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BROWN

By Frank Belknap Long

Brown was a robot, a minikin of a robot, but he had intelligence. And—a nasty sense of humor with respect to his builder.

Illustrated by Kramer

THEY had been good for a laugh, for entertainment for six months. And they had been good for nothing else. Amazing they were, more ingenious than anything dreamed of at the beginning of the century.

They reposed on metal shelves all about Horn now—dark-browed little figures twenty inches tall. How Horn detested the word "robot." He had created *thinking* minikins. He had infused his genius into them, along with the plastics and wires which made them click.

They could feel and think and talk. But their thought processes chilled Horn to the depths of his being. No one else seemed aware of how inhuman they were.

The problem of creative intelligence had never vexed Horn more. What was original thought, anyway? You could build up from an idiot's mental grimaces to the fine-blown product which was the brain of a Faraday, a Pasteur, or a Darwin without getting an answer to that question.

Horn's minikins were brilliant, but they were too inhuman to think creatively. Destructive criticism could be creative after a fashion, but when it emanated from Horn's minikins, it seemed dreadful somehow. Cold and unproductive and sterile—a corrosive blight. Even children of ten had better sense than to jeer at *everything*.

James Brown was the worst offender. He was cynical and superficial and yet—*he* had something. Unlike the other robots, he could grasp and solve problems of the utmost technical complexity. In naming his newest minikin, Horn had resorted to the familiar dodge of concealing something a little sinister under the most run-of-the-mill appellation he could think of.

Brown sat on a testing prop in

Horn's laboratory, swinging his jointed beryllium legs, his metal lips twisting in derision. He had acquired an audience already. He was playing up to the gallery of little figures behind him, holding their maker up to scorn.

"You've stippled this planet with the ravages of war, crime, famine and disease," he was saying. "Now you want to take your detestable civilization to Mars. I could help you, but I won't."

Horn's eyes were glowing. He wiped sweat from his forehead and stared down at the little minikin.

"What? You mean you could solve the fuel problem?"

"Of course I could solve it. But I won't, Horn. You can't order me around."

Horn's ruggedly handsome features grew dark with anger. "You little fool! Do you realize I could take you apart, and park your lucky-accident brain in a Leyden jar?"

"Horn, have you lost your mind? You've toiled over me for weeks."

"The most gifted physicist I ever knew, destroyed the work of a lifetime in ten minutes, recklessly, on impulse," Horn said. "Do you want me to do something I'll regret for the rest of my life?"

Brown shook his head, his expression still derisive. "No, Horn. I'm aware that you need my help badly. I said I wouldn't assist you, but I might—for a consideration."

"Well, let's have it."

"Horn, I want to go to Mars with you."

THE DOOR of Horn's laboratory opened and a slender, blond and very lovely girl came in. She gravitated toward Horn without even glancing at Brown, her eyes luminous with concern.

"Why don't you call it a day,

Fred?" she said. "You look all in. Haven't you discovered yet that these wretched mechanical dolls can't help you with the ship?"

"With *me* to advise him," Brown said, with an acid inflection, "he can't fail."

The girl swung on the little robot, her eyes glinting. "You scheming little wretch! The best you can do is parrot human speech. If Fred wasn't self-hypnotized, he'd know that thought can't rise above its source."

There was an indignant protest from the shelved robots. It took the form of a running commentary, which scarcely rose above a whisper as it encircled the laboratory. It was not complimentary to Horn's fiancée, but it did not appear to embarrass her in any way.

Horn laid a restraining hand on her arm. "Be quiet, Joan. Brown has—an exceptional gift."

"I'll say he has. The gift of gab. The vile little cheat—taking advantage of you when you're worn out. Why don't you take him apart? You can, can't you? Shall I?"

Brown said: "I wouldn't, Fleming."

The girl picked the little robot up and shook him until his coils rattled. "Do you think I'm afraid of you?"

Horn turned pale. "Darling, put him down. His brain is unique. He thinks—cumulatively and elliptically. I never expected to succeed so well."

With a despairing shrug, Joan Fleming returned Brown to the testing prop.

