

THE COSMIC JUNKMAN

By Rog Phillips

**After the war, Earth stored away its robot
armies or sold them for scrap—because fighting
machines were dangerous. But more deadly was—**

THE COSMIC JUNKMAN

Log Report:—

Fleet: Alpha Aquilae; 20,080 surviving ships. Flagship ROVER.

Personnel: human;

*Fleet Admiral William A. Ford, Vice Admiral Paul G. Belcross
robot;*

2,649,366 (Ids. appended)

passenger: (human);

Generalissimo Vilbis (prisoner under w.c.a.)

Dates May 7, 4765; flight formation arrow, speed 1,700,000 m.p.s.

Scheduled date of arrival at Earth: June 11, 4766

Distance from Earth on Earth-Aquilae axis: ten light years.

"Rummy," Vilbis said, reaching through the hand-hole in the inch thick laminated glass wall of his prison and spreading his cards on the table. His lips formed into the cruel haughty smile that had been his trademark to billions of humans for almost half a century. His wide-set black eyes mocked the other two players.

"Well, well," Paul Belcross smirked. "I see now why you lost the war, Vilbis. Isn't that a six of diamonds in your heart sequence?"

The black eyes glanced down. The long-fingered hand began to retrieve the cards, then paused. Vilbis' almost classic features darkened with anger. With an effort he became calm. A secret

inner amusement made little lights in his eyes as he looked up at his two captors again.

"You know," Bill Ford said thoughtfully, "sometimes I think you must have some kind of an ace up your sleeve. You don't seem at all concerned that this is your last trip. The War Crimes Court—then death by hanging." Bill frowned. "Could be you figured the angle I've always worried about. The Federation is always too quick to demobilize the robots after a war. Some day some punk like you is going to take that into consideration. He's going to surrender, but have a reserve space navy waiting until Earth is without defenses, then take over and win."

"Too bad I didn't think of that when I could have done something about it," Vilbis said too cheerfully.

"Maybe you did think of it," Bill said. "When we get home I'm going to suggest we keep the Aquilae Fleet mobilized for at least ten years."

"You know they won't do that," Paul Belcross said. "They're more afraid of the robots than they are of attack. So am I, actually."

"We're just afraid of what they could do if they got free," Bill said. "Their potential intelligence is greater than human. If they overcame their built-in instinct for obedience to human command they could—why think of what our two million robots could do!"

"Why all this discussion of robots?" Vilbis said. "They're just dogs. Not even that. They were dogs for six months of their existence before their brains were transplanted into synthegell fluid by the mind transplant machine." His eyes took on a far away look. His voice became regretful. "I had a hundred thousand scientists

working on that problem. If the mind of one dog could be transplanted into synthegell without destroying the dog's brain there would be no limit to the production of robot brain cartridges. If we could have licked that problem I'd have won the war."

"If!" Paul spat. "You're a renegade Earthman. I'm putting in my application to be the one to hang you as soon as we get home."

"How do you—" Vilbis clamped his lips closed and scooped up his cards.

"How do we know we'll get home?" Bill Ford said. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Vilbis looked at his cards casually. "No," he said absently. "I was going to say how do you expect to play cards and talk at the same time?"

A raucous blast exploded in the room. Bill and Paul stared at each other in surprise. Vilbis smiled.

Bill leaped across the room to the cm board. He jabbed at buttons. A giant screen lit up, showing a spaceship. Smaller screens lit up, revealing robot ship commanders.

"Look at that ship, Paul," Bill said. "You know them all. Aquilanean, Centaurian, Cygnian. It isn't any known type—and with a war just over, there hasn't been time to mass-produce new types." He jabbed at a button. "All ships," he said. "All ships. Defense formation five. Five. Operation three. Three." He listened to the repeats.

Paul Belcross had leaped to the huge tri-di sphere and turned it on. Seconds later both men, Vilbis forgotten but watching with bright

eyes, were studying the small dots in the tri-di. The flight formation in the shape of a giant arrow was quickly changing shape as the fleet formed a defensive sphere around the flagship and its human occupants. The *Rover* was the only bright blue dot. The others were red.

But now other dots were materializing at the outer fringe of the tri-di, too many new dots to count. Approaching ships.

Across the room a voice from a loudspeaker was saying, "Eighty seconds to contact. No response. No response."

"Another second and they'll be within range," Paul said.

"God!" Bill's voice exploded. His eyes were on the large area of the tri-di where ships had abruptly ceased to exist.

"Something's wrong with the tri-di," Paul said. "No weapon could do that."

"Nothing's wrong with the tri-di," Bill said sharply. "And we don't have that kind of weapon. They're something alien. Have to be. Some other galaxy. There's always been that possibility."

