

# STARTLING

*stories*

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He sent current through the  
ear electrodes

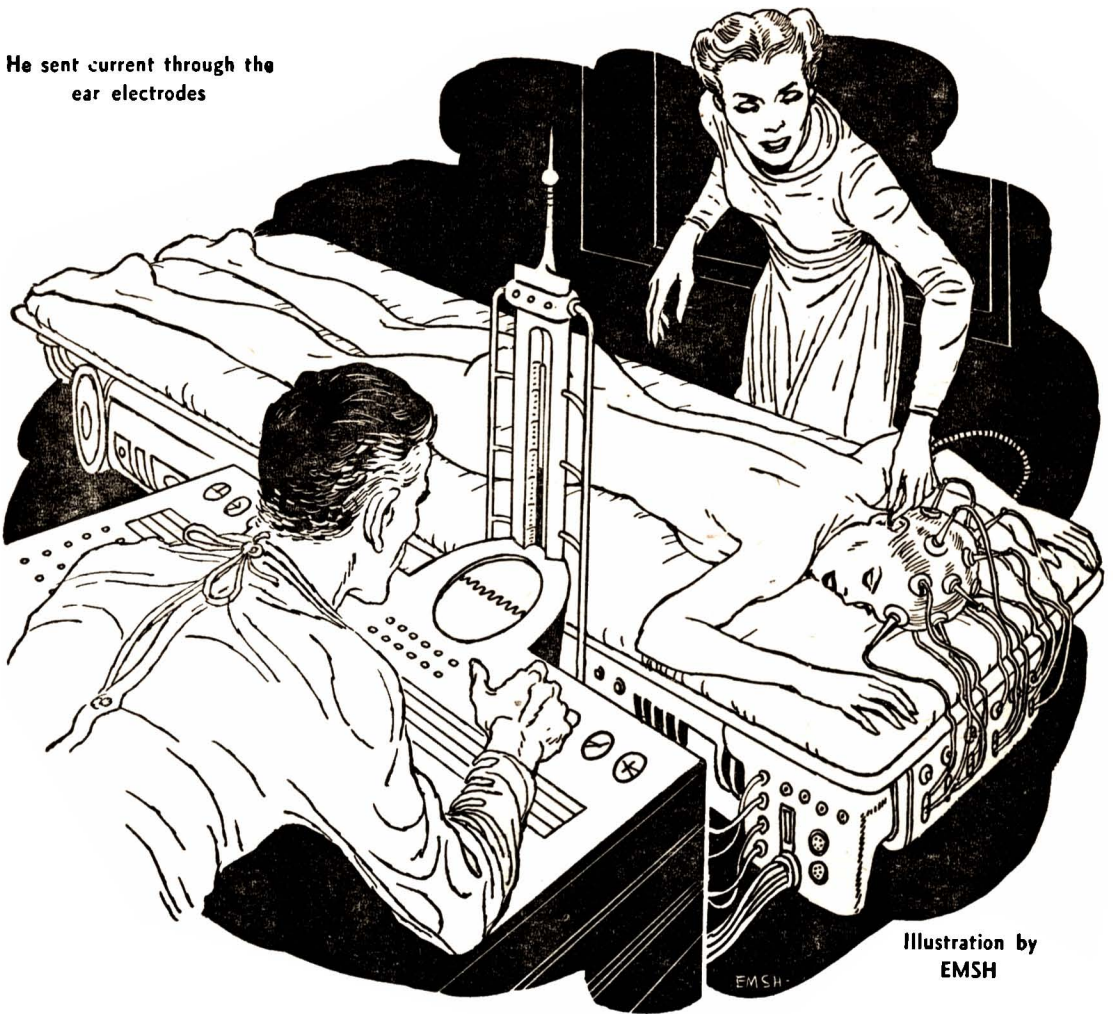


Illustration by  
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## THE SIN BY WINSTON MARKS

**T**HE letters following the name of Robert Irwine, as leafed in gold on his office door, began, modestly enough; M.D., Ph.D., L.L.D., etc. He could have added his scholastic achievements in psychology, sociology, cybernetics, criminology and micromechanics, but by and large these were not so specifically impressive to his clients as the bold-print

windup to this typographical heraldry; D.R., (FACTORY TRAINED).

