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EDITORS

Ray Palmer

Bea Mahaffey

ART DIRECTOR

Malcolm H. Smith

Front Cover:

*Robert Gibson Jones
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Back Cover:

*Robert Gibson Jones
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Want a baby-sitter who won't raid the ice box, run up the phone bill or have the gang in for a party? Call Sitter Service for Robot xx343.

PUNISHMENT FIT THE CRIME

By Lyn Venable

"CLEMM, will you fasten these pearls for me," asked Nona Noldis, "I seem to be all thumbs."

Her husband switched off his electric shaver and took the necklace from her, fastening it about her slim throat. He playfully pinched the back of her neck.

"Not still worried about leaving Bobo tonight are you? Marianne told you that she has been using Sitter Service for months and everything has worked out fine. Still if you'd rather not go to the party I can call the Briggs' and tell them we can't make it."

Nona smiled as she pushed a few strands of hair into place. "No dear, we haven't been to a real party since Bobo was born, and I know how much this means to you businesswise. It's just that Bobo is still such a baby. The idea of leaving him with a . . ."

The doorbell chimed. Just once.

"That must be the sitter," exclaimed Clemm, "I'll go." From the bedroom Nona heard the door open and then a clanking. The clanking

drew nearer and in a moment Clemm came in with the sitter.

"Oh Clemm," moaned Nona, "we can't, we just simply can't!"

"Hush," admonished her husband, "you don't want to hurt its feelings, do you?"

There was a whirring, and a metal hand produced a printed card from somewhere inside a metal body. The card said, "I am Robot xx343. Please refer to me by this serial number if you wish to make any comment on the quality of my services. I respond to oral commands. Please supply me with the following information: What food is to be administered to the child? What medication, if any? Where may you be reached in case of emergency? My distress signal should I have to call you will be a siren-like wail. Should you phone me to check, my signal that all's well will be a radar-like blip-blip. If any person is to be permitted to enter the premises during your absence, please describe him or her to me in detail. I trust my services will be satisfactory. Thank you.

P.S. My meter will start registering



as you leave. It will register 20 credits per hour. You will be billed on the first of the next lunar cycle by Sitter Service."

Nona and Clemm looked at each other. The latter assumed more assurance than he actually felt. "Well, there, you see? Everything's provided for. Now tell it what it's supposed to know, we're late already."

"Are you sure it'll understand?"
"Sure I'm . . . well let's test it. Er—you, go fetch the baby's formula from the refrigerator, heat it to the proper temperature and bring it to me." The robot turned slowly and clanked away, unerringly to the kitchen. There were metallic sounds. Shortly it returned with the bottle in its hand.

Nona reached out to take the bot-

tle, then drew back her hand, then extended it again. The robot gave her the bottle. She sprinkled a few drops of the fluid on her bare forearm.

"Just right, just exactly right. But Clemm, suppose Bobo doesn't like him. Suppose he's afraid of him?"

"We'll see about that. Come on xx343." The robot lumbered after them into the baby's room. They switched on the light. The cherubic face of year-old Bobo stared out at them from between the bars of his crib, like a tiny prisoner.

"Bobo," began Nona uncertainly, "this is someone who is going to stay with you for a while while Daddy and I go to the party." The baby smiled a bubbly smile and reached out for his bottle.

"See, he doesn't know the difference. Now tell it those things and let's go. The Briggs' are probably waiting dinner."

"All right. Let's see. Now, he won't need another bottle, but give him a teaspoonful of syrup if he starts coughing. That bottle on the bedside table. We're not expecting anyone . . . no, don't let anyone in. You can reach us at YO-77754. And if you don't mind tidying up the kitchen a bit I'd . . ."

There was a sudden whirring and relays clicked somewhere inside xx343. Another printed card appeared. "I am a baby sitting robot. I am capable only of performing those acts having a direct bearing on the care and welfare of my charge. These instructions are built into my memory banks and cannot be altered. I am

sorry. Thank you."

Nona tossed her head, "Well, Mr. Robot, I guess you got me told."

"Honey," began Clemm patiently, "it's a well known principle of robotics that a robot can perform only such acts as it has been preconditioned to perform. All these impulses must be stored in its memory banks, and on a small portable model like this one, naturally, the capacity of the memory banks is limited. But don't worry, it can do everything it has to do for Bobo. Now for Pete's sake, let's go." He led her, still uncertain, toward the door.

Bobo slept. xx343 sat stiff and immobile in a chair. Every hour a relay clicked, and xx343 got up, checked the child's pulse, respiration and temperature and went back to his chair. A thin, thin tongue of smoke, almost invisible, curled probingly under the door. The smoke was sucked into xx343's atmosphere sampler. Warning shot through every coil into the robot's brain.

FIRE! click . . . click-click. Call fire department; parents of child and Sitter Service office in that order, click-click.

The robot shot to his feet. Seconds later the phone was in his hand. He dialed. First the fire department. (The phone was dead.)

The smoke curled under the door in thick grey ropes. In its room, the baby began to cough and cry.

