

OTHER WORLDS

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EDWARD E. SMITH, Ph. D. • GIBSON • de CAMP • PALMER

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK WHAT DO YOU READ? ***

WHAT DO YOU READ?

By Boyd Ellanby

Illustrated by Malcolm Smith

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**Writers have long dreamed of a plot machine, but the machines in
Script-Lab did much more than plot the story—they wrote it. Why
bother with human writers when the machines did the job so much
faster and better?**

Herbert would have preferred the seclusion of a coptor-taxi, but he knew he could not afford it. The Bureau paid its writers adequately, but not enough to make them comfortable in taxis. In front of his apartment house, he took the escalator to the Airway. It must have been pleasant, he thought as he stepped onto the moving sidewalk, to be a writer in the days when they were permitted to receive royalties and, presumably, to afford taxi fare.

On the rare occasions when he was forced to travel in the city, he usually tried to insulate himself from the Airway crowds by trying to construct new plots for his fiction. In his younger days, of course, he had occupied the time in reading the classics, but lately, so great was the confusion of the city, he preferred to close his eyes, and try to devise a reverse twist for one of his old stories.

Today, he found it harder than usual to concentrate. The Airway was crowded, and he had never heard the people so noisy. Up ahead half a block, there was a sharp scream. Herbert opened his eyes and peered ahead to see what had happened. Someone had been pushed through the railing of the Airway, and as his section rolled on and passed, he could see lying on the pavement below the body of a young cripple, his hands still holding a broken crutch.

Herbert shuddered. He felt sick, and closed his eyes again.

"Wonder how that happened?" said the man in front of him.

"He probably got in the way," said a girl, callously.

The man ahead made no comment, and Herbert dismissed his own puzzlement. Could he make a plot out of this incident of the crippled boy? he wondered.

He shifted to the slower track, descended the escalator, and stepped onto the street across from the Bureau of Public Entertainment. He had to wait a moment, for an ambulance was clanging down the street; then he crossed to the stone-faced building.

As he rode up the elevator, he wondered again why John had ordered him to come to lunch. He realized that he was no longer a young man, but he certainly did not feel ready to be pensioned. And in the last year he had actually written more fiction than in any other year of his life. Very little of

it had been used, for some reason, but story for story he thought it matched any of his previous output.

Ludwig received him with little ceremony. "Sit down, Herbert. It was good of you to come. Miss Dodson," he called through the intercom, "this is strictly off the air. Nothing is to be recorded. Is that clear?"

"Well, John," said Carre. "You're looking harassed, if I may say so. Are they working you too hard? Or are you just faced with the unpleasant job of firing an old friend? I realize, of course, that AFE aren't using much of my stuff just now."

Ludwig smiled unhappily and shook his head. "I'm not planning to fire you, Herbert. But you know, of course, that you're in the same boat with the other Writers, and that boat is in choppy waters. Frankly, I'm not very happy about the situation. The five-year experimental period is coming to an end. This Bureau has the job of providing entertainment, and that includes, among many other categories, literature. Books, articles, and stories. And I'm faced with a difficult decision: shall we employ Writers, or use Script-Lab? You are only one of the many people we support, of course, and both you and Script-Lab furnish material to Adult Fiction, Earth, who distribute it as they see fit."

Herbert Carre nibbled at his graying moustache. "I know. And for the last year, for some reason, AFE has not seen fit to use much of my stuff. And yet it's no different. I write just the same sort of thing I always did."

"Tastes change, Herbert. Script-Lab reports that the public seem to prefer the machine-made stories. I have a week to make a definite decision, and I'm particularly anxious to finish the job because I've been asked to transfer, at the earliest possible moment, to the Bureau of Public Safety. The Committee are inclined, on the whole, to favor the enlarging of Script-Lab, and transferring all the Writers to some other department."

"Great Gamma! You mean *all* literature will be machine-made from now on?"

"Don't get excited, Herb! That's what I've got to decide. But if they can really write it just as well, why not? You remember Hartridge, don't you? Class behind me at college, majored in electronics? He's in charge of the machine experiment and he's about convinced us that his machines can turn

out manuscripts at lower cost, more rapidly and of better quality than you Writers can. And he says the public like his product better. Have you seen any of it?"

"No," said Carre, "I don't know that I have. You know I never read anything but the classics, for pleasure; nothing later than Thackeray, or, at the latest, James Joyce. What principle do they work on?"