The robot crossed his beryllium legs and said: "Horn, let's get down to brass tacks. I have one consuming drive—curiosity. And you—you want to reach Mars in a rocket-driven ship so that you can pass yourself off as a man of daring and

be admired by everyone on Earth."

"That's a lie," said Joan Fleming.

Horn shook his head. "No. No, let him have his say."

"Well, vanity is not so disgraceful. You might have made me vain, but you neglected to do so. I simply want to see Mars with my own eyes before I rust. Will you take me along?"

"I'll take you if you'll tell me how—"

"Horn, it's simpler than you dream. We won't propel the ship at all. *We'll vibrate it.*"

"You'll what?"

"Horn, we'll vibrate it until it warps the continuum, and slides slantwise through space-time under its own momentum. D'you see? We'll bobsleigh down a groove in the continuum and reach Mars through a back door in the sky. We'll get to Mars quickly that way. A straight line is not the quickest distance between two points. You can slide down a concave slope much faster than you can slide down a straight slope."

"But, how could we pilot a ship through buckling folds of space-time," Horn gasped. "I'll concede we know more about the continuum than we did in Einstein's day. But what you're proposing would involve mathematical calculations of the utmost complexity."

"The slightest error would take us out of the Solar System. And that's just one of the risks. We'd be liable to emerge in Coma Berenices or cut a permanent groove in the continuum, like Bernard's Runaway Star. The continuum is scarred with permanent whorls cut by suns which increased their density too fast. They go around and around, and *never come out.*"

"Don't worry, Horn," the little robot said. "I've got it all figured

out. You've seen how my mind works. I take all the known facts, correlate them, and build up an infallible plan of action. I can surmount any contingency because my brain has an error-quotient which can only be expressed by a unit of thirty-six zeros."

"You're sure you can chart and hold a course through the continuum which will bring us out on Mars?"

Brown nodded. "I can, Horn. Give me a month and I'll prove it."

A MONTH and three days later, Horn sat at Joan Fleming's side in the pilot room of a space-time ship which he had constructed at his own expense, selecting top men in the engineering field to test its every beam and strut.

It was supposed to be his ship. It had the blessings of the Smithsonian Institution and all the best minds on Earth were wishing him luck with it.

But somehow, Horn couldn't think of himself as really in command. When Brown's irritability forced itself upon his attention in annoying flashes, he was compelled to recognize it for what it was—an usurpation on the part of the little robot which weakened his authority and filled him with misgivings.

Brown was scowling now. He sat on an auxiliary pilot dais, between Horn and Joan Fleming, his beryllium legs swinging.

"What are you waiting for, Horn," he grumbled. "Are you afraid to take off?"

Horn set his lips. "All right," he said. "Here it comes."

He glanced at his fiancée as he spoke.

Joan's face had gone dead-white. "It isn't too late," she whispered, without turning her head. "You can still take him apart."

Brown heard her and swung

about, his faceted eyes darting venom. "You're straining my patience, Fleming. Horn needs me and you know it."

"Be quiet," rapped Horn. "I need both of you. Can't you understand that?"

"No," said Joan. "And I never will."

Leaning abruptly forward, Horn manipulated a rheostat on the luminous control board. "It isn't Brown," he whispered. "I'm aware that we'll be leaving all the familiar, safe and agreeable things the instant we warp space. But you can't buck a tropism."

"What do you mean?"

"The most primitive living organisms are polarized and—so are we. The urge to reach out, to cross new frontiers, is a biological constant. It's in you and me and I put it into Brown."

"It isn't in me," Joan said. "A woman seeks new frontiers in a man's arms, but—"

"It's all part of the same drive," Horn assured her.

The vibration hit them all at once. The deck trembled and the air slapped against them like a wind-lashed sheet. A quivering seized Brown. His knees clicked together, and he started bouncing up and down.

Joan shivered and tried to strap herself more securely into her seat. Horn reached out, and tapped her on the shoulder. "Easy," he cautioned. "This is just the beginning." He was holding on to his own seat, his knees colliding. "Keep relaxed."

IT BECAME terrible suddenly. The ship seemed to be bursting with energy that kept breaking over them, and twisting them about. The luminous control panel came to life. Its humidification units winked,

whistled and shook. Up and down the board sparks rumba-danced and then joined the military, marching back and forth in wavering columns of light.

