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THE RIVALS

By ROBERT SILVERBERG

What about this do-it-yourself craze? It's caught on like crazy. You can build your own house, fix your own car, tat your own doilies, and psychoanalyze your wife. But all good things must finish, and this is Mr. Silverberg's idea of the complete and final end!

MICHAEL KARREN held the solido slide slightly to one side, tipped it up and down to see which was the proper way of inserting it, and slid it into the projector. Instantly the image of his wife Helen and their two young sons took form at the end of his living room, glowing and life-like in three dimensions. He could almost smell once again the sharp sea tang that had been in the air, and as he looked at the solido image he found himself recapturing every pleasant moment of that glorious vacation.

Phil Jennerton stared at the image for a moment, nodded his appreciation, and strode heavily over to examine Karren's projector.

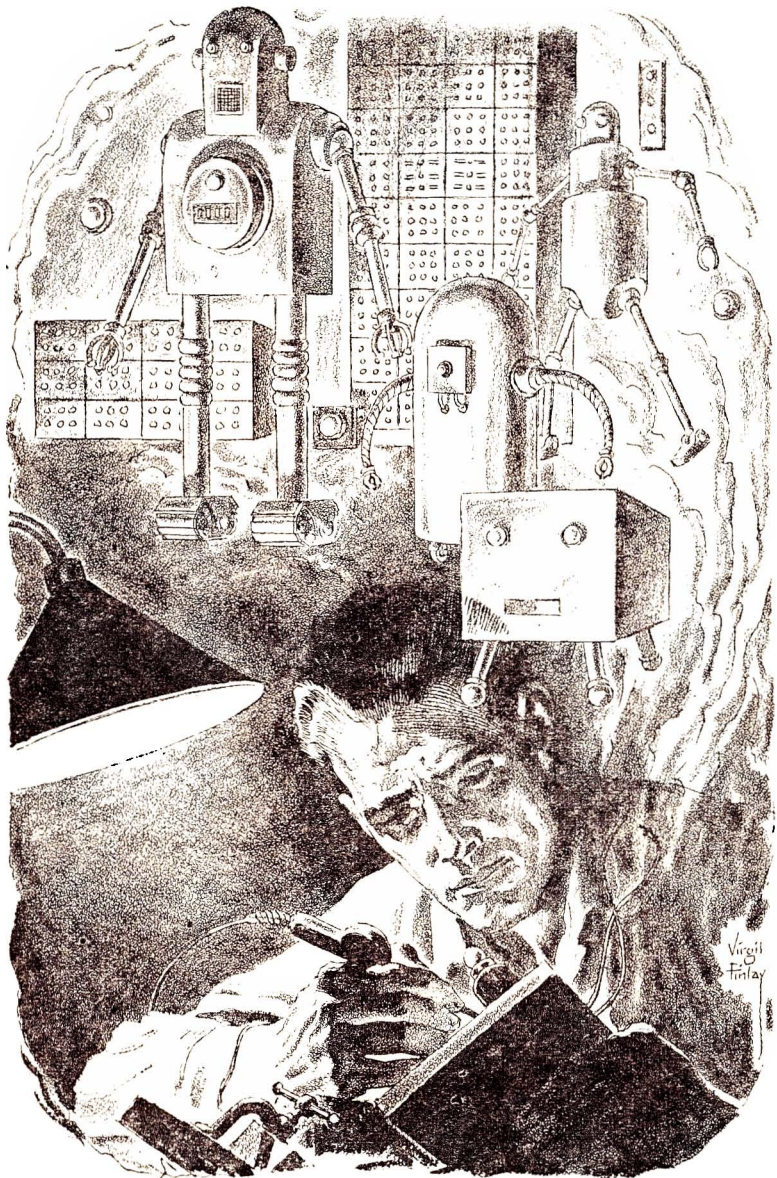
"You *bought* this," Jennerton said accusingly.

"Four hundred credits," said Karren.

"You're very proud of this," Jennerton said. "You think the mere ownership of a fancy solido-projector is an occasion for pride!"

Puzzled and alarmed by the big man's tone, Karren turned to look at him. Ever since the Karrens had moved here he had distrusted Jennerton, who lived next door. There was something too confident, too superior about Jennerton that had caused Karren, a mild, quiet young advertising executive, to dislike him from the start. But their wives had become friendly, and, after much conjugal pressure, Karren had agreed to invite Jennerton over for an evening. The solido demonstration was to have been the high point. But Jennerton did not seem at all impressed.

