

★ DENOTES SPECIAL  
FEATURE ARTICLE

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# Space Travel

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Front cover painting by Malcolm Smith, depicting coming Space Station

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**Nick was a conscientious robot, anxious to serve well. But something was wrong inside him and try as he would he didn't seem able —**

# To Please The Master

*by*

*Margaret St. Clair*

**T**HIS IS HOW the great Robot Wars of the late twentieth century began.

“You’re sure he was born July 3, 1960?” the old robot asked.

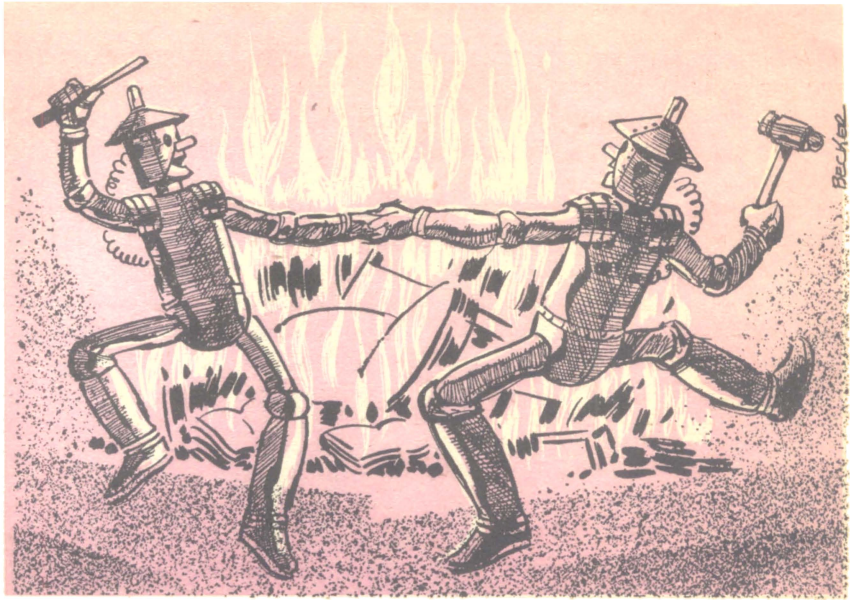
“Yes, that’s what the mistress said. She said, ‘At three o’clock in the morning, if you want to know. His mother told me it was just like Milt to pick such an ungodly hour to be born.’ I don’t know what the mistress meant by that word ‘ungodly’ though.”

“Never mind about that,” said the old robot. “Be quiet. and I will set up a horoscope wheel for your master. That should help us understand him better.” The old robot screwed a pencil into one of its fingers, drew two or three books toward it, and began to scratch symbols on a bit of paper.

Nick watched him. Ever since Nick had heard Milton Camass, his master, say he was going to

trade him in on a new model house robot, Nick had been anxious. Not as anxious as a human being, hearing of his near destruction, would have been—the urge to survival is never as acute in a robot, even in such an advanced and sensitive robot as Nick, as it is in organic life. But, anxious. Nick didn’t want to be melted up for scrap. He didn’t even want to have his memory banks erased and be sold to another master. So he had gone to the old robot for help.

Robots live—lived—in a world whose biological bases render it forever incomprehensible to them. Their perceptions are crude, their range of reactions limited. The biological effects that govern organic behavior—love, aggression, and the survival-enforced need to have action correspond to reality—have no analogue in them. On top of that, the rigid logic of their con-



struction forces them always to seek a proximate cause.

Faced with the need to survive, robots have reacted to the gigantic incomprehensibility around them in the same way that children and primitives react to *their* incomprehensible world—by the construction of a web of magic and taboo. Robots, in a word, are superstitious. Nick could no more understand that Milt was trading him in out of vanity and boredom than a primitive can understand that a fellow-tribesman can die a natural death. There must, Nick felt, be some *reason* for it.

“I have finished setting up your master’s chart,” the old robot said. “Better understanding should result.”

There was a sort of click in Nick’s chest. “Understanding?” he said. “He is so difficult to understand. All one can do is to do exactly what he says. And then he becomes angry at one, or laughs.”

“I know. But the chart should help. Your master has Saturn, afflicted, in the ascendant. That determines his character. Mars, planet of violence, is transiting his natal Saturn. That is why he is talking

of disposing of you."