Brown twisted double suddenly, a spasm of giggling coming from his throat.

Horn stared at him, aghast. "What in blue blazes—"

"Can't—help it—Horn. Voice box—isn't—concussion proof. Needles of sound—damn it, Horn—it's—your fault."

A thin trickle of blood was running from Horn's mouth. He tried to sit erect, but the hammering vibrations kept adding to his weight. He wished that the mountain which was resting on his shoulders, would shift about a little. When he took a deep breath, volcanic fires belched from it, and seared his lungs.

Joan seemed to be fleeing in mortal terror from something that she couldn't see. At least, she conveyed that impression, *sitting rigid in her seat*. Stunningly it was borne in on Horn that a person could remain motionless, and yet seem to be running with every muscle taut.

Brown had stopped giggling. He was staring at Horn now with a thin smile on his face, his flexible nose crinkling. "It's curious, Horn. The beginning vibrations hit my throat box, but now I can talk again. We're oscillating beautifully, Horn. We're deep in the continuum and sliding straight toward Mar's orbit."

Horn groaned. "When will that hammering stop? I can't stand much more of—"

"It's stopping already. Can't you tell? We're sliding down the groove under our own momentum. The build-up is draining off."

A little moan came from Joan. "I think I'm going to faint."

"Horn, sometimes I surprise my-

self," said Brown callously. "I was sitting here, expecting I'd have to ask you to make certain modifications on the board, but the automatic plug-in has functioned perfectly. We haven't missed a trick.

"Just look at that panel! Every cyclometric equation indicator has come to a full stop. That means we'll come out a little to the north of the Equator, on the banks of the Northwestern Canal.

Horn caught Joan as she swayed. He untied the straps which held her loosely to her seat and drew her across his knees. He chafed her wrists and cooled her brow with his palm. There was no need for him to dip his hand in water. It was already cold and dripping.

Brown seemed unable to tear his gaze from the control panel. He sat rigid on the auxiliary dais, his hands on his knees. His features had a drawn-together look, which was the way his face expressed elation.

He was still sitting there like an egg-laying rooster brooding over inscrutable gifts when Joan's green-irised eyes opened and stared up into Horn's white face.

"Well, that was bad," she said. "I guess I just can't take it."

Horn helped her to sit up. "The ship has stopped pulsating," he exclaimed, staring in growing bewilderment from the still-rigid minikin to the control panel and back again.

Brown came suddenly to life. He folded his jointed arms and jerked his head up and down. "Right, Horn. We've arrived at our destination."

Horn's heart gave a sudden leap. "Joan, I . . . I've got to have room to breathe. Do you mind slipping back to your own seat?"

Joan obeyed, casting a scornful glance at Brown, who was climbing down from his seat.

"Horn, we'll go out and look around. I don't think we'll have any trouble with the atmosphere. The photomolecular samples from Yerkes rang up a pretty high oxygen count. The desert air may be a little thin, but I'm sure it's breathable."

"I'm more concerned about the heat," said Horn, unstrapping himself. "The temperature skids up pretty high in the Equatorial belt."

"We'll wear sun helmets, Horn. I mean, uh—you will. I don't have to worry about the heat."

"Fred," Joan said. "Suppose there's some sort of corrosive on Mars—in the atmosphere, I mean—which eats away metal."

Brown jerked his head up and regarded her stonily, his nose crinkling. "Nothing that you can say, Fleming, can get under my plating."

"I didn't think you were *that* dense," said Joan and bit her lip, aware that her barb was a little tarnished.

Horn flushed angrily. "Will you stop your infernal bickering. 'We're going into the unknown together. If we don't—'"

"It isn't bickering," Joan interrupted. "I hate his coils."

Brown started to reply to that, but was silenced by a look from Horn which said as plain as words: "Don't overstep yourself, Brown. If you say what you're thinking, I'll smash you."

Joan seemed to be struggling with herself. Slowly, the animosity left her countenance and a look of resignation took its place.

"I suppose," she said, "I shall have to put up with him. As you say, we're going into the unknown

together. I'll try to keep my mind on something clean."

