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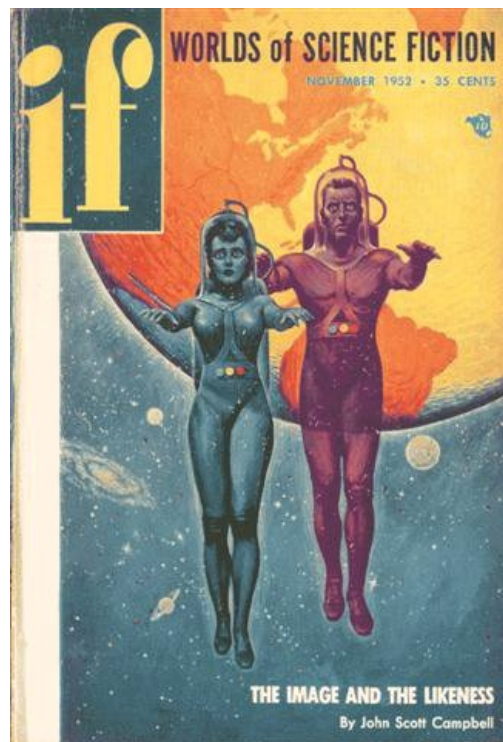
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# Let There Be Light

By Horace B. Fyfe

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The two men attacked the thick tree trunk with a weary savagery. In the bright sunlight, glistening spatters of sweat flew from them as the old axes bit alternately into the wood.

Blackie stood nearby, on the gravel shoulder of the highway, rubbing his short beard as he considered the depth of the white notch. Turning his broad, tanned face to glance along the patched and cracked concrete to where squat Vito kept watch, he caught the latter's eye and beckoned.

"Okay, Sid—Mike. We'll take it a while."

The rhythm of the axe-strokes ceased. Red Mike swept the back of a forearm across the semi-

*No matter what the future, one factor must always be reckoned with—the ingenuity of the human animal.*

shaven stubble that set him as something of a dandy. Wordlessly, big Sid ambled up the road to replace Vito.

"Pretty soon, now," boasted Mike, eyeing the cut with satisfaction. "Think it'll bring them?"

"Sure," replied Blackie, spitting on his hands and lifting one of the worn tools. "That's what they're for."

"Funny," mused Mike, "how some keep going an' others bust. These musta been workin' since I was a little kid—since before the last blitz."

"Aw, they don't hafta do much. 'Cept in winter when they come out to clear snow, all they do is put in a patch now an' then."

Mike stared moodily at the weathered surface of the highway and edged back to avoid the reflected heat.

"It beats me how they know a spot has cracked."

"I guess there's machines to run the machines," sighed Blackie. "I dunno; I was too young. Okay, Vito?"

The relieving pair fell to. Mike stepped out of range of the flying chips to sit at the edge of the soft grass which was attempting another invasion of the gravel shoulder. Propelled by the strength of Vito's powerful torso, a single chip spun through the air to his feet. He picked it up and held it to his nose. It had a good, clean smell.

When at length the tree crashed down across the road, Blackie led them to the ambush he had chosen that morning. It was fifty yards up the road toward the ruined city—off to the side where a clump of trees and bushes provided shade and concealment.

"Wish we brought something to eat," Vito said.

"Didn't know it would take so long to creep up on 'em this morning," said Blackie. "The women'll have somethin' when we get back."

"They better," said Mike.

He measured a slender branch with his eye. After a moment, he pulled out a hunting knife, worn thin by years of sharpening, and cut off a straight section of the branch. He began whittling.

"You damn' fool!" Sid objected. "You want the busted spot on the tree to show?"

"Aw, *they* ain't got the brains to notice."

"The hell they ain't! It stands out like one o' them old street signs. D'ya think they can tell, Blackie?"

"I dunno. Maybe." Blackie rose cautiously to peer over a bed of blackberry bushes. "Guess I'll skin up a tree an' see if anything's in sight."

He hitched up his pants, looking for an easy place to climb. His blue denims had been stoutly made, but weakened by many rips and patches, and he did not want to rip them on a snag. It was becoming difficult to find good, unrotted clothing in the old ruins.