A rapidly repeated pip-pip-pip came from the cm board. Bill leaped to it. A light, under a small screen showing a robot, was blinking. He pressed the button. The robot saluted. His Id was stamped across his chrome chest, with four gold stars after it. "We will be destroyed, sir," it said. "Would suggest Flagship *Rover* change course forty degrees at eight o'clock and go on without fleet."

"You're giving orders?" Bill said, his face going pale and his eyes narrowing—not at the impending defeat, but at this sign of independent initiative in a robot.

"It's your only chance for survival," the robot said. "It must be done at once."

"Place yourself under ship arrest and give me the next in command," Bill ordered sharply. The screen went blank. "That's mutiny!" he shouted, unbelieving.

Vilbis, behind his glass wall, laughed aloud.

"Not mutiny," Paul said. "They are gone. All our ships are gone!" His voice conveyed the incredulous horror in his mind.

In the tri-di there was only the bright blue dot, and the thousands of approaching ships of the enemy.

The next instant the ship lurched violently.

"They're boarding!" Bill shouted. "But they aren't going to get Vilbis back alive."

He leaped to a locker and opened it with clumsy fingers, bringing out a g.i. raygun. He turned to leap toward the glass wall separating him from Vilbis. Before he could take a step a large section of a bulkhead vanished in smoke. For a brief instant Bill and Paul stared with unbelieving eyes at what entered the room.

Then they died.

"Stop!" The word exploded from Vilbis's lips. He stared at the cooked flesh that had been his captors. Then his eyes lifted to the jagged hole in the bulkhead.

"You fools!" he spat. His lips curled with cold anger. "Where do you hope to get two other humans now?"

The demobilization station trailed the Earth, a million and a half miles behind and in the same orbit around the Sun. It was shaped like a thick disc. At the moment there were five ships resting against one surface of the station. Three of them were warships. One was a Federation ship. The fifth was a giant freighter with *SURPLUS JUNK CO.* painted on it in bold blue letters.

Each of the five ships was attached to the space station underneath its hulk by short airlocks containing elevators. These led down into the station where air pressure was kept at fifteen pounds.

Inside the station, robots were emerging from the elevators leading to the three warships. The robots were all identical except for their Id numbers across their metallic chests. Arms and legs of metal rods and joints in almost exact duplication of human bones, torso shaped like a metal box, short neck joint supporting a head that was little more than two four inch glass lenses, two rod-microphones, and a small voice box.

The emerging robots moved at orders snapped by a human and marched toward a building fifty yards away, where they lined up at attention and became motionless.

Two humans moved swiftly down the line, behind the lined up robots. At each robot one of them twisted a copper-colored disk in the robot's back, carefully drew out a cylinder eight inches long and four inches in diameter, and handed the cylinder to the other, who lowered it into a plastic case. These cylinders were the brains of the robots. They were destined for the Federal ship—and storage until the next war.

While the robot brain was being lowered into its plastic storage case by the one man, the first lifted the now demobilized robot body and placed it on a cart, already stacked high with similar bodies. The immediate destination of these bodies was the junk company freighter.

If the robots were aware of what was about to happen to them as they waited, they gave no indication, no protest. Their lens eyes were directed straight ahead of them, unmoving—except for one robot.

The Id across its chest was 532-03-2615 followed by four gold stars. Its head was turned just enough so that it could see down the line. Its rod microphones were turned so that it could listen....

"That junkman gives me the creeps, Joe," the man placing brain cylinders into plastic cases grumbled.

"That's because he's a creep, Mel. Here. Take this." He thrust a brain cylinder at his companion.

"Hey! Careful!" Joe said, almost dropping it.

Mel chuckled and flipped the robot body, almost weightless on the station here in space, carelessly to the top of the stack on the truck.

"Here comes junky now, Joe," he said.

"Don't damage the bodies. Don't damage the bodies." The figure that approached, pushing an empty truck, wore a dirty and well worn civilian suit that seemed even more decrepit in contrast to the neat military uniforms. His skin was leathery. A pair of glasses hung on his hawkish nose, their thick lenses magnifying the close-set eyes underneath, and making them seem to lie on the inner

surfaces. His lips were partly open, but never seemed to move while he talked. "There was a cracked lens on one," he accused.

"What's the matter, junky?" Joe grinned. "If we get a scratch on one it's still two hundred pounds of scrap metal—or were you planning on using the bodies?" He and Mel laughed.

"Who knows?" the junkman said. "I only follow my orders. No scratches. No damage to the bodies. Who knows? Maybe they go into storage until the next war." He reached with a dirty hand to clutch at Mel's lapel, but didn't make it. "I'll show you," he said. "*Two* of them are damaged. Not worth seventeen credits."

