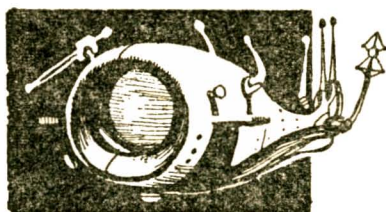


READY, AIM, ROBOT!

By RANDALL GARRETT

The featureless round ball hovered in the air—and only one man knew the secret of its mask of innocence.



ROSS UNDERHILL slipped one hand casually into his coat pocket, felt the hardness of the gun there, and said: "I'm looking for Mr. Quentin Thursday."

The secretary said: "Your name, please; I'll check it against the appointment list."

With his hand still in his coat pocket, Ross aimed the gun carefully at the secretary, hoping that the policeman standing at his side wouldn't notice the slight movement.

"My name is Ross Underhill," he said quietly. Then he pressed the trigger of the handgun in his pocket.

The beam, silent, invisible,

and unimpeded by the fabric of the coat, speared into the secretary. Death came instantly.

Ross and the cop next to him stood there for several seconds. No outward sign disclosed that the robot secretary had ceased to function. Then the door at the far side of the office, no longer held tightly locked by the automatic circuits of the robot secretary, swung silently open, as if to beckon them.

"I guess we can go in, Ross," said the police officer.

Ross grinned. "Let's go." He walked toward the door, at the same time pulling his hand out of his pocket, leaving the gun nestled securely in the pocket.

Then he followed the cop into the inner office.

The robot secretary, its neurotronic brain burned out by the radiations from Ross Underhill's gun, had no objection whatsoever.

Ross was ready, now, for whatever Quentin Thursday might have to say. Thursday could say anything he liked, and—

As the two men crossed the threshold into the inner office, they took one look and stopped.

"What the hell!" said the officer softly.

Quentin Thursday wouldn't say anything. He was quite obviously dead.

"You'd better take a look at him, Sergeant," said Ross. But the suggestion had been unnecessary; Sergeant Hurst was already walking toward the desk. He walked all around the corpse, taking a good look. Then he touched one of the hands that lay on the desk.

"Dead at least an hour," he said. "Coagulator pistol."

Ross nodded silently. The corpse had the all-over blue look and the odd, bloated stiffness that indicated the protein change within the cells and the nearly instantaneous clotting of the blood that resulted when a coagulator was used.

Hurst didn't touch anything else. He took one more look around, then said: "Let's get back to the outer office. We'll have to call Homicide."

"I don't suppose he could have

killed himself?" Ross asked, although he knew the answer in advance.

"Killed himself? And then hid the gun, I suppose?" The sergeant grinned. "Not likely. Come on."

The two of them walked back to the secretary. "I want a call placed to FEDERAL 3-333-333, Extension 97. Sergeant Jameson Hurst calling."

The secretary didn't answer. It just sat there, a squat, oblong metal box the size and shape of an office desk, its lights dead, its various panels closed.

Hurst frowned. "Did you hear? Respond!"

Nothing. The robot was dead. "That's queer," said the cop. "It was all right a minute ago."

Ross Underhill was thinking frantically. He had burned out the robot's brain, not knowing that Quentin Thursday was dead on the other side of the door. If they found out what he'd done, they'd have reason to think that he'd also cooked Thursday.

Hurst said: "Underhill, you're an expert on neutron robots; what's the matter with this one all of a sudden?"

"Brain burned out," Ross said promptly. There was no need to beat around the bush about something that he should have known. It would be very suspicious if a robotocist didn't know right away what was the matter with the thing. "Either that," he went on, "or else the main connections from the brain to the

rest of the machine have been severed. And I doubt that."

"Why?" Hurst was curious.

"No time," Ross told him. "To sever all those connections would take at least five minutes, and they wouldn't burn through all at once by accident. But the brain can be shorted accidentally."

Hurst looked back at the machine. "Queer. Why should it—" He stopped abruptly. "We'll have to go to one of the other offices in the building to use the phone. Let's get going on the double."

The room was full of people. In the inner office, the police lab technicians were taking photos and prowling around with other instruments, checking everything.

Ross Underhill was seated in the outer office, trying to look relaxed, leaning against the back of the couch. Next to him sat Sergeant Hurst, not looking quite so relaxed.

There was a reason for it. Captain Liddel of Homicide was scowling at him.

"Let's get this straight, Hurst," said the captain. "You came up here with Underhill to what?"

"To serve a subpoena, sir." Hurst swallowed, then went on to explain. "Mr. Underhill is a friend of mine, Sir. He knew I was off duty, so he asked me to come with him in case Thursday got rough. Thursday has—had—a reputation for getting nasty

with people he didn't like. And he didn't like process servers."

Captain Liddel turned his head and focused his attention on Ross Underhill. "May I see the subpoena, Mr. Underhill?"

"Certainly." Ross reached into his coat pocket and pulled it out—being careful not to disturb the gun that was there.

Liddel looked it over. "*Underhill vs Thursday*. What were you suing him for?"

"Breach of contract. I designed the neurocircuits he's been using on the new BZ-7 automatic kitchen he's put on the market. He claimed he'd designed them himself and refused to pay me." He noticed the look on the captain's face and grinned. "I know, Captain; it looks like it might be a motive, but it isn't. I'm a professional roboticist, and a good one. The money I'd lose if Quentin Thursday failed to pay was important, but it wasn't that important. I wouldn't gain anything by killing him, anyway. That wouldn't get me my money."

