

Brown Robert

By Terry Carr

Arthur Leacock shuffled quickly down the wooden hall of the small midwestern university where he had worked for thirty-two years and eight months, give or take maybe a week. His sleep-rumpled, peppery hair stuck out from under the old leather cap which he had worn for fully seventeen of those years, and his oft-resoled shoes were almost silent in the hallway, though its echoing properties were so good that Arthur had often fancied he could hear his own breathing whispered back to him from the walls.

He turned right at the large waiting room in the middle of the building and went up the stairs to the second floor two at a time, grasping the handrail with large-knuckled hands to pull himself along. He did not look where he was going, but instead rested his eyes unseeingly on the stairs passing beneath him, his mouth drawn back into the heavy wrinkles of his cheeks.

Robert Ernsohn, full-voiced Robert with brown soul, would already be in his office, of course. Wavy Robert, whose brow was noble as a mannequin's, always arrived half an hour before the time he set for Arthur. When Arthur arrived, he knew, Robert would be rechecking the figures he had pored carefully over till midnight—not because Robert did not trust his own abilities, but because it was his policy always to double-check his figures. Robert, naturally, would never give in to the danger of overconfidence, which might be called conceit; he always made sure that he had made no mistake. And then he always smiled.

At the top of the stairs Arthur pushed through the door to the second floor and crossed to Robert's office. The door creaked twice behind him and then rested shut.

Robert Ernsohn looked up from his pretentiously small desk in the corner by the window and pushed the papers aside. The red-orange sun, slipping silently from behind the roof of the building beyond the courtyard, cast lines of light through the venetian blinds across the desk. Brown-eyed, brown Robert smiled with innocent satyriasis and dropped his pencil in the pencil-glass.

"I've checked it all four times," he said. "Short of going upstate to a computer that's all I can do. I hope it's right."

Arthur watched his mouth as he spoke and then stepped into the cloakroom to hang up his overcoat. He found a cleaning rag and took it with him when he came out and went on across the office, five steps, into the laboratory. A small laboratory, cluttered and dirty. The floor was dirty, at any rate; the equipment was polished. But Arthur set to polishing it again, because this morning it would be used.

There was a reclining couch in the midst of the cacophony of mechanical and electrical complexity. Arthur brushed off the couch, touching the leather softly with his fingertips, and then began carefully rubbing down the metal of the machine. He tested a few levers by hand and oiled one of them, humming to himself. But he noticed himself humming and stopped.

The machine, the time machine, was ready for operation. It was clean and had been checked over for a week; all the parts which were doubtful had been replaced, and on a trial run yesterday it had performed

perfectly. Robert's sweater—Robert's, of course, not Arthur's—had been sent two days into the future and had come back. It had been sent six months and then five years into the future, and it had still come back. But of course Arthur had never doubted that it would.

Robert appeared in the doorway and watched him as he threw the switch and warmed the machine. A few dials moved, and Robert stepped forward with his intelligent eyes to read them and glance down at the figures in his hand and nod. Arthur ignored him. He switched the machine off and stepped to the window to look at his watch; it was 7:43 a.m. He unstrapped the watch and handed it to Robert and went into the other room.

In the office he sat in Robert's chair by the window and looked out onto the courtyard. The girl, eighteen and brunette, had a class across the way at eight o'clock, and she always arrived early. Arthur always watched for her and when he saw her he diverted Robert's attention, so that he always missed seeing her. He had been doing that ever since he had seen Robert talking with her two months before.

Presently he saw her, walking quickly through the cold and up the steps to the courtyard. It was cold weather and she wore a heavy coat which concealed her figure—which was a good thing. Arthur knew how young men like cheekbone Robert liked the summer months on campus.

"What time you want to go?" he called out, and when Robert came into the room he did not look out the window.

"At eight," said Robert.

"You're sure?"

"Of course. I told you definitely yesterday, and I seldom change my mind."

"Well, you never know," said Arthur. "Something might have come up, might have changed your plans."

Robert smiled as though he were flexing his face muscles. "Nothing is likely to at this point. Except perhaps an act of God."

An act of God, Arthur repeated in his mind, wanting to look out the window to see if the girl was safely out of sight yet.

"There's someone at the door," he said.

Robert went to the door, but there was no one there and he went outside to look down the stairs. Arthur turned and looked for the girl. She had sat down on a bench by the door to her building and was paging through a book, her hair falling softly like water mist across her forehead. Even from this distance Arthur could see that it was clean, free hair, virgin's hair. He knew the way absent Robert would like to run his fingers through it, caressing the girl's neck, tightly, holding her ...

Robert was dangerous. No one else realized that, but Arthur had watched young men on that campus for thirty-two years, and he recognized the look he so often saw in Robert's eyes. So many of them, students and young professors, had that look: veiled, covert, waxing and waning behind the eyes, steadily building up to an explosion like an— But Arthur did not want to think about that.

