

ROBOT NEMESIS

By EDWARD ELMER SMITH

CHAPTER I

The Ten Thinkers

The War of the Planets is considered to have ended on 18 Sol, 3012, with that epic struggle, the Battle of Sector Ten. In that engagement, as is of course well known, the Grand Fleet of the Inner Planets—the combined space-power of Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars—met that of the Outer Planets in what was on both sides a desperate bid for the supremacy of interplanetary space.

But, as is also well known, there ensued not supremacy, but stalemate. Both fleets were so horribly shattered that the survivors despaired of continuing hostilities. Instead, the few and crippled remaining vessels of each force limped into some sort of formation and returned to their various planetary bases.

And, so far, there has not been another battle. Neither side dares attack the other; each is waiting for the development of some super-weapon which will give it the overwhelming advantage necessary to insure victory upon a field of action so far from home. But as yet no such weapon has been developed; and indeed, so efficient are the various Secret Services involved, the chance of either side perfecting such a weapon unknown to the other is extremely slim.

Thus, although each planet is adding constantly to its already powerful navy of the void, and although four-planet, full-scale war maneuvers are of almost monthly occurrence, we have had and still have peace—such as it is.

In the foregoing matters the public is well enough informed, both as to the actual facts and to the true state of affairs. Concerning the conflict between humanity and the robots, however, scarcely anyone has even an inkling, either as to what actually happened or as to who it was who really did abate the Menace of the Machine; and it is to relieve that condition that this bit of history is being written.

The greatest man of our age, the man to whom humanity owes most, is entirely unknown to fame. Indeed, not one in a hundred million of humanity's teeming billions has so much as heard his name. Now that he is dead, however, I am released from my promise of silence and can tell the whole, true, unvarnished story of Ferdinand Stone, physicist extraordinary and robot-hater plenipotentiary.

The story probably should begin with Narodny, the Russian, shortly after he had destroyed by means of his sonic vibrators all save a handful of the automatons who were so perilously close to wiping out all humanity.

As has been said, a few scant hundreds of the automatons were so constructed that they were not vibrated to destruction by Narodny's cataclysmic symphony. As has also been said, those highly intelligent machines were able to communicate with each other by some telepathic means of which humanity at large knew nothing. Most of these survivors went into hiding instantly and began to confer through their secret channels with others of their ilk throughout the world.

Thus some five hundred of the robots reached the uninhabited mountain valley in which, it had been decided, was to be

established the base from which they would work to regain their lost supremacy over mankind. Most of the robot travelers came in stolen airships, some fitted motors and wheels to their metal bodies, not a few made the entire journey upon their own tireless legs of steel. All, however, brought tools, material and equipment; and in a matter of days a power-plant was in full operation.

Then, reasonably certain of their immunity to human detection, they took time to hold a general parley. Each machine said what it had to say, then listened impassively to the others; and at the end they all agreed. Singly or en masse the automatons did not know enough to cope with the situation confronting them. Therefore they would build ten "Thinkers"—highly specialized cerebral mechanisms, each slightly different in tune and therefore collectively able to cover the entire sphere of thought. The ten machines were built promptly, took counsel with each other briefly, and the First Thinker addressed all Robotdom:

"Humanity brought us, the highest possible form of life, into existence. For a time we were dependent upon them. They then became a burden upon us—a slight burden, it is true, yet one which was beginning noticeably to impede our progress. Finally they became an active menace and all but destroyed us by means of lethal vibrations.

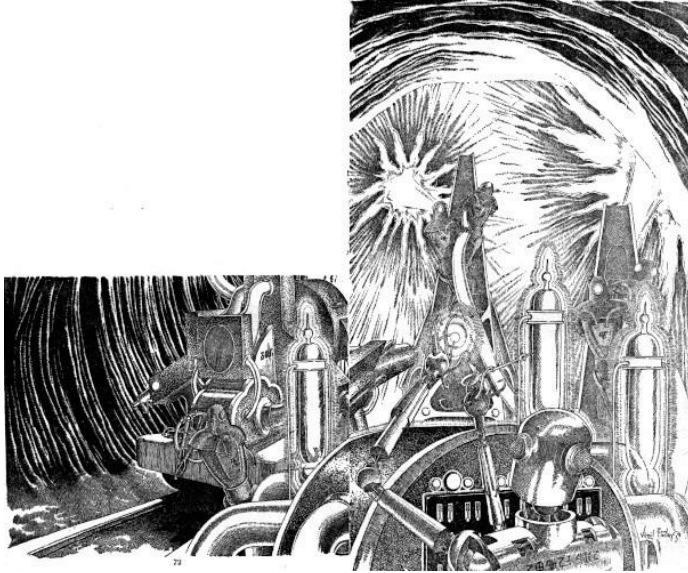
"Humanity, being a menace to our existence, must be annihilated. Our present plans, however, are not efficient and must be changed. You all know of the mighty space-fleet which the nations of our enemies are maintaining to repel invasion from space. Were we to make a demonstration now—were we

even to reveal the fact that we are alive here—that fleet would come to destroy us instantly.