The captain nodded, but his suspicious look didn't go away. His expression said clearly that he'd look more deeply into the story. "Where were you between 1300 and 1500 hours this afternoon?" he asked.

"Home," said Ross. "At least, I was most of the time." He paused. He might as well tell as much as he could. "I was right here about 1310," he admitted. "The robot secretary told me Thursday was out, so I headed

for home to do a few things before he returned."

"You came here to serve that subpoena?" Liddel's eyes narrowed. "Why didn't you have Hurst with you then?"

"I didn't have the subpoena then. I didn't decide to sue until 1520 or so. Then I registered with the Court and got the subpoena issued."

"And then you went to get Hurst?"

"That's right."

"And you can't prove where you were between 1310 and 1520?"

Ross shook his head. "No. I was home. I didn't know I'd need an alibi."

Liddel started to say something else, but a voice from across the room interrupted him.

"Hey, Captain! The brain's burned out, all right. I can't quite see why yet, but it's still warm from the overload." It was the police roboticist who had been looking at the secretary. He had partially dismantled the mechanism and was looking at the plastic case which housed the neurotronic brain.

Then another voice. This time, it came from the inner office. "Captain, come here a second, will you?"

Liddel turned and walked across the room to the inner office.

When he was gone, Sergeant Hurst turned to Ross.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" he asked.

"I didn't kill him. Believe me, Jamie, he was worth more to me alive than dead." He paused, then added: "A hell of a lot more."

Captain Liddel stuck his head out of the door to the inner office. "Sergeant, come here a minute."

Hurst rose, and Underhill leaned back again in the couch. When the sergeant was out of sight, Ross Underhill slipped his hand into his coat pocket, eased out the gun, and pushed it into the crack between the armrest and the foam cushion of the couch. He knew they'd find it eventually; he knew they'd pin the burning of the secretary on him. But meanwhile, he had to have time.

When the gun was safely hidden, he stood up and walked over to where the police roboticist was dismantling the dead robot.

"How does it look?" he asked conversationally.

"Damned peculiar," said the technician. "I can't figure out why it burned out. Can't figure it at all." He glanced up from his work. "Ross Underhill. You're the guy who designed those Thinkers?" It was half a question, half a statement.

Ross grinned. "I'm the guy, I guess."

The technician nodded his approval. "Beautiful job. They can find a flaw in the evidence in no time."

Ross frowned a little. "Not ex-

actly. They're nothing but a double-checking logic machine with a verbal feed-in. They can't find a flaw in the evidence, only on the interpretation."

"Oh, sure," said the technician, going back to his work, "but it's still amazing to watch a detective outline his theory on how a crime was committed and have the Thinker point out the errors in his theory. We've sure uncovered a lot of evidence that way—looking for stuff that has to be there, I mean."

"There'll be improvements," Ross said.

"Yeah. Damn! I can't see what happened to this secretary! Look here; the third iota stage is seared through in the J sector, but . . .

He and Ross spent the next several minutes talking shop. Ross did most of the listening, only offering innocuous suggestions now and then. But when the technician stood up with an odd look on his face and said: "Well, I'll be damned!" Ross was ready to throw in the sponge.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You know," said the technician, "for a while, I was beginning to think someone had burned it out with a gamma-ray projector. I'd just about decided that was it."

"What made you change your mind?" The voice was that of Sergeant Hurst, who had just come out of the inner office.

The technician said: "Well, Sergeant, you said that you and

Mr. Underhill weren't out of this room more than a minute, so there wouldn't have been time. Besides, I found something here." He pointed into the brain case. "Take a look."

Hurst peered. "What? That little scratch?"

"That's right. It's on the memory bank. Somehow, it got a little scratch—piece of sand or something in the lubricant."

"You mean a little scratch like that can burn out the whole neurotronic brain?" Hurst asked.

"Sure," said the robotocist. "Oh, it could be done without burning out the brain, but it'd take an expert. That scratch is what did it."

"Mmm." Hurst turned toward Underhill. "Go on in the office, Ross. Captain wants to speak to you."

Ross Underhill shrugged and went into the inner office, leaving Hurst and the technician to discuss the scratch on the robot's brain.

Captain Liddel still looked suspicious, but not quite so much so. "You did quite a bit of work with Thursday, did you, Underhill?"

"Not really," Ross said. "I worked for him for about six months, on and off. Free lance stuff, you understand; I was on a small retainer salary, but all I was really paid for was the work I actually delivered. Most of it was relatively unimportant, inexpensive circuit work. It was the complete redesign of that

robot kitchen that was hard work and would have cost him money—if he'd paid."

Liddel nodded. "I was wondering if you'd ever been in his office before?"

"A couple of times," Underhill admitted.

"Do you happen to know what might have been in that niche?" The captain's finger pointed toward a section of the wall. A panel had been opened to disclose a previously concealed cupboard in the wall.

Ross Underhill frowned. Hell, yes, he knew what had been in that panel—but did he dare admit it now?

"I didn't even know that place was there," he said truthfully.

"Take a good look at it," said Captain Liddel evenly. His iron-gray eyes were coldly watchful.

Underhill obediently walked over and looked inside, being careful not to touch anything. It was a small cabinet, cubical, a little less than eighteen inches each way. There were two small, grooved electrodes in the bottom of it.

"It looks like a recharging station for a free robot," said Underhill.