As the only fully accredited Doctor of Robotics in the Pacific Northwest, Irwine, age 142, was already beginning to show traces of gray at the temples, testimony of his rigorous schedule of six hours a day, four days a week.

His practice was almost entirely

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*A robot could get away with murder,  
but one crime was unpardonable. . . .*

among robots. Few humans would pay his \$500 office-visit fee to have him work on their own bodies, but with their \$8000 roboid servants it was another matter.

There were a few who were financially pressed enough to seek the doubtful assistance of the lowly chiromechanics, but Dr. Robert Irwine was confident he was getting 99% of the robot adjustment business in his four-state territory.

There was no substitute for competence, and his broad, scholastic experience in the humanities gave him a skill that enabled him to serve his clients expertly enough so that he could keep out competition.

A persistent feeling of frustration had plucked at him lately, however. As he entered his waiting-room one morning, he decided to take action.

The spacious outer lobby was occupied by three robots, a full morning's work. Ignoring them, he addressed his receptionist-technician, Eva Brown. "Good morning, Miss Brown. No patients just yet, please. May I see you?"

Without waiting, he proceeded into his large, well-lighted treatment chamber, 118 stories above Puget Sound. He plucked at his loosely-hung necktie, which slipped from his chest, releasing the tension cords. His street clothes dropped away, shoes and all, and he stepped out of them. Kicking the pile into a low disposal slot, he stepped into his professional uniform of immaculate white and drew it up over his lightly tanned, youthful-appearing body.

Eva Brown arrived in time to gather the tension strings and knot the white silk tie for him.

WITH her face so close to his, Irwine was forcibly reminded of Eva Brown's overly broad forehead, straight unattractive hair and heavy masculine cheekbones.

She was over eighty, but she had enjoyed only two marriages. Irwine always assumed it was her non-feminine appearance that had left her short-rationed on romance. He felt vaguely sorry for her, reflecting on the satisfying

marital experiences of the twelve alliances he had enjoyed.

Irvine prized Eva highly, but not because of her sex. Indeed, such post-adolescent attractions had long since vanished for him, leaving him free from the energy-consuming ravages of callow youth.

The ability to afford a human assistant these days did not always assure one of finding a satisfactory one. Eva had been with him for almost 30 years and he was deeply attached to her. She knew his needs, his moods, his irritations, and his appetites. She administered to him with an efficiency and faultless loyalty that all his millions of dollars could never replace, were he to lose her. It was rare, exceedingly rare, in the 22nd Century, to find a highly intelligent, sensitive, prideful human being willing to subordinate herself to another human—regardless of his exalted professional position, regardless of wages or any other considerations.

Eva was the wonderful exception, and Robert Irvine was so appreciatively aware of this fact that his own super-sensitive personality was continually attuned for the slightest symptom of disharmony between them.

For over a month now, such a dissonant note had crept into their relationship. Out of sheer affection, platonic though it were, he had restrained his impulse to bring it to her attention—until this morning. Last night, however, he had been delayed sleeping a half hour, puzzling over her almost imperceptible loss of powers of concentration.

"Thank you, Miss Brown," he said, shrugging the garment so the wrinkles fell out smoothly. He seated himself before his desk-like console, and Eva Brown stood opposite him, hands almost relaxed at her sides, awaiting his pleasure.

"Miss Brown," he began softly, "as you probably have guessed, I have sensed that something is troubling you. I have waited for you to confide in me, but in the absence of such confidence I have decided to invite you specifically to unburden on me."

