

## PLAN M FOR MERCURY

My chief engineer, Ron Wick, sauntered into the office, perched himself perogatively on the corner of my desk, and announced “I quit.”

I felt another frown add itself to my sunburned forehead. However, I was not particularly worried by Wick’s comment: he had threatened to quit twice before. The first time was on account of what he considered to be the unreasonable male/female ratio at the camp. Back when we started excavation for the Mirror, there had only been four women on staff; and after working himself sequentially through three of them, his sexual appetite became ravenous. (The fourth woman – our computer chief Charlotte – had slapped the engineer’s face and told him to go fry himself, which on Mercury would have been easy to do.) Now we had 123 men and 82 women working on the project, so Wick’s amorous problem was obsolescent. The second time my chief engineer had said he was quitting, the reason was more mechanical. He had pointed out, quite rightly, that a quake under the Mirror would cause its liquid metal to rush out, pouring downhill and engulfing the camp. I had avoided that issue by appealing to his manhood. What mining camp in history has been free of risk? And anyway, we were all being paid very well for living by the side of a million-ton pool of the metal after which the planet was named: mercury.

So when I looked up from my annual report, my voice was weary but calm. I simply asked “Why?”

Wick hopped off the edge of my desk and began walking up and down in front of it, making a good show of being agitated. “I’ll tell you the truth, Stu.”

I leaned back in my chair and suppressed a yawn. This, also, I had heard before. For some reason, Ron Wick felt obliged to preface every argument he made by a claim about his verisimilitude. There was actually no room for serious falsehood or error on Mercury. The temperature outside the dome where we lived was high enough to melt the softer metals, like lead, silver, zinc and (of course) the mercury that we were using for the Mirror. Anybody who did not do their job right was likely to cause the death either of himself or a coworker. The morale in the dome was in some ways more like that of an army base than a mining camp. And the Sun never let us forget our fragility. Its glare slammed through the thick window of my office like something solid. The hot air shimmered around Wick’s gesticulating figure and turned him into a blurry phantom.

“It’s about the robots, Stu.”

I groaned. *Not again*, I thought. We had 1,326 active robots on the project. The number was clear in my mind, because I was including in my annual report a request for an additional 428 of the many-functioned creatures. We needed them. Desperately. No ordinary man, even in a thermal suit, could work outside the dome for any length of time before getting dehydrated and disoriented by the thudding weight of the Sun. We absolutely needed the help of the mechanical creatures with their androidal brains to upgrade the Mirror. Presently we were receiving about three zigawatts of light from the Sun, bouncing it off the Mirror, and sending it in a tight beam to Earth. But the Earth’s population demanded even more energy, and it was up to us to provide it. And for that, we needed the robots.

I suddenly felt irritated. After all, concern about robots – in one form or another – had been around for eons. It was passé. I accused “You’ve been reading that silly story, *Fondly Fahrenheit*, haven’t you?”

The temporary blank look on my chief engineer’s face showed that I had over-estimated his erudition. The story I referred to was a classic. It concerned a man who owned a very capable robot, whose androidal brain unfortunately became erratic when the temperature climbed above some critical point, causing it to commit mayhem, much to the anguish of its dedicated owner. Sort of a space-age Frankenstein story. I could not remember the conclusion of the tale, and promised myself I would visit the camp’s library to find out what happened in the end. Thinking about this, I realized that if I could not recall all of the story, there was really no reason I should expect Ron Wick to have read it at all. In fact, I had never seen Ron in the library, in the many years we had been on Mercury. This was in contrast to our computer chief Charlotte, who was often to be seen rummaging through the files, presumably looking for something to entertain her off-duty time. I thought that this was a bit of a loss; since as a bachelor, I was sure I could have provided more entertainment than some old book, and would gladly have...

“... so *that’s* why you need to consider the robots!” Ron concluded.

“Interesting,” I muttered, covering my inattention. I groped for a sentence that would cover my ignorance and allow him to restate his argument. After all, Ron Wick was a good engineer even if a little paranoid, and I would prefer to keep his services. I picked up the gold nugget from my desk – a frozen blob from the dark side of a boulder that was the first thing I noticed when I arrived on Mercury – and began to turn it over between my fingers. Lowering my

furrowed forehead, I said in a suitably concerned tone: “Do you consider the problem to be serious?”

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Charlotte waltzed into my office later, her bosom bouncing in the funny gravity, but with a half-serious expression playing around her usually laughing lips.

