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A GREAT NEW NOVELETTE BY WALTER M. MILLER, JR.
Kendall Foster Crossen • Henry Kuttner • Algis Budrys

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THE SENATOR AND THE ROBOT

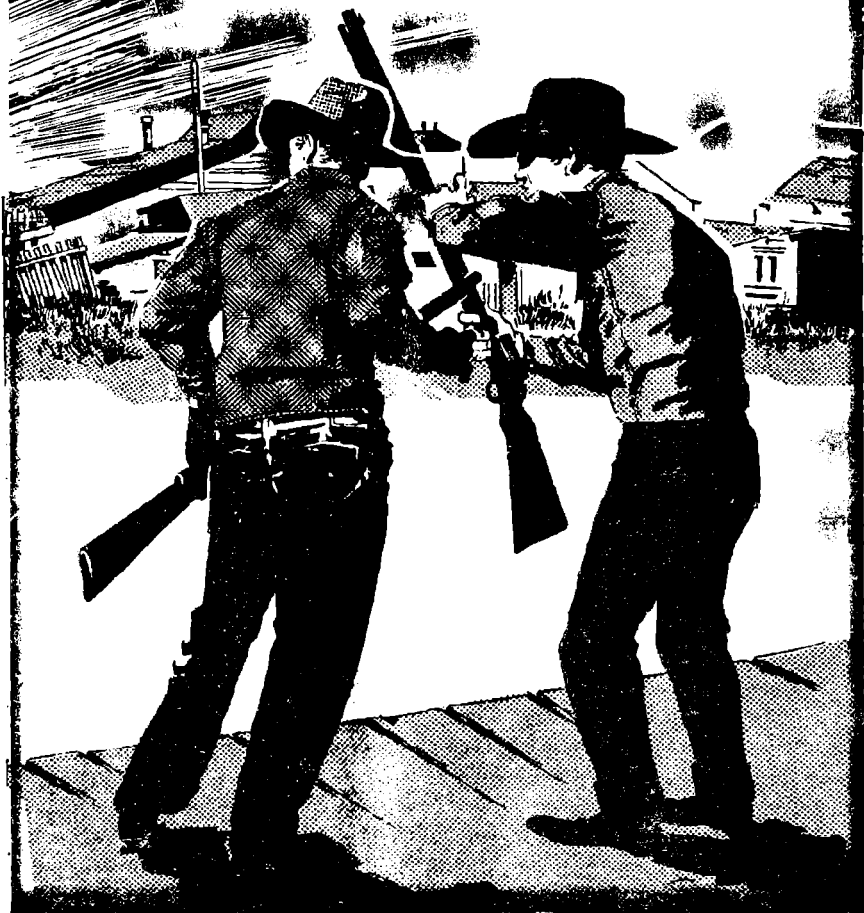
By IVAR JORGENSEN

THE robot stood in the long-unused street in front of what had once been the Palace Hotel and watched the miner come down from the hills. The robot was bright and shining — in sharp contrast to the sand-blasted, gutted buildings that made up the ghost town. It had three legs, and a telescopic eye that protruded

from its steel skull and was connected to a highly sensitized recorder.

This recorder translated the image of the miner and his donkey into — *A multiple, self-propelling unit consisting of two main sections: The foremost, a bipedal section draped in worn cloth molded loosely to the body. Second section — quad-*

There's nothing that goes on over taking you but now
is for your own good". Dictators use it quite often, and
the invaders from space were no exception. We didn't be-
lieve a word of it, but all we had to put against them were
three bewildered Intelligence men, a gal with very nice legs,
a small donkey, and a pompous politician. After the in-
vaders turned the donkey into a bed of roses, things
looked pretty bad for us. We still had the Senator of
course, but we'd been trying to lose him for years.



ruped with large, loosely attached audio equipment. Second section wearing tightly fitting garment of short hair. Units connected by half-inch cable.

As a supplement to this description, the robot took an excellent photo of the miner and his donkey and sent both the photo and the description far off into space where they were duly received and noted.

As the miner came closer to the ghost town, the robot stood motionless in front of the old hotel awaiting instructions. These were flashed swiftly back through the ether, whereupon the robot turned on the photographic cell in its tubular, glowing eye, set the transmitter to *continuous*, and retired to the shelter of a narrow alleyway between two buildings.

The miner came slowly into the town; slowly, because one did not move very fast through a temperature of slightly more than one hundred degrees. As he walked, he carried on a desultory, one-sided conversation with his mule as men without human company are wont to do.

"We'll stop off and have us a leetle food and water in the shade of a building, Minny. Shade comes in mighty handy in weather like this. Then maybe we'll take us a leetle nap 'fore we move on to the west diggin's."

Minnie did not explode with enthusiasm over the prospect, but neither did she object. She ambled

along with the neat mincing step of the pack donkey, her ears flopping in rhythm to her gait.

As the miner led his animal up the main street of the town, the robot's eye gleamed brighter — crimson — in comparison to its previous dull-rosy glow. It stood motionless as the duo passed its hiding place, then moved forward so that the tip of its red eye kept them under observation.

The miner chose the wall of the Chance Queen saloon as a shelter from the sun; then, incongruously enough, he built a fire. He fried bacon and ate his dinner, after which he and Minny shared some water from one of the canvas bags in her pack. Then he lay down for his nap.

A few minutes later, the robot left its hiding place and came up the street on remarkably silent legs. As it approached the prone man, the donkey stamped a lazy foot and looked on in mild interest. The robot bent over the miner and the red eye glowed even brighter. It moved in a slow circle around him, apparently peering at him from as many angles as possible.

