

Fyfe Horace Bowne

Manners of the Age



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With everyone gone elsewhere, Earth was perfect for gracious living – only there was nothing gracious about it!

The red tennis robot scooted desperately across the court, its four wide-set wheels squealing. For a moment, Robert's hard-hit passing shot seemed to have scored. Then, at the last instant, the robot whipped around its single racket-equipped arm. Robert sprawled headlong in a futile lunge at the return.

"Game and set to Red Three," announced the referee box from its high station above the net.

"Ah, shut up!" growled Robert, and flung down his racket for one of the white serving robots to retrieve.

"Yes, Robert," agreed the voice. "Will Robert continue to play?" Interpreting the man's savage mumble as a negative, it told his opponent, "Return to your stall, Red Three!"

Robert strode off wordlessly toward the house. Reaching the hundred-foot-square swimming pool, he hesitated uncertainly.

"Weather's so damned hot," he muttered. "Why didn't the old-time scientists find out how to do something about that while there were still enough people on Earth to manage it?"

He stripped off his damp clothing and dropped it on the "beach" of white sand. Behind him sounded the steps of a humanoid serving robot, hastening to pick it up. Robert plunged deep into the cooling water and let himself float lazily to the surface.

Maybe they did, he thought. I could send a robot over to the old city library for information. Still, actually doing anything would probably take the resources of a good many persons – and it isn't so easy to find people now that Earth is practically deserted.

He rolled sideward for a breath and began to swim slowly for the opposite side of the pool, reflecting upon the curious culture of the planet. Although he had accepted this all his life, it really was remarkable how the original home of the human race had been forsaken for fresher worlds among the stars. Or was it more remarkable that a few individuals had asserted their independence by remaining?

Robert was aware that the decision involved few difficulties, considering the wealth of robots and other automatic machines. He regretted knowing so few humans, though they were really not necessary. If not for his hobby of televising, he would probably not know any at all.

"Wonder how far past the old city I'd have to go to meet someone in person," he murmured as he pulled himself from the pool. "Maybe I ought to try accepting that televised invitation of the other night."

Several dark usuforn robots were smoothing the sand on this beach under the direction of a blue humanoid supervisor. Watching them idly, Robert estimated that it must be ten years since he had seen another human face to face. His parents were dim memories. He got along very well, however, with robots to serve him or to obtain occasional information from the automatic scanners of the city library that had long ago been equipped to serve such a purpose.

"Much better than things were in the old days," he told himself as he crossed the lawn to his sprawling white mansion. "Must have been awful before the population declined. Imagine having people all around you, having to listen to them, see them, and argue to make them do what you wanted!"

The heel of his bare right foot came down heavily on a pebble, and he swore without awareness of the precise meaning of the ancient phrases. He limped into the baths and beckoned a waiting robot as he stretched out on a rubbing table.

"Call Blue One!" he ordered.

The red robot pushed a button on the wall before beginning the massage. In a few moments, the major-domo arrived.

"Did Robert enjoy the tennis?" it inquired politely.

"I did *not*!" snapped the man. "Red Three won – and by too big a score. Have it geared down a few feet per second."

"Yes, Robert."

"And have the lawn screened again for pebbles!"

As Blue One retired he relaxed, and turned his mind to ideas for filling the evening. He hoped Henry would televise: Robert had news for him.

After a short nap and dinner, he took the elevator to his three-story tower and turned on the television robot. Seating himself in a comfortable armchair, he directed the machine from one channel to another. For some time, there was no answer to his perfunctory call signals, but one of his few acquaintances finally came on.

"Jack here," said a quiet voice that Robert had long suspected of being disguised by a filter microphone.

"I haven't heard you for some weeks," he remarked, eyeing the swirling colors on the screen.

He disliked Jack for never showing his face, but curiosity as to what lay behind the mechanical image projected by the other's transmitter preserved the acquaintance.

"I was ... busy," said the bodiless voice, with a discreet hint of a chuckle that Robert found chilling.

He wondered what Jack had been up to. He remembered once being favored with a televised view of Jack's favorite sport – a battle between companies of robots designed for the purpose, horribly reminiscent of human conflicts Robert had seen on historical films.

He soon made an excuse to break off and set the robot to scanning Henry's channel. He had something to tell the older man, who lived only about a hundred miles away and was as close to being his friend as was possible in this age of scattered, self-sufficient dwellings.

"I don't mind talking to *him*," Robert reflected. "At least he doesn't overdo this business of individual privacy."

He thought briefly of the disdainful face – seemingly on a distant station – which had merely examined him for several minutes one night without ever condescending to speak. Recalling his rage at this treatment, Robert wondered how the ancients had managed to get along together when there were so many of them. They must have had some strict code of behavior, he supposed, or they never would have bred so enormous a population.

"I must find out about that someday," he decided. "How did you act, for instance, if you wanted to play tennis but someone else just refused and went to eat dinner? Maybe that was why the ancients had so many murders."

He noticed that the robot was getting an answer from Henry's station, and was pleased. He could talk as long as he liked, knowing Henry would not resent his cutting off any time he became bored with the conversation.

The robot focused the image smoothly. Henry gave the impression of being a small man. He was gray and wrinkled compared with Robert, but his black eyes were alertly sharp. He smiled his greeting and immediately launched into a story of one of his youthful trips through the mountains, from the point at which it had been interrupted the last time they had talked.

Robert listened impatiently.

"Maybe I have some interesting news," he remarked as the other finished. "I picked up a new station the other night."

"That reminds me of a time when I was a boy and – "

Robert fidgeted while Henry described watching his father build a spare television set as a hobby, with only a minimum of robot help. He pounced upon the first pause.

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