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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor. 178



**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**



"The light grew dimmer and dimmer till we got into a ghastly greenish obscurity."

# The Thinking Machine

By J. J. CONNINGTON

*A strange and curious story about a fantastic weird machine  
that possessed a brute desire to slay—a startling  
thrill-tale of an eery invention*

I WAS lucky enough to find an empty compartment in the train at Euston; and when I had put my suit-case on the rack above a window-seat, I went out on to the platform to get something to read on the journey. Coming back again, just as the whistle blew, I was slightly put out to find that someone had planted himself, vis-à-vis, in the opposite corner, though all the rest of the seats were empty. I hate conversations with casual strangers in the train; so without a glance at my unwanted companion I opened one of the books I had just bought, and began to read.

Over the edge of the page, I noticed that the fellow was eyeing me as though looking for an opening; so I shifted the book an inch or two higher, hoping that this would choke him off. Then he got to his feet, leaned forward over me, and deliberately examined the label of my suit-case. After that, he sat down again, bent forward, and tapped me on my knee to attract my attention. I had to lower my book.

"I thought it looked like you," he explained; "so I glanced at your name on the label. Don't you remember me? I'm Milton."

Then I recognized him. The watery blue eye was as cold as ever, and I recalled the twist of the bad mouth with its rat-like teeth. He and I had never been more than acquaintances during our university days. Physics was his line, and I was on the biology side; so we had few contacts. Since

then, we had completely lost sight of each other, having nothing in common; and I resented the resurgence of this ghost from the past who would evidently irritate me with his conversation on a long railway journey. I wasn't cordial, I'm afraid. Not that he seemed to mind. He wanted someone to talk to, and I was a gift from the gods.

He discussed the weather, the emptiness of the train, a sore throat he'd had that week, and the chance of a hard winter. When I managed to insert myself into the talk, I mentioned that for the last two years I'd been out of touch with things, botanizing in Central Africa on behalf of a go-ahead drug firm. That didn't interest him, and he fell back on boring reminiscences of our student days. "Do you remember So-and-so?" Extremely tiresome. It seemed to last for hours. And slowly, as I listened to this stream of trivialities, I began to see that the man was all on edge, talking to keep himself from thinking, just a bundle of nerves in bad order. Then I happened to mention Stevenson.

In my student days, Stevenson was marked out as the coming man in physics—heaps of brains, large private means, and a knack of working things out in an incredibly short time, once he started on them. Two characteristics told against him in the scientific world. He was quite unorthodox in his views and he was amazingly secretive until he had finished the piece of research

he had in hand. He could afford private assistants, but he used them purely as mechanical hands. Unless they could guess for themselves, they learned nothing of the ultimate object in view in the researches they helped him with. He did his own thinking and kept the results to himself. The last line he'd been on before I left for Africa had been a parallelism between response in living and in non-living materials. And when his name came up, I remember vaguely that Milton had been one of these mechanical hacks employed in the private laboratory.

"Are you still with Stevenson?" I inquired. "What's he on, nowadays?"

MILTON seemed a bit confused by the direct question. He hunted in his pocket for a moment or two without answering, and I began to fear I had been too inquisitive. After all, one can't expect a paid assistant to be overfree about his chief's private work. However, at last he fished out a pocket-book and extracted a newspaper cutting which he flipped across to me. As far as I can remember, it ran something like this:

#### DISAPPEARANCE OF WELL-KNOWN SCIENTIST

It appears probable that the well-known physicist, Professor Loraine Stevenson, has been drowned. He was spending his vacation on his estate in the Hebrides, and on Tuesday morning he and his assistant went out in a motor-launch. A storm came on during the afternoon, and it is feared that the launch capsized. No trace of the launch or its occupants has been found. The name of the assistant has not transpired. A peculiar feature of the case is the disappearance of a number of bearer bonds which the late professor is known to have had in his possession at the time of his disappearance.

I handed him back the cutting.

"Who was the assistant they mention? It must be fairly well known, who he was."

Milton looked at me and I seemed to see a flicker of something in his glance, something I couldn't put a name to, a disturbing thing like the gleam of insanity in a lunatic's eye.