Then it straightened up and returned to its hiding place.

An hour later, the miner opened his eyes and within a few minutes he and the mule were trailing off toward the foothills in the direction opposite from whence they had come. The robot watched

them go, then something clicked in its metal dome and the eye dimmed down to a rosy glow.

It took the miner a good two hours to reach the rough country flanking the salt flat beside which the ghost town was located. But once there, he knew exactly where he wanted to go. To a stone-walled pocket where a campsite was protected on three sides.

Once there, he peeled the thick beard from his face, rubbed his jaws vigorously with both hands, and sighed with relief. He said, "Damn! That's good," then went forthwith into a pup tent where he sat down in front of a high-powered radio set and began twisting the dials. Soon, the donkey — if at all interested — could have heard the man's sharp, clear voice going into a microphone and out along a closely guarded short wave channel:

"No invitation, but I wondered how the party was going, so I took a trip down to the hacienda. No dancing. Everybody gone but the butler —"

And so on for half an hour.

In an office deep in the Pentagon, a blond young man picked up his 'phone and said, "Nick Kendall speaking." During the next three minutes, he was transformed from a tolerably cheerful person to a haggard individual with a hunted look. Finally he got a few words in: "Now wait a minute."

Then, a little later, in sheer desperation: "But for God's sake! Can't somebody else satisfy him? Can't you block him off somewhere down the line? Give us a break up here, will you? We aren't nursemaids to lame-brained —"

Evidently his protests got him nowhere, because he finally said, "Okay — send him up, but give me five minutes to shoot myself." As he hung up, his intercom buzzed. He threw the switch and emitted a lifeless, "Yeah?"

The voice that came back over the system was bubbling with triumph. "Big stuff, boss! Franky came through. A report and a picture! I'll bring 'em in!"

"Do that," Nick Kendall said without any great enthusiasm.

A few moments later a slim, dark man in his middle twenties entered the office carrying some papers and wearing a puzzled look. He said, "Maybe you didn't understand me. I said we've got it! Franky came through."

"That's fine. The report decoded?"

"Of course."

"Read it."

Still puzzled, the dark young man scanned one of the sheets he was carrying. "*They attempted no contact but I took a chance and went down into the ghost town. The place was deserted except for the robot. Minny and I had lunch and I tried luring the robot within camera range by lying down for a nap. It*

worked. Got a good shot with micro-cam while it was bending over me. Film out by pigeon to the Kingsford office. You should have it now. Where the hell do we go from here?"

"And here's the photo," John Mitchell said. "A big leg up, eh?"

Scowling, Nick Kendall picked up the 8x10 glossy and studied it. "It's their exploratory robot," he said.

"You're damned right it is! Franky shot it against the sky — lying on his back. A beautiful photo."

"Uhhuh."

"For crissake, Nick! What the hell's wrong with you? This is big stuff. What gives?"

Kendall shrugged. "Why so big? It only proves what we've suspected all along. Frankly, I'd say it makes the situation worse. Up to now we could have been dead wrong." He flipped the photo across the desk. "This seals up our last exit."

Joe Mitchell dropped into a chair and shook his head in bewilderment. "Nick — this isn't you. Give it to me. What's happened? I can take it. I'm of age."

"Okay — brace yourself. I just got kicked in the belly. There's a politician in our fair land, name of Senator Benjamin McCambridge."

"Uh-huh. Known affectionately by the Washington bank and file as Blow Hard Ben — Lard Head McCambridge —" Joe Mitchell

did a mild double take. "Wait a minute! He's senator from —"

"That's right. From the same state our extraterrestrials have put their greedy little eyes on and put their cute little robot down in."

"Okay — what about Big Mouth Ben?"

"He's blowing his top — hair piece and all. He heard rumors of what's afoot and he started asking questions. He was shunted off by expert shunters, but he kept hitting left of tackle until he broke all their bones and now he's on the way up here. Our buffers have all collapsed."

"Tell him to go to hell," Joe flared.

Nick Kendall looked with marked pity upon his second in command. "Would you like the job of telling a United States Senator where you think he belongs; or would you rather take a knife and slice your own throat without mess and bother?"

Nick subsided glumly. "On second thought, I'll take the knife."

"You are indeed wise."

Joe Mitchell's mouth had assumed a sullen downward twist, oddly reminiscent of a small boy frustrated in some small desire. "Okay," he said. "That cooks it. I know a couple of very nice chicks I've been saving for a rainy day. I'll arrange contact and we'll smother our sorrow tonight in a pair of lovely bosoms. That's all

that's left." Joe Mitchell grinned.

"Maybe — maybe not. But speaking of chicks —" Nick leaned forward and snapped the intercom. There was an answering click from somewhere out beyond and he said, "Send Margaret Heart in." A mousy voice said, "Yes sir," and Nick sank back in his chair.

Joe Mitchell drooled mentally and said, "Maggie Heart. There's a dish. You know I can't get within ten feet of —"

"Get your mind above your belt, Joe," Nick Kendall snapped. "If you weren't a boy wonder with languages and dialects I'd —"

Maggie Heart must have been very close, because she entered at that moment. "You called for me, Nick?"

The intercom buzzed again and Nick snapped it open. "Sit down, Maggie. No time for briefing. Just follow along." Then, more impersonally, "Yes?"

"Senator McCambridge, Mr. Kendall."

Nick sighed audibly. "Send him in."

There were a few scant moments of silence. Joe Mitchell spent them with his eyes and mind on Maggie Heart. When the flash of guilt came, he met it head-on. What the hell! He'd done his job. And after today it was pretty sure to be a short life, so why not make it a happy one?

