

# A PAWN FOR

by

*Harry Jenkins, Jr.*

Milton reached uncertainly for the pawn, while Blake grinned



Hadden

**A** BIG metal hand slowly relaxed its grip on the playing piece and Jon Blake smiled across the table.

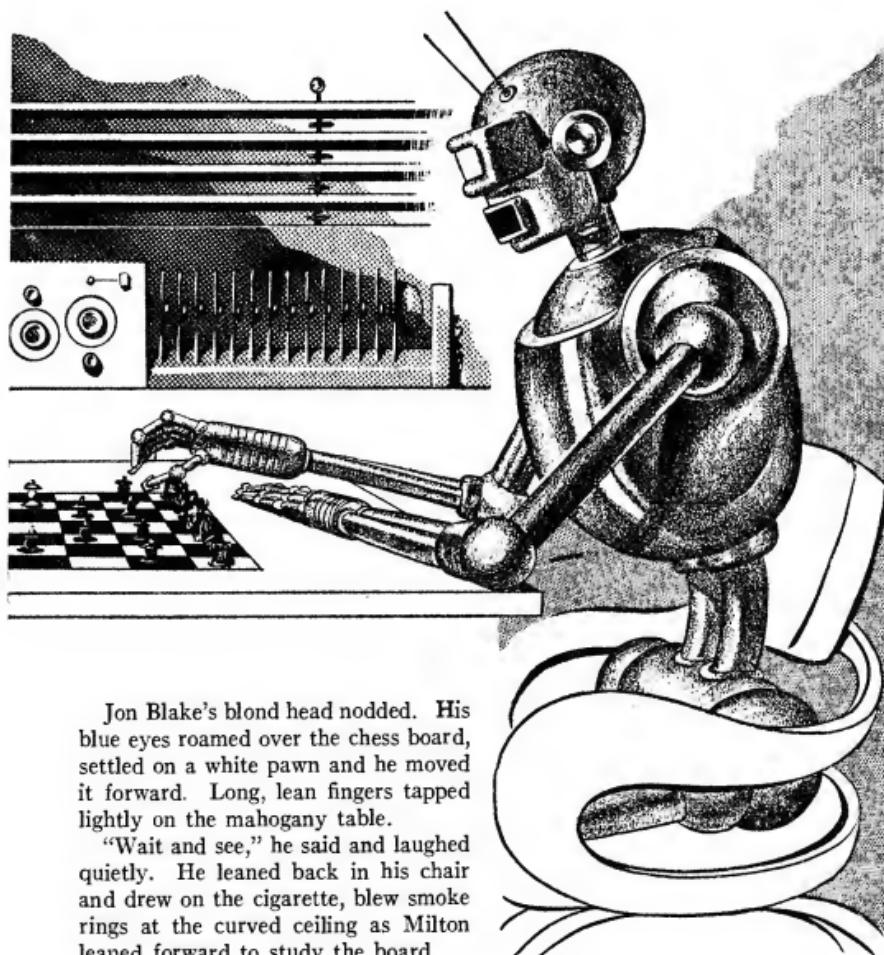
"Milty," Blake said, "you are a beaten man."

Milton, the tall robot, closed his sensitive eye shutters in imitation of an Earthly blink.

"But, Jon, have I made a mistake?"

# A KING . . .

**Milton the Robot tried hard but he just  
couldn't seem to master the game of chess.  
However he did learn its cardinal rule . . .**



Jon Blake's blond head nodded. His blue eyes roamed over the chess board, settled on a white pawn and he moved it forward. Long, lean fingers tapped lightly on the mahogany table.

"Wait and see," he said and laughed quietly. He leaned back in his chair and drew on the cigarette, blew smoke rings at the curved ceiling as Milton leaned forward to study the board.

Blake could almost see Milty's iridium sponge brain contracting in deep thought. Funny, Blake thought, a man thinking so much of a robot—a creation of man himself. But, after all, a man gets that way after five long years on a God-forsaken asteroid, alone with a robot.

Blake crumpled his cigarette in a plastic ash tray and leaned forward. Milty still knew only the elementaries of chess-playing, but he was learning fast.

"Damn!" the grating voice said. Milton blinked his metal eyes again and looked up. "I'll be damned if I can see any reason why I shouldn't take that pawn. You can't take my pawn after I've moved . . . maybe you've slipped up."

Milton looked at Blake questioningly, but Blake maintained a solemn face.