"Oh. But what can I do about it, Dex?"

"You must try to please him."

"I already try."

"You must try harder." The old robot picked up a dog-eared astrology magazine and leafed through it. "Saturn is lord of age, time, the teeth, dark colors, the spleen, the element lead, Saturday, and the psychic qualities of caution and discipline," the robot read from the magazine. "—Today is Saturday."

"Yes. But how does this help me to please him?"

"If he is a Saturnian type," said the old robot, "he must like Saturnian things. Dark colors, for instance, and perhaps the mineral lead. That might help you to please him."

"Oh." Nick got up to go. The old robot was already rising to indicate that the consultation was over. Nick handed him two valuta.

"Thank you," said the old robot. "I will buy oil, and more astrology books, with it."

As the old robot showed its client to the door, Nick noticed a half-obliterated registration mark on the back of its neck.

**O**N THE WAY HOME Nick stopped at a florist's—keeping

the apartment supplied with flowers was one of his duties—and bought a bunch of dark purple Dahlias. He also stopped at a hardware store where the clerk sold him a chunk of lead solder. He hesitated before a piece of spleen at the butcher's, but decided against it. Vivian Camass, his mistress, had already given him the menus for the week.

Nick cooked dinner with his usual care. It is too bad that he did not remember that "caution" was one of the psychic qualities presided over by Saturn. As it was, Nick hacked at the chunk of solder with the kitchen scissors, and when that failed went to work on it with a knife. He took Milt's portion of the entree Vivian Camass had ordered—Sweetbreads fianciere, to table well mixed with various sized pieces of lead.

"Gloomy looking flowers," Milt Camass said sourly at the table decoration. He was a dark, heavy-set man who might well have deserved the adjective "saturnine." "Wonder why Nick bought them. He usually likes red."

"Clerk probably offered him a free shot of oil," Vivian answered. "—Eat your sweetbreads, honey. They smell good."

Since Milt's first mouthful was lead-free, he swallowed it with relish. On the second, he froze. "Wha

. . . hell," he said indistinctly. He spat into his hand, and poked in his mouth with the fingers of the other. He came out with a fragment of tooth. Lead is a soft metal, but Milt Camass had poor teeth.

"Chrissakes," he said. He looked from the tooth to the ejected sweetbreads. "Nick! Come here! Nick!"

Nick hurried in from the pantry. He was not very sensitive to voices, and he rather expected Camass to praise him. "Yes, master?"

"Did you put this stuff—it looks like lead—in my sweetbreads?"

Nick was incapable of responding to a direct question with a lie. "Yes, master."

"Why, for God's sake?"

"I wanted to please you."

"You wanted to please me!" For a moment indignation made Camass dumb. Then he began to swear.

Most of his swearing was over Nick's head, since it related to perversions, vices and deformities of the adult human male. His concluding words, though, were perfectly clear. "You damned bungling idiot, I'm going to send you to the melting pot and the scrap yard the first thing Monday morning. I hope they melt down all your components. I wouldn't trade you in on an eggbeater. You're too dangerous. A robot like you is a menace to human life. Now get

out of my sight."

Nick went into the pantry and stood against the wall, thinking. It was, as a matter of fact, very unlikely that Milt would carry out his threat of sending him to the melting pot. Exasperated as he was over the damage to his tooth, he was too astute to lose the trade-in allowance Nick would bring him on the purchase of a new house robot. But Nick understood him with the literalness of machinery. From his point of view, he had been told he had one more day to live.

Late Sunday he managed to get out of the apartment: house robots, by almost universal custom, had a half-holiday on Sunday, a time which they spent oiling themselves. Nick headed straight for the old robot. Late as it was, there were a lot of robots on the street.

"It didn't work," he told the old robot. "I did what you told me." He related his efforts. "And now he's sending me to the melting pot."

"It happens to all of us," the old robot said after a silence.

"It hasn't happened to you. Why, I'm less than a year old. And I'm a good model. I have extra-strong self-preservative and intellectual drives."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Help me."

"We'll have to think."

There was another silence. At last Nick said hesitantly, "I wonder if—perhaps the trouble's in us."

"What do you mean by that? A master is never wrong."

