

THE TWONKY

by

LEWIS PADGETT

*

THE TURNOVER at Mideastern Radio was so great that Mickey Lloyd couldn't keep track of his men. It wasn't only the draft; employees kept quitting and going elsewhere, at a higher salary. So when the big-headed little man in overalls wandered vaguely out of a storeroom, Lloyd took one look at the brown dungaree suit—company provided—and said mildly, "The whistle blew half an hour ago. Hop to work."

"Work-k-k?" The man seemed to have trouble with the word.

Drunk? Lloyd, in his capacity as foreman, couldn't permit that. He flipped away his cigarette, walked forward, and sniffed. No, it wasn't liquor. He peered at the badge on the man's overalls.

"Two-oh-four, rn-mm. Are you new here?"

"New. Huh?" The man rubbed a rising bump on his forehead. He was an odd-looking little chap, bald as a vacuum tube, with a pinched, pallid face and tiny eyes that held dazed wonder.

"Come on, Joe. Wake up!" Lloyd was beginning to sound impatient. "You work here, don't you?"

"Joe," said the man thoughtfully. "Work. Yes, I work. I make them." His words ran together oddly, as though he had a cleft palate.

With another glance at the badge, Lloyd gripped Joe's arm and ran him through the assembly room. "Here's your place. Hop to it. Know what to do?"

The other drew his scrawny body erect. "I am—expert," he remarked. "Make them better than Ponthwank."

"O. K.," Lloyd said. "Make 'em, then." And he went away.

The man called Joe hesitated, nursing the bruise on his head. The overalls caught his attention, and he examined them wonderingly. Where—oh, yes. They had been hanging in the room from which he had first emerged. His own garments had, naturally, dissipated during the trip—what trip?

Amnesia, he thought. He had fallen from the . . . the something

- . . when it slowed down and stopped. How odd this huge, machinefilled barn looked. It struck no chord of remembrance.

Amnesia, that was it. He was a worker. He made things. As for the unfamiliarity of his surroundings, that meant nothing. He was still dazed. The clouds would lift from his mind presently. They were beginning to do that already.

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Work. Joe scuttled around the room, trying to goad his faulty memory. Men in overalls were doing things. Simple,, obvious things. But how childish—how

elemental! Perhaps this was a kindergarten. After a while Joe went out into a stock room and examined some finished models of combination radio-phonographs. So that was it. Awkward and clumsy, but it wasn't his place to say so. No. His job was to make Twonkies.

Twonkies? The name jolted his memory again. Of course he knew how to

~make Twonkies. He'd made them all his life—had been specially trained for the job. Now they were using a different model of Twonky, but what the hell! Child's play for a clever workman.

Joe went back into the shop and found a vacant bench. He began to build a Twonky. Occasionally he slipped off

and stole the material he needed. Once, when he couldn't locate any tungsten, he hastily built a small gadget and made it.

His bench was in a distant corner, badly lighted, though it seemed quite bright to Joe's eyes. Nobody noticed the console that was swiftly growing to completion there. Joe worked very, very fast. He ignored the noon whistle, and, at quitting time, his task was finished. It could, perhaps, stand another coat of paint—it lacked the Shimmertone of a standard Twonky. But none of the others had Shimmertone. Joe sighed, crawled under the bench, looked in vain for a relaxopad, and went to sleep on the floor.

A few hours later he woke up. The

factory was empty. Odd! Maybe the working hours had changed. Maybe—Joe's mind felt funny. Sleep had cleared away the mists of amnesia, if such it had been, but he still felt dazed.

Muttering under his breath, he sent the Twonky into the stock room and compared it with the others. Superficially it was identical with a console radio-phonograph combination of the latest model. Following the pattern of the others, Joe had camouflaged and disguised the various organs and reactors.

He went back into the shop. Then the last of the mists cleared from his mind. Joe's shoulders jerked convulsively.

“Great Snell!” he gasped. “So that

was it! I ran into a temporal snag!”

With a startled glance around, he fled to the storeroom from which he had first emerged. The overalls he took off and returned to their hook. After that, Joe went over to a corner, felt around in the air, nodded with satisfaction, and seated himself on nothing, three feet above the floor. Then Joe vanished.

“Time,” said Kerry WTesterfield, “is curved. Eventually it gets back to the same place where it started. That’s duplication.” He put his feet up on a conveniently outjutting rock of the chimney and stretched luxuriously. From the kitchen Martha made clinking noises with bottles and glasses.

“Yesterday at this time I had a

Martini,” Kerry said. “The time curve indicates that I should have another one now. Are you listening, angel?”

“I’m pouring,” said the angel distantly.

“You get my point, then. Here’s another. Time describes a spiral instead of a circle. If you call the first cycle a , the second one’s $a + i$ —see? Which means a double Martini tonight.”