And when Joe thought of girls,

he was a very happy man.

Then a cyclone named Benjamin McCambridge thundered into the room and all hell itself stood poised for flight.

The Senator glowered and said, "This place is —?" His pause was a not-too-subtle demand for information.

Nick Kendall got up from his chair using a smile for a mask. "The Office of Intelligence — Division of Public Welfare. I'm Nicholas Kendall — Director. This is Margaret Heart — psychologist. And Joseph Mitchell — linguist. Sit down, Senator."

Sacré bleu! Joe Mitchell thought.

A windbag with an inferiority complex as big as his pot, Maggie Heart diagnosed.

They both smiled.

Senator McCambridge snorted and looked about him like a bad-tempered bull. "You're all three mighty damn young! What is this? A government by children?"

"We're products of the times, Senator," Nick retorted, meaning to say absolutely nothing and succeeding. "What can I do for you?"

The word for the Senator, as he dropped into a chair, was belligerence. "They tell me this is the top of the ladder."

"If I get what you mean, the answer is yes," Nick replied.

"All right. I've been shunted around from the Potomac to breakfast. Now I want some facts."

"I'll help in whatever way I'm able."

"You damn right you will. I've heard on good authority—" The Senator took a deep breath. "—one, that the government knows a lot more about the flying saucers than they're telling the people. Two—it's known definitely that the saucers contain extraterrestrial beings who plan to take over our world. Three—that this invasion from outer space is pin-pointed smack on the state I have the honor to represent in the Congress of the United States—"

McCambridge—red in the face now—stopped for breath while Maggie Heart prayed silently, Please, Senator—*I just had lunch and I wouldn't want to spoil this rug.* And Joe Mitchell recalled a funny he'd seen printed over a bar: *Y R THER MOR ORZE-ZAZZEZ*—

Nick Kendall pried his teeth apart, silently cursed the "good authority," and said, "There is more truth in what you've heard than we like to admit, Senator."

"Then why this criminal censorship? There's going to be an investigation, and I warn you—some heads will fall!"

"Senator—"

"Shut up! I've only begun to talk. Why hasn't something been done? Why hasn't a ring of steel been thrown around the area in question? Why hasn't the atom

bomb been used? Why haven't we taken the initiative?"

Nick Kendall's eyes blazed. "Look here! All you can get is my job and be damned to you! So there's a limit to what I'll take!"

The Senator's head jerked. His jaw flopped down. He hauled it up again and blinked. "Now wait a minute, young man!"

Nick Kendall was reviling himself for the weakness of anger. "I want to be reasonable, Senator—"

"And I'm a reasonable man. My worst enemy couldn't call me otherwise!"

"Of course. So let me give you our side of it."

"That's all I've been asking for. Get to it!"

"Very well. The facts are these. We've suspected for some time that the saucers were from outer space. Today we got proof." Nick handed the photograph of the robot to the Senator, and went on. "That is an authentic picture of a robot that was put down in the south-central desert of your state about a week ago. It was taken by one of our agents yesterday."

"Three legs," McCambridge observed blankly.

"Yes, three legs. Our previous efforts—I won't bore you with details—gives us proof of only these facts: The saucers contain intelligent creatures from outer space. And they are hovering over the western United States. Upon these two pillars, we must con-

struct a structure of pure theory."

"I'm listening."

"On the face of it, we must assume that these beings possess a technology far superior to our own. In short, we must assume that we are at their mercy."

"Why must we assume that?"

"Because they are obviously smarter than we are. They have not chosen to contact us though we've given them the opportunity. Therefore we have no way of knowing whether they are friendly or hostile. With no knowledge of these creatures or their motivations, we feel it would be foolish to antagonize them by a show of belligerence. If the die is cast in that direction — if there is no alternative — we will of course alert the world and put up whatever defense we can." Nick managed a smile. "Perhaps we were remiss in not acquainting you with the facts, but now that you have them, don't you agree that it would be foolish to possibly panic the nation with the meager knowledge we have? And also extremely ill-advised to display open antagonism without further data?"

The Senator was trapped into a nod of agreement. He tempered it, however, with a scowl and a question. "Then what in Tophet are we going to do? We've certainly got to do something!"

"Of course. We are going to try to make contact with them."

Nick had finally decided the Senator could not be blamed for his sneer. It was built in — as permanently as the look of perpetual distrust in his eyes. This warmed Nick to the man — a little bit, anyway. "That's about all we can do. Maggie and Joe and I are heading west tonight. We will travel as a party on the hunt for uranium. Amateur miners so to speak."

"Why the masquerade?"

Nick frowned, hesitated, then said, "Because a general pattern of some sort must be maintained. We can hardly go out into the desert and stand there in our underwear —"

"I'll have no impudence, young man!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I meant that we've got to proceed as we would against an enemy of our own intelligence level. Even though we are certain these creatures are on a much higher plane."

There was silence while the Senator pondered.

Peeking out from behind a respectful look, Joe Mitchell studied the bulging contour of the McCambridge jaw. Then his eyes roamed down to Maggie's legs and stayed there.

"I'm going with you," McCambridge said suddenly.

"We may all be killed, Senator," Nick Kendall said.

"Be that as it may, I owe it to my constituents to be on the

scene. We've had enough of this hush-hush stuff. The people of the great state of —"

"Very well," Nick snapped. "We leave tomorrow morning. Can you be ready?"

"I'll be ready." The Senator spoke with a belligerence that dared anyone to say he wouldn't.

