

## A DAY IN THE LIFE OF ABLE CHARLIE

by Frederik Pohl

Like "Remthe Rememberer (and also like "The Way It Was, both also in this volume), this story was written for a special purpose: It was to be part of an advertising campaign some visionary adman had dreamed up to run in the pages of *Scientific American*. True to form, about the time I finished the story I got a call from the adman to say, shamefacedly, that his boss had hated the campaign and so it was canceled as of that morning. This time the jinx did not stop there. About the time I was trying to decide whether I wanted to publish the story myself in *Galaxy* (which I was then editing) or offer it to some other publication, I discovered in the incoming manuscripts from authors a Stephen Goldin story called "Sweet Dreams, Melissa. To my horror, it was very like this one-worse, it was a good story. I could not honorably reject it; nor could I, I felt, allow my own to be published anywhere near it. So I tucked the story away for several years, until a magazine called *Creative Computing* asked me for something, and published it. So, unless you were a reader of computer magazines a decade ago, there's no way you could have seen this story before. . . and if it sounds at all familiar, it's probably because you've read "Sweet Dreams, Melissa.

The time was 0900:00 A.M. and Charlie woke up. The first thing he had to do was to find out who he was that day, and so he explored his memory. He discovered that he was a white male American, thirty-two years old, married, employed in the sales department of a public utility company. He had two children, a boy and a girl. He had made \$17,400 in the year just past, and if it hadn't been for Harriet's part-time teaching salary he didn't know how they would have managed. He still owed over \$19,000 on their \$38,000 house, \$1,900 on the car, and nearly a thousand on the loan for modernizing the kitchen they had taken out two years before. Moreover, his daughter, Florence, had unfortunately inherited his bite, and so the orthodontist was going to cost him fifteen hundred dollars very soon. Charlie discovered that many of his thoughts were of money.

However, his memory contained many other things. He became aware that he was a fan of the Los Angeles Dodgers, and that he had volunteered as a Little League coach against the day when his four-year-old son, Chuck, was old enough to play. Charlie remembered that he was inclined to favor Chuck over the girl. It was curious that he could not remember what color Chuck's hair was, or whether Florence was doing well in school, but Charlie didn't realize that it was curious and so he continued to explore his memory.

He was a heavy smoker, drank a can of beer now and then, especially in hot weather, but didn't go much for the hard stuff. Although he liked looking at other women, he did not go beyond looking. Although he enjoyed a game of poker twice a month, he did not care to gamble heavy stakes. He drove a small foreign car (it was not clear whether it was a Datsun . a VW, or a Fiat), on which he got 24.7 miles to the gallon in everyday use and nearly 29 miles a gallon on the road. (He did not know what color it was. it did not occur to him to wonder why.) Charlie remembered that he was active in his party's politics (he did not know whether it was Democrat or Republican) and that he thought the mayor of his town was a crook. But he could not have said the mayor's name.

All these things about himself Charlie apprehended in a very short time indeed. He then spent somewhat longer remembering what brand of cigarettes he smoked, where he bought them, what had happened

when he tried to give them up (his wife complained of his short temper and begged him to start again), and what other brands he had tried. He rehearsed the services offered by his neighborhood filling station, and what he looked for when he needed gas on the road; what kind of Scotch impressed him when he was offered it at a friend's home; and why he had decided against switching from lather to an electric razor. Charlie inventoried every purchase he and his family had made for the past year, swiftly and without error. He recalled what TV programs he watched, what magazines he read and which of the thousands of commercials and advertisements they contained had affected any of the purchases.

At that point Charlie discovered that he had done everything he was required to do just then. He made a quick parity check on his instructions. When it revealed no gross error or failure on his part, he announced that he was ready for his next task and waited in standby mode for orders.

He waited what was for Charlie a very, very long time. All of this had taken Charlie a period measured only in fractions of a second. Now he rested, neither wondering nor moving, for a stimulus to further action. Without it he would do nothing, ever. He was not impatient. He knew what "patience was in conceptual terms-he could relate it to his memory of himself waiting without "patience for a traffic light to change-but it did not occur to him to feel that way now.

At 0901:30, give or take a few seconds, a young woman in a light gray dress, carrying a container of coffee, set the coffee down on her desk and seated herself before a large typewriter. She had heard the bell that announced Charlie was ready more than a minute before, but she was not quite ready for Charlie. She typed several rows of characters, checked them over, took a sip of her coffee, and stood up.

She glanced at the various lights and dials on Charlie's front panel, saw nothing to cause concern. Her typewriter had produced not only the visible row of characters on the sheet of paper it held but, on a spool connected electrically to the keys, a strip of magnetic tape. She snipped a four-foot length of it free, taped it to another reel, rewound it, and fed it into a scanning device. She removed the rubber band from a packet of perforated cards and dropped them into a hopper.

Then she pressed a button. Rubber-tipped fingers dealt the cards into sorting bins where, one by one, they were taken up again and read, like the music roll of an old player piano. The tape reel slid past its scanning head on a cushion of air and disappeared. The time was 0901:55.