"I'm not an electronics man. Hartridge tells me they are specially sensitive blocks of tubes, and that memory, including all the basic plots of fiction, and all the basic varieties of dialog have been built into them."

Carre shuddered. "I will never believe, in the face of any evidence, that machines can take the place of human writers. What machine could have written 'Alice'?"

"Calm down, Herbert. I want your help. I haven't followed developments since the days of the early electronic computers, and I haven't time for studying them now. And, unfortunately, I never read modern fiction any more—no time for anything but official reports. Now I've always respected your judgment. I want your opinion of the adequacy of the material put out by Script-Lab."

"Have you forgotten," said Carre, "that I am a Writer? Aren't you afraid of a biased report?"

"Not from you. I need a competent judge. And if you are forced to bring in a favorable report, you know I'd find you a place in some other field. I might even get you a pension."

"I hope not. Not yet."

"Go over and see Hartridge, look over his machines, and bring me a critical estimate of the quality of their work—not just literary quality, of course; we're interested also in entertainment value. Don't be prejudiced. I imagine you'd be the last to deny that writing can be damned hard work."

"You're right," said Carre. "I would be the last person to deny it. Somehow, I've always liked the work, but if the machines can really take our place, I will try to bow out gracefully."

Once again Carre took the escalator to the Airway and moved across the city. He tried to think of fiction plots, but he could not control his mind. He was worried. The people standing near him were quarreling, their shrill voices hurt his ears, and the crowd was so dense that he could not move away.

Age, he feared, was making him irritable. As he approached his station, he pushed towards the escalator. He brushed against a woman who was reading a plastibacked book. She looked up, frowned, and then stamped viciously on his extended foot. Half-stunned with pain and amazement, Herbert managed to get to the escalator, went down, and limped slowly through the doorway of Computer House. What had possessed the woman? he wondered. He'd barely brushed her sleeve, in passing.

He stood before the door labelled "Manuscript Laboratory: Dr. Philip Hartridge," and pushed the button. The door opened, but two husky guards with pistols in hand blocked his entrance.

"Your name, please, and your business?"

Herbert fought a tendency to stammer. His foot still hurt him, he had developed a headache, and he felt bewildered.

"I just want—My name is Herbert Carre and I want to see Dr. Hartridge. Why, we've known each other for years!"

"Identification, please?"

They examined his identity card and his Bureau papers, and nodded. Then one returned his pistol to its holster and approached him.

"Just as a formality, if you please. Dr. Hartridge apologizes for this." He ran his hands over Herbert's shabby blouse and trousers, then stepped back.

"That's all, Mr. Carre," he said. "You can go in." They preceded him into the reception room, advanced to the rear wall and pushed a series of buttons in a complex pattern. A double door, made of metal instead of the innocent oak it had seemed to be, slowly swung open.

Philip Hartridge rose from his desk and extended his hand.

"Awfully good to see you, Carre," he said. "It must have been nearly ten years. Sorry you've never come over to see us sooner. We're very proud of

Script-Lab. How are things?"

"Not bad," said Herbert. "I'm still feeling overwhelmed by the elaborate protective system you have here. What explains the body-guards? I didn't suppose this laboratory was classified."

Hartridge leaned back in his chair. "It's not classified. Those men are here to protect me from possible violence."

"Violence? Great Gamma, do you mean personal threats?"

"Yes. Only last week, my 'copter exploded a few minutes after I started the motor. By a lucky chance, I had gone back to the house to get my briefcase. But someone had certainly tried to kill me."

"Why on earth, Hartridge, should some one—"

"It might be one of several people," he said. "But I think it's my brother Ben. He would, of course, like to have my share of the money our father left us. But I'll take care he doesn't get it." He grinned, and patted his hip. "It's rather more likely to be the other way around. But we won't waste time in trivialities, Carre. Ludwig called me. I know you want to see our set-up here. Come in and see the machines."

They walked through another set of double doors and into the Laboratory.

The noise was deafening. Twenty enormous machines sat in the room. Each was contained in a dull plastic case, and the control panels were a maze of dials, buttons, and red and green indicator lights. An electric typewriter was connected to and operated by each machine, and through each typewriter ran an endless roll of paper, which emerged to be cut off into eleven-inch lengths by automatic knives.

"How do you stand the noise?" asked Carre. "Why don't you use Silent Typers?"

"Oh, the machines don't mind the noise. Silent Typers would be an unnecessary expense, and as a matter of fact, I've come to like the sound. It's soothing, after a time."

