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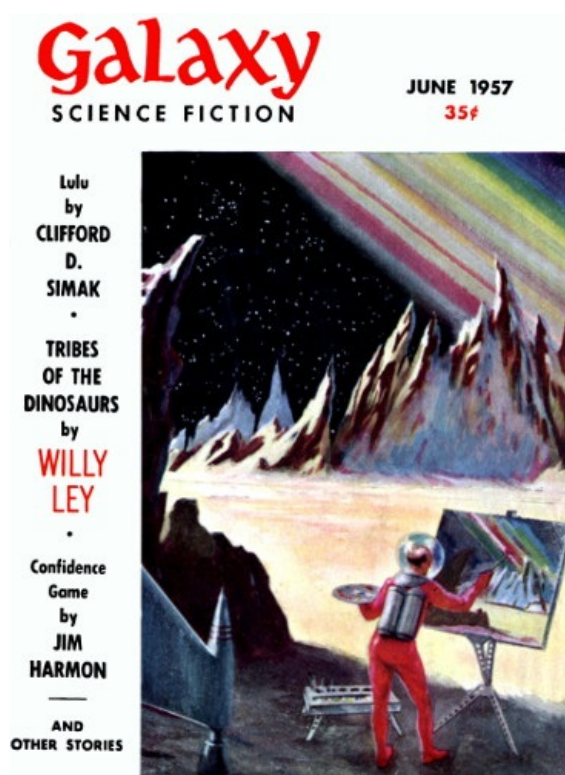
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PRIME DIFFERENCE ***



PRIME DIFFERENCE

By ALAN E. NOURSE

Illustrated by SCHOENHEER

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***Being two men rolled out of one would solve
my problems—but which one would I be?***

I suppose that every guy reaches a point once in his lifetime when he gets one hundred and forty per cent fed up with his wife.

Understand now—I've got nothing against marriage or any thing like that. Marriage is great. It's a good old red-blooded American Institution. Except that it's got one defect in it big enough to throw a cat through, especially when you happen to be married to a woman like Marge—

It's so *permanent*.

Oh, I'd have divorced Marge in a minute if we'd been living in the Blissful 'Fifties—but with the Family Solidarity Amendment of 1968, and all the divorce taxes we have these days since the women got their teeth into politics, to say nothing of the Aggrieved Spouse Compensation Act, I'd have been a pauper for the rest of my life if I'd tried it. That's aside from the social repercussions involved.

You can't really blame me for looking for another way out. But a man has to be desperate to try to buy himself an Ego Prime.

So, all right, I was desperate. I'd spent eight years trying to keep Marge happy, which was exactly seven and a half years too long.

Marge was a dream to look at, with her tawny hair and her sulky eyes and a shape that could set your teeth chattering—but that was where the dream stopped.

She had a tongue like a #10 wood rasp and a list of grievances long enough to paper the bedroom wall. When she wasn't complaining, she was crying, and when she wasn't crying, she was pointing out in chilling detail exactly where George Faircloth fell short as a model husband, which happened to be everywhere. Half of the time she had a "beastly headache" (for which I was personally responsible) and the other half she was sore about something, so ninety-nine per cent of the time we got along like a couple of tomcats in a packing case.

Maybe we just weren't meant for each other. I don't know. I used to envy guys like Harry Folsom at the office. His wife is no joy to live with either, but at least he could take a spin down to Rio once in a while with one of the stenographers and get away with it.

I knew better than to try. Marge was already so jealous that I couldn't even smile at the company receptionist without a twinge of guilt. Give Marge something real to howl about, and I'd be ready for the Rehab Center in a week.

But I'd underestimated Marge. She didn't need anything real, as I found out when Jeree came along.

Business was booming and the secretaries at the office got shuffled around from time to time. Since I had an executive-type job, I got an executive-type secretary. Her name was Jeree and she was gorgeous. As a matter of fact, she was better than gorgeous. She was the sort of secretary every businessman ought to have in his office. Not to do any work—just to sit there.

Jeree was tall and dark, and she could convey more without saying anything than I ever dreamed was possible. The first day she was there, she conveyed to me very clearly that if I cared to supply the opportunity, she'd be glad to supply the motive.