He had tried, once, to warn others about Robert, whose mind was a labyrinth of foggy, dark halls. He had told them, down in the main office, one day after hours. That had been the day he had seen dark

Robert with the girl, seen them together. He had told Mr. Lewis' assistant and tried to warn her—fog Robert must be dismissed and sent away. But the woman had hardly listened to him, and as he had stood in the outer room on the way out, looking calmly at a chip in the baseboard, he had heard her speaking to Mr. Lewis, the president of the university. "We have to remember that Arthur is getting on in years," she had said. "He's probably having a little trouble with his memory, playing tricks on him. People who are getting on in years sometimes aren't very much in contact with reality." Mr. Lewis' assistant was a dull, gray woman.

"Robert Ernsohn is one of our most valued young men," Mr. Lewis had said. "We're backing his research as fully as possible, and we have every confidence in him." Arthur had heard some papers rustle and then silence, so he had stopped looking at the baseboard and gone out.

Not in contact with reality? Arthur had been watching the realities of young men and their eyes through all his years at the campus, first as a janitor, then later as an assistant in the chemistry labs and up in the small observatory on the top floor. He had seen them looking at the girls, light and rounded, long hair and tapered ankles and tight, swaying skirts. He knew about realities.

He had read about them, in books from the library's locked shelves. Case histories of sadists and murderers and twisted minds of all sorts. Men who cut girls straight up the belly, dissected their breasts, removed the organs of their abdomens and laid them out neatly on the floor, and then carefully washed what remained of their bodies and put their clothes back on them and went away. Arthur had read all those books carefully, and he knew what reality was. It was all around him and he was certainly in contact with it.

The door behind him opened and frowning, covert Robert came back into the room.

"There was no one," he said, and glanced at the watch and went into the laboratory where the machine was.

"It must be time," Arthur said, and followed him.

"Yes, it is," Robert said, sitting on the couch. Arthur pulled the scanner forward to where it rested directly above Robert's body and set the calibration exactly correctly. He activated the machine and waited while it warmed.

Ambitious Robert was going into the future. Not far, just one hour ... but it would make history; he would be the first. No one else seemed to have the slightest inkling of the method, but narrow-eyed Robert had run across it and had built his machine, telling the administration it was something else, keeping it secret, keeping men from the bigger universities and corporations from coming in and taking over his work. "I have to believe in my own abilities," Robert had said.

Arthur watched him as he lay back on the couch under the apparatus of the machine. Robert's eyes, long-lashed, closed softly, and he drew a deep, even breath. "I'm ready."

So brown Robert goes into the future, Arthur thought. And when he comes back he intends to bring witnesses to see him an hour from now, two of him, and to explain it all with his full, rich, curdled voice, and write a paper and go to a larger university and be famous where there are more and more young, rounded girls. Because Robert knows reality almost as well as I do.

Arthur checked the dials and meters of the machine carefully, seeing that they were exactly as Robert had ordered them. Arthur was a good, careful worker, and that was why, even when Mr. Lewis' assistant

had scoffed at him, he had not been afraid of being dismissed. Everybody knew that he always did exactly as he was told.

"Good-bye," he said. He flicked the switch and Robert disappeared.

He stepped over to the empty couch and placed his hand on the soft, worn leather cushion, feeling its warmth from the body which had just left it. Robert was in the future.

But he had to bring him back. He reset the machine and threw another switch and Robert reappeared on the couch. Arthur went and stood over him and looked for a long time at the blood flowing from his mouth and nostrils and eyes and ears. There was a small hole torn through his right leg, and that was beginning to bleed too. He was dead.

The gash in his leg must have been from a small meteor, Arthur decided. He had heard about them when he'd been working in the observatory. And one afternoon when he had been working there he had realized what would happen to Robert when he went into the future. Of course he could travel forward in time and reappear an hour later, but the Earth would not be there, because the Earth moved around the sun at about eighteen and half miles a second and for that matter the whole solar system seemed to be moving at about twelve miles a second toward a point in the constellation Hercules. That was what someone in the Astronomy department had told him, anyway, and he had memorized it.

So Robert had landed an hour in the future, but somewhere out in space, and he had died, the pressure of oxygen in his body hemorrhaging his blood vessels and bursting his lungs before he could even suffocate. But of course it hadn't been Arthur's fault.

Humming softly to himself, Arthur closed down the machine and washed as much blood as he could from Robert's head. Some of it was drying already, leaving a brownish crust on the cold skin. He rearranged Robert's clothes and went downstairs to report what had happened.

He went directly, stopping only once to watch a young girl with a soft, full red sweater as she struggled out of her heavy coat.

The End

© 1962. First published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, July 1962.