



Manners of the Age
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The red tennis robot scooted desperately across the court, its four wide-set wheels squealing. For a moment, Robert's hard-hit passing shot seemed to have scored. Then, at the last instant, the robot whipped around its single racket-equipped arm. Robert sprawled headlong in a futile lunge at the return.

"Game and set to Red Three," announced the referee box from its high station above the net.

"Ah, shut up!" growled Robert, and flung down his racket for one of the white serving robots to retrieve.

"Yes, Robert," agreed the voice. "Will Robert continue to play?" Interpreting the man's savage mumble as a negative, it told his opponent, "Return to your stall, Red Three!"

Robert strode off wordlessly toward the house. Reaching the hundred-foot-square swimming pool, he hesitated uncertainly.

"Weather's so damned hot," he muttered. "Why didn't the old-time scientists find out how to do something about that while there were still enough people on Earth to manage it?"

He stripped off his damp clothing and dropped it on the "beach" of white sand. Behind him sounded the steps of a humanoid serving robot, hastening to pick it up. Robert plunged deep into the cooling water and let himself float lazily to the surface.

Maybe they did, he thought. I could send a robot over to the old city library for information. Still, actually doing anything would probably take the resources of a good many persons—and it isn't so easy to find people now that Earth is practically deserted.

He rolled sideward for a breath and began to swim slowly for the opposite side of the pool, reflecting upon the curious culture of the planet. Although he had accepted this all his life, it really was remarkable how the original home of the human race had been forsaken for fresher worlds among the stars. Or was it more remarkable that a few individuals had asserted their independence by remaining?

Robert was aware that the decision involved few difficulties, considering the wealth of robots and other automatic machines. He regretted knowing so few humans, though they were really not necessary. If not for his hobby of televising, he would probably not know any at all.

"Wonder how far past the old city I'd have to go to meet someone in person," he murmured as he pulled himself from the pool. "Maybe I ought to try accepting that televised invitation of the other night."

Several dark usuform robots were smoothing the sand on this beach under the direction of a blue humanoid supervisor. Watching them idly, Robert estimated that it must be ten years since he had seen another human face to face. His parents were dim memories. He got along very well, however, with robots to serve him or to obtain occasional information from the automatic scanners of the city library that had long ago been equipped to serve such a purpose.

"Much better than things were in the old days," he told himself as he crossed the lawn to his sprawling white mansion. "Must have been awful before the population declined. Imagine having people all around you, having to listen to them, see them, and argue to make them do what you wanted!"

The heel of his bare right foot came down heavily on a pebble, and he swore without awareness of the precise meaning of the ancient phrases. He limped into the baths and beckoned a waiting robot as he stretched out on a rubbing table.

"Call Blue One!" he ordered.

The red robot pushed a button on the wall before beginning the massage. In a few moments, the major-domo arrived.

"Did Robert enjoy the tennis?" it inquired politely.

"I did *not*!" snapped the man. "Red Three won—and by too big a score. Have it geared down a few feet per second."

"Yes, Robert."

"And have the lawn screened again for pebbles!"

As Blue One retired he relaxed, and turned his mind to ideas for filling the evening. He hoped Henry would televise: Robert had news for him.

After a short nap and dinner, he took the elevator to his three-story tower and turned on the television robot. Seating himself in a comfortable armchair, he directed the machine from one channel to another. For some time, there was no answer to his perfunctory call signals, but one of his few acquaintances finally came on.

"Jack here," said a quiet voice that Robert had long suspected of being disguised by a filter microphone.

"I haven't heard you for some weeks," he remarked, eyeing the swirling colors on the screen.

He disliked Jack for never showing his face, but curiosity as to what lay behind the mechanical image projected by the other's transmitter preserved the acquaintance.

"I was ... busy," said the bodiless voice, with a discreet hint of a chuckle that Robert found chilling.

He wondered what Jack had been up to. He remembered once being favored with a televised view of Jack's favorite sport—a battle between companies of robots designed for the purpose, horribly reminiscent of human conflicts Robert had seen on historical films.

He soon made an excuse to break off and set the robot to scanning Henry's channel. He had something to tell the older man, who lived only about a hundred miles away and was as close to being his friend as was possible in this age of scattered, self-sufficient dwellings.