“I know where that would end,” Martha remarked, coming into the spacious, oak-raftered living room. She was a small, dark-haired woman with a singularly pretty face and a figure to match. Her tiny gingham apron looked slightly absurd in combination with slacks and silk blouse. “And they don’t

make infinity-proof gin. Here's your Martini." She did things with the shaker and manipulated glasses.

"Stir slowly," Kerry cautioned. "Never shake. Ah—that's it." He accepted the drink and eyed it appreciatively. Black hair, sprinkled with gray, gleamed in the lamplight as he sipped the Martini. "Good. Very good."

Martha drank slowly and eyed her husband. A nice guy, Kerry Westerfield. He was forty-odd, pleasantly ugly, with a wide mouth and an occasional sardonic gleam in his gray eyes as he contemplated life. They had been married for twelve years, and liked it.

From outside, the late faint glow of sunset came through the windows,

picking out the console cabinet that stood against the wall by the door. Kerry peered at it with appreciation.

“A pretty penny,” he remarked. “Still —”

“What? Oh. The men had a tough time getting it up the ‘stairs. Why don’t you try it, Kerry?”

“Didn’t you?”

“The old one was complicated enough,” Martha said, in a baffled manner.

“Gadgets. They confuse me. I was brought up on an Edison. You wound it up with a crank, and strange noises came out of a horn. That I could understand. But now—you push a button, and extraordinary things happen. Electric

eyes, tone selections, records that get played on both sides, to the accompaniment of weird groanings and clickings from inside the console—probably you understand those things. I don't even want to. Whenever I play a Crosby record in a superdooper like that, Bing seems embarrassed.”

Keny ate his olive. “I’m going to play some Sibelius.” He nodded toward a table. “There’s a new Crosby record for you. The latest.”

Martha wriggled happily. “Can I, maybe, huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“But you’ll have to show me how.”

“Simple enough,” said Kerry, beaming at the console. “Those babies

are pretty good, you know. They do everything but think.”

“I wish it’d wash dishes,” Martha remarked. She set down her glass, got up, and vanished into the kitchen.

Kerry snapped on a lamp near by and went over to examine the new radio, Mideastern’s latest model, with all the new improvements. It had been expensive—but what the hell? He could afford it. And the old one had been pretty well shot.

It was not, he saw, plugged in. Nor were there any wires in evidence

—not even a ground. Something new, perhaps. Built-in antenna and ground. Kerry crouched down, looked for a socket, and plugged the cord into it. That

done, he opened the doors and eyed the dials with every appearance of satisfaction. A beam of bluish light shot out and hit him in the eyes. From the depths of the console a faint, thoughtful clicking proceeded. Abruptly it stopped. Kerry blinked, fiddled with dials and switches, and bit at a fingernail.

The radio said, in a distant voice, "Psychology pattern checked and recorded."

"Eh?" Kerry twirled a dial. "Wonder what that was? Amateur station—no, they're off the air. Hm-m-m." He shrugged and went over to a chair beside the shelves of albums. His gaze ran swiftly over the titles and composers' names. Where was the "Swan of

Tuonela"? There it was, next to

"Finlandia." Kerry took down the album and opened it in his lap. With his free hand he extracted a cigarette from his pocket, put it between his lips, and fumbled for the matches on the table beside him. The first match he lit went out.

He tossed it into the fireplace and was about to reach for another when a faint noise caught his attention. The radio was walking across the room toward him. A whiplike tendril flicked out from somewhere, picked up a match, scratched it beneath the table top—as Kerry had done—and held the flame to the man's cigarette.

Automatic reflexes took over. Keri-

sucked in his breath, and exploded in smoky, racking coughs. He bent double, gasping and momentarily blind. When he could see again, the radio was back in its accustomed place. Kerry caught his lower lip between his teeth. "Martha," he called.

"Soup's on," her voice said.

Kerry didn't answer. He stood up, went over to the radio, and looked at it hesitantly. The electric cord had been pulled out of its socket. Kerry gingerly replaced it.

He crouched to examine the console's legs. They looked like finely finished wood. His exploratory hand told him nothing. Wood—hard and brittle. How in hell—"Dinner!" Martha called.

Kerry threw his cigarette into the fireplace and slowly walked out of the room. His wife, setting a gravy boat in place, stared at him.

“How many Martinis did you have?”

“Just one,” Kerry said in a vague way. “I must have dozed off for a minute. Yeah. I must have.”

“Well, fall to,” Martha commanded. “This is the last chance you’ll have to make a pig of yourself on my dumplings, for a week, anyway.”

Kerry absently felt for his wallet, took out an envelope, and tossed it toward his wife. “Here’s your ticket, angel. Don’t lose it.”

“Oh? I rate a compartment!” Martha thrust the pasteboard back into its

envelope and gurgled happily. "You're a pal. Sure you can get along without me?"

