

A MAGAZINE OF THE BIZARRE AND UNUSUAL



Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 25 CONTENTS FOR FEBRUARY, 1935 Number 2

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Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$3.00 a year in the United States, \$4.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeants' Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 840 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGET, Editor.

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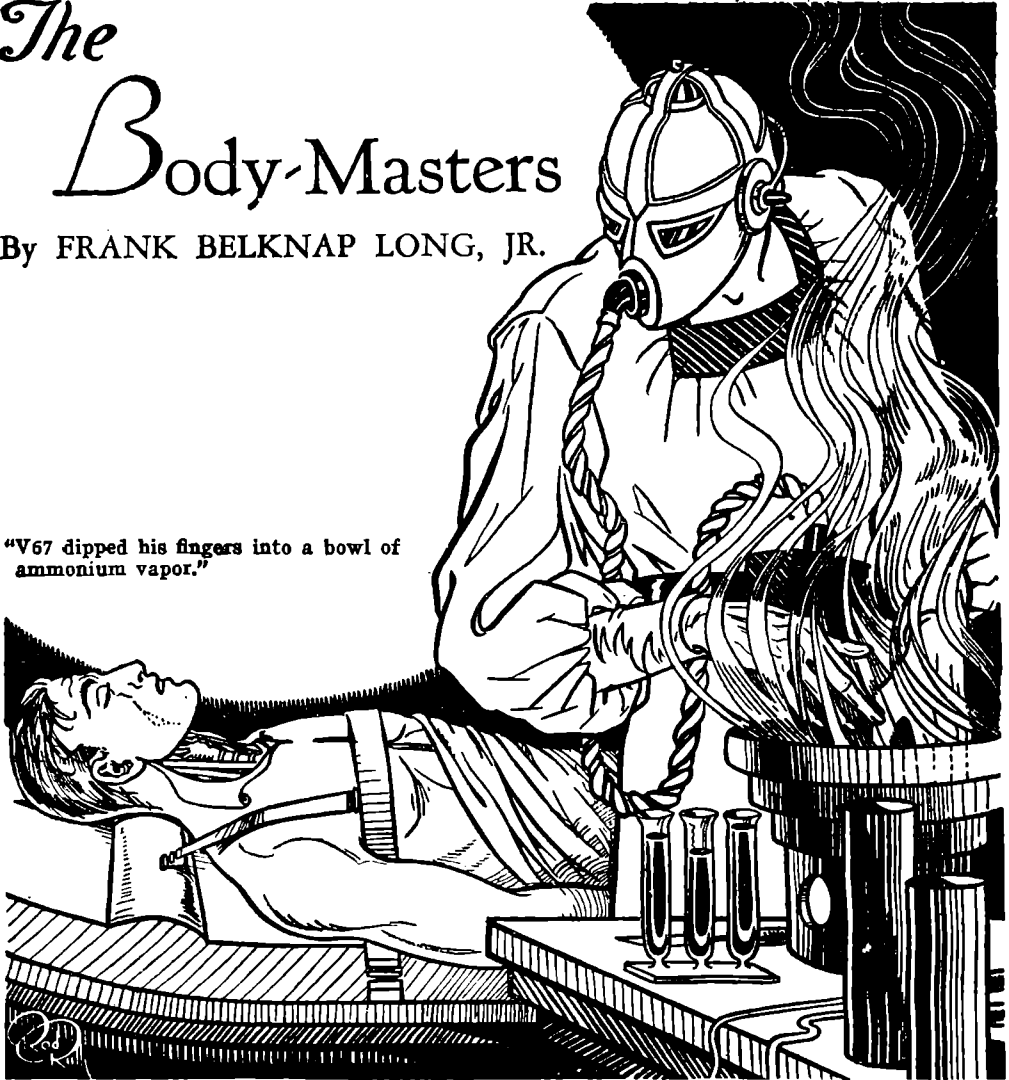


WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Body-Masters

By FRANK BELKNAP LONG, JR.

"V67 dipped his fingers into a bowl of ammonium vapor."