Maggie studied the solon thoughtfully. *As a senator, I must respect you. But as a man, I can see through you like a window, you overgrown slob in a Brooks Brothers special. You don't believe a word of all this. Your weird and wonderful mind refuses to accept it. You think the robot was built by General Electric. You think it's all a great big publicity stunt and you're not going to miss an inch of it. Bless you, Senator, and may your fat run off in rivers.*

"I think the Senator is very brave and public-spirited," Maggie said demurely.

The sun had dropped behind the mountains now and the blistering heat had abated. Senator McCambridge shivered, growled, and said, "This accursed desert! You either freeze or fry!"

He and Nick Kendall were seated at an open-air table over the remains of supper. To the south lay the great salt flat, shimmering in the dusk. On its nearer edge, the ghost town was a dark blot some two miles away.

Nick Kendall forebore any an-

swer to McCambridge's complaint and the latter seemed to resent it.

McCambridge growled, "why the hell doesn't something happen? We just putter around this hell-hole — putting on an act —"

"Something did happen. Frank's donkey disappeared."

The Senator bristled. "I'll take no impudence, young man. If you're trying to be smart, you'd best remember —"

A certain weariness came into Nick's voice. "I'm not trying to be smart — and certainly not impudent. You complained that nothing had happened and I'm telling you that the donkey is gone."

"I was referring to something important. What does it matter if a donkey wanders off?"

"It didn't wander off. It was removed — stolen — spirited away while Frank was asleep. As you say — it may not be important. But I'd still like to know who swiped the beast."

McCambridge squinted suspiciously at the younger man. "Why haven't I met this Frank? Are you hiding him?"

"Of course not. I merely felt it was smarter to keep him out on his own — clear of our party. If the worst happens, he may be able to reach his sending set."

"He's come to see you though?"

"Late at night, when you were asleep."

"What are you doing — keep-

ing me from talking to him?"

"Not at all," Nick said with some weariness. "I didn't think you'd want to be awakened from a sound sleep."

"I hope he measures up better than the rest of your personnel."

"You mean Maggie and Joe? What's wrong with them?"

"Mitchell is a scatterbrain if I ever saw one. And that Maggie Heart. Well, her main qualifications seem to be a fine pair of legs. Was she brought along to keep young Mitchell from being bored?"

Nick held his temper. "You only see the obvious, Senator. Ed may be somewhat immature but he happens to be a genius in his line."

And what's that? Following women around?"

"Languages. If anyone living can converse with these extraterrestrials, it's Joe Mitchell."

McCambridge's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Mitchell — Edward Mitchell. Say — didn't I see a report once —?"

"And Maggie," Nick went on, hurriedly, "don't let her good looks fool you. She's older than she appears to be — in her early thirties and she's a psychology whizz kid. She could save our lives."

McCambridge scowled into the fast deepening night. "Mitchell — Mitchell —" He snapped his fat fingers. "I remember. Some sort of sex charge." The Senator's harsh gaze was tempered by a grim

smile. Good solid grist for the investigation mill, this. He said, "What's going on around here, Kendall. I want the facts!"

Nick sighed. "That was Joe's brother. And he wasn't in government employ. The case was incorporated in an overall report."

This saddened McCambridge. He retreated, but refused to be completely routed. "Lax, Kendall. Grossly lax. Strains like that can run in a family — can haunt the blood."

"Not necessarily," Ken replied. He managed to cover his apprehension, however. An apprehension born of a feeling that — in this case — the taint *did* encompass both brothers. And springing also from a feeling of personal guilt. Joe Mitchell was the greatest in his line. His services were invaluable. Nick Kendall could not deny that he'd stretched a point or two in Joe's favor.

Senator McCambridge evidently tired of the subject. He turned his gaze toward the now-invisible ghost town. "Why doesn't something happen, Kendall? We've been here two days now. Are you sure that — that robot creature is really down there?"

"No. We're only sure it *was* there."

"Then why don't we go down there — why don't you send somebody down there to find out?"

"It seems a useless risk. Whether

it's there or not at the moment doesn't affect the situation any. We can only wait."

"Kendall," the Senator said sharply. "Tell me—and tell me the truth. Is all this on the level? Or is it just an act to make a nice report for the Appropriations Committee later on?"

"I give you my solemn word, Senator. It's very much on the level."

"And we could be blasted into eternity any second?"

"Yes, but I don't think they'd do it that way."

"Why not?"

"Because that wouldn't fit an intelligent pattern—at least I don't think it would. I'm more inclined to believe that if they're going to kill us, they'd do it in a different way."

"How?"

"As an act of research, possibly. Suppose they got curious as to how we're made. They might take us apart and lay the pieces out on a table for classification."

There was the brushing of footsteps and Maggie stood beside the table. She wore pastel shaded blouse and shorts, colorless in the gloom, lighter than the gleam of her bronzed legs.

"Is it necessary to go around nude?" McCambridge growled. "You know we have a sex mani—"

"It fits the overall pattern, Senator," Nick said, sharply. "We're attempting to look au-

thentic. A party of natives searching for ore."

"If these creatures are so all-fired intelligent, why do we bother?"

"Maybe you've got something there." A touch of weariness was apparent in Nick's words. He glanced up at the girl. "I'd think you'd be chilly, Maggie."

"Not chilly. Worried."

"What's the trouble?"

"How long since you've seen Joe."

"Three or four hours. He had a headache and didn't want any supper. I thought he was in his tent."

"He left camp well before sundown. I've been looking for him. I can't find him."

To Senator McCambridge, everything had a name. "Kidnapped!" he said. "They've taken him."

