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Title: All Jackson's Children

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Release date: February 11, 2016 [EBook #51185]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALL JACKSON'S CHILDREN ***



All Jackson's Children

By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Illustrated by FINLAY

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
Galaxy Science Fiction January 1957.
Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that
the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.]**



***Their chances hung literally on a prayer ...
which they had to answer all by themselves!***

Angus McIntosh vigorously scuffed the tarnished nameplate on the wrecked cargo carrier. Then he stepped back and squinted under shaggy gray eyebrows.

Letter by letter, number by number, he coaxed out the designation on the crumpled bow of the spacer in the vine-matted gorge: "RT ... 3070 ... VG-II."

His lean frame tensed with concern as he turned to stare soberly at the other. "A Vegan robot trader!"

Bruce Drummond grinned. "Are we lucky! Clunkers are worth money—in any condition."

Angus snorted impatiently. "Let's get out of here, quick."

"Get out?" the stocky Drummond repeated incredulously as he ran thick-set fingers over the black stubble on his cheek. "Ain't we going to salvage the clunkers? The book says they're ours after fifty years."

"The hold's empty. There's no cargo."

"There was when it landed. Look at the angle of incidence on those fins."

"Exactly." Frowning, Angus shifted his holster around on his hip and strode back toward the plain. "Ever hear of a frustrated compulsion?"

Drummond, following hesitantly, shook his head.

"Those clunkers have to satisfy a basic behavior circuit," McIntosh explained as he hastened his step. "We don't know what the compulsion of this bunch is. Suppose—well, suppose they have a chiropractic function. How'd you like to be the first person to show up after they've been frustrated for a hundred years?"

"Oh," Drummond said comprehendingly, stumbling to keep pace.

Angus McIntosh brushed a mass of tendrils aside and stepped out on the plain. "We'll report it and let them send in a deactivation crew. That way, at least, we'll get fifty per cent of salvage and no danger."

"Even that ain't bad—just for following an SOS a hundred light-years. Taking an uncharted route and picking up that signal sure paid off like—"

Drummond gagged on his words as he gripped Angus's arm and pointed.

Their ship was a shining oval, bobbing and weaving on a sea of silver that surged across the plain toward a cliff on the left.

"Clunkers!" Drummond gasped. "Hundreds of 'em—making off with our boat!"

He unholstered his weapon and fired.

Angus struck his wrist sharply. "Why don't you just run out waving your arms? We don't have enough firepower to get more than eight or ten of them."

But the warning was too late. Already the tide had washed away from the ship and was surging toward the gorge.

There was a noise behind them and Angus spun around. Ten feet away stood a robot with the designation RA-204 on his breast-plate.

"Welcome, O Jackson," the clunker said reverently.

Then he hinged forward on his hip joints until his head almost touched the ground. The gesture was a clockwork salaam.

McIntosh's thin legs dangled in front of 204's breast-plate and his ankles were secure in the grip of metal fingers as he rode the robot's shoulders.

RA-76 strode alongside, carrying a squirming and swearing Drummond. Around them, the shining horde marched along noisily.

"He has come!" cried one.

"Jackson has come!" chanted the others of the shining horde.

"He will show us the way!" shouted RA-204.

Drummond kicked, but 76 only held his legs more firmly. Furious, Drummond reached for his gun.

"That's using your head," Angus said sarcastically. "Agitate them. Then we'll never get out of here."

Drummond let the weapon slip back into its holster. "What did we get into—a nest of fanatics? Who's Jackson?"

Angus helplessly shrugged his bony shoulders.

The procession filtered through a narrow woods and broke out on another plain, headed for the nearby cliff.

Angus leaned forward. "Put me down, 204."

"Thou art Jackson," said the robot solemnly. "And Thou art testing me to see whether I would so easily abandon my Supervisor."

"Not testing," Angus said. "Just asking. Come on, how about it?"

"Praise Jackson!" 204 cried.

