

Balance

by Mike Resnick

SUSAN CALVIN STEPPED UP TO THE PODIUM AND SURVEYED her audience: the stockholders of the United States Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation.

“I want to thank you for your attendance,” she said in her brisk, businesslike way, “and to update you on our latest developments.”

What a fearsome face she has, thought August Geller, seated in the fourth row of the audience. *She reminds me of my seventh-grade English teacher, the one I was always afraid of*

Calvin launched into a detailed explanation of the advanced new circuitry she had introduced into the positronic brain, breaking it down into terms a layman—even a stockholder—could understand.

Brilliant mind, thought Geller. *Absolutely brilliant. It’s probably just as well. Imagine a countenance like that without a mind to offset it.*

“Are there any questions at this point?” asked Calvin, her cold blue eyes scanning the audience.

“I have one,” said a pretty young woman, rising to her feet.

“Yes?”

The woman voiced her question.

“I thought I had covered that point,” said Calvin, doing her best to hide her irritation. “However...”

She launched into an even more simplistic explanation.

Isn’t it amazing? thought Geller. *Here are two women, one