"Well," he answered haltingly, "the fact is . . . I mean . . . well, you see, I was the assistant."

"So the boat wasn't lost at all? What became of Stevenson, then? And how did it come that your name was left out of that yarn?"

And at that, out came his tale. I don't say I believe it, nor do I say I disbelieve it. Queerer things than that have turned out to be true, in the scientific field. I put it down as he told it to me—in his own words as far as I can remember them.

MIND, I don't expect you to believe this [he began]. It's a bit out of the common—so much so, that I'd prefer to leave the newspaper story as it stands, rather than contradict it. You'll see why, later on.

This is how it happened. Last summer, Stevenson offered to take me up north with him. You know he had a place up there? He'd a big bit of work on hand that he wanted to finish, and he needed help with it. I was to get some fishing, but it was really work he was taking me there for. There was to be a good bonus in addition to my ordinary screw, so long as I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't even to say I was going up with him.

Of course I jumped at the bonus suggestion. We got up there at the end of the week. A God-forsaken establishment: a rambling old house on a drafty headland. An old housekeeper, stone-deaf—cooked divinely, though, I must say. She never knew my name. No letters were sent on to me, you know, and I didn't trouble to bawl into her ear.

For a month or so, Stevenson kept me hard at it, measuring potential-differences

in the air. It seemed to me the merest waste of time. However, when I showed him my results, he seemed satisfied. I supposed he was after wireless atmospherics; but I've thought differently since then, though even now I'm in the dark. You know how tight he was about any of his work.

He had a small petrol-launch—the thing they mention in that cutting—and every morning he used to go off alone in it. The natives about there thought he went fishing, I believe. Then one day he seemed dissatisfied with my results. The location was bad, by his way of it, and he wanted a place where there would be less disturbance than in the house. It was all Greek to me, but he never encouraged one to stick one's oar in.

Next morning he got me to put the apparatus into the petrol-launch, and off we went, down the coast a bit, zigzagging among some small islands. I never had any head for topography, and soon I hadn't the foggiest notion where we were. Finally, he swung her round a point and brought her close inshore. Just in front of us was a fairly big arch in the cliffs. The launch went through it, into a sea-cave, and Stevenson turned on a small light he had in the bow.

You know the eery feeling these sea-caves give you? The waves come in smoothly, with an edge of foam at the rocks; then you lift up as the crests go by, and it feels as if you were going to hit the roof. The wave drops you again; you hear it swirl on into the dark, and finally it breaks, away in, with a sickening kind of roar. I never liked sea-caves. They always give me the impression that there's some huge brute at the far end, waiting to pounce on me. As a matter of fact, there *was* a brute waiting for me at the far end of that one, a new kind of brute, worse than anything one sees in nightmares.

But I'm getting ahead of my yarn. The

launch came alongside a ledge of rock and we dragged out the apparatus-cases. Stevenson took some of the stuff; I carried the rest; and we went along toward the land-end of the cave. It grew darker and darker as we came nearer the surf on the rocks at the end of the tunnel, and I began to think it was a queer place for a simple physicist to make his living in. I slipped on a bit of wet sea-weed, once; and that showed me that at high tide most of this part of the cave must be under water. The light grew dimmer and dimmer till we got into a ghastly greenish obscurity; and even that waxed and waned every time a wave came into the cave-mouth. Everything was beastly. Once I trod on a crab and nearly stumbled into the water. After that, Stevenson produced an electric torch. I suppose he'd been into the place so often that he'd forgotten that a stranger might trip on the door-mat. And the swirl of water up the channel and the crash of it at the end of the tunnel got on my nerves. I was completely fed up with the whole business.

Finally, we came to a kind of funnel leading up into the dark. There was a rope-ladder and a windlass affair for shifting stuff up to a higher level. The ladder brought us up into a decent-sized cave out of which a series of tunnels ran. I couldn't see much by the light of the torch, and Stevenson didn't seem eager to show me round the premises. He led me down one tunnel, and I found myself in quite a snug little place. Surprising, eh? It was quite dry; and he'd even put in electric heating of some sort.