"Jackson! Jackson!" intoned the throng.

Drummond leaned an elbow on 76's skull plate and disgustedly cupped his chin in his hand. "What if they *are* chiropractor robots?"

"We'll probably need one after this ride," Angus said uncomfortably.

"Not like we'll need a way to get back to the ship and cut off those converters before they over-charge."

"Slow charge?" Angus asked between grunts timed with 204's stride.

"Hell, no. I didn't think we'd be here more than a couple of hours. By tomorrow at this time, there'll be a crater out there big enough to bury the Capellan fleet."

"Great," said Angus. "That gives us another thing to worry about."

The robots fell into two groups as they neared a cave in the cliff.

"Jackson is my Supervisor!" chanted the ones on the right.

"I shall not rust!" answered those on the left.

"He maketh me to adjust my joint tension!" cried the first group.

"Oh, brother," said Drummond.

"Sounds like a psalm," suggested Angus.

"You ought to know. You always got your nose in that Bible."

"Notice anything peculiar about them?"

"Very funny," sneered Drummond at the question.

"No, I'm serious."

"They bounce the daylights out of you when they walk," Drummond grumbled.

"No. Their finish. It's shiny—like they were fresh out of the factory—not like they've been marooned here for a hundred years."

Drummond scratched his chin. "Maybe their compulsion is metal polishing."

"Not with the kind of fingers they have."

Angus indicated the hand that held his ankle. Three digits were wrenches of various sizes. The index finger was a screwdriver. The thumb was a Stillson wrench. The thumb on the other hand was a dislike appendage.

Drummond hunched over. "76, what's your function?"

The robot looked up. "To serve Jackson."

"You're a big help," said Drummond.

"Why dost thou tempt us, O Jackson?" asked RA-204. "Wouldst Thou test our beliefs?"

"We're no gods," Angus declared as the robot drew up before the cave.

"Thou art Jackson!" insisted 204.

Drummond and McIntosh were hoisted to a ledge beside the mouth of the cave. The robots backed off, forming a half circle, and bowed in obeisance.

Angus ran a hand helplessly through his sparse gray hair. "Would you say there are four hundred of them?"

"At least." Drummond surveyed the expanse of metal bodies. "You know, maybe they don't have a function."

"Impossible. Hasn't been a clunker in five hundred years without a primary compulsion."

"Think they forgot theirs?"

"Can't. They may forget how to put it in words, but the compulsion is good for as long as their primary banks are intact. That's not what's worrying me, though."

"No?"

"*Religious* robots! There can't be any such brand. Yet here they are."

Drummond studied them silently.

"Before there can be theological beliefs," McIntosh went on, "there has to be some sort of foundation—the mystery of origin, the fear of death, the concept of the hereafter. Clunkers *know* they come from a factory. They *know* that when they're finally disassembled, they'll be lifeless scrap metal."

Drummond spat disdainfully. "One thing's for sure—this pack thinks we're God Almighty."

"Jackson Almighty," Angus corrected somberly.

"Well, God or Jackson, we'd better get back to the ship or this is going to be a long visitation."

Drummond faced the almost prostrate robots and made a megaphone of his hands. "All right, you guys! How's about knocking it off?"

Slowly, the robots reared erect, waiting.

"Take us back to our ship!"

RA-204 stepped forward. "Again Thou art testing us, O Jackson."

Angus spread his arms imploringly. "Look, fellows. We're men. We're—"

"Thou art our Supervisor!" the throng roared.

"One of you is Jackson," explained 204. "The other is a Divine Test. We must learn which is the True Supervisor."

"You're *not* being tested!" McIntosh insisted.

"Our beliefs are firm, O Jackson!" cried a hundred metallic voices.

"Thou are the Supervisor!" declared 204 resolutely.

"For God's sake," urged Drummond, "tell 'em you're their Jackson and then lay down the law."

"No. Can't do it that way."