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Choosing a branch slightly over his head, he sprang for it, pulled, kicked against the trunk, and flowed up into the foliage with no apparent effort. The others waited below. Sid glanced up occasionally, Vito idly kicked at one of the clubs made from an old two-by-four.

The other lay beneath the piled jackets; but enough of the end protruded to show that they had been chopped from the same timber, gray-painted on one side, stained and gouged on the other where boards had once been nailed. A coil of rope lay beside the axes.

High in the upper branches, Blackie braced himself with negligent confidence and stared along the concrete ribbon.

*From here, he thought, you'd almost think the place was still alive, instead of crumbling around our ears.*

The windows of the distant houses were dark, unglazed holes, but the sunlight made the masonry clean and shining. To Blackie, the ragged tops of most of the buildings were as natural as the tattered look of the few people he knew. Beyond, toward the center of the city, was real evidence of his race's bygone might—a vast jumble of shattered stone and fused metal. Queer weeds and mosses infected the area, but it would be centuries before they could mask the desolation.

Better covered, were the heaps along the road, seemingly shoved just beyond the gravel shoulders—mouldering mounds which legend said were once machines to ride in along the pavement.

Something glinted at the bend of the highway. Blackie peered closer.

He swarmed down the tree from branch to branch, so lithely that the trio below hardly had the warning of the vibrating leaves before he dropped, cat-footed, among them.

"They're comin'!"

He shrugged quickly into his stained jacket, emulated in silent haste by the others. Vito rubbed his hands down the hairy chest left revealed by his open jacket and hefted one of the clubs. In his broad paws, it seemed light.

They were quiet, watching Sid peer out through narrowly parted brush of the undergrowth. Blackie fidgeted behind him. Finally, he reached out as if to pull the other aside, but at that moment Sid released the bushes and crouched.

The others, catching his warning glance, fell prone, peering through shrubbery and around tree trunks with savage eyes.

The distant squawk of a jay became suddenly very clear, as did the sighing of a faint breeze through the leaves overhead. Then a new, clanking, humming sound intruded.

A procession of three vehicles rolled along the highway at an unvarying pace which took no account of patches or worn spots. They jounced in turn across a patch laid over a previous, unsuccessful patch, and halted before the felled tree. Two were bulldozers; the third was a light truck with compartments for tools. No human figures were visible.

A moment later, the working force appeared—a column of eight robots. These deployed as they reached the obstacle, and explored like colossal ants along its length.

"What're they after?" asked Mike, whispering although he lay fifty yards away.

"They're lookin' over the job for whatever sends them out," Blackie whispered back. "See those little lights stickin' out the tops o' their heads? I heard tell, once, that's how they're run."

Some of the robots took saws from the truck and began to cut through the tree trunk. Others produced cables and huge hooks to attach the obstacle to the bulldozers.

"Look at 'em go!" sighed Sid, hunching his stiff shoulders jealously. "Took us hours, an' they're half done already."

They watched as the robots precisely severed the part of the tree that blocked the highway, going not one inch beyond the gravel shoulder, and helped the bulldozers to tug it aside. On the opposite side of the concrete, the shoulder tapered off into a six-foot drop. The log was jockeyed around parallel to this ditch and rolled into it, amid a thrashing of branches and a spurting of small pebbles.

"Glad we're on the high side," whispered Mike. "That thing 'ud squash a guy's guts right out!"

"Keep listenin' to me," Blackie said, "an' you'll keep on bein' in the right place at the right time."

Mike raised his eyebrows at Vito, who thrust out his lower lip and nodded sagely. Sid grinned, but no one contradicted the boast.

"They're linin' up," Blackie warned tensely. "You guys ready? Where's that rope?"

Someone thrust it into his hands. Still squinting at the scene on the highway, he fumbled for the ends and held one out to Mike. The others gripped their clubs.

"Now, remember!" ordered Blackie. "Me an' Mike will trip up the last one in line. You two get in there quick an' wallop him over the head—but good!"

"Don't go away while we're doin' it," said big Sid. "They won't chase ya, but they look out fer themselves. I don't wanna get tossed twenty feet again!"

The eyes of the others flicked toward the jagged white scar running down behind Sid's right ear and under the collar of his jacket. Then they swung back to the road.

"Good!" breathed Blackie. "The rollin' stuff's goin' first."

