

TECHMECH

ROBERT F. YOUNG

In his last appearance here ("Perchance to Dream," February) Robert F. Young dealt seriously with a powerful theme—the collective unconscious. Now he returns in a lighter vein to sketch for us the birth of a god for our times...

Illustrated by Laurence Kamp

OUR HERO this time is a sculptor named Morton; our scene, the interior of an abandoned warehouse that he has converted into a studio and which is located in the waterfront of a more-or-less typical American metropolis. The studio is equipped with an overhead traveling crane and a chain-fall, and furnished with a long workbench. Rectangles of morning sky was visible through a series of paneless windows spaced at even intervals just below the raftered ceiling, and on the right, a high, wide doorway looks out onto a chuckhole-crated street.

As the curtain rises we see Morton standing on one of the lower rungs of an aluminum extension ladder, his face hidden behind a welder's mask. A retractable cable trails down from a torch in his right hand to a portable electric arc welder that stands several feet from the base of the ladder, and he is busily at work welding a refurbished 1969 Falcon hubcap to the knee-joint of his latest masterpiece—a statue of heroic proportions entitled "Techmech". Typical traffic noises, occasionally interspersed by the sigh of the sea, are audible in the background.

MORTON (*extinguishing the torch and tilting back his mask*): There, old buddy-boy—that should do it. Now you're all set to be unveiled.

CHORUS (*Five working housewives who have paused to peer through the doorway on their way to work in the cannery next door*): Hail, Techmech! We the Daughters of the Industrial Revolution salute you! (*Exit Chorus.*)

Enter Morton's fiancée, Genevieve, bearing a covered tray. **GENEVIEVE**: I brought you your breakfast, Joe. (*She clears a space on the cluttered workbench and sets the tray down.*) I figured you'd work all night, so I went to bed.

MORTON (*proudly*): How's he look, Gen? He's all done. **GENEVIEVE** (*gazing dubiously up at the statue*): Couldn't you weld on some kind of an upper lip so those awful teeth wouldn't show?

MORTON: Those teeth are solid aluminum-bronze cutter blades. I *want* them to show.

GENEVIEVE: Aren't you going to give him any eyelids?

MORTON: Hell no! (*He descends the ladder and lays the mask and torch aside.*)

GENEVIEVE: But without eyelids his eyes stick out too much. Everybody will know they're nothing but 22" picturetubes.

MORTON (*removing the cover from the tray*): What could be more fitting than for a statue epitomizing the technological age to have cathode-tube eyes? ... How come just plain bread and butter?

GENEVIEVE: The toaster went on the fritz.

MORTON: I thought we just got it.

GENEVIEVE: We did.

Enter HERALD (A retired Western Union messenger who wears his Western Union uniform morning, noon and night and who is spending his Golden Years haunting newsstands, memorizing newspaper headlines and reciting them afterward in bars, barbershops, billiard lounges and sundry other places): **NEW POWER BLACKOUT COVERS WISCONSIN, ILLINOIS, INDIANA, MICHIGAN AND OHIO. CHRYSLER TO RECALL ALL NEW-MODEL DODGE DARTS FOR POSSIBLE FUEL-PUMP FAILURE. PENN CENTRAL DERAILMENT IN UPSTATE NEW YORK KILLS 15. WOMAN IN POTTSVILLE, PA. OPENS SHELTER FOR STRAY CATS—CALLS IT "THE**

CATHOUSE". FORD MOTOR COMPANY TO BUILD NEW STAMPING PLANT IN NEWFOUNDLAND. 6 DEAD, 9 INJURED IN CHAIN-SHROUDED CALIFORNIA HIGHWAY. (Exit HERALD.)

GENEVIEVE (*still gazing at the statue*): Don't you think you ought to rig him up a pair of pants out of an old tent or something, Joe?

MORTON (*finishing his breakfast*): The implication being, I suppose, that that length of 4" plastic pipe I used isn't realistic enough.