Brown quivered. "Fleming, if you think—"

Horn wheeled on him. "You heard her, Brown. I'll expect the same sort of loyalty from you."

THEY EMERGED together, Horn and the girl, wearing tropical slacks and sun helmets, and the little robot metal-naked to the solar glare.

A hidden watcher, crouching behind hillocks of sand, would have gasped at the spectacle of such divergent shapes descending from an air lock in a gleaming space-time voyager, which was shaped like the constellation Bootes, with its end-avanes spread out symmetrically behind it. But there were no eyes to see or ears to hear.

Brown descended between Horn and Joan Fleming, his eighteen-inch-high body scarcely reaching to their knees. Silhouetted against the sun, with his angular contours blurred by the glare, he looked like an infant tottering between them—an infant just learning to walk.

But no infant could have spoken as he did, or cushioned the shock of adults in so casual a way. "Well, that is certainly a city, Horn. It isn't like any city on Earth, but what else could it be?"

Neither Horn nor Joan had an answer ready. They stood at the base of the air lock, on a hot and sloping wilderness of sand, and stared up at the most titanic structure they had ever seen, their senses reeling.

From the structure's high black walls broad, metallic ramps streamed downward. The ramps emerged from a continuous dark aperture which encircled the walls near the summit of the towering edifice, and descended for a thousand feet to the

desert below. Wind-blown sands were piled high about the bases of these immense superficies, which were the only avenues of ingress visible from below.

"Well," said Brown. "What are we waiting for? If you'd just found red sand and a soggy ditch of a canal, you'd be stirring fast enough. Pulling up low-grade vegetation by the roots, groveling in some rancid fungus patch and shouting discovery, discovery. But when a whole city is dumped in your lap you stand there gaping."

Horn seemed stunned. "The beings who built that structure must have possessed intelligence of a high order."

"Words, Horn. Empty words, until we climb up there and see for ourselves. To a Martian, a termite's nest would seem wonderful and the product of intelligence. Horn, let's get going."

Five minutes later they were ascending the ramp. Up, up they climbed until the dark, cavernous opening above them acquired a geometric pattern and they perceived that it was a symmetrical portal, floored and roofed with metal and extending inward for a hundred feet. Through it immense, glittering shapes wavered in a dimly illumed world of uncouth dimensions.

The shapes were inanimate. As they emerged from the portal and stood staring upward, an utterly stupefying sight met their gaze. All about them towered cobweb vistas of metal. Beams and girders and shafts, and vast, flowery tracteries interwove in the air high above them and as far as their gaze could penetrate downward, were similar stupendous structures. And in that mile-deep, mile-high web, where the rays of the sun penetrated but feebly, there was no stir of living

things or faintest echo of sound.

They had the extraordinary sensation of standing at the hub of an enormous metallic network, where all lines converged with geometric precision toward a single focal point. The far-flung structure emitted a dull, greenish radiance in the diffuse sunlight which filtered down from above.

The beam on which they stood, sloped gently from the inner extremity of the portal toward an immense, slightly convex, circle of gleaming metal. The circle was wedged between four cyclopean columns, whose gleaming bases were lost to view in the shadows below, and was joined to the structure above by thin, metallic filaments which spread upward and outward in meshlike strands.

JOAN was shivering. Something about that vast, intricate and awesomely gleaming web had utterly unnerved her. Even Brown seemed alarmed. There was no mockery in his voice when he said: "It's pretty dark down there, isn't it, Horn?"

Horn did not reply. He was staring rigidly downward into the vast, dimly lit vistas beneath him. He had mistaken the thing for a shadow at first. It hovered amidst a multitude of shadows in the interstices of metal far below, and when it moved, its outlines seemed to flicker and spread. But it was not a shadow.

There was a rustling movement in the depths, and slowly, cumber-somely, the spider ascended on its long legs along a fissure in the massive column, heaved itself over a meshlike strand and glided to the edge of the circular disk.