"I don't mind talking to *him*," Robert reflected. "At least he doesn't overdo this business of individual privacy."

He thought briefly of the disdainful face—seemingly on a distant station—which had merely examined him for several minutes one night without ever condescending to speak. Recalling his rage at this treatment, Robert wondered how the ancients had managed to get along together when there were so many of them. They must have had some strict code of behavior, he supposed, or they never would have bred so enormous a population.

"I must find out about that someday," he decided. "How did you act, for instance, if you wanted to play tennis but someone else just refused and went to eat dinner? Maybe that was why the ancients had so many murders."

He noticed that the robot was getting an answer from Henry's station, and was pleased. He could talk as long as he liked, knowing Henry would not resent his cutting off any time he became bored with the conversation.

The robot focused the image smoothly. Henry gave the impression of being a small man. He was gray and wrinkled compared with Robert, but his black eyes were alertly sharp. He smiled his greeting and immediately launched into a story of one of his youthful trips through the mountains, from the point at which it had been interrupted the last time they had talked.

Robert listened impatiently.

"Maybe I have some interesting news," he remarked as the other finished. "I picked up a new station the other night."

"That reminds me of a time when I was a boy and—"

Robert fidgeted while Henry described watching his father build a spare television set as a hobby, with only a minimum of robot help. He pounced upon the first pause.

"A new station!" he repeated. "Came in very well, too. I can't imagine why I never picked it up before."

"Distant, perhaps?" asked Henry resignedly.

"No, not very far from me, as a matter of fact."

"You can't always tell, especially with the ocean so close. Now that there are so few people, you'd think there'd be land enough for all of them; but a good many spend all their lives aboard ship-robots."

"Not this one," said Robert. "She even showed me an outside view of her home."

Henry's eyebrows rose. "She? A woman?"

"Her name is Marcia-Joan."

"Well, well," said Henry. "Imagine that. Women, as I recall, usually do have funny names."

He gazed thoughtfully at his well-kept hands.

"Did I ever tell you about the last woman I knew?" he asked. "About twenty years ago. We had a son, you know, but he grew up and wanted his own home and robots."

"Natural enough," Robert commented, somewhat briefly since Henry *had* told him the story before.

"I often wonder what became of him," mused the older man. "That's the trouble with what's left of Earth culture—no families any more."

Now he'll tell about the time he lived in a crowd of five, thought Robert. He, his wife, their boy and the visiting couple with the fleet of robot helicopters.

Deciding that Henry could reminisce just as well without a listener, Robert quietly ordered the robot to turn itself off.

Maybe I will make the trip, he pondered, on the way downstairs, if only to see what it's like with another person about.

At about noon of the second day after that, he remembered that thought with regret.

The ancient roads, seldom used and never repaired, were rough and bumpy. Having no flying robots, Robert was compelled to transport himself and a few mechanical servants in ground vehicles. He had—idiotically, he now realized—started with the dawn, and was already tired.

Consequently, he was perhaps unduly annoyed when two tiny spy-eyes flew down from the hills to hover above his caravan on whirring little propellers. He tried to glance up pleasantly while their lenses televised pictures to their base, but he feared that his smile was strained.

The spy-eyes retired after a few minutes. Robert's vehicle, at his voiced order, turned onto a road leading between two forested hills.

Right there, he thought four hours later, was where I made my mistake. I should have turned back and gone home!

He stood in the doorway of a small cottage of pale blue trimmed with yellow, watching his robots unload baggage. They were supervised by Blue Two, the spare for Blue One.

Also watching, as silently as Robert, was a pink-and-blue striped robot which had guided the caravan from the entrance gate to the cottage. After one confused protest in a curiously high voice, it had not spoken.

Maybe we shouldn't have driven through that flower bed, thought Robert. Still, the thing ought to be versatile enough to say so. I wouldn't have such a gimcrack contraption!

He looked up as another humanoid robot in similar colors approached along the line of shrubs separating the main lawns from that surrounding the cottage.

"Marcia-Joan has finished her nap. You may come to the house now."

Robert's jaw hung slack as he sought for a reply. His face flushed at the idea of a robot's offering *him* permission to enter the house.