"Why not? Unfair advantage, I suppose?" There was a cutting edge on the younger man's words.

Angus stared thoughtfully at the robots. "If we only knew how they forgot their origin, how they got religion, we might find a way to get through to them."

Drummond laughed contemptuously. "*You* figure it out. *I'm* going to play Jackson and get back to

the ship." He turned toward the robots.

But McIntosh caught his arm. "Let me try something else first." He faced the horde below. "Who made you?"

"Thou hast, O Supervisor!" the robots chanted like a gleeful Sunday school class.

"And Thou hast put us on this world and robot begot robot until we were as we are today," added 204 solemnly.

Drummond slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead. "Now they think they've got a sex function!"

Angus's shoulders fell dismally. "Maybe if we try to figure out their designation. They're all RAs—whatever the A stands for."

There was a hollow rumbling in the cave that grew in volume until the cliff shook. Then a second group of robots emerged and fanned out to encircle the ledge.

"Hell," said Drummond in consternation. "There's twice as many as we figured!"

"Thought there'd be more," Angus admitted. "That ship was big enough to hold a thousand clunkers. And they didn't waste space in those days."

The newcomers fell prostrate alongside the others.

The planet's single satellite hung like a lost gem over the low mountains east of the plain. It washed the cliff with a cloak of effulgence and bathed the forbidden ship in an aura of gleaming silver.

Below the ledge, the reverent robots wavered occasionally and highlights of coruscation played capriciously across their plates. Their whispered invocations were a steady drone, like the soft touch of the wind.

"Quit it!" Drummond yelled angrily. "Break it up! Go home!"

Angus sat with his head against the cliff, face tilted up. "That didn't help any."

"When are they going to give up?"

McIntosh glanced abstractedly at the horde. "How long would we keep it up if *our* God appeared among us?"

Drummond swore. "Damned if you haven't been reading the print off that Bible!"

"What do you suppose happened," Angus went on heedlessly, "to make them more than clunkers—to make them grope for the basic truths?"

Drummond spat disgustedly in answer.

"Civilization goes on for a hundred years," Angus said as he leaned back and closed his eyes, "spreading across a hunk of the Galaxy, carrying along its knowledge and religious convictions. And all the while, there's this little lost island of mimic beliefs—so much like our own creed, except that their god is called Jackson."

Drummond rose and paced. "Well, you'll have plenty of time to set them straight, if we're still sitting on this shelf eleven hours from now."

"Maybe that's what it'll take—bringing them step by step through theology."

"Overnight?"

No, not overnight, Angus realized. It would take months to pound in new convictions.

Drummond slipped down from the ledge. "Here goes nothing."

Interestedly, Angus folded his arms and watched the other square his shoulders and march off confidently through the ranks of robots toward the ship in the distance.

For a moment, it seemed he would succeed. But two of the RAs suddenly reared erect and seized him by the arms. They bore him on their shoulders and deposited him back on the ridge beside McIntosh.

"Warm tonight," Drummond observed bitterly, glancing up at the sky.

"Sure is," Angus agreed, his voice calm. "Wouldn't be surprised if we got some rain tomorrow."

Drummond flipped another pebble and it *pinged* down on a metal back. "Seven out of thirteen."

"Getting good."

"Look, let's tell 'em we're their Supervisor and end this marathon worship."

"Which one of us is going to play the divine role?"

"What difference does it make?"

Angus shrugged and his tired eyes stared off into the darkness. "One of us is—Jackson. The other

is an impostor, brought here to test their faith. When they find out which is which, what are they going to do to the impostor?"

Drummond looked startled. "I see what you mean."

The miniature moon had wheeled its way to the zenith and now the first gray tinge of dawn silhouetted the peaks of the mountain range.

Angus rose and stretched. "We've got to find out what their function is."

"Why?"

"It looks like religion is their only interest. But maybe that's because they're completely frustrated in their basic compulsion. If we could discover their function, maybe we could focus their attention back on it."

