FANTASTIC UNIVERSE SCIENCE FICTION

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RENDEZVOUS WITH DESTINY
A New Novel
By JOHN BRUNNER

SHAPES IN THE SKY by CIVILIAN SAUCER INTELLIGENCE

Stories by AVRAM DAVIDSON • THEODORE PRATT • R. M. WILLIAMS

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

MARCH 1958
Vol. 9, No. 3

Rendezvous With Destiny 4
by *John Brunner*

Command Performance 35
by *Donald Keith*

The Bounty Hunter 45
by *Avram Davidson*

Seed 50
by *Theodore Pratt*

New York in 2½ Hours 63
by *Sir Miles Thomas*

The Son of Jalnor 66
by *Robert Moore Williams*

Shapes in the Sky 80
by *Civilian Saucer Intelligence*

The Robot Who Wanted to Know . . . 91
Our Cover Story by *Felix Boyd*

Universe in Books 97
by *Hans Stefan Santesson*

I've Got Your Wavelength 102
by *P. H. Booth*

Calling All Aliens 109
by *Jack Lewis*

Hands of Steel 116
by *Dean McLaughlin*

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FANTASTIC UNIVERSE, Vol. 9, No. 3. Published monthly by KING-SIZE PUBLICATIONS, INC., 320 Fifth Ave., N. Y. 1, N. Y. Subscription, 12 issues $3.75, single copies 35¢. Foreign postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter at the post office, New York, N. Y. The characters in this magazine are entirely fictitious and have no relation to any persons living or dead.

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Printed in U. S. A.

the robot who wanted to know

by . . . Felix Boyd

Did he have a right to feel this way? Was this really forbidden by law—this wonderful frightening emotion!

THAT was the trouble with Filer 13B-445-K, he wanted to know things that he had just no business knowing. Things that *no* robot should be interested in—much less investigate. But Filer was a very different type of robot.

The trouble with the blonde in tier 22 should have been warning enough for him. He had hummed out of the stack room with a load of books, and was cutting through tier 22 when he saw her bending over for a volume on the bottom shelf.

As he passed behind her he slowed down, then stopped a few yards further on. He watched her intently, a strange glint in his metallic eyes.

As the girl bent over her short skirt rode up to display an astonishing length of nylon-clad leg. That it was a singularly attractive leg should have been of no interest to a robot—yet it was. He stood there, looking, until the blonde turned suddenly and noticed his fixed attention.

"If you were human, Buster," she said, "I would slap your face for being rude. But since you are a robot, I would like to know what

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The possibility that robots, in common with certain humanoids, might in time share certain emotions with their creators, has been frequently considered. Here Felix Boyd returns with this sensitive short-short, based on our cover. (F. B. is the pseudonym of a prominent SF writer and editor.)

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your little photon-filled eyes find so interesting?"

Without a microsecond's hesitation, Filer answered, "Your seam is crooked." Then he turned and buzzed away.

The blonde shook her head in wonder, straightened the offending seam, and chalked up another credit to the honor of electronics.

She would have been very surprised to find out what Filer had been looking at. He *had* been staring at her leg. Of course he hadn't lied when he answered her—since he was incapable of lying—but he had been looking at a lot more than the crooked seam. Filer was facing a problem that no other robot had ever faced before.

Love, romance, and sex were fast becoming a passionate interest for him.

That this interest was purely academic goes without saying, yet it was still an interest. It was the nature of his work that first aroused his curiosity about the realm of Venus.

A Filer is an amazingly intelligent robot and there aren't very many being manufactured. You will find them only in the greatest libraries, dealing with only the largest and most complex collections. To call them simply librarians is to demean all librarians and to call their work simple. Of course very little intelligence is required to shelf books or stamp cards, but this sort of work has long been handled by robots that are little more than wheeled IBM machines. The cataloging of human information has always been an incredibly complex task. The Filer robots were the ones who finally inherited this job. It rested easier on their metallic shoulders than it ever had on the rounded ones of human librarians.

Besides a complete memory, Filer had other attributes that are usually connected with the human brain. Abstract connections for one thing. If he was asked for books on one subject, he could think of related books in other subjects that might be referred to. He could take a suggestion, pyramid it into a category, then produce tactile results in the form of a mountain of books.