GENEVIEVE: It isn't. Any reasonably well-educated woman will know the second she looks at it that he wouldn't be able to—couldn't possibly—get an erection in a million years!

MORTON (*slamming his fist on the workbench*): Damn it, Gen, you're reacting atavistically! Techmech isn't a fertility god—he's a *technological* god!

GENEVIEVE: Joe! For a minute I thought he moved his head!

MORTON (*following her gaze*): Probably it shifted a little on the cervical mount. Maybe I'd better reinforce the seam.

GENEVIEVE: He moved it again, Joe! The other way.

MORTON (*grabbing his mask and torch*): I'll go up and have a look.

GENEVIEVE (*pulling him back from the ladder*): No, Joe!—no! Look! His eyes are lighting up! His whole body's starting to glow. Joe, he's coming to life! He's *breathing*!

MORTON: Don't be ridiculous, Gen! How could he possibly come to life? He's nothing but an anthropomorphic agglomeration of automobile chassis, automobile tailpipes, automobile radiators, utility-appliance cabinets, television antennas, discarded computer components, airplane fuselage, bicycle chains, BX cable and chicken wire . . . My God! he *is* coming to life! My God, Gen!—he's *walking*!

The two mortals shrink back against the workbench clinging tightly to each other as Techmech lifts his right foot, extends it forward, knocking over the ladder and the electric arc welder, and plants it with an awesome clang! in the middle of the concrete floor. The cathode-tube eyes are aswirl with violent reds and blues and greens, but they take no cognizance of the two humans far below as their outsize owner, a bluish glow emanating from his limbs and torso, shoves aside the chain fall with a sweep of a beam-like arm. He reaches down and snatches a large Phillips screwdriver from the workbench; a second clanging step brings him almost to the doorway. It is necessary for him to stoop way down in order to pass through it, and he does so with a great groaning and screeching of his various metal parts. For a moment it appears that he will lose his balance and fall forward onto his face, but he does not, and presently, after a series of clanks, clangs and clatters, he gains the street and disappears from view.

Morton runs over to the doorway. Screams sound in the background; the squealing of tires.

MORTON: He's walking up the street, carrying the screwdriver. People are running away from him. By God, Gen! what have I done?

Re-enter HERALD: BLACKOUT EXTENDS TO KENTUCKY, TENNESSEE, WEST VIRGINIA, VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA—CAUSE UNKNOWN!, CONFUSING "OLD-YOUNG PICTURE" OF MARS ASCRIBED BY NOTED ASTRONOMER TO POSSIBLE MARINER 9 CAMERA DEFECT. PENN CENTRAL DENIES NEGLIGENCE IN 20-CAR DERAILMENT IN UPSTATE NEW YORK THAT KILLED 15. FORD TO BUILD NEW STAMPING PLANT IN NEW GUINEA. LEADING ENVIRONMENTALIST RECEIVES SPECIAL GRANT TO STUDY LONG-RANGE EFFECTS OF NITROGEN OXIDES ON VIPERS BUGLOSS, BUTTERFLYWEEDS AND FIELD DAISIES. HI-RISE APARTMENT IN SCHENECTADY COLLAPSES, KILLING 87. FORD MOTOR COMPANY TO RECALL ALL

NEW-MODEL LTD BROUGHAMS, LTD'S AND GALAXIE 500's FOR POSSIBLE UNIVERSAL JOINT "FREEZE-UP". SHORT IN WASHER ELECTROCUTES 17-YEAR OLD HOUSEWIFE.
(Exit HERALD.)

GENEVIEVE (*joining Morton in the doorway*): Get back inside, Joe, before somebody fingers you as a second Frankenstein.

MORTON: Wish I could get a better view of him. Wait—I know! (*He re-enters the studio, drags the extension ladder over to the right wall and extends it to the sill of one of the windows that overlook the street.*) Hold her steady, Gen. (*He clambers to the topmost rung and leans through the window.*)

GENEVIEVE (*holding onto the ladder*): Can you see him, Joe?