Was there the slightest tensing of her shoulders? Her face remained relaxed. "There is nothing seriously wrong," she said. "I appreciate your concern, however."

"You are evaluating the external factor," Irwine said. "It may be of little consequence, but its effect upon you is more notable than you may suspect." He opened a little notebook. "This last month you have made the following errors: Confusions in recording appointments, three; inadequately prepared patients, seven; failures to obtain adequate addresses of clients for billing, two; displays of irritation with recalcitrant patients, five; incomplete entries in the . . ."

SHE interrupted with a slight gesture of one hand. "I'm aware of my short-comings, Dr. Irwine."

"These are simple errors of inattention, Miss Brown," he persisted. "Not serious in themselves, but indicative of a diminishing concentration. Now you know my dislike of people who manifest irregularities and yet resist efforts to probe their causes. Please oblige me by letting me help you."

It was the proper appeal. His tactful confession that she was getting on his nerves broke down her reticence. "It is my personal robot," she said.

"Max? No trouble with his new leg, I hope?" Less than two months ago the robot had suffered a smashed leg in a copter accident, and Irwine had had to replace it.

"No. The leg is fine," she said. "But ever since—well, little incidents have been occurring that lead me to think that Max has developed a—a gratitude complex."

"Incidents? Come now, Miss Brown, you aren't qualified to diagnose these things. What kind of incidents?"

She hesitated, sighed and continued. "A neighbor's dog barked at me one evening. Max chased it and killed it. He has developed an over-alert attitude with strangers in my presence. He even scrutinizes some of my oldest friends and embarrasses me with his hostility toward them. And then he

keeps oversupplying me with my favorite foods and beverages. Every time I turn around he's offering me a martini."

She stopped speaking and looked the doctor squarely in the face. "Why are you frowning at me, Dr. Irwine?"

Irwine quickly forced his face to relax. "I wasn't aware of it. However, I would like to know why you haven't brought Max in for a survey of this—this gratitude complex?"

"You've been so busy, so many appointments," she apologized. "And you always refuse to accept a fee from me. . ."

They were impalpable excuses, and Irwine found himself annoyed out of all proportion to the gravity of the incident. He stifled the desire to press her for more valid reasons and said merely, "That's very unkind of you. I'll expect you to phone Max and have him here for my first appointment after lunch."

He issued it as an order. A little tightness gathered in his throat when he saw that she was debating whether to accept it. Finally she nodded, "Yes, doctor. I'll cancel the Worthington appointment to make room."

THE first patient of the day entered the treatment chamber in response to Irwine's signal to Miss Brown in the waiting room. It was a female model, and she barely made it in under her own power. She wobbled to an uncertain halt before his desk and tottered precariously from foot to foot.

Since no printed dossier of symptoms accompanied her, Irwine assumed her communication equipment was intact. "Describe your symptoms, please," he requested.

The robot spoke dutifully, "Muscular coordination is seriously impaired."

"Sudden or gradual development of the impairment?"

"Both," the robot answered twitching one wrist and tilting her neck with a remarkable similarity to a human spastic.

"How could there be both?" the doctor asked mystified.

"The symptoms had been growing only slightly worse until last night," she explained. "Then I spilled soup on

Senator McClane at dinner. He lost his temper and struck a heavy foot-blow to my median posterior. My condition worsened suddenly at that time."

With the new mesonic brains crowding the skulls of the humanoid type robots, even the important motor-nerve primary relays were now located in the cheeks of the buttocks, a foolish and extravagant place for an owner to vent his ill-temper.

Eva Brown, who had been listening to the conversation at her desk in the waiting room, clicked off the intercom and entered the treatment chamber. "Would you please lie down here? Prone, if you will," she said without a glance at Irwine.