Nick Kendall got up from his chair. "Not necessarily. The tent was very hot. He may have gone off trying to find a cooler place. We'll have another look around. He may have dropped off to sleep somewhere. You go to bed, Senator. Maggie and I will have a look around."

The Senator did not comply. He sat drumming the table with his fingers, watching the two yellow spots from his companion's flashlights move off across the desert floor. He sat for possibly five minutes reassembling his

thoughts. Perhaps there was something to this saucer scare after all. If so, his chances for future publicity were enhanced immeasurably. Also his chances of a quick death. Would it be better to pull out and go home?

He was pondering the wisdom of this when a voice addressed him from the darkness. "Senator, will you please step this way?"

It was an oddly mechanical voice. Each word was perfectly enunciated. The voice was utterly toneless. "Senator, will you please step this way?" Exactly the kind of a voice one would imagine as coming from a lamp post, if one could imagine such a thing.

Senator McCambridge got up and walked into the darkness.

Beyond earshot of the camp, Maggie laid her hand on Nick's arm. She said, "I'm scared, Nick. I'm really scared now."

"We'll find him."

"Not Joe. It's something I found out in the ridges while I was looking for him. Come. I'll show you."

A five-minute walk brought them to a ragged rock spur at the edge of the salt flat. "In there," Maggie said. "There's another salt pocket."

"I smell flowers."

"Wait 'til you see them."

She led him through the jagged lava and the smell of flowers heightened. Then Maggie flashed

her light just ahead and Nick gasped at the sudden riot of color that stood revealed.

"Frank's donkey," Maggie whispered.

"What are you talking about?"

The flower bed was rectangular — roughly five feet by three. The blossoms were huge things of every imaginable hue. The perfume was heady. Nick dropped to his knees, held one of the blooms in his palm and trained his flashlight on it. "Good God! I've never seen anything like this before!"

"Of course not. No flowers like these were ever grown on Earth."

"What were you saying about Frank's donkey?"

"Look." With the tip of her shoe, Maggie pushed several small objects together. Nick bent down to inspect them. "Donkey's hoofs!"

"Exactly. There are also fragments of bone — and hair. Don't you see what happened — what this proves?"

Nick rubbed a hand across his face. "It's been thrown at me pretty suddenly. I —"

"Well I've had some time to think, Nick, and this is an example of horticultural alchemy beyond our wildest imaginings. I'm sure that those creatures tested our soil for productivity, using their own methods. They needed living matter and so they

took the donkey. Look here —” Maggie thrust her hand down into the bed and brought up a mound of soft, dark soil. “Don’t you see what they’ve done?— This is new earth. In less than forty-eight hours, they’ve transformed that animal’s cells and sinews into — *dirt!*”

Nick ran his fingers through the soil. “I guess we’ll have to assume that you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right! And it makes me a little sick. They happened to use the donkey. What if they’d used one of — us?”

Nick’s short laugh was calculated to comfort her. “Not so fast. We still have no proof that they’re contemptuous of human life.”

“No? How did they know but what the donkey was human?”

“You’re forgetting something. When the robot came close to Frank in the ghost town, it waited until it thought Frank was asleep. The donkey was still awake. Therefore they knew the animal was inferior to us.”

“I hope you’re right. But I wish I knew where Joe is.”

“You go back to camp and hit the sack. All this has been hard on you. I’ll circle around and see if I can locate him.”

Maggie passed a weary hand over her face. “I think I’ll take you up on that.”

“I’d better walk back with

you first. It’s a black night.”

“What’s the use. If they come after us it doesn’t matter where we are. There’s no protection from them.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ll see you back at camp.”

The camp was dark and silent when Maggie got back. She walked along just behind the bright spot of flashlight. She had the feeling of a person walking in a sea of smothering darkness — struggling to reach the safety of a tiny sun and never quite making it. She found her tent, slipped inside and dropped to her cot with a sigh of relief. An odd nervous reaction set in. She found herself breathing irregularly though her physical effort had been scant.

This is absurd, she thought. Take yourself in hand. You’re acting like a ten-year-old.

She steadied herself, sternly. She removed her blouse and dropped her shorts, kicking them off her ankles and slipping off her sandals. Shivering slightly, she turned toward her cot.

“Hello Maggie.”

Instinctively, she snatched up the blanket and covered herself. “Joe! What are you doing in here?”

“Waiting for you angel.”

“Get out! Get out immediately. I’ll call the Senator!”

“The Senator isn’t here.”

"That's absurd. He's asleep in his tent."

"The Senator isn't here, angel. I checked." There was a thickness, a lack of control in Joe Mitchell's voice that shot fear through Maggie. Then her training and education came to the fore. She folded the blanket around herself and sat down. "Then he must have gone for a walk," she said quietly. "What happened to you? We thought you were lost. Nick is out hunting for you now."

"Let him hunt. The exercise will do him good."

"Were you hiding in here all the time?"

"It doesn't matter where I was. I'm here now — and you're here. And we're alone."

Joe Mitchell had changed; and even though Maggie — a psychologist and a woman — knew why, it still revolted her. I mustn't lose my head, she told herself. He's out of his mind and he has to be handled. An approach suggested itself and she said, "Joe, in a way I'm glad your here. I'm frightened. I'm afraid none of us will come out of this alive." Desperately, she hoped to arouse his protective instinct.

Joe laughed — a choked, unnatural sound. He was on the cot beside her. He said, "Who cares, baby. A short life and a happy one. Let's not waste time."

Maggie knew she had failed.

Another instinct — not the protective — had Joe Mitchell by the throat. "Please, Joe!"

