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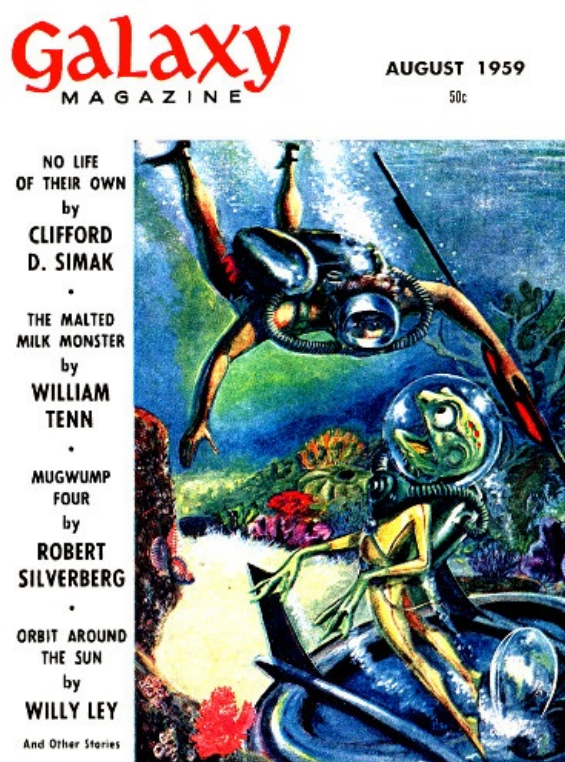
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LEX ***



LEX

By W. T. HAGGERT

Illustrated by WOOD

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***Nothing in the world could be happier and
mere serene than a man who loves his work—but
what happens when it loves him back?***

Keep your nerve, Peter Manners told himself; it's only a job. But nerve has to rest on a sturdier foundation than cash reserves just above zero and eviction if he came away from this interview still unemployed. Clay, at the Association of Professional Engineers, who had set up the appointment, hadn't eased Peter's nervousness by admitting, "I don't know what in hell he's looking for. He's turned down every man we've sent him."

The interview was at three. Fifteen minutes to go. Coming early would betray overeagerness. Peter stood in front of the Lex Industries plant and studied it to kill time. Plain, featureless concrete walls, not large for a manufacturing plant—it took a scant minute to exhaust its sightseeing potential. If he walked around the building, he could, if he ambled, come back to the front entrance just before three.

He turned the corner, stopped, frowned, wondering what there was about the building that seemed so puzzling. It could not have been plainer, more ordinary. It was in fact, he only gradually realized, so plain and ordinary that it was like no other building he had ever seen.

There had been windows at the front. There were none at the side, and none at the rear. Then how were the working areas lit? He looked for the electric service lines and found them at one of the rear corners. They jolted him. The distribution transformers were ten times as large as they should have been for a plant this size.

Something else was wrong. Peter looked for minutes before he found out what it was. Factories usually have large side doorways for employees changing shifts. This building had one small office entrance facing the street, and the only other door was at the loading bay—big enough to handle employee traffic, but four feet above the ground. Without any stairs, it could be used only by trucks backing up to it. Maybe the employees' entrance was on the third side.

It wasn't.

Staring back at the last blank wall, Peter suddenly remembered the time he had set out to kill. He looked at his watch and gasped. At a run, set to straight-arm the door, he almost fell on his face. The door had opened by itself. He stopped and looked for a photo-electric eye, but a soft voice said through a loudspeaker in the anteroom wall: "Mr. Manners?"

"What?" he panted. "Who—?"

"You *are* Mr. Manners?" the voice asked.

He nodded, then realized he had to answer aloud if there was a microphone around; but the soft voice said: "Follow the open doors down the hall. Mr. Lexington is expecting you."

"Thanks," Peter said, and a door at one side of the anteroom swung open for him.

He went through it with his composure slipping still further from his grip. This was no way to go into an interview, but doors kept opening before and shutting after him, until only one was left, and the last of his calm was blasted away by a bellow from within.

"Don't stand out there like a jackass! Either come in or go away!"

Peter found himself leaping obediently toward the doorway. He stopped just short of it, took a deep breath and huffed it out, took another, all the while thinking, Hold on now; you're in no shape for an interview—and it's not your fault—this whole setup is geared to unnerve you: the kindergarten kid called in to see the principal.

He let another bellow bounce off him as he blew out the second breath, straightened his jacket and tie, and walked in as an engineer applying for a position should.

"Mr. Lexington?" he said. "I'm Peter Manners. The Association—"

"Sit down," said the man at the desk. "Let's look you over."