That night, I could tell that Marge had been thinking something over during the day. She let me get the first bite of dinner halfway to my mouth, and then she said, "I hear you got a new secretary today."

I muttered something into my coffee cup and pretended not to hear.

Marge turned on her Accusing Look #7. "I also hear that she's five-foot-eight and tapes out at 38-25-36 and thinks you're handsome."

Marge had quite a spy system.

"She couldn't be much of a secretary," she added.

"She's a perfectly good secretary," I blurted, and kicked myself mentally. I should have known Marge's traps by then.

Marge exploded. I didn't get any supper, and she was still going strong at midnight. I tried to argue, but when Marge got going, there was no stopping her. I had my ultimatum, as far as Jeree was concerned.

Harry Folsom administered the *coup de grace* at coffee next morning. "What you need is an Ego Prime," he said with a grin. "Solve all your problems. I hear they work like a charm."

I set my coffee cup down. Bells were ringing in my ears. "Don't be ridiculous. It's against the law. Anyway, I wouldn't think of such a thing. It's—it's indecent."

Harry shrugged. "Just joking, old man, just joking. Still, it's fun to think about, eh? Freedom from wife. Absolutely safe and harmless. Not even too expensive, if you've got the right contacts. And I've got a friend who knows a guy—"

Just then, Jeree walked past us and flashed me a big smile. I gripped my cup for dear life and still spilled coffee on my tie.

As I said, a guy gets fed up.

And maybe opportunity would only knock once.

And an Ego Prime would solve all my problems, as Harry had told me.

It was completely illegal, of course. The wonder was that Ego Prime, Inc., ever got to put their product on the market at all, once the nation's housewives got wind of just what their product was.

From the first, there was rigid Federal control and laws regulating the use of Primes right down to the local level. You could get a license for a Utility model Prime if you were a big business executive, or a high public official, or a movie star, or something like that; but even then his circuits had to be inspected every two months, and he had to have a thousand built-in Paralyzers, and you had to specify in advance exactly what you wanted your Prime to be able to do when, where, how, why, and under what circumstances.

The law didn't leave a man much leeway.

But everybody knew that if you *really* wanted a personal Prime with all his circuits open and no questions asked, you could get one. Black market prices were steep and you ran your own risk, but it could be done.

Harry Folsom told his friend who knew a guy, and a few greenbacks got lost somewhere, and I found myself looking at a greasy little man with a black mustache and a bald spot, up in a dingy fourth-story warehouse off lower Broadway.

"Ah, yes," the little man said. "Mr. Faircloth. We've been expecting you."

I didn't like the looks of the guy any more than the looks of the place. "I've been told you can supply me with a—"

He coughed. "Yes, yes. I understand. It might be possible." He fingered his mustache and regarded me from pouchy eyes. "Busy executives often come to us to avoid the—ah—unpleasantness of formal arrangements. Naturally, we only act as agents, you might say. We never see the merchandise ourselves—" He wiped his hands on his trousers. "Now were you interested in the ordinary Utility model, Mr. Faircloth?"

I assumed he was just being polite. You didn't come to the back door for Utility models.

"Or perhaps you'd require one of our Deluxe models. Very careful workmanship. Only a few key Paralyzers in operation and practically complete circuit duplication. Very useful for—ah—close contact work, you know. Social engagements, conferences—"

I was shaking my head. "I want a *Super* Deluxe model," I told him.

He grinned and winked. "Ah, indeed! You want perfect duplication. Yes, indeed. Domestic situations can be—awkward, shall we say. Very awkward—"

I gave him a cold stare. I couldn't see where my domestic problems were any affairs of his. He got the idea and hurried me back to a storeroom.

"We keep a few blanks here for the basic measurement. You'll go to our laboratory on 14th Street to have the minute impressions taken. But I can assure you you'll be delighted, simply delighted."

The blanks weren't very impressive—clay and putty and steel, faceless, brainless. He went over me like a tailor, checking measurements of all sorts. He was thorough—embarrassingly thorough, in fact—but finally he was finished. I went on to the laboratory.