"Of course I'm proud of it," Karren retorted. "Not



He found himself in a wonder-world of exact science.

many people own a solido-projector, and I'm proud to be able to demonstrate one in my own home."

"You don't seem to understand," Jennerton said, and Karren observed the nostrils of his magnificent aquiline nose flicker in a gesture he had long since learned signified impatience. "When you say you're *proud* of owning this solido-projector, what do you really mean? Learn to examine the meanings of your words, Karren; it's the only way to survive in this world."

"I've studied semantics—"

"So has everyone else," Jennerton continued coolly. "But most people stop thinking when they leave college. Here's what I'm driving at," the big man said. "The source of your pride in the solido-projector is really your purchasing power. You're terribly puffed up simply because you're able to afford one. Do you share any pride of craftsmanship with the men who made it? No. Do you know how it works? No. You take a pile of credits to the store, and they give you a machine. You plug it in, and then you say you're proud of it." He spoke quickly.

"Now hold on a minute,

Jennerton. Not everyone can own—"

"You're missing my point completely, as expected. Man, you're old-fashioned. You're just a spectator in this great technological world of ours, not a participator. You're nothing more than a vegetable!"

"I'm not going to stand for that, Jennerton," said Karren angrily, snapping off the solido. The image of his wife and children spiralled into a small vortex of rainbow colors and vanished.

"Let's not start an argument, Phil," said Jennerton's tall blonde wife. She tugged on his arm, but he ignored her. He tried to goon, but Jennerton continued.

"Let me explain," Jennerton said. "I don't mean to insult you, but I mean what I say. Being proud of something you didn't make yourself is a sign of decadence, of overspecialization. You don't have any more idea of why that machine works than I do about what you had for breakfast early this morning. You're just content to go along mindlessly, piling up credits at whatever job you make your living, and spending them on gadgets that you'll never understand. Pardon me if I'm speaking

strongly, old man, but I feel strongly about this."

"But what would you have me do?" Karren said. "*Build a solido?*"

"I did," said Jennerton blandly.

"You *what?*"

"I said I built one. Every bit as good as yours, even better. I added one little wrinkle that the commercial ones don't have yet. I hooked mine up with a senso circuit, and when I show my slides I'm able to reproduce every sound and smell I experienced when taking them."

Karren remembered the salty sea-odor he had thought of while showing the slide.

"That must be good," he said weakly. "Makes the scene even more real."

"Of course. But I had to do it myself. And that's the basis of contemporary civilization, Karen. *Do it yourself*. It's the only way a man can maintain any smidgin of self-respect. Everyone does it; you're the first educated man I've seen who relies wholly on commercial readymades. If you let yourself be bullied by technologists, you'll march on from one gadget to the next without ever understanding why the world runs the way it does. And the longer that goes on, the deeper you slip

down into the mindless muck."

Karren looked at the solido-projector, which now had taken on an ominous, threatening character, and at the intense, powerful figure of Jennerton.

"You build things yourself?" he ventured timidly.

"Phil builds all sorts of things," said Mrs. Jennerton. "Just last week he put together a pretty little transistor wrist-radio for Carrie, so she wouldn't miss her favorite programs when she's coming home from school."

"That's right," Jennerton said. "I build everything. Washing machines, TV sets, air conditioner—you name it. And it's not because we can't afford readymades. No; most of the time the separate parts cost more than a readymade would, but—"

It seemed to Karren that at this Mrs. Jennerton widened her eyes in surprise, as if this were something new to her, but Jennerton continued right on.

"Yes, sometimes I spend more," he went on. "But at least I'm fully alive to 21st Century technology, which you're not. As I said, you're a vegetable — completely passive."

Karren looked at him grimly, and saw his wife also staring at Jennerton. "What do you mean, vegetable? If I had wanted to, I could have built all those things too. I'm just not interested."

"That's it exactly," Jennerton said triumphantly. "You sit back and let technology overwhelm you, and then you say you're not interested. You can't sit still. Pretty soon you're outmoded."

"Let me worry about that," Karren said, and flicked the solido-projector back on.