"Can't stop now," Mel said. "We want to get done by quitting time. Joe has a date."

"Come on," the junkman said. "You've got to look. I have to have witnesses when I hand in my report on the carelessness of the military."

"Oh, all right," Mel said. He and Joe followed the dusty junkman around the building.

The instant they were out of sight, 2615 moved, running swiftly around the other end of the building. It reached a vantage point where its lens eyes could watch the three figures when they emerged from the elevator to the ship above.

It watched Joe and Mel return to their work. It waited until the junkman had gone for another truckload of demobilized robot bodies. Then, swiftly, it ran to the elevator. At the top it sent the elevator back down, then faced the tiers of frames that filled the vast hold of the ship. Most of them now held inert robot shapes.

2615 chose an empty rack and climbed in, lying face up. It looked no different than any of the thousands of other forms.

It remained motionless. The junkman returned with load after load. Eventually the hold was filled. Clanging and whirring noises told of preparations for departure.

Acceleration pushed the robot deeper into the protective foam rubber of its rack. It waited....

Fear. It began in the eyes of the cataloguer when his sorting machine came to a stop on the Id card for 532-03-2615. It grew as a terrible, animating force that drained blood from faces and made hands clumsy, as the checking and rechecking on 2615 began. It spread through networks of communication wires. It stopped at the borders of news release, lest it spread over the world.

Fear organized itself, finally, settling into a pasty expression, unnatural eyes, and drumming fingers. The expression and eyes and fingers belonged to Carl Wilson, chief of the Demobilization staff. It centered there, but its aura spread out over the backwash it had left. Fear lurked in the hushed silence. Fear rode as an undertone in the slightest sound, lay ready to spring from behind every door.

Larry Jackson felt it as he gave the receptionist his name.

Stella Gamble was oblivious of it as she pushed into the waiting room.

Larry looked at her and wished it was his day off and a girl like her was with him. He wondered what her name was.

"I'm Stella Gamble," Stella said to the receptionist. "I've got to see Mr. Wilson at once. My freighter is overdue with two million junked robots. Something's got—"

"Will you please be seated, Miss Gamble?" the receptionist said firmly. Then, "You may go right in, Mr. Jackson. Mr. Wilson is waiting for you."

It was then Stella and Larry looked into each other's eyes. Hers were narrowed, sizing him up, guessing what he was and why he was there. His were friendly, smiling.

"Thanks," he murmured to the receptionist. He went toward the door, conscious of Stella's eyes following him. He went in.

"*There* you are, Jackson," Wilson said, running fingers through his iron gray hair in nervous relief. "You've guessed why—"

"Yes," Larry said.

Behind him the door opened violently. Sharp heels clicked on the floor. "Mr. Wilson," Stella demanded. "I know why this man is here. You're going to give him instructions to blast my freighter out of existence the minute he can—"

"You're Stella Gamble?" Wilson said. "I've heard of you. Will you please wait in the reception room until I finish with—"

"Larry Jackson," Stella pronounced the name. Her wide-set blue eyes showed scorn. "The man who is going to kill one of my men and destroy my ship and its cargo just to get at a robot."

"*Just* to get at a robot?" Wilson said indignantly. "You must be out of your head!" He picked up an oblong of paper on his desk and thrust it at Larry. "The junkship has been traced three hundred

million miles out by routine radar. You can pick it up from there by ion tracking—we hope. Don't take any chances. *Destroy that ship!*" His lips trembled. "Even if the pilot is still on it. It's one life against...." He didn't complete the thought.

"Against fear," Stella said. "You are all cowards. Afraid of a dog because it could turn against you."

"Afraid of an *intelligence*," Wilson said wearily. His lips pulled back in a weak grin. "So are you. You're just more afraid of going broke."

Larry folded the paper and put it in his pocket. He turned toward the door. Stella clutched his sleeve, stopping him. She spoke swiftly, pleading. "Let me go with you. I'm capable. Give me a chance to go down and reason with that robot. If it doesn't work...."

Larry looked at her upturned face, the lips that could smile or laugh more naturally than pout, the wide-set eyes that could do things to him at any other time. He thought, it's a shame I won't ever get the chance. "Sorry, Miss Gamble," he said stiffly, "I'm on duty, and I'm not permitted to take passengers with me."

He went on toward the door, feeling his sleeve tear at her nails as she tried to hold him longer.

"It's very unfortunate—" Wilson said as Larry opened the door.

"If I can't go with him after my freighter I'm going after it on my own!" Stella said as he closed the door.

Larry put his fingers to his lips for the benefit of the receptionist and swiftly side-stepped to a filing cabinet where he stooped down out of sight.