Carre strolled slowly, rather mournfully, from one monster to another, glancing at the emerging manuscripts.

"The rate of output," said Hartridge, "is not less than a hundred words a minute, and they never have to stop to look up their facts, or to struggle with a balky plot. Can you do as well?"

"I wish I could," said Carre. "I know so little about electronics. Do the machines use much current?"

"No, that's another of their virtues, they're very economical. The tubes are so efficient that all twenty machines are run from this one source, right here—Don't touch it! It's not ordinary house current, you know. We start with eight thousand volts,—it saves on metal and transformers."

Herbert found it hard to think against the clatter of the typewriters. "I'm ashamed to admit," he said, "that I feel a kind of envy, they seem to compose with such ease."

Hartridge laughed. "No trouble at all! I tell you, my pretty typewriters are going to put you out of business. You can see for yourself, Carre, that there's no need for you human writers. We are doing a perfect job here, and we could supply all the material—novels, stories, fact articles, biographies—that the country could read. AFE has been using more and more of our scripts, as you probably know."

"I know."

"I can't say exactly why it is, but we do seem to be able to hit the public taste better than you Writers." He reached over and patted one of the plastic cases, as though it had been an affectionate dog.

"Do your machines do nothing but write new material?" asked Carre, as he strolled on.

"That depends on the demand. Sometimes we have a call for some out-of-print item, or some work which is so hard to get hold of that we simply have the machines re-do it. After Number Twelve, here, produced the entire English translation of 'War and Peace' without a single semantic error, we were not afraid to trust them with anything. As a matter of fact, we've got Number Eight re-writing some nineteenth-century items that have not been available for years—things that were destroyed or banned during the Atomic Wars, but which the present government finds acceptable. Would you like to see?"

Carre stood in front of Number Eight in fascination as the metal arms hammered out the words and lines. After a moment, he frowned. "I seem to remember this! I must have read it in my early boyhood. It seems so long ago. Joan of Arc! But I don't remember its happening just this way."

"Just goes to show you can't trust your memory, Carre. You know the machines are perfectly logical, and they can't make a mistake."

"No, of course not. Odd, though." He brushed his hand over a forehead grown wet.

The knife flashed down, cut the paper, and the page fell into its basket. Hartridge picked it up.

"Would you like this sheet, as a memento? Number Eight can easily re-do it."

"Thank you."

"And is there anything else I can show you? I don't mind admitting I'm very proud of my machines."

"Well," said Carre, "perhaps you might let me have some of your current manuscripts, just for tonight? I can make a comparative study, for Ludwig, and return them sometime tomorrow."

"Nothing easier." He assembled a bundle of stapled sheets and put them in a box, and then rang for the guards, to show him out.

"Take care of yourself, Carre. See you tomorrow."

Herbert sat, that evening, in his book-lined room, reading manuscripts. He looked more and more puzzled, and ill at ease. He got up, after a time, to pace the room, and on a sudden impulse he left the apartment and hurried up the street.

It had grown dark outside, and he hurried. He could not stand the thought of the Airway, so he walked. He had covered nearly half a mile when, at the corner ahead, two Street-taxis approached each other at right angles. The drivers glared at each other. Neither slowed to let the other pass; they

crashed, and began to burn. Carre hurried on, trying not to hear the screams of the people or the siren of the approaching ambulance. No wonder, he thought, that they need Ludwig in the Bureau of Public Safety; people were behaving so irrationally!

He climbed the steps of the City Library, and advanced to the desk.

"I should like to see files of the magazines published by Adult Fiction, Earth, if you please."

"But which magazine, sir? They publish hundreds."

"Well, as a start, let me see those which publish light fiction."

For two hours he sat in the Scholar's Room, skimming the pages of the magazines—*Sagebrush Westerns*, *Romance and Marriage*, *Pinkerton's Own*, *Harper's*, and a dozen others. He read with concentration, and made few notes. On his way home he stopped at a news-machine and selected an armful of the current issues to take home with him. He read in his room until nearly dawn, and when he did lie down he could not sleep, or rest.

"I don't believe it," he whispered to himself. "It can't be true." And, half an hour later, "How did it happen?"

At nine next morning he was sitting in the reception room of the Bureau of Public Entertainment, with brief-case on his knees, waiting for Ludwig. It was nearly noon before Ludwig himself arrived, and summoned his visitor.