'A strange weird story of the far-distant future—a tale of mechanical robots and synthetic love

RAY-BRONZED and dripping, Gland Surgeon V67 emerged from the sun pool, and flicked the water from his hair and eyebrows. Then he stooped, and thrust a sturdy, muscular arm into the pale green water. The arm was seized by slim hands, and a voice said: "Help me out, darling."

V67 raised from the water an adorable form. His face was aglow with boyish

rapture as he set it down beside him on the edge of the pool.

Mechanical Companion GH8 looked up at him. Her lips were parted in a smile, and the disk in her bosom said: "It is lovely up here in the sun. Kiss me, darling."

V67 bent, and implanted a fervent, lingering kiss on the soft, pneumatic lips of Mechanical Companion GH8. GH8

sighed, and her arms crept about the crippling shoulders of her very human and warm-blooded escort.

For a moment they embraced in silence. Then V67 gently untangled her arms, and asked: "Cold, my sweet?"

Mechanical Companion GH8 said nothing. The disk was exhausted. V67 debated for a moment with himself. Supervisor of Emotion T74 had supplied Companion GH8 with only one reply disk. He knew that if he rewound the record mechanism and set GH8 back in the pool she would swim and splash about and begin to talk to him again. But he was by no means certain that the glamor and enchantment would survive a second trial. Besides, there was a chill wind blowing, and his flesh was breaking out in goose-pimples.

With infinite tenderness he bent and lifted the fragile rubber form of Mechanical Companion GH8 from the gleaming, metallic margin of the pool. He had been compelled to time his questions so that they would accord with the answer intervals on the disk, but now he could talk to her more freely, and still preserve an illusion of reality.

Murmuring endearments he carried her across the sky garden and set her gently down in one of the racks which the Supervisor of Emotion had provided for exhausted companions. For a moment he stood gazing down at her with glowing eyes. Then, abruptly, he turned, and strode to the vacuum chute.

Three other men were waiting to enter the chute. One of them, a thin, ascetic-looking individual in striped swimming-shorts, was an associate of V67's at the Gland Surgery. V67 greeted him with upraised palm.

"Mechanical Companion GH8 was glorious," he said. "No man would want to divorce his wife these days. I was get-

ting frightfully bored and despondent, but GH8 has corrected all that. Don't you like the Companions, J78?"

The man in shorts shook his head. "If I had my way these recreational gardens would be abolished," he said. "We are becoming a race of self-indulgent flat-fish. I like the pools here, and the squash-ball courts, but the Companions are utterly pernicious."

V67 frowned. "You need a gland injection, J78," he said. "A shot of adrenalin and perhaps a little thyroid. You talk like a Twentieth Century puritan."

J78 grunted. "And you behave like a perfect sybarite," he said. "It is a good thing we are not living in the Twentieth Century. Or even in the Twenty-first. The ancient moralists would have put you in a lethal chamber."

V67 laughed. "I'm not as bad as you think, J78," he said.

J78 grunted again.

One of the waiting men heaved himself up to the aluminum slide at the pinnacle of the vacuum chute and relaxed with a contented sigh. His weight caused the slide to tilt slightly. As he vanished from sight V67 said: "Do you mind if I go next? I'm ten minutes overdue at the surgery."

J78 and the other man nodded.

WITH a brisk, athletic leap V67 surmounted the slide and settled his long limbs in a reposeful attitude. Immediately the slide tilted, and released him. For an instant the soft blue sky above the sky garden was visible to his upturned gaze. Then it dimmed and vanished. A faint droning arose from the depths beneath, and a thick blanket of darkness settled about him.

He was soon speeding with a terrific velocity in a vertical direction. The chute was an almost perfect vacuum and he was

compelled to hold his breath as the miles beneath him telescoped into a thrumming spatial porridge. The thrumming came from the pounding blood in his ears.

As he fell, his mind became a kaleidoscopic canvas. Something in the swift rhythms of the descent generated a mental attitude akin to slumber. As in a dream of infinite magnitude and brief duration his mind surged in the blackness.

In visual splendor he beheld a vivid panorama of Mechanical Companions dancing, racing and swimming for the edification of tired and despondent husbands. Their lithe, graceful bodies glistened in the screen-filtered sunlight on the flower-garlanded roof-tops of Cosmopolis.