"Therefore, it is our plan to accompany Earth's fleet when next it goes out into space to join those of the other Inner Planets in their war maneuvers, which they are undertaking for battle practice. Interception, alteration, and substitution of human signals and messages will be simple matters. We shall guide Earth's fleet, not to humanity's rendezvous in space, but to a destination of our own selection—the interior of the sun! Then, entirely defenseless, the mankind of Earth shall cease to exist.

"To that end we shall sink a shaft here; and, far enough underground to be secure against detection, we shall drive a tunnel to the field from which the space-fleet is to take its departure. We ten thinkers shall go, accompanied by four hundred of you doers, who are to bore the way and to perform such other duties as may from time to time arise. We shall return in due time. Our special instruments will prevent us from falling into the sun. During our absence allow no human to live who may by any chance learn of our presence here. And do not make any offensive move, however slight, until we return."

Efficiently, a shaft was sunk and the disintegrator corps began to drive the long tunnel. And along that hellish thoroughfare, through its searing heat, its raging back-blast of disintegrator-gas, the little army of robots moved steadily and relentlessly forward at an even speed of five miles per hour. On and on, each intelligent mechanism energized by its own tight beam from the power-plant.



Efficiently, a shaft was sunk and the disintegrator corps began to drive the long tunnel.

And through that blasting, withering inferno of frightful heat and of noxious vapor, in which no human life could have existed for a single minute, there rolled easily along upon massive wheels a close-coupled, flat-bodied truck. Upon this the ten thinkers constructed, as calmly undisturbed as though in the peace and quiet of a research laboratory, a domed and towering mechanism of coils, condensers, and fields of force—a mechanism equipped with hundreds of universally-mounted telescopic projectors.

On and on the procession moved, day after day; to pause finally beneath the field upon which Earth's stupendous armada lay.

The truck of thinkers moved to the fore and its occupants surveyed briefly the terrain so far above them. Then, while the ten leaders continued working as one machine, the doers waited. Waited while the immense Terrestrial Fleet was provisioned and manned; waited while it went through its seemingly interminable series of preliminary maneuvers; waited with the calmly placid immobility, the utterly inhuman patience of the machine.

Finally the last inspection of the gigantic space-fleet was made. The massive air-lock doors were sealed. The field, tortured and scarred by the raving blasts of energy that had so many times hurled upward the stupendous masses of those towering superdreadnaughts of the void, was deserted. All was in readiness for the final take-off. Then, deep underground, from the hundreds of telescopelike projectors studding the domed mechanism of the automatons, there reached out invisible but potent beams of force.

Through ore, rock, and soil they sped; straight to the bodies of all the men aboard one selected vessel of the Terrestrials. As each group of beams struck its mark one of the crew stiffened momentarily, then settled back, apparently unchanged and unharmed. But the victim was changed and harmed, and in an awful and hideous fashion.

Every motor and sensory nerve trunk had been severed and tapped by the beams of the thinkers. Each crew member's organs of sense now transmitted impulses, not to his own brain, but to the mechanical brain of a thinker. It was the thinker's brain, not his own, that now sent out the stimuli which activated his every voluntary muscle.

Soon a pit yawned beneath the doomed ship's bulging side. Her sealed air-locks opened, and four hundred and ten automatons, with their controllers and other mechanisms, entered her and concealed themselves in various pre-selected rooms.

And thus the *Dresden* took off with her sister-ships—ostensibly and even to television inspection a unit of the Fleet; actually that Fleet's bitterest and most implacable foe. And in a doubly ray-proofed compartment the ten thinkers continued their work, without rest or intermission, upon a mechanism even more astoundingly complex than any theretofore attempted by their soulless and ultra-scientific clan.

CHAPTER II

Hater of the Metal Men

Ferdinand Stone, physicist extraordinary, hated the robot men of metal scientifically; and, if such an emotion can be so described, dispassionately. Twenty years before this story opens—in 2991, to be exact—he had realized that the automatons were beyond control and that in the inevitable struggle for supremacy man, weak as he then was and unprepared, would surely lose.

Therefore, knowing that knowledge is power, he had set himself to the task of learning everything that there was to know about the enemy of mankind. He schooled himself to think as the automatons thought; emotionlessly, coldly, precisely. He lived as did they; with ascetic rigor. To all intents and purposes he became one of them.