These traits are usually confined to homo sapiens, they are the things that pulled him that last, long step above his animal relatives. If Filer was more human than other robots he had only his builders to blame.

He blamed no one—he was just interested. All Filers are interested, they are designed that way. Filer 9B-367-O, librarian at the university in Tashkent, had turned his interest to language due to the immense amount of material at his disposal. He spoke thousands of languages and dialects, all he could find, and enjoyed a fine reputation in linguistic circles. That was because of his library. Filer 13B, he of the interest in girls' legs, labored in the dust filled corridors of New Washington. In addition to all the gleaming new microfiles, he had

access to tons of ancient printed-on-paper books that dated back for centuries.

Filer had found *his* interest in the novels of that by-gone time.

At first he was confused by all the references to *love* and *romance*, as well as the mental and physical suffering that seemed to accompany them. He could find no satisfactory or complete definition of the terms and was intrigued. Intrigue led to interest and finally absorbtion. Unknown to the world at large, he became an authority on love.

Very early in his interest, Filer realized that this was the most delicate of all human institutions. He therefore kept his researches a secret and the only records he kept were in the capacious circuits of his brain. Just about the same time he discovered that he could do research *in vivo* to supplement the facts in his books. This happened when he found a couple locked in embrace in the zoology section.

Quickly stepping back into the shadows, Filer had turned up the gain on his audio pickup. The resulting dialogue he heard was dull to say the least. A sort of wasted shadow of the love lyrics he knew from his books. This comparison was interesting and enlightening.

After that he listened to male-female conversations whenever he had the opportunity. He also tried to observe women from the viewpoint men, and vice versa. This is what had led him to the lower-limb observation in tier 22.

It also led him to his ultimate folly.

A researcher sought his aid a few weeks later and fumbled out a thick pile of reference notes. A card slid from the notes and fell unnoticed to the floor. Filer picked it up and handed it back to the man who put it away with mumbled thanks. After the researcher had been supplied with the needed books and gone, Filer sat back and reread the card. He had only seen it for a split second, and upside down at that, but that was all he needed. The image of the card was imprinted forever in his brain. Filer mused over the card and the first glimmerings of an idea assailed him.

The card had been an invitation to a masquerade ball. He was well acquainted with this type of entertainment—it was stock-in-trade for his dusty novels. People went to them disguised as various romantic figures.

Why couldn't a robot go, disguised as people?

Once the idea was fixed in his head there was no driving it out. It was an un-robot thought and a completely un-robot action. Filer had a glimmering of the first time that he was breaking down the barrier between himself and the mysteries of romance. This only made him more eager to go. And of course he did.

Of course he didn't dare purchase a costume, but there was no problem in obtaining some ancient

curtains from one of the storerooms. A book on sewing taught him the technique and a plate from a book gave him the design for his costume. It was predestined that he go as a cavalier.

With a finely ground pen point he printed an exact duplicate of the invitation on heavy card stock. His mask was part face and part mask, it offered no barrier to his talent or technology. Long before the appointed date he was ready. The last days were filled with browsing through stories about other masquerade balls and learning the latest dance steps.

So enthused was he by the idea, that he never stopped to ponder the strangeness of what he was doing. He was just a scientist studying a species of animal. Man. Or rather woman.

The night finally arrived and he left the library late with what looked like a package of books and of course wasn't. No one noticed him enter the patch of trees on the library grounds. If they had, they would certainly never have connected him with the elegant gentleman who swept out of the far side a few moments later. Only the empty wrapping paper bore mute evidence of the disguise.

Filer's manner in his new personality was all that might be expected of a superior robot who has studied a role to perfection. He swept up the stairs to the hall, three at a time, and tendered his invitation with a flourish. Once inside he headed straight for the bar and threw down three glasses of champagne, right through a plastic tube to a tank in his thorax. Only then did he let his eye roam over the assembled beauties. It was a night for love.

And of all the women in the room, there was only one he had eyes for. Filer could see instantly that she was the belle of the ball and the only one to approach. Could he do anything else in memory of 50,000 heroes of those long-forgotten books?