Another vision flashed across his mind. He saw the Divorce Bureaus in the Fifth Level kiosks, saw the crowded booths and the rapidly growing mountains of writs and petitions. He saw the long, long files of hopeless women, the wan clerks, and—chief objects of pity—the bored and dispirited husbands.

It was a vision of the past. As V67 sped downward in the darkness the gloomy and depressing picture was replaced by a verbal hallucination. V67 distinctly heard the Dictator of Emotional Arts affirm: "The normal male will at times fervently crave the solace of a new face, and mysterious, unknown hands upon his brow. 'The wonder and enticement of a strange woman.' You are all familiar with the phrase. But if this anti-social urge could be surmounted as soon as it arises, in a way that would not provoke jealousy, and that would—" The voice droned on, became confused and indistinct.

V67 had another blinding vision of the sky gardens and their lithe-limbed and rhythmically moving dispensers of solace. It was a joy to reflect that Mechanical

Companions were already in attendance in thirty-three of Cosmopolis' sky gardens. The vogue, introduced at the beginning of the year 5678, was spreading like wildfire, and would undoubtedly tend to preserve and glorify the time-honored institution of monogamous marriage. No sensible wife could be jealous of a mechanical, pneumatic leisure-hour companion. It was the beginning of a new dawn in the emotional lives of thousands of husbands, and V67 had no misgivings as slowly from amidst the congeries of racing, dancing forms a lovely face wreathed in silver talc emerged, and usurped his vision. He saw again the enticing pneumatic lips of his own dear Mechanical Companion GH8, and heard her whisper: "It is glorious here in the sun. Are you happy, my darling?"

Metallic arms crept about him in the darkness, and the droning became a roar as of cyclopean dynamos.

THE white-aproned street sanitationists of Level TG assisted him from the basal slide at the circular lower exit to Vacuum Chute H65. As he arose in the incandescent light the jointed basal slide shot upward. It would contact his associate J78 a thousand feet above the exit, and carry him downward in its mechanical arms.

V67 did not wait for his associate to arrive. He did not like J78. The man was a prig and a hypocrite. Striding rapidly along the pressed resovin pavement of Level TG he drew the spice-scented air deep into his lungs and exhaled with zest.

Ordinarily he shunned drugs. The mild intoxication produced by the health-air which circulated freely on Level TG, and the other non-recreational levels, was all the stimulation he needed. On this occasion, however, he extracted a

small bluish vial from his upper tunic pocket, and poured upon his palm six grains of astravasin.

Astravasin deadened and dissipated the softer emotions, and stimulated cold, scientific zeal. It was more favored by women than men, but V67 found it occasionally beneficial. He had sufficient virility to dismiss as irrelevant the conventional sneers which were directed against the male astravasin users.

He snuffed the drug into his nostrils and accelerated his pace. He was facing a trying ordeal. The patient awaiting him in the Gland Surgery was a victim of a hideous maladjustment of secretions. The wretch had actually reverted to the mores of the jungle, and killed his wife in a fit of jealous rage.

To steady his perspective, V67 walked to the edge of the pavement and looked down into the abyss beneath him. Far below, the outer extremities of the lower level platforms abutted above the great central artery of Cosmopolis. Down, down he stared, past the projecting tiers and platforms, past the laboratory levels and the industrial levels and the agrarian levels till his gaze rested on the cyclopean turbines five miles below.

A vertigo swept over him. He withdrew his gaze and walked on. Level TG was a running tier of laboratories. At intervals of fifty feet, circular doors opened in the resovin façade that ran the length of the entire cityward wall of the level. They were surmounted by blue-litten classification plates bearing labels in radiumite script. He passed the Skin and Exoskeleton Correctional Laboratory, the Sympathetic System Clinic, the Muscle and Nerve Surgery, the Epithelial and Glandular Tissue Laboratory, and the Tumor Removal Center. There was a long line of patients waiting to enter the Removal Center.

V67 shivered inwardly. He did not like to think about cancer. It was a major blight—the one appalling malady that had successfully defied the medical innovations of fifty centuries. A quarter of the population was afflicted with malignant tumors of one sort or another. The Health Supervisors affirmed that the malady was directly traceable to over-indulgence in electric baths and cosmic-ray rejuvenators, but V67 was skeptical of their glib and facile explanations.

