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Title: Two Plus Two Makes Crazy

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Release Date: May 20, 2009 [EBook #28894]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Stephen Blundell and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO PLUS TWO MAKES CRAZY ***

Walt Sheldon is bitter-bright in this imaginative short satire of Man's sell-out by a group of staunch believers in the infallibility of numbers.

two plus two makes crazy

by ... Walt Sheldon

The Computer could do no wrong. Then it was asked a simple little question by a simple little man.

THE LITTLE MAN had a head like an old-fashioned light bulb and a smile that seemed to say he had secrets from the rest of the world. He didn't talk much, just an occasional "Oh," "Mm" or "Ah." Krayton figured he must be all right, though. After all he'd been sent to Computer City by the Information Department itself, and his credentials must have been checked in a hundred ways and places.

"Essentially each computer is the same," said Krayton, "but adjusted to translate problems into the special terms of the division it serves."

Krayton had a pleasant, well-behaved impersonal voice. He was in his thirties and mildly handsome. He considered himself a master of the technique of building a career in Computer City—he knew how to stay within the limits of directives and regulations and still make decisions, or rather to relay computer decisions that kept his responsibility to a minimum.

Now Krayton spoke easily and freely to the little man. As public liaison officer he had explained the computer system hundreds of times. He knew it like a tech manual.

"But is there any *real* central control, say in case of a breakdown or something of that sort?" The little man's voice was dry as lava ash, dry as the wastes between and beyond the cities. Tanter, was the name he'd given—Mr. Tanter. His contact lenses were so thick they made his eyes seem to bulge grotesquely. He had a faint stoop and wore a black tunic which made his look like one of the reconstructed models of prehistoric birds called crows that Krayton had seen in museums.

"Of course, of course," said Krayton, answering the question. "It's never necessary to use the *All* circuit. But we could very easily in case of a great emergency."

"The *All* circuit? What is that?" Mr. Tanter asked.

Krayton gestured and led the little man down the long control bank. Their steps made precise clicks on the layaplast floor. The stainless steel walls threw back tinny echoes. The chromium molding glistened, always pointing the way—the straight and mathematical way. They were in the topmost section of the topmost building of Computer City. The several hundred clean, solid, wedding-cake structures of the town could be seen from the polaflex window.

"The *All* circuit puts every machine in the city to work on any selection-problem that's fed into

our master control here. Each machine will give its answer in its own special terms, but actually they will all work on the same problem. To use a grossly simple example, let us say we wish to know the results of two-and-two, but we wish to know it in terms of *total security*. That is, we wish to know that two-plus-two means twice as many nourishment units for the Department of Foods, twice as many weapons for the Department of War, but is perhaps not necessarily true according to the current situational adjustment in the Department of Public Information.

"At any rate, we would set up our problem on the master, pushing the button *Two*, then the button *Plus*, and the button *Two* again as on a primitive adding machine. Then we would merely throw the *All* switch. A short time later the total answer to our problem would be relayed back from every computer, and the cross-comparison factors canceled out, so that we would have the result in terms of the familiar *Verdict Statement*. And, as everyone knows, the electronically filed *Verdict Statements* make the complete record of directives for the behavior of our society."

"Very interesting," said Mr. Tanter, the little crow-like man. He blinked rapidly, stared at the switch marked *All* that Krayton was pointing out to him.

Krayton now folded his hands in front of his official gold-and-black tunic, looked up into the air and rocked gently back and forth on his heels as he talked. He was really talking to himself now although he seemed to address Tanter. "You can see that the Computer System is quite under our control in spite of what these rebellious, underground groups say."

"Underground groups?" asked Mr. Tanter mildly. Just his left eye seemed to blink this time. And the edge of his mouth gave the veriest twitch.

"Oh, you know," said Krayton, "the organization that calls itself the Prims. Prim for Primitive. They leave little cards and pamphlets around damning the Computer System. I saw one the other day. It had a big title splashed across it: OUR NEW TYRANT—THE COMPUTER. The article complained that some of the new labor and food regulations were the result of conscious reasoning on the part of The Computer. Devices to build the Computer bigger and bigger and bigger at the expense of ordinary workers. You know the sort of thing."

"But it is true that the living standard is going down all the time, isn't it?" asked Mr. Tanter, keeping his ephemeral smile. "What about those three thousand starvation deaths up in Hydroburgh?"

Krayton waved an impatient hand. "There will always be problems like that here and there." He turned and stared almost reverently at the long control rack. "Be thankful we have The Computer to solve them."

"But the deaths were due to diverting that basic carbon shipment down here to Computer City for computer-building, weren't they?"

"Now, there—you see how powerful the propaganda of the Prims can be?" Krayton put his hands on his hips. "That statement is not true! It simply isn't true at all! It was analyzed on The Computer some days ago. Here, let me show you." He took several steps down the corridor again and stopped at another panel.

"We first collected from the various departments—Food, Production, Labor and so forth—all the *possible* causes of the starvation deaths in Hydroburgh. Computer Administration had its machine translate them into symbols. We're getting a huge new plant and machine addition over at Administration, by the way.

"At any rate, we simply registered all the possible causes with the Master Computer, threw in this circuit marked *Validity Selector*. Out of all those causes The Computer picked the one that was most valid. The Hydroburgh tragedy was due to lack of foresight on the part of Hydroburgh's planners. If they'd had a proper stockpile of basic carbon the thing never would have happened."

"But no community ever stockpiles," said the little man.

"That," said Krayton, "doesn't alter the fundamental fact. The Computer never lies." He drew himself up stiffly as he said this. Then abruptly he consulted the chronometer on the far wall.

"Excuse me just a moment, Mr. Tanter," he said. "It's time to feed the daily tax computation from Finance. We have to start a little earlier on that these days—the new taxes, you know."

As Krayton moved off Tanter's thin smile widened just a little. As soon as Krayton was out of sight he stepped with his odd, crow-like stride to the numerical panel, punched two-plus-two, then adjusted the Operations pointer to *HOLD*. After that he punched three-plus-one, and *HOLD* once more.

He moved over to the *Validity Selector*, switched the numerical panel in, closed the circuit.

In his dry voice he murmured to the whole control rack: "Three-plus-one makes four, two-plus-two makes four. Three-plus-one, two-plus-two—tell me which is really true."

All through the master computer relays clicked and tubes glowed as the problem was sent to all the sub-computers in their own special terms. Food, Production, Labor, Public Information, War, Peace, Education, Science and so forth.

All over Computer City the solenoids moved their contacts and the filaments turned cherry red. Oscillating circuits hummed silently to themselves in perfect Q. The life warmth of hysteresis

pulsed and throbbed along wires and channels. *Three-plus-one, two-plus-two—tell me which is really true.* The problem criss-crossed in and out, around, about, checking, cross-checking, re-checking as The Computer 'thought' about the problem.

Which was really true?

Even before Krayton returned parts of The Computer had begun to get red hot. It hummed in some places and in the other places relays going back and forth in indecision made an unhealthy rattling noise.

Little Mr. Tanter beamed happily to himself as he recalled the words of an old directive The Computer itself had issued in the matter of public thought control. *When a brain is faced with two absolutely equal alternatives complete breakdown invariably results.*

Mr. Tanter kept smiling and rocked back and forth on his feet as Krayton had done. Before nightfall The Computer would be a useless and overheated mass of plastic and metal!

He took a printed folder from his pocket and casually dropped it on the floor where someone would be sure to find it. It was one of the pamphlets the Prims were always leaving around.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO PLUS TWO MAKES CRAZY ***

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