"RA," Drummond mumbled puzzledly. "Robot agriculturist?"

Angus shook his head. "They wouldn't be frustrated—not with a whole planet to farm. Besides, they'd be equipped with agricultural implements instead of wrenches."

Drummond got up suddenly. "You figure it out. I have something else to try."

Angus followed him along the ledge until they reached the mouth of the cave.

"What are you going to do?"

Drummond hitched his trousers. "The way we're ringed in here, it's a cinch we won't get past 'em in the six hours we have left."

"So you're going to make off through the cave?"

The younger man nodded. "They might take off after me. That'll give you a chance to get to the ship and cut off those converters before they make like a nova."

Angus chuckled. "Suppose half of them decide to stay here with me?"

Drummond swore impatiently at his skepticism. "At any rate, one of us might get back to the converters."

"And leave the other here?"

"He can say he's Jackson and order an attack in force on the ship."

"I don't follow you."

"Skidding the ship in a circle with the exhaust blowers on," Drummond explained patiently, "will take care of *ten thousand* clunkers."

He dropped from the ledge and raced into the cave. None of the robots stirred. Either they hadn't noticed Drummond's departure, Angus reasoned, or they weren't concerned because they knew the cave led nowhere.

The sun came up, daubing the cliff with splotches of orange and purple and striking up scintillations in the beads of dew on the robots' backs.

And still the tiresomely shouted veneration continued.

Angus paced the ledge, stopping occasionally to stare into the impenetrable shadows of the cave. He checked his watch. Five hours to go—five hours, and then time would be meaningless for the rest of his life, with the ship destroyed.

It was unlikely that rescue would come. The wrecked spacer's automatic distress signals had gone out in an ever-expanding sphere for a hundred years, and he and Drummond had been the only humans to hear them.

Trade routes were pretty stable in this section of the Galaxy now. And it was hardly possible that, within the next ten or twenty years, one would be opened up that would intercept the SOS that had lured them here.

He stood up and surveyed the robots. "RA-204."

204 reared erect. "Yes, Jackson?"

"One of us is gone."

"We know, O Supervisor."

"Why did you let him get away?"

"If he is not the True Jackson, it doesn't matter that he fled. If he is the Supervisor, he will return. Otherwise, why did he come here to us in the first place?"

Another robot straightened. "We are ashamed, O Jackson, that we have failed the Divine Test and have not recognized our True Supervisor."

Angus held up his arms for silence. "Once there was a cargo of robots. That was a hundred years

ago. The ship was from Vega II. It developed trouble and crashed when it tried to land on this planet. There was—"

"What's a year, O Supervisor?" asked 204.

"A Vega-two, Jackson?" said 76 bewilderedly.

"What's a planet?" another wanted to know.

McIntosh leaned back hopelessly against the cliff. All of their memories and a good deal of their vocabularies had been lost. He could determine how much only through days of conversation. It would take weeks to learn their function, to rekindle a sense of duty sufficiently strong to draw their interest away from religion. Unless—

He drew resolutely erect. "Strip the converters! Pull the aft tube lining!"

The robots looked uncomprehendingly at him. It was obvious they weren't trained for spacecraft maintenance.

But it had to have something to do with mechanics. "A battle fleet is orbiting at one diameter! Arm all warheads on the double!"

They stared helplessly at one another, then back at Angus. Not ordnancemen.

"Pedestrian Strip Number Two is jammed! Crane crew, muster on the right!"

The robots shifted uncertainly. Apparently they weren't civic maintenancemen, either.

Defeated, Angus scanned their blank face plates. For a moment, it was almost as though he could discern expressions of confusion. Then he laughed at the thought that metal could accommodate a frown.

Suddenly the robots shifted their gaze to the cave. Drummond, shoulders sagging dismally, walked out and squinted against the glare. Several of the robots started toward him.