He sat at his desk, his white hair rumpled, and nervously fingered his watch chain as Carre took the chair opposite.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Herbert. The Commissioners over in Safety have a bad situation to handle, and I've been trying to advise them. I'll be glad when this writing business is straightened out, and I can give full attention to Safety. What did you think of Script-Lab?"

"Well, it's very efficient."

"I knew that," said Ludwig. "Machines are built to be efficient. But what do you think of their output? How does it compare with the work of the

Writers?"

Carre cleared his throat. "John, don't you read the magazines any more?"

"No. No time. Do you?"

"I haven't, until yesterday. I read them, all night. I hardly know how to express myself. John, something is wrong with the machines."

"Nonsense! There can't be anything wrong with them. They're fed the plots, fed the variations, and then with perfect logic they create their stories. You're not an electronics expert, you know."

Carre stared at the floor. Ludwig sighed.

"I'm sorry, Herbert. I'm just too tired to be decently courteous. But what I wanted from you, after all, was a literary evaluation and not a scientific one."

"I express myself so badly. There's something wrong, something I can't exactly define, with what they write."

Ludwig looked exasperated. "But *what*, man? Be concrete."

"I'll try. Here's a short story that was made yesterday. Glance over it, please, and tell me how it strikes you."

Ludwig read through the manuscript with his accustomed rapidity. "I don't see anything particularly wrong about it," he said. "Murder mysteries have never been to my taste, and I don't know that I exactly approve of the hero's killing his benefactress with an undetectable poison, and then inheriting her fortune and marrying her niece. Undetectable poisons are all nonsense, anyway."

"The story doesn't seem to you—unhealthy?"

"I don't know what you're getting at! It's on the grim side, I suppose, but isn't most modern fiction a little grim? How about your own stuff?"

"I think there's a difference. I know I've written a few mysteries, and even some tragic stories, but I don't believe I've ever written anything exactly like this. And this is typical. They're doing reprints, too, of books that were destroyed or lost during the Atomic Wars. Do you remember Joan of Arc? Mark Twain's version? Here is a page from Script-Lab's manuscript."

Ludwig took the sheet and read aloud: "By-and-by a frantic man in priest's garb came wailing and lamenting and tore through the crowd and the barrier of soldiers and flung himself on his knees by Joan's cart and put up his hands in supplication, crying out—

"O, forgive, forgive!"

'It was Loyseleur!

'And Joan's heart knew nothing of forgiveness, nothing of compassion, nothing of pity for all that suffer and have been offensive—"

Ludwig looked up with a frown. "That's odd. It's been so long since I saw that book—I was only a boy—but that isn't just the way I remember it."

"That's what Script-Lab is writing."

"But the machines, don't—"

"I know. They don't make mistakes."

The buzz of the visi-sonor interrupted them, and the Commissioner of Public Safety spoke from the screen.

"For heaven's sake, Ludwig, shelve the book-business and get over here. We've had a rash of robberies with violence, a dozen bad street accidents, and two suspicious deaths of diabetics in coma. We need help."

Ludwig was already reaching for his brief case. "Right away," he said, and flicked the switch.

"John!" Carre begged, "This book matter is serious. You can't just drop it! Come with me to Hartridge's lab and see for yourself!"

"I can't. No time. You heard the Commissioner."

"Tomorrow morning?"

"Can't make it. Have to go to a funeral. A niece of mine who died suddenly of cancer. Poor girl. We thought she was doing so well, too, with the hormone injections. Not that her husband will break his heart, from what I know of the scoundrel."

Carre followed him towards the door. "Then make it tomorrow afternoon! It's vital!"

Ludwig pulled out his watch, and thought for a second. "All right. Meet you there tomorrow at three." The door slammed behind him.

They followed the guards through the chrome steel doors into the room with the machines. All twenty typewriters were hammering out their hundred words a minute.

"It is an honor to have a visit from you, Commissioner Ludwig," said Hartridge. "We're very proud of Script-Lab. You'll agree, I know, that the experiment has been eminently successful. Tough on you, of course, Carre. But you Writers can always land on your feet."

"The decision has not yet been made," said Ludwig. "Now to business." He pulled a chair up to the desk, opened his brief case, and took out some papers.

"Before I examine the machines, I'd like to check with you the facts and figures that Carre has compiled for me. In 1971, the first year of the experiment, only ten per cent of Script-Lab's output of stories, books, and articles was accepted by Adult Fiction, Earth. Right?"