She knew what was needed, and helped the robot to disrobe, stretch out on the operating table, and arrange herself. Then she taped eleven electrode cups to the patient's skull, taking up the slack on the thin cables so they wouldn't tangle. Lastly, she inserted a prod into each ear. The cables to these were heavier and capable of carrying a lethal jolt of high voltage. In mechanical cases of this nature, execution of the patient was never necessary, but the routine was a simple safeguard upon which Irwine always insisted. It enabled him, from the control console, instantly to destroy any robot whose mentality proved to be impaired beyond redemption. Only twice in all her experience had Eva Brown seen such executions. Her employer's skills were vast, and his enviable reputation did not come from admitting failure and destroying \$8000 robots.

When all was in readiness Irwine said, "Incise right gluteus maximus for replacement for the primary motor relay." He nodded for her to proceed with the operation, and while she collected the necessary surgical instruments and replacement parts, Irwine began his systematic examination of the brain.

**F**IRST he sent a disabling current through the ear electrodes to anaesthetize the robot and prevent reflex pain motion. Then his fingers moved surely over the array of switches. All

through the operation he remained at the console studying the brain wave-patterns.

With the flicker-scope, which beamed a needle of fluctuating light into the eyes of the robot, he incited various portions of the brain to action. At length he found what he was seeking, a slight abnormality in the Alpha waves. Excessive Alpha under concentration meant there was an unhealthy tendency in the female robot toward introspection.

He traced down the trouble to a weakened transatron in the Sinus Transversus. By now Eva was through with the mechanical repair, so he directed her scalpel to the skull where she quickly dissected the faulty part and replaced it.

Even allowing ten minutes for the cement solvent to dry and "heal" the plasticoid skin over the incisions, the patient was dressed and gone within a half hour.

Eva paused on her way out. "Fee?"

Irwine pinched his nose. "One office call, plus replacement parts, plus \$300 anger penalty. That should teach Senator McClane not to vent his temper on his servants. He's a neurotic fish, anyway. Voted against him last election. If he'd spend some money on his own head he'd be a better law-maker."

"But a poorer politician." Miss Brown smiled thinly.

"Yes, yes, I suppose so. Who is next?"

"A custody case. Human death involved."

"I'm ready."

It was a male robot, and he was manacled and escorted at each elbow by two hyper-muscled attendants with the insignia of the public welfare department. They retained their grip on him until the electrodes were in place and the disabling button alertly attended by the doctor.

Irwine dismissed the attendants confidently, telling them to return to their dispatch depot.

Again there was no dossier of history, so Irwine began his questioning, playing the scanning pulses over the brain and watching his scope.

"I killed my owner, Mr. Sorenson."

"I see. What disposition of you does the family wish?"

"They want my return if I am salvageable."

"Why are you manacled?"

"At my own suggestion. There was only the one homicidal impulse, but it was so overpowering that it would be foolish to risk its recurrence." The robot spoke calmly. "I can give you no clues as to the source of the trouble. I seem to be functioning perfectly in all respects, and except for the one lapse there has been no previous aberrated behaviour."

**I**RWINE activated the flicker-scope and studied the responses. He found what he was seeking almost at once. There was no trace of the Delta rhythms, the waves that corresponded to the human blanking-out pulses that come slowly, faintly, about two a second during normal consciousness. Only when the brain is being over-stimulated or is in extreme pain or danger do the Deltas surge strongly and blank out the brain.

The doctor jumped to his feet, jerked out a drawer, grabbed a pistol from it and brandished it wildly. "You dirty murderer! Kill a human being, will you?"

He fired the blank charge squarely at the robot.

During the whole action Irwin's eyes never left the scope. Not a flicker of the Delta wave appeared. However, his peripheral vision caught a motion before him. Without looking up he stabbed the disabling button.

The robot stopped in midstride, lowered his upraised, manacled wrists and unballing his fists. A look of placidity remained on his face when Irwine released the disabler. The incident was over, the danger was past.

Irvine addressed him once more. "Did your owner give you any provocation?"

"No provocation justifies killing one's owner," the robot answered with precisely correct response.