"Baby — let's be sensible. Do you think you were given those legs and that shape to waste? They were made to be used, angel. All this morality rot is so much conversation. Nature gave us appetites to be satisfied. Let's get going."

She waited, tense, for the touch of his hands. "Joe — don't do anything you'll be sorry for!"

"Cut it out! You're no school girl. Do you think you can walk around half naked and not expect something to happen?"

Joe anticipated her scream and cut it off with a quick hand over her mouth. "Baby," he said, in a thick whisper. "This is *it*. You might as well relax. I wouldn't want to hurt you."

The blanket was gone. Maggie was facing lust coupled with superior strength and all her education in the ways of humans was of no avail. Here was a practical demonstration of the way of a human not able to practice restraint. Maggie went down on the cot — forced backward — turned — bent. . . .

"Joe Mitchell. Will you please step this way?"

The voice was expressionless, mechanical and was somehow more than a voice. A command sheathed in a power not identifi-

able nor definable. Yet power there was — in the darkness of the tent — in the air around them. Power to damp out the fire in a man's blood and the will from his mind.

Joe Mitchell lifted his hands from the body of Maggie Heart and raised himself from the cot. He stood for a moment — frozen — like a person staring into infinity.

Then he walked out of the tent into the night.

Maggie Heart huddled in the blanket on her cot. She tried to control the muscular and nervous reaction in her body; tried to concentrate through the wierd singing in her ears. It was as though a giant bow, was being pulled across a thousand strings in one mighty discord; as if every muscle in her body responded to a different string and was trying to tear away from her bones.

By force of will, Maggie pushed her mouth into a grim semblance of a smile — then managed a laugh that was little more than a croaking sound. "This is certainly no time for a girl to be caught naked." She spoke the words aloud as though creating the sound as something to cling to, however tenuous.

She got off the cot and clawed around the floor of the tent after her shorts. She found the blouse first and put it on with quick jerky movements.

The singing in her ears increased and she went to her knees, now, sobbing in an oddly mournful, animal-like manner as she hunted for the rest of her clothing. She found the shorts, raised one leg to put them on and found she could not keep from falling. I'm helpless, she thought; helpless. Utterly in the power of whatever force or entity that is playing tricks on my mind and body.

With dogged determination, she sat carefully upon the edge of the cot and raised one leg. She pulled her garment carefully over it, then over the other leg. She stood up and finished clothing herself. The buttons caused trouble because her fingers were numb. While she worked with them, a sudden reaction set in. This came as a picture, entirely unbidden, entered her mind. She giggled. The giggle rose into a full-blown laugh. Can't button them, she said to herself. Numb fingers. Not sure they're buttoned. Never can be sure. Walk out of the tent. Outraged. Very dignified. Head thrown back. Imperious. Then my pants fall down.

Hysterical laughter. Funny — so very very funny.

Maggie dropped to the edge of the cot. She put her face in her hands and sobbed.

The ringing stopped. At last Maggie realized, quite suddenly, that it was gone. Her nerves steadied. The muscle twitch sub-

sided. She drew a deep breath.

Then a machine-like, chillingly impersonal voice called. "Maggie Heart. If you are ready, will you please step this way?"

Of course, Maggie thought. Of course I will. You have but to ask. While, far back in her brain a question glowed like a far-away beacon.

In God's name — what is happening to me?

But it didn't matter really. Maggie walked out of the tent and saw the robot.

Nick Kendall's face was drawn and haggard. He paced back and forth in front of his tent, one fist punching rhythmically into an open palm. Frank Carney wearing his heavy beard and old prospector's get-up, sat against the tent wall, nursing his knees.

Gloom and tension were the order of the day.

"All three of them gone," Nick muttered. "Gone like flames blown out in the wind."

"I'd say we're pretty helpless," Frank grunted.

"If we could only see them in daylight! If we could only get some idea of what we're up against!"

"I don't think daylight or darkness has anything to do with it." The whiskers seemed to interfere with free speech. Frank scowled and pushed them away from his lips.

"Take the damned things off. We aren't fooling anybody."

"Thanks. What a relief." He peeled off the beard and threw it to the ground. I think that ship could come down at high noon and we still wouldn't see it."

"How so? How could they blanket it?"

"They could blanket us. They've got power, man! — power!"

"Then why are they playing with us like mice in a trap?"

Frank Carney studied the other through narrowed blue eyes. "I don't know anything about that, Nick, but I do know we've got to get some of this pressure off."

"How?"

"You've parked here doing nothing. That hasn't been easy. Let's make a move of some kind. Let's take a couple of Brownings and go looking for that robot. Sit here long enough and you'll blow a valve."

"The basic order was 'no hostile moves', Frank."

"Uh-huh. So we squat here until all of us fade into thin air and then Washington sends somebody out to drive the jeep back. Big deal!"

Nick stared — pondering — off across the blazing salt flat. After a few moments, Frank Carney added: "Either that or send a full report and get new orders. What's holding you back on sending a report, Nick?"

"Because I know how their minds work back there. I know exactly what their orders would be: 'Make every effort to locate absent member of party in surrounding country'. The sane assumption is that they fell ill from amnesia or something and wandered away."

"We know that's silly."

"But they don't. Then too, there's the Senator's reputation. The scandal columnists would tie McCambridge and Maggie up together. The old boy would be washed up."

"I've got a hunch he's washed up already."

"Could be."

Frank sighed. "So we sit here waiting to evaporate."

Nick turned away abruptly. He walked into his tent and bent over an unlocked case beside his cot. "Come and get 'em," he called.

Frank entered the tent and Nick handed him a Browning automatic rifle.

"How about a couple of grenades?"