But he did worry about it, for the rest of that evening, after the Jennertons had roundly trounced him and his wife at a game of Canada and had consumed most of his remaining Scotch and had finally gone home, bubbling over with arrogant gaiety.

As he began to tidy up the living room before retiring, he glumly considered the implications of Jennerton's argument. The electronic dust-catcher seemed to accuse him grimly as he wandered around the living room, straightening cushions and replacing doilies. The solido-projector gaped bleakly at him, and from the kitchen the sound of the dish-dryer whirred incessantly into his tired, dis-

couraged mind. Jennerton was right. So far as contemporary technology was concerned, he thought, he *was* a vegetable. He had only the vaguest notion of how his autocoaster worked, none whatsoever of the principles behind the electronic duster or the dish-dryer or the solido-projector or any of the other things he had accumulated during fifteen years of more-or-less happy house-keeping.

His wife finished her chores and came in.

"You know, dear, I think perhaps Phil's right. So many men build things for themselves these days; it's a fascinating hobby, I hear. And all that talk about technology—I think he may have something there!

"I'm sure he does, Helen," Karren said wearily.

"And there's something else I've meant to tell you all week. The Browns have a wonderful new robot watchdog. It keeps strangers away, and I think Hal built it himself, and—"

"Yes, I saw it," he said, dropping down tiredly on a couch. "Very handy gadget."

"You don't think you—"

But the idea had hit Karren first.

He set to work with fran-

tic haste, converting a section of the basement into a workshop. Karren buckled down to the job with determination. He intended to demonstrate to himself, to his wife, and especially to Jennerton that he was as capable as the next man of making intelligent use of contemporary technology; he was not going to sit back with his readymades and grow roots, not in a world where the dominant philosophy was Do it Yourself.

The first step was a trip to the library, from whence he returned burdened by three textbooks of robotics and a short introductory guide to electronics. Next, acquisition of blueprints, soldering iron, solenoids, riveter, and a host of other items, the very names of which he had not even known the week before.

After a few false starts he got to work on a robot watchdog, similar to the one the Browns had. It ought to impress Jennerton, Karren thought, and it'll be a useful sort of thing besides. As the days passed, he found himself growing steadily more adept at mechanical techniques, and, almost before he realized it, the watchdog was completed and he was sur-

veying the finished product.

The rivets up the left side wandered a little out, but otherwise it was an impressive job. The completed robot watchdog was a squat, stubby metal box with two gleaming solenoid eyes and short ball-bearing legs. When indoctrinated, it would require all visitors to the Karren house to identify themselves, and it would transmit the identification to the Karrens inside the house. It could be adjusted so members of Karren's family and certain close friends would be passed through without question.

Karren folded up his worksmock and activated the watchdog. He had equipped it with several motion-patterns, and he set it for the one in which it would follow him obediently around. Then, triumphantly, he headed out to display it to Jennerton.

The watchdog tagged along behind him, purring softly, as he crossed over and headed for Jennerton's house. He rang the bell.

"Good to see you, Karren," boomed a hearty voice.

Karren looked up at Jennerton's big figure framed in the doorway. He was wearing a softly-glowing plastiline jacket, and his graying hair was trimmed close to the

scalp in a rugged-looking crew cut. He gestured for Karren to come in, and as he did so Jennerton closed the door behind him. The robot watchdog climbed the steps, batted against the closed door, and buzzed impotently outside.

Karren opened the door and the watchdog shot through and came to a halt next to his trousers-leg. "What's that?" Jennerton asked.

"I've taken your advice," Karren said. "I've done a little job of construction. Put together this watchdog the other day," he said casually. "Thought you'd like to see it. It was a lot easier than I thought it would be." He looked at Jennerton a bit smugly.

"Of course," Jennerton said. "I'll bet you enjoyed doing it, too. It must have given you a feeling of real satisfaction, discovering that you could cope with robotics." He bent down and lifted the watchdog expertly, cradling it in his arms while it hummed gently.

"Rivets a little lopsided here," he said. "You still need practice."

"Yes, of course," Karren said. "But you have to admit it's a pretty good piece of workmanship."

"Sure, it is—for a beginner," Jennerton said. Karren felt devastated. All that work, tossed off in one sentence. Pretty good—for a beginner.

He looked up at Jennerton, and started to say something, when suddenly he felt chill hands lift his coat off his shoulders. He whirled and confronted a short figure with a cold, metallic face.