The truck and bulldozers set out toward the city, with the column of robots marching a fair distance behind. The latter approached the ambush—drew abreast—began to pass.

Blackie raised himself to a crouch with just the tips of his fingers steadying him.

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As the last robot plodded by, he surged out of the brush, joined to Red Mike by their grips on the twenty feet of rope. They ran up behind the marching machine, trailed by the others.

In his right hand, Blackie twirled the part of the rope hanging between him and Mike. On the second swing, he got it over the head of the robot. He saw Mike brace himself.

The robot staggered. It pivoted clumsily to its left, groping vaguely for the hindrance. Mike and Blackie tugged again, and the machine wound up facing them in its efforts to maintain balance. Its companions marched steadily along the road.

"Switch ends!" barked Blackie.

Alert, Mike tossed him the other end of the rope and caught Blackie's. They ran past the robot on either side, looping it in. Blackie kept going until he was above the ditch. He wound a turn of rope about his forearm and plunged down the bank.



***With skill of long practice, they brought the robot down.***

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A shower of gravel spattered after him as Mike jammed his heels into the shoulder of the highway to anchor the other end. Then he heard the booming sound of the robot's fall.

Blackie clawed his way up the bank. Vito and Sid were smashing furiously at the floundering machine. Mike danced about the melee with bared teeth, charging in once as if to leap upon the quarry with both feet. Frustrated by the peril of the whirling two-by-fours, he swept up handfuls of gravel to hurl.

Blackie turned to run for one of the axes. Just then, Sid struck home to the head of the robot.

Sparks spat out amid a tinkle of glass. The machine ceased all motion.

"All right!" panted Blackie. "All *right!* That's enough!"

They stepped back, snarls fading. A handful of gravel trickled through Mike's fingers and pattered loudly on the concrete. Gradually, the men began to straighten up, seeing the robot as an inert heap of metal rather than as a weird beast in its death throes.

"We better load up an' get," said Blackie. "We wanna be over on the trail if they send somethin' up the road to look for *this.*"

Vito dragged the robot off the highway by the head, and they began the task of lashing it to the two-by-fours.

It was about two hours later when they plodded around a street corner among the ruins and stopped before a fairly intact building. By that time, they had picked up an escort of dirty, half-clad children who ran ahead to spread the news.

Two other men and a handful of women gathered around with eager exclamations. The hunters dropped their catch.

"Better get to work on him," said Blackie, glancing at the sky. "Be dark soon."

The men who had remained as guards ran inside the entrance of polished granite and brought out tools: hammers, crowbars, hatchets. Behind them hurried women with basins and large cans. The original four, weary from the weight of the robot despite frequent pauses on the trail, stepped back.

"Where first, Blackie?" asked one of the men, waiting for the women to untangle the rope and timbers.

"Try all the joints. After that, we'll crack him open down the middle for the main supply tank."

He watched the metal give way under the blows. As the robot was dismembered, the fluid that had lubricated the complex mechanism flowed from its wounds and was poured by the women into a five-gallon can.

"Bring a cupful, Judy," Blackie told his woman, a wiry blond girl. "I wanna see if it's as good as the last."

He lit a stick at the fire as they crossed the littered, once-ornate lobby, and she followed him down a dim hall. He pulled aside the skins that covered their doorway, then stumbled his way to the table. The window was still uncovered against the night chill, but it looked out on a courtyard shadowed by towering walls. To eyes adjusted to the sunny street, the room was dark.

Judy poured the oil into the makeshift lamp, waited for the rag wick to soak, and held it out to Blackie. He lit the wick from his stick.

"It burns real good, Blackie," the girl said, wrinkling her nose against the first oily smoke. "Gee, you're smart to catch one the first day out."

"Tell them other dames to watch how they use it!" he warned. "This oughta last a month or more when we get him all emptied."

He blew out the dying flame on the stick and dropped the charred wood thoughtfully to the floor.

"Naw, I ain't so smart," he admitted, "or I'd figure a way to make one of them work the garden for us. Maybe someday—but *this* kind won't do nothin' but fix that goddam road, an' what god's that to anybody?"

His woman moved the burning lamp carefully to the center of the table.

"Anyway, it's gonna be better'n last winter," she said. "We'll have lights now."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LET THERE BE LIGHT \*\*\*

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