"Right," said Hartridge. "But that was our worst year. Since then—"

Ludwig held up his hand. "In the second year, you supplied thirty-five per cent of the needs of AFE. Check?"

"Check."

"In the two years following you supplied seventy-five per cent, and in 1976, this year you are supplying about ninety per cent of all published matter, with the Writers supplying only ten per cent. Correct?"

"Correct. A wonderful record, Commissioner."

Ludwig turned to another sheet of data. "As I understand it, you feed into the machine's memories, basic plots, factual data, conversational variants, and they do the rest?"

"That's right. We give them the material, and they create with perfect rationality. I myself read nearly everything they make, and even I am

amazed at their craftsmanship. And they are so efficient, and write so swiftly!"

"Speed is no doubt a desirable feature," said Ludwig.

"But not the only one!" said Carre.

Hartridge smiled. "Professional jealousy is warping your judgment, old man. It may be hard to take, but you Writers have nothing to give the world, anymore, that machines can't."

Ludwig turned his back and surveyed the room. "I would like to see, now, some of your productions."

Hartridge beamed. "As a matter of fact, I have something that ought to interest you, particularly. Just follow me, gentlemen. Here, by the way, is our power source. Note how simple and efficient the circuit design is. Ah, here we are. Knowing that you were making us a visit today, I gave to Number Seven, here, the necessary data for creating your own monologue on 'Our Duties to the Aged.' That was your doctoral thesis, I believe?"

"But that's out of print! I haven't seen a copy myself in years!"

"To Script-Lab, that is unimportant. Feed it the data, the basic premises, and it will do the rest. Would you like to see?"

The three men crowded around Number Seven, and watched the emergence of paper from the typewriter as the keys tapped the words into lines, and the carriage shifted. Ludwig, at first, showed only the pleasure which any writer feels on re-reading a good piece of work. Gradually, his face changed. He looked puzzled, uncertain, and then his skin reddened with anger.

"He looked puzzled, uncertain, and then his skin reddened with anger."

The automatic knife chopped down and severed the completed page. Ludwig scooped it up from the basket and read the page a second time. He raised his eyes to meet the tense gaze of Carre.

"Is this what you were trying to tell me, Herbert?"

"That sort of thing. Yes."

"Is something wrong, Commissioner?" said Hartridge. "I thought you'd be pleased."

"Pleased? But this is something I never wrote!"

"But you *must* have written it," said Hartridge. "Or are you just trying to sabotage my project with a deliberate misstatement?"

"Read it!" said Ludwig. "Read that paragraph out loud."

"Our duties to the aged," read Hartridge, "are closely bound to our duties to ourselves. When the old become infirm, they should be quietly helped out of a contented existence. After all, the only measure of the value of aged men and women should be their present usefulness to society."

He looked up from the page. "I don't see why you're so unwilling to admit your authorship, Commissioner. There's nothing wrong with this."

"Only," Ludwig said softly, "I didn't write it. What the monologue actually said was something like this: 'Our duties to the aged are closely bound to our duties to ourselves. When the old become infirm, they should be quietly helped to a contented existence. After all, the only measure of the value of aged men and women should be their past usefulness to our society.'"

"You've made your point, Carre," he went on. "If this sort of perverted advice has been fed to our people the last few years, it's no wonder we're having a wave of crimes. Be selfish! It pays. An eye for an eye! Poison the old man! Nobody will ever know and you'll get his money!"

Hartridge was still studying the typescript, and he spoke with defiance. "Number Seven's excerpt from your monologue seems perfectly sensible to me," he said. "For some reason of your own you must be lying about it. Why, the version you say you remember is utterly illogical!"

"Of course it's illogical!" said Carre. "Don't you see—"

"Of course it's illogical!" shouted Ludwig. "It was illogical for Joan to forgive her tormentor. It's illogical to take care of invalids. It's illogical to forget an injury. But it's human! How on earth is society to exist if it feels only the rational emotions? You, yourself, Hartridge, have been corrupted by reading the work of Script-Lab, and you no longer have any sense of human charity. These monsters have been undermining our whole life, because the only motivation they were provided was the most dangerous and ugly thing possible in the world of human beings—pure logic!"

As he shouted, he fumbled at his watch, unhooked the long gold chain, and with a sudden lunge, flung it across the bus bars which supplied the current to the machines.

There was a blinding flash, a hiss, and the eternal clacking of the typewriters was replaced by silence.

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