“Boss”, she announced, using the term in an ironic way which implied that she could replace me anytime as field-head of Mercury Mirror Incorporated, “I want to talk to you about the robots.”

“Sure,” I replied. Instinctively, I adopted my paternalistic/ but-not-quite-over-the-hill attitude. Charlotte was an attractive but mature woman. I knew from her file that she had two children back on Earth. For some reason she had chosen to isolate herself on a ball of metal that cringed under the blast of the Sun, and was about as remote from the green fields of home as could be imagined. But that was her business.

By the same rule, it was between me and the file on Ron Wick, that if he returned to Earth he would probably be shot by an irate but long-remembered husband with an old-fashioned prejudice against adultery. I was grateful for the security system of Mercury Mirror Incorporated, because it protected not only the histories of my employees but also the past misdeeds of its Head of Operations (i.e., me). Feeling secure in encryption, I invited Charlotte: “Please tell me what’s bothering you.”

My computer chief sucked in a chestful of air, as if about to make a major speech. Then her eyebrows arched over her mischievous eyes and she said “Stu, I think it would be better if you came Outside and actually *looked*.”

I groaned. None of the human population at the camp went Outside unless it was necessary. It meant a lengthy process of donning a suit, clumping about among cinders under a ton weight of sunlight, and then a period of recuperation over a beer. Only the last part of the procedure held any attraction for me. I said defensively, “Ron Wick has already talked to me, and he doesn’t think that the problem with the robots is critical.”

“Bah!” Charlotte exclaimed, her eyes flashing with contempt. “Ron Wick wouldn’t know the difference between a fart and a hurricane.”

Interested by her choice of words, I quietly sniffed the air of my office. The atmosphere inside the dome was recycled, of course. And a low hum told that things were running normally,

presumably dealing with the flatulence I had experienced during the long time I had spent on my annual report. The component parts of *that* lay scattered over my desk, interspersed with old coffee stains and the remains of my lunch. Ancient files were stacked against the curving wall of the office, which was broken at eye level by a thin horizontal strip, through which the Sun shone in an intense fan of yellow light.

Blinking at this evidence of the Outside, I must have looked undecided. For the woman urged: “Come on, Stu! You’ll be able to write in your report that you made a special survey.” Seeing that this did little to defray my reluctance, she grinned and added: “You’ll also be able to watch me strip.”

I did not know whether the last comment was a come-on or the placing of a boundary. But suddenly I laughed. “Okay. Let’s go.”

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The Sun hit like a hammer as soon as I stepped out of the airlock. Almost immediately, the visor on my helmet darkened, leaving me squinting at imaginary stars against the black sky of Mercury. There is no atmosphere on the planet, and the jagged horizon seemed unnaturally near and sharp – resembling a scene cut out of cardboard. The terrain nearby seemed at first to be a jigsaw of fiery rocks and pitch-black shadows, depending on the direction of the Sun. The latter was an intense blob, strangely large at only a third of the distance as seen from Earth, its outline made hazy by the automatic screening provided by my visor. As my eyes adjusted, the scenery went from having the quality of a black-and-white photograph to showing colour: predominantly browns and yellows, with splashes of glinting blue where the sunlight bounced off pools of liquid metal. It was hell.

“Don’t get your feet wet, Boss.” The sound of Charlotte’s voice, tense with awe, sounded clearly inside my helmet.

I looked down, and saw that the boot on my left foot was half into a puddle of molten mercury. Stepping back, the quicksilver ran off the boot’s toe, setting up ripples in the pool that ran about with the same agility as water on Earth. And beyond the ridge which formed our horizon was a massive ocean of the same stuff, carefully designed to bounce the Sun’s light to the tiny blue spot in the sky that was the energy-starved Earth. Oppressively aware of my responsibility, I waved to Charlotte. A track lead upwards between the jagged rocks, beaten into sand by the passage of many human feet and the stamping of numerous robots. Charlotte was

right: it was my duty to investigate the problem that had developed with our mechanical brethren; and I was damned certain I *would* mention our trial in my report, because the brief beauty of the woman's naked body while we changed was hardly recompense for the stifling heat which was building inside my suit, and the first uncomfortable trickle of sweat down my spine. "Come on," I muttered.