They quitted the camp armed to the teeth and walked swiftly toward the ghost town. Already, Nick Kendall's tension seemed to have lessened.

"Suppose we meet that three-legged tin woodman out of Oz? Do we blast away?"

"Let's try to talk to it?"

"We'll ask it if it plays bridge."

"If things look dangerous, we'll turn tail and run like hell — try and get far enough away to throw a grenade. I've got a hunch about that thing."

"What hunch?"

"That the thing's a walking bomb. It stands to reason they wouldn't want it to fall into our hands. The logical safeguard against that would be a self-destruction unit."

"Okay — I'll follow your lead."

They walked along the edge of the salt flat, their feet breaking the crust. "Nice place to test a racing car," Frank said.

"Not big enough."

They were hardly aware of the statement or the reply as they marched along — their eyes trained on the tumbling town. Rising heat waves made it twist and shimmer. Entering the outskirts and moving up the main street, they found themselves walking on tiptoe, their throats tense, their knuckles white from gripping the guns.

"Looks deserted."

"When I got the picture, the damned thing came from between those two buildings."

They reached the far end of the street, turned to retrace their steps. Halfway back, a glint of light caught Nick's eye. He spoke quietly. "There it is — beside the hotel."

They both turned slowly and

faced the robot. It stood unmoving, except for the tubular eye that angled slowly about in a slow, wierd, eccentric pattern.

"What do we do now?" Frank whispered. "Blast the thing?"

"Hold it!"

The robot stepped from the shelter of the tilting wall and came toward them. They waited. Twenty feet away, the robot stopped. A tinny, mechanical voice said, "Please don't use your weapons. They would be of no value."

"It talks!" Frank breathed in wonder.

The reply came instantly. "No. This mechanism is merely a transmitter of visible and audible waves. It is also capable of destroying you, so please do not make that necessary."

"Where are you?" Nick asked. "Where are you speaking from?"

"We are some ninety miles above you. Out in space. We control the robot from here."

"Certain members of our party have disappeared. Do you —?"

"We have them. We are carrying on some experiments."

"Then your intent is hostile. You come as enemies."

There was a pause of almost thirty seconds before the three-legged transmitter spoke again. "A question. Assuming that — how would you proceed?"

"We would resist, of course."

"Thank you. We feel your

level of education and awareness is so low as to make further conversation a waste of time. Return to your camp if you are so inclined. We have no need of you at present."

"And suppose we are not so inclined?"

The answer came in action rather than words. The robot raised one arm. In the clutching mechanism at the end of it was a small, tube-like object. The robot pointed this at the sagging wall of a building close at hand. There was a sudden sound; a sound filled with the agony of tortured molecules in the process of swift and violent change. The wall disappeared — was transformed into a heat blast that singed the hair from the faces of the two men. They sprang backward and cringed away from it. There was the rumble of unsupported beams and timbers tumbling to the ground; then a cloud of lazy dust rising into the sky.

"We suggest you return to your camp — if you are so inclined."

"I guess we're inclined," Frank muttered.

They went back as they had come, crunching along the edge of the salt sea. The sun, lowering toward the hills, seemed to pour out as much heat as midday. Halfway back to camp, Frank turned to look toward the ghost

town. The robot was still there. "They ought to move their boy to the sidewalk," Frank growled. "He'll get run down in traffic."

Nick gave no sign that he heard. "We've got to make a full report," he said. "There's nothing else we can do."

"Uh-huh. Bring out the jets. Start firing the rocket interceptors. We should knock them down easy. They're only ninety miles up."

Nick suddenly grasped his arm. "You see what I see?"

"Huh? Where?"

"In camp. Someone's sitting at the table."

Frank rubbed the sweat from his eyes and peered ahead. "You're right. it's — it's Maggie."

They began running. The distance lessened. Now they were close enough to see the girl clearly. She sat with her elbows and forearms resting on the table, her hands folded. She stared straight ahead, not even turning to look at them as they came into the camp.

"Maggie — Maggie! Are you all right?"

She moved her head around very slowly, but her expression did not vary; a vacant expression. She could have been in complete control of herself or in an advanced stage of shock. "I'm quite all right," she said.

"Where did they take you?"

"When did you get back?"

"I'm not quite sure about either answer. I think I've been here quite a while. I was probably on their ship — I'm not sure."

"Do you want anything, Maggie? A drink. Something to eat?"

She brushed away the offers with a shake of her head. "They have power, Nick. They have great power."

"Do you feel like talking about it?"

"I'm feeling better now. My head is clearing. The daze I've been in is a little hard to explain, but this is what it boils down to: I have no doubt seen them and their ship, but I have no recollection of what they looked like. I'm quite sure that I remember what they want me to remember — that I've completely forgotten what they do not wish us to know."

"How did they capture you?"

"I was called out of my tent and I saw the robot standing there. I felt duty-bound to go with him. I went. Now I'm back. And I've been changed. I've been changed a great deal."

The two men glanced at one another, waited.

"They've eliminated certain faults in my character that would keep me from being a docile animal. Now I will fit into any slot they want me to. I could give milk for their children — shine their shoes — if they wear shoes

— work on a production line in a factory."

"Maggie — I don't understand," Nick said. Then, "Wait — you need rest. Hit the sack now, and we'll talk later."

"No, I'm quite all right. I was sent back for a reason — to tell you how it's going to be so you can report to Washington."

"Okay — if you want to talk."

"They did me no damage. In fact they helped me — improved my character. You see, all resistance in a people to a just ruler and overlord springs from character flaws in individuals. If the flaws are eliminated there is no resistance."