"Huh? Hm-m-m—I think so." Kerry salted his avocado. He shook himself and seemed to come out of a slight daze. "Sure, I'll be all right. You trot off to Denver and help Carol have her baby. It's all in the family."

"We-ell, my only sister—" Martha grinned. "You know how she and Bill are. Quite nuts. They'll need a steadying hand just now."

There was no reply. Kerry was brooding over a forkful of avocado. He muttered something about the Venerable Bede.

"What about him?"

"Lecture tomorrow. Every term we

bog down on the Bede, for some strange reason. Ah, well.”

“Got your lecture ready?”

Kerry nodded. “Sure.” For eight years he had taught at the University, and he certainly should know the schedule by this time!

Later, over coffee and cigarettes, Martha glanced at her wrist watch.

“Nearly train time. I’d better finish packing. The dishes—”

“I’ll do ‘em.” Kerry wandered after his wife into the bedroom and made motions of futile helpfulness. After a while, he carried the bags down to the car. Martha joined him, and they~headed for the depot. The train was on time. Half an hour after it had pulled out,

Kerry drove the car back into the garage, let himself into the house and yawned mightily. He was tired. Well, the dishes, and then beer and a book in bed. With a puzzled look at the radio, he entered the kitchen and did things with water and soap chips. The hall phone rang. Kerry wiped his hands on a dish towel and answered it.

It was Mike Fitzgerald, who taught psychology at the University.

“Hiya, Fitz.”

“Hiya. Martha gone?”

“Yeah. I just drove her to the train.”

“Feel like talking, then? I’ve got some pretty good Scotch. Why not run over and gab a while?”

“Like to,” Kerry said, yawning again,

“but I’m dead. Tomorrow’s a big day. Rain check?”

“Sure. I just finished correcting papers, and felt the need of sharpening my mind. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing. Wait a minute.” Kerry put down the phone and looked over his shoulder, scowling. Noises were coming from the kitchen. What the hell!

He went along the hall and stopped in the doorway, motionless and staring. The radio was washing the dishes.

After a while he returned to the phone. Fitzgerald said, “Something?”

“My new radio,” Kerry told him carefully. “It’s washing the dishes.”

Fitz didn’t answer for a moment. His laugh was a bit hesitant. “Oh?”

“I’ll call you back,” Kerry said, and hung up. He stood motionless for a while, chewing his lip. Then he walked back to the kitchen and paused to watch.

The radio’s back was toward him. Several limber tentacles were manipulating the dishes, expertly sousing them in hot, soapy water, scrubbing them with the little mop, dipping them into the rinse water, and then stacking them neatly in the metal rack. Those whiplashes were the only sign of unusual activity. The legs were apparently solid.

“Hey!” Kerry said.

There was no response.

He sidled around till he could examine the radio more closely. The tentacles emerged from a slot under one

of the dials. The electric cord was dangling. No juice, then. But what—Kerry stepped back and fumbled out a cigarette. Instantly the radio

turned, took a match from its container on the stove, and walked forward. Kerry blinked, studying the legs. They couldn't be wood. They were bending as the . . . the thing moved, elastic as rubber. The radio had a peculiar sidling motion unlike anything else on earth. It lit Kerry's cigarette and went back to the sink, where it resumed the dishwashing.

Kerry phoned Fitzgerald again. "I wasn't kidding. I'm having hallucinations or something. That damned radio just lit a cigarette for me."

"Wait a minute—" Fitzgerald's voice

sounded undecided. "This is a gag—eh?"

"No. And I don't think it's a hallucination, either. It's up your alley. Can you run over and test my knee-jerks?"

"All right," Fitz said. "Give me ten minutes. Have a drink ready."

He hung up, and Kerry, laying the phone back into its cradle, turned to see the radio walking out of the kitchen toward the living room. Its square, boxlike contour was subtly horrifying, like some bizarre sort of hobgoblin. Kerry shivered.

He followed the radio, to find it in its former place, motionless and impassive. He opened the doors, examining the

turntable, the phonograph arm, and the other buttons and gadgets. There was nothing apparently unusual. Again he touched the legs. They were not wood, after all. Some plastic, which seemed quite hard. Or—maybe they were wood, after all. It was difficult to make certain, without damaging the finish. Kerry felt a natural reluctance to use a knife on his new console. He tried the radio, getting local stations without trouble. The tone was good—unusually good, he thought. The phonograph— He picked up Halvorsen's "Entrance of the Boyards" at random and slipped it into place, closing the lid. No sound emerged. Investigation proved that the needle was moving rhythmically along the groove,

but without audible result. Well?

Kerry removed the record as the doorbell rang. It was Fitzgerald, a gangling, saturnine man with a leathery, wrinkled face and a tousled mop of dull-gray hair. He extended a large, bony hand.

“Where’s my drink?”

““Lo, Fitz. Come ill the kitchen. I’ll mix. Highball?”

“Highball.”