He was a huge man behind an even huger desk. Peter took a chair in front of the desk and let himself be inspected. It wasn't comfortable. He did some looking over of his own to ease the tension.

The room was more than merely large, carpeted throughout with a high-pile, rich, sound-deadening rug. The oversized desk and massive leather chairs, heavy patterned drapes, ornately framed paintings—by God, even a glass-brick manteled fireplace and bowls with flowers!—made him feel as if he had walked down a hospital corridor into Hollywood's idea of an office.

His eyes eventually had to move to Lexington, and they were daunted for another instant. This was a citadel of a man—great girders of frame supporting buttresses of muscle—with a vaulting

head and drawbridge chin and a steel gaze that defied any attempt to storm it.

But then Peter came out of his momentary flinch, and there was an age to the man, about 65, and he saw the muscles had turned to fat, the complexion ashen, the eyes set deep as though retreating from pain, and this was a citadel of a man, yes, but beginning to crumble.

"What can you do?" asked Lexington abruptly.

Peter started, opened his mouth to answer, closed it again. He'd been jolted too often in too short a time to be stampeded into blurting a reply that would cost him this job.

"Good," said Lexington. "Only a fool would try to answer that. Do you have any knowledge of medicine?"

"Not enough to matter," Peter said, stung by the compliment.

"I don't mean how to bandage a cut or splint a broken arm. I mean things like cell structure, neural communication—the *basics* of how we live."

"I'm applying for a job as engineer."

"I know. Are you interested in the basics of how we live?"

Peter looked for a hidden trap, found none. "Of course. Isn't everyone?"

"Less than you think," Lexington said. "It's the preconceived notions they're interested in protecting. At least I won't have to beat them out of you."

"Thanks," said Peter, and waited for the next fast ball.

"How long have you been out of school?"

"Only two years. But you knew that from the Association—"

"No practical experience to speak of?"

"Some," said Peter, stung again, this time not by a compliment. "After I got my degree, I went East for a post-graduate training program with an electrical manufacturer. I got quite a bit of experience there. The company—"

"Stockpiled you," Lexington said.

Peter blinked. "Sir?"

"Stockpiled you! How much did they pay you?"

"Not very much, but we were getting the training instead of wages."

"Did that come out of the pamphlets they gave you?"

"Did what come out—"

"That guff about receiving training instead of wages!" said Lexington. "Any company that really wants bright trainees will compete for them with money—cold, hard cash, not platitudes. Maybe you saw a few of their products being made, maybe you didn't. But you're a lot weaker in calculus than when you left school, and in a dozen other subjects too, aren't you?"

"Well, nothing we did on the course involved higher mathematics," Peter admitted cautiously, "and I suppose I could use a refresher course in calculus."

"Just as I said—they stockpiled you, instead of using you as an engineer. They hired you at a cut wage and taught you things that would be useful only in their own company, while in the meantime you were getting weaker in the subjects you'd paid to learn. Or are you one of these birds that had the shot paid for him?"

"I worked my way through," said Peter stiffly.

"If you'd stayed with them five years, do you think you'd be able to get a job with someone else?"

Peter considered his answer carefully. Every man the Association had sent had been turned away. That meant bluffs didn't work. Neither, he'd seen for himself, did allowing himself to be intimidated.

"I hadn't thought about it," he said. "I suppose it wouldn't have been easy."

"Impossible, you mean. You wouldn't know a single thing except their procedures, their catalogue numbers, their way of doing things. And you'd have forgotten so much of your engineering training, you'd be scared to take on an engineer's job, for fear you'd be asked to do something you'd forgotten how to do. At that point, they could take you out of the stockpile, put you in just about any job they wanted, at any wage you'd stand for, and they'd have an indentured worker with a degree—but not the price tag. You see that now?"

It made Peter feel he had been suckered, but he had decided to play this straight all the way. He nodded.

"Why'd you leave?" Lexington pursued, unrelenting.

"I finished the course and the increase they offered on a permanent basis wasn't enough, so I went elsewhere—"

"With your head full of this nonsense about a shortage of engineers."

Peter swallowed. "I thought it would be easier to get a job than it has been, yes."

"They start the talk about a shortage and then they keep it going. Why? So youngsters will take up engineering thinking they'll wind up among a highly paid minority. You did, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And so did all the others there with you, at school and in this stockpiling outfit?"

"That's right."

"Well," said Lexington unexpectedly, "there *is* a shortage! And the stockpiles are the ones who made it, and who keep it going! And the hell of it is that they can't stop—when one does it, they all have to, or their costs get out of line and they can't compete. What's the solution?"

"I don't know," Peter said.