**WE** GOT the cases in, and I spent the rest of the day putting the apparatus together and testing it. Stevenson himself disappeared up one of the other tunnels. Later on, he came in with some lunch, for it seemed we couldn't get out through the sea-cave till the tide went down again. He left me again. Once I heard him hammer-

ing at something, and another time I caught the noise of some fair-sized machinery going. Sounds get magnified a bit in these caves.

I couldn't tell what sort of machine it was. It whirred, like a dynamo. Altogether, it struck me as a queer place to work in, but it was ideal for steadiness. The waves didn't shake the instruments; so we must have been in pretty solid rock. I never found out how he got the place equipped—he must have done it single-handed.

Late in the afternoon, he came along and told me the tide had gone down enough to make the cave-entrance practicable. So we went home in the launch.

This sort of thing went on for a week or two, though of course the program-hours varied with the tides. We went off in the launch. I did my measurements while he vanished into one of the tunnels. The weather was first-class, and I quite enjoyed the boat-trips.

Then, one evening, sitting smoking over the fire after dinner—it was chilly weather and a rainy night for once—he grew quite communicative. Surprising, eh? It took me aback, you know. So unlike him. Sometimes I wonder if it wasn't a kind of presentiment—*fey*, the Scots call it. Anyhow, I got the last testament of a scientific genius. He talked to himself almost as much as to me, I think; so I didn't feel called to contribute anything of note. You remember his queer, pedantic way of talking: every word in full and no elisions. I can't pretend to reproduce what he said exactly, but it ran something like this:

"I presume it has puzzled you as well as my other assistants. Most of my work may seem disjointed, but if you had the clue, you would have been able to follow out the main lines for yourself. It has taken me fifteen years, but I think I am in sight of the end. Probably I am very near the end."

He was—a mighty sight nearer than he thought, then.

"I was not anxious to define my objective until I came within reach of the solution," he went on. "I had no desire to be called a quack, and that is what they would have termed me. The kernel of the problem I had set myself to solve was this: to construct an intelligent machine."

So that was what he was after! A thinking machine! What would you have thought if he'd said that to you? Rot, eh? Worse than old Frankenstein. I just bit on my pipe and said nix. He gave me a moment or two to digest it. Then he went on again.

"A living organism differs from a normal machine in that, if you stimulate it, it either fights or runs away from the stimulus; whereas a machine is simply passive. Therefore I had to choose one of two ways in constructing my machine; either give it the power of locomotion or endow it with a capacity for self-defense in its own environment. The second is the easier solution, for the machine can be placed in an environment wherein it is superior to anything which can be brought against it. My view is that if once you give an organism—be it machine or anything else—the power of appreciating stimuli and coping with them, you produce in it something akin to intelligence. It is certain, I believe, to develop the most fundamental of all instincts, a sense of self-preservation. It will become a thinking mechanism."

His cigar had gone out and he relighted it before going on.

"That is what I have been working toward for the last fifteen years, and the machine is finished at last. It may be a total failure. One can never be sure. But I have taken pains over the details. You are the first person to whom I have said anything on the matter. I had not meant to tell you, but I suppose I feel the need of an audience, after all."

He stopped abruptly and looked as if he regretted having said so much. I didn't care

to ask questions. The communicative mood seemed to have dropped off him suddenly, and he wasn't the kind of man one could cross-examine. We played chess for the rest of the evening.

NEXT morning, the weather had changed. The sea was pretty rough, squalls came down at times, and the launch rolled a lot as he took her round. We got into the cave all right, though, and climbed up to the laboratory level. Stevenson seemed to be regretting his overnight confidences, and I half thought he was going to draw back after all. But the cat was out of the bag; so apparently he made up his mind to show me his machine.

From the well-head, we went along a tunnel, turned into another one, and then switched into a side-passage. The place was a perfect warren, a regular labyrinth, I thought, as I followed the light of the torch he was carrying as he led me on. At last we came into a biggish cave, lighted by electric lamps. (He got his electricity from tidal power, he told me, once.) It was a sort of irregular hall, about eighty feet by fifty, with a fairly high roof. The floor was leveled and the walls were smooth.