“O. K.” Kerry led the way. “Don’t drink it just yet, though. I want to show you my new combination.”

“The one that washes dishes?” Fitzgerald asked. “What else does it do?”

Kerry gave the other a glass. “It won’t

play records.”

“Oh, well. A minor matter, if it’ll do the housework. Let’s take a look at it.”

Fitzgerald went into the living room, selected “Afternoon of a Faun,” and approached the radio. “It isn’t plugged in.”

“That doesn’t matter a bit,” Kerry said wildly.

“Batteries?” Fitzgerald slipped the record in place and adjusted the switches. “Now we’ll see.” He beamed triumphantly at Kerry. “Well? It’s playing now.” 7

It was.

Kerry said, “Try that Halvorsen piece. Here.” He handed the disk to Fitzgerald, who pushed the reject switch

and watched the lever arm lift. But this time the phonograph refused to play. It didn't like "Entrance of the Boyards."

"That's funny," Fitzgerald grunted. "Probably the trouble's with the record. Let's try another."

There was no trouble with "Daphnis and Chloe." But the radio silently rejected the composer's "Bolero."

Kerry sat down and pointed to a nearby chair. "That doesn't prove anything. Come over here and watch. Don't drink anything yet. You, uh, you feel perfectly normal?"

"Sure. Well?"

Kerry took out a cigarette. The console walked across the room, picking up a match book on the way, and politely

held the flame. Then it went back to its place against the wall.

Fitzgerald didn't say anything. After a while he took a cigarette from his pocket and waited. Nothing happened.

"So?" Kerry asked.

"A robot. That's the only possible answer. Where in the name of Petrarch did you get it?"

"You don't seem much surprised."

"I am, though. But I've seen robots before— Westinghouse tried it, you know. Only this—" Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with a nail. "Who made it?"

"How the devil should I know?" Kerry demanded. "The radio people, I suppose."

Fitzgerald narrowed his eyes. "Wait a

minute. I don't quite understand—”

“There's nothing to understand. I bought this combination a few days ago. Turned in the old one. It was delivered this afternoon, and—” Kerry explained what had happened.

“You mean you didn't know it was a robot?”

“Exactly. I bought it as a radio. And . . . and. . . the damn thing seems almost alive to me.”

“Nope.” Fitzgerald shook his head, rose, and inspected the console carefully. “It's a new kind of robot. At least—” he hesitated. “What else is there to think? I suggest you get in touch with the Mideastern people tomorrow and check up.”

“Let’s open the cabinet and look inside,” Kerry suggested. Fitzgerald was willing, but the experiment proved impossible. The presumably wooden panels weren’t screwed into place, and there was no apparent way of opening the console. Keny found a screwdriver and applied it, gingerly at first, then with a sort of repressed fury. He could neither pry free a panel nor even scratch the dark, smooth finish of the cabinet.

“Damn!” he saidlinally. “Well, your guess is as good as mine. It’s a robot. Only I didn’t know they could make ‘em like this. And why in a radio?”

“Don’t ask me,” Fitzgerald shrugged. “Check up tomorrow. That’s the first step. Naturally I’m pretty baffled. If a

new sort of specialized robot has been invented, why put it in a console? And what makes those legs move?

There aren't any casters."

"I've been wondering about that, too."

"When it moves, the legs look—rubbery. But they're not. They're hard as . .

. as hardwood. Or plastic."

"I'm afraid of the thing," Kerry said.

"Want to stay at my place tonight?"

"N-no. No. I guess not. The—robot—can't hurt me."

"I don't think it wants to. It's been helping you, hasn't it?"

"Yeah," Kerry said, and went off to mix another drink. The rest of the conversation was inconclusive.

Fitzgerald, several hours later, went home rather worried. He wasn't as casual as he had pretended, for the sake of Kerry's nerves. The impingement of something so entirely unexpected on normal life was subtly frightening. And yet, as he had said, the robot didn't seem menacing— Kerry went to bed, with a new detective mystery. The radio followed

him into the bedroom and gently took the book out of his hand. Kerry instinctively snatched for it.

“Hey!” he said. “What the devil—”

The radio went back into the living room. Kerry followed, in time to see the book replaced on the shelf. After a bit Kerry retreated, locking his door, and

slept uneasily till dawn.

In dressing gown and slippers, he stumbled out to stare at the console. It was back in its former place, looking as though it had never moved. Kerry, rather white around the gills, made breakfast. He was allowed only one cup of coffee. The radio appeared, reprovingly took the (second cup from his hand, and emptied it into the sink. That was quite enough for Keny Westerfield. He found his hat and topcoat and almost ran out of the house. He had a horrid feeling that the radio might follow him, but it didn't, luckily for his sanity. He was beginning to be worried.

During the morning he found time to telephone Mideastem. The salesman

knew nothing. It was a standard model combination—the latest. If it wasn't giving satisfaction, of course, he'd be glad to— "It's O. K.," Kerry said. "But who made the thing? That's what

I want to find out."