What seemed like a geological age later, I emerged on top of the ridge, scouted around, and plonked my perspiration-soaked bottom onto a convenient rock. My thighs were shaking with exertion, and my lungs gasped for air inside the microclimate of my suit. My dull gaze swept indolently about my feet. This was not only a desert – it was a *dead* desert. The desolate places of the Earth have a certain charm, for despite their emptiness they offer meagre signs of life, in the form (say) of a nub of cactus or the skittering of a tip-toeing lizard. On Mercury, there is no natural life of any kind. Nor has there ever been life. The planet is just a ball of hot rock and metal, whizzing around the Sun in the killing drench of its radiation. Mercury is a place that makes a man feel lonely and scared.

Charlotte may have also felt the intimidation of the place. Staggering on to the top of the ridge, she sprawled in the sand at my feet and rested her head unemotionally on my knee. I could see her shoulders heaving through the padding of her thermal suit. After a while, the panting of her lungs in my earphones became more regular. She said unnecessarily "God, it's bloody hot!"

I grunted in agreement, but my attention was fixed by the scene at our feet: a gigantic plain of liquid metal lay shimmering in the sunlight – vast and silent.

This was the Mercury Mirror. It filled a shallow crater with metal of the same name, and its very size made it the greatest technological achievement of mankind. Indeed, its overwhelming brightness meant that the Mirror not only fed energy to the Earth, but also formed a kind of interstellar beacon: it put our solar system on the cosmic map, making us visible from the dark reaches of the Milky Way.

Perhaps, even as Charlotte and I lounged on its shores, the Mirror was being viewed from the end of one of the Galaxy's spiral arms – maybe by an alien couple, messing about with a telescope on their patio after an extraterrestrial dinner party. Conceivably, the couple saw the strange disk among the ordinary constellations as something romantic, causing them to hold hands under its silvery glow, before going to their bed...

I chuckled at my own flight of fancy. Charlotte raised her head, peering into the darkness of my visor. Her own was near-black also, and went an even darker shade as she turned her gaze onto the Mirror.

To us, the surface of this sea of metal looked flat. But really it was a shallow paraboloid, designed to reflect light in a narrow, tight beam. In fact, the Mirror was a gigantic version of an old idea for making telescopes on Earth: a rotating pool of quicksilver went automatically into a concave figure, in effect a ready-made telescope. That technology had been superceded by others at Earthly astronomical observatories. But here on Mercury, it had proven itself superior as a means of reflecting power to the factories of London, Tokyo and New York, which passed by turn under the terminus of the beam, carried by the Earth's rotation. The spin of Mercury was low by comparison, but careful engineering had created an ocean of liquid metal that was bent by just the right amount to provide a safe, continuous source of energy.

Safe, that was, unless something was to go wrong ...

I must admit I was somewhat concerned by what my engineer Ron Wick and my computer person Charlotte had told me about the robots whose job it was to maintain the Mirror. However, I must also say for the record that I was not outright worried. I knew, better than either of them, that the failsafe devices in place were close to fool-proof. Even if the 1,326 robots we presently employed all went crazy simultaneously, the worse that could happen would be a shutdown. There were protocols in place that would ensure against any malfunction of the energy beam that was dangerous to the billions of energy-consuming Earthlings. Even in the most risky case those people would only suffer an interruption of power. No, the sketchy accounts I had received from my colleagues about the behaviour of the robots pointed not to something dangerous, but to something *peculiar*...

Polarizing the right-hand half of my visor allowed me to block out the light from the Mirror, so that its rocky shores leapt into visibility. There were robots there. Lots of them. Some seemed to be walking idly alone. Some were standing in small groups. Some were collected into a sizeable crowd not far away, sitting by the liquid lake and apparently involved in some deep discussion. The point was: *none of them was working*.

"The lazy bums!" I exclaimed.

"Maybe it's their day off?" Charlotte suggested.

I growled, and stomped off down the hill towards the Mirror and its neglectful workers.

The first one I encountered was a large bucket-headed individual who appeared to be smoking a pipe. At the opposite end of its metallic body, the feet splashed idly in the mercury sea. The barrel-like torso lounged against a large red boulder, but on the dust-covered back of the robot some joker had inscribed “Clean me”.

Approaching his apparition with care, I said “Hello there!” The bucket head swiveled slightly in my direction and two platinum irises brought me into view. “What are you doing?”

The silvery-grey eyes (which I recognized as top-of-the-line F-1000s), regarded me as if I had less intelligence than the standard positronic brain (which I knew was the ubiquitous I-100). After a while, the robot’s mouth opened, and I noted that due to neglect or some act of vandalism, several of the carborundum teeth were missing, causing an old-man-like smirk. There was a stutter of static in my earphones, as if the robot was clearing its throat. Then a slow drawl replied: “Jest sittin.” This statement of the obvious was in line with the brain powers of most of our mechanical staff at the Mirror. As was the further statement: “An smokin...”