And that was all there was to it.

Practical androids had been a pipe dream until Hunyadi invented the Neuro-pantograph. Hunyadi had no idea in the world what to do with it once he'd invented it, but a couple of enterprising engineers bought him body and soul, sub-contracted the problems of anatomy, design, artistry, audio and visio circuitry, and so forth, and ended up with the modern Ego Primes we have today.

I spent a busy two hours under the NP microprobes; the artists worked outside while the NP technicians worked inside. I came out of it pretty woozy, but a shot of Happy-O set that straight. Then I waited in the recovery room for another two hours, dreaming up ways to use my Prime

when I got him. Finally the door opened and the head technician walked in, followed by a tall, sandy-haired man with worried blue eyes and a tired look on his face.



"Meet George Faircloth Prime," the technician said, grinning at me like a nursing mother.

I shook hands with myself. Good firm handshake, I thought admiringly. Nothing flabby about it.

I slapped George Prime on the shoulder happily. "Come on, Brother," I said. "You've got a job to do."

But, secretly, I was wondering what Jeree was doing that night.

George Prime had remote controls, as well as a completely recorded neurological analogue of his boss, who was me. George Prime thought what I thought about the same things I did in the same way I did. The only difference was that what I told George Prime to do, George Prime did.

If I told him to go to a business conference in San Francisco and make the smallest possible concessions for the largest possible orders, he would go there and do precisely that. His signature would be my signature. It would hold up in court.

And if I told him that my wife Marge was really a sweet, good-hearted girl and that he was to stay home and keep her quiet and happy any time I chose, he'd do that, too.

George Prime was a duplicate of me right down to the sandy hairs on the back of my hands. Our fingerprints were the same. We had the same mannerisms and used the same figures of speech. The only physical difference apparent even to an expert was the tiny finger-depression buried in the hair above his ear. A little pressure there would stop George Prime dead in his tracks.

He was so lifelike, even I kept forgetting that he was basically just a pile of gears.

I'd planned very carefully how I meant to use him, of course.

Every man who's been married eight years has a sanctuary. He builds it up and maintains it against assault in the very teeth of his wife's natural instinct to clean, poke, pry and rearrange things. Sometimes it takes him years of diligent work to establish his hideout and be confident that it will stay inviolate, but if he starts early enough, and sticks with it long enough, and is fierce enough and persistent enough and crafty enough, he'll probably win in the end. The girls hate him for it, but he'll win.

With some men, it's just a box on their dressers, or a desk, or a corner of an unused back room. But I had set my sights high early in the game. With me, it was the whole workshop in the garage.

At first, Marge tried open warfare. She had to clean the place up, she said. I told her I didn't *want* her to clean it up. She could clean the whole house as often as she chose, but *I* would clean up the workshop.

After a couple of sharp engagements on that field, Marge staged a strategic withdrawal and reorganized her attack. A little pile of wood shavings would be on the workshop floor one night and be gone the next. A wrench would be back on the rack—upside down, of course. An open paint can would have a cover on it.

I always knew. I screamed loudly and bitterly. I ranted and raved. I swore I'd rig up a booby-trap with a shotgun.

So she quit trying to clean in there and just went in once in a while to take a look around. I fixed that with the old toothpick-in-the-door routine. Every time she so much as set foot in that workshop, she had a battle on her hands for the next week or so. She could count on it. It was that predictable.

She never found out how I knew, and after seven years or so, it wore her down. She didn't go into the workshop any more.

As I said, you've got to be persistent, but you'll win.

Eventually.

If you're *really* persistent.

Now all my effort paid off. I got Marge out of the house for an hour or two that day and had George Prime delivered and stored in the big closet in the workshop. They hooked his controls up and left me a manual of instructions for running him. When I got home that night, there he was, just waiting to be put to work.

After supper, I went out to the workshop—to get the pipe I'd left there, I said. I pushed George Prime's button, winked at him and switched on the free-behavior circuits.

"Go to it, Brother," I said.

George Prime put my pipe in his mouth, lit it and walked back into the house.

Five minutes later, I heard them fighting.