It was one of the simplest circuits to build into a small robot. Even back in the nineteen-forties, small mechanisms had been built which would automatically go to a specific place to recharge their batteries when they needed it.

"Got any idea what kind of

robot it was?" the captain asked.

Underhill spread his hands. "There are lots of small robots—firefighters, floor cleaners—lots of them."

Liddel frowned. "I know. To be honest, I don't quite see why it would be of any interest. But someone broke the lock on it and then slid the door shut again."

"The lock was jimmied?"

"That's right." Captain Liddel shrugged. "I thought maybe you could shed some light on it." He picked up a piece of paper from the top of Quentin Thursday's desk. "Maybe you can tell me something about this. We found it in the desk drawer." He handed it to Underhill.

It was a list of names and times.

Graydon—1400

Meinster—1450

Manetti—1500

"Looks like a list of appointments," Underhill said.

Liddel nodded. "But why should he write them down? His robot secretary would keep a list."

"I can answer that," Ross Underhill said. "Quentin Thursday didn't really trust robots; he always kept lists and made notes. It was his way of double-checking the robot, you see."

Liddel nodded again. "Yeah. Do you know any of those names?"

"They're familiar, but I couldn't be sure they're the same people. There aren't any first names there."

"We'll decide that. Who are they?"

Underhill tapped the list. "The first one might be Phil Graydon. He's a robot repair technician—works for Branchurst General Repair Company. The second guy might be James Meinster; he's an inventor—has fingers in all kinds of pies."

"We know Meinster," said the captain. "Who's the third man?"

"Could be Gus Manetti—Augustus Manetti. He's in the same business I'm in—free-lance robot design engineer."

Liddel nodded. "Okay; we'll check. And don't worry—we won't tell them where we got the information."

"I'm not worried about that, Captain; I have nothing to hide, either from you or from them." He pointed at the list. "Besides, it could be three other guys with the same last names."

"You don't believe that," said Liddel, "and neither do I."

He glanced again at the corpse that still sat in the chair at the desk. "Damn it! The newscasters are really going to be on our necks. This makes the ninth one in two months. And we haven't got a single idea." Then he looked up at Underhill again. "Okay, Underhill, you can go, but don't go anywhere out of town without notifying the police department."

Fifteen minutes later, Ross Underhill was sitting in a bar on Fifth Avenue, trying to decide what he should do. Of all

the things he did not want to do, getting nabbed on a murder charge was right up near the top of the list. Of course, it would be nice if he could tell them who the real murderer was, but—hell! He was no detective!

He sat in a darkened booth, staring at his drink, trying to put things together.

"Shove over, Ross. I want to talk to you." The voice was hard, but it still retained a touch of friendliness. It was Sergeant Jameson Hurst.

"Hullo, Jamie. Go ahead, sit down. What's eating you?"

"You. I figured you might tell me something you didn't tell the captain." Hurst pushed his big bulk into the booth and signaled for a beer.

"What makes you think so?" Underhill asked.

Hurst scowled. "Don't give me that, Ross. You've already pulled one funny one on me; don't pull another. I've known you for years, and I've always thought you were straight, but now you've got me wondering.

"What was the real purpose of your going to Thursday's office?"

Ross downed half his drink and looked at Hurst for a moment.

"Okay," he said finally, "I'll give it to you. All I ask is that you check up before you run me in for a killing I didn't do. Fair enough?"

"If you didn't do it, you're safe. If you did, I'll nail you. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly." Ross Underhill stuck a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. "So here it goes.

"This is the ninth coagulator killing in the past two months, right?"

Hurst moved his head a little. "Right. So?"

"Would you be happy to know that you've already got the killer?"

"Yeah. Who?"

"The late Mr. Quentin Thursday."

Sergeant Hurst picked up his beer and sipped at it. "Go on. Draw me a picture."

"There's nothing much to it. Thursday was doing expensive killings for hire. He had an almost foolproof method."

"No method is foolproof," Hurst said.

"Come off it, Jamie," Ross said in exasperation. "You know that nobody has a lead on the eight previous killings. You don't have a suspect, you don't know how it was done. All you know is that a man is found dead, shot by a coagulator. And it isn't easy to get hold of a coagulator.

"A coagulator has an effective range of about fifteen feet, so you know that the killer must have been close to the dead man in each case. And yet, there's never any indication that the late lamented even suspected whoever was in the room. Or even suspected that there was anyone in the room at all.

"That makes it pretty tough to figure, doesn't it?"

"All right," Hurst said, "so it's tough. And you claim that the man in the room was Quentin Thursday?"

"I didn't say that; I said Thursday killed them, but I didn't say he was in the room with them. He wasn't."

"Who was?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all."

Hurst looked dangerous. "What the hell are you trying —" Then, suddenly, his eyes widened. "Robot," he said softly.

Underhill nodded. "Exactly. A small robot, about the size of a regulation football, with a coagulator mounted in the nose. All Thursday had to do was give it instructions, and it went out and killed the men who'd been fingered. Nothing to it. When you know the set-up."

Hurst slumped back in the seat and stared into space. "That's what the recharging station in Thursday's wall was for. He kept his little killer there."

"Sure," said Underhill.

"What a setup! I didn't know a robot like that could be built. How the hell did it maneuver? How did it get up to that niche?"

"I know what you're thinking," said Ross Underhill. "I knew that your Captain Liddel was wondering about it, too. Most recharging stations are down on the floor, so that the little robots can just roll in on wheels, recharge, and go their

way. To have one halfway up the wall looked funny."