Frank leaned forward and laid a hand on her arm. "Listen, honey. "You aren't making it very clear. Why not start from the beginning?"

"This is a test expedition. If our planet is right in all respects, they'll take it over. They won't be cruel; no more so than a dairyman is cruel to a herd of cattle. It's to his advantage to be kind. So if all conditions are right — and it appears that they are —" Maggie looked up quickly. "What were you saying?"

"I said — why not start at the beginning?"

"Oh, of course. I'm sorry." She glanced upward, a slight frown on her face. "Joe and the Senator should be back shortly.

The three of us were test cases. But they have such power. It's so very easy for them to straighten us out. We're so far beneath them."

"Honey — please."

Maggie smiled at Frank. "From the beginning? I'm not quite sure where the beginning is. I suppose it's when I got there — wherever they took me. I have a vague recollection that they were tall and that they looked like we do, but that may have been an illusion they projected into my mind. Anyhow, I'm supposed to tell you this: They've made many tests on this planet and it's ideal in practically all respects. The soil — the climate — the location. There are other planets too. In fact this is a little like a contest. They feel we should deem it an honor to be accepted as a productive colony. No more worries for us. All our problems eliminated by superior minds." Maggie looked at Nick with just a shade of anxiety in her face. "If you turned the animals out of a zoo, they'd be lost, you know. We solve their problems — feed them — give them good homes."

"Maggie, honey — what in God's name!"

"These people are as high above us as we are above the animals we capture and cage."

"What are they doing to Joe and the Senator?"

"Just what they did to me.

You see if our planet is to be used, all things must be right. If we had to stand over our animals night and day with guns and whips, it wouldn't be worth while. We'd leave them in the jungles. But we have ways of taming our animals and they have ways of taming — us." Her eyes pleaded for understanding. "Don't you see? They used the three of us as specimens. They're eliminating the flaws from our personalities so that we'll conform perfectly."

Both Nick and Frank looked at Maggie and sickened inside. It wasn't necessary that she repeat — *they have great power*. Frank said, "We'll fight. By God —"

"Frank! What chance has a cow — or a monkey — or a tiger, if we want them?"

There was a moment of silence before Maggie said, "But we won't mind. After a while we'll be grateful."

"After a while —"

The sun had set but none of them noticed the deep dusk until footsteps startled them and Joe Mitchell was standing by the table. Oddly enough, they greeted him in complete silence. He was anticlimax; he was aftermath. There was nothing to be said.

Nor did he appear to think it odd. He ignored the men completely. His eyes and his attention were upon Maggie. He went straight to her and stood with

the air of a criminal about to receive sentence. He asked, "Can you forgive me? Can you ever do anything but hate me?"

"It's all right, Joe," she said.

"No, it isn't all right. If I could only understand. If it made the least bit of sense. How can a man in his right mind act that way toward a woman? How can he violate every essence of decency ingrained in his being? How can he —?"

"It's all right Joe. Over and done with."

"I must have gone momentarily mad. That's the only answer. Such an act can't possibly be rationalized."

"It could never happen again?"

"Never. I'm certain of that, but if I could only understand how —"

"Why don't you go to bed, Joe? You're tired."

"Yes. I'm tired. I'll see you in the morning."

Nick and Frank had sat mute during the conversation. Joe had gone into his tent before Nick spoke. "What was he talking about?"

"Before they balanced out his personality, he attacked — he tried to attack me. That's all gone though. He'll have no further urge for excesses."

Frank scowled, looked in the direction of Joe's tent. Half rising from her chair Maggie said, "All of their tests have been positive

We were the last. They'll move quickly — very quickly. Oh, Nick!"

Suddenly she was off her chair and in Nick's arms. "We're helpless! We're doomed!" Sobs wracked her shoulders and her words came between them: "At least we'll have one thing left. Even animals can be sad. We'll still be able to cry!"

Nick held her tight, hunting for words. But he never found them. A rumbling base voice accompanied by heavy footsteps came from the darkness. "What in hell's name is this? Why don't you turn on some lights?"

As though released by a switch, Frank went to the supply box after lamps and the table was brightly lighted when Senator McCambridge strode into view. "What sort of laxness is this? Where is dinner? Must a man go forever without food?"

"Senator!" Frank said, "They let you go? They —?"

"Let me go? They escorted me down from their damn ship mighty damn quick when I told them what they were up against. Blasted upstarts! When they started their shenanigans in that stupid laboratory I gave them twenty minutes — just twenty minutes — to put me back on American soil! They didn't have much hankering for a fleet of jets blasting their funny looking saucers out of the sky!"

Maggie was trembling in Nick's arms. "They — they went away?"

"They certainly did. When they found out who they were fooling with, they picked up their stupid looking robot and hit for home. They found out pretty quick that I'd stand for none of that kind of foolishness. I told them they were dealing with the United States of America! The strongest and greatest nation in the history of the world!"

Maggie's nails were digging into Nick's chest. Her lips were close to his ear. She spoke in a whisper. "Of course! Oh Nick! Of course they've gone. They refuse to rule with a club. We had to conform and — and the Senator just didn't. The test was negative."

"What on earth is this?" The Senator roared. "Shameless love making on a government expedition? If you think I won't report exactly what's gone on here —"

Maggie turned from Nick and moved close to the Senator. She put her arms around his neck and pressed close to him. He would have had to be a pillar of salt not to react. He scowled down at her and — waited.

"Senator," Maggie said. "You're an old doll! I'm in love with you and I don't care what you report. I'm going to give you one big kiss and then make you the best supper you ever ate."

McCambridge let her do both.