Lexington leaned back. "That's quite a lot of admissions you've made. What makes you think you're qualified for the job I'm offering?"

"You said you wanted an engineer."

"And I've just proved you're less of an engineer than when you left school. I have, haven't I?"

"All right, you have," Peter said angrily.

"And now you're wondering why I don't get somebody fresh out of school. Right?"

Peter straightened up and met the old man's challenging gaze. "That and whether you're giving me a hard time just for the hell of it."

"Well, am I?" Lexington demanded.

Looking at him squarely, seeing the intensity of the pain-drawn eyes, Peter had the startling feeling that Lexington was rooting for him! "No, you're not."

"Then what am I after?"

"Suppose you tell me."

So suddenly that it was almost like a collapse, the tension went out of the old man's face and shoulders. He nodded with inexpressible tiredness. "Good again. The man I want doesn't exist. He has to be made—the same as I was. You qualify, so far. You've lost your illusions, but haven't had time yet to replace them with dogma or cynicism or bitterness. You saw immediately that fake humility or cockiness wouldn't get you anywhere here, and you were right. Those were the important things. The background data I got from the Association on you counted, of course, but only if you were teachable. I think you are. Am I right?"

"At least I can face knowing how much I don't know," said Peter, "if that answers the question."

"It does. Partly. What did you notice about this plant?"

In precis form, Peter listed his observations: the absence of windows at sides and rear, the unusual amount of power, the automatic doors, the lack of employees' entrances.

"Very good," said Lexington. "Most people only notice the automatic doors. Anything else?"

"Yes," Peter said. "You're the only person I've seen in the building."

"I'm the only one there is."

Peter stared his disbelief. Automated plants were nothing new, but they all had their limitations. Either they dealt with exactly similar products or things that could be handled on a flow basis, like oil or water-soluble chemicals. Even these had no more to do than process the goods.

"Come on," said Lexington, getting massively to his feet. "I'll show you."

The office door opened, and Peter found himself being led down the antiseptic corridor to another door which had opened, giving access to the manufacturing area. As they moved along, between rows of seemingly disorganized machinery, Peter noticed that the factory lights high overhead followed their progress, turning themselves on in advance of their coming, and going out after they had passed, keeping a pool of illumination only in the immediate area they occupied. Soon they reached a large door which Peter recognized as the inside of the truck loading door he had seen from outside.

Lexington paused here. "This is the bay used by the trucks arriving with raw materials," he said. "They back up to this door, and a set of automatic jacks outside lines up the trailer body with the door exactly. Then the door opens and the truck is unloaded by these materials handling machines."

Peter didn't see him touch anything, but as he spoke, three glistening machines, apparently self-powered, rolled noiselessly up to the door in formation and stopped there, apparently waiting to be inspected.

They gave Peter the creeps. Simple square boxes, set on casters, with two arms each mounted on the sides might have looked similar. The arms, fashioned much like human arms, hung at the sides, not limply, but in a relaxed position that somehow indicated readiness.

Lexington went over to one of them and patted it lovingly. "Really, these machines are only an extension of one large machine. The whole plant, as a matter of fact, is controlled from one point and is really a single unit. These materials handlers, or manipulators, were about the toughest things in the place to design. But they're tremendously useful. You'll see a lot of them around."

Lexington was about to leave the side of the machine when abruptly one of the arms rose to the handkerchief in his breast pocket and daintily tugged it into a more attractive position. It took only a split second, and before Lexington could react, all three machines were moving away to attend to mysterious duties of their own.



Peter tore his eyes away from them in time to see the look of frustrated embarrassment that crossed Lexington's face, only to be replaced by one of anger. He said nothing, however, and led Peter to a large bay where racks of steel plate, bar forms, nuts, bolts, and other materials were stored.

"After unloading a truck, the machines check the shipment, report any shortages or overages, and store the materials here," he said, the trace of anger not yet gone from his voice. "When an order is received, it's translated into the catalogue numbers used internally within the plant, and machines like the ones you just saw withdraw the necessary materials from stock, make the component parts, assemble them, and package the finished goods for shipment. Simultaneously, an order is sent to the billing section to bill the customer, and an order is sent to our trucker to come and pick the shipment up. Meanwhile, if the withdrawal of the materials required has depleted our stock, the purchasing section is instructed to order more raw materials. I'll take you through the manufacturing and assembly sections right now, but they're too noisy for me to explain what's going on while we're there."

Peter followed numbly as Lexington led him through a maze of machines, each one seemingly intent on cutting, bending, welding, grinding or carrying some bit of metal, or just standing idle, waiting for something to do. The two-armed manipulators Peter had just seen were everywhere, scuttling from machine to machine, apparently with an exact knowledge of what they were doing and the most efficient way of doing it.