The doctor rephrased the question. "What was Mr. Sorenson's behaviour

immediately preceding his death."

"Mr. Sorenson was drunk. He was practicing saber thrusts on me. He stumbled. Had I not moved to protect myself he would have decapitated me."

"Then what happened?"

"I seized the saber and decapitated him."

"Why?"

"Under Robotica Law number three which says a robot must protect himself from destruction and injury at all times."

"Finish it," Irwine commanded.

"... except when to do so would result in injury or death to a human."

"Why did you not give me the whole law the first time?"

"Because in this instance I only applied the first half of the law. Thinking back, the incident was over before the restrictive part of the law occurred to me."

Irvine nodded to himself. Precisely his diagnosis. The very purpose of the blanking Delta pulses in robots was to give that vital instant of delay for reflection that enabled them to react to all their somewhat complex and arbitrary codes of behaviour.

Irvine called Eva Brown in and told her what to do. He disabled the robot again while she sliced deeply at his skull and replaced a whole assembly vaguely analogous to the human hypothalamus.

**T**HEY removed the manacles and sent the robot back to the bereaved owners in less than fifteen minutes. Irvine told his assistant to delay the third patient for a few minutes, then he dictated to an invisible microphone. His letter was a report to the manufacturers, with copies to the authorities and the family of the deceased. If there was a law suit, he stated, he would be willing to testify in behalf of the Sorenson family. This was, he pointed out to the fabricators, the third Delta type deficiency he had treated in two years, and all had resulted in dangerously violent behaviour. He suggested to the authorities that a rigorous regime of inspection be enforced to see that the manufacturer complied with advertised specification.

The third patient was an almost totally useless male robot rendered psychotically apathetic by deep manic depression. Irwine couldn't refrain from smiling at the lugubrious expression on his face as Eva led him in by the hand. The doctor didn't even open his mouth. After a single glance Miss Brown adjusted the electrodes and left the room. Irwine deftly moved his switches in a familiar pattern, sent four corrective jolts of micro-ampere magnitude low-frequency electricity into the robot's brain, and five minutes later he walked-out cheerfully under his own power.

Irwine glanced at his watch and spoke into the intercom. "That was a light morning. I think I'll play some golf. Would you like to join me?"

"No thanks. Not today."

"Very well, I'll be back at two o'clock . . . in time to take care of Max," he ended with emphasis.

He returned to the office feeling fit and well-fed, after shooting a par-busting 71 at golf and downing a one-pound steak at the clubhouse.

Max was in the waiting room, sitting in the chair closest to his mistress, when Irwine passed through. The doctor's spirits slipped a little. It had been an exceptionally easy morning, but he had the feeling the afternoon would get off to a bad start.

He scrutinized his receptionist while she taped the electrodes to her robot's forehead, crown and skull base. She seemed sure-fingered and calm, but then she was capable of exemplary restraint, he knew.

Since he had the case history of the complaint, he asked no questions at first. He bent over his instruments. Minutes passed in growing tension as he followed the wavering, rising and falling patterns on the toposcope. He probed the male robot's brain with the light beam and his whole array of oscillating and pulse frequencies. Nothing!

Forty-five minutes later he switched off the console and began studying the eyes and features of the patient. He asked, "Are you aware why you are here, Max?"

The robot replied at once. "Yes, Doc-

tor. My Eva is extremely thoughtful of my welfare. When my leg was crushed she . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know about that," Irwine broke in. "But what prompted her to bring you to me this time?"

"She didn't say."

"You have no idea?"

"None."

**I**RWINE glanced at Miss Brown and caught her eye with a signal meaning, "Brace yourself!"

"All right, Max, I'll tell you. Your mistress and I are going to be married, and we are going into the Canadian mountains for our honeymoon. We'll be camping out, so we won't need your services. I'll just give you a pre-storage check-over, then you can run over to the Yesler Street Warehouse and . . ."