"One moment, sir." There was a delay. "It came from Mr. Lloyd's department. One of our foremen."

"Let me speak to him, please."

But Lloyd wasn't very helpful. After much thought, he remembered that the combination had been placed in the stock room without a serial number. It had been added later.

"But who made it?"

"I just don't know. I can find out for you, I guess. Suppose I ring you back."

“Don’t forget,” Kerry said, and went back to his class. The lecture on the Venerable Bede wasn’t too successful.

At lunch he saw Fitzgerald, who seemed relieved when Kerry came over to his table. “Find out any more about your pet robot?” the psychology professor demanded.

No one else was within hearing. With a sigh Kerry sat down and lit a cigarette. “Not a thing. It’s a pleasure to be able to do this myself.” He drew smoke into his lungs. “I phoned the company.”

“And?”

“They don’t know anything. Except that it didn’t have a serial number.”

“That may be significant,” Fitzgerald said.

Kerry told the other about the incidents of the book and the coffee, and Fitzgerald squinted thoughtfully at his milk. "I've given you some psych tests. Too much stimulation isn't good for you."

"A detective yarn!"

"Carrying it a bit to extremes, I'll admit. But I can understand why the robot acted that way—though I dunno how it managed it." He hesitated.

"Without intelligence, that is."

"Intelligence?" Kerry licked his lips. "I'm not so sure that it's just a machine. And I'm not crazy."

"No, you're not. But you say the robot was in the front room. How could it tell what you were reading?"

“Short of X-ray vision and superfast scanning and assimilative powers, I can’t imagine. Perhaps it doesn’t want me to read anything.”

“You’ve said something,” Fitzgerald grunted. “Know much about theoretical—machines——of that type?”

“Robots?”

“Purely theoretical. Your brain’s a colloid, you know. Compact, complicated—but slow. Suppose you work out a gadget with a multimillion radioatom iinit embedded in an insulating material—the result is a brain, Kerry. A brain with a tremendous number of units interacting at light-velocity speeds. A radio tube adjusts current flow when it’s operating at forty

million separate signals a second. And — theoretically—a radioatomic brain of the type I've mentioned could include perception, recognition, consideration, reaction and adjustment in a

.hundred-thousandth of a second.”

“Theory.”

“I've thought so. But I'd like to find out where your radio came from.”

A page came over. “Telephone call for Mr. Westerfield.”

Kerry excused himself and left. When he returned, there was a puzzled frown knitting his dark brows. Fitzgerald looked at him inquiringly.

“Guy named Lloyd, at the Mideastern plant. I was talking to him about the radio.”

“Any luck?”

Kerry shook his head. “No. Well, not much. He didn’t know who had built the thing.”

“But it was built in the plant?”

“Yes. About two weeks ago—but there’s no record of who worked on it. Lloyd seemed to think that was very, very funny. If a radio’s built in the plant, they know who put it together.”

“So?”

“So nothing. I asked him how to open the cabinet, and he said it was easy. Just unscrew the panel in back.”

“There aren’t any screws,” Fitzgerald said.

“I know.”

They looked at one another.

Fitzgerald said, "I'd give fifty bucks to find out whether that robot was really built only two weeks ago."

"Why?"

"Because a radioatomic brain would need training. Even in such matters as the lighting of a cigarette."

"It saw me light one."

"And followed the example. The dishwashing—hm-m-m. Induc tion, I suppose. If that gadget has been trained, it's a robot. If it hasn't—"

Fitzgerald stopped.

Kerry blinked. "Yes?"

"I don't know what the devil it is. It bears the same relation to a robot that we bear to eohippus. One thing I do know, Kerry; it's very probable that no

scientist today has the knowledge it would take to make a . . . a thing like that.”

“You’re arguing in circles,” Kerry said. “It was made.”

“Uh-huh. But how—when—and by whom? That’s what’s got me worried.”

“Well, I’ve a class in five minutes. Why not come over tonight?”

“Can’t. I’m lecturing at the Hall. I’ll phone you after, though.”

With a nod Keny went out, trying to dismiss the matter from his mind. He succeeded pretty well. But dining alone in a restaurant that night, he began to feel a general unwillingness to go home. A hobgoblin was waiting for him.

“Brandy,” he told the waiter. “Make it

double.”

Two hours later a taxi let Kerry out at his door. He was remarkably drunk. Things swam before his eyes. He walked unsteadily toward the porch, mounted the steps with exaggerated care, and let himself into the house. He switched on a lamp.

The radio came forward to meet him. Tentacles, thin, but strong as metal, coiled gently around his body, holding him motionless. A pang of violent fear struck through Kerry. He struggled desperately and tried to yell, but his throat was dry.

From the radio panel a beam of yellow light shot out, blinding the man. It swung down, aimed at his chest.