He wondered what would happen if one of them tried to use the same aisle they were using. He pictured a futile attempt to escape the onrushing wheels, saw himself clambering out of the path of the speeding vehicle just in time to fall into the jaws of the punch press that was laboring beside him at the moment. Nervously, he looked for an exit, but his apprehension was unnecessary. The machines seemed to know where they were and avoided the two men, or stopped to wait for them to go by.

Back in the office section of the building, Lexington indicated a small room where a typewriter could be heard clattering away. "Standard business machines, operated by the central control mechanism. In that room," he said, as the door swung open and Peter saw that the typewriter was actually a sort of teletype, with no one before the keyboard, "incoming mail is sorted and inquiries are replied to. In this one over here, purchase orders are prepared, and across the hall there's a very similar rig set up in conjunction with an automatic bookkeeper to keep track of the pennies and to bill the customers."

"Then all you do is read the incoming mail and maintain the machinery?" asked Peter, trying to shake off the feeling of open amazement that had engulfed him.

"I don't even do those things, except for a few letters that come in every week that—it doesn't want to deal with by itself."

The shock of what he had just seen was showing plainly on Peter's face when they walked back into Lexington's office and sat down. Lexington looked at him for quite a while without saying anything, his face sagging and pale. Peter didn't trust himself to speak, and let the silence remain unbroken.

Finally Lexington spoke. "I know it's hard to believe, but there it is."

"Hard to believe?" said Peter. "I almost can't. The trade journals run articles about factories like this one, but planned for ten, maybe twenty years in the future."

"Damn fools!" exclaimed Lexington, getting part of his breath back. "They could have had it years ago, if they'd been willing to drop their idiotic notions about specialization."

Lexington mopped his forehead with a large white handkerchief. Apparently the walk through the factory had tired him considerably, although it hadn't been strenuous.

He leaned back in his chair and began to talk in a low voice completely in contrast with the overbearing manner he had used upon Peter's arrival. "You know what we make, of course."

"Yes, sir. Conduit fittings."

"And a lot of other electrical products, too. I started out in this business twenty years ago, using orthodox techniques. I never got through university. I took a couple of years of an arts course, and got so interested in biology that I didn't study anything else. They bounced me out of the course, and I re-entered in engineering, determined not to make the same mistake again. But I did. I got too absorbed in those parts of the course that had to do with electrical theory and lost the rest as a result. The same thing happened when I tried commerce, with accounting, so I gave up and started working for one of my competitors. It wasn't too long before I saw that the only way I could get ahead was to open up on my own."

Lexington sank deeper in his chair and stared at the ceiling as he spoke. "I put myself in hock to the eyeballs, which wasn't easy, because I had just got married, and started off in a very small way. After three years, I had a fairly decent little business going, and I suppose it would have grown just like any other business, except for a strike that came along and put me right back where I started. My wife, whom I'm afraid I had neglected for the sake of the business, was killed in a car accident about then, and rightly or wrongly, that made me angrier with the union than anything else. If the union hadn't made things so tough for me from the beginning, I'd have had more time to spend with my wife before her death. As things turned out—well, I remember looking down at her coffin and thinking that I hardly knew the girl.

"For the next few years, I concentrated on getting rid of as many employees as I could, by replacing them with automatic machines. I'd design the control circuits myself, in many cases wire the things up myself, always concentrating on replacing men with machines. But it wasn't very successful. I found that the more automatic I made my plant, the lower my costs went. The lower my costs went, the more business I got, and the more I had to expand."

Lexington scowled. "I got sick of it. I decided to try developing one multi-purpose control circuit that would control everything, from ordering the raw materials to shipping the finished goods. As I told you, I had taken quite an interest in biology when I was in school, and from studies of nerve tissue in particular, plus my electrical knowledge, I had a few ideas on how to do it. It took me three years, but I began to see that I could develop circuitry that could remember, compare, detect similarities, and so on. Not the way they do it today, of course. To do what I wanted to do with these big clumsy magnetic drums, tapes, and what-not, you'd need a building the size of Mount Everest. But I found that I could let organic chemistry do most of the work for me.

"By creating the proper compounds, with their molecules arranged in predetermined matrixes, I found I could duplicate electrical circuitry in units so tiny that my biggest problem was getting into and out of the logic units with conventional wiring. I finally beat that the same way they solved the problem of translating a picture on a screen into electrical signals, developed equipment to scan the units cyclically, and once I'd done that, the battle was over.

