

SCIENCE FICTION IMAGINATION

27



**WE'RE OFF
TO MARS!**

CARLTON FURTH

SCIENCE FICTION IMAGINATION

A short story

WE'RE OFF TO MARS!

by Carlton Furth

The strange little robot machine would create anything Joe Linger wanted. The catch was, that he was being told what to create—and didn't know it!

PUBLISHER NOTE: Science Fiction. Short Story. 5,300 words.

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LUMINOSITY
PUBLISHING

LUMINOSITY PUBLISHING LLP

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JANUARY 2022 Carlton Furth

First Published September 1951

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

WE'RE OFF TO MARS!

Joe Linger raised up on one elbow and stared at the door, frowning. "Who is it?" he called out.

A muffled voice answered from beyond the cracked, peeling wood. "Package for Mr. Joseph Linger!"

"Just a minute!" Joe laid his magazine aside, rolled to the edge of the bed, and pulled on his trousers. Rising, he poked his feet into frayed slippers and, walking to the door, swung it open.

"Sign here, please!" A little, old man stood in the doorway. He held a large square package under one arm and extended the other, holding out a clipboard and pencil to Joe. He had a thatch of white hair and a red, wrinkled face with blue eyes and a scowl. He wore a loose, blue uniform with a cloth badge on his shallow chest, reading: *Time Deliveries, Inc.*

Joe took the clipboard and pencil, scrawled his name and frowned with sudden surprise.

The name on the clipboard list above his was: *Pontius Pilate, Rome, 12 A.D.*

And when he looked up at the scowling little man who was now holding the package out to him and extending a hand to receive back his clipboard and pencil, Joe saw that he was holding the package out with two right arms and reaching for the clipboard with two left arms!

Joe fell back a step. "Who in blazes *are* you?"

"Time Deliveries, Incorporated," the little man chanted. "We guarantee deliveries to anyone, anywhere, any time. Here's your package, Mr. Linger."

"B-but," Joe stammered, "where'd you *come* from?"

The little man lifted his lower left hand and fingered his pointed chin. A gleam entered his blue eyes. "Originally, I came from Ursula Major," he said. "That's 3428 A.D., by the present calendar. Now, do you accept this package or—"

"I—I accept!" Joe blurted, grabbing for the package. In his haste, he dropped the clipboard and pencil, but four hands deftly snatched them up before they hit the floor.

"Very well," said the little man. "Good day, Mr. Linger!" He stepped back into the hallway and pulled the door shut.

Joe stood frozen with the large square package clutched to his chest. Then he lunged forward, wrenched at the doorknob, jerked the door open, and leaped out into the hall. "Hey-y-y-y!" his shout wavered off into weak dismay.

The hallway was empty.

He reentered his room, closed and locked the door carefully, and walked over to his bed. His dazed eyes wandered to the window, to the dirty brick wall of the apartment house next door, to the shaft of blazing afternoon sunlight that struck the grimy windowpane. In broad daylight! *It had happened in broad daylight!*

He sat on the bed, staring at the package in his lap. It was a light, bulky package, wrapped in some silvery gray substance that felt colder and smoother than rubber—more like metal. On one side of the package was an inscription in large, bold script:

*To: Mr. Joseph Linger
June 27th, 1951, Dark Ages Earth
24 Kens Street, Jersey City, N.J.
United States, North America*

He wondered if it was a gag. But the little old man with four arms hadn't been a gag!

Finally, Joe opened the package. He merely inserted his thumb into a conspicuous slot at the corner and pushed it around the top edges. The silver-gray material parted easily, and the lid came off the package. As it fell aside, he saw that the interior was filled with what resembled a rubber sponge soaked in black lacquer. It was dry, springy, and blackly glistening. He clutched at it and pulled it out.

Only a top layer came out. Beneath that, surrounded with layers of the cushioning substance, was—*something*—and a folded sheet of glossy, white paper.

Joe took out the paper and read it.

*Mr. Joseph Linger
June 27th, 1951, U.S.A.
Dark Ages Earth*

Dear Mr. Linger:

We have chosen you to assist us in an important research project, because our investigation has found you to be a science fiction enthusiast. We believe you have a better chance of comprehending the scope of our research than would most people of your time.

As you may have suspected, time involves a countless number of varying probability universes, all coexisting in the same time dimension. It is much like a giant tree, with branches sprouting from the root—the very beginning of time—and subsequent branches sprouting from others; and so, on and on.