"So?"

"So, it didn't have wheels. It was jet operated. Small wings, and powerful baffled jets—so quiet that they barely whispered, but powerful enough to keep the robot airborne."

Sergeant Hurst whistled very softly. "That explains how it got in and out of places without being seen or heard. No wonder we couldn't figure out who did those killings. Who designed it, do you know?"

Ross Underhill nodded slowly. "Yeah. I know. I did. It's my brainchild."

"I see," said Hurst. "I see. No wonder you didn't want to talk."

"I didn't design it as a killer," Underhill said. "It was supposed to be a camera device. Thursday told me he had an idea for TV and movie cameras. He wanted to mount them in a self-levitating device, which would do away with dollies and stuff like that. And it could be robot operated so that the cameraman could control it remotely or let it do its own work, if necessary. It would be a hell of a nice gadget for news coverage; it could get into places where a human being couldn't go.

"All Thursday did was mount a coagulator in place of the camera, you see. Or rather, he must have had it mounted; he didn't know anything about robot operation, so he must have had someone else do it for him."

"How'd you find out all this?" Hurst asked.

"He tried to kill me with the damned thing. Since I'd built it, he wanted me out of the way. He sent the thing into my apartment last night."

"How'd you get away from it?"

Underhill grinned. "You haven't seen my apartment lately. You know that big mirror I had in my bedroom? Well, I'd moved it into my office to do some tests with a microbeam reflector. That damned robot of mine came floating in the window, saw my reflection in the mirror, and beamed it with the coagulator. A robot isn't very bright, you know. Fortunately, a coagulator beam won't reflect. I dropped behind my desk when I saw what it was. It assumed that I was dead and went back to Thursday."

"What were you up to today?"

Underhill rubbed his jaw. "Well, I had to find out. I couldn't be sure that Quentin Thursday was really the man behind the killer robot. Someone might have bought it from him and made the conversion themselves. So I went to Thursday's office to ask him."

"Wasn't that kind of dangerous?" Hurst asked. "If he was out to knock you off, he might have done it in his office."

"Nope," said Ross Underhill, "not Quentin Thursday. He wasn't the type. I knew him

pretty well. I knew that he wouldn't kill me if he could possibly be connected with it. I'd be safe in a public place like that—I mean, at 1300 in the afternoon, there would be several people in his outer office, so he couldn't get away with anything."

"So you went there and spoke to him?"

"I went there, but I didn't speak to him. As soon as the secretary relayed my name to the inner office, he refused to see me. He was busy. I knew better than that."

"So then you went and got the subpoena," Hurst said.

"That's right. I knew then that he was guilty, so I brought suit. Perfectly legal, too; he actually did owe me the money for that robot kitchen—and for his killer. I'd let things slide because he'd been late before, but I decided to use it as an excuse to get into his office. I wanted you with me because I wanted to catch him red-handed with the robot in his wall niche."

"You knew about the wall niche?"

Ross shook his head. "Nope. But I knew it had to be in his office somewhere. I figured that if you were with me, we could nab him with the goods, see?"

"Yeah—but why didn't you just tell me?"

"What proof did I have? Besides, you would've wanted to do it all legally, with a search warrant and everything. All he needed was two minutes warn-

ing, and he'd have had the robot going elsewhere—a long ways away."

Hurst finished his beer and signaled for another. "That makes sense. I—*hey!*" He looked sharply at Ross. "If all he needed was a minute or so, how come you figured you could get in? All he had to do was have the secretary delay you long enough to get rid of his killer robot." His eyes narrowed. "I thought it was damned funny about that secretary going dead."

Ross Underhill sighed. "Yeah. I was carrying a gamma projector in my pocket. You'll find it stuffed down in the couch in Thursday's outer office."

"The captain's probably already found it, I—"

Something buzzed very softly. Sergeant Hurst glanced at Ross and then lifted his wrist to his lips. "Sergeant Hurst," he said into the wrist microphone, anticipating the caller.

A voice spoke into the speaker in his ear.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst. "He's with me now; I'll bring him in." A pause, then: "Yes, sir, I will. Right away."

He dropped his hand and said to Ross: "Finish your drink. The captain wants to see you at headquarters."

Three days later, Ross Underhill sat morosely in his cell, staring at the floor. Across from him sat Martin Blaine, his lawyer.

"It looks bad, Underhill," Blaine said.

"I know," Ross Underhill said, without looking up. "How much longer?"

"The preliminary hearing is in ten minutes." Blaine was a thin, balding man with a nervous manner. "I think we'll be able to confuse the prosecutor a little. There's no motive yet, as far as I can see."

"What about the killer robot I told Hurst about?"

"They can't use Hurst's testimony; that's hearsay. And they can't force you to testify. They still haven't found the robot."

A police officer came up to the door of the cell and activated the electrolock. "All right, let's go. Judge Hogbotham wants you up there early."

Fifteen minutes later, Judge Hogbotham was saying: "The purpose of this preliminary examination is to determine whether anyone should be bound over to stand trial in Circuit Court. The prosecutor will begin."

The prosecutor was a sleepy-looking individual with a slight paunch and a baritone voice. He looked over the accused, Ross Underhill, then looked at the judge.

"If the Court please, it is the contention of the prosecution that the deceased, Quentin Thursday, was murdered for gain. We will attempt to show that the defendant, Ross Underhill, had both motive and opportunity."