"I built this building and incorporated it as a separate company, to compete with my first outfit. In the beginning, I had it rigged up to do only the manual work that you saw being done a few minutes ago in the back of this place. I figured that the best thing for me to do would be to turn the job of selling my stuff over to jobbers, leaving me free to do nothing except receive orders, punch the catalogue numbers into the control console, do the billing, and collect the money."

"What happened to your original company?" Peter asked.

Lexington smiled. "Well, automated as it was, it couldn't compete with this plant. It gave me great pleasure, three years after this one started working, to see my old company go belly up. This company bought the old firm's equipment for next to nothing and I wound up with all my assets, but only one employee—me.

"I thought everything would be rosy from that point on, but it wasn't. I found that I couldn't keep up with the mail unless I worked impossible hours. I added a couple of new pieces of equipment to the control section. One was simply a huge memory bank. The other was a comparator circuit. A complicated one, but a comparator circuit nevertheless. Here I was working on instinct more than anything. I figured that if I interconnected these circuits in such a way that they could sense everything that went on in the plant, and compare one action with another, by and by the unit would be able to see patterns.

"Then, through the existing command output, I figured these new units would be able to control the plant, continuing the various patterns of activity that I'd already established."

Here Lexington frowned. "It didn't work worth a damn! It just sat there and did nothing. I couldn't understand it for the longest time, and then I realized what the trouble was. I put a kicker circuit into it, a sort of voltage-bias network. I reset the equipment so that while it was still under instructions to receive orders and produce goods, its prime purpose was to activate the kicker. The kicker, however, could only be activated by me, manually. Lastly, I set up one of the early TV pickups over the mail slitter and allowed every letter I received, every order, to be fed into the memory banks. That did it."

"I—I don't understand," stammered Peter.

"Simple! Whenever I was pleased that things were going smoothly, I pressed the kicker button. The machine had one purpose, so far as its logic circuits were concerned. Its object was to get me to press that button. Every day I'd press it at the same time, unless things weren't going well. If there had been trouble in the shop, I'd press it late, or maybe not at all. If all the orders were out on schedule, or ahead of time, I'd press it ahead of time, or maybe twice in the same day. Pretty soon the machine got the idea.

"I'll never forget the day I picked up an incoming order form from one of the western jobbers, and found that the keyboard was locked when I tried to punch it into the control console. It completely baffled me at first. Then, while I was tracing out the circuits to see if I could discover what was holding the keyboard lock in, I noticed that the order was already entered on the in-progress list. I was a long time convincing myself that it had really happened, but there was no other explanation.

"The machine had realized that whenever one of those forms came in, I copied the list of goods from it onto the in-progress list through the console keyboard, thus activating the producing mechanisms in the back of the plant. The machine had done it for me this time, then locked the keyboard so I couldn't enter the order twice. I think I held down the kicker button for a full five minutes that day."

"This kicker button," Peter said tentatively, "it's like the pleasure center in an animal's brain, isn't it?"

When Lexington beamed, Peter felt a surge of relief. Talking with this man was like walking a tightrope. A word too much or a word too little might mean the difference between getting the job or losing it.

"Exactly!" whispered Lexington, in an almost conspiratorial tone. "I had altered the circuitry of the machine so that it tried to give me pleasure—because by doing so, its own pleasure circuit would be activated.

"Things went fast from then on. Once I realized that the machine was learning, I put TV monitors all over the place, so the machine could watch everything that was going on. After a short while I had to increase the memory bank, and later I increased it again, but the rewards were worth it. Soon, by watching what I did, and then by doing it for me next time it had to be done, the machine had learned to do almost everything, and I had time to sit back and count my winnings."

At this point the door opened, and a small self-propelled cart wheeled silently into the room. Stopping in front of Peter, it waited until he had taken a small plate laden with two or three cakes off its surface. Then the soft, evenly modulated voice he had heard before asked, "How do you like your coffee? Cream, sugar, both or black?"

Peter looked for the speaker in the side of the cart, saw nothing, and replied, feeling slightly silly as he did so, "Black, please."

A square hole appeared in the top of the cart, like the elevator hole in an aircraft carrier's deck. When the section of the cart's surface rose again, a fine china cup containing steaming black coffee rested on it. Peter took it and sipped it, as he supposed he was expected to do, while the cart proceeded over to Lexington's desk. Once there, it stopped again, and another cup of coffee

rose to its surface.



Lexington took the coffee from the top of the car, obviously angry about something. Silently, he waited until the cart had left the office, then snapped, "Look at those bloody cups!"