MORTON: Yeah. He's still walking up the street. Still carrying that damned screwdriver. Traffic is stalled. People are still screaming and running away from him. No. Some—some of them are following him.

GENEVIEVE: *Following him?*

MORTON: That's right. Following him. More and more of them. You know what, Gen? I don't think I created a monster after all. I think I created a savior.

GENEVIEVE: Knock it off, Joe. This whole thing is crazy enough without you going crazy too.

MORTON: It only seems crazy because you're looking at it the wrong way. Think for a minute, Gen. Every age needs a savior, and generally one arises, in one form or another. We happen to be living in a unique age, and the ordinary kind of savior just wouldn't have done. We needed a special kind: a sort of divine plumber and electrician and mechanic combined who would go forth and fix everything that's gone wrong.

GENEVIEVE: With a *screwdriver*?

MORTON: He only grabbed that because it was handy. Because he was so eager to get started. Give him time.

GENEVIEVE: Joe, come back down to Earth. You're just a cold-water flat sculptor who can't pay his electric bill. How could you possibly create a god?

MORTON: I couldn't. I didn't. I realize that now. I was merely an instrument. It was the people's need for Techmech, working through me, that gave him tangible form, that ultimately brought him to life. They needed a *deus ex machina*, and they got one.

GENEVIEVE: What's he doing now, Joe?

MORTON: He's reached the Square. He's standing by the flagpole. Now he's gripping the pole with both hands and resting his forehead against it. He seems to be listening. . . You know what, Gen? I think he's using the pole as a sort of aerial, that he's tuning in on everything that's going on in the whole country—maybe in the whole world! (*Pause*) Gen! *the people are kneeling at his feet! They're even getting out of their cars!* They know who he is, Gen! They recognize him! (*A siren sounds in the distance.*) Gen! the police have arrived. They're getting out of *their* cars. *They're kneeling too!*

Re-enter HERALD: BLACKOUT NOW EXTENDS TO MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, GEORGIA, SOUTH CAROLINA AND FLORIDA—AUTHORITIES CONFOUNDED. FORD MOTOR COMPANY TO BUILD NEW STAMPING PLANT IN ANARCTICA. THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS ON CAMPUSES THROUGHOUT NATION TO PARTICIPATE IN HERMANN HESSE MEMORIAL FUND DRIVE. AMERICAN MOTORS TO RECALL ALL NEW-MODEL GREMLINS TO CORRECT POSSIBLE FRONT-END SUSPENSION IMBALANCE! NEW SHOPPING MALL MOVIE HOUSE COLLAPSES, KILLING 102. (*Exit* HERALD.)

GENEVIEVE: What's he doing now, Joe?

MORTON: He's still standing there with his head against the flagpole. Listening. Now he's stepping back. His—his shoulders are sagging. He seems kind of downcast. (*Pause*) Gen! *he just threw away the screwdriver!* Now he's leaving the Square. He's heading back this way. What do you make of *that*, Gen?

GENEVIEVE (*petulantly*): What do you expect me to make of it? Why'd you have to get yourself mixed up in such a crazy mess anyway? Why couldn't you have settled for being an *ordinary* welder?

You could five got a good job in the Ford Stamping Plant back home. They hire all sorts of welders. We could have been married by now and living respectably in a house instead of living in sin in a cold-water flat. We could have been driving a new LTD instead of a crummy old Volkswagon. But oh no!—you were too good for *that* kind of welding. *You* had to be a sculptor! You had to play Pygmalion! *You*—

MORTON: Gen! He stumbled over a pile of garbage! He nearly fell! Oh my God!

GENEVIEVE: It would be a good thing if he did fall!

MORTON: The people are following him, Gen. Drove and drove of them. But he seems so sad, so—so depressed. Traffic has stopped moving altogether. A solemn silence has settled over the whole city—(Abruptly *the silence is broken by the sound of thousands of voices lifted in song.*) Gen! The people are starting to sing!

GENEVIEVE: I hear them.