Charlie began work-not at 0901:55.exactly , but at a time so near to it that the difference was measurable only in picoseconds.

His first problem, he was informed, had to do with cigarette package designs. He waited while the cards on that subject were scanned. There were forty-one alternate designs, and they were presented to him in pairs. First he was offered Package One and Package Two simultaneously; he compared them, made a value judgment based on what he knew of his own buying habits and preferences, and stated his preference. Then Package One and Package Three were offered to him, then Package One and Package Four, and so on until Package One had been compared with each of the others. Then he was offered Package Two with Package Three, Package Two with Package Four; and on and on until each prospective design on the list had been compared with each other. (There were 861 combinations in all, taken two at a time.)

At that point Charlie went into a sort of reverie while another part of his mind-it could have been called his "subconscious -tabulated the results of his cross-pairing and established an order of preference. He wrote down, in order, the ten package designs he had most favored . He wrote it in the form of impulses recorded on a magnetic tape (this caused a reel by the desk of the girl in gray to spin rapidly for a

moment, which she noticed out of the corner of her eye). Then he hummed for a moment, waiting for the card reader to allow him to begin his next task.

Each of Charlie's value decisions had taken him only about four nanoseconds, but the evaluation and readout were much slower. It took him considerably longer to announce his results than to arrive at them, and so it was 0902:45 before he began his next job.

The next assignment was to assess the merits of some proposed shaving-cream formulations.

Here the task was considerably more difficult, for several reasons. The first part of his task was to rank his preferences among the fifty-five formulations as to their odors, textures, and visual appearances, each in combination with the other. Charlie did not, in fact, realize quite how difficult it was, since he had no idea that he possessed neither smell nor vision, and touch only in the sense that certain of his members were capable of probing a card or tape for punched holes. He then had to evaluate some twenty-four shapes and weights of pressure canisters in relation to each sort of lather. Here too, Charlie was unaware of his lacks. In fact he did not have thumb and fingers; the "grasp and "weight and feel of the canisters in his "hand was in fact only a locating of certain binary statistics within the parameters of certain other quantities that were a part of his memory. In order for Charlie to be able to express an opinion on any of the matters on which his verdict was sought, many subtler fuges had been devised by the programmers on the staff of the advertising agency that owned Charlie. They materially prolonged the time for each comparison. However, he was in no way concerned by this. He did what he had always done. He did the task that was assigned to him, and when it was done he looked for, and did, the task that was next.

In all of the hour and forty-odd minutes in which Charlie, husband of Harriet, father of Florence and Chuck, searched his responses to a wide range of offerings, he performed something over five thousand million separate operations, including parity checks and internal verifications. He faithfully reflected the customs and tastes of the average of a sample of some 4 million American males as they pertained to the purchase of tobacco, beer, gasoline, automotive accessories, soft drinks, airline tickets, motion picture admissions, sporting goods, hi-fl equipment, toilet articles, and power tools. When his final magnetic report was on the tape, he signaled by ringing a bell. That was the end of Charlie's working day. In a sense it was the end of his life.

The girl in the light- graydress was in the assistant division chief's office when Charlie's bell rang, and so she didn't react at once. Charlie waited like a man on a benzedrine high, his mind clear and capable, but disengaged. It was nearly 1100 when the girl got back to her desk.

She took the spool of tape that held all his opinions and threaded it into a printer, where it began typing out plain copy at a rate of 350 words a minute. She replaced it with a blank spool, consulted her work sheet, and began to change Charlie with switch, with patch-cord, and with dial.

As she worked whole banks of memories dropped out of circuit. Chuck and Florence fell out of his personality without leaving a mark. His wife disappeared, his house, his car; the Los Angeles Dodgers went, with the Little League and the dunning letters from the bank.

She then checked the programming sheet and, following its instructions, selected new personality ingredients for Charlie: an economic level, an age, a set of buying habits, a profile of interests. She began to charge Able Charlie with the sum of these habits and biases. He was not yet aware of what he was, since he had not yet received the command to learn himself. For that matter, he was no longer "he. Now Able Charlie was a teenage girl, her principal interests cosmetics, soft drinks, clothes, records, and boys.

When all the patches were complete and the new tapes were ready to roll, the girl in the gray dress

double- checked, and pressed the "execute button. Able Charlie, AC-770, began to take up his-her-its new life.

The girl in the gray dress idly examined the polish on her nails. Her mind was not far from standby mode, either; until the first readout came, or a trouble signal, she had nothing to do but wait for lunch.

Inside the AC-770 Charlie, or Charlotte, was swiftly sniffing colognes whose fragrance was only the simulation of magnetic patterns on iron-oxide tape and comparing shades of lipstick whose colors were only a point on a hypothetical scale. The girl programmer was comparing colors , too. She wished idly that she had a friend to chat with-Rose Pink, after all? Or CatalinaCoral ? -but when she thought she heard a low contralto sigh she dismissed it at once. She knew that she was alone.