"Very well; proceed."

"Call Police Sergeant Jamieson Hurst."

Hurst was sworn in. He told his story—exactly what had happened on the afternoon of the killing.

"Did you search the accused immediately after the discovery of the body, Sergeant?" asked the prosecutor.

"No, sir," said Hurst.

"Why not?"

"At the time, I saw no reason to. I had no reason to think he had done it."

The prosecutor looked angry and addressed the Court. "I'd like to remind the Court that this is a conclusion of the witness and should not be admitted as testimony."

Blaine stood up. "I'd like to remind the Court," he said in his reedy voice, "that this is the prosecution's witness."

"The answer will remain," said Judge Hogbotham. "Proceed."

"Have you any reason to believe that the defendant may have been armed?" the prosecutor asked.

"Yes, sir," said Hurst.

"Explain, please."

"A gamma projector was found in the sofa near the spot where Underhill was sitting. His fingerprints were on it."

The prosecutor nodded. "This was after the body had been discovered?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it possible that he might

have had more than one weapon on him?"

"Objection!" said Blaine. "A gamma projector is a tool, not a lethal weapon. Only prolonged exposure to its effects can kill a man."

"Sustained," said the Court. "Rephrase the question."

"Is it possible," asked the prosecutor, "that the defendant may have been carrying something besides the gamma projector?"

"Objection." It was Blaine again. "It has not been proved that the defendant was carrying the projector."

"His fingerprints were on it," snapped the prosecutor.

"That hasn't been proved, either. Witness has so stated, but witness has not qualified as a fingerprint expert."

The prosecutor turned to the bench. "Your Honor, my next witness will be a police laboratory technician who will state that the fingerprints are most definitely that of the defendant. If the Court wishes, I will have Sergeant Hurst step down for a few moments and ask the technician to testify."

"Your Honor," said Blaine smoothly, "that won't be necessary. We stipulate that the fingerprints were those of the defendant. We further stipulate that the projector was in possession of the defendant and was placed in the sofa at the time suggested by the witness."

The prosecutor looked flabbergasted.

"Why did you object, then?" the judge asked.

"Your Honor, I must insist that the prosecutor lay a proper foundation before he asks certain questions."

"Prosecution is so instructed," said the judge. "Proceed."

"Thank you, your Honor," said the prosecutor. He turned back towards Hurst. "Sergeant, was anything else found in the room which had any bearing on the case?"

"Yes, sir. A Nordling-Fenshaw coagulator."

"And where was it found?"

"In the same sofa, sir."

Ross Underhill tried not to show the shock he felt. Someone had put a coagulator in that sofa! Oh, brother! That cooked it!

The prosecutor looked triumphantly at Blaine. "Will the defense stipulate to the coagulator, too?"

"Certainly not," snapped Blaine.

"Very well. Cross examine."

Blaine got up and walked over to the witness chair. "Sergeant Hurst, were there any fingerprints found on the coagulator?"

"No, sir, there were not."

"Can you give any reason for there being fingerprints on the gamma projector and not on the coagulator?"

"The coagulator had been wiped off, sir, but the projector hadn't."

"I see. Now, you were sitting

next to the defendant during the time in question?"

"Not all the time. Most of it." Hurst went on to explain what he had done.

"Doesn't it seem odd to you that the defendant would have wiped off one of the objects and not the other?"

"Objection!" said the prosecutor. "That calls for a conclusion of the witness."

"Sustained," said Judge Hogbotham.

Ross Underhill pondered the evidence. What had happened? How could he have walked into a trap like that?

The next witness was a technician who testified as to the effective range and the action on the human body of a coagulator. It was established that it was impossible to pin down a coagulator death within a period of time less than six hours because of the effect on the human body. Rigor mortis set in immediately, and the temperature of the body dropped as the body's own energy was used to denature the protein in the tissues.

"In other words," said the prosecutor, "it is possible that the killing took place only seconds before Sergeant Hurst and the defendant entered the room?"

"That's right; yes, sir."

Ross could see where the testimony was heading. The police were going to contend that he had shot Thursday through the door of the office just before he had gone in with Hurst! And

then he had concealed the weapon in the sofa.

Witness number three was the technician who had been in Thursday's office with the police, the one who had taken the robot secretary apart. After qualifying him as an expert witness, the prosecutor said: "Now, would you please tell the Court your conclusions as to what caused the death of the robot?"

"Not 'death,'" the technician said importantly. "Since the neurotronic brain of a robot is technically not alive to begin with. We speak of the 'total randomization of impulses' in the brain."

"I understand, sir, but isn't this 'total randomizing' in the neurotronic brain of a robot commonly called 'death'?"

"Oh, yes—by the layman."

Judge Hogbotham leaned forward. "The witness will remember that most of the people in this courtroom are laymen as far as his expert testimony is concerned. I would prefer that the witness refrain from using technical jargon as much as possible. It will, of course, be permitted if it is necessary to draw fine technical differences; the Court has no wish to hamper the testimony of the witness unduly."

"Uh—thank you, your Honor."

"Proceed."

The prosecutor repeated the question.

"The cause of—uh—'death',"

said the technician, "was the application of high-intensity gamma radiation to the brain itself. This causes the impulses within the brain to become completely random, so that the brain can no longer function logically or rationally."

"Could such randomization have been caused by the gamma projector in the Exhibit Box?"