He met several co-workers as he progressed toward the surgery. Bio-chemist H43, grave and severe in his india-rubber frock, greeted him with upraised palm as he emerged from Bio-chemical Clinic R66, and T52 saluted him from the edge of the pavement. He passed quickly by K99, L90 and W43.

"How is your wife?" asked W43.

V67 said: "Very well, thanks," and experienced a momentary qualm. It was absurd, of course. In adoring Mechanical Companion GH8 he had adhered to a highly moral conduct pattern. His wife could not possibly resent his attentions to an artificial woman. The Dictator of Emotional Arts had proclaimed after extensive research and experimentation that no normal wife *could* be jealous of a Mechanical Companion. Jealousy was a disease anyway—a pathological reversion to a primitive level of thought and feeling—but even when it did arise, its malignant shafts were directed against flesh-and-blood realities. The Dictator of Emotional Arts was a man of vast erudition, and V67 was content to abide by his decision.

V67 was now abreast of the Gland Surgery. Turning in at the bulb-surmounted entrance he passed quickly down a long, blue-lit corridor, and nodded to the attendant at the door of the operating-room.

"F56 has just been asking for you," said the attendant. "Your patient isn't standing it very well."

V67 nodded gravely. He was conscious of an intense cerebral curiosity, but sympathy and compassion were alien to his mood. The astravasin was circulating freely in his blood-stream. With ceremonious precision he removed his tunic and asked the attendant for his antiseptic suit and mask.

The attendant opened a numbered drawer in a metal cabinet at his elbow, and handed V67 a folded rubber garment and a black surgical mask.

The mask was a cumbersome contrivance that went completely over his head. It had eyeholes of violet glass, and a long, twisted breathing-tube that terminated in a square metallic box in the region of the wearer's navel. In appearance it was strikingly like the Western European gas masks of the World Wars of 1914, 1936, 1967 and 1987 in the primitive artifacts wing of the Museum of Historical Antiquities on Level K97.

HAVING adjusted the mask and pulled the thin rubber antiseptic garment up over his shoulders, V67 nodded to the attendant and passed into the operating-room.

The operating-room was bathed in a diffused purple light. It was heavily impregnated with hylofoam, that powerful and dangerous anesthetic which exerted a numbing influence on the lower nerve centers, leaving them almost insensible to pain and yet with sufficient vitality to relay messages to the brain and spinal cord. Its action was insidious and curious. It entered the blood-stream by absorption through lungs and skin, and altered the vitalistic content of individual cells in every organ and tissue of the human body. Invented in the Twenty-third Cen-

W. T.—4

tury, it had displaced all the cruder anesthetics of an earlier age.

It had one disadvantage: it did not completely do away with pain. But as the victim of its fumes remained in full possession of his faculties and could even discourse rationally with his dissectors, the surgical workers who refused to countenance its use were branded as Twentieth Century sentimentalists, or worse.

V67 walked slowly across the vast, dome-ceilinged operating-room in the direction of Table 4R6. He breathed deeply of the pure oxygen which circulated beneath his antiseptic mask, and stopped occasionally to greet associates as he passed between the long tiers of tables. Three hundred and twenty-four operations were in progress.

Some of his associates were selecting and arranging their instruments, others were actually at work on the glands of their human subjects, and a few were busy rectifying blunders, or guarding against future mistakes by dissecting the dead.

When he arrived at Table 4R6 the tall form of Gland Surgeon F56 arose from a stooping posture, laid down a gleaming metallic instrument, and advanced to greet him: "You're ten minutes late," he said reproachfully, through the audition tube in the lower left-hand corner of his mask. "You *know* I'm too nervous to work past my schedule. My nerves are all shot. Why didn't you relieve me?"

"I'm sorry, F56," said V67. "I was sun-bathing in a sky garden, and you know how exacting the new Companions are. You'd better take a shot of adrenalin before you leave."

He paused an instant, then asked: "How's the patient?"

F56 lowered his head. "He's lost consciousness," he said. "He's horribly over-emotional, I'm afraid."