The machine itself was in the middle of the place. When he spoke to me the night before, I'd no idea he meant such a huge contrivance. It covered about a hundred square feet of the floor. I don't know if you've any feeling about "personality" in machines—the difference between a racing-car and a runabout, for instance. I mean a matter of lines, you know, not mere sizes. This machine of Stevenson's was like no machine I'd ever seen before; but its physical appearance wasn't the thing that struck me most about it. It had, somehow, a personality. I can't explain what I mean. It looked wicked, just as a bull looks wicked in comparison with a cow.

And of course it was unlike any machine

you ever set eyes on. First of all one saw a pair of things like huge wooden cameras with dark lenses. Behind them was a mass of intricate machinery with coils of insulated wire sprouting up, here and there. Underneath the cameras, on the floor, were coils and coils of some kind of jointed metallic cable, and one end of each coil ran back under the cameras and ended up among the machinery. Above the cameras lay what seemed to be a couple of loose hanks of very fine wires, almost filaments. The whole contraption looked like a gigantic squid built out of all sorts of electrical fittings, and the camera-lenses made a pair of big gloomy eyes to the thing. A gruesome-looking brute!

Stevenson interrupted my inspection before I had time to see many details.

"I have no time to explain the construction just now," he said, "but you can see the outlines for yourself. The machine needs motive power, and I got that by using the rise and fall of the tide in the cavern below. That drives a dynamo, so the machine is independent of fuel supply.

"Now as regards the means of detecting foreign objects, it was clear from the first that the machine would need something akin to sight. You notice that the walls and floor of this place have been painted uniform in tint. The two camera-shaped devices above the main body of the machine act as eyes. They are actually cameras, but instead of the ordinary focussing-screens, they have surfaces built up from hundreds of tiny photo-electric cells. Normally, these cells are uniformly illuminated since the wall coloring is uniform. But if a foreign object approaches the machine, then wherever its image falls on the 'focussing-screens', the cells there will be lighter or darker than before. This difference in the incident-rays sets up a current in the wire attached to that particular cell, and thus a means of setting the protective machinery in motion is provided. It is per-

factly simple. And, of course, one needs two cameras, just as one needs two eyes in an animal to get the perspective.

"In addition, I added these tentacles which you see lying in a heap above the cameras. You will see their function in a moment or two.

"The means of defense are these wire coils on the floor. As soon as the 'eyes' or the tentacles locate a foreign body in the room, the machine can uncoil one or more of these cables and project it to the proper spot. That was merely a question of coordinating the joints."

He went out of the place and left me to inspect his toy. The more I looked at it, the less I liked it. The ugliest machine I ever saw! I'd seen a dead squid on the shore a day or two earlier, and it reminded me of that, more than anything. Ugh! But I hadn't much time to examine its beauties. Stevenson came back almost at once, carrying a small monkey, of all things.

"This brute will serve for a first experiment," he said, pitching it on the floor. "It has a fair degree of intelligence and reasonable agility—a sound test of the machine's capacity, I imagine. We can stand in this recess near the entrance and be out of reach of the cameras. The control switch is here, just outside the recess."

He pulled over the switch, and I noticed that he broke the circuit to bring the machine into action, which isn't the usual way with switches. I suppose, normally, his current was running into his batteries, or something. I only noticed this subconsciously, for I was watching the machine.

WITH the click of the switch, the sprawling mass of machinery on the floor seemed to come to life. There's no other word for it. Ever see a spider making a dart out of its den, and then stopping suddenly as it catches sight of you? The machine had that action to a hair. There was a sudden rustle of the cables, a sort of

general heave in the thing; the cameras swung round with a jerk, and stopped. Then—stillness.

The monkey was crawling about on the floor between us and the machine, and at the sudden movement of the contrivance behind it, it stopped dead, crouched, and looked over its shoulder. The two things looked at each other. Then, in a flash, the tentacles above the cameras sprang up, diverged, and hung wriggling like Medusa's hair above the head of the machine. At that, the monkey began a kind of scrambling run. Before it had gone a yard, a long cable shot out from below the cameras, twined itself round the little beast's body, clinched, and fell back as quickly as it had come, leaving the poor little brute dead on the floor. It was as quick a killing as one could look for.

