

IDIOT'S MATE

By ROBERT TAYLOR

Mankind will take his inhumanity to man into space, there can be no doubt about that. What this may mean to one man is told here in a powerful first story by a new author.

RODGERS lost his last Bishop as they came together over the ridge and down into the floor of the crater, urged on by desperation. A lone Black Pawn, slunk deep into White territory and hidden, stood up from behind a rock and fired.

Rodgers felt the rumble of the explosion through his feet, and, unthinking, jetteted a hundred feet into the sky to come flaming down on top of the Pawn, firing burst after burst from the angry snout of the weapon before the poor fellow had a chance to readjust his aim. Dust spouted angrily from the ground and flame belched out as oxygen spilled from the torn suit.

He stood over the ruined ground, the dark waters of anger, rage, and fear flowing like fire through his blood. His eyes blazed dark, and he could see himself standing silver and tall in the silent Lunar night, breathing heavily under the dark alien sky, the suit sucking his skin dry. Burning fires laced the sky with

patterns, but they weren't the patterns that he had known since early in childhood when he had first stood under the simple stars that blazed in the cold mountain air. These stars frowned down upon him, and his eyes tried to hide from their terrible glare.

He reached out a hand to steady himself against a rock. The cold wind of vacuum threatened to bowl him over.

Flicking up to the visi-scanner, his eyes were heavy with tears, tears that had been repressed for twenty years, tears that now bubbled up from the dark well of his soul. But they did not overflow and run down his cheeks in a glistening flood. They built up behind his eyes and threatened to overflow.

Rodgers stood alone on a lifeless plain of silver dust and empty starlight, while his eyes burned with seeing too much and his brain shivered with knowing too much and his hands ached with doing too

much. Dust, that had never known the strong blowing of October winds or the soft warmth of a September morning, but only the blazing heat and the burning cold of interplanetary nights and days, lay all about him. He stood on a plain within crater walls with morning racing close behind him, close and closer with every breath drawn, with every blink of the eye. Morning two days off and coming always closer, striding like a giant with golden legs. Inevitable as death.

He saw his forces positioned on the visi-scanner in gleaming lights and wept. And he did not know whether he wept for them or for himself. His weeping had been far done, long gone, forgotten with childhood. Even in prison he had not let the tears flow. But now a strange dew formed on his cheeks, to be sucked up by the suit as soon as it formed.

You mustn't cry now, his mother said. You mustn't cry now ever again. You're a man now, and men don't cry.

Yes, Mother, he said. I will never cry again.

And the remembrance of the discarded silver shells lying cold upon the naked dust struck him hard in the chest.

Rodgers felt his numbed eyes flowing silently over the glowing figures on the visi-scanner, flowing and flowing because they had nothing else to do.

A Knight, one Rook, one Pawn.

And himself.

King.

Standing silent, he felt his heart throbbing deep within him, pulsing blood through his body, ticking softly in his wrists and in his throat.

His whole body was a quivering mass that followed the throbbing and the pulsing of his heart. Why, he was almost swept away with each throb, each pulse. His legs and arms ached with a deep heaviness. He closed his eyes and felt the shores of reality, of sanity, slowly pulsed away by the pulsing of his heart.

"Rook," he whispered into the microphone, eyes pressed tightly closed against the lurking brilliance of the long, cold, interplanetary night. Colors flowed and swayed in the burning darkness behind his eyelids, burned and swayed like the waving treetops in a blowing wind.

"Rook!"

His eyes were gummed shut by drying tears, but still they opened swiftly when he felt the slight change in the visi-scanner. It burned brightly down at him.

His last Knight was gone. He could almost hear the death-scream and the shrill gasp of the lunar vacuum reaching deep into a human soul. His hands clenched tightly on the three feet of black death that he carried in them.

"Rook!" So loud, his world spun about him.