Abruptly a queer taste was perceptible under Kerry's tongue.

After a minute or so, the ray clicked out, the tentacles flashed back out of sight, and the console returned to its corner. Kerry staggered weakly to a chair and relaxed, gulping.

He was sober. Which was quite impossible. Fourteen brandies infiltrate a definite amount of alcohol into the system. One can't wave a magic wand and instantly reach a state of sobriety. Yet that was exactly what had happened.

The—robot—was trying to be helpful. Only Kerry would have preferred to remain drunk.

He got up gingerly and sidled past the radio to the bookshelf. One eye on the

combination, he took down the detective novel he had tried to read on the preceding night. As he had expected, the radio took it from his hand and replaced it on the shelf. Kerry, remembering Fitzgerald's words, glanced at his watch. Reaction time, four seconds. He took down a Chaucer and waited, but the radio didn't stir. However, when Kerry found a history volume, it was gently removed from his fingers. Reaction time, six seconds.

Kerry located a history twice as thick.
Reaction time, ten seconds.

Uh-huh. So the robot did read the books. That meant X-ray vision and superswift reactions. Jumping Jehoshaphat!

Keny tested more books, wondering what the criterion was. “Alice in Wonderland” was snatched from his hand; Millay’s poems were not. He made a list, with two columns, for future reference. The robot, then, was not merely a servant. It was a censor. But what was the standard of comparison?

After a while he remembered his lecture tomorrow, and thumbed through his notes. Several points needed verification. Rather hesitantly he located the necessary reference book—and the robot took it away from him.

“Wait a minute,” Kerry said. “I need that.” He tried to pull the volume out of the tentacle’s grasp, without success. The console paid no attention. It calmly

replaced the book on its shelf.

Kerry stood biting his lip. This was a bit too much~. The damned robot was a monitor. He sidled toward the book, snatched it, and was out in the hall before the radio could move.

The thing was coming after him. He could hear the soft padding of its . . . its feet. Kerry scurried into the bedroom and locked the door. He waited, heart thumping, as the knob was tried gently. A wire-thin cilia crept through the crack of the door and fumbled with the key. Kerry suddenly jumped forward and shoved the auxiliary bolt into position. But that didn't help, either. The robot's precision tools—the specialized antenna—slid it back; and then the console

opened the door, walked into the room, and came toward Kerry.

He felt a touch of panic. With a little gasp he threw the book at the thiRg, and it caught it deftly. Apparently that was all that was wanted, for the radio turned and went out, rocking awkwardly on its rubbery legs, carrying the forbidden volume. Kerry cursed quietly.

The phone rang. It was Fitzgerald.

“Well? How’d you make out?”

“Have you got a copy of Cassen’s ‘Social Literature of the Ages’?”

“I don’t think so—no. Why?”

“I’ll get it in the University library tomorrow, then.” Kerry explained what had happened. Fitzgerald whistled softly.

“Interfering, is it? Hm-m-m. I wonder
—”

“I’m afraid of the thing.”

“I don’t think it means you any harm.
You say it sobered you up?”

“Yeah. With a light ray. That isn’t
very logical.”

“It might be. The vibratory
equivalent of thiamin chloride.”

“Light?”

“There’s vitamin content in sunlight,
you know. That isn’t the important point.
It’s censoring your reading—and
apparently it reads the books, with
superfast reactions. That gadget,
whatever it is, isn’t merely a robot.”

“You’re telling me,” Kerry said
grimly. “It’s a Hitler.”

Fitzgerald didn't laugh. Rather soberly, he suggested, "Suppose you spend the night at my place?"

"No," Kerry said, his voice stubborn. "No so-and-so radio's going to chase me out of my house. I'll take an ax to the thing first."

"We-ell—you know what you're doing, I suppose. Phone me if if anything happens."

"O. K.," Kerry said, and hung up. He went into the living room and eyed the radio coldly. What the devil was it—and what was it trying to do? Certainly it wasn't merely a robot. Equally certainly, it wasn't alive, in the sense that a colloid brain is alive.

Lips thinned, he went over and

fiddled with the dials and switches. A swing band's throbbing erratic tempo came from the console. He tried the short-wave band—nothing unusual there. So?

So nothing. There was no answer.

After a while he went to bed.

At luncheon the next day he brought Cassen's "Social Literature" to show Fitzgerald.

"What about it?"

"Look here," Kerry flipped the pages and indicated a passage. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Fitzgerald read it. "Yeah. The point seems to be that individualism is necessary for the production of literature. Right?"

Kerry looked at him. "I don't know."

"My mind goes funny."

Fitzgerald rumpled his gray hair, narrowing his eyes and watching the other man intently. "Come again. I don't quite—"

With angry patience, Kerry said, "This morning I went into the library and looked at this reference. I read it all right. But it didn't mean anything to me. Just words. Know how it is when you're fagged out and have been reading a lot? You'll run into a sentence with a lot of subjunctive clauses, and it doesn't percolate. Well, it was like that."