"Very good for a first trial," said Stevenson. "Now I'll switch off and——"

As he put out his hand to the switch, the cameras swung round with a snap; half a dozen cables swept out, seized his arm, and dragged him out of the niche. He nearly gripped me as he went. D'you remember the serpent and the donkey in the *Swiss Family Robinson*? It killed him like that—squeezed the life out of him in no time. Oh, very quick, very quick indeed!

I thought of jumping for the switch while it was busy, but just as I'd made up my mind about it, two more cables uncoiled from the thing and tore the switchboard off the wall. He'd forgotten to paint it neutral tint like the walls, and of course his machine spotted it at once and abolished it. I suppose he'd painted the walls long before, and put up the switch at the last moment, forgetting that it showed up on the uniform background. Curious how one can't think of everything!

Well, there I was, in a pretty case. The switch was gone. I had no means of stopping the infernal machine. And the only man who knew the ins and outs of the



brute was lying more or less in bits in front of me. First of all I was sick, deadly sick. When I felt better I sat down in the niche and did a quick piece of thinking, I can tell you. The trouble was, you see, that although I was out of sight of the machine unless I leaned out of the niche, I'd no idea of the brute's full capabilities. For all I knew, Stevenson might have equipped it with a whole battery of ways of finding the stranger within its gates. I'd no notion if the filaments were long enough to reach round into my recess. If they did get there, a cable or two would come my way, pretty quick, I was sure.

It didn't take me long to see that the main weapon on the machine's side was its eyesight. Fancy thinking of a machine's eyesight! But by that time I'd ceased to bother much about its being only a bit of mechanism. It was quite alive enough for all practical purposes. Blind it! That was the game. Blind it, and take my chance with the rest of the equipment. But it was out of the question to get at the camera-lenses and smash them; they looked pretty solid. So for a while I was stuck, simply couldn't think of anything.

Then, by Jove! I had it! If I could chuck something at the electric lamps and break them, the trick would be done. Once the place was in darkness, the cameras would be out of action. I nearly laughed in the machine's face. Oh, yes, it had a sort of suggestion of a face—quite as much as the average spider, you know. The bother was, of course, that if I leaned too far out of the niche, the thing would have me. For a while I couldn't get over this; then at last I thought of diverting the brute's attention by throwing my coat out, just before I had to lean out myself. This seemed the only plan.

Then I began to reckon up ways and means. There were four lamps: two close to me, and two that would be longish shots. I went through my pockets and found I had

six pennies, a florin, a half-crown, and two shillings. Then I had a petrol cigarette-lighter, a penknife, two keys of a reasonable size, and a wrist-watch. Queer collection of things to stand between a man and death, what?

I decided to start work on the nearer lamps, so as to get my hand in. Luckily I used to play cricket. One of them I could get at comfortably without going out of the recess, and I smashed it second shot with one of the shillings. I wasn't anxious to begin shedding clothes till I had to. I wanted to keep them in reserve in case I had to make a rush for the exit at the last. So I had a go at the other nearer lamp, and I wasted four of my pennies and a florin over it, before I got it square with the second shilling. I never knew the real joy of breaking things until that lamp went out.

**M**Y END of the place was very gloomy by that time, and the machine seemed to grow perturbed by the change. It began sending out its cables and worrying the bodies on the floor. Finally it gathered them nearer to itself, had a good look at them, and then gave them a few warm embraces. Bones do make a nasty crack, especially when you expect your own ones to go the same way, before long. By this time I must have been well off my head. I know I had wild ideas about reasoning with the brute, if only I could find a means of communicating with it.

I turned my attention to the other two lamps. One was dead in front of the niche, but it was a long shot. The penny and the half-crown went near it, but both missed. Then I opened fire with the rest of my collection. I got pretty excited over it, and when at last I did score a hit, I found I'd used up all my ammunition. So there I was, with nothing in hand and one lamp to the bad; besides which, the machine was now getting seriously disturbed and had begun to throw its filaments out round about

the place. It was only a question of time till it had me, if the antennæ were long enough to reach into my niche.