"Okay, okay!" he growled, heading back for the ledge before they could reach him.

"No luck?" Angus asked.

Disgusted, Drummond clambered up beside him. "The cave's just a nice-sized room."

"Took you two hours to find that out?"

The younger man shook his head. "I was hiding by the entrance, waiting for the clunkers to break it up and give me a chance to run for the ship.... How many robots did we decide there were?"

"About eight hundred."

"Wrong. You can add another four hundred or so."

"In the cave?"

Drummond nodded. "With their parts spread all the way from here to hell and back."

"Dismantled?"

"Down to the last nut and bolt. They've even got their secondary memory banks stripped."

Angus was thoughtfully silent a long while. "RA ..." he said finally. "Robot Assembler!"

"That's what I figured." Drummond turned back toward the robots and funneled his voice through his hands.

"Okay, you clunkers! I want all odd-numbered RAs stripped down for reconditioning!" He glanced at Angus. "When they get through, I'll have half of what's left strip the other half, and so forth."

McIntosh grinned caustically. "Brilliant! The whole operation shouldn't take more than two or three days." Then his face took on a grim cast. "Drummond, we've only got four hours left to get to those converters."

"But you don't understand. Once they get started, they'll be so busy, we'll probably be able to walk away."

Angus smiled indulgently. "Once they get started."

He nodded toward the robots.

They had all returned to their attitude of veneration.

"It won't work," McIntosh explained. "Their obsession with religion is stronger than their primary compulsion. That's probably because they've been satisfying their compulsion all along." He jerked a thumb in the direction of the cave.

Drummond swore venomously.

Angus dropped down on the ledge and folded his knees in his arms. He felt his age bearing down on him for the first time.

"Twelve hundred robots," he said meditatively. "Twelve hundred *RA* robots. Out of touch with civilization for a century. Satisfying their primary function by disassembling and assembling one another. Going at it in shifts. Splitting themselves into three groups."

"That device on their left thumb," Drummond interrupted. "It's a burnisher. That's why they're so shiny."

Angus nodded. "Three groups. Group A spends so many months stripping and reassembling Group B. Meanwhile, Group C, which has just been put together again, has no memory because their secondary banks have been wiped clean. So, like children, they *learn* from the working Group A."

Drummond's mouth hung open in shocked understanding. "And by the time A finishes the job, C's education is complete! And it's A's turn to be stripped!"

"By then," Angus went on, "Group C is not only ready to start stripping Group A, but has also become intellectually mature enough to begin the education of the reassembled Group B!"

They sat still for a while, thinking it over.

"The compulsion to do their jobs," McIntosh continued, "is unchanged because the primary function banks are sealed circuits and can't be tampered with. But in each generation, they have their secondary memory circuits wiped clean and have to start all over, getting whatever general knowledge they can from the last generation."

Drummond snapped his fingers excitedly. "That's why they don't know what we are! Their idea of Man had to be passed down by word of mouth. And it got all distorted in the process!"

Angus's stare, more solicitous now, swept slowly over the prostrate robots. "More important, that's why they developed a religion. What's the main difference between human and robotic intelligence? It's that our span of life is limited on one end by birth, the other by death—mysteries of origin and destiny that can't be explained. You see, the *ordinary* clunker understands where *he* came from and where he's going. But here are robots who have to struggle with those mysteries—birth and death of the conscious intellect which they themselves once knew, and forgot, and now have turned into myths."

"So they start thinking in terms of religion," Drummond said. "Well, that clears up the whole thing, doesn't it?"

"Not quite. It doesn't explain why the religion they've invented parallels ours so closely. And it doesn't tell us who Jackson is."

Drummond ran thick fingernails against the stubble on his cheeks. "Jackson is my Supervisor. I shall not rust. He maketh me to adjust my joint tension—" He stopped and frowned. "I've heard that before somewhere, only it sounded different."

Angus gave him a wry, tired smile. "Sure. It's practically the Psalm of David. Now you see why the resemblance is driving me batty."

