked one of the council members. "The whole colony's outdone itself on the festival that's starting today—Lord knows, it's the first time we've had a reason for one since we landed here. We'd be more than honored if you'd only agree to be the guest of honor."

"Hate to miss the affair," said Jackman, shaking his head reluctantly. "Always did think that small-town parties were more fun than anything. But I'm afraid I gotta get back to the office and check on things there. Left my wife's brother in charge, against my better judgment, and I'm gettin' to think I've been away too long as it is. Might not have a business to go back to!" He offered his hand around again.

The hunter held his aim on

the gnarled trunk of the tree for a long moment, making sure that there could be no possibility of his missing. Slowly, his finger pressed on the trigger, forcing it back to contact.

"Maybe someday I'll get back here on my next swing through this sector," said Jackman, seeing the crestfallen looks of the men before him. "You've got a real pretty planet here. But I gotta go." He turned and climbed into his ship. The lock door began to close with its usual slowness, and he waved at the group just as the hunter finally closed his contact.

The tree stayed unharmed.

Dumbfounded, he looked the weapon over, making sure the safety was off and the power connected. He squeezed the trigger several more times before admitting that he held a dud. Then he turned and ran towards the distant ships, shouting at the top of his voice. "We've been gyped!"

The Mayor and the Council moved outside the blackened area of tarmac, and flame immediately shot from the tubes. In harmony, the cargo ship began firing also, and the two

ships slowly rose on their columns of destruction.

The hunter ran up as they disappeared into the heavens.

"**Q**UIET, YOU!" Jackman said to his grumbling stomach. He took another handful of soda pills, and it momentarily subsided, although the grumbling was still there under the blanketing cover of fizz.

"Lord, that swill was awful," he said, remembering with distaste the taste of the wine. "I hope that this next world has something better in the way of liquid refreshments." He watched Jordan's Delight swimming up in his screen.

"Wonder what the Mayor's gonna do when his constituents ask him how come he let himself be took in by a pacifist?" He chuckled at the thought.

The little ship screamed down from the sky and passed rapidly over the garish artificial-thatched roofs currently popular with the inhabitants of Jordan's Delight. It banked sharply, and retraced its route, heading for the small spaceport a few miles away from the capital village. With the ease of

long experience, the pilot abruptly stood his ship on its tail and set it down in the center of the black blossom scoured on the tarmac by its own fire.

The gangling teen-ager holding port-watch dashed from his cubbyhole office to meet the new arrival.