Then, all at once, I thought of the best thing of all: my shoes. Queer how one overlooks the obvious, isn't it? I had them off in a jiffy. By this time, it was a case of all or nothing; so I took off my coat, balanced a shoe in my hand, and ran out toward the last lamp. If I'd waited to think over it, I'd never have been able to screw myself up to that. The cameras came round—snap!—and for a moment I looked into their dark lenses and began to feel almost hypnotized. The thing was so much like a monstrous misshapen animal. I can't convey the impression to you, but the personality of the brute almost did for me. All the machines you've ever met were doing their job quietly, with no interest in your existence; but here was a thing whose sole purpose was my destruction. One couldn't help thinking of it as a gigantic beast.

I had just sense enough to jump aside; and as I did so, a leash of cables coiled out at me. I flung the shoe straight at the lamp—I was only ten feet or so from it—and out went the light. I jumped again, more by instinct than judgment, and a cable swung past me with a hiss. Darkness seemed to have thrown the thing into a panic, for it made no systematic attempt to search the place. If it had done so, my number would have been up. As it was, I'd only the vaguest ideas about the position of the entrance, and to get there I had to risk blundering into some tentacle or other.

However, I moved in what I took to be the right direction, and at last I found a cool draft blowing. Something gripped the coat from my hand—I found I'd forgotten to throw it away—and three hair-like things fell across my neck and cheek. But by that time I was at the entrance—and free. Behind me, I could hear the thing lashing round in fury; then suddenly there was silence. Perhaps it had some means of know-

ing that I was out of range. I ran down the pitch-dark corridor, blundered into another, and then into a third. Then I collapsed on the floor.

When I came to my senses again, I realized the hole I was in. I'd lost my way in the corridors, I hadn't any matches, and if I stumbled into the den of the machine in the dark, I might expect short shrift. It took me hours to find my way through that labyrinth to the well-head. The tide was in, and I had to wait for the ebb before I could get the launch out. I started the engine and nearly wrecked the damned boat on the way down the sea-cave. All the while I had a nightmare feeling that the machine might come after me. Silly, of course, but my nerves were all to bits, you know.

It was dark—nighttime—when I got out of the cave. As it said in the cutting I showed you, there was a storm. I didn't much care. All I wanted was to get clean away from that infernal cave. I ran the launch for all she was worth through the best part of the night, and once I nearly rammèd a fishing-boat. Then I just missed getting piled up on some rocks. Finally, about dawn, a big sea broke over us, and down she went.

I just managed to swim ashore. Then I collapsed. Some people picked me up in a state of what the novelists call brain-fever, and I lay in their house till I got better. When I did come back to a reasonable condition, I saw that if I told the truth, I should be put down as a lunatic—I'd been delirious, you know—so I decided to suppress that for a bit. You're the first person I've told the yarn to. Perhaps you'll believe it. At least it's done me some good to get it out of my mind.

**T**HAT was the tale Milton told me. When he had finished, I glanced at the cutting again, mechanically, and something in it caught my eye.

"What about these bearer bonds they talk about here?" I asked.

Milton stared at me with that fishy eye of his.

"Oh, Stevenson gave me them as my bonus, of course."

People were passing along the corridor of the train, and I remembered I'd put myself down for a seat in the restaurant car. I got up, expecting Milton to follow, but he sat tight. "I'm not taking dinner on the train," he said.

I left him sitting there, but when I came back after dinner, he was gone. The train stopped at Rugby and he must have got out there.

I feel I'm in an awkward position. On

the face of it, the man in the street would say that Milton probably murdered Stevenson for the sake of those bearer bonds, and that I ought to lodge information with the police. On the other hand, the whole thing may be imagination on Milton's part: one of his delirium's nightmare dreams which has become real to him. And, finally, there's nothing impossible in his tale. A machine of that sort could be made, improbable as it sounds. Science is full of queer things. It's as well to keep an open mind. But if anyone discovers that sea-cave, I should keep out of it, if I were in his shoes. If there's anything in the story, that machine will still be waiting, for tidal power doesn't run down.