"I should think he would be!" exclaimed V67. "A man jealous enough to subject his wife to an atomic bombardment just because she exchanged five-minute kisses with a turbine mechanic is mighty shabby human material."

"Jealousy is a revolting disease," affirmed F56. "A superstitious, utterly illogical hang-over from the ages of savagery. That man is actually living in the Twentieth Century."

"All strong emotion is pathological," assented V67 gravely. He was conscious that he was reaffirming a truism, but he had to say something to ease the tension. F56 was obviously worried about the man on the table. He had lost four cases in as many weeks, and the Chief of Staff was beginning to regard him with suspicion. If the suspicion became a certainty the Chief of Staff might conceivably decide that F56's place was where his patient was now lying. It was a contingency which F56 didn't like to think about. He loved the full, abundant life which his slightly unstable glands afforded him.

V67, despite the astravasin in his blood-stream, could sympathize with this very human weakness of his associate. He was himself slightly unstable. Mechanical Companion GH8 could bear witness to that.

Gripping his associate by the shoulder, he murmured reassuringly: "Don't worry, F56. I'll bring him out of it."

"Thanks, old man," said F56.

His gait was slightly unsteady as he turned from the table and made his way slowly across the vast, domed room.

WITH a sigh V67 moved forward, and stood for a moment staring intently down at the white, haggard face of the man on the table. The subject was young, and physically robust. The surgeons of an earlier and less remorseless

age would have shuddered at the way V67's associate had taken advantage of that robustness. There was only a small area of firm flesh remaining.

V67 did not shudder. The man on the table had been guilty of an anti-social act, and society insisted, as it had every right to do, upon a surgical corrective. The man had deliberately reduced his wife to an inert mass of gray ash by bombarding her with an atomic disintegrator. Men who succumbed to violent emotions were a menace to the peace and well-being of the Corporate Commonwealth. The surgeons of Cosmopolis were the benevolent masters, the therapeutic overlords of anti-social bodies. V67 dipped his fingers into a bowl of ammonium vapor, and rubbed them across the young man's brow.

Slowly, unsteadily, the patient's eyelids flicked open. For a moment he stared up in dazed bewilderment at his new benefactor.

Conquering his disgust and enmity, V67 said: "How do you feel now, boy?"

The young man's eyes showed an awareness of pain. He essayed a twisted smile. "I feel pretty rotten," he said. "How long is it going to take, Surgeon?"

"Not long," said V67. "Not long, boy. We've removed a portion of your thyroid and right lobe pituitary, and cut away practically all of your adrenal cortex. A few stitches, and we'll be finished. I rather suspect that psychopaths will find that you will not require any mental reconditioning. The jealousy spasm was purely glandular."

"You mean, I wouldn't have—have disintegrated her if my glands had been normal?" asked the youth. His facial muscles contracted pitifully as he spoke.

V67 was busy with his surgical dressing. He nodded sadly as he sewed and kneaded the lacerated tissues into a semblance of normality. "I'm afraid the

glands were at the root of all your troubles, boy," he said. "Your parental supervisors should have corrected the maladjustment in childhood."

"But several thousand years ago men often killed their wives," said the youth.

"Several thousand years ago men murdered one another on a wholesale scale in hideous blood-letting contests," said V67. "They had no control whatever. You can not justify your conduct by exalting the primitive, my lad. If our race has raised itself above the level of the jungle it has done so only by a long process of selective mating. When the eugenists of the Twenty-second Century started selecting stocks on a glandular basis they——"

"Were blind!" interrupted the youth, in desperation. "Blind, I tell you. War was awful, but love——"

V67 shrugged. "We still love," he said.

The youth's face twisted in a grimace. "You think you do," he said.

"We have overcome certain crude and violent prejudices, that is all," said V67 calmly. He wished the young man would not talk so much. His ceaseless, primitive chatter unnerved him, despite the astrava-sin in his blood-stream.

He did not realize that the young man was talking to keep up his courage. It was not so much the pain that the young man dreaded. He dreaded the thought that he would become like his benefactor—high-minded, impartial and serene.