Pulling deep within himself, he withdrew from the hammering reality about him. He was gone, a nothing. Rivers of fatigue flooded over him. Only the suit, the gleaming silver suit, was left now to move and think and feel and taste and hear and smell and see. And kill. The suit absorbed him, and he merely watched while all the action flowed on around him.

From far away, a voice: "This is Rook, King."

Another voice that sounded

remarkably like his own rang out into the ether: "What's the situation there?"

"Situation? There is none. They're all gone, searching after you."

"What do they have?" He fumbled at anything for hope, for time.

"We've killed one Bishop, five Pawns—"

"Six Pawns now. We lost our last Bishop."

"One Bishop, six Pawns, one Knight."

Oh God! "That's all?"

"All."

"Come help me." It was a plea.

"We're coming. Don't worry. Been after them for half an hour."

I wonder if it's true, thought Rodgers, that at the moment of death a hypnotic command overflows the mind with purest pleasure.

The black gun pressed heavily on his hands. He thought of the black legions that were coming. Can't stay here, he felt his lips saying. Gotta move.

A mechanism deep within the suit functioned. Chemicals began surging through his blood. His mind cleared as if pure water were running over it. He stood tall and cold in his own body again. Lost muscles began to awaken to their tasks. He began running the best he could under the low strength of the Lunar gravity.

With the chemicals coloring his dark blood even darker, he was a virtual superman now.

But so were his pursuers.

Rodgers turned and fled towards the blazing Earth that had long lain unnoticed in the sky. She glowed brilliantly now, a gleaming eye in

the black sky, watching him in more ways than one.

All right, he thought, we'll give them a chase a last farewell. We'll run beneath the Earth all shining bright. We'll show them that we can still die like men. We'll give them a dance, a dance by earthlight.

Give them hell, said his father. Knock them and rock them and shake them 'til they don't know what to think. Always do the unexpected, and don't let them catch you being stupid. Doesn't matter if you win or die, but if you win, win hard, and if you die, be expensive.

Yes old man, he cried silently to the still winds of Luna.

Rodgers kicked out a burst from his rockets. He was lifted by a genie and carried a hundred yards by an invisible hand. Another burst landed him like a dust mote.

The thing to do now, he thought, is to make distance, get far away from this place where two dead beetles clutter the ocean shore. Get somewhere far away and hide, and wait, and get them all, one by one, when they come to seek you out.

He ran and ran, and then rocketed. He ran some more and rocketed again. The dark anger aching in his blood, and up and down, and run, run.

My men will never get them in time. Doomed, he thought. Doomed and damned and doomed and double damned.

He fights best who knows he is doomed, said a voice somewhere deep in the misty memories of his mind in a gentle tone that sounded like October rain.

Mountains and craters and seas

and plains floated all about him, and the great sky crushed heavily upon his shoulders.

Caught in flight, time fled quickly past him, leaving his body untouched. Each heartbeat took a thousand years, each breath an aeon. Once he saw his own face reflected off the faceplate for a millenium by a freak of starlight. Wild eyes glared up at him from darkness, bones sticking out from under the skin, new metal teeth gleaming brightly. Scar tissue burned pale, silver beads stood frozen on his face.

*So low in cheek and high in bone,-
Johnny I hardly knew you . . .*" Sang the ancient song deep within his mind, echoing out of the black forgotten chambers that lay oh so deep down within his mind.

Somewhere deep within the suit, a mechanism stopped functioning. Another took its place. His legs were cut away from him. In midstride he felt his body sucked away to lie suspended deep in the suit while he still went on and on.

He tried to move the lost body.

He fell face downward and lay gleaming on the desert sand. His weapon slipped from his grasp, bounced and lay still just before him.

Get up, said his mind, weakening. Fatigue began to pour down upon him in a massive flood his legs refused to move.

Wait a little while, said a deeper part of his mind. It's just clearing your blood for you. You can't go on forever with just chemicals. They build up and poison you.

His fevered brain pounded in his head.

"What did I do to deserve this?" he whispered to his fates.

"High Treason, Captain. That is what you committed."