"Read it now," Fitzgerald said quietly, thrusting the book across the table. Kerry obeyed, looking up with a

wry smile. “No good.”

“Read it aloud. I’ll go over it with you, step by step.”

But that didn’t help. Kerry seemed utterly unable to assimilate the sense of the passage.

“Semantic block, maybe,” Fitzgerald said, scratching his ear. “Is this the first time it’s happened?”

“Yes . . . no. I don’t know.”

“Got any classes this afternoon? Good. Let’s run over to your place.”

Kerry thrust away his plate. “All right. I’m not hungry. Whenever you’re ready—”

Half an hour later they were looking at the radio. It seemed quite harmless. Fitzgerald wasted some time trying to

pry ? panel off, but finally gave it up as a bad job. He found pencil and paper, seated himself opposite Kerry, and began to ask questions.

At one point he paused. "You didn't mention that before."

"Forgot it, I guess."

Fitzgerald tapped his teeth with the pencil. "Hm-m-m. The first time the radio acted up—"

"It hit me in the eye with a blue light —"

"Not that. I mean—what it said."

Kerry blinked. "What it said?" He hesitated. "'Psychology pattern checked and noted,' or something like that. I thought I'd tuned in on some station and got part of a quiz program or something.

You mean—”

“Were the words easy to understand? Good English?”

“No, now that I remember it,” Kerry scowled. “They were slurred quite a lot. Vowels stressed.”

“Uh-huh. Well, let’s get on.” They tried a word-association test. Finally Fitzgerald leaned back, frowning. “I want to check this :sthff with the last tests I gave you a few months ago. It looks funny to me—damned funny. I’d feel a lot better if I knew exactly what memory was. We’ve done considerable work on mnemonics—artificial memory. Still, it may not be that at all.”

“Eh?”

“That—machine. Either it’s got an

artificial memory, has been highly trained, or else it's adjusted to a different milieu and culture. It has affected you—quite a lot”

Kerry licked dry lips. “How?”

“Implanted blocks in your mind. I haven't correlated them yet. When I do, we may be able to figure out some sort of answer. No, that thing isn't a robot. It's a lot more than that.”

Kerry took out a cigarette; the console walked across the room and lit it for him. The two men watched with a faint shrinking horror.

“You'd better stay with me tonight,” Fitzgerald suggested.

“No,” Kerry said. He shivered.

The next day Fitzgerald looked for

Kerry at lunch, but the younger man did not appear. He telephoned the house, and Martha answered the call.

“Hello! When did you get back?”

“Hello, Fitz. About an hour ago. My sister went ahead and had her baby without me—so I came back.” She stopped, and Fitzgerald was alarmed at her tone.

“Where’s Kerry?”

“He’s here. Can you come over, Fitz? I’m worried.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“I . . . I don’t know. Come right away.”

“O. K.,” Fitzgerald said, and hung up, biting his lips. He was worried. When, a short while later, he rang the Westerfield

bell, he discovered that his nerves were badly out of control. But sight of Martha reassured him. He followed her into the living room. Fitzgerald's glance went at once to the console, which was unchanged; and then to Kerry, seated motionless by a window. Keny's face had a blank, dazed look. His pupils were dilated, and he seemed to recognize Fitzgerald only slowly.

"Hello, Fitz," he said.

"How do you feel?"

Martha broke in. "Fitz, what's wrong? Is he sick? Shall I call the doctor?"

Fitzgerald sat down. "Have you noticed anything funny about that iadio?"

"No. Why?"

"Then listen." He told the whole

story, watching incredulity struggle with reluctant belief on Martha's face. Presently she said, "I can't quite—"

"If Kerry takes out a cigarette, the thing will light it for him. Want to see how it works?"

"N-no. Yes. I suppose so." Martha's eyes were wide. Fitzgerald gave Kerry a cigarette. The expected happened. Martha didn't say a word. When the console had returned to its place, she shivered and went over to Kerry. He looked at her vaguely.

"He needs a doctor, Fitz."

"Yes." Fitzgerald didn't mention that a doctor might be quite useless.

"What is that thing?"

"It's more than a robot. And it's been

readjusting Kerry. I told you what's happened. When I checked Kerry's psychology patterns, I found that they'd altered. He's lost most of his initiative."

"Nobody on earth could have made that—"

Fitzgerald scowled. "I thought of that. It seems to be the product of a well-developed culture, quite different from ours. Martian, perhaps. It's such a specialized thing that it naturally fits into a complicated culture. But I do not understand why it looks exactly like a Mideastern console radio."

Martha touched Kerry's hand. "Camouflage?"

"But why? You were one of my best pupils in psych, Martha. Look at this

logically. Imagine a civilization where a gadget like that has its place. Use inductive reasoning.”