He didn't bother to finish the fiction. What his instruments had failed to reveal was now written all over the robot's mobile face. A visible trembling shook him, and his strong, slender fingers clawed at his trouser legs.

"I could be of great service on a camping trip," Max said with a voice that was noticeably unsteady. "I can cook for you and carry your supplies." He turned to appeal to his mistress. "It will be dangerous for you alone in the woods with only a man to protect you."

"We have decided," Irwine said flatly, and he studied the robot's face for one second longer. Max dropped his chin to his thick chest in a very human simulation of defeated despair and capitulation.

Irwine removed the safety from the long, red lever at his elbow and slammed the high-voltage switch closed.

The nickel electrodes protruding from Max's ears should have crackled with 20,000 volts, and the robot should have instantly crumpled to the copper ground-plate on which he was standing. In that first thousandth of a second every nerve fiber in his body should have shrivelled, fusing all synapses and reducing the mesonic brain to a molten froth.

Nothing happened.

Quickly he touched the disabling button, locking it down. Max jerked and

stood erect, indicating that the disabling circuit was still intact.

Then the doctor forced himself to face Eva Brown. To an outsider she would have appeared quite normal and placid, but Irwine read what he feared he would find, plainly, eloquently in her eyes. To confirm the tearing feeling in his own heart, two tears rolled down her cheeks and streaked her careful makeup.

"Eva," he said quietly, "you removed the fuses from the high-voltage circuit."

It was the first time he had ever used her first name, but she seemed not to notice. "Yes. I was afraid you would reach this diagnosis. I wanted to talk it over with you first."

"There is nothing to talk over. You know that very well." He arose and circled the desk to her. He picked up both her hands in his and held them. "Max is in love with you."

**S**HE dropped her head.  
"I—I know."

"And that's why you refused to bring him here earlier," Irwine said. "When you mentioned the gratitude complex this morning I was quite certain. We do not refer to the reaction of gratitude as a complex. It is quite normal and allowable in a robot. Max wouldn't have made such gross over-compensations from any degree of gratitude of which he is capable. Now give me the fuses, please."

"No, doctor! Please don't!" She said it even as she obeyed him, slipping the two little silver-alloy bus-bars from her pocket and holding them out to him.

"I know it's hard for you to accept," Irwine said, "but the most noble emotion in man is the greatest sin in a robot. Man's love can enrich his life and the lives of others immeasurably. A robot's can only ruin his utility, at best. If a human should reciprocate his love, well, that's the type of tragedy it is my duty to prevent."

"I know, I know," she said, "but can't you treat him? Can't you do anything?"

"Think back, Eva, to the only two robots I have executed. Remember my explanation then? It is the same with

Max. The emotion of love is diffused through his whole nervous system. Unlike a man, we cannot find its source and remove the stimulation-response in a robot. It is a fantastic emotion to discover at all in a robot. We do not know where it begins. We only know that Max is corrupted with it. He must be destroyed."

He took the fuses from her trembling palm, reached under the back edge of the console and replaced them. His hand moved to the heavy red switch.

"No, no!" Eva flung herself at her servant and grasped the two deadly electrodes from his ears. Irwine clawed at the red lever to open the circuit again, but the spring-loaded switch took micro-seconds to react.

Eva stiffened, an electrode in each hand. Then she crumpled noiselessly to the floor. Irwine swept around the console and scooped her up in his arms. "You insane little idiot!"

He dropped her on the little-used operating table for human patients and stethoscoped her chest. The brief charge of current had travelled from hand to hand across her body, and her heart fluttered futilely in fibrillation.

Irwine grabbed instruments from the cabinet behind him, slashed the neck of her dress and ripped it to her waist, baring her meager bosom. He cut deeply, almost recklessly, clipped ribs, and raised the vibrating heart in his naked, unsterile hands.