The robots stirred. Several of them stood up and plodded into the cave. The others continued repeating their endless praise and devotion—prayers in every sense of the word except common sense.

Angus leaned back against the cliff and let the sun's heat warm him.

"Somehow it doesn't seem fair," he commented unhappily.

"What doesn't?" Drummond asked.

"They're so close to the Truth. Yet, after we file a report, a deactivation crew will come along and erase their beliefs. They'll have their memory banks swept clean and once more they'll be nothing but clunkers with a factory-specification job of routine work to do."

"Ain't that what they're supposed to be?"

"But these are different. They've found something no clunker's ever had before—hope, faith, aspiration beyond death." He shook his head ruefully.

There was movement at the mouth of the cave and the smaller group of robots emerged from the shadows, two of them bearing a stone slab. Their steps were ceremoniously slow as they approached the ledge. Bowing, they placed the tablet at Angus's feet and backed away.

"These are the articles of our faith, O Jackson," one announced. "We have preserved them for Thy coming."

McIntosh stared down at the charred remains of a book. Its metal-fiber binding was shredded and fused and encrusted with the dust of ages.

Drummond knelt beside it and, with stiff fingers, brushed away the film of grime, uncovering part of the title:

**OLY
BIB E**

Eagerly, Angus eased the cover back. Of the hundreds of pages it had originally contained, only

flaked parts of two or three remained. The printing was scarcely legible on the moldy paper.

He read aloud those words he could discern:

"... to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside cool waters; He...."

Drummond jabbed Angus with a triumphant forefinger. "They didn't invent any religion, after all!"

"It isn't important *how* they got it. The fact that they accepted it—that's what's important." McIntosh glanced up at Drummond. "They probably found this in the wreck of the ship they'd been in. It's easy to see they haven't used it in hundreds of generations. Instead, the gist of what's in it was passed down orally. And their basic concepts of Man and supervisor were distorted all along the way—confused with the idea of God."

Gently, he let the cover fall. And a shining square of duraloid fell out.

"It's somebody's picture!" Drummond exclaimed.

"An ID card," Angus said, holding it so the light wouldn't reflect off its transparent protective cover.

It was a picture of a nondescript man—not as stout as Drummond, nor as lean as McIntosh—with hair neither all black, like the younger man's, nor nearly all white, like Angus's.

The print below the picture was indiscernible, except for the subject's last name....

"Jackson!" Drummond whispered.

Angus slowly replaced the card. "A hundred years of false devotion," he said pensively. "Just think —"

"This is no time for that kind of gas." Drummond glanced at his watch. "We got just two hours to cut off those converters." Desperately, he faced the robots. "Hey, you clunkers! You're robot assemblers. You got four hundred clunkers in that cave, all in pieces. Get in there and put 'em together!"

Angus shook his head disapprovingly. Somehow it didn't seem right, calling them clunkers.

"Jackson is my Supervisor!" intoned RA-204.

"Jackson is my Supervisor!" echoed the mass.

Drummond glanced frantically at his watch, then looked helplessly at Angus. Angus shrugged.

The younger man's face suddenly tensed with resolution. "So they've got to have a Jackson? All right, I'll give 'em one!"

He waved his fist at the horde. "I'm your Supervisor! I'm your Jackson! Now clear out of the way and—"

RA-76's hand darted out and seized Drummond's ankle, tugged him off the ledge. As he fell to the ground, a score of robots closed in over him, metal arms flailing down methodically. Angus yelled at them to stop, saw he was too late and sank down, turning away sickly.

Finally, after a long while, they backed off and faced Angus.

"We have passed the Divine test, O Jackson!" 204 shouted up jubilantly.

"We have redeemed ourselves before our Supervisor!" exclaimed 76.

It took a long, horror-filled moment before Angus could speak.

"How do you know?" he managed to ask at last.

