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# SCIENCE FICTION *Quarterly*

Volume  
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## *Feature Novelet*

### THE CHILDREN OF THON

by Irving E. Cox, Jr. . . . . 8

Dirrul had been told that the key to the mystery of Thon lay in the special meanings that these people had for the terms they used. And that it would be fatal to employ his own meanings for Thonian words — as he discovered!



## *Short Stories*

- A TRANSMISSIBLE MATTER** . . . . . Ray Earl Schmidt 34  
It's mad, merry mayhem when matter transmitted is mixed up.
- THE DRY SPELL** . . . . . Charles E. Fritch 52  
You can't be too sure . . . maybe this isn't as fantastic as it sounds!
- LAST STAND OF A SPACE GRENADIER** . . . . . David Grinnell 57  
Perhaps some of these space-programs are more than entertainment.
- THE MONSTER OR - - THE MONSTER?** . . . . . Eando Binder 63  
Could Valler remember all the important details in time?
- THE LAST HERO** . . . . . Bryce Walton 68  
Hendricks could go to the stars — but not exactly as he thought.
- AUDIENCE REACTION** . . . . . Robert F. Young 74  
When a trend goes to its limit, the wide world can be changed.

## *Special Features*

- IT SAYS HERE (Where I Talk, and You Talk Right Back)** . . . . . 6
- THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES (Article) L. Sprague de Camp** 45
- REMEMBERED WORDS (Who gets the originals?)** . . . . . 65
- THE RECKONING (Your rating of the November issue)** . . . . . 98
- READERS' PREFERENCE COUPON (For busy voters)** . . . . . 98

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*Interior illustrations by Luros, Orbân, and Sibley*

ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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At last, one of science fiction's greatest  
mysteries is explained!

# THE DRY SPELL

by Charles E. Fritch

(illustrated by Milton Luros)

**T**HIS IS my last story. Do I hear wild applause from the balcony. No? Good. I'd much prefer a swansong with the gentle strains of a violin, not a bronx cheer. Besides, you'll probably see other stories by me—at least in name. But I won't have written them—at least, not the real me, the brains behind the typewriter. No, not one word, not a precious syllable.

You've seen stories by me in all the magazines (perhaps without realizing it) under a dozen different names. I've gotten a great kick out of reading comments from readers like "You can't kid me, I know Joe Roe is really Bill Schmill." Know something? He's right. I'm both those guys—and lots of others, too. This, though, is my last story—the last one written by the real me. After this, things are going to be different, and a certain guy (mentioning no names, pen or otherwise) is going to have to write his own yarns from here on in, the lazy bum.

It's not that I'm being mean, you understand. It's just that—well, this isn't the kind of life for anyone to lead, not even me, so I'm not going to.

It started about two years ago when I was teaching business-machine operation at the University. I had two hobbies—working on complex computing-machines and writing science-fiction, neither of which at the time paid off in that green stuff that rich people say isn't everything.

It was while Millie and I were sit-

ting one summer evening on her porch swing that she started the line of thinking that was to change my life. Both our lives, in fact. Maybe three lives, if you'll pardon an innocent mechanical brain for having a life.

"The trouble with you," Millie said in an analytical tone, "is that you're trying to dash off in several directions at once, trying to be a jack-of-all-trades and not being good, really good, at anything."

"So?" I said. It wasn't a particularly bright remark, I'll admit, but at least it fit the occasion. "I don't want to give up any of them; I like them all. I like machines. I like working on calculators. I like writing science-fiction." I waved my hands in despair. "I'm stuck."

"Combine them," she suggested, as though she had come up with a world-shaking solution.

"I do," I told her. "I write stories of great big complicated computing-devices, ones that think and talk, and some that even know how to rhumba. But it's not the same thing. What I need is a twist of some kind, something that's different. Now take this story I'm working on right now; it's a story about a machine—"

"That's it!" Millie sat up straight, a smile bursting over her pretty face. "You write stories about machines. There's your twist. Reverse it. Make a machine that writes stories!"

I groaned. "Millie, please. A machine that— Oh, for goodness sakes." But I thought about it for awhile, and the idea got rosier. "Hm, that



I fed a batch of current issues into the machine.

would be rather convenient, wouldn't it."