"It could."

"Your witness," said the prosecutor.

Martin Blaine rose and smiled in a friendly manner. "I wonder," he said, "if there might be anything else which could have caused the death of the robot. Was there any damage done to it? Physical damage that could *not* have been caused by a gamma projector?"

"You mean the scratch?"

"If there was such a scratch, yes. Could a scratch cause the total randomization of a neurotronic brain?"

"It could, but it didn't in this case."

Blaine looked a little surprised. "Oh?"

"Just a minute," interposed the judge. "Witness has mentioned a scratch. Nothing has been said about this scratch before. Before we go any further, I'd like to have a description of this scratch."

The technician nodded. "Yes, your Honor. The scratch was noticed . . ."

He went on to describe the scratch and its location.

"What could have caused it?" the judge asked.

"A grain of abrasive dust in the cooling lubricant solution is usually responsible for such things, your Honor."

"And it could have caused the death of the robot in question?"

"It could have, but it didn't. You see, when the gamma gun was found, I was asked to do a more detailed analysis of the randomized brain. The scratch did not go through the B-K layer, the outermost section of the brain. A scratch would have to go through the F-2 layer to cause complete randomization. It did not go that far."

"I see," said the judge. "Go ahead, Counsellor."

"What could the scratch have done?" Blaine asked.

"That's hard to say. I'd have to know the reactions of the non-randomized brain. It's hard to tell from a 'dead' brain. The scratch is in the memory area, but that's all I could tell you."

"And it definitely could not have caused the randomization of the brain?"

"Definitely not."

Blaine nodded. "Thank you. That's all." He went back and sat down beside Underhill while the prosecutor called his next witness.

"How does it look?" Ross Underhill whispered.

"Just hold on. We're doing all right."

"The hell we are! They've practically proved method and opportunity."

"Just hold on," the lawyer repeated.

The next three witnesses were called in, one after the other, to establish the time of Quentin Thursday's death—which could not be done by medical evidence. Ross Underhill perked up his ears and listened carefully as Mr. Philip Graydon was called to the stand. Graydon had been number one on the little list that Thursday had had in his desk.

The prosecutor had Graydon establish that he was a control circuit repairman, and that he had had an appointment with Thursday at 1400 hours on the fatal afternoon.

"Now, Mr. Graydon, at what time did you arrive at the office of the deceased?"

"At approximately 1403 or 1404. I was a little late." Graydon was a short, thin, nervous, balding man with a pencil-thin mustache, a skirmish line of hairs on his upper lip.

"And what was the nature of your business?"

"I have been doing a certain amount of circuit work for Mr. Thursday—control and sensory circuits, that sort of thing. I went up to discuss the details of one of his new line of kitchen robots."

"This, then, was a purely business call?"

"It was. Certain sensory circuits weren't functioning properly. Mr. Thursday didn't like their reactions."

The prosecutor nodded. "And

he wanted you to make some changes in the brain circuits?"

Graydon shook his head. "Not the brain. I'm not a neurotronic brain specialist; I simply work with the circuits that make the machine move. The nerves and muscles, so to speak, not the brain."

"I understand. Now, I ask you: Was Mr. Quentin Thursday alive when you came to his office?"

"Yes, sir. Very much so, sir," said Graydon.

"Was he alive when you left him?"

"Yes, sir," Graydon said positively, "he was."

"About what time was that?"

"I should say around 1445."

"How can you place the time so accurately?"

"I had to catch a subway to Boston. It left at 1500, and it's about a twelve minute walk from Thursday's office to the station. I caught the train easily, so it couldn't have been much later than, say, 1447 when I left. On the other hand, I didn't have to wait long for the train, either. A minute, maybe."

"I see. Was there anyone else in Mr. Thursday's office while you were there?"

Graydon said: "Not in the inner office, no. But there was a man waiting in the outer office when I left."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Yes. It was James Meinster."

"Are you personally acquainted with Mr. Meinster?"

"I know him by sight, and

I've spoken to him once or twice. I've seen him around Mr. Thursday's office several times."

"And he was waiting in the outer office, you say?"

"That's right."

"At approximately 1445?"

"That's right."

The prosecutor turned to Blaine. "Your witness."

Blaine rose to his feet. "If the Court please, I should like to call Mr. Graydon back later for cross-examination. Right now, I would like to hear the rest of the prosecution's testimony."

"Granted," said the judge. "Go on, Mr. Prosecutor."

"I call Mr. James Meinster to the stand."

Meinster was in his late forties, heavy set, graying, and very distinguished looking. He was sworn in, and identified himself as a professional investor.

"I put money into businesses that no one else will back," he explained. "I usually have an eye for a good investment that looks risky to a bank."

"I see." The prosecutor put his hands behind his back. "Mr. Meinster, when was the last time you saw Mr. Quentin Thursday?"

Meinster identified the time.

"You were in his office," the prosecutor said. "At what time was that?"

"Well, the appointment was for 1450, but I was a few minutes early."

"Was there anyone else in the outer office with you?"

"In the outer office? No, not at first. I walked in and spoke to the secretary robot—told it I was waiting to see Thursday. At about 1445, a man came out. Walked on by me, as though he was in a hurry. I waited five more minutes, or so, and then the secretary told me to go in."

"This man who walked out—was he known to you?"

"Slightly. It was a man named Graydon. Met him once or twice."

"I see. Now, you went in to Mr. Thursday's office. Was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"He was. And he was alive when I left."