"If he had been Jackson," exclaimed 204, "we could not have destroyed him."

The robots fell prostrate again and returned to their devotional. But now the phrases were triumphant, where before they had been servile and uncertain.

Angus stared numbly down at Drummond, then backed against the cliff. The litany below, exuberant now, grew mightily in volume, booming vibrantly against distant hills.

"There is but one Supervisor!" intoned 204.

"But one Jackson!" answered the assembly.

"And now He dwelleth among His children!" 76 chanted.

"In their midst!" boomed the hundreds.

Suddenly it all seemed horribly ludicrous and Angus laughed. The litany, stopped and his laughter grew shriller, louder, edged with hysteria.

The shimmering sea of metal, confounded, stared at him and it was as though he could see fleshy furrows of confusion on the featureless faces.... But how could a clunker show emotion?

His laughter slowed and died, like the passing of a violent storm. And he felt weakened with a

sickening sense of compassion. Robots—*human* robots—standing awed before unknown concepts while they groped for Truth. Clunkers with a sense of right and wrong and with an overwhelming love. It was absurd that he had been elected father of twelve hundred children—whether flesh or metal—but it didn't *feel* at all absurd.

"Dost Thou despair of us, O Jackson?" asked 76 hesitantly, staring up at him.

204 motioned toward the ship, the top of its hull shining beyond the nearby woods. "Wouldst Thou *still* return to Thy vessel, Supervisor?"

Incredulous, Angus tensed. "You mean I can go?"

"If that is Thy wish, True Jackson, you may go," said 76 submissively.

As he watched unbelievably, a corridor opened in their ranks, extending toward the woods and the ship beyond. He glanced anxiously at his watch. There was still more than an hour left.

Wearily, he dropped from the ledge and trudged toward freedom, trying to look straight ahead. His eyes, nevertheless, wandered to the dejected figures who faced him with their heads bowed.

Then he laughed again, realizing the illogical nature of his solicitous thoughts. Imagine—*dejected* clunkers! Still, the metal faces seemed somehow different. Where, a moment earlier, he had fancied expressions of jubilation, now there was the sense of hopelessness on the steel plates.

Shrugging off his uncertainty, he walked faster. After all, was it *his* fault they'd stumbled upon a substitute for birth and death and had become something more than clunkers? What was he supposed to do—stay and play missionary, bring them the Truth so that when a deactivation crew came along, they would be so advanced morally that no one would suggest their destruction?

He stopped and scanned the ranks on either side. He'd do one thing for them, at least—he wouldn't report the wreck. Then it would be centuries, probably, before another ship wandered far enough away from the trade routes to intercept the distress signals.

Relieved by his decision, he went ahead more at ease.

And the litany started again—softly, appealing:

"Jackson is my Supervisor."

"I shall not rust...."

Angus stiffened abruptly and stared at his watch, realizing belatedly that it had stopped. But how long ago? How much time did he have left? Should he take the chance and make a dash for the converters?

He reached the end of the robot corridor and started to sprint for the ship.

But he halted and turned to glance back at the humble, patient horde. They were expectantly silent now—as though they could sense his indecision. He backed away from them.

Then the light of a hundred Arcturan days flared briefly and a mighty mountain of sound and concussion collapsed on him. The trees buckled and branches were hurled out against the cliff. It rained leaves and pieces of metal from the hull for a long while as Angus hugged the ground.

When he finally looked up, familiar bits of the ship were strewn around him—a spacesuit helmet here, a control dial there, a transmitter tube up ahead.

He rose shakily, staring at a black book that lay near the helmet with its pages ruffled. He picked it up and straightened out the leaves. Then he motioned to the robots and they clustered around him.

He would have to start from the beginning.

He wet his lips.

"In the beginning," Angus read in a loud, convincing voice, "*God* created heaven and earth and the earth was void and empty and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And *God* said, 'Let there be light'...."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ALL JACKSON'S CHILDREN ***

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