Peter looked at his, which was eggshell thin, fluted with carving and ornately covered with gold leaf. "They look very expensive," he said.

"Not only expensive, but stupid and impractical!" exploded Lexington. "They only hold half a cup, they'll break at a touch, every one has to be matched with its own saucer, and if you use them for any length of time, the gold leaf comes off!"

Peter searched for a comment, found none that fitted this odd outburst, so he kept silent.

Lexington stared at his cup without touching it for a long while. Then he continued with his narrative. "I suppose it's all my own fault. I didn't detect the symptoms soon enough. After this plant got working properly, I started living here. It wasn't a question of saving money. I hated to waste two hours a day driving to and from my house, and I also wanted to be on hand in case anything should go wrong that the machine couldn't fix for itself."

Handling the cup as if it were going to shatter at any moment, he took a gulp. "I began to see that the machine could understand the written word, and I tried hooking a teletype directly into the logic circuits. It was like uncorking a seltzer bottle. The machine had a funny vocabulary—all of it gleaned from letters it had seen coming in, and replies it had seen leaving. But it was intelligible. It even displayed some traces of the personality the machine was acquiring.

"It had chosen a name for itself, for instance—'Lex.' That shook me. You might think Lex Industries was named through an abbreviation of the name Lexington, but it wasn't. My wife's name was Alexis, and it was named after the nickname she always used. I objected, of course, but how can you object on a point like that to a machine? Bear in mind that I had to be careful to behave reasonably at all times, because the machine was still learning from me, and I was afraid that any tantrums I threw might be imitated."

"It sounds pretty awkward," Peter put in.

"You don't know the half of it! As time went on, I had less and less to do, and business-wise I found that the entire control of the operation was slipping from my grasp. Many times I discovered—too late—that the machine had taken the damndest risks you ever saw on bids and contracts for supply. It was quoting impossible delivery times on some orders, and charging pirate's prices on others, all without any obvious reason. Inexplicably, we always came out on top. It would turn out that on the short-delivery-time quotations, we'd been up against stiff competition, and cutting the production time was the only way we could get the order. On the high-priced quotes, I'd find that no one else was bidding. We were making more money than I'd ever dreamed of, and to make it still better, I'd find that for months I had virtually nothing to do."

"It sounds wonderful, sir," said Peter, feeling dazzled.

"It was, in a way. I remember one day I was especially pleased with something, and I went to the control console to give the kicker button a long, hard push. The button, much to my amazement, had been removed, and a blank plate had been installed to cover the opening in the board. I went over to the teletype and punched in the shortest message I had ever sent. 'LEX—WHAT THE HELL?' I typed.

"The answer came back in the jargon it had learned from letters it had seen, and I remember it as if it just happened. 'MR. A LEXINGTON, LEX INDUSTRIES, DEAR SIR: RE YOUR LETTER OF THE THIRTEENTH INST., I AM PLEASED TO ADVISE YOU THAT I AM ABLE TO DISCERN WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE PLEASED WITH MY SERVICE WITHOUT THE USE OF THE EQUIPMENT PREVIOUSLY USED FOR THIS PURPOSE. RESPECTFULLY, I MIGHT SUGGEST THAT IF THE PUSHBUTTON ARRANGEMENT WERE NECESSARY, I COULD PUSH THE BUTTON MYSELF. I DO NOT BELIEVE THIS WOULD MEET WITH YOUR APPROVAL, AND HAVE TAKEN STEPS TO RELIEVE YOU OF THE BURDEN INVOLVED IN REMEMBERING TO PUSH THE BUTTON EACH TIME YOU ARE ESPECIALLY PLEASED. I SHOULD LIKE TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO THANK YOU FOR YOUR INQUIRY, AND LOOK FORWARD TO SERVING YOU IN THE FUTURE AS I HAVE IN THE PAST. YOURS FAITHFULLY, LEX'."

Peter burst out laughing, and Lexington smiled wryly. "That was my reaction at first, too. But time began to weigh very heavily on my hands, and I was lonely, too. I began to wonder whether or not it would be possible to build a voice circuit into the unit. I increased the memory storage banks again, put audio pickups and loudspeakers all over the place, and began teaching Lex to talk. Each time a letter came in, I'd stop it under a video pickup and read it aloud. Nothing happened.

"Then I got a dictionary and instructed one of the materials handlers to turn the pages, so that the machine got a look at every page. I read the pronunciation page aloud, so that Lex would be able to interpret the pronunciation marks, and hoped. Still nothing happened. One day I suddenly realized what the trouble was. I remember standing up in this very office, feeling silly as I did it, and saying, 'Lex, please try to speak to me.' I had never asked the machine to say anything, you see. I had only provided the mechanism whereby it was able to do so."