I turned as Charlotte arrived. Switching to a circuit where only she could hear me, I explained “This robot talks strangely.”

The woman crouched down beside us, we looking at the robot with interest and it looking at us with disinterest. The ‘pipe’ it held between articulated metal fingers was actually a tube which I recognized as coming from one of the remote-sensing arrays that surrounded the Mirror. The tube had been fitted with a crude bowl at one end, and the other had been flattened to form a mouthpiece. We watched perplexed, as the robot slowly put the pipe between its snagged teeth, pretended to inhale, and let its hooded eyes half close in imaginary ecstasy. A puff of yellow smoke emanated from the plastic lips, spreading without disturbance into the airless space over the flat surface of the mercury lake.

“It’s smoking sulpher!” I exclaimed.

“Right, Einstein,” Charlotte replied sarcastically. She waved a hand over the heat-blasted rocks around us. “There must be loads of it around here.” And then, getting to the more important issue: “But *why*?”

Miffed by her superior attitude, I decided to ask the robot a different question. “Are you going to do any work?”

The creature lowered its pipe to rest on an angled knee, regarded me with a neutral stare, and eventually replied “Byenn by ...”

I scrambled to my feet. “This thing,” I said on our internal circuit, “is delusional. It talks like Huckleberry Finn.”

Charlotte, who was still sitting on eye-level with the robot, seemed to be more sympathetic. “What’s your name?”

The detoothed mouth bent into an ingratiating grin. “Dey call me Rastus.”

“Figures!” I muttered, and walked away. My companion dusted off the knees of her thermal suit and followed, her head bowed in what might have been thought, or the wish to pick the easiest route between the rocks that formed the shoreline.

In the hills which surrounded the Mirror our remote-sensing units were located at regular intervals. They looked like black boxes, but were really quite sophisticated devices. For example, each contained an argon jet. The punch from one of these, undiluted by any atmosphere, was enough to bend the liquid mercury surface like a physical blow. Ron Wick and his staff used them to correct deformations in the figure of the Mirror, bringing it back into the optimum shape to reflect light from the Sun to the Earth. Now, I examined each in turn as I picked my way along the beach, looking to see if any of them had been cannibalized by the robots. I could not detect any signs of this, but made a note to have the whole array checked out.

Turning a corner, Charlotte and I found ourselves in a small bay. There was a large group of robots on the far shore, doing some activity whose details I could not make out. My attention was in any case caught by something else: a crude hut of stones, with a black shadow for an entrance, in which a figure appeared to be smashing an object on a boulder which projected from the sea. Moving closer, I saw that the robot was a buxomly type. As I watched, she scooped mercury onto what looked to be a piece of cloth and then worked the liquid into the garment, before flailing it onto the rock to remove the excess fluid.

“She’s doing the laundry,” Charlotte said. “The old-fashioned way.”

“Well, at least she’s doing *something*,” I growled. And then, realizing that my blood pressure was going up and that this was not a good place for a heart attack, I suggested: “Why don’t *you* talk to her? Try to find out what the heck’s going on.”

Charlotte, with a look of concern, stumbled over to the hut, leaving me to sit looking in the shadow of an outcrop. This was ridiculous, I thought. It was as if some epidemic of insanity had taken hold of our robotic corps, turning it from a precision workforce into a dull-witted group of peons. I tried to reason it out, but not with much success. Staring uncomprehending at the



stone hut, I saw that its lintel was chalked with the words *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. "At least they got the spelling right," I thought.

Charlotte returned. In the shade of the big rock, her visor went transparent and I saw that her face was covered with bafflement. "Her name's Emma."

"Emma what?" I countered derisively. "Don't slaves usually have a second name, like Chambers or Grandmaison?"

"Calm down, Stu," said Charlotte patiently. "Her name's just Emma, and she says that most of the robots now see themselves as members of The Tribe."

I guess I must have looked apoplectic through my visor, because Charlotte put a comforting hand on my knee. "Stu, this is more serious than we thought. Emma says that nearly all of the robots – even the ones with low intelligence – have *Seen the Light*."

"What?!" I shouted. The volume of my exclamation inside my companion's helmet made her flinch "What *Light*? Does she mean the Sun? What's going on here, in God's name?"