But there was nothing the young man could do. He was bound and helpless. He would be turned into a cool, impersonal cog in the vast mechanism of the Corporate State. "Curse them!" he muttered, in jungle fury. "Curse them all!"

His resentment was short-lived. The excess glandular secretions were ceasing to stimulate his brain even as he spoke. With the glands removed, the remaining

hormones became mild aids to normality instead of goads to anti-social action.

For exactly forty-five minutes V67 labored with painstaking care. Then he straightened, dipped his instruments in a basin of pale blue antiseptic, and drew a thin sheet of transparent rubber over the breast and limbs of his patient.

"You'll be all right now," he said. "I'll prescribe a cathartic, and your digestion will be checked by the dietician."

The youth's eyes were melancholy and resigned. "Thank you, Surgeon," he said.

TEN minutes later V67 was standing before a vacuum chute in the Release Corridor of Level TG. He was very tired. His work was exacting and arduous, and the unstable portions of his personality were in mild revolt. It was really unjust that he should be compelled to devote five hours a week to social labor, he told himself. It was his conviction that with a more equitable distribution of leisure and a more rigidly planned economy the work quotas could be substantially reduced.

"Your turn, V67," said an impatient, red-haired bio-chemist on the opposite side of the chute.

V67 nodded, climbed up and relaxed on the broad, unstable slide. The slide tilted and released him. He thought of many things as he shot downward in the darkness. The faces of Mechanical Companion GH8 and his wife vied for supremacy in his mind. Eventually they merged into a single image, and he sighed in rapture.

It was a mystical ideal he beheld now—the composite of all feminine loveliness. Mechanical Companion GH8 was simply another aspect of his wife's personality. It was absurd to imagine that

the concept *woman* did not embrace a variety of lovely forms. Individual women were merely facets, isolated aspects of one eternal and glorious reality—the feminine principle, imperishable, mysterious and sublime.

"My own sweet wife and dear companion," he murmured, in mystical adoration.

Down, down he swept. The blood throbbed in his temples, his pulses ached. Finally a droning began and he felt something collide with his nether extremities. Then the steel-cold arms of the jointed basal slide crept about him, and his consciousness reverted to a more practical level.

He emerged in a glare of incandescence. The sun-simulating arc lamps which lined the cityward wall of **Suburban Home Level RH** shone down upon him in radiant splendor, and a tempered buoyancy came upon him as he climbed from the slide and turned his steps in the direction of his suburban home.

He hoped that his wife had heard no disquieting rumors. The sky gardens were far removed, both spatially and spiritually, from the quiet haven of his home. As he walked between the cyclopean tiers of potted shrubs, the great domed aquariums with their myriads of brilliant-hued and exotic fishes and crustaceans, and felt upon his brow the warm sea breezes still redolent with the spices of far islands and archipelagoes as they emerged from hundreds of swinging odorphones, a look of supreme contentment came into his face.

So rapidly did he walk that he traversed the distance between the chute exit and the portals of his suburban home without meeting anyone. Stepping into the vacuum lift he was whirled up fifty-five stories, and emerged in the community corridor adjoining his wife's quarters.

THE corridor was deserted. He was glad of this, for he did not wish to talk to dull and gossipy B54, or exuberant and boisterous C88, or any of the other tenants of Story 55.

As he tiptoed across the floor to the door of his wife's television room a great joy came upon him. He felt confident that she would be sitting relaxed in the darkness, enjoying an African or Asian telolog. He would steal up behind her and implant a fifteen-second kiss on the nape of her neck, immediately beneath the two blond curls which intertwined so adorably below her coiffure.

He laid his hand on the door and drew it outward. The television room was in darkness as he had anticipated, and his wife was clearly visible from the doorway. Clearly visible, and leaning on the shoulder of another man!

As his gaze swept the room he felt his flesh go suddenly cold. It was an optical illusion, of course—a mad, cruel hallucination caused by the astravasin in his blood-stream.

Yet his wife was actually *whispering* in the darkness as she stroked the dark, curly hair of the other man. Her head rested on his right shoulder, and he was crushing her hand in his long, virile fingers.

"My dear, my darling," she whispered. "You understand me."

"It is glorious here in the darkness," said her companion.