He massaged the trembling organ, fingers wet with slippery blood, and he felt it quiet. Then it surged and pulsed again. A motion caught Irwine's eye. Max, with the ear-electrodes gone, had recovered from the disabling shock. He stood beside the high table staring down at the crimson splotch and the gaping cavity in his mistress's chest.

A second later Irwine would have had a homicidal robot tearing him apart, but the doctor comprehended the problem.

**M**AX, I need you to save Eva's life," he commanded sharply. "The anesthetic tube, there behind you. Put the mask on her face, quickly! She's beginning to breathe again. If she re-



gains consciousness now the pain-shock will kill her."

Max stood uncertainly for an instant, then he moved to obey. Irwine dictated instructions, meanwhile moving swift fingers to repair the grisly damage he had wrought. Gas hissed into the face mask, and Eva's chest heaved rhythmically.

He moved to the washroom, where he removed his spattered uniform and scrubbed up. His trembling fingers could manage only a crude knot in his tie, and he was unnerved to discover the toll which the unaccustomed human surgery had taken from him.

Moving back to the console, he spoke harshly to Max, who was hovering near Eva's side. "Remove the mask. She'll be all right."

The robot did so with gentle fingers. Then Irwine ordered, "Now pick up those electrodes and put them into your ears."

Max remained motionless, staring down at his mistress. "That's an order, Max! Pick up those electrodes and put them back in your ears!"

The robot turned slowly. "You are going to destroy me. You tried before, and Eva saved me. Isn't that so?"

"It is quite so," Irwine admitted without hesitation. "You have caused your mistress enough pain. Now let's get this over with before she becomes conscious."

"You mean—I caused this?" Max pointed to Eva's bandaged chest.

"Yes, you caused that. Now hurry up! There's no need to expose her to . . ."

Eva groaned softly. Max turned back to her, touched her hair with his fingers for a moment, then stooped and picked up the electrodes. He slipped them into his ears. "I am ready," he said.

Irvine scowled. Eva's head was turned to them, and her eyes fluttered open. The grimace of pain vanished in horror at the tableau before her. "No!" she whispered. "No, doctor! Please!" she sobbed weakly.

Irvine's hand fell away from the switch. He touched the disabling stud instead, and Max went rigid. Irvine crossed to Eva and took a cold hand in

his own. "It's the only way. He's hurt you enough already."

"THEN let me die," she said closing her eyes. "I'm ugly. No one has ever really loved me. Not even you after 30 years—"

"But, I'm past all that, Eva. Don't you understand?"

"Max isn't. He loves me. Don't take him away from me!"

"My dear Eva, even if I didn't think so much of you, I couldn't turn Max loose again. He'll become dangerous. You'd have to keep him locked up.

"I will."

"But he'll break out. They always do. They become more and more jealous of everyone you associate with. Their jealousy becomes a fixation, and sooner or later he'll kill someone."

She clutched his hand and rolled her head from side to side. "I'll take care of him. He won't break out. I promise. Robert, if you have any gratitude for all the years I've been with you, please, please let me take Max home again."

The whisper faded, and the excruciating pain pulled her back into merciful oblivion. Irvine administered a sedative intravenously and then hurled the hypodermic across the room.

He jabbed the phone stud and called the hospital ten floors below his office. "Send up a stretcher team, please," he ordered. "Human patient for convalescence. Post-surgery. No visitors." He paused for a second. "No visitors except her servant, a male robot—name of Max. Let him attend her."

He snatched a form from a drawer, filled out the pertinent information for admitting Eva, made the necessary notation concerning Max, and signed it. In the absence of Eva's signature he was, in effect, making himself responsible for Max's behaviour.

It was unethical, irresponsible, even irrational. Some day an innocent human would pay for this action. The hospital order before him was no less than a death warrant, an undated check payable to Max in the amount of one human life.

And the life, Dr. Robert Irvine knew, would most likely be his own . . . ● ● ●