A robot.

"Hope he didn't frighten you," Jennerton said. "I just activated him the other day, and the word's not around yet that I have one."

Karren studied the robot. It was about five feet tall, roughly humanoid, with a few extra non-humanoid features, such as a pair of long, wiry tentacles and a strange-looking multipurpose fifth arm.

"Pretty nice, eh? Does the dishes, mixes drinks with that other arm, minds the baby, winds the clock, walks and talks, and it's a shark at Canada. Strange we should both be dabbling in robotics at the same time, isn't it?"

"Very strange," Karen said, and then he realized it. "You mean you *built* that robot?" He looked down at his watchdog, making small circles around his feet. Sud-

denly the watchdog seemed a pathetic, inconsequential little thing.

"Of course," Jennerton said jovially. "After all I said when I was over at your house, you didn't think I'd be buying one, did you? No, I built it. Took a couple of weeks. I'm sort of proud of it," he said.

"You should be," said Karren, looking at his watchdog. "I feel very—very—well, envious."

"No need to be," Jennerton replied. "It's just a matter of application, of good hard work. The technology's nothing at all, nothing at all. But say—care for a drink? I'll have my robot mix you something."

Karren stared gloomily at the little robot watchdog, feeling utterly deflated. He had gone to Jennerton's bursting with pride, but after Jennerton had finished describing the circuits of his robot butler, Karren and his watchdog had slunk home, crushed.

Inferiority.

That was the word he found it impossible to escape. For the first time he noticed how frequently the other men at the office talked of building some gadget or other, the

ease with which they contemplated their projects, and he became acutely conscious of his own mechanical ineptitude. There was always the towering figure of Jennerton to remind him of his—inferiority.

He discovered that there was a tremendous Do-It-Yourself craze in which almost everyone seemed involved but himself. While he had blissfully gone on buying ready-made dishwashers and solido-projectors, just about everybody else had succumbed to the delights of Do-It-Yourself.

Karren deliberately began a campaign of studying technical books, subscribing to home mechanics magazines, coming home with great boxes of components. Somewhere in the back of his mind he felt amusement and horror at the hobby Jennerton had goaded him into, but he felt now that he would be marked forever as an outcast, an incompetent, unless—

What was it Jennerton had said, that fateful first night? "*Do it yourself.* It's the only way a man can maintain any smidgin of self-respect."

He began disappearing into his workshop as soon as he returned home each night,

often toiling long hours into the night.

An electronic mousetrap.

A steam-heated bird-house.

A collapsible canoe for use on summer hiking trips.

A monstrous bookcase with built-in dust-removing circuits.

A twelve-stringed guitar.

He showed each new gadget to his wife and family with pride, and contrived to get Jennerton over to see and be impressed. But somehow Jennerton failed to be impressed.

The dust-removing bookcase had an occasional tendency to swallow a book or two along with the dust. "It doesn't really matter," Karren protested. "What's a book or two?"

But Jennerton fixed that with a couple of twists of his pliers, and Karren mentally kicked himself.

Then something went wrong with the detector of the electronic mousetrap and it snapped the robot watchdog by mistake, causing serious feedbacks in the nervous systems of both articles. Jennerton came over, amiably disconnected both of them, and repaired the damage, explaining to Karren what he should have done to avoid such difficulties.

Helen frequently complained now, both about Karren's preoccupation with do-it-yourself things and Jennerton's obvious superiority. The more she spoke about the big man's ability, the harder Karren was goaded to the workshop. And he worked with a hopeless desperation.

For Jennerton's skill was incredible. Besides repairing the inevitable flaws in the items Karren assembled, the big man turned out quite a collection of things himself. In short order he designed and built a robot nursemaid, a radio-TV that turned itself on when the baseball games were broadcast and shut off when the last out was recorded, a self-propelling baby carriage, an automatic potato-peeler. And they worked flawlessly.

Karren plunged deeper and deeper into the workshop world. He began to wear an angry, hunted look. His work at the office suffered, his children never saw him, he snarled at his wife on those infrequent moments when he emerged from his workshop. But still, every gadget he designed was promptly topped by something which Jennerton had apparently turned out between sneezes one morning, and Jennerton

seemed to take real delight in tracking down the bugs in Karren's devices and setting them straight.