The next instant the door from Wilson's office burst open again, banging against the wall. Stella's eyes searched the office. She ran to the hall door, and out.

Larry bounded back into Wilson's office. Wilson said, "Whew!" and mopped his brow, then pointed to his private entrance. Larry nodded and left.

It was a world of hard whites and bottomless blacks, with the hard whites so close they gave you the feeling you could reach out and touch them. Then you blinked your eyes and they were holes in infinity through which loneliness poured. That was space. Sure, there was the Earth somewhere aft of the rockets' red glare, and the Moon, looking like high-priced models against a velvet backdrop.

But you didn't look at them, because the stars were points on a tri-di screen, and you were back in school working a problem in navigation and hoping you didn't get a wrong answer.

You loved it—or you went crazy. Larry loved it. Or maybe it wasn't love. It was like a woman. It was in his blood.

He stopped punching the keys of the calculator and used both hands to press the studs controlling the gyro motors, watching the needles of gyro meters until they pointed to the right numbers.

He took several deep breaths, squirming back in his seat against the form-fitting cushion of foam rubber. He made sure his elbows rested securely in their little niches so that his arms wouldn't pull out of their sockets.

Then he touched the controls, feeling the surge of power as his ship, an SP47, responded, hearing the subsonic vibration around

him as atoms broke into little bits in the fission chambers of the rockets and spewed out of them into space.

The G needle moved past three, past four, past five. It moved into the part of the dial where the glossy white changed to pink. It crept slowly toward the darker pink, toward the deep red.

I don't WANT an ice cream cone. It was his sister's voice, real as audible sound. He had been six years old when she had said that, back in Springfield.

The voices came. The images came. Vivid and unimaginative. True reproductions. That's what acceleration did to the brain. It squeezed the juice out of brain cells into nerve networks. It could get you—

Larry jerked back to an awareness of what he was doing. Sweating, he coaxed the G needle back down a little. Not much.

It had been close. Why had he done it? Fear. He could let himself realize that, now that he was alone. Fear of a robot that had stolen a ship and gone out into space, when robots only obeyed orders. It was an instinctive thing, bred in all men for generations.

You ought to be whipped! That was dad. Good old dad. Larry had been about nine then. He had run away—hitchhiked four hundred miles to watch a spaceship leave the ground and climb up out of sight.

Pip-pip, pip-pip, pip-pip.

Larry lifted his fingers from the controls gradually in response to the signal from the board. The G needle dropped back into the white.

The voices were gone, the images, the thoughts. He grinned on one side of his face. This was the end of the radar line. Now his work would begin. Around his ship charged ions were streaming past. Some of them would have come from the junk ship.

The *tracker*, a sensitive electronic instrument projecting from the shell, would read them—their concentration, velocity, and direction. From that he could project the position and trajectory of the junk ship.

Or maybe he could see it already.

He flicked on the video eyes of the ship and waited for the screen to light up. There *was* a ship ahead.

The fear bit into him like acid. As quickly, it vanished. The stern outline of the ship ahead was not that of a freighter. It was a small job. Private, in the LR class—probably an LR65.

An absurd thought flashed into his mind. It couldn't be. Stella Gamble could have put a line on him, but she would have had to wait until he went into full acceleration before she could have calculated his direction.

But she would have blacked out trying to follow him. No girl and few men could have kept up with him. None could have gotten ahead of him into that position.

He turned on the radio and set it at commercial communication. He waited impatiently until the warm-up tube went off.

"Look astern and identify yourself," he said sharply.

"Hello, Larry," a triumphantly impudent and very familiar voice purred from the loudspeaker. "My ship is the LR65, *Hell Bat*."

"Miss Gamble—Stella!" Larry sputtered. "What are you doing—"

"Never mind that now, spaceman," her voice came, business-like. "I've got his track coming in. Keep out of my way. That's all I ask. Give me time to do it my way. You can always destroy the freighter later—if I don't succeed."

"Sure," Larry said bitterly. "I can always destroy a ship that has a girl in it I could like—" He bit his lip.

Her laugh answered him. She was drawing away from him.

Muttering a curse, he extended his *trackers* from the shell, but even as he did, he realized the trick she had played on him. Her own exhaust trail would make it impossible for him to detect that other fainter trail.

And there was something else.

"Miss Gamble!" he spoke into the microphone sharply. "Stella! That robot could leave a space mine. Your ship is a private job. It doesn't have the equipment in it to get away from a mine."

Her laugh was unbelieving, scornful. "And where could that robot get a space mine?" she taunted.

"It could make one. It has the materials."

2615 endured the acceleration with impatience. It would lift an arm and hold it still, feeling how much effort it took. All the time it kept its gleaming eyes of polished glass fixed intently on the hatch to the pilot compartment.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

