

## Piers Anthony - The Toaster

From 'Anthonology'

Buoyed by my first sale, I kept writing. I submitted a long science fiction poem, 'Strange is the Measure', to four markets and retired it. Then I wrote 'The Toaster' and tried it on the leading SF magazine, Analog. That magazine, in its prior guise as Astounding, had been the light of my life in the late 1940s when I discovered the genre; how nice it would be to have one of my own stories represented on its hallowed pages! Alas, three and a half months later my story came back, rejected. I have always wondered how a magazine that publishes every month can take several months to consider a story; surely the editor should run out of stories at that rate! (The answer, of course, is the slush pile: that towering stack of unsolicited manuscripts from hopeful writers like me that the editor postpones reading as long as humanly possible. Editors don't take three months to look at my fiction today.) I tried it on Galaxy, and then on Fantastic, and finally on Cosmopolitan. All bounces, so I retired it, as I had run out of markets and postage adds up. Hopeful writers have to pay the postage both ways, you know, if they want to get their stories back. This, then, is a tailed story; it has never before appeared in print. Is it worse than 'Possible to Rue'? Only about one in four of my stories ever sold, which is one reason I had to graduate to novels. It was economics, not natural inclination, that forced the move - but once I had done it, I discovered that I liked being a novelist better than being a storyteller.

Some of my fans today don't realize that I ever did write stories.

The announcer bonged respectfully. 'Speak your piece,' the cheerful white-haired woman said briskly.

'Miss Porter to see Miss Porter,' it said.

The woman frowned, but with a twinkle. 'You make about as much sense as a cheese factory on the moon,' she commented. 'Now let's try it again, and this time use *names*.'

The announcer paused in confusion, then got its circuits adjusted. 'Miss Ophelia Porter is present at the subterranean access and has expressed the desire to pay a personal call on resident Miss Adelaine Porter.'

'Why that's fine, just fine.' Miss Porter busily smoothed her old-fashioned apron. 'Why didn't you say so in the first place?'

'I'm already in, Auntie,' a voice tinkled behind her. 'I snuck into the 'vator while you were dickering with the blurt-box.'

Miss Porter smiled without surprise and turned to face the girl. Ophelia stood in front of the freight receptacle, resplendent in purple pantaloons and a conical hat. Her dark hair was gathered into a single enormous braid, and her eyes were artfully shadowed. 'Why do you think I stalled the contraption, dear? What on earth are you wearing?'

'Playsuit, Auntie. See?' Ophelia pirouetted into the centre of the room, the sides of her garment parting to reveal her thighs.

Miss Porter snorted. 'Seems to me you're still a little young for that sort of play. Nine years old –

'Ten, Auntie. And I -'

The announcer rang urgently. 'Miss Porter can not be – ' It hesitated. 'Miss Ophelia Porter can not be located,' it said with mixed triumph and chagrin.

'Well, find her, Blurtbody,' Ophelia exclaimed with impish glee. She knew that the announcer was too primitive to discern the difference between voices.

'It's a pleasure to serve you, madame,' the machine said dubiously.

The old woman clapped her hands together sharply. 'Don't call me "madam", you clamorous contraption. Get back to your business.'

'Yes, Miss Porter,' it said, cutting off quickly. Ophelia had already made herself comfortable in the archaic couch. 'When's it coming, Auntie?' she demanded. 'The Toaster, I mean.'

Miss Porter favoured her with a mock frown. 'I should have known you didn't come calling all by yourself out of love for your old maiden great-great aunt.' She settled into a chair herself. 'It's due at ten

o'clock. That will be in a quarter of an hour. Why don't you run out and play for a little while, dear, while you're waiting?'

Ophelia looked baffled. 'Outside?' 'Why certainly, dear. When I was a girl a century ago I used to delight in running through the forest paths, feeling the wind take my dress. When I was your age –'

'But Auntie - what about the radiation?' Miss Porter looked up, surprised. 'Dear me! I had forgotten about that. I suppose you can't go out these days.'

'Why do you still use those old-fashioned toasters, Auntie? Is it because you're eccentric?'

Miss Porter raised an eyebrow. 'Your father's been putting strange notions into your head, dear. Toasters and I have an ancient affinity.'

She leaned back and closed her eyes. 'I was just ten years old when I used my first toaster - if you could call it that.' She smiled reminiscently. 'That was in the year 1930. My mother let me put slices of homemade bread on a clean section of the old wood stove. Sometimes the pieces burned - but oh, my, it was delicious.'

Ophelia was pleased. 'We learned about bread in Cultural History class.'

Miss Porter didn't seem to hear. 'Of course, when I became a young woman I bought my own toaster. That was in 1940; it was one of those simple side-door affairs. I had to plug it in to start, and unplug to turn\_ it off. When I opened the doors the toast was supposed to slide down and flip itself over, so that I could do the other side without burning my fingers. But it didn't always work.'

'How come you didn't have any children of your own?' Ophelia inquired directly. 'Back when you were a luscious young piece?'

Miss Porter opened her eyes, tolerant of the child's language; times had changed. 'Why you see, dear, I never married - '

'But you don't need to be married to have children. Down at the free love clinic - '

'Some people feel that marriage has its advantages nevertheless, dear,' Miss Porter said gently. 'And a woman must wait until she's asked.'

'Daddy says he heard lots of men asked you. He says they were howling after you like bounds after a bitch in he -'

'Your father's long overdue for a spanking, I'm sure,' Miss Porter said severely.