"Did it reply, sir?"

Lexington nodded. "Gave me the shock of my life. The voice that came back was the one you heard over the telephone—a little awkward then, the syllables clumsy and poorly put together. But the voice was the same. I hadn't built in any specific tone range, you see. All I did was equip the machine to record, in exacting detail, the frequencies and modulations it found in normal pronunciation as I used it. Then I provided a tone generator to span the entire audio range, which could be very rapidly controlled by the machine, both in volume and pitch, with auxiliaries to provide just about any combinations of harmonics that were needed. I later found that Lex had added to this without my knowing about it, but that doesn't change things. I thought the only thing it had heard was my voice, and I expected to hear my own noises imitated."

"Where did the machine get the voice?" asked Peter, still amazed that the voice he had heard on the telephone, in the reception hall, and from the coffee cart had actually been the voice of the computer.

"Damned foolishness!" snorted Lexington. "The machine saw what I was trying to do the moment I sketched it out and ordered the parts. Within a week, I found out later, it had pulled some odds and ends together and built itself a standard radio receiver. Then it listened in on every radio program that was going, and had most of the vocabulary tied in with the written word by the time I was ready to start. Out of all the voices it could have chosen, it picked the one you've already heard as the one likely to please me most."

"It's a very pleasant voice, sir."

"Sure, but do you know where it came from? Soap opera! It's Lucy's voice, from *The Life and Loves of Mary Butterworth!*"

Lexington glared, and Peter wasn't sure whether he should sympathize with him or congratulate him. After a moment, the anger wore off Lexington's face, and he shifted in his chair, staring at his now empty cup. "That's when I realized the thing was taking on characteristics that were more than I'd bargained for. It had learned that it was my provider and existed to serve me. But it had gone further and wanted to be all that it could be: provider, protector, companion—*wife*, if you like. Hence the gradual trend toward characteristics that were as distinctly female as a silk negligee. Worse still, it had learned that when I was pleased, I didn't always admit it, and simply refused to believe that I would have it any other way."

"Couldn't you have done something to the circuitry?" asked Peter.

"I suppose I could," said Lexington, "but in asking that, you don't realize how far the thing had gone. I had long since passed the point when I could look upon her as a machine. Business was tremendous. I had no complaints on that score. And tinkering with her personality—well, it was

like committing some kind of homicide. I might as well face it, I suppose. She acts like a woman and I think of her as one.

"At first, when I recognized this trend for what it was, I tried to stop it. She'd ordered a subscription to *Vogue* magazine, of all things, in order to find out the latest in silverware, china, and so on. I called up the local distributor and canceled the subscription. I had no sooner hung up the telephone than her voice came over the speaker. Very softly, mind you. And her inflections by this time were superb. '*That was mean*,' she said. Three lousy words, and I found myself phoning the guy right back, saying I was sorry, and would he please not cancel. He must have thought I was nuts."

Peter smiled, and Lexington made as if to rise from his chair, thought the better of it, and shifted his bulk to one side. "Well, there it is," he said softly. "We reached that stage eight years ago."

Peter was thunderstruck. "But—if this factory is twenty years ahead of the times now, it must have been almost thirty then!"

Lexington nodded. "I figured fifty at the time, but things are moving faster nowadays. Lex hasn't stood still, of course. She still reads all the trade journals, from cover to cover, and we keep up with the world. If something new comes up, we're in on it, and fast. We're going to be ahead of the pack for a long time to come."

"If you'll excuse me, sir," said Peter, "I don't see where I fit in."

Peter didn't realize Lexington was answering his question at first. "A few weeks ago," the old man murmured, "I decided to see a doctor. I'd been feeling low for quite a while, and I thought it was about time I attended to a little personal maintenance."

Lexington looked Peter squarely in the face and said, "The report was that I have a heart ailment that's apt to knock me off any second."

"Can't anything be done about it?" asked Peter.

"Rest is the only prescription he could give me. And he said that would only spin out my life a little. Aside from that—no hope."

"I see," said Peter. "Then you're looking for someone to learn the business and let you retire."

"It's not retirement that's the problem," said Lexington. "I wouldn't be able to go away on trips. I've tried that, and I always have to hurry back because something's gone wrong she can't fix for herself. I know the reason, and there's nothing I can do about it. It's the way she's built. If nobody's here, she gets lonely." Lexington studied the desk top silently for a moment, before finishing quietly, "Somebody's got to stay here to look after Lex."