Slowly the metal hand moved the black pawn into the space the white pawn occupied, grasped the white pawn carefully and moved it from the board.

"It is sometimes necessary to sacrifice a pawn for a king," said Blake and moved his queen across the board and onto the black king's space.

"Damn!" Milton said again. "When will I ever learn to play chess?"

Blake laughed. "You didn't do bad, Milty. Really you didn't."

The robot didn't answer. He lay his head into his hands, would have cried, could he have done so.

"But that's ten times straight," he wailed. "I should win at least once. Three weeks we've played . . . every night . . . and I haven't learned to play yet."

Blake's smile vanished from his face. He pushed the table silently aside, walked around the table and placed a hand on Milton's shoulder. "There, there, Milty. After all, I've been playing for years and years and I still

don't know how to play. Come on, sit up like a man."

Blake's smile reappeared as the robot straightened up; Milty liked to be called a "man." He attempted to twist his flexible metal face into an imitative smile, but failed.

He started to say something, but the shining face of the Visiscreen burst into activity. An incessant buzzing filled the room.

Blake walked over to the screen, snapped a switch and stepped back. Slowly, bit by bit, square by square, a rather poor reproduction of a face appeared on the screen. The lips moved, but the sounds took several seconds longer to reach the receiver.

"Earth calling Asteroid 38 . . . Earth calling Asteroid 38 . . . are you receiving us, Lieutenant Blake?"

Blake snapped the switch back and spoke into the little mouthpiece below the screen. "Am receiving you perfectly, sir. Come in."

The lips of the figure moved again. Blake had never ceased to be surprised to see the words formed and then hear them seconds later. "Orders from Prime Base to Lieutenant Jon F. Blake, Station Commander—Asteroid #38. Subject: Change of duty. Lieutenant Jon F. Blake is ordered to report immediately to Earth, Prime Base, for new assignment. Robot #321 will remain in charge of the station until Blake's replacement arrives."

The voice paused, and Blake's brain whirled madly. They couldn't take him from Asteroid 38; not without Milty.

The speaker continued: "Special conditions, based on reports from Prime Base Bureau, recommend departure for Earth between 21 and 22 o'clock, Solar Time. That is all."

Blake switched off with nerveless fingers. He didn't want to turn around—

Milty had heard the report and . . .

Blake wiped the corner of his eye with his sleeve and turned around slowly.

The room was empty!

**B**LAKE yelled "Milty" in a frantic voice and ran into the kitchen. The robot wasn't there. His eyes roamed over the small storeroom behind the kitchen—Milty wasn't there.

There was only one other possible place he could be in the limited space covered by the small station, and that . . . Blake dashed through the living-room, knocked over the chess-table in his haste and fumbled with the air-lock door. After what seemed minutes instead of seconds, he tore the door open in time to see Milty about to open the outer air-lock door that led to the cold, desolate rocklands outside.

"Milty!" Blake screamed again, and the robot's hand relaxed.

"They say I must stay, Jon. Stay here without you." 

Blake moved closer to the robot. If he worked too fast, Milty would open that last lock and step outside. Without his Gravsuit, he would shoot off into space, to be battered by the huge, spinning rocks that whirled around the tiny asteroid.

"Milty," Blake said, "come on back inside. I won't leave you here; I'm taking you with me."

The robot's hand flew up to the last lock again. "You aren't kidding, are you, Jon?"

"No, Milty, certainly not," said Blake with conviction.

The metal hands closed the bolts to the outer locks and turned around.

"I'll check our rockets. It's been a long time since the space traveler has been used," Milty said simply.

Blake's voice caught in his throat as he tried to speak.

**T**HE curved dome of the reception room at Prime Base was decorated with a marvelous conception of the Universe. Milton's eyes roamed over the many-colored panorama in amazement.

The brunette receptionist with the horn-rimmed glasses glared across the rail at Blake and Milton. She scrutinized Milton closely; it was very, very unusual that a robot should enter Prime Base. Even one of the highly advanced class.

"Colonel Tilden will see you now," she said.

Blake doffed his cap to the receptionist, brushed an imaginary speck from his clean, white uniform and drew a deep breath. It was going to be mighty hard explaining Milty's presence, he thought, as he pushed open the door marked "Private."

The elderly man with close-cropped white hair didn't look up from the myriad of papers that cluttered his desk.

"Next case," he snapped.

"Lieutenant Jon F. Blake reporting from Asteroid 38," Blake said.

The elderly man looked up hurriedly. "Blake! Good God, man, it's been an awful long time, you know, since I saw you last. A long time."