Our research teams have travelled successfully into the past. However, in attempting to return, they have been faced with innumerable branches

in time-probability, with no way of determining which branch led to our universe!

Only a few have succeeded in returning—by recording the complete facts of history as they went into the past, then stopping and checking those facts every few years on their return. When the facts didn't check, they knew they were off on another branch leading to another universe; they would back-track, try again, and check until they were on the right branch.

Even so, many members of our research teams died before they could return—and our average lifespan is five thousand years! You may understand, then, that this is an intolerable situation that needs correcting.

The purpose of this project is to determine the amount of probability stress which causes a branch in time, this allowing us to check back and spot every moment that such branches occur! With that, we can compute the moments of stress and the number of branches in all time-probability! Consequently, our research teams may then travel safely to any time-era, in any probability universe, with a yardstick which can always lead them back to our own universe.

And so, in order to measure the probability stress which causes time-branching, we have decided to introduce such stress ourselves. Enclosed is a product of our civilization. You would probably call it a robot. It should never have existed in your time; therefore, it will induce considerable stress upon probability. A branch in time should result, if not when the robot arrives, certainly when you make use of it. That, of course, is where you come in.

We have sent this robot because it will repay you many times over for your assistance in our project. We have scanners focused on your time, ready to record the branching and probability stress when it occurs. We ask only your cooperation. You may keep the robot, of course.

It will fashion any object you desire from surrounding matter—solid objects, air molecules, anything within a thousand yards of it—if you but type out the name and description of the desired object on its keyboard. Thus, if you wish an automobile, take the robot to a deserted road and type on its keyboard the word, “automobile.” By influencing the sub-atomic forces of the dirt in the road, the empty air over the road, perhaps the grass along the side of the road, the robot will make you an automobile.

You may desire objects which do not exist in your time. If you type the word, spaceship, for example, be sure to include a description of its

performance, range, amount of supplies, etc.—and be on a large, open field when you do so.

In conclusion, it might be wise to remember that illegal possession of wealth in your time is punishable by law. I trust, for your own sake, you will exercise the utmost discretion.

Sincerely,

*Myytnor Skurle
Director, Historical Research
Galactic Renaissance, Sol III*

~

Joe put the letter carefully on the bed beside him and reached into the box for the robot. He lifted it out. It was a shimmering, silver-gray globe, lighter than aluminum, with one side of it flattened to accommodate a keyboard. It was about the size of a bowling ball, he guessed. The keyboard had small pushbuttons, lettered exactly like a typewriter, with a small glass lens above it. He struck the “J” key and a tiny, glowing “J” appeared in the center of the lens. He punched the tab marked “clear” at the top of the keyboard, and the “J” vanished.

His mind reeled at the implications of what he had read. Anything he wanted was his, merely by typing its name on this keyboard! Even objects he only imagined, which didn’t even exist—spaceships, antigravity devices, *anything*...

His thoughts were confused. What did he want? Money? But what good was money when he wouldn’t have to buy anything? What did he want?

He felt a sudden, overwhelming desire to confide in someone—to ask someone—

He rested the globe in his lap, clutching it with moist, slippery palms. His vision was blurred, his hands fumbling, as he pecked at the keyboard:

TELEPHONE

There was a swirling glow of blue radiance, a faintly audible click from within the globe—then a loud, sharp *crack* and the smell of ozone!

A telephone rested on the bed beside him! Its black cord snaked across the floor to the baseboard beside the chipped dresser.

Joe relaxed with a shuddering sigh. He mopped at the sweat on his forehead with a wet palm—he had a telephone! The robot worked!

But did the telephone work? He reached over, lifted the receiver, and placed it to his ear. The dial-tone was unmistakable.

He replaced the receiver on its cradle and sat staring at the 'phone. Now that he had it, who would he call?

What did he *really* want?

He looked down at the robot in his lap and swallowed hesitantly. He had requested a telephone, so he got a telephone. But that wasn't what he wanted. He knew—the realization grew in his mind—what he really wanted, what any young guy would want, given the opportunity!

Feverishly, he clutched the robot in his lap and with a numb index finger, began pecking at the keyboard. He finished the phrase—then, hastily and with sudden apprehension, added a comma. His brow furrowed with intense concentration for a moment, then he resumed typing.