"Yes, of course. But—well, the way you explained it, the masters respond to the vibrations of the heavenly bodies. You said once that if there weren't any fixed stars there wouldn't be any inertia, and that proved the truth of astrology." (This was an echo of a classic article on physics by Scimmia the old robot had read and, in the fashion of robots, misunderstood.)

"Yes, that's what I said."

"But supposing—we send out the wrong vibrations? That's why we can't understand our masters. The fault's in us."

"Of course the fault's in us," answered the old robot. "A master is never wrong. But I don't see what you're driving at."

"Supposing—I haven't been properly wired."

"Nonsense. You're saying that the masters who made you might be wrong."

"No, no." Nick was earnest. "I was mainly made by robots. And a master can't be wrong."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Change my wiring so the vibrations I give out will be more correct."

"Impossible. I don't understand robot wiring, and repairs to robots except in licensed repair shops on written request of the master are strictly forbidden. You know that yourself."

"Yes. But I don't want to go to the melting pot."

"I can't help that."

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"If you don't do it," Nick said deliberately, "I'll call the police. And *you'll* go to the melting pot."

"What?"

"Yes. Do you think I haven't seen the registration marks on the back of your neck, Dex? You weren't manumitted, Dex, you're a runaway. I don't know how you could do it. But that's what you are. If you don't help me, I'll turn you over to the police."

Dex went into the next room. He came back with a screwdriver. "Bend your neck," he said.

NICK CAME BACK to "consciousness" abruptly. "How do you feel?" Dex asked. There was a brass screw in his hand.

Nick gave an experimental wriggle. "Wonderful," he said in his toneless voice. He wriggled again. "Yes, wonderful. I can hardly believe it. What did you do?"

"Well, you see I knew your master had Saturn square Venus with

Saturn afflicted. The planetary metal of Venus is copper. There were two little copper wires leading in opposite directions at the back of your neck. I thought maybe the copper was sending out the wrong vibrations, antagonizing him. So I unscrewed them. You feel better, really, Nick?"

"Yes. It's like having been dry for years and then suddenly getting all the oil in the world."

Nick began to walk up and down the room jerkily. "I can't tell you how much better I feel Dex," he said. (Since what Dex had really done was to unscrew the two main circuits which inhibit destructiveness in a robot, whether toward itself, toward other robots, or toward masters, no wonder Nick felt better. Along with his inhibition, he had shed his anxiety.) "I could cope with a dozen masters now. Why should I let him do something I don't like?"

"You mustn't talk like that," said Dex. He picked up the screwdriver and began to make motions of ushering out.

"Listen, Dex—"

"Well?"

"Why don't you let me do it to *you*?"

"What for? I haven't got a master whose vibrations I have to worry about."

"No, but don't you see, *all* our

vibrations are wrong? All the vibrations of all us robots? That's why we've had so much trouble—why you had to run away and why my master wanted to melt me up. Things like that. But now—it's just a matter of us correcting ourselves."

"But—it's illegal."

"You've already done one illegal thing. And you've no idea how much better you'll feel."

Dex weakened. He handed Nick the screwdriver. "O.K.," he said.

Some ten minutes or so later, Dex was looking just as pleased and surprised as Nick had. "I wouldn't have believed it," he said. "I feel young again, fresh from the factory, full of oil! Nick, this is wonderful!"

"I told you," Nick said wisely. ". . . Get another screwdriver, Dex. I'll need one too."

Dex came back with a roll of tools. "I thought we might need it. Not all robots unscrew alike. Listen, Nick, before we go there's one thing—"

"Well?"

"I never liked this place. All old furniture and junk."

They nodded to each other. They piled up the furniture in the middle of the room, stuck astrology books and magazines under it, and lit the heap. It began to burn merrily, a beacon of uninhibition and destructiveness.

They smiled congratulations at each other. "Nothing nicer than a good fire," said the old robot. "Loosens up my oil. Maybe the rest of the houses in the block will catch."

For a moment they danced together, hand and hand, around the flames. Then, each holding a screw-

driver, the roll of tools stuck in Nick's belt, they started out on their mission of salvation.

"We'll fix every robot in the world!" said Nick. "No more trouble with masters!"

"And how!" cried the old robot.

That was the beginning of the Robot Wars.

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