"A long time, sir?" Blake said hesitantly.

"Yes, yes," the colonel said, "don't you remember? Graynow Preparatory School . . . in Perry's Port, Mars."

"Yes, sir," Blake said. His heart pounded madly. "You were my instructor in special mathematics."

"Indeed I was, my boy. And you were my best scholar, with the worst behavior."

They both laughed, but the colonel broke off abruptly.

"Behind you there—that robot," he said, gesturing.

Blake twisted his cap in his hands. "You see, sir, Milty, there, and I have

been together for five years, and I couldn't very well leave him on #38 alone. After all, sir, he even tried to commit suicide when he learned he was to be left there."

"But the Venusians may get there before we do, Blake. Don't you know there's a war on?"

Blake was startled. "A war . . . with Venus, sir?"

"Good God, man," the colonel snapped. "Don't you know that Venus attacked the Alman outpost on Mars two weeks ago? Don't you know that they've control of Luna through their damnable treachery? Why do you think we told you to leave 38 at a specified time?"

"I don't know anything, sir," Blake said. Their Screen had been on the blink for a week, and Blake had repaired it only the night before he was summoned to Earth.

"Well, if your robot would have remained on #38 and maintained the force field, we could have kept a valuable base. Now it's probably lost, forever."

The colonel came from behind his desk, his eyes had been fiery, now they had calmed. "But that is a minor point now. Blake, I am about to offer you a difficult assignment. We have learned through our spies that tomorrow the Venusians will have a convoy of about twenty ships on its way to Luna. Fortunately, one of our spies obtained time of departure and cruising speed. If we can keep that convoy from reaching its destination, it will give us time for our Martian and Mercurian fleets to rendezvous and join our Prime Base detachments. The convoy will, of course, be heavily guarded. We have here, at Prime Base, only a few of our battlecruisers, which *must* remain here for the defense of the base. So an attack in force would be impossible.

We do, however, have twelve light cruisers. Speed and the element of surprise will be on our side in an attack. I know of your remarkable achievements with space cruisers, I know of your rather remarkable feats during the Gladley maneuvers in 2015; and I know the reason you were sent to #38."

Blake frowned.

"The former commander of Prime Base knew your ability, too. He knew that at the rate of progress you were making, you would soon take his place."

"So he shipped me to No. 38," Blake said bitterly.

"But that's all over," the Colonel said. "Will you take command of the twelve light cruisers?"

Blake's chest rose and fell slowly. This was the biggest thing in his life. There would be responsibility plus, but if he made good . . .

"Yes, sir," he said very slowly and shook the colonel's extended hand.

He accepted the sealed orders, said good-by to the colonel, saluted and walked out, followed by the ever-present Milton.

**B**LAKE glanced at his watch, paced up and down the small cabin of the little cruiser. "Check speed again," he said to the mate.

The officer turned to his instruments. "One-fourth A. U. per hour, sir."

*Good, Blake thought.* If they maintained that speed for another five minutes, that should bring them in sight of the Venusian convoy. He had poured all night over the figures, calculating, figuring, checking his Astronomical Unit speeds, rechecking and checking yet again. If there was just one figure wrong, they would over-shoot their mark, the convoy would proceed unmolested. And Earth—it wouldn't be a human-dominated world any longer.

"Jon," the metal voice grated, "may I ask you what those silver projectiles are in the third quarter down?"

Blake turned and stared wearily into the faceted eyes of the robot. "Those are spatial torpedoes. They are very seldom used now; not enough power in one or two to stop a big ship. Besides, their directional finders never were any good in space. But—they might come in useful; never can tell."

"But, Jon, wouldn't a concentration of them break a big ship's screen?"

Blake nodded. "About eight would work."

"Lieutenant Blake, come here, sir," the mate's excited voice said. "Look into the 'Scope."

Blake slid into the seat, peered into the round openings of the 'Scope and whistled softly. "Tilden certainly underestimated that convoy. If there aren't fifty ships there, I'm a Martian's uncle."

Blake rose, walked over to the speaking tube. "Connect me with all ships," he said and waited for the connections to be made. "All ships, attention. Screens up, rays ready, battle stations. This is going to be a tough fight, but—it's for old Mother Earth."

Milty sat down slowly beside the chess board in the corner of the room and looked at his friend as he checked the screens.

"If the instruments are working perfectly, sir, our screens are flawless."

