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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BIG
ENGINE ***

THE BIG ENGINE

By FRITZ LEIBER

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*Have you found out about the Big
Engine? It's all around us, you
know—can't you hear it even now?*

There are all sorts of screwy theories (the Professor said) of what makes the wheels of the world go round. There's a boy in Chicago who thinks we're all of us just the thoughts of a green cat; when the green cat dies we'll all puff to nothing like smoke. There's a man in the west who thinks all women are witches and run the world by conjure magic. There's a man in the east who believes all rich people belong to a secret society that's a lot tighter and tougher than the Mafia and that has a monopoly of power-secrets and pleasure-secrets other people don't dream exist.

Me, I think the wheels of the world just go. I decided that forty years ago and I've never since seen or heard or read anything to make me change my mind.

I was a stoker on a lake boat then (the Professor continued, delicately sipping smoke from his long thin cigarette). I was as stupid as they make them, but I liked to think. Whenever I'd get a chance I'd go to one of the big libraries and make them get me all sorts of books. That was how guys started calling me the Professor. I'd get books on philosophy, metaphysics, science, even religion. I'd read them and try to figure out the world. What was it all about, anyway? Why was I here? What was the point in the whole business of getting born and working and dying? What was the use of it? Why'd it have to go on and on?

And why'd it have to be so complicated?

Why all the building and tearing down? Why'd there have to be cities, with crowded streets and horse cars and cable cars and electric cars and big open-work steel boxes built to the sky to be hung with stone and wood—my closest friend got killed falling off one of those steel boxkites. Shouldn't there be some simpler way of doing it all? Why did things have to be so

mixed up that a man like myself couldn't have a single clear decent thought?

More than that, why weren't people a real part of the world? Why didn't they show more honest-to-God response? When you slept with a woman, why was it something you had and she didn't? Why, when you went to a prize fight, were the bruisers only so much meat, and the crowd a lot of little screaming popinjays? Why was a war nothing but blather and blowup and bother? Why'd everybody have to go through their whole lives so dead, doing everything so methodical and prissy like a Sunday School picnic or an orphan's parade?

And then, when I was reading one of the science books, it came to me. The answer was all there, printed out plain to see only nobody saw it. It was just this: Nobody was really alive.

Back of other people's foreheads there weren't any real thoughts or minds, or love or fear, to explain things. The whole universe—stars and men and dirt and worms and atoms, the whole shooting match—was just one great big engine. It didn't take mind or life or anything else to run the engine. It just ran.

Now one thing about science. It doesn't lie. Those men who wrote those science books that showed me the answer, they had no more minds than anybody else. Just darkness in their brains, but because they were machines built to use science, they couldn't help but get the right answers. They were like the electric brains they've got now, but hadn't then, that give out the right answer when you feed in the question. I'd like to feed in the question, "What's Life?" to one of those machines and see what came out. Just figures, I suppose. I read somewhere that if a billion monkeys had typewriters and kept pecking away at them they'd eventually turn out all the Encyclopedia Britannica in trillions and trillions of years. Well, they've done it all right, and in jig time.

They're doing it now.

A lot of philosophy and psychology books I worked through really fit in beautifully. There was Watson's *Behaviorism* telling how we needn't even assume that people are conscious to explain their actions. There was Leibitz's *Monadology*, with its theory that we're all of us lonely atoms that are completely out of touch and don't effect each other in the slightest, but only seem to ... because all our little clockwork motors were started at the same time in pre-established harmony. We *seem* to be responding to each other, but actually we're just a bunch of wooden-minded puppets. Jerk one puppet up into the flies and the others go on acting as if exactly nothing at all had happened.

So there it was all laid out for me (the Professor went on, carefully pinching out the end of his cigarette). That was why there was no honest-to-God response in people. They were machines.

The fighters were machines made for fighting. The people that watched them were machines for stamping and screaming and swearing. The bankers had banking cogs in their bellies, the crooks had crooked cams. A woman was just a loving machine, all nicely adjusted to give you a good time (sometimes!) but the farthest star was nearer to you than the mind behind that mouth you kissed.

See what I mean? People just machines, set to do a certain job and then quietly rust away. If you kept on being the machine you were supposed to be, well and good. Then your actions fitted with other people's. But if you didn't, if you started doing something else, then the others didn't respond. They just went on doing what was called for.

It wouldn't matter what you did, they'd just go on making the motions they were set to make. They might be set to make love, and you might decide you wanted to fight. They'd go on making love while you fought them. Or it might happen the other way—seems to, more often!

Or somebody might be talking about Edison. And you'd happen to say something about Ingersoll. But he'd just go on talking about Edison.

You were all alone.

Except for a few others—not more than one in a hundred thousand, I guess—who wake up and figure things out. And they mostly go crazy and run themselves to death, or else turn mean. Mostly they turn mean. They get a cheap little kick out of pushing things around that can't push back. All over the world you find them—little gangs of three or four, half a dozen—who've waked up, but just to their cheap kicks. Maybe it's a couple of coppers in 'Frisco, a schoolteacher in K.C., some artists in New York, some rich kids in Florida, some undertakers in London—who've found that all the people walking around are just dead folk and to be treated no decenter, who see how bad things are and get their fun out of making it a little worse. Just a mean *little* bit worse. They don't dare to destroy in a big way, because they know the machine feeds them and tends them, and because they're always scared they'd be noticed by gangs like themselves and wiped out. They haven't the guts to really wreck the whole shebang. But they get a kick out of scribbling their dirty pictures on it, out of meddling and messing with it.

I've seen some of their fun, as they call it, sometimes hidden away, sometimes in the open streets.

You've seen a clerk dressing a figure in a store window? Well, suppose he slapped its face. Suppose a kid stuck pins in a calico pussy-cat, or threw pepper in the eyes of a doll.

No decent live man would have anything to do with nickel sadism or dime paranoia like that. He'd either go back to his place in the machine and act out the part set for him, or else he'd hide away like me and live as quiet as he could, not stirring things up. Like a mouse in a dynamo or an ant in an atomics plant.

(The Professor went to the window and opened it, letting the sour old smoke out and the noises of the city in.)

Listen (he said), listen to the great mechanical symphony, the big black combo. The airplanes are the double bass. Have you noticed how you can always hear one nowadays? When one walks out of the sky another walks in.

Presses and pumps round out the bass section. Listen to them rumble and thump! Tonight they've got an old steam locomotive helping. Maybe they're giving a benefit show for the old duffer.

Cars and traffic—they're the strings. Mostly cellos and violas. They purr and wail and whine and keep trying to get out of their section.

Brasses? To me the steel-on-steel of streetcars and El trains always sounds like trumpets and cornets. Strident, metallic, fiery cold.

Hear that siren way off? It's a clarinet. The ship horns are tubas, the diesel horn's an oboe. And that lovely dreadful french horn is an electric saw cutting down the last tree.

But what a percussion section they've got! The big stuff, like streetcar bells jangling, is easy to catch, but you have to really listen to get the subtleties—the buzz of a defective neon sign, the click of a stoplight changing.

Sometimes you do get human voices, I'll admit, but they're not like they are in Beethoven's *Ninth* or Holst's *Planets*.

There's the real sound of the universe (the Professor concluded, shutting the window). That's your heavenly choir. That's the music of the spheres the old alchemists kept listening for—if they'd just stayed around a little longer they'd all have been deafened by it. Oh, to think that Schopenhauer was bothered by the crack of carters' whips!

And now it's time for this mouse to tuck himself in his nest in the dynamo. Good night, gentlemen!

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BIG ENGINE

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