Carol Ann van Damm was bored as usual. Her face was disguised, but no mask could hide the generous contours of her bosom and flanks. All her usual suitors were there, dancing attendance behind their dominoes, lusting after her youth and her father's money. It was all too familiar and she had trouble holding back her yawns.

Until the pack was courteously but irrevocably pushed aside by the wide shoulders of the stranger. He was like a lion among wolves as he swept through them and faced her.

"This *is* our dance," he said in a deep voice rich with meaning. Almost automatically she took the proferred hand, unable to resist this man with the strange gleam in his eyes. In a moment they were waltzing and it was heaven. His muscles were like steel yet he was light and graceful as a god.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"Your prince, come to take you away from all this," he murmured in her ear."

"You talk like a fairy tale," she laughed.

"This is a fairy tale, and you are the heroine."

His words struck fire from her brain and she felt the thrill of an electric current sweep through her. It had, just a temporary short circuit. While his lips murmured the words she had wanted to hear all her life into her ear, his magic feet led her through the great doors onto the balcony. Once there words blended with action and hot lips burned against hers. 102 degrees to be exact, that was what the thermostat was set at.

"Please," she breathed, weak with this new passion, "I must sit down." He sat next to her, her hands in his soft yet vise-like grip. They talked the words that only lovers know until a burst of music drew her attention.

"Midnight," she breathed. "Time to unmask, my love." Her mask dropped off, but he of course did nothing. "Come, come," she said. "You must take your mask off too."

It was a command and of course as a robot he had to obey. With a flourish he pulled off his face.

Carol Ann screamed first, then burned with anger.

"What sort of scheme is this, you animated tin can? Answer."

"It was love dear one. Love that brought me here tonight and sent me to your arms." The answer was true enough, though Filer couched it in the terms of his disguise.

When the soft words of her darling came out of the harsh mouth of the electronic speaker Carol Ann screamed again. She knew she had been made a fool of.

"Who sent you here like this, answer. What is the meaning of this disguise, answer. ANSWER! ANSWER! you articulated pile of cams and rods!"

Filer tried to sort out the questions and answer them one at a time, but she gave him no time to speak.

"It's the filthiest trick of all time, sending you here disguised as a man. You a robot. A nothing. A two-legged IBM machine with a victrola attached. Making believe you're a man when you're nothing but a robot."

Suddenly Filer was on his feet, the words crackling and mechanical from his speaker.

"I'm a robot."

The soft voice of love was gone and replaced by that of mechanical despair. Thought chased thought through the whirling electronic circuits of his brain and they were all the same thought.

I'm a robot—a robot—I must have forgotten I was a robot—what can a robot be doing here with a woman—a robot can't kiss a woman—a woman can't love a robot—yet she said she loved me—yet I'm a robot—a robot. . . .

With a mechanical shudder he turned from the girl and clanked

away. With each step his steel fingers plucked at his clothes and plastic flesh until they came away in shards and pieces. Fragments of cloth marked his trail away from the woman and within a hundred paces he was as steel-naked as the day he was built. Through the garden and down to the street he went, the thoughts in his head going in ever tighter circles.

It was uncontrolled feedback and soon his body followed his brain. His legs went faster, his motors whirled more rapidly, and the central lubrication pump in his thorax churned like a mad thing.

Then, with a single metallic screech, he raised both arms and plunged forward. His head hit a corner of a stair and the granite point thrust into the thin casing. Metal grounded to metal and all the complex circuits that made up his brain were instantly discharged.

Robot Filer 13B-445-K was quite dead.

That was what the report read that the mechanic sent in the following day. Not dead, but permanently impaired, to be disposed of. Yet, strangely enough, that wasn't what the mechanic said when he examined the metallic corpse.

A second mechanic had helped in the examination. It was he who had spun off the bolts and pulled out the damaged lubrication pump.

"Here's the trouble," he had announced. "Malfunction in the pump. Piston broke, jammed the pump, the knees locked from lack of oil—then the robot fell and shorted out his brain."

The first mechanic wiped grease off his hands and examined the faulty pump. Then he looked from it to the gaping hole in the chest.

"You could almost say he died of a broken heart."

They both laughed and he threw the pump into the corner with all the other cracked, dirty, broken and discarded machinery.