**WHAT A DEAL** that would be.

Just feed paper and typewriter ribbons and erasers—no, erasers wouldn't be necessary—and carbon paper into the machine, press a button—and out would come a story ready for mailing. I pictured myself lying in a hammock in the shade of a tree, sipping cool drinks, while a machine beside me clicked and turned out story after story, for check after check from editor after editor. It was the pleasantest dream I'd had all day.

But I shook my head. "Can't be done."

"Why not?" she demanded.

I shrugged. "Well, it's—well, just because—well—"

"Well?" Millie is so impractical.

"Machines can't do something like that," I protested; finally; "you've got to have the human element."

"Nonsense!" Millie declared with enthusiasm. "Machines these days are almost human, and a lot of stories I read these days are pretty mechanical. If a machine can juggle figures it can juggle plot-elements and characterizations."

"But—"

"But me no buts, my boy, and get to work."

Is it any wonder I love Millie? She not only stands behind a guy, she gives him a terrific shove in the right direction. At the time, I wasn't certain it was the right direction; but I was seriously intrigued by the idea. A machine that produced finished stories, ready for mailing. Why, with a machine like that I could become another Zane Grey.

Actually, Millie had more on her mind than that. We'd been engaged for three and a half years, and I'd been putting off the marriage hoping for better things to happen to me, ei-

ther jobwise or paywise. Nothing had—at least, till now. Maybe she was getting desperate. Maybe I was, too.

Anyway, I got to work on the project right away. I had some old parts of antiquated supercalculating machines I'd been working on, and I managed to get others. I made changes in the relays, installed a typewriter as a basic part of the unit—this machine would handle words, not figures—and spent many long hours tinkering, putting into the machine the basic plots and the basic emotions necessary to its new career.

Millie dropped in often, giving me a hand, coffee and sandwiches, plus plenty of much-needed encouragement.

"Maybe I should try one million monkeys and one million typewriters," I suggested during a moment of depression; "some of them are bound to come up with something."

She shook her head. "Not selective. You'd get ninety-nine percent gibberish. Look at the waste of typing-paper. And the feed bills!"

"Not to mention the problem of sanitation," I added, and wished I hadn't.

**I** WORKED on the machine for intermittent periods totalling three months, fourteen days, sixteen hours, three minutes, and a negligible number of seconds—and then it was done.

"Well, now," I said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Well, now—what?" Millie said beside me, going one step further.

"The acid-test; got a sheet of typing paper?"

She shook her head. "How about a slightly-used envelope?" she suggested, handing me a wrinkled letter from her purse.

"It'll do, I suppose."

I placed it in the slot and waited. After a few minutes gears whirled and the typewriter keys played their click-

ing melody. Seconds later, the envelope popped from the bottom.

"What does it say?" Millie asked eagerly. She was more excited than I was.

I read it aloud: "*Please adopt the professional attitude,*" it said, "*and submit stories on regular typing-paper, in an approved format.*"

"My God," I moaned, "don't tell me it's going to come out with rejection-slips, too."

"I don't blame it," Millie said, after considering the matter briefly. "This machine was constructed for a definite purpose—to write professional science fiction. How can you expect it to, if you don't supply the correct equipment for the job?"

I sighed. "I knew *human* writers were temperamental, but this is ridiculous."

"We can get some paper and carbons down at the corner store," Millie said, setting me back on the right track.

We rushed to the corner drugstore and bought two packs of typing paper and some carbons, then hurried back to the machine and deposited them in the slot.

"Well," I said impatiently, after a two-minute wait, "well, why doesn't it do something? What in the name of H. G. Wells is wrong now?"

"Be patient," Millie suggested. "It's probably thinking of a plot. . . . Ah, there it goes."

It did. I watched, fascinated as gears geared themselves for the coming onslaught, then whirred swiftly into action. The typewriter keys went flying, and paper began dropping into the bottom box neatly typed.

I picked up the first sheet. It was, as I had expected, a title page. On it were the beginnings of a story called: "The Spaceman and His Dog."

I stared at it. "The Spaceman and His Dog?" I said, a little incredulously. I repeated it, and it didn't sound

any better the second time: "The Spaceman and His Dog?"

"I think it's a good title," Millie put in. "It has an element of humor, of pathos, of—"

"It's a stupid title," I said, "and what's more it's probably a stupid story, too. I'll even bet the dog is named Sirius."

Millie was puzzled. "What makes you think that?"