MORTON: They're singing The Battle Hymn of the Republic!

GENEVIEVE: That's sacrilegious, Joe, and you know it. Besides, the words don't even fit.

MORTON: Some of them do.

GENEVIEVE: What's he doing now?

MORTON: He's still heading this way. I think he's coming back to the studio. (*The singing grows louder; it is accompanied by sporadic clanks, clangs and clatters. Gradually both sounds diminish in volume.*) No—no, he's not coming here after all. He's going right by. . . Gen! he's heading for the sea!

GENEVIEVE (*sarcastically*): Maybe he's going to walk on the water.

MORTON: He's wading *into* the sea! Between two of the piers. My God! Gen! He's going to drown himself!

GENEVIEVE: Now Joe, take it easy. He may have another reason. Maybe he's overheated and wants to cool off. Maybe—

MORTON: He's walking out deeper and deeper. He's way beyond the piers. The water's all the way up to his waist. *Stop him! Stop him, somebody!*

GENEVIEVE: Joe, calm down. There's nothing you can do.

MORTON: I can just barely see the top of his head. Now that's gone too. . . The whole waterfront's lined with people. They're crying like crazy and singing through their tears. The longshoremen are crying and singing too. Gen! *Johnny Cash is standing at the end of one of the piers playing his guitar!*

GENEVIEVE: What's he playing—the Amoco commercial?

MORTON (*crying uncontrollably*): It's the most moving sight you ever saw!

GENEVIEVE: Joe, get hold of yourself and come down off that ladder before you fall! You've got it made and don't know it. I was wrong when I said you should have settled for being an ordinary welder—I see that now. I don't know whether Techmech was a god or not, but everybody seems to think so and it doesn't seem to matter to them that he chickened out. When it gets around that you created him—and I intend to see that it does—you'll be famous. You'll be snowed under with offers to appear on the talk-shows and to do TV commercials and to write your life story. You'll go down in history as a culture hero. This studio will become a shrine and we can buy the building and charge a \$50 admittance fee. As for Techmech, we'll hire a dredge and—

MORTON: (*descending the ladder to her side*): No, Gen—that would be sacrilegious. The sea is his chosen resting place and that's where he's going to stay. Besides, all we'd dredge up would be a bunch of junk. To all intents and purposes, Techmech's dead ... Our last hope. Gone. . . Let's go home, Gen—let's go home.

Re-enter HERALD: BLACKOUT SPREADING TO NORTHEASTERN SEABOARD-OFFICIALS DESPERATE. PILOT ERROR LISTED AS PROBABLE CAUSE OF LATEST AIRLINES DISASTER IN WHICH 206 PERISHED. FORD MOTOR COMPANY TO BUILD NEW STAMPING PLANT IN TIMBUKTU. BELL TELEPHONE TO ASK FOR DOUBLE PRESENT SERVICE RATES TO AVERT MAINTENANCE CRISIS. LEGAL BATTLE OVER COMPULSORY PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO GO TO NY SUPREME COURT. POSTAL SERVICE THROWS IN SPONGE-WE JUST CAN'T COPE, SPOKESMAN SAYS.

HIGH-LEVEL ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL DISPLAYS AMAZING VIRTUOSITY ON VIOLIN AT FUND-RAISING DINNER! GM TO RECALL ALL NEW-MODEL CAPRICES, IMPALAS, BEL AIRS AND BISCAYNES FOR HOOD-LATCH DEFECT. BILLION-DOLLAR SATURN PROBE EXPECTED TO THROW NEW LIGHT ON COMPOSITION OF RINGS. MIDEASTERN AND EASTERN U.S. DRUGSTORES REPORT UNPRECEDENTED DEMAND FOR CANDLES. (Exit HERALD.)

CHORUS (*The same five working housewives on their coffee-break*): In the beginning God gave to every people a color-television set, and with this set they enriched their lives. Now our set is broken.

(*Exeunt omnes.*)

—ROBERT F. YOUNG