It sounded so familiar that I laughed out loud. Then I caught a cab on the corner and headed uptown.

We had quite a night, Jeree and I. I got home just about time to start for work, and sure enough, there was George Prime starting my car, business suit on, briefcase under his arm.

I pushed the recall and George Prime got out of the car and walked into the workshop. He stepped into his cradle in the closet. I turned him off and then drove away in the car.

Bless his metallic soul, he'd even kissed Marge good-by for me!

Needless to say, the affairs of George Faircloth took on a new sparkle with George Prime on hand to cover the home front.

For the first week, I was hardly home at all. I must say I felt a little guilty, leaving poor old George Prime to cope with Marge all the time—he looked and acted so human, it was easy to forget that he literally couldn't care less. But I felt apologetic all the same whenever I took him out of his closet.

"She's really a sweet girl underneath it all," I'd say. "You'll learn to like her after a bit."

"Of course I like her," George Prime said. "You told me to, didn't you? Stop worrying. She's really a sweet girl underneath it all."

He sounded convincing enough, but still it bothered me. "You're sure you understand the exchange mechanism?" I asked. I didn't want any foul-ups there, as you can imagine.

"Perfectly," said George Prime. "When you buzz the recall, I wait for the first logical opportunity I can find to come out to the workshop, and you take over."

"But you might get nervous. You might inadvertently tip her off."

George Prime looked pained. "Really, old man! I'm a Super Deluxe model, remember? I don't have fourteen activated Hunyadi tubes up in this cranial vault of mine just for nothing. You're the one that's nervous. I'll take care of everything. Relax."

So I did.

Jeree made good all her tacit promises and then some. She had a very cozy little apartment on 34th Street where we went to relax after a hard day at the office. When we weren't doing the town, that is. As long as Jeree didn't try too much conversation, everything was wonderful.

And then, when Jeree got a little boring, there was Sybil in the accounting department. Or Dorothy in promotion. Or Jane. Or Ingrid.

I could go on at some length, but I won't. I was building quite a reputation for myself around the office.

Of course, it was like buying your first 3-V set. In a week or so, the novelty wears off a little and you start eating on schedule again. It took a little while, but I finally had things down to a reasonable program.

Tuesday and Thursday nights, I was informally "out" while formally "in." Sometimes I took Sunday nights "out" if things got too sticky around the house over the weekend. The rest of the time, George Prime cooled his heels in his closet. Locked up, of course. Can't completely trust a wife to observe a taboo, no matter how well trained she is.

There, was an irreconcilable amount of risk. George Prime had to quick-step some questions about my work at the office—there was no way to supply him with current data until the time for his regular two-month refill and pattern-accommodation at the laboratory. In the meantime, George Prime had to make do with what he had.

But as he himself pointed out he was a Super Deluxe model.

Marge didn't suspect a thing. In fact, George Prime seemed to be having a remarkable effect on her. I didn't notice anything at first—I was hardly ever home. But one night I found my pipe and slippers laid out for me, and the evening paper neatly folded on my chair, and it brought me up short. Marge had been extremely docile lately. We hadn't had a good fight in days. Weeks, come to think of it.

I thought it over and shrugged. Old age, I figured. She was bound to mellow sometime.

But pretty soon I began to wonder if she wasn't mellowing a little too much.

One night when I got home, she kissed me almost as though she really meant it. There wasn't an unpleasant word all through dinner, which happened to be steak with mushrooms, served in the dining room (!) by candlelight (!!) with dinner music that Marge could never bear, chiefly because I liked it.

We sat over coffee and cigarettes, and it seemed almost like old times. *Very* old times, in fact I even caught myself looking at Marge again—really *looking* at her, watching the light catch in her hair, almost admiring the sparkle in her brown eyes. Sparkle, I said, not glint.

As I mentioned before, Marge was always easy to look at. That night, she was practically ravishing.

"What are you doing to her?" I asked George Prime later, out in the workshop.

"Why, nothing," said George Prime, looking innocent. He couldn't fool me with his look, though, because it was exactly the look I use when I'm guilty and pretending to be innocent.

"There must be *something*."