The robot dialed the number Nona had left with him. (The phone was dead.) In the hall, someone screamed a long drawn-out scream. xx343 dialed

Sitter Service. (The phone was dead.) There were running feet in the hall. There was shouting and more, much more screaming. The child gasped and cried fitfully in the other room.

The robot began the whole monotonous process over again. Dialing numbers into an instrument that was dead, lifeless, useless. The phone was out of order . . . somewhere a wire . . . burned through . . . fused . . . broken . . . the phone was . . . **OUT OF ORDER.**

The robot let the instrument drop to the floor. He walked to the door and opened it. The hall was a blazing inferno. A woman ran past him, her long hair flaming behind her like the tail of some dreadful comet. He saw the elevator shaft, acting as a chimney, drawing the fierce heat upwards. The stairwell collapsed with a crashing crescendo as he stood there.

Click-click-click. No phone . . . no elevator . . . no stairs. Atmosphere becoming too contaminated for survival of subject . . . degrees Fahrenheit over 100. Danger point. Circumstances point to extreme physical danger to subject. Click?????

There was nothing there . . . nothing. Something jumped a circuit . . . got its wires crossed . . . went hay-wire. Something happened to xx343.

Quietly, slowly, he closed the door. He went into the child's room and looked down at it. Then he went to the window and looked down, down at the street below. He opened the window.

THE people in the street outside of the Sitter Service offices had ugly faces. Ugly as all faces are ugly when contorted by anger, hate and a thinly disguised readiness for violence. The face of The Mob.

Clemm scarcely heard their muttered comments as he shouldered his way through the outer fringes of the seething crowd.

"Like I always said, them big machines walkin' around loose like that, never know what they're liable to do. A coupla them wires gets crossed or somethin' an' then what? Like this case about the kid in the fire . . ."

"I say wreck the lot of 'em. This should prove it."

"Decent folks should stay home evenings anyway, instead of galivantin' off and leavin' their kids with a hunk of tin."

"But the act was essentially good."

"But the act was not part of its emergency action bank. It was not part of any of its banks. The robot *thought*. We can't have 500 pounds of nearly indestructible metal going around *thinking*."

Clemm was at the inner hub of the crowd now. A burley figure blocked his path. "Where do you think you're goin', Mister? You wouldn't be wanting to give any business to this place would you? Not after what happened?"

Clemm, with a gesture almost of desperation, tried to push past the obstructor. The man became menacing.

"We say nobody goes in here Mister."

Clemm's face blanched with anger. "Get out of my way you fool, I'm Clemm Noldis!"

The crowd fell back, almost shrank back as though he had said he were a leper. An awed murmur went through it, the man who had been blocking his way stepped aside, giving him one last surly glance from under lowered brows.

Once inside the door, the big glass door with Sitter Service stencilled in gold on it, he paused to light a cigarette with trembling hands before proceeding to the reception desk.

The girl's face was pale and she looked at him without welcome. Perhaps she was thinking of the ugly mob outside and what happens to people who try to do their jobs when an organized gang says "Don't Work."

"I-I'd like to see Mr. Versinger, please," asked Clemm quietly.

"Mr. Versinger isn't seeing anyone today," she answered without looking at him.

For the second time that day he answered, "I'm Clemm Noldis."

‡ J. H. Versinger sat behind his desk and toyed with a scale model of his robot. He turned the tiny figure over in his hands almost lovingly as he spoke. "I've been afraid, for a long, long time, Mr. Noldis, that something like this would happen. We hired the finest robotics men in the country, they checked and rechecked every circuit after each robot came in from a job. Whatever happened to xx343 is . . . beyond them. They simply don't know. The worst part of it

is, he's still thinking, and he doesn't realize . . . he can't understand what he's done wrong.

Clemm slowly withdrew his check-book from his pocket. "Mr. Versinger, I'm not a wealthy man but I'll pay every cent I can raise if you will sell me that robot."

The other man's eyes met his in a long moment of understanding and sympathy. "I know how you feel, but public sentiment is too strong against it. They've tried to close me up a dozen times in the past. A dozen times. Petitions, strikes, court orders, zoning, everything they could think of. People don't like them you know. Afraid of them. And now this has gotten out. No, Mr. Noldis, xx343 has got to be dismantled—executed is a better word. Completely and permanently.

"But, we're finished anyway." There was only one letter on the shining surface of the mahogany desk. He held it out to Clemm. The latter read it slowly, moving his lips a little, mouthing the unfamiliar words.

"What—what does it mean?"

"It means that I must cease and desist from any furtherance of my business. It means a government man will be here in the morning to decide what is to be done with my work, my money and with me. It means, Mr. Noldis, precisely the end."

"No! Murdered because he saved my child's life?"

Versinger laughed bitterly. "If he had let the child smother or burn to death in the fire it would have been

the same. But then, it would have been justified, his death and probably mine too, because if such a thing had even happened I-I'd have killed myself. But no, xx343, having exhausted every emergency instruction to no avail, made up some of his

own. He carefully tore the bedclothing into strong strips, made a sling and lowered your little Bobo safely to the ground. *He thought for himself.* This, in a robot, is unforgivable."

THE END