Somehow the grave, mechanical tones of the speaker's voice seemed vaguely unnatural. V67 had no clear notion at first as to the cause of this. He simply stood trembling in the doorway, resisting the evidence of his senses, and telling himself over and over that it was the astravasin, the astravasin. The drug soothed at first, but later it heightened and distorted the perceptions of sense.

What he saw was surely nothing more than a visual illusion, the figments of a drug-fevered brain.

The attempt at evasion was tragically short-lived. Slowly, insidiously, the truth crept upon him, and he was shaken to the core of his being by the sickening realization that his wife had succumbed to the flatteries of that newest of fads and abominations—the sirupy-voiced male Mechanical Companion!

The horror of it was more than he could sanely endure. With an oath he slammed the door shut, and strode fiercely into the room.

His wife turned about, and screamed. Without uttering a word V67 lifted the Companion into the air and brought him down with violence on the tempered steel floor of the television room.

There ensued a crash. Something tinkled in the mannikin's chest, and a small revolving wheel emerged from a twisted sleeve, and rolled diagonally across the floor. With a curse V67 picked the detestable creature up, and hurled him across the room. Never in his life had he experienced such primitive, unregenerate wrath.

The Companion collided with the opposite wall and sank limply to the floor. As his head contacted the hard steel the record in his breast said: "Your husband does not esteem you as I do. I see you enwreathed in roses, bedewed in mists of glory. Your lips are like a lotus-flower, and the touch of your hand is a healing benison. When you are beside me the moon's splendor is enhanced tenfold, and all the stars of heaven sing for me."

V67 turned slowly about. His wife was shrinking white-faced against the base of the television screen.

"So you console yourself with a gigolo in my absence!" he cried, his lips livid with wrath.

"A gig—gig——" stammered his wife, in a frightened whisper.

V67 cursed his wife's lack of erudition. "The new male Companions are exactly like the abominable gigolos of the ancient world," he muttered fiercely. "A more despicable type of parasite never existed."

"But the Dictator of Emotion has announced that Mechanical Companions are perfectly respectable," pleaded his wife, in desperation.

V67 looked at her. His eyes were destitute of compassion. "He was speaking of the female Companions," he said. "That sort of thing is all right for a man."

"It's a strange rule that doesn't work both ways," said his wife, in a despairing tone.

Brutal and primitive passions were flooding V67 in waves. Something loathsome and aberrant in his nature surged to the surface, and for a moment he felt an impulse to strike his wife—actually to strike her—with the flat of his hand.

The impulse generated its own negation. Man is not built to cross the humanizing gulf of forty centuries and revert to the savagery of a dead world without experiencing an overwhelming reaction. No sooner had V67 experienced the detestable emotion than a great shame and horror came upon him. He sank into a chair, and covered his face with his hand.

Compassionately his wife rose and crossed to where he was sitting. Slipping to the floor beside him, she rested her blond, talc-wreathed head against his right knee.

"My poor darling," she whispered. "Do you imagine for a moment that he has taken your place in my affections? Why, he is a mere mechanical toy, an amusing diversion. Even if he does talk divinely of moonlight and roses he is, in essence, nothing but a gadget. I was lone-

ly, and horribly unhappy, and I wanted to make you jealous. But if you will give up that *creature*——”

V67 was silent for a moment. Then his hand descended, and caressed his wife's coiffure. As the flimsy adornment slipped between his fingers he said: "You are right, my sweet. Tomorrow I shall ask Supervisor of Emotion T74 to give me permission to dismantle Mechanical Companion GH8. You will doubtless be relieved when the bosom records are destroyed, and the tender, individual nuances of her face, throat and limbs cease to exist as parts of an illusionary whole."

His wife looked up at him. She thought: "He will give up Mechanical Companion GH8 for my sake, but he still loves her. He is going to dismantle her because he can not bear the thought of surrendering her to another. In his sight she will always remain as young and lovely and inaccessible as the figures on a Grecian urn. How did the ancient poet phrase it?"

"She can not fade, though thou hast not thy bliss.
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.

"I shall have a *real* rival now."

There was a far-away look in V67's eyes as he continued, tenderly, to caress his wife's silver coiffure.