George Prime shrugged. "Any woman will warm up if you spend enough time telling her all the things she wants to hear and pay all the attention to her that she wants paid to her. That's elemental psychology. I can give you page references."

I ought to mention that George Prime had a complete set of basic texts run into his circuits, at a slightly additional charge. Never can tell when an odd bit of information will come in useful.

"Well, you must be doing quite a job," I said. *I'd* never managed to warm Marge up much.

"I try," said George Prime.

"Oh, I'm not complaining," I hastened to add, forgetting that a Prime's feelings can't be hurt and that he was only acting like me because it was in character. "I was just curious."

"Of course, George."

"I'm really delighted that you're doing so well."

"Thank you, George."

But the next night when I was with Dawn, who happens to be a gorgeous redhead who could put Marge to shame on practically any field of battle except maybe brains, I kept thinking about Marge all evening long, and wondering if things weren't getting just a little out of hand.

The next evening I almost tripped over George Prime coming out of a liquor store. I ducked quickly into an alley and flagged him. "*What are you doing out on the street?*"

He gave me my martyred look. "Just buying some bourbon. You were out."

"But you're not supposed to be off the premises—"

"Marge asked me to come. I couldn't tell her I was sorry, but her husband wouldn't let me, could I?"

"Well, certainly not—"

"You want me to keep her happy, don't you? You don't want her to get suspicious."

"No, but suppose somebody saw us together! If she ever got a hint—"

"I'm sorry," George Prime said contritely. "It seemed the right thing to do. *You* would have done it. At least that's what my judgment center maintained. We had quite an argument."

"Well, tell your judgment center to use a little sense," I snapped. "I don't want it to happen

again."

The next night, I stayed home, even though it was Tuesday night. I was beginning to get worried. Of course, I did have complete control—I could snap George Prime off any time I wanted, or even take him in for a complete recircuiting—but it seemed a pity. He was doing such a nice job.

Marge was docile as a kitten, even more so than before. She sympathized with my hard day at the office and agreed heartily that the boss, despite all appearances, was in reality a jabbering idiot. After dinner, I suggested a movie, but Marge gave me an odd sort of look and said she thought it would be much nicer to spend the evening at home by the fire.

I'd just gotten settled with the paper when she came into the living room and sat down beside me. She was wearing some sort of filmy affair I'd never laid eyes on before, and I caught a whiff of my favorite perfume.

"Georgie?" she said.

"Uh?"

"Do you still love me?"

I set the paper down and stared at her. "How's that? Of course I still—"

"Well, sometimes you don't act much like it."

"Mm. I guess I've—uh—got an awful headache tonight." Damn that perfume!

"Oh," said Marge.

"In fact, I thought I'd turn in early and get some sleep—"

"Sleep," said Marge. There was no mistaking the disappointment in her voice. Now I knew that things were out of hand.

The next evening, I activated George Prime and caught the taxi at the corner, but I called Ruby and broke my date with her. I took in an early movie alone and was back by ten o'clock. I left the cab at the corner and walked quietly up the path toward the garage.

Then I stopped. I could see Marge and George Prime through the living room windows.

George Prime was kissing my wife the way I hadn't kissed her in eight long years. It made my hair stand on end. And Marge wasn't exactly fighting him off, either. She was coming back for more. After a little, the lights went off.

George Prime was a Super Deluxe model, all right.

I dashed into the workshop and punched the recall button as hard as I could, swearing under my breath. How long had this been going on? I punched the button again, viciously, and waited.

George Prime didn't come out.

It was plenty cold out in the workshop that night and I didn't sleep a wink. About dawn, out came George Prime, looking like a man with a four-day hangover.

Our conversation got down to fundamentals. George Prime kept insisting blandly that, according to my own directions, he was to pick the first logical opportunity to come out when I buzzed, and that was exactly what he'd done.

I was furious all the way to work. I'd take care of this nonsense, all right. I'd have George Prime rewired from top to bottom as soon as the laboratory could take him.

But I never phoned the laboratory. The bank was calling me when I got to the office. They wanted to know what I planned to do about that check of mine that had just bounced.