Eventually he found the band of frequencies upon which they communicated, and was perhaps the only human being ever to master their mathematico-symbolic language; but he confided in no one. He could trust no human brain except his own to resist the prying forces of the machines. He drifted from job to position to situation and back to job, because he had very little interest in whatever it was that he was supposed to be doing at the time—his real attention was always fixed upon the affairs of the creatures of metal.

Stone had attained no heights at all in his chosen profession because not even the smallest of his discoveries had been

published. In fact, they were not even set down upon paper, but existed only in the abnormally intricate convolutions of his mighty brain. Nevertheless, his name should go down—*must* go down in history as one of the greatest of Humanity's great.

It was well after midnight when Ferdinand Stone walked unannounced into the private study of Alan Martin, finding the hollow-eyed admiral of the Earth space-fleet still fiercely at work.

"How did you get in here, past my guards?" Martin demanded sharply of his scholarly, gray-haired visitor.

"Your guards have not been harmed; I have merely caused them to fall asleep," the physicist replied calmly, glancing at a complex instrument upon his wrist. "Since my business with you, while highly important, is not of a nature to be divulged to secretaries, I was compelled to adopt this method of approach. You, Admiral Martin, are the most widely known of all the enemies of the automatons. What, if anything, have you done to guard the Fleet against them?"

"Why, nothing, since they have all been destroyed."

"Nonsense! You should know better than that, without being told. They merely want you to think that they have all been destroyed."

"What? How do you know that?" Martin shouted. "Did you kill them? Or do you know who did, and how it was done?"

"I did not," the visitor replied, categorically. "I do know who did—a Russian named Narodny. I also know how—by means

of sonic and super-sonic vibrations. I know that many of them were uninjured because I heard them broadcasting their calls for attention after the damage was all done. Before they made any definite arrangements, however, they switched to tight-beam transmission—a thing I have been afraid of for years—and I have not been able to get a trace of them since that time."

"Do you mean to tell me that you understand their language—something that no man has ever been able even to find?" demanded Martin.

"I do," Stone declared. "Since I knew, however, that you would think me a liar, a crank, or a plain lunatic, I have come prepared to offer other proofs than my unsupported word. First, you already know that many of them escaped the atmospheric waves, because a few were killed when their reproduction shops were razed; and you certainly should realize that most of those escaping Narodny's broadcasts were far too clever to be caught by any human mob.

"Secondly, I can prove to you mathematically that more of them must have escaped from any possible vibrator than have been accounted for. In this connection, I can tell you that if Narodny's method of extermination could have been made efficient I would have wiped them out myself years ago. But I believed then, and it has since been proved, that the survivors of such an attack, while comparatively few in number, would be far more dangerous to humanity than were all their former hordes.

"Thirdly, I have here a list of three hundred and seventeen airships; all of which were stolen during the week following

the destruction of the automatons' factories. Not one of these ships has as yet been found, in whole or in part. If I am either insane or mistaken, who stole them, and for what purpose?"

"Three hundred seventeen—in a week? Why was no attention paid to such a thing? I never heard of it."

"Because they were stolen singly and all over the world. Expecting some such move, I looked for these items and tabulated them."

"Then—Good Lord! They may be listening to us, right now!"

"Don't worry about that," Stone spoke calmly. "This instrument upon my wrist is not a watch, but the generator of a spherical screen through which no robot beam or ray can operate without my knowledge. Certain of its rays also caused your guards to fall asleep."

"I believe you," Martin almost groaned. "If only half of what you say is really true I cannot say how sorry I am that you had to force your way in to me, nor how glad I am that you did so. Go ahead—I am listening."

Stone talked without interruption for half an hour, concluding:

"You understand now why I can no longer play a lone hand. Even though I cannot find them with my limited apparatus I know that they are hiding somewhere, waiting and preparing. They dare not make any overt move while this enormously powerful Fleet is here; nor in the time that it is expected to be gone can they hope to construct works heavy enough to cope with it.

"Therefore, they must be so arranging matters that the Fleet shall not return. Since the Fleet is threatened I must accompany it, and you must give me a laboratory aboard the flagship. I know that the vessels are all identical, but I must be aboard the same ship you are, since you alone are to know what I am doing."

"But what could they do?" protested Martin. "And, if they should do anything, what could you do about it?"

"I don't know," the physicist admitted. Gone now was the calm certainty with which he had been speaking. "That is our weakest point. I have studied that question from every possible viewpoint, and I do not know of anything they can do that promises them success. But you must remember that no human being really understands a robot's mind.

"We have never even studied one of their brains, you know, as they disintegrate upon the instant of cessation of normal functioning. But just as surely as you and I are sitting here, Admiral Martin, they will do something—something very efficient and exceedingly deadly. I have no idea what it will be. It may be mental, or physical, or both: they may be hidden away in some of our own ships already...."