Nevertheless, he followed it across the wide lawn and between banks of gaily blossoming flowers to the main house. Robert was not sure which color scheme he disliked more, that of the robot or the unemphatic pastel tints of the house.

The robot led the way inside and along a hall. It pulled back a curtain near the other end, revealing a room with furniture for human use. Robert stared at the girl who sat in an armchair, clad in a long robe of soft, pink material.

She looked a few years younger than he. Her hair and eyes were also brown, though darker. In contrast to Robert's, her smooth skin was only lightly tanned, and she wore her hair much longer. He thought her oval face might have been pleasant if not for the analytical expression she wore.

"I am quite human," he said in annoyance. "Do you have a voice?"

She rose and walked over to him curiously. Robert saw that she was several inches shorter than he, about the height of one of his robots. He condescended to bear her scrutiny.

"You look just as you do on the telescreen," she marveled.

Robert began to wonder if the girl were feeble-minded. How else should he look?

"I usually swim at this hour," he said to change the subject. "Where is the pool?"

Marcia-Joan stared at him.

"Pool of what?" she asked.

Sensing sarcasm, he scowled. "Pool of water, of course! To swim in. What did you think I meant—a pool of oil?"

"I am not acquainted with your habits," retorted the girl.

"None of that stupid wit!" he snapped. "Where is the pool?"

"Don't shout!" shouted the girl. Her voice was high and unpleasantly shrill compared with his. "I don't have a pool. Who wants a swimming pool, anyway?"

Robert felt his face flushing with rage.

So she won't tell me! he thought. All right, I'll find it myself. Everybody has a pool. And if she comes in, I'll hold her head under for a while!

Sneering, he turned toward the nearest exit from the house. The gaily striped robot hastened after him.

The door failed to swing back as it should have at Robert's approach. Impatiently, he seized the ornamental handle. He felt his shoulder grasped by a metal hand.

"Do not use the front door!" said the robot.

"Let go!" ordered Robert, incensed that any robot should presume to hinder him.

"Only Marcia-Joan uses this door," said the robot, ignoring Robert's displeasure.

"I'll use it if I like!" declared Robert, jerking the handle.

The next moment, he was lifted bodily into the air. By the time he realized what was happening, he was carried, face down, along the hall. Too astonished even to yell, he caught a glimpse of Marcia-Joan's tiny feet beneath the hem of her pink robe as his head passed the curtained doorway.

The robot clumped on to the door at the rear of the house and out into the sunshine. There, it released its grip.

When Robert regained the breath knocked out of him by the drop, and assured himself that no bones were broken, his anger returned.

"I'll find it, wherever it is!" he growled, and set out to search the grounds.

About twenty minutes later, he was forced to admit that there really was no swimming pool. Except for a brook fifty yards away, there was only the tiled bathroom of the cottage to bathe in.

"Primitive!" exclaimed Robert, eyeing this. "Manually operated water supply, too! I must have the robots fix something better for tomorrow."

Since none of his robots was equipped with a thermometer, he had to draw the bath himself. Meanwhile, he gave orders to Blue Two regarding the brook and a place to swim. He managed to fill the tub without scalding himself mainly because there was no hot water. His irritation, by the time he had dressed in fresh clothes and prepared for another talk with his hostess, was still lively.

"Ah, you return?" Marcia-Joan commented from a window above the back door.

"It is time to eat," said Robert frankly.

"You are mistaken."

He glanced at the sunset, which was already fading.

"It *is* time," he insisted. "I always eat at this hour."

"Well, I don't."

Robert leaned back to examine her expression more carefully. He felt very much the way he had the day the water-supply robot for his pool had broken down and, despite Robert's bellowed orders, had flooded a good part of the lawn before Blue One had disconnected it. Some instinct warned him, moreover, that bellowing now would be as useless as it had been then.

"What *do* you do now?" he asked.

"I dress for the evening."

"And when do you eat?"

"After I finish dressing."

"I'll wait for you," said Robert, feeling that that much tolerance could do no particular harm.

He encountered the pink-and-blue robot in the hall, superintending several plain yellow ones bearing dishes and covered platters. Robert followed them to a dining room.