"What check?" I asked.

"The one you wrote to cash yesterday—five hundred dollars—against your regular account, Mr. Faircloth."

The last I'd looked, I'd had about three thousand dollars in that account. I told the man so rather bluntly.

"Oh, no, sir. That is, you *did* until last week. But all these checks you've been cashing have emptied the account."

He flashed the checks on the desk screen. My signature was on every one of them.

"What about my special account?" I'd learned long before that an account Marge didn't know about was sound rear-guard strategy.

"That's been closed out for two weeks."

I hadn't written a check against that account for over a year! I glared at the ceiling and tried to think things through.

I came up with a horrible thought.

Marge had always had her heart set on a trip to Bermuda. Just to get away from it all, she'd say. A second honeymoon.

I got a list of travel agencies from the business directory and started down them. The third one I tried had a pleasant tenor voice. "No, sir, not *Mrs.* Faircloth. *You* bought two tickets. One way. Champagne flight to Bermuda."

"When?" I choked out.

"Why, today, as a matter of fact. It leaves Idlewild at eleven o'clock—"

I let him worry about my amnesia and started home fast. I didn't know what they'd given that Prime for circuits, but there was no question now that he was out of control—*way* out of control. And poor Marge, all worked up for a second honeymoon—

Then it struck me. Poor Marge? Poor sucker George! No Prime in his right circuits would behave this way without some human guidance and that meant only one thing: Marge had spotted him. It had happened before. Couple of nasty court battles I'd read about. And she'd known all about George Prime.

For how long?

When I got home, the house was empty. George Prime wasn't in his closet. And Marge wasn't in the house.

They were gone.

I started to call the police, but caught myself just in time. I couldn't very well complain to the cops that my wife had run off with an android.

Worse yet, I could get twenty years for having an illegal Prime wandering around.

I sat down and poured myself a stiff drink.

My own wife deserting me for a pile of bearings.

It was indecent.

Then I heard the front door open and there was Marge, her arms full of grocery bundles. "Why, darling! You're home early!"

I just blinked for a moment. Then I said, "You're still here!"

"Of course. Where did you think I'd be?"

"But I thought—I mean the ticket office—"

She set down the bundles and kissed me and looked up into my eyes, almost smiling, half reproachful. "You didn't really think I'd go running off with something out of a lab, did you?"

"Then—you knew?"

"Certainly I knew, silly. You didn't do a very good job of instructing him, either. You gave him far too much latitude. Let him have ideas of his own and all that. And next thing I knew, he was trying to get me to run off with him to Hawaii or someplace."

"Bermuda," I said.

And then Marge was in my arms, kissing me and snuggling her cheek against my chest.

"Even though he looked like you, I knew he couldn't be," she said. "He was like you, but he wasn't *you*, darling. And all I ever want is you. I just never appreciated you before...."

I held her close and tried to keep my hands from shaking. George Faircloth, Idiot, I thought. She'd never been more beautiful. "But what did you do with him?"

"I sent him back to the factory, naturally. They said they could blot him out and use him over again. But let's not talk about that any more. We've got more interesting things to discuss."

Maybe we had, but we didn't waste a lot of time talking. It was the Marge I'd once known and I was beginning to wonder how I could have been so wrong about her. In fact unless my memory was getting awfully porous, the old Marge was *never* like this—

I kissed her tenderly and ran my hands through her hair, and felt the depression with my forefinger, and then I knew what had really happened.

That Marge always had been a sly one.

I wondered how she was liking things in Bermuda.

Marge probably thought she'd really put me where I belonged, but the laugh was on her, after all.

As I said, the old Marge was never like the new one. Marge Prime makes *Jeree* and *Sybil* and *Dorothy* and *Dawn* and *Jane* and *Ruby* all look pretty sad by comparison.

She cooks like a dream and she always brings me my pipe and slippers. As they say, there's nothing a man likes more than to be appreciated.

A hundred per cent appreciated, with a factory guarantee to correct any slippage, which would

only be temporary, anyhow.

One of these days, we'll take that second honeymoon. But I think we'll go to Hawaii.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PRIME DIFFERENCE ***

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