When he finished, the small, glowing letters beneath the lens read:

A BEAUTIFUL GIRL,
WHOM I CAN TRUST.

There was the swirling blue radiance, as before. He heard the faintly audible click from within the globe. His eyes shot around the room, expectantly. A vision flashed into his mind—a vision of the girl who would appear—young, with soft, dark hair tumbling to her shoulders, delicate features and a slender, lovely figure. A neat, immaculate suit would enhance her shapely curves. He waited....

Nothing happened. No sharp crack, no smell of ozone. The robot had failed!

Joe sighed dismally. Resignedly, he steadied the robot in his lap and reached his thumb for the “clear” button. Then he saw it.

The tiny, glowing letters beneath the lens were different! The words he'd typed out were no longer there!

In their stead, he read:

DELAWARE 6-2717,
ASK FOR BARBARA!

He dialed the number.

“Hello?” a soft, feminine voice answered.

“Is this Barbara?” he asked.

“Yes. Who're you?”

“Joe Linger,” he said. “Are you beautiful?”

“Why—I suppose so,” came the modest answer. “What—”

“Can I trust you?” Joe persisted.

“Well, really!” she exclaimed. “Mr. Linger, I'm afraid I don't know you—”

Joe groaned inwardly. Of course, they were strangers! The robot couldn't help that!

"Just—just what is it you want?" the girl's voice stammered from the receiver.

"Nothing," Joe replied wearily. "Nothing, now. Maybe I'll call you back."

He hung up and sat staring into space.

Anything he wanted—anything! Money? What use was money when he didn't have to buy anything? Food? What about food? Meat and vegetables weren't inanimate objects, either.

He set the bright globe in his lap and placed his fingertips on its keyboard. Swiftly, he typed:

SIRLOIN STEAK SMOTHERED IN ONIONS, GRAVY, MASHED POTATOES,
ASPARAGUS, TOAST, COFFEE, APPLE PIE A LA MODE.

There came the shimmering blue radiance, the faint click, the sharp crack, and the smell of ozone.

Across the room, there was a battered writing table with a glass and a chipped china pitcher half-filled with stale water. Glass and pitcher vanished; instead, there sat the complete dinner, not only as he had ordered it but cooked to perfection. Complete with dishes, silverware, salt-and-pepper shakers, coffee cream, sugar bowl—everything.

After he had eaten, Joe settled back and surveyed the dishes. How to get them washed? Furthermore, how to explain to Mrs. Haggerty, the landlady, that he had not been cooking in his room and what happened to her pitcher and glass?

He picked up the robot again and typed out:

ONE PITCHER, ONE GLASS, BELONGING TO MRS. HAGGERTY.

With swirling blue radiance, faint click, sharp crack, and smell of ozone, the battered writing table resumed its former appearance.

Then he had his shoes changed into a cat. Afterwards, he had the cat changed back into new shoes. His two suits, brought out of the musty closet, were changed to brilliant, cloth-of-gold togas: then, because togas were hardly practical, he changed them back into new, expensive suits. With that beginning, he proceeded to rejuvenate his entire wardrobe. He began adding to it, acquiring some much-needed extra linen and some much-desired sports clothes, but the process had to be reversed when he noticed the wallpaper was disappearing from the walls, the closet was minus its door, and the air in the room was beginning to reek with ozone. Mrs. Haggerty would never stand for that!

And by sheer accident, he learned how to control the robot's influence on surrounding matter. When he had concluded that shoes were a more practical possession than a cat, he had accidentally typed the phrase:

SHOES FROM THE CAT.

And—with the glow, click, crack, and ozone smell—the cat had become a new pair of shoes. If he hadn't mentioned the cat, the robot might have jerked out one of the dresser drawers and made it into a pair of new shoes....

He sat at the writing table, staring at the metal globe set before him. *It's like the Midas touch*, he mused reflectively. Old King Midas, sitting in his treasure rooms, watching gold coins dribble through his fingers; the old King had thought it would be wonderful if he could turn everything he touched into gold—until he could, and finally touched his young daughter—

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Joe pushed back his chair and walked over to the bed. He sat down and lifted the telephone receiver. Swiftly, he dialed the Delaware number.

“Hello?” It was the soft, feminine voice again.

“Barbara?” His tone was uncertain.

“Yes. Who's this?”

“Joe Linger,” he said. “Barbara, I know you've never met me, but I don't know anyone else who can help me. I've got to talk to someone—maybe if I could talk to you, I'd be able to work things out? Could—could I come over to see you?”

“Well-l-l-l,” she replied doubtfully, “I really don't—”

“Is someone else there?” he asked anxiously. “Someone else in the family?”

“Do you want to speak to father?”

“Yes—please!”

“Just a minute—”

As he waited, Joe laid down the receiver and returned to the table for the robot. He brought it back to the bed, sat down, placed it in his lap, and swiftly typed out:

BARBARA'S ADDRESS.

A gruff voice rattled faintly from the receiver. “Hello? Hello, who's this?”

There was a swirling blue glow and a click. Beneath the lens, at the top of the keyboard, was Barbara's address.

Joe picked up the receiver. “My name is Joe Linger,” he said. “Sir, I don't know your name, but I thought I ought to see you. It's about something your daughter has become involved in without her knowledge. I thought you ought to know—”

“What?” The voice spoke sharply. “What're you talking about?”

“I’d rather not discuss it over the ‘phone,” Joe replied nervously. “Could I come over to see you, personally?”

“Why—um, ah—why, yes!” A hard edge crept into the voice. “Perhaps you’d *better!*”

Joe felt a wave of relief. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes,” he promised.

He was five minutes early. He parked the sleek, yellow convertible in the driveway and climbed out. He looked dapper and well-groomed in his dark, expensive suit as he went up the front steps and rang the doorbell. The round, gleaming globe of the robot was tucked under his arm.

The door was opened by a tall, stocky man with iron-gray hair. He raked Joe with a sharp, piercing gaze. “You’re Mr. Linger?”

Joe nodded. “That’s right. But I don’t know your name.”

“James Bowen,” the man said stiffly. “Come in, Mr. Linger.”

Joe hesitated, shook his head. “First, Mr. Bowen, I want to explain,” he said. “I’m a stranger—your daughter has never met me—and yet, I was able to get her first name and telephone number. I thought you might like to know how I did that.”

Bowen scowled darkly. “Well, please come in, Mr. Linger,” he insisted stiffly. “We’ll sit down and discuss the matter—”

“No,” Joe refused, shaking his head again. “I want to show you something, first. I want you to see exactly what this is all about—” He cradled the robot in his arm and began typing on its keyboard, turning to face the driveway as he did so.

Bowen stepped out the door and stared at Joe’s yellow convertible. Then he jerked back, startled.

There was a swirling blue glow from the bright globe, a faint click. And then—
Crack!

~

Bowen grabbed at the door, his eyes bulging as he stared out at the driveway. Air currents swirled and eddied across the front lawn. The convertible had vanished.

“This globe is a robot mechanism,” Joe said hastily. “It transmuted the metal atoms of that car into molecules of air. It can change any matter into any shape, form, or object desired! Watch!” Swiftly, he began typing again.

The swirling glow and sound effects were repeated.

And in the driveway, poised gracefully on its tricycle landing gear, was a small, gleaming light plane!

“I made that out of air molecules, too,” Joe explained. “That is, the robot made it.”

“Get—get that airplane off my driveway!” Bowen stammered hoarsely. “The neighbors will—”

Joe typed busily. The glow and noise repeated. The plane disappeared.

“Now you’ve seen it,” Joe said quietly, gazing up at the tall, dazed man. “This is what I want to talk to you about. I—I need help, Mr. Bowen—”

“Come in,” Bowen said weakly. “Come in—but turn that god-forsaken thing off!” He turned and walked back into the house. “Atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs—and now, *this!* And I’d always thought they’d have rocket ships first—”

Joe followed him in through a short foyer to a small, comfortable living room. Then, in the living room doorway, he stopped. He felt the breath go out of him in a long sigh, and an excited fluttering in his chest.

Barbara Bowen stood across the room, beside the front window. She had heard the noises, had seen what happened. She was pale and frightened. And she was beautiful. Soft, dark hair framed a peach oval of a face with large gray eyes, short nose, and perfect lips. A soft blue housecoat draped over a smoothly curved, long-limbed figure.

Bowen had crossed the room and settled into a comfortable chair, taking out his pipe and tobacco pouch. “Sit down, Mr. Linger,” he offered, with a gesture to a nearby chair. “This is my daughter, Barbara.”

“Hello,” Barbara said simply. Her voice was a soft, husky sound.

Joe merely swallowed and nodded, then crossed hurriedly to the proffered chair. Barbara sat down on the couch.

Then, haltingly at first, but with a constantly growing familiarity, Joe told them everything that had happened. He took the letter from Myttnor Skurle out of his pocket and showed it to them.

For several minutes after he finished, Mr. Bowen sat smoking his pipe and staring into space.

“Have you tried making money with it, Mr. Linger?” he asked, pensively.

“No,” Joe admitted. “There doesn’t seem to be any need for me to have money.”

Bowen rose with sudden decision and crossed to a low writing desk. He got a piece of paper and, after some searching, a small magnifying glass. Then he returned and laid the paper on the small coffee table. “There,” he said. “Change that into some five-dollar bills.”

Joe stared at the paper, frowning, then cradled the bright globe in his lap, and began typing. The usual effects followed.

The paper changed into four five-dollar bills.

Bowen picked them up and returned to the writing desk. He took out his wallet, extracted a five-dollar bill, and sat down. Carefully, he examined the robot’s bills against his own.

~

Minutes dragged past. Joe licked his lips nervously, noticed that Barbara was doing the same thing, and they stared at each other. Then Barbara smiled, and he smiled, and—

“Mr. Linger,” Bowen spoke sharply, “I want you to do something else—no, wait!” He rose and walked back to them. “Mr. Linger, let me try that robot thing!”

Joe glanced at Barbara, then mutely handed the globe to Bowen.

“Now,” Bowen said, turning, “Barbara, get off the couch, will you?”

“Yes, father!” Barbara rose hurriedly.

“Um,” said Mr. Bowen. He cradled the globe on his arm and pecked at the keyboard.

There was the swirling blue glow, the faint click—and a loud *crack* that rattled the windows. The air swirled about the room, reeking with ozone—

And where the couch had been was now an ugly, anti-tank cannon, squatting heavily on its rubber tires.

“Holy cow!” Joe exclaimed, jumping to his feet.

“Uh *huh!*” Bowen grunted, satisfied. He handed back the robot. “Now, if you please, Mr. Linger—give us back our couch! Can you?”

“Why—why, yes—” Joe stammered. He took the robot and changed Bowen’s cannon back into the couch it had been.

“Uh *huh!*” Bowen grunted again. He settled into his chair and resumed smoking his pipe, calmly.

Joe returned to his seat, frowning perplexedly. Barbara moved back toward the couch—then hesitated, staring at it uncertainly, and moved over toward Joe’s chair. Almost without thinking, she perched herself on the arm of his chair. Joe slipped his arm around her hips to steady her, and neither of them seemed to notice their nearness. They sat staring at her father.

Bowen stared into space, nodded, and grunted a few times. Finally, he cleared his throat and began speaking.

“Mr. Linger, the bills that robot made are perfect. You couldn’t spot one of ‘em for a counterfeit in a million years! And we’ve just discovered that not only will the robot make weapons, but anyone can work it—not just you! That puts a pretty serious light on the business. I’m thoroughly convinced, young man, that with that robot of yours, any man could become the ruler of the world!”

Joe gasped faintly. “That—that hadn’t occurred to me!” he stammered weakly.

Bowen smiled at him with warm friendliness. “I didn’t think it had,” he said quietly. “But I’m afraid we’re going to have to face facts. Joe, your life isn’t going to be worth a plugged nickel if this ever gets out. Why, the moment you handed me that robot, I could’ve committed the perfect murder—by *changing you into a statue!*”

Joe shook his head. “The robot can’t influence animate objects,” he protested.

“Didn’t you make a cat?” Bowen asked sharply.

Joe gulped nervously. *Yes, he had!* And he’d changed the cat back into new shoes—

“You mustn’t deny the danger for a minute, Joe,” Bowen went on, gravely. “If ever the wrong people hear about that robot and get their hands on it, you’re as good as dead! And the rest of the world will shortly be under the killer’s thumb—”

“Father—” Barbara blurted impulsively. “Father, can’t we—help him, somehow?”

Bowen raised his brows and grinned at his daughter. “Maybe for your sake, we’d better!” he exclaimed, chuckling.

Barbara fidgeted with embarrassment.

"I've been wondering about the people who sent the robot to you," Bowen resumed seriously. "But it seems that they weren't interested so much in what the robot might do to our world as they were in getting their experiment done. So, this seems to be left entirely in your hands, Joe." He glanced up, his gray eyes boring into Joe's face. "Do you want to make your own decision about it, or do you want us to make a suggestion?"

Joe ran his fingers through his hair, nervously. "I'd—I'd appreciate anything you say, Mr. Bowen! Anything!"

But in the back of his mind—even as Bowen began speaking again—Joe felt the beginnings of an idea, a decision that formed and grew and flooded into his whole being with the exhilaration of a drug! Even as Bowen began speaking, Joe knew what he was going to do—what he *had* to do—

~

The yellow convertible swung up over a shoulder and down the winding dirt road into a narrow valley. Ahead lay a small lake.

"Your summer cabin's on the south shore, you say?" Joe asked, tooling the big car down into the cool, tree-shaded lowland.

Bowen nodded, beside him. "I still think you ought to let me put my oxygen torch to that thing."

Joe grinned and slowed the car, whipping it off the road into a small clearing. A small, weather-beaten cabin stood back among the pines. Beyond the clearing was the sandy shore and the lake.

"There's our cabin," Barbara acknowledged, as Joe headed the car toward it. He parked under the trees, and they got out. He carried the bright globe under his arm.

"Well," Bowen said, facing him, "We're here, now. What is it you plan to do, Joe?"

Joe nodded toward the clearing. "I think I'd better do it out there," he said.

"It's wonderful up here on weekends," Barbara remarked, matching stride with them as they started toward the clearing. She was wearing brief shorts and a sweater, with a bright kerchief tied around her head. "There's swimming and fishing and no one to bother us. Father's always wished he could build a home up here—"

Joe stopped, turning to her father. "Have you?"

Bowen nodded, frowning. "Always wanted a quiet, little place for the day I retire—"

"Just a minute, then!" Joe faced back toward the cabin and steadied the robot. Deftly, he began typing:

SMALL HOUSE FROM CABIN FOR MR. BOWEN,
ALL CONVENIENCES, FURNISHED.

There was the blue glow and faint click from the globe—then, a thunderous crash from the trees! A strong gust of wind whipped waves across the mirror-surface of the lake.

It was a small, white stucco house, with a low, rock wall extending around a garden in front. Bright flowers bloomed in the garden, vines climbed the trellises at the little windows. The roof was bright red tile. Bowen stared back at it, his face tight, his gray eyes misting.

“There,” Joe said kindly. “That should fix you up.”

“I—I didn’t ask for it!” Bowen protested stubbornly. “I didn’t earn it!”

“Oh, but you will!” Joe grinned brightly. “You’re going to earn it by not telling anyone about what I’m going to do out here!” Chuckling softly, he turned and trudged on out toward the clearing.

Barbara caught up with him and tugged at his arm. “Joe,” she pleaded. “Please, Joe! Don’t do anything you’ll be sorry for—”

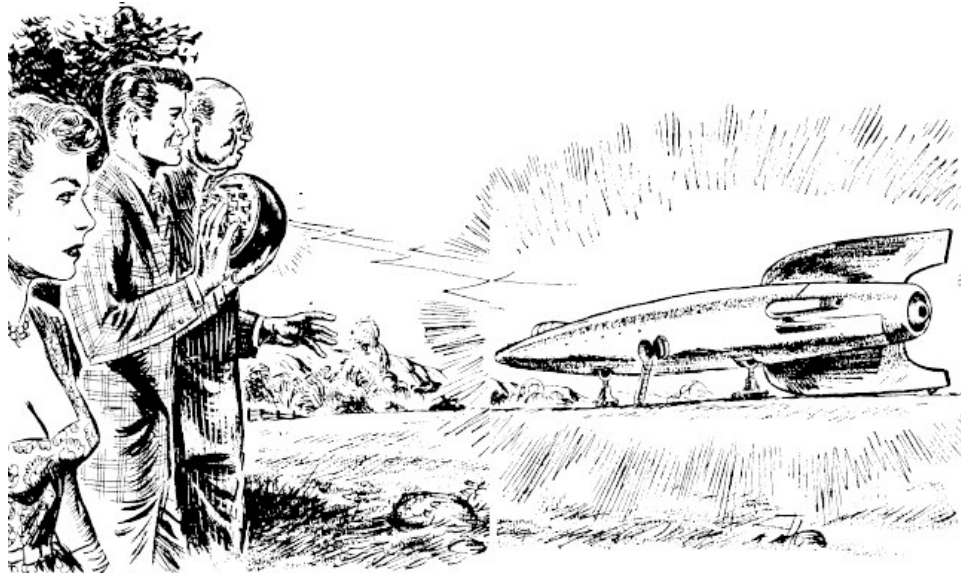
Then they stopped at the clearing’s edge. Joe cradled the robot on his arm, touched his fingers to the keyboard—and paused, silent for a moment. “I’ll never be sorry for doing this!” he said, finally, and began typing.

~

One minute, there was the small clearing, green grass waving gently in the warm afternoon sunshine. Then the very heavens seemed to split open, and a giant thunderbolt came hurtling into the ground. The concussion almost knocked them off their feet.

And the next minute—

It was a long, silvery, torpedo-shaped hull, completely filling the small clearing. Rocket tubes jutted from its tapering tail; narrow fins creased its smooth flanks. A round airlock door stood open, waiting.



Joe raised the strange robot globe and depressed the keys. Out on the plain a spaceship came into being.

"A—A *rocket ship!*" Bowen gasped.

"More than that!" Joe was grinning as he moved out toward the open airlock. "She's equipped with water and air purifying devices and food synthesis tanks that'll supply one man as long as ten years! She has antigravity equipment that can lift her right off the Earth—and a rocket drive that'll accelerate to a velocity of two hundred and seventy-eight miles per second! That's roughly a million miles an hour! That means I can reach Mars' orbit in just over thirty hours!"

"But—but what're you going to *do* with it?" Barbara stammered.

"Do?" Joe leaped into the airlock, his robot clutched under his arm, and faced them with a laugh. "I'm going to the only place I'll be safe, Barbara! And I'll find out who built the canals on Mars! And what mysteries lie below the cloud-blanket of Venus! And whether any of the moons of Jupiter are inhabitable—"

"Y-you mean," Bowen sputtered, "you're *going into space?*"

Barbara shook her head. "But—not *alone!*"

A shadow flicked across Joe's young features. Then he grinned easily. "Why not? I'm no longer safe among men—"

"But you *can't* go alone!" she stormed. "You—Father! *I'm going with him!*"

"Barbara!" Bowen shouted. "What on earth—"

"Not on earth!" she cried, leaping forward. She landed in the narrow airlock, thrusting Joe back into its metal confines. She whirled back to her father, grabbing the door's levers to steady herself. "Not for long!" she added breathlessly. "Don't you see, father? He has to go—but he *can't go alone!* Someone has to be with him, to take care of him, to see that he eats his meals and—and I'm going with him! Goodbye, father! We'll—we'll be back!"

And tugging, panting, she swung the heavy door closed. It swung flush into the smooth, metal hull.

James Bowen stood transfixed, on the edge of the clearing. Behind him was the small, white house with the red roof and the little garden in front, as he watched the sleek, torpedo-shaped spaceship rise effortlessly from the ground and go skimming across the lake, climbing higher and higher until it dwindled to a silvery speck in the clear blue sky and vanished.

Then Bowen's face suddenly took on a new cast. There was a grim, satisfied light in his eyes as he followed the faint vapor trail up into the heavens. Slowly he reached a hand in his coat pocket. From it he withdrew a small metallic object. It was shaped oddly like a pocket radio, but of a more advanced and intricate design.

He depressed a small switch and the object glowed. About him there was the snap and crackle of powerful electrical forces. Bowen's voice suddenly sounded.

"Myttnor Skurle reporting to Headquarters on project Time Stress."

There was a blue crackle in the air about him. Then a distant voice intoned: “What is your report?”

He stared up at the sky, smiling, now. “I have personally seen Joe Linger on his way. My daughter accompanies him on the experiment. She will remain with the Earthman for his lifetime, keeping us informed as events progress. I believe she is attracted to him—however, that is a side issue, the main project having been successfully executed. Shall I return to Sol III?”

Again, the blue crackle. “Our compliments, Myytnor Skurle. You may return.”

The crackle faded and he made a further adjustment on the object he held. The smile was still on his face as he gazed into the sky after the spaceship—and vanished...

THE END

CARLTON FURTH



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