Blake looked at the instruments, twisted a dial slightly and sat down before the 'Scope. The mate hurried over and connected a portable Wright-Lornier speaker.

"Speed?" Blake asked without taking his eyes from the 'Scope.

"One-third A. U., sir."

Blake's left hand reached out to a small wheel and turned it slightly. His right hand picked up the speaker.

"Speed?" he asked again.

"One-half A. U., sir."

Blake spoke into the speaker. "Down screens." He paused and a dead silence fell over the room. Milty stopped scraping a knight on the chess table and listened expectantly for Blake's next order.

Blake's face was tense, his voice cold. "Fire!" The mate stared into a duplicate 'Scope.

"We've got six of them, sir!" he said.

Blake's eyes came away from the 'Scope. "They've seen us now. They'll have their screens up before we can get in a second raying. Clear frontal visibility."

There was a slow grating and the dull metal of the nose of the ship parted to reveal the battle. Dull, sluggish, slow-moving freighters were literally surrounded by the green-colored light cruisers of the Empire of Venus. These cruisers now spurted forward, or braked with forward rockets.

Blake groaned when he saw the red ray flashes from the six big, sleek Venusian battlecruisers. He had hoped that they would rely solely on light cruisers for convoy duty, but now—

A TERRIFIC explosion shook the ship, it rolled through space. The steel beams seemed to shake and threaten to snap; great rumblings from the holds seemed to portend ominous disaster, but the little cruiser held together. Blake steadied himself, shook his head to clear his spinning senses and walked back over to the control board.

"Those Venusians are getting to be pretty darned good shots. That was a *close* near miss," Blake said, and checked damages with the ray-crews in the fourth and fifth quarters.

"Lieutenant Blake," an insistent voice came from the receiver. "Cruiser Rigél reporting. The light cruisers

Orion, Centauri, Vega, Capella, and Betelgeuse have been lost. The Venusian battlecruisers' tays are too strong for our screens, sir. Our screen is down, and—"

An explosion which needed no explanation echoed in the receiver.

Milton appeared silently by Blake's side. "Jon, do the Venusians use robot land fighters?"

"Of course they do, Milty. Leave me alone now, can't you see—"

"But, Jon, if they shipped them to Luna, they would go unassembled, and the ship carrying the iridium sponge brains would be the most heavily guarded, for without the brain . . ."

Blake didn't wait for Milton to finish. He strode over to the screen.

"Take control," he said to the mate as he scanned the scene below.

He saw a green freighter explode into fragments as a small Earth cruiser caromed into it. A Venusian cruiser glowed with an organish color—the ammunition hold was afire beneath the broken screen. He saw one of his own ships lower its screens, fire, and then be blasted into nothingness before it could get its screens back up.

There were eight cruisers and one battlecruiser concentrated about a single ship—a big, brown, ugly thing. The concentration could mean only one thing: that freighter was the ship carrying the robot brains. Blake reached for the speaker.

"Attention all cruisers . . . attention all cruisers," he said. "Report your condition and position."

He waited thirty seconds. One light cruiser reported; its screens

broken, instruments shot to hell, and leaking air badly . . . ten space points distant . . . out of the fight. The rest did not answer . . .

Blake turned around to speak to Milty. But the robot wasn't in the room. He spoke to the mate.

"In exactly one minute, turn around and run like hell for home."

Blake whirled without another word and walked into the second quarter, through it and into the third.

He walked over to the airlock door to open it.

It was already open!

Blake twisted around quickly, stared at the empty space where the fast, speedy little raft should have been. There were eight of the silver torpedoes missing—the raft could have easily carried that many. He didn't bother to close the airlock door as he passed it on the way back to the control room.

A deafening roar split the heavens and the little cruiser rolled around, tossed by the force of the explosion. Blake had anticipated the explosion, yet he had trouble maintaining his equilibrium.

"Lieutenant Blake, sir," the mate shouted. "The Venusian freighter carrying the robot sponge brains has been destroyed!"

Unashamed tears rolled down Blake's cheeks as he walked over to the chess table in the corner of the room.

He stooped and picked up two chessmen, crushed by the strength of a metal hand.

One was a black king—the other was a white pawn.

THE END

## "CASTING" A FISH

THE making of replica casts of the rarest fish in the world, the dinosaur-age, blue-eyed giant caught four years ago off the east coast of South Africa will have to be postponed until the war is over.

The fish, belonging to a family thought to have become extinct fifty million years ago, is the greatest prize of the East London Museum. It has been given the scientific name *Latimeria chalumnae*.