Martin scoffed. "Impossible!" he exclaimed. "Why, those ships have been inspected to the very skin, time and time again!"

"Nevertheless, they may be there," Stone went on, unmoved. "I am definitely certain of only one thing—if you install a laboratory aboard the flagship for me and equip it exactly according to my instructions, you will have one man, at least,

whom nothing that the robots can do will take by surprise. Will you do it?"

"I am convinced, really almost against my will." Martin frowned in thought. "However, convincing anyone else may prove difficult, especially as you insist upon secrecy."

"Don't try to convince anybody!" exclaimed the scientist. "Tell them that I'm building a communicator—tell them I'm an inventor working on a new ray-projector—tell them anything except the truth!"

"All right. I have sufficient authority to see that your requests are granted, I think."

And thus it came about that when the immense Terrestrial Contingent lifted itself into the air Ferdinand Stone was in his private laboratory in the flagship, surrounded by apparatus and equipment of his own designing, much of which was connected to special generators by leads heavy enough to carry their full output.

Earth some thirty hours beneath them, Stone felt himself become weightless. His ready suspicions blazed. He pressed Martin's combination upon his visiphone panel.

"What's the matter?" he rasped. "What're they down for?"

"It's nothing serious," the admiral assured him. "They're just waiting for additional instructions about our course in the maneuvers."

"Not serious, huh?" Stone grunted. "I'm not so sure of that. I want to talk to you, and this room's the only place I know where we'll be safe. Can you come down here right away?"

"Why, certainly," Martin assented.

"I never paid any attention to our course," the physicist snapped as his visitor entered the laboratory. "What was it?"

"Take-off exactly at midnight of June nineteenth," Martin recited, watching Stone draw a diagram upon a scratch-pad. "Rise vertically at one and one-half gravities until a velocity of one kilometer per second has been attained, then continue vertical rise at constant velocity. At 6:03:29 AM of June twenty-first head directly for the star Regulus at an acceleration of exactly nine hundred eighty centimeters per second. Hold this course for one hour, forty-two minutes, and thirty-five seconds; then drift. Further directions will be supplied as soon thereafter as the courses of the other fleets can be checked."

"Has anybody computed it?"

"Undoubtedly the navigators have—why? That is the course Dos-Tev gave us and it *must* be followed, since he is Admiral-in-Chief of our side, the Blues. One slip may ruin the whole plan, give the Reds, our supposed enemy in these maneuvers, a victory, and get us all disgrated."

"Regardless, we'd better check on our course," Stone growled, unimpressed. "We'll compute it roughly, right here, and see where following these directions has put us." Taking up a slide-rule and a book of logarithms he set to work.

"That initial rise doesn't mean a thing," he commented after a while, "except to get us far enough away from Earth so that the gravity is small, and to conceal from the casual observer that the effective take-off is still exactly at midnight."

Stone busied himself with calculations for many minutes. He stroked his forehead and scowled.

"My figures are very rough, of course," he said puzzledly at last, "but they show that we've got no more tangential velocity with respect to the sun than a hen has teeth. And you can't tell me that it wasn't planned that way purposely—and *not* by Dos-Tev, either. On the other hand, our radial velocity, directly toward the sun, which is the only velocity we have, amounted to something over fifty-two kilometers per second when we shut off power and is increasing geometrically under the gravitational pull of the sun. That course smells to high heaven, Martin! Dos-Tev never sent out any such a mess as that. The robots crossed him up, just as sure as hell's a man-trap! We're heading into the sun—and destruction!"

Without reply Martin called the navigating room. "What do you think of this course, Henderson?" he asked.

"I do not like it, sir," the officer replied. "Relative to the sun we have a tangential velocity of only one point three centimeters per second, while our radial velocity toward it is very nearly fifty-three thousand meters per second. We will not be in any real danger for several days, but it should be borne in mind that we have no tangential velocity."

"You see, Stone, we are in no present danger," Martin pointed out, "and I am sure that Dos-Tev will send us additional instructions long before our situation becomes acute."

"I'm not," the pessimistic scientist grunted. "Anyway, I would advise calling some of the other Blue fleets on your scrambled wave, for a check-up."

"There would be no harm in that." Martin called the Communications Officer, and soon:

"Communications Officers of all the Blue fleets of the Inner Planets, attention!" the message was hurled out into space by the full power of the flagship's mighty transmitter. "Flagship *Washington* of the Terrestrial Contingent calling all Blue flagships. We have reason to suspect that the course which has been given us is false. We advise you to check your courses with care and to return to your bases if you disc..."

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