"Intuition," I told her. I read the first page and confirmed it. "Yep, here it is right here." I shook my head and crumpled the paper. "No, Millie, this'll never do. We've got to make a few adjustments, so—"

**A**N ANGRY whir came from the machine, interrupting me, and a sheet of paper came hurtling out onto the now-large pile of typewritten sheets. I picked it up, half-expecting an insolent note. But it was just another first sheet. Another angry whir came from the machine, then it continued its hum and clicking.

"That'll teach you a lesson," Millie said.

"Now, this is going too far," I muttered and picked up a monkeywrench. "No machine is going to whir at me and get away with it."

But Millie's loving arms were restraining me. "Hold on," she said, holding on. "This thing is likely to be your bread and butter for the next several years."

"With 'The Spaceman and His Dog'?" I said. "Don't be silly; where would I send a story like that?"

The machine had stopped its chatter. At my question, it began again. Millie and I looked at each other, wondering. A sheet of paper dropped out. I picked it up.

"For market analyses, feed late-issue magazines into slot for scanning," the paper said. "Please also include manuscript envelopes of two sizes and double-postage."

I blinked at the paper in my hand,

then at Millie, then at the machine. "This is incredible. Why, I bet if I put wheels on this, it could go down to the store and the post office and make its own purchases!"

"Maybe I should marry the machine," Millie suggested dryly.

"It'll never come to that," I assured her; and then I thought about the remark and decided it was a particularly revolting idea even to consider.

**I** GATHERED up copies of science-fiction magazines I had around the house, bought a few more at a local newsstand, and then pushed these, together with envelopes and stamps into the machine. The magazines I never saw again (evidently the machine digested them), but one of the envelopes came sliding out, fully stamped and addressed to *Smashing Science Fiction* magazine. Inside was the return envelope.

Millie said happily, "That must be the magazine most likely to accept your story. What's the matter?"

I solemnly contemplated the envelope. "Wonder why the machine didn't put the manuscript in the envelope and seal it?"

"Well, it wouldn't kill you to do *something* for the cause," Millie said unreasonably.

I brightened. "I know, it couldn't handle all that mucilage. Let's see, now—if I put a moist sponge about here..."

That was the beginning. I sent the story off to *Smashing Science-Fiction*, where it was immediately snapped up and published two months later. It was a rollicking success, and letters from readers came in praising it from Cucamoga to Fairbanks to Capetown. Hollywood bought up movie-rights and later produced a technicolor epic of it, co-starring Mickey Rooney and Lassie in the leading roles. The machine dashed off a sequel, "Return of the Spaceman and His Dog", followed

by "The Spaceman and His Dog's Puppies", with the same results. I was in.

The middle part you know, if you read science-fiction (and who doesn't?). The machine produced more stories than you could shake at an editor, and I had to operate under half a dozen or more pen names—names that you'd recognize if I listed them here. I married Millie, retired to a home in the country with a heated swimming pool and a French maid. And, of course, I had oodles of money—but that, after all, isn't everything. There's the sense of satisfaction in knowing I've created something of worth, something lasting, something for posterity.

The ending you're reading right now. The machine has reached what most writers reach at one time or another—a dry spell. Theoretically, it should be able to produce indefinitely, but as I may have mentioned earlier it's temperamental; you know how writers are, mechanical or otherwise. It sits glumly, longing for its old job back as a calculating machine in an office; none of this insecurity—work eight to five every day and be *done* with it, that's the ticket. So I

suppose I'll have to retire it and write my own stories.

I noticed this change of attitude when I came into the machine's private writing-room for three days in a row and found it resting contemplatively in its air-conditioned corner, its keys silent and unmoving, not a trace of a rumble in its well-oiled gears. Carefully, I checked on its supply of paper, ribbons, and other necessities; all was in order. Hope flared in me as it made lazy tentative movements for a few minutes, but when the paper dropped out, I saw it held not a story but a design made by typewriter-keys of a nude calculating machine.

I recognized the symptoms and sighed, for I had been half-expecting this. My fears were realized when, a short time later, it clicked out its final story. It began:

"This is my last story.

"Do I hear wild applause from the balcony. No? Good..."

It concluded with "not going to", but no other fanfare to denote the retirement from a fabulous and energetic career to a happier, more peaceful existence. It said simply: THE END.