Karren's house now overflowed with strange and impossible things: butterfly nets, skin-diving outfits, toasters boasting little hands that would plug the toast and butter it. If it could be built yourself, Karren built one.

The idea for the cybernetic brain came to him one day when Billy, his oldest son, had wandered into the workshop to get some help with his math homework. Karren's irritation changed to delight when the idea came to him, and he set to work.

The huge thing occupied what had formerly been the guest room. Karren toiled for days and nights on it, feeling like Michelangelo in the Sistine as he patiently assembled one tiny part after another and hooked them all together. At last it was complete, and he invited Jennerton over for the usual demonstration.

"I'll begin with something simple," Karren said, noting with a thrill of pure joy Jennerton's whistle of amazement at the sight of the formidable computer.

He tapped out a simple equation and fed it to the machine.

$$2X \text{ Plus } X = 18$$

Immediately the answer clicked out.

$$X = 7.$$

Karren showed the tape to Jennerton, waved it joyously around.

"Very good," Jennerton said. "Just one trouble. In that equation, X is 6."

"What?" Karren looked at the tape, then at his son's algebra book, and to his horror saw that the big man was right. The machine had made an error on its first try.

"Let's try again," he said, mustering a heartiness he did not feel.

$$3X \text{ Plus } Y = 24$$

$$Y = 6$$

Without a moment's hesitation, the machine clicked back.

$$X = 7.$$

Karren began frantically to search through his schematics, wondering where he had gone wrong. By the time he found the error (a trifling miswiring) Jennerton had already corrected it and the computer was happily spewing out differential equations.

Karren remained in the grip of despair for almost a week, sitting silently in the

living room, growling at anyone who approached, wondering why it was that the whole world could do things while he invariably failed.

Jennerton's house was now bristling with new gadgets; Michael Karren couldn't even bear to look at it through the window.

But after a while, the cloud lifted. Karren resumed everyday life, carefully avoiding Jennerton. And now, he started to make thoughtful inquiries.

"Been doing any handiwork yourself, Joe?" he would ask. "Any projects on the line?"

And slowly the truth came to him.

He was just like everybody else.

Jennerton hadn't lied. This was an age of Do-It-Yourself. But Karren was a perfectly normal, ordinary man, and the average man is a fumbler. Karren gradually discovered that his mechanical mishaps were perfectly customary, that most of the other local build-it men had had similar troubles.

No. Jennerton had embarked on a deliberate campaign to convince Michael Karren that he was inferior. For what reasons, Karren didn't know and didn't care. Per-

haps, he thought, it was sheer pride; Jennerton, so swelled up by his uncanny mechanical aptitude, was loftily reaching down to crush Michael Karren's soul with god-like gratuitousness.

It didn't matter why. Jennerton was doing it. And so, Karren set about constructing his last do-it-yourself project, the one that would symbolize his final capitulation to Jennerton.

He built it in the garage, moving the autocooper to the roof, keeping the garage-door locked at all times. When anyone questioned him, he explained that he was working on something new, something that represented a completely unthought-of advance in the do-it-yourself field.

At length it was completed, and he invited Jennerton over to see it in operation.

"You look terrible, Mike," Jennerton said as he approached. He smiled heartily.

"I know," said Karren. "I've been working till all hours. But I've built something new," he said dreamily. "Something that will revolutionize the whole do-it-yourself field. And it's a gift—for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, Phil," Karren said,

almost affectionately. "I did it all specially for you—and here it is."

Inside was a squat metal cabinet, unpainted, rectangular, about seven feet square.

"What is this, Mike?" asked Jennerton. "A joke?"

"I made it for you because you love to do things yourself. It's the ultimate do-it-yourself gadget." He pressed a button on the side, feeling his moment of triumph at last approaching, and a door in the cabinet opened, disclosing a roaring furnace within. A pair of metallic arms shot out from the sides of the cabinet, wrapping

around Jennerton and pinioning him firmly.

"What the hell, Mike?"

"Don't you see?" Karren asked. "You like to do things yourself. Here's your big chance. All you have to do is press this button over here, and the arms will transport you smoothly inside. Inside, there is light—like the sun. It's a Karren Jiffy Crematorium, specially created for self-use. Go on, Phil—press the button. Here's your chance."

He smiled. Jennerton's last do-it-yourself act wouldn't require any talent at all. Why, Karren could even help him, if necessary.

THE END