A prickling sensation spread over Horn's scalp. The spider was larger than an elephant. Its wrinkled, dead-black body was thinly covered with rust-colored hair, and its long legs were hair-tipped. In the center of its spherical head, a single lidless

eye glowed dully. As it crouched on the disk, with its ten segmented legs drawn up sharply beneath it, it seemed to radiate venom.

It was staring downward, into the depths. Frozen to immobility, Horn watched it. From its massive, spinning mammillae, thin, silky strands descended into the geometrical maze beneath. The mammillae were in constant motion and, as they opened and closed, the white, adhesive silk was drawn into the spiders mouth.

The thin strands wavered, slackened and were drawn taut again. For interminable seconds, this slow absorption of its own silk continued. Then, suddenly, the spider shifted its position on the disk, and its long, hairy forelegs went out and gathered up all the remaining strands.

It drew this residual web across the disk and deposited it in massive folds at its feet. And, suddenly, Horn perceived with horror that there were small, moving forms enmeshed in the web. As he stared, the great arachnid disentangled the struggling little knobs and protuberances, picked them up swiftly with its forelegs, and proceeded to—*eat them.*

There ensued a sickening crunch, and a thin ribbon of scarlet ran down the spider's swollen abdomen and formed into a little pool in the center of the disk. The spider picked the forms from the web with fastidious care.

As though with grim and calculating irony, it allowed the freed men and women to stand upright on the disk for an instant as it drew them from the silk. Then, swiftly, it lifted them to its mouth and consumed them. A few attempted to escape, running wildly toward the edge of the disk as soon as the loathsome creature freed them, but invariably they were caught and devoured.

Brown moved close to Horn and plucked at his sleeve. "Perhaps, Horn, we'd better be getting back to the ship."

Horn scarcely heard him. The horror in his mind was being fed from two sources simultaneously. The spectacle of men and women being consumed was appalling enough, but even more terrifying was the nimbleness of the spider. The beam on which they stood was more than two hundred feet from the edge of the disk, but the spider's legs were the opposite of stumpy.

It was then that Brown put his foot into it. "Horn, I want to see the robot one. That is two million years further along, but—"

Horn felt something explode inside his skull. He swung about and grasped Brown by the throat, his face purpling.

"*What did you say?*"

"Let go of me, Horn. You're pressing on my—"

"Brown, you knew we'd see this. You knew it was here. I've felt it all along. *This isn't Mars.*"

"No, it's—Horn, you're choking me. If you want me to tell you, set me down."

Horn set Brown down with such violence that the spider stopped midway on a morsel and rolled its single eye upward. The pair of legs protruding from its mouth jerked up and down.

Horn froze. For a moment he stood staring down at the great arachnid, his eyes widening.

Brown whispered: "Don't be alarmed, Horn. It's probably myopic."

The spider lowered its gaze abruptly. Its mandibles quivered, and the dangling legs disappeared.

Horn gripped the little minikin's shoulders. "Start talking," he said, his expression robotcidal.

Brown sighed. "Well, I—"

"No evasions, Brown. I want the truth."

"HORN, I intended to tell you. We traveled through the continuum, but I didn't set our course for Mars. I arranged the automatic plug-in so that it would bring us out on . . . on one of the future variants, Horn."

"Future variants?"

"Horn, there are thousands of possible future variants for the human race, all existing in space-time. We have simply traveled forward in time through the continuum without leaving Earth, and we've seen the spider variant. You see, Horn, I wasn't much interested in Mars. I lied to you about that. I'm a realist and there is more than enough to whet my curiosity right here on Earth.

"There is also a robot variant, Horn. As a by-product of the human race, I am naturally interested in its future. I wanted to see the robot variant particularly. But it was necessary for me to cushion the shock by showing you what will happen if the spiders get the upper hand. This is a bad variant, from your point of view, but the robot one is much worse.

"It is too bad that you are so thin-skinned, Horn. I had to lie to you, d'you see? I had to pretend that we were going to Mars, and to keep up the deception. Otherwise you might have drawn back."

Horn's face was apoplectic. "I should have listened to Joan."