Rodgers raised his eyes. The black judge stood before him just as he had been during the trial, his black robes unruffled by wind, his black hair burning with hate, and his dark eyes blazing as one who had sold himself to the Fiend. He stood just in front of Rodgers. If he could only move his arm just a little . . .

"High treason against the government of Terra."

"I did no treason!"

"Come, Captain. You allowed five enemy ships to pass your position, with your permission. And when your commanding officer tried to blast them, you attacked him."

"They weren't enemy ships. Refugees from the asteroids. Women and children. I inspected every ship myself. He was going to murder them all."

"Come, come, Captain."

"The Jovian Moons are so far from us. We don't need them."

"Enough. You were lucky to be sent to Devil's Rock and not to Gallows Hill."

Rodgers looked up at the black judge's eyes. They gleamed wickedly.

"May God have mercy on your soul, Captain."

Bunching all his muscles, Rodgers made a sudden lunge for the black judge who smelled of sulfur. He was a shaft of silver lightning and moondust kicked high into the not-air. He closed about a darkness. His fingers ached heavily on the gun and he was firing madly. Rock chipped

into a flaked and powdered oblivion as the explosive shells ate into it.

Rodgers knelt in the center of a spray of rock dust, cold reality biting at him again. The plain was empty.

No! he screamed to the silent seas. You've got to control your mind. If you start hallucinating, you're lost.

He stood tall. Think. You've got to form a plan. It's been done before. One man can beat six if he's smart enough.

If they would just give me time to think!

Jogging along, part of his mind thought about the Chess Tournament. There weren't many rules. It was merely controlled slaughter for the enjoyment of the blood hungry masses back on Earth. Every move was watched by cameras flown over in rockets, magnifying eyes peering hungrily. No real rules, not really. Just a certain form that was followed. You could do anything you wanted, even hide.

Yes, hide, let them seek you out, and then kill them.

Only, every twenty-four hours, he thought (almost laughing), each suit emitted a five minute radar wail, and then everybody knew where everyone else was. How deliciously ironic. The game was always rigged, and the people of Earth wanted action.

Six hours, he thought. I've got six hours before the signal. Then I'll run and hide, wait, run and hide again. I'll beat them yet. Keep one step ahead of them.

There had never been any consideration that Rodgers would be anything *but* a King. Only the most notorious criminals were made

Kings. They had more to fight for, they always put up a better show. And their anguish was a beautiful thing to behold. They would never do as mere Pieces or Queens. No, they must suffer to be rewarded, and suffer doubly, for they were responsible for fifteen other lives, and they depended on those lives for their own. It was especially terrible when you were gentle.

But they were rewarded. And that was why he had even considered becoming a King.

He remembered the day that he had agreed. The warden had called him to his office, and he had been escorted there by armed guards. He had pushed open the door and stepped in, fear eating at him . . .

He eased himself into the chair. The warden looked at him, smiling.

"Hello, Rodger. I hope they haven't been treating you too badly."

Rodgers ran his tongue around, up and down, over his broken teeth. His hand ran softly over his scarred and twisted face. A faint mist of pain hung over everything, but he had grown used to the pain and it was forgotten. But not the smiles on the faces of the guards as they crept up around him and struck with their dark truncheons. That was blazed into his mind.

"Ah yes, Rodgers. Yes, your record is admirable."

The warden spun around in his chair.

"How would you like to get out of here Rodgers? Of course you would, of course. You aren't an evil person by nature, you just made a mistake at such a time that you were forced

to pay for it. This place bothers you, so of course you want to get out. And you can."

His hand moved against some papers on his desk. "The Chess Tournament, Rodgers. You can volunteer. The winners are always pardoned. Yes? Good. Here, this paper. Sign right here."

The warden smiled, and suddenly his smile changed into that of the black judge.

Rodgers screamed into his microphone.

Rock exploded behind him, chips flashing past him. He fell and rolled in the dust and rock. Dizzy, he lifted his gun and fired at the first glint of silver that he saw.