"Marcia-Joan sits there," the major-domo informed him as he moved toward the only chair at the table.

Robert warily retreated to the opposite side of the table and looked for another chair. None was visible.

Of course, he thought, trying to be fair. Why should anybody in this day have more than one chair? Robots don't sit.

He waited for the major-domo to leave, but it did not. The serving robots finished laying out the dishes and retired to posts along the wall.

Finally, Robert decided that he would have to make his status clear or risk going hungry.

If I sit down somewhere, he decided, it may recognize me as human. What a stupid machine to have!

He started around the end of the table again, but the striped robot moved to intercept him. Robert stopped.

"Oh, well," he sighed, sitting sidewise on a corner of the table.

The robot hesitated, made one or two false starts in different directions, then halted. The situation had apparently not been included among its memory tapes. Robert grinned and lifted the cover of the nearest platter.

He managed to eat, despite his ungraceful position and what he considered the scarcity of the food. Just as he finished the last dish, he heard footsteps in the hall.

Marcia-Joan had dressed in a fresh robe, of crimson. Its thinner material was gathered at the waist by clasps of gleaming gold. The arrangement emphasized bodily contours Robert had previously seen only in historical films.

He became aware that she was regarding him with much the same suggestion of helpless dismay as the major-domo.

"Why, you've eaten it all!" she exclaimed.

"All?" snorted Robert. "There was hardly any food!"

Marcia-Joan walked slowly around the table, staring at the empty dishes.

"A few bits of raw vegetables and the tiniest portion of protein-concentrate I ever saw!" Robert continued. "Do you call that a dinner to serve a guest?"

"And I especially ordered two portions—"

"Two?" Robert repeated in astonishment. "You must visit me sometime. I'll show you—"

"What's the matter with my food?" interrupted the girl. "I follow the best diet advice my robots could find in the city library."

"They should have looked for human diets, not song-birds'."

He lifted a cover in hopes of finding some overlooked morsel, but the platter was bare.

"No wonder you act so strangely," he said. "You must be suffering from malnutrition. I don't wonder with a skimpy diet like this."

"It's very healthful," insisted Marcia-Joan. "The old film said it was good for the figure, too."

"Not interested," grunted Robert. "I'm satisfied as I am."

"Oh, yes? You look gawky to me."

"You don't," retorted Robert, examining her disdainfully. "You are short and stubby and too plump."

"Plump?"

"Worse, you're actually fat in lots of places I'm not."

"At least not between the ears!"

Robert blinked.

"Wh-wh-WHAT?"

"And besides," she stormed on, "those robots you brought are painted the most repulsive colors!"

Robert closed his mouth and silently sought the connection. *Robots? he thought. Not fat, but repulsive colors, she said. What has that to do with food? The woman seems incapable of logic.*

"And furthermore," Marcia-Joan was saying, "I'm not sure I care for the looks of you! Lulu, put him out!"

"Who's Lulu?" demanded Robert.

Then, as the major-domo moved forward, he understood.

"What a silly name for a robot!" he exclaimed.

"I suppose you'd call it Robert. Will you go now, or shall I call more robots?"

"I am not a fool," said Robert haughtily. "I shall go. Thank you for the disgusting dinner."

"Do not use the front door," said the robot. "Only Marcia-Joan uses that. All robots use other doors."

Robert growled, but walked down the hall to the back door. As this swung open to permit his passage, he halted.

"It's dark out there now," he complained over his shoulder. "Don't you have any lights on your grounds? Do you want me to trip over something?"

"Of course I have ground lights!" shrilled Marcia-Joan. "I'll show you—not that I care if you trip or not."

A moment later, lights concealed among the trees glowed into life. Robert walked outside and turned toward the cottage.

I should have asked her what the colors of my robots had to do with it, he thought, and turned back to re-enter.

He walked right into the closed door, which failed to open before him, though it had operated smoothly a moment ago.

"Robots not admitted after dark," a mechanical voice informed him. "Return to your stall in the shed."

"Whom do you think you're talking to?" demanded Robert. "I'm not one of your robots!"

There was a pause.

"Is it Marcia-Joan?" asked the voice-box, after considerable buzzing and whirring.