"Horn, why should you resent a little harmless deception? I have given you, a man of the twenty-first century, a glimpse into the remote future. You've got to remember this doesn't *have* to be the destiny of the human race. It is merely one of many possible destinies, a branching variant. Events back in the world we left, will determine the main line. Tomorrow, perhaps, in

that world, a man will stumble or a child break its doll, and so alter the course of human events that the spiders will be exterminated ten thousand years later, before they can evolve any further.

"But, of course, all the variants exist in space-time. The main line strongly; the rest as weak sisters. There is a vast network of weak sister variants extending through space-time, Horn. I can chart that web with mathematical precision and travel through the continuum toward strands which are fifty million years in the future. But there's one thing I can't do. Determining which variant will become the main line, is a little beyond me."

Joan was staring at him white-lipped. "If only he had *looked* like a snake."

"Just a minute, Joan," Horn said. "I want to get this straight. Brown, what happens in the robot variant?"

Brown's nose crinkled. "I'd rather show you, Horn."

"You mean I won't like it?"

"I've told you, Horn. It's even worse than this—from your point of view. But I can't help that. You've got to remember it doesn't have to be—"

"*What happens?*"

"Horn, he's in a sort of museum. All shrunken up, like a mummy. But not in an exhibition case, Horn. Dangling. His flesh is black, because so many years—"

Joan moaned. "Fred, stamp on him."

"The last man on Earth, Horn. The robots are still a little resentful. On holidays, when the museum is crowded, you can't get close enough to see him. And there isn't much you *can* see—until they pull out all the darts and rub in a cleansing paste. He's riddled all over, but the few visitors who come on workdays get a pretty good idea of what he looked like when the museum was first opened."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Horn. He had both hands on Brown now and was lifting him up.

"Horn, put me down. What are you—"

"Brown, Joan's right. You don't look like a snake, but that's what I've turned out—a beryllium-plated snake. You brought us here to watch us squirm."

"That isn't true, Horn. Put me down."

"Brown, it must be cold and horrible down there—in the depths. The spiders will spin webs over you. You'll lie there for a million years, rusting."

"No, no, Horn. You can't do that to me. How would you get back?"

"I'll admit you have that one talking point, Brown. Without you, we couldn't. If I *don't* let you drop, will you take us back?"

"I will, Horn. I swear it."

"Not into the robot variant, but back to the twenty-first century."

"I'll do it, Horn."

The spider had finished its meal. Moving to the edge of the disk, it began to advance up the beam, its long legs unbending.

"You spoke just in time, Brown," Horn said.

TOGETHER they fled—Horn and the girl dragging Brown between them. Dragging now a very limp minikin that did not say a word as they fled down the broad, metallic ramp of that sinister spider city, and out across sands which would never exist on Earth unless—

Unless the future's spinning wheel stopped at just that one notch in ten thousand which contained the spider's variant. They hoped it wouldn't. All the way back to Earth they kept hoping that it wouldn't. There were certainly vari-

ants which gave the human race a better break than that. Variants which left Earth and moved from planet to planet until the entire Solar System echoed to the tread of—the colonizers.

And all the way back, Brown sat brooding, his conical head sunken on his chest.

Just before the vibrations ceased, Joan said: "I'll bet he'd like to go back and live in that robot variant."

If Brown heard her, he gave no sign. When the ship stopped pulsating, he did not even emerge with them into the sunlight, but sat sullenly in his auxiliary seat before the control panel, frustration twisting the metal lineaments of his face.

Leaving him alone like that was a blunder which Horn was to regret to the end of his life. But the grueling trip had so shattered his nerves that he couldn't get out fast enough.

Beneath familiar, white buildings and the looming space-time ship, Joan gravitated into his arms and remained polarized for a full minute, her lips warm against his.

Then, suddenly, she stirred. "*Brown*," she exclaimed. "You forgot to take Brown out!"

Alarmed, Horn wheeled.

There was no longer any need to take Brown anywhere. Where the ship's stern had rested, a thin spiral of smoke was ascending toward the pale sky, but up forward, where Brown had been, there yawned only empty air.

"I bet he'd like to go back and live in that robot variant."

Turning, Horn found himself wondering if Joan had directed that comment to him alone. When he met her eyes again, he ceased to wonder. Startlingly, it was borne in on him that a woman's wiles could be more devious than a robot's.