The Black Knight lifted off, the black of his horse helmet shining strangely by earthlight. He came roaring down on top of Rodgers, firing madly, insanely.

Dust and rock shot up all around Rodgers. His left hand suddenly blazed with pain, and the thin hiss of escaping air tore at his ears, but he paid it no heed. Holding the gun tight in his right hand, he got off three quick shots, then jettisoned away at a steep angle.

The ground heaved, and the rocks all about reflected the sudden glow back to Rodgers.

His left arm was all pain now. A rock thrown by an explosion had taken the hand neatly off at the wrist. Grunting, he tightened the wrist joint until the suit was sealed again, then he capped the mangled limb with a device thoughtfully provided by the manufacturer.

He seemed to be standing outside himself.

No. loss, he thought. If I get through this alive, I don't need it, and if I—

The stars swung in front of him, and he knew that he had fallen down.

The blood rushed through his body, throbbing, throbbing. His whole left side burned with pain. He felt three sharp gasps slip through his lips. A sickly dampness flowed on his forehead.

Rodgers searched the pimpled sky. Were there any cameras on him now? Undoubtedly. He could almost see the flash of rockets as a flight of cameras went over. The kill-lust was in the air now, they were closing in on him. On Earth, they were waiting for him to do something clever, to prolong the action as long as possible, and then to die.

He show them something.

Deep within the suit, a mechanism became aware of what had happened. Chemicals slipped quietly into his blood. The pain ebbed away. A warmth settled about his stump and the red flow stopped. The muscles of the suit were his muscles. The suit was his only strength.

The suit lifted him up, made him scan the horizon. Nothing yet, but they would be coming soon. There was no possibility that the Knight had failed to report Rodgers' position and solitude.

Eyes shifting helplessly to the visi-scanner, he wasn't surprised to find it blank. Everything was gone now. His only hope lay in himself.

Run and hide, run and hide.

A slope there, to his right, rising suddenly from the lunar surface. "Over the mountain," he said to the suit.

He felt amazement as his limbs swing smoothly within the suit, as he had thought they could never do again; and then he was rocketing up, once, twice, three times, again and again, and over the top of the rising slope. He was about to rocket again when his foot suddenly failed to find a place to stand.

He fell into darkness.

Rodgers stood outside the body, looking down on it. It lay sprawled across the moon surface, one hand stretched out, fingers clutching uselessly at a gun that had slipped from them and fallen inches away.

Pitiful driven thing, he thought.

He became aware of someone standing near him. A man, tall, his hair dark but ready to burst into greyness, eyes grey but with a power lurking behind them.

"Hello, Father."

"Hello, Son. Looks like they've about run you to ground." The voice sounded like soft October rain.

"Not yet. I can still become master of the situation."

"You're outnumbered, you know. How many does Black have? six? seven?"

"I am no longer such that I can't control my environment. I control my fate. Once at Thermopylae, Father, three hundred Greeks held off a host of Persians. If I am to die, I will die fighting."

His father smiled, gesturing. "Up there, they're thirsting for your

blood. Don't give it to them; make them take it away from you."

"Once at Thermopylae, Father."

"The Greeks were eventually defeated."

"Only through treachery."

"You'd better get up now, Son."

"I will kill a Queen for you, Father."

Rodgers crouched behind the rock, watching the Pawn as the tiny figure slinked about the plain.

You won't find me there, little man, his lips whispered softly. Look up here.

He was filled with a terrible urgency. Time was hurried now and he knew that the chase was coming his way. The pace was accelerating, and somehow he couldn't help feeling that it all might be over in seconds.

He crouched, listening to the humming sound that his suit made.

The figure below moved closer, started up the hill.

Rodgers held his breath sharply, as if the Pawn below him could hear the breath puffing in his lungs.

Closer yet.

Now!

Rodgers reached out and grabbed. His left arm was almost numb, but he could still use it to pull the man hard against him. He stood and slammed the Pawn against the rock, slammed him down again. Then he rammed his gun against the chest of the suit and fired twice.