'Oh, they don't spank people anymore, Auntie.'

'Really?' she inquired with interest. 'And what do they do these modern days?'

'You were telling me about your toasters,' Ophelia said uncomfortably. 'What did you get in 1950?'

Miss Porter leaned back again and let her old eyes close. 'I was thirty then, and thrilled by the advances they had made in toasting. Two slots in the top for the bread, and when you pressed down the handle it ticked away for three minutes - or was that the egg timer? - and then up popped the toast.'

'What's an egg?' Ophelia asked. The old woman sighed. 'Ask me that on another day. Today is Toaster Day. In 1960 there were no levers at all - you just dropped in the bread, and the toaster lowered it and popped it back at you in less than a minute. Sometimes I would eat a few berries, too -'

'Berries?' Ophelia put in, shocked. 'You *ate* them?' Her eyes were big and round.

'Why of course, dear. High bush blueberries fresh from the wilderness, though of course there wasn't much of *that* left even then. And sometimes strawberries -'

'Oh, Earthberries,' Ophelia said, sighing with relief. 'I thought you meant Betelguese Berries.'

Miss Porter wondered briefly what kind of fruit that could be, but decided not to inquire. Her great-great niece could be disconcertingly graphic. 'Let me see - in 1990 my toaster took the bread out of the package by itself, and buttered it hot and served it up on a little plate. I didn't have to do anything except order the bread and sweep up the crumbs. And in 2000 I didn't even have to do that.'

'It's here!' Ophelia squealed. Miss Porter opened her eyes once more and saw that a machine had materialized in the freight receptacle. It was larger than the old model and looked exceedingly complicated. She was not as enthusiastic about its arrival as Ophelia evidently was; the old one had served her well for ten years, also fixing meals, answering the viz, washing dishes and making the bed. The new one might be more ambitious, and that was not necessarily good.

'Are you going to show me a toast now, Auntie?' Ophelia exclaimed, dancing in front of the machine.

'Gracious, dear - do you mean to tell me that your family never fixed toast? We'll attend to that right away.' She eased herself to her feet and faced the machine. 'Toaster.. front and centre!'

The machine rolled forward a few inches and hesitated. 'Is Mistress addressing me?' it rumbled sonorously.

'Don't call me "mistress", you overstuffed tin can. At least, not in that masculine voice. Yes, I mean you. Come here.'

The machine moved into the centre of the room and cleared its speaker. 'I am your new Automated Service Tribune,' it said in a feminine pitch. 'I am a utility deluxe robotic housekeeper, model T-Zero. May I be of service?'

'You certainly may,' Miss Porter said crisply. 'I am Miss Adelaine Porter, your new mis - your new owner. I want you to prepare me two pieces of your finest buttered toast, with jelly on the side.'

'Beg pardon?' Tribune said. 'Did the Mistress ask for toads?'

'I said toast, you box of bolts. Two pieces.' Tribuuiie retreated in confusion. 'Perhaps if the Mistress

would describe what she wants -'

'I want two slices of bread heated until they char on the outside, with churned bovine extract spread on the upper surface. Does that make it quite clear, hardwarebrain?'

'Mistress must be aware that no bread has been manufactured for a number of years,' Tribune protested. 'And the zoo would hardly allow any of its valuable endangered-species bovines to be molested - '

Miss Porter tapped her foot menacingly. 'I want you to know that I'm a hundred and ten years old and set in my ways and I WILL HAVE MY TOAST. I'm going to give you just one more chance to perform, you - what did you say your name was?'

The machine drew itself up on its rollers. 'I am your Automated Service Tribune. You may call me AST for convenience. Model number T-Zero.'

'Well, give me some T-zero-A-S-T. T 0 A S T! Do you understand me, you silly Ast?'

The machine retreated and clicked to itself. Finally it rumbled to a decision. 'If Mistress persists in making an illogical or nonsensical request, it will be necessary to escort her to a clinic for a psychiatric examination.'

Ophelia came up to her nervously. 'It can do it, Auntie,' she warned. 'Those T-Zero models have special - '

Miss Porter patted the girl's hand. 'A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,' she quoted. 'I'm consistent, but I'm not foolish. I've had experience with wilful machines.' She opened her purse and extracted a small object.

'Auntie - that's a megawatt disruptor!' Ophelia cried. 'It certainly is, dear.' She activated it and slapped it against the braincase of the machine.

'But that will burn out the computer circuits of the AST!'

'It certainly will, dear.' 'But then it won't be able to answer the viz or do your shopping or supervise your entertainment,' Ophelia said. 'It won't be able to do *anything*.'

Miss Porter laughed as she nonchalantly discarded the spent disruptor. 'You are mistaken, dear. Stripped of its modernistic, male-inspired notions, it will have to revert to the limited functions of its ancestry. In short, it will MAKE TOAST.'

'Yess Misstresss,' the machine slurred dutifully. It treated into itself for a few minutes of internal clicks and gurgles. Evidently something quite complicated was going on inside. At length, a slot opened and a plate emerged containing two pieces of hotly buttered toast. 'That's very good, Tribune,' Miss Porter said, patting c machine on its lobotomized dome.

'Thank you, Misstresss,' it replied slavishly.

Miss Porter took the plate and handed one of the pieces to her niece. 'This, my dear, is toast. Eat it.' Ophelia took it and bit in dutifully.

Suddenly her face lighted. 'Auntie!' she exclaimed credulously. 'It's GOOD!'

## About this Title

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