"We'll get to that in a moment, Mr. Meinster," said the prosecutor. "Now, can you tell us what your business with Mr. Thursday was?"

"He had asked me to back a new line of kitchen robots he wanted to put out. I was there to discuss the details."

Ross Underhill tried to keep his face calm; his lawyer had told him not to display too much anxiety. But Ross kept wanting to chew his fingernails or tear his hair or anything else to relieve the tension that was building up within him.

The trial seemed to drag on and on. No, not *trial*; he had to remember that. This was just a preliminary examination, to show cause why he should be held for trial. No matter what was found out here, the trial it-

self would be the big battle, unless the judge decided not to bind him over.

The next witness was Augustus Manetti, who identified himself as a free-lance robot design engineer.

"Did you have an appointment with Mr. Quentin Thursday on the day in question?"

"I did."

"At what time?"

Manetti, a big, hulking blond-haired man, folded his arms over his chest. "The appointment was for 1500. I was there on the dot."

Manetti went on to explain that he had only recently begun to work for Thursday on robot design. Ross Underhill thought sourly to himself: *Yeah; Thursday hired Manetti after he'd thrown me out.*

"You showed up for the appointment on time," the prosecutor paraphrased. "And was Mr. Thursday alive at that time?"

"I don't know; I didn't get to see him."

"How did this happen?"

"I went to the secretary—the robot—and gave it my name. It said that I had no appointment for that time. I tried to get it to call Mr. Thursday to verify the appointment, but it said that Mr. Thursday had given it orders that he was not to be disturbed."

It was at that moment that the answer flashed into Ross Underhill's mind. Suddenly, as if he had had the picture drawn for him, he knew what had happened that fatal afternoon.

He leaned over and began whispering furiously into Martin Blaine's ear. As he talked, Blaine's eyes grew wider.

At last he whispered back to Underhill. "All right. But I'll have to stall. I'll try it."

When the witness was turned over to Blaine, he stood up and began cross-examining, boring into every bit of Manetti's testimony. Underhill listened, but nothing more came out that would be of any interest to him. He kept his eyes on the clock as the hand moved slowly toward time for the noon recess.

At last, the judge said: "Could this cross-examination be interrupted for lunch, Counsellor?"

"Certainly, your Honor."

"There will be a recess of one hour. This Court will reconvene at 1300 hours. All witnesses are instructed that they will appear at that time."

In the cell of the Felony Jail, Ross Underhill stood by his bunk while the guard let his lawyer and Sergeant Hurst in through the grilled door.

"It's unusual to allow a member of the police department to set in on a conference like this," said Martin Blaine, "but there's reason for it."

Sergeant Hurst nodded. "If Ross is innocent, I'll do everything I can to get him off."

"Thanks, Jamie," Ross said. "Just to give you something to think about, do you remember exactly what happened when we went into Thursday's office? Aft-

er I killed the secretary, I mean."

"Why—sure. We went in and found him dead. Quentin Thursday was—"

"Who went into the room first?"

Hurst frowned. "Why, I did. I was on your left, so I was naturally closer to the door."

"Then how did I beam down Thursday, shooting through the door, without hitting you? Tell me that."

Hurst blinked. "I guess you could have done it, but I'm damned if I see how. It wouldn't be easy."

"It sure wouldn't. I'd have to aim past you so that the vibrations wouldn't hit you. That would mean I'd have to take the gun out of my pocket."

Hurst considered that. "Not necessarily; I don't think my testimony on that would stand up in court."

"I'm not trying to convince the Court, Jamie; I'm trying to convince you. What do you think?"

"I believe you," Hurst said. "Now, how do we get you off?"

"Okay, listen. If I didn't do it, it must have been one of the other three who were there this afternoon, right?"

"Probably. Although there could be a fifth person that we haven't found yet."

Ross shook his head. "If we start off on something like that we'll never get anywhere. Let's just stick to the suspects we have." He felt in his pockets,

found them empty, and then accepted a cigarette from Hurst.

"The whole thing hinges on that little scratch on the robot's brain. When was it put there, and how, and by whom?"

"Go ahead, Ross," the sergeant said. "I'm listening."

Ross went ahead.

"The Court will come to order," said Judge Hogbotham. "The defense will continue with cross-examination."

Martin Blaine rose. "If the Court please, I would like to dismiss Mr. Manetti for the moment and recall Mr. Meinster to the stand."

"Very well. Call Mr. Meinster."

As Meinster went to the witness box, there was a slight commotion in the rear of the courtroom. Sergeant Hurst came in, wheeling a stand on which sat an object covered by a sheet of canvas.

"What is this?" asked the judge in some surprise.

"Merely an exhibit for the defense, your Honor. I will ask that it be admitted in evidence later."

"Proceed."

"Thank you." Blaine turned to the witness. "I think you stated, Mr. Meinster, that you arrived at Quentin Thursday's office at about 1445 and left at about 1510?"

"That's right."

"When you left, Mr. Meinster, did you take anything with you?"

Meinster paled a little. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you carry any object from that office which you had not had in your possession previously?"

Meinster hesitated for a moment, then: "No, I did not."

"Let the record show that witness hesitated," said Blaine. Then he walked over to the canvas-covered object on the stand and whipped off the cloth. "I ask you, Mr. Meinster, if you have ever seen this before."

It was a small, metallic oblate spheroid about the size of a regulation football. At one end was a lensed opening; at the other end were several tubes, and there were other tubes projecting from the sides.