The explosion twisted the gun from his hand as fire leaped out of the hole torn in the Black Pawn.

A look of most beautiful ecstasy

was blazed forever on the Pawn's face.

Rodgers picked up the Pawn's weapon. His own had been ruined by the explosion. This one didn't have as much range as his own, it barely spat the shells out, but it would have to do.

He stood tall, breathing heavily. His left arm was completely numb now, but he could probably use it if he had to. Silently he blessed the suit that fed chemicals mother-like into his blood.

Oh God, what now? Slowly his agonized mind formulated a plan, a childish plan it seemed, an almost futile plan, one that had but little chance of success.

But he would have to take the chance. He was a falling man, clutching at spiderwebs, and he would have to chance anything that might work in his favor.

Carefully, he hunched the dead Pawn up about the rock, holding him up with another rock, in a mock attempt at concealment. From a distance, they wouldn't notice the rounded crest of a Pawn.

Now, to run fast and far? or wait and see what victims this trap collects?

The decision was made for him.

The rock shattered as a powerful shell from a powerful gun ate into it. Rodgers was thrown back, badly shaken. He snatched up his weapon and looked at his assailant, fear quaking his heart.

The Queen stood at the bottom of the hill.

Ice water flowed over him. Then his cover was gone as the shattered

rock finally crumbled away and began to slip downhill in small pieces. The dead Pawn slid down a few feet and stopped. Rodgers pointed the gun with his right hand and fired, the kick jolting him badly, but the Queen was out of range.

The Queen was coming up the hill now, his dark eyes boring straight at Rodgers.

Rodgers fired again, again.

A shell exploded in front of him.
No use running now.

The Queen was at the extreme range of good control. He took a step and Rodgers aimed for the foot in desperation.

The shell exploded beneath the foot as it was coming down. The Queen was thrown off balance and started falling forward. He flung his shoulders back, overbalanced, and fell backwards, dropping his gun.

Rodgers leaped, kicking the gun away. He grabbed the Queen as he was trying to get up. They grappled, striking at each other. Struggling, they rolled downhill. Rodgers felt his own gun torn from his grasp and flung away.

Time had no meaning now. All he knew was that this instant was forever and the moment of his death was striding towards him rapidly.

The Queen flung Rodgers off, and savagely he brought the capped end of his left arm down against the face-plate that gleamed darkly below the eagle-head of the Queen. It bounded off, leaving just a tiny crack in the tough material. Not good enough to release the trapped air.

The Queen struck back and Rodgers went down. Then the great

silver figure leaped up and started running for its gun.

Rodgers did the only thing that could possibly save him. He stood and kicked on his rockets, coming down, down, down on the Queen without stopping his fall.

There was a puff of air, and pain tore through his body.

Stupid, stupid. Your legs are shattered.

He lay on his back, staring up at the starry sky. God of my fathers, are you there?

The pain, the terrible pain.

Suit, where are you when I need you?

But the mechanism would never function again. It was shattered beyond repair.

There was someone standing near him.

"I'm cold, Father. It's all so still. I can feel myself."

He blazed out his soul on the lifeless moon.

A flight of cameras overhead, arcing down close, crashing as they transmitted their pictures.

Someone was coming close now, closer.

Rodgers arched his head back and found Earth glowing sweetly in the sky. He smiled. Then he remembered the dark smile of the black judge and the smiles of the guards and the joyful smile of the laughing warden. And he saw the smiles on the faces of the people of Earth as they leaned forward to see his body ripped apart. He saw his torn suit spill its shivering contents onto the dead moon.

Then he saw himself blasting the Pawn and the Knight, and again the Pawn, and hurtling down upon the Queen. How many had he killed with his own hands?

"Am I as bad as they are, Father?"
A shadow blotted out the sky.

"I don't hurt any more, Father."

Something pressed hard against his chest. "Mate," said a voice.

"Father, I killed a Queen for you!"
The stars blazed cold.

The End

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