"No, I'm Robert."

There was another pause while the mechanism laboriously shifted back to its other speech tape. Then: "Robots not admitted after dark. Return to your stall in the shed."

Robert slowly raised both hands to his temples. Lingeringly, he dragged them down over his cheeks and under his chin until at last the fingers interlaced over his tight lips. After a moment, he let out his breath between his fingers and dropped his hands to his sides.

He raised one foot to kick, but decided that the door looked too hard.

He walked away between the beds of flowers, grumbling.

Reaching the vicinity of the cottage, he parted the tall shrubs bordering its grounds and looked through carefully before proceeding. Pleased at the gleam of water, he called Blue Two.

"Good enough! Put the other robots away for the night. They can trim the edges tomorrow."

He started into the cottage, but his major-domo warned, "Someone comes."

Robert looked around. Through thin portions of the shrubbery, he caught a glimpse of Marcia-Joan's crimson robe, nearly black in the diffused glow of the lights illuminating the grounds.

"Robert!" called the girl angrily. "What are your robots doing? I saw them from my upstairs window—"

"Wait there!" exclaimed Robert as she reached the shrubs.

"What? Are you trying to tell me where I can go or not go? I—YI!"

The shriek was followed by a tremendous splash. Robert stepped forward in time to be spattered by part of the flying spray. It was cold.

Naturally, being drawn from the brook, he reflected. Oh, well, the sun will warm it tomorrow.

There was a frenzy of thrashing and splashing in the dimly lighted water at his feet, accompanied by coughs and spluttering demands that he "do something!"

Robert reached down with one hand, caught his hostess by the wrist, and heaved her up to solid ground.

"My robots are digging you a little swimming hole," he told her. "They brought the water from the brook by a trench. You can finish it with concrete or plastics later; it's only fifteen by thirty feet."

He expected some sort of acknowledgment of his efforts, and peered at her through the gloom when none was forthcoming. He thus caught a glimpse of the full-swinging slap aimed at his face. He tried to duck.

There was another splash, followed by more floundering about.

"Reach up," said Robert patiently, "and I'll pull you out again. I didn't expect you to like it this much."

Marcia-Joan scrambled up the bank, tugged viciously at her sodden robe, and headed for the nearest pathway without replying. Robert followed along.

As they passed under one of the lights, he noticed that the red reflections of the wet material, where it clung snugly to the girl's body, were almost the color of some of his robots.

The tennis robot, he thought, and the moving targets for archery—in fact, all the sporting equipment.

"You talk about food for the figure," he remarked lightly. "You should see yourself now! It's really funny, the way—"

He stopped. Some strange emotion stifled his impulse to laugh at the way the robe clung.

Instead, he lengthened his stride, but he was still a few feet behind when she charged through the front entrance of the house. The door, having opened automatically for her, started to swing closed. Robert sprang forward to catch it.

"Wait a minute!" he cried.

Marcia-Joan snapped something that sounded like "Get out!" over her shoulder, and squished off toward the stairs. As Robert started through the door to follow, the striped robot hastened toward him from its post in the hall.

"Do not use the front door!" it warned him.

"Out of my way!" growled Robert.

The robot reached out to enforce the command. Robert seized it by the forearm and put all his weight into a sudden tug. The machine tottered off balance. Releasing his grip, he sent it staggering out the door with a quick shove.

A hasty glance showed Marcia-Joan flapping wetly up the last steps. Robert turned to face the robot.

"Do not use that door!" he quoted vindictively, and the robot halted its rush indecisively. "Only Marcia-Joan uses it."

The major-domo hesitated. After a moment, it strode off around the corner of the house. First darting one more look at the stairs, Robert thrust his head outside and shouted: "Blue Two!"

He held the door open while he waited. There was an answer from the shrubbery. Presently, his own supervisor hurried up.

"Fetch the emergency toolbox!" Robert ordered. "And bring a couple of others with you."

"Naturally, Robert. I would not carry it myself."

A moment after the robot had departed on the errand, heavy steps sounded at the rear of the hall. Marcia-Joan's robot had dealt with the mechanism of the back door.

Robert eyed the metal mask as the robot walked up to him. He found the color contrast less pleasant than ever.

"I am not using the door," he said hastily. "I am merely holding it open."

"Do you intend to use it?"

"I haven't decided."

"I shall carry you out back," the robot decided for him.

"No, you don't!" exclaimed Robert, leaping backward.

The door immediately began to swing shut as he passed through.

Cursing, he lunged forward. The robot reached for him.

This time, Robert missed his grip. Before he could duck away, his wrist was trapped in a metal grasp.

The door will close, he despaired. They'll be too late.

Then, suddenly, he felt the portal drawn back and heard Blue Two speak.

"What does Robert wish?"

"Throw this heap out the door!" gasped Robert.

Amid a trampling of many feet, the major-domo was raised bodily by Blue Two and another pair of Robert's machines and hustled outside. Since the grip on Robert's wrist was not relaxed, he involuntarily accompanied the rush of metal bodies.

"Catch the door!" he called to Blue Two.

When the latter sprang to obey, the other two took the action as a signal to drop their burden. The pink-and-blue robot landed full length with a jingling crash. Robert was free.

With the robots, he made for the entrance. Hearing footsteps behind him as the major-domo regained its feet, he slipped hastily inside.

"Pick up that toolbox!" he snapped. "When that robot stops in the doorway, knock its head off!"

Turning, he held up a finger.

"Do not use the front door!"

The major-domo hesitated.

The heavy toolbox in the grip of Blue Two descended with a thud. The pink-and-blue robot landed on the ground a yard or two outside the door as if dropped from the second floor. It bounced once, emitted a few sparks and pungent wisps of smoke, lay still.

"Never mind, that's good enough," said Robert as Blue Two stepped forward. "One of the others can drag it off to the repair shop. Have the toolbox brought with us."

"What does Robert wish now?" inquired Blue Two, trailing the man toward the stairway.

"I'm going upstairs," said Robert. "And I intend to be prepared if any more doors are closed against me!"

He started up, the measured treads of his own robots sounding reassuringly behind him... .

It was about a week later that Robert sat relaxed in the armchair before his own telescreen, facing Henry's wizened visage.

The elder man clucked sympathetically as he re-examined the scratches on Robert's face and the bruise under his right eye.

"And so you left there in the morning?"

"I certainly did!" declared Robert. "We registered a marriage record at the city library by television, of course, but I don't care if I never see her again. She needn't even tell me about the child, if any. I simply can't stand that girl!"

"Now, now," Henry said.

"I mean it! Absolutely no consideration for my wishes. Everything in the house was run to suit her convenience."

"After all," Henry pointed out, "it *is* her house."

Robert glared. "What has that to do with it? I don't think I was as unreasonable as she said in smashing that robot. The thing just wouldn't let me alone!"

"I guess," Henry suggested, "it was conditioned to obey Marcia-Joan, not you."

"Well, that shows you! Whose orders are to count, anyway? When I tell a robot to do something, I expect it done. How would you like to find robots trying to boss you around?"

"Are you talking about robots," asked Henry, "or the girl?"

"Same thing, isn't it? Or it would be if I'd decided to bring her home with me."

"Conflict of desires," murmured Henry.

"Exactly! It's maddening to have a perfectly logical action interfered with because there's another person present to insist—*insist*, mind you—on having her way."

"And for twenty-odd years, you've had your own way in every tiny thing."

Somewhere in the back of Robert's lurked a feeling that Henry sounded slightly sarcastic.

"Well, why shouldn't I?" he demanded. "I noticed that in every disagreement, my view was the right one."

"It was?"

"Of course it was! What did you mean by that tone?"

"Nothing... ." Henry seemed lost in thought. "I was just wondering how many 'right' views are left on this planet. There must be quite a few, all different, even if we have picked up only a few by television. An interesting facet of our peculiar culture—every individual omnipotent and omniscient, *within his own sphere*."

Robert regarded him with indignant incredulity.

"You don't seem to understand my point," he began again. "I told her we ought to come to my house, where things are better arranged, and she simply refused. Contradicted me! It was most—"

He broke off.

"The *impudence* of him!" he exclaimed. "Signing off when *I* wanted to talk!"

—H. B. FYFE

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