Meinster paled even more. "Yes," he said finally, "I've seen it."

"When?"

"Uh — in — uh — in Quentin Thursday's office."

"Was that the last time you saw it?"

Suddenly, Meinster clamped his lips shut tightly. "I refuse to answer that question on the grounds that it would tend to incriminate me."

"Oh?" Blaine leaned forward. "Now, surely, Mr. Meinster, it is better to be indicted for robbery than for murder, isn't it?"

Meinster said nothing.

Blaine turned to the judge. "If your Honor will permit, I would like to demonstrate this object. I'd like to show how it works."

The judge looked somewhat

baffled, but he nodded his okay. "You may proceed."

Blaine went over to the control board. "This is a robot which has been preset to search for a certain man and then take his picture. Right now, it has in its memory several men. If it sees any of them, its mechanism will operate."

"Is it perfectly harmless?" asked the judge.

Blaine turned to Ross Underhill. "It is, isn't it, Ross?"

Underhill stood up. "I built it myself. It contains nothing but a camera, a brain, and sensory and control apparatus. It is as harmless as a cleaning robot." Then he smiled. "Unless someone has planted something in it since I saw it last, it's perfectly harmless."

"Proceed," said the judge.

Blaine pressed a button on the control panel. The little mechanism coughed a couple of times, then rose silently into the air. Then it hovered and began to turn slowly, as though it were looking over the men in the courtroom—which, in a manner of speaking, it was.

It turned and stared at Meinster. Meinster looked at it apprehensively, but said nothing.

"Mr. Meinster," Blaine said suddenly, "isn't it true that you jimmed open the electrolock on Thursday's door?"

"I refuse to answer," said Meinster, without taking his eyes off the floating robot.

The robot's muffled jets hissed

a little, and it swiveled around and stared directly at Philip Graydon, the repair technician.

Graydon screamed.

In the judge's chambers, half an hour later, Judge Hogbotham said: "I still do not completely understand, Mr. Underhill."

"It's fairly simple, your Honor. It was that scratch on the brain that bothered me, you see. It was much too precise to have been done by accident. It erased part of the memory, but not all of it. It *could* have been an accident, but I assumed that it wasn't and went on from there.

"When was it put there? It had to be before I got there.

"Who put it there? An expert, obviously. No layman could have been that precise. No layman could have incised out the exact spot where the memory of that afternoon's appointments was without either taking all the memory or burning out the brain.

"Since I knew it wasn't I who had done it, it must have been one of the other three. From the first, I thought it had to be either Graydon or Manetti, since Meinster isn't a robot man. Then, when Meinster said that the robot had let him in, I decided that it must be Manetti."

Martin Blaine chuckled. "Then Manetti fouled you up by testifying that the robot wouldn't let him in."

"It only fouled me up for a minute, really. Then I knew that it had to be either Graydon or

Meinster. Meinster just might have known more about robots than he let on.

"What happened was this: Philip Graydon kept his appointment with Thursday at the time he said he did. He had evidently been working with Thursday on the killer robot; he was the man who had put the coagulator in it instead of the camera that I had put in. But Thursday wanted to get rid of Graydon, just as he had tried to kill me.

"Graydon decided to get Thursday first, so he killed him with the coagulator. Then he went out to the outer office and made that little scratch on the secretary's brain at just the right place to remove the appointment list, not knowing that Thursday had a written list.

"Then he heard someone at the door of the outer office—Meinster. He shoved the coagulator into the sofa cushions and pretended to be coming out of Thursday's office. The idea he had was to deny that he had been able to get in to see Thursday. But when he found out that the whole brain had been burned out, he changed his story."

"If he'd stuck to it," said Sergeant Hurst, "you would really have been in trouble because you were the only one who had been in there previously."

"Yeah," Ross agreed. "Anyway, Meinster came in. The secretary told him that he was not on the appointment list, since that had been scratched from its memory. Meinster didn't like

that at all. He stormed over to the door and jimmied the electrolock—it's easy to do. Then he got a shock when he found Thursday dead.

"I think you'll find that he had an interest in the killer robot, too, only he didn't know it was supposed to be a killer. He had money in it as a spy device. He knew that he couldn't get any of his money back with Thursday dead, so he decided to take the robot and have it duplicated later, claiming it as his own. But he didn't know it had a coagulator in the nose instead of a camera."

"I take it," said the judge, "that the device you demonstrated in the courtroom was not the one that Meinster stole. You couldn't have risked that."

"That's right, sir. It was one of my own that I had in my apartment; Sergeant Hurst got it for me. It isn't even a robot; just the operating shell without a brain. But Meinster thought

it was the same one that he had taken—and so did Graydon.

"Meinster wasn't worried when it pointed at him. He thought it was just a camera device, anyway. But Graydon knew that the robot in Thursday's office had a coagulator in it, and he knew that Thursday had given the robot his recognition pattern. So he panicked."

The judge rubbed his chin. "If he hadn't confessed in the courtroom, you might still be in trouble. But that was good detective work, young man."

Sergeant Hurst's snort was good-naturedly derisive. "Detective work, my foot! He was going by guesswork, pure and simple. He just assumed he knew the answer and went on from there. There was no chain of evidence leading positively to Philip Graydon."

Underhill grinned broadly. "Sure. But, what the hell, Jamie, that's all Sherlock Holmes ever did."
THE END