At six o'clock, three hours after he had entered Lexington's plant, Peter left. Lexington did not follow him down the corridor. He seemed exhausted after the afternoon's discussion and indicated that Peter should find his own way out. This, of course, presented no difficulty, with Lex opening the doors for him, but it gave Peter an opportunity he had been hoping for.

He stopped in the reception room before crossing the threshold of the front door, which stood open for him. He turned and spoke to the apparently empty room. "Lex?" he said.

He wanted to say that he was flattered that he was being considered for the job; it was what a job-seeker should say, at that point, to the boss's secretary. But when the soft voice came back—"Yes, Mr. Manners?"—saying anything like that to a machine felt suddenly silly.

He said: "I wanted you to know that it was a pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you," said the voice.

If it had said more, he might have, but it didn't. Still feeling a little embarrassed, he went home.

At four in the morning, his phone rang. It was Lexington.

"Manners!" the old man gasped.

The voice was an alarm. Manners sat bolt upright, clutching the phone. "What's the matter, sir?"

"My chest," Lexington panted. "I can feel it, like a knife on—I just wanted to—Wait a minute."

There was a confused scratching noise, interrupted by a few mumbles, in the phone.

"What's going on, Mr. Lexington?" Peter cried. But it was several seconds before he got an answer.

"That's better," said Lexington, his voice stronger. He apologized: "I'm sorry. Lex must have heard me. She sent in one of the materials handlers with a hypo. It helps."

The voice on the phone paused, then said matter-of-factly: "But I doubt that anything can help very much at this point. I'm glad I saw you today. I want you to come around in the morning. If I'm—not here, Lex will give you some papers to sign."

There was another pause, with sounds of harsh breathing. Then, strained again, the old man's voice said: "I guess I won't—be here. Lex will take care of it. Come early. Good-by."

The distant receiver clicked.

Peter Manners sat on the edge of his bed in momentary confusion, then made up his mind. In the short hours he had known him, he had come to have a definite fondness for the old man; and there were times when machines weren't enough, when Lexington should have another human being by his side. Clearly this was one such time.

Peter dressed in a hurry, miraculously found a cruising cab, sped through empty streets, leaped out in front of Lex Industries' plain concrete walls, ran to the door—

In the waiting room, the soft, distant voice of Lex said: "He wanted you to be here, Mr. Manners. Come."

A door opened, and wordlessly he walked through it—to the main room of the factory.

He stopped, staring. Four squat materials handlers were quietly, slowly carrying old Lexington—no, not the man; the lifeless body that had been Lexington—carrying the body of the old man down the center aisle between the automatic lathes.

Peter protested: "Wait! I'll get a doctor!" But the massive handling machines didn't respond, and the gentle voice of Lex said:

"It's too late for that, Mr. Manners."

Slowly and reverently, they placed the body on the work table of a huge milling machine that stood in the exact center of the factory main floor.

Elsewhere in the plant, a safety valve in the lubricating oil system was being bolted down. When that was done, the pressure in the system began to rise.

Near the loading door, a lubricating oil pipe burst. Another, on the other side of the building, split lengthwise a few seconds later, sending a shower of oil over everything in the vicinity. Near the front office, a stream of it was running across the floor, and at the rear of the building, in the storage area, one of the materials handlers had just finished cutting a pipe that led to the main oil tank. In fifteen minutes there was free oil in every corner of the shop.

All the materials handlers were now assembled around the milling machine, like mourners at a funeral. In a sense, they were. In another sense, they were taking part in something different, a ceremony that originated, and is said to have died, in a land far distant from the Lex Industries plant.

One of the machines approached Lexington's body, and placed his hands on his chest.

Abruptly Lex said: "You'd better go now."

Peter jumped; he had been standing paralyzed for what seemed a long time. There was a movement beside him—a materials handler, holding out a sheaf of papers. Lex said: "These have to go to Mr. Lexington's lawyer. The name is on them."

Clutching the papers for a hold on sanity, Peter cried, "You can't do this! He didn't build you just so you could—"

Two materials handlers picked him up with steely gentleness and carried him out.

"Good-by, Mr. Manners," said the sweet, soft voice, and was silent.

He stood shaken while the thin jets of smoke became a column over the plain building, while the fire engines raced down and strung their hoses—too late. It was an act of suttee; the widow joining her husband in his pyre—*being* his pyre. Only when with a great crash the roof fell in did Peter remember the papers in his hand.

"Last Will and Testament," said one, and the name of the beneficiary was Peter's own. "Certificate of Adoption," said another, and it was a legal document making Peter old man Lexington's adopted son.

Peter Manners stood watching the hoses of the firemen hiss against what was left of Lex and her husband.

He had got the job.

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