“I’m trying to. I can’t think very well. Fitz, I’m worried about Kerry.”

“I’m all right,” Kerry said.

Fitzgerald put his fingertips together. “It isn’t a radio so much as a monitor. In this other civilization, perhaps every man has one, or maybe only a few—the ones who need it. It keeps them in line.”

“By destroying initiative?”

Fitzgerald made a helpless gesture. “I don’t know! It worked that way in Kerry’s case. In others—I don’t know.”

Martha stood up. “I don’t think we should talk any more. Kerry needs a doctor. After that we can decide upon

that.” She pointed to the console. Fitzgerald said, “It’d be rather a shame to wreck it, but—” His look was significant.

The console moved. It came out from its corner with a sidling, rocking gait and walked toward Fitzgerald. As he sprang up, the whiplike tentacles flashed out and seized him. A pale ray shone into the man’s eyes. Almost instantly it vanished; the tentacles withdrew, and the radio returned to its place. Fitzgerald stood motionless. Martha was on her feet, one hand at her mouth.

“Fitz!” Her voice shook.

He hesitated. “Yes? What’s the matter?”

“Are you hurt? What did it do to

you?”

Fitzgerald frowned a little. “Eh? Hurt? I don’t—”

“The radio. What did it do?”

He looked toward the console. “Something wrong with it? Afraid I’m not much of a repair man, Martha.”

“Fitz.” She came forward and gripped his arm. “Listen to me.” Quick words spilled from her mouth. The radio. Kerry. Their discussion— Fitzgerald looked at her blankly, as though he didn’t quite understand. “I guess I’m stupid today. I can’t quite understand what you’re talking about.”

“The radio-you know! You said it changed Kerry—” Martha paused, staring at the man.

Fitzgerald was definitely puzzled. Martha was acting strangely. Queer! He'd always considered her a pretty level-headed girl. But now she was talking nonsense. At least, he couldn't figure out the meaning of her words—there was no sense to them.

And why was she talking about the radio? Wasn't it satisfactory? Kerry had said it was a good buy, with a fine tone and the latest gadgets in it. Fitzgerald wondered, for a fleeting second, if Martha had gone crazy. In any case, he was late for his class. He said so. Martha didn't try to stop him when he went out. She was pale as chalk.

Kerry took out a cigarette. The radio walked over and held a match.

“Kerry!”

“Yes, Martha?” His voice was dead.

She stared at the . . . the radio. Mars? Another world—another civilization?

What was it? What did it want? What was it trying to do?

Martha let herself out of the house and went to the garage. When she returned, a small hatchet was gripped tightly in her hand. Kerry watched. He saw Martha walk over to the radio and lift the hatchet. Then a beam of light shot out, and Martha vanished. A little dust floated up in the afternoon sunlight.

“Destruction of life-form threatening attack,” the radio said, slurring the words together.

Kerry’s brain turned over. He felt

sick, dazed and horribly empty. Martha

His mind—churned. Instinct and emotion fought with something that smothered them. Abruptly the dams crumbled, and the blocks were gone, the barriers down. Kerry cried out hoarsely, inarticulately, and sprang to his feet.

“Martha!’.’ he yelled.

She was gone. Kerry looked around. Where— What had happened? He couldn’t remember.

He sat down in the chair again, rubbing his forehead. His free hand brought up a cigarette, an automatic reaction that brought instant response. The radio walked forward and held a lighted match ready. Kerry made a

choking, sick sound and flung himself out of the chair. He remembered now. He picked up the hatchet and sprang toward the console, teeth bared in a mirthless rictus.

Again the light beam flashed out.

Kerry vanished. The hatchet thudded onto the carpet. The radio walked back to its place and stood motionless once more. A faint clicking proceeded from its radioatomic brain.

“Subject basically unsuitable,” it said, after a moment. “Elimination has been necessary.” Click! “Preparation for next subject completed.”

Click.

“We’ll take it,” the boy said.

“You won’t be making a mistake,”

smiled the rental agent. "It's quiet, isolated, and the price is quite reasonable."

"Not so very," the girl put in. "But it is just what we've been looking for."

The agent shrugged. "Of course an unfurnished place would run less. But —"

"We haven't been married long enough to get any furniture," the boy grinned. He put an arm around his wife. "Like it, hon?"

"Hm-m-m. Who lived here before?"

The agent scratched his cheek. "Let's see. Some people named Westerfield, I think. It was given to me for listing just about a week ago. Nice place. If I didn't own my own house, I'd jump at it

myself.”

“Nice radio,” the boy said. “Late model, isn’t it?” He went over to examine the console.

“Come along,” the girl urged. “Let’s look at the kitchen again.”

“O. K., hon.”

They went out of the room. From the hail came the sound of the agent’s smooth voice, growing fainter. Warm afternoon sunlight slanted through the windows.

For a moment there was silence. Then — Click!