"That," said Charlotte quietly, "is a pretty good choice of words."

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Back in the dome, the sound of many voices reverberated from the curved wall of my office. It was hot and sweaty, even though the horizontal window was narrowed to a yellow slit. All of the section heads were there. Normally these people worked well together, dedicated as they were to the smooth functioning of the Mirror. But my oral report on the activities of the robots appeared to have caused a split, and there was definitely no consensus on how to deal with the problem.

McKee, head of chemistry, was openly skeptical of my account. I could not entirely blame him for this, since it had actually taken a while for me to admit that our mechanical workers had somehow caught religion. McKee was a short, bald guy who compensated for his lack of physical stature by talking too much. He also thought he could sing, and at one point in my account had broken out in a mock-spiritual voice with "Dat old man ribber, he jest keep rollin along..." Charlotte, who was seated alongside, told him to shut up.

Ron Wick, our long-standing head of engineering, saw the problem with the robots as deadly serious. He was scared sick that they would disrupt the workings of the Mirror. However, his reaction was overly dramatic. I heard him say to Charlotte, "I tell you the truth – the only good robot is a dead robot." To which her reply was the same as before.

Charlotte and I had actually worked out a plan for dealing with the problem, which we viewed as a kind of compromise. It was the result of long, close deliberations. (This was why when the worried Ron Wick had called her last night, he found she was not occupying her own bed; but that's a different story.) We could not just stay idle. Already, the activities of the robots were causing disruptions, even though they were confined to the shore of what they were calling the Sea of Galilee. There had been a large jump in the amount of argon used by the units around the Mirror to blow out deformations in its surface, and keep the sunlight reflected from its surface tightly collimated. However, we could not be too aggressive in dealing with the robots. For example, if we were to try and shut them down, they might take it as persecution and conceivably react with violence. And anyway, what we really wanted was to get them back to work, so we could maintain the Mirror and its beam. Any plan we adopted had to avoid – at all cost – a break in the energy supply to Earth.

As I tried to quieten the hubbub of voices in my office, it was clear to me that a priority was to get the differing factions to work together. In fact, Charlotte and I would need the cooperation of all the project's sections if we were to realize our plan. I would talk to McKee and Ron Wick later, in private. Now I needed to stop the squabbling, and try to establish a common sense of purpose.

“Colleagues,” I announced, “please adjust your eyes for our major feature presentation.”

The room fell into puzzled silence. Charlotte came forward and adopted a lectural stance. I hit the control on my desk, and the slit of sunlight along the outer wall of the dome snipped shut, plunging everything into darkness.

Flash! A picture appeared on the wall. It showed a jumble of Sun-blasted rocks, with waves of mercury lapping around a couple of boulders that protruded above the surface of the Mirror, whose shimmering expanse stretched to a sharply-defined horizon. It might well have been the Sea of Galilee – except that the distant sky was black, punctuated only by the bluish dot of a distant Earth.

“This is a video of the last encounter that Stu and I had with the robots,” explained Charlotte. “We had earlier talked with a couple of them, Rastus and Emma.”

A snigger from the audience showed that the chemist McKee thought that the names were amusing. But a groan from the engineer Ron Wick showed that *he* thought the waves in the liquid mercury to be anything but funny. The movie had been cobbled together from the

surveillance cameras in three of the remote-sensing units around the edge of the Mirror. As we watched, the viewpoint switched from one camera to another, and zoomed in. Quicksilver splashed up onto an ochre rock, and began to dribble down, leaving a few sparkling splotches in the rocky crevices. It might have been the seaside at some Earthly resort.

“In a moment,” continued Charlotte, “you will see where the waves originate.”

The third camera gave more of a panorama. Two figures in thermal suits were picking their way along the shoreline, detouring around large outcrops and climbing over the smaller boulders. A crackly audio circuit cut in: grunts and inaudible curses in a baritone, plus deep but regular breaths that ended with a soprano voice saying “Hold it!”

I watched my own image on the film, as it bumped into the other figure and took a step backwards. The two humans stood still, staring at a group of a dozen robots in the medium distance. The picture was slightly out of focus, and showed only that the mechanoids were clustered in a rough circle at the sea’s edge, intent on something in their midst. But whatever was happening there must have been clearer to the human observers, because suddenly the male voice said with feeling: “Shit!”

There was a short titter of laughter from the audience. Charlotte explained “This video has not been edited.”

Actually, this was not completely accurate. At my insistence, a piece of the record had been omitted. It showed me falling on my arse off a rock, being helped up by Charlotte, and receiving a pretend get-better kiss. However, nothing of *scientific* value had been left out.

Abruptly, the scene shifted as it was taken up again by camera two. It had managed to reprogram itself, and was now shooting in a narrow focus through the legs of a massive robot which was stooped over the surface of the sea. Drops of silver cascaded from between the mechanized fingers, as the right hand took a scoop of liquid. The fingers of the broad left hand were splayed, and in their cusp there rested – a baby.

The viewers gasped. Charlotte, in charge of the presentation, might have said something in way of clarification at this point. To the effect that the ‘baby’ was really a tiny robot of the sort we use to clean the air ducts at the dome. But sensitive to the moment and its impact, she kept quiet.

Audio, which for some reason had been out, now cut back in. It carried the sound of a dozen mechanical voices, singing in unison: “Rock of ages, cleave for me...” The feet of the

robots tramped up and down, in time to the tune. A confused barrage of waves of mercury converged on the baby, which was now being held half-submerged in the lake. The big robot's right hand sent a cascade of quicksilver onto the forehead of the baby, which started to struggle, and let out a very human cry.

“Christ!” Ron Wick exclaimed from the front row of onlookers. I did not know whether he was offended by the disturbance to his holy sea of mercury, or if he objected to the nature of the ceremony. For there could be no doubt that we were witnessing a baptism – Mercury style.

Camera three came back on. A spindly, long-legged robot on the edge of the crowd pointed a long arm at the two human figures, which were slowly approaching along the edge of the Mirror. Some of the attendees at the baptism looked up from the subject of the ceremony. Confusion spread among the congregation: gesticulating limbs, rotating heads and the sound of wailing. The thin robot suddenly started to run along the shoreline with remarkable speed, to meet the human intruders. A couple of the other mechanoids, more hefty in construction, followed. One of these, passing by the site of camera three, abruptly stopped. It seemed to be thinking.

An accusing finger pointed directly into the camera, backed by a fierce expression from red eyes and a yell of anger. The audience in my office shrank from the scene, as if they had been there in reality.

The red-eyed robot stooped and picked up a jagged rock. Its companion mechanoid, whom I recognized as Rastus, laid a restraining hand on the other's raised arm. “Cast not the first stone, lest...”

The appeal was lost, however. Something blurry occupied the centre of the picture, which abruptly exploded into stars and went blank.

The silence of the audience was total. As I walked back to my desk, I could even hear the usually inaudible hum of the air conditioners. I passed Charlotte, and we exchanged a look: we knew that we had them, and that there was no need to explain anything else. It would be near to a formality to get the agreement of the assembled section heads to the plan we had hatched.

I opened the dome window again, letting in a fan of glaring sunlight. In its illumination, I saw that Ron Wick was sprawled in his chair, stupefied; while the garrulous McKee sat hunched up, looking quietly at the floor. The rest of them resembled robots themselves. But ones on which a bomb had been dropped.

“Colleagues,” I began; and then stopped, remembering that I had used the same ingratiating term earlier, and realizing that some members of the audience needed more time to reprogram their minds. When the majority of eyes were focussed on me, I continued: “We are in a difficult situation, but I would remind you all that we have a duty to Mercury Mirror Incorporated, and that...”

“What do you want to *do*?” McKee interrupted.

I thought, this guy is a genuine pain in the backside. But then, I never liked speeches. And the attentive looks of the other heads of section showed that I could dispense with loyalty-inspiring rhetoric.

“I would like,” I said, “to present to you Plan M.”

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Plan M was audacious. Even as its inventor, I gave it only a fifty/fifty chance of success. In the first place, it depended on several technological things over which we lacked complete control. And in the second place, it depended on the cooperation of the section heads, which was proving more difficult than I had expected. McKee the chemist showed himself surprisingly dedicated in trying to modify the viscosity of liquid mercury, which with a density relative to water of about 14 is an awkward substance. I eventually had to order him to take a break and get some sleep. Ron Wick, by comparison, was irritatingly recalcitrant. He could not see that – even if we could do it without a major revolt – cutting off the robots would not solve the problem of how to maintain the Mirror. In fact, the question of the robots’ psychology was a second thing that bothered me. Even with an average intelligence of only 100, they were too canny to be fooled into submission by some old-fashioned missionary-style trick, such as an eclipse. Anyway, there was nothing of any size between Mercury and the Sun which could be used to engineer a solar eclipse. This notwithstanding the fact that a long time ago some astronomers had hypothesized a planet near to the Sun called Vulcan, which was supposed to explain the puzzling orbit of Mercury. That idea was made obsolete by Alby (Einstein) and his theory of general relativity, and passed into history, along with corsets and spats. However, while Plan M was technologically and psychologically as robust as we could make it, I knew that it was a gamble.

“Don’t worry,” insisted Charlotte as we made the last preparations. “I’m sure you’ll pull it off.”

I grunted doubtfully. The oversized galoshes, as I pulled them on over my suit, seemed to sum up the silliness of our approach. But I did appreciate Charlotte's support. And her humor-inducing smile. And other things about her, which I had recently come to appreciate but which would not find a place in my annual report. "At least," I thought to myself, "if Plan M succeeds, I won't have to rewrite that whole damned report. An appendix will cover matters. And then..."

My mind started to speculate, as Charlotte checked the seals on my suit and McKee thrust the Book into my gloved hands. It was really a laboratory manual, one of only a few actual documents still to be found in the dome. Its crinkly pages were so profuse with chemical names and symbols that it might just as well have been written in some dead language of Earth. And what, I wondered, would Earth be like when I returned?

For I had decided to go home. This irrespective of whether Plan M was a success, or (as seemed increasingly likely to me) a spectacular failure. The only thing that still nagged at me, in connection with this decision, was whom to recommend to Mercury Mirror Incorporated as my successor. I reluctantly came to the conclusion that it would have to be McKee. Because the chemist's volubility, shaven head and strutting small figure represented less of a threat than the lanky engineer with his pseudo-honesty and shoot-em-up attitude. Naturally, Charlotte would have been the better choice by far to be the new boss. She was a good computer person, and had a quiet self-confidence that made her male rivals look like social misfits. But it was precisely these qualities which made her unavailable to the new person in charge. For Charlotte had decided to return to Earth with me. She had gotten things organized back there, and her two teenage kids would be vacating the family home in order to go to college. I was looking forward to lounging on the porch at the farm, at long last able to contemplate something green and growing...

"Wake up!" Charlotte exclaimed. "You're all set." She gave me a kiss on the visor, leaving a smudge. The shapes formed by her lips faded as I waddled out into the battering sunlight of the Mercury landscape.

I was on the far edge of the Mirror, with the darkness of the semi-permanent Mercury night at my back. The immense expanse of quicksilver in front of me was glittering but sullen. It might have been solid; but as I walked into the metal, two interfering circles of disturbance spread out, racing each other to the far shore. There lay the dome and its hundreds of human workers, most of them still unaware of what was planned. Between myself and the dome –

gathered in random groups along the shoreline of the Mirror – a thousand or so robots were going about their new-found religious business. I felt abruptly sorry for the misguided creatures: even if there *was* a God, this Sun-smitten hell was no place to find Him.

“Don’t drop the book!”

McKee’s tedious voice crackled in my ears, and I looked down to see that my improvised prop was in danger of falling from my gloved grip. Not that it would matter much if it did. The book would probably sink no more than its cover thickness into the dense metal. The same unnatural buoyancy kept my own weight supported, and I moved steadily across the surface of the sea with the quicksilver splashing sluggishly around my knees. But I had a long way to go, and turned up the argon thruster in my backpack. I was doing all right, and expected that Charlotte and McKee would shortly be heading back, using the company vehicle to jounce their way around the periphery of the Mirror.

“We’ll see you later,” came the woman’s voice inside my helmet, in confirmation. There was a pause, and I could hear the remote whir of an electric motor and the complaining tone of the chemist. Then Charlotte said “Good luck, Stu.”

Click. Things went silent, except for the slosh of liquid mercury around my shins and the rasping of my own breaths. It was getting hot. Sweat began trickling down my back. And my slogging thighs were already starting to ache. “Oh well,” I muttered to myself. “If Jesus could do it, then so can I.”

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The sun-filled bowl of the Mercury sky was split by the lightening of an amplified electronic command:

“Repent!”

A thousand robot heads went motionless, and then swiveled to look out to sea. Two thousand crystal eyes focused on the figure: clad in shining samite, holding a real book, and walking on the waves. This last was by itself a miracle, as no metallic creature could be so buoyed.

“I will read to you from the Book!”

Robots remote from the apparition started to amble along the shores towards the point of closest approach, mesmerized. Those already close to the figure forgot what they were doing: artificial clothes in the process of pointless washing fell unheeded into the mercury waves;

pretend baby robots who were being shamelessly baptized slipped from the large mechanical hands into the quicksilver, from which they scrambled squalling onto land.

“Chapter One,” boomed the figure from the sea. “On the noble gases.”

There was a pause, necessary to translate the ancient laws about helium, argon and xenon into edicts relevant to the present situation.

“They are noble,” lectured the voice, covering the repetitious nature of the comment by turning a crinkly page. Exposed to the direct blast of the Sun, the leaf started to turn brown. In a short act of self-immolation, the page burst into flame. But with no atmosphere to support the conflagration, the page shriveled and became black. The reader – perhaps surprised but with quick responses – ripped it from the volume and dropped it onto the silvery surface of the sea, where it lay as an accusation.

“And *you* should be noble,” continued the voice, piped with exquisite stereo and timbre into every listening circuit among the spellbound robots. The voice took on a sing-song, hung-up quality which was reminiscent of an ancient cathedral but was in practice the result of electronic tremolo: “For there is no more noble purpose than to maintain the Mirror – which is holy in His sight.”

Another page of the Book went up in brief flames, and was hastily dropped from singed fingers onto the surface of the sea.

“And for those who do not listen,” threatened the figure in a steel-spring voice, “there is Chapter Two, on the Horrors of the Halogens.”

Some of the robots began wailing. Others, unsure how to show penitence, scooped up handfuls of mercury and rubbed it onto their dusty heads, seeking to cleanse both their metallic bodies and the imagined sins of their positronic brains.

“Chlorine and fluorine shall eat thy joints!” yelled the voice. “And iodine will bite out yer dammed eyes.”

By now, half the robots were in despair. They ran purposelessly up and down the shore, pulling at figurative hair and trying to dent their invulnerable bodies with sharp-edged rocks. The sermon was working, and the floating figure on the lake seemed to take pity on the misguided members of its flock. The voice shifted into the vernacular version of robot speech, though with a note that urged its listeners to action:



“Be fleet, be fleet!” And then, staring directly at the nearest and largest robot: “Jeet thy seat!”

The massive mechanoid bent at the knees, pushing out its posterior, like a cartoon figure ready to depart with a *whoosh!* But it still seemed reluctant...

Suddenly, the shining, gowned figure floating on the sea snapped shut the Book. An appropriately-placed microphone broadcast the sound as a clap of thunder. The right arm of the spectre raised itself in admonition. “Go!” was the order. And then, in a forgiving but still authoritative tone: “Go, and return to your true callings.”

Robots streamed away from the Mirror, heading for the dome and reprogramming which awaited them there. A few, obstinate ones hung around for a while. But finally they, too, followed their fellows through the broken rocks of Mercury. The Mirror finally lay deserted and quiet.

“I quite enjoyed that,” the lonely figure said to itself.

\*

I was sitting in my office, enjoying a hefty drink, when Charlotte bounced in. I must admit that I was in a self-congratulatory mood, so it took a while before the meaning of what she was saying penetrated to my brain.

“What d’you mean, they found a Bible?”

Charlotte sighed, like a mother who has to repeat something unpleasant to a smug child.” Ron Wick and McKee found a *real* copy, on the shores of the Mirror.”

I shrugged. The discovery was hardly surprising, given what had happened. Indeed, the only remarkable thing was that such an old book could still cause so much trouble. I was not especially concerned: the recent problem with the robots had been solved, our bags were packed, and I was ready to board the ship back to Earth. But I made a note to remind McKee, as my replacement, to make a search for more copies of the subversive text. “Why so serious?” I asked.

Charlotte looked at me with a quizzical, mixed expression. Her luggage was stacked by the side of mine, near the door. The slit of light from the office window cut across our mutual belongings, and I would not be sad to see the last of that yellow glare. Shortly, Rastus would arrive to lug our baggage to the ship. But like most women, Charlotte had a big purse with her personal and ‘essential’ things in it. Looking nervous, she opened this and delved into it, pulling out a dog-eared volume. “Take a look,” she invited.

The copy of the Bible was dilapidated. There was no cover, and a robot footprint was stamped in dust across the dense writing of the first page. I read "*In the beginning...*" But something seemed wrong, and I skipped through the text with a premonition of a new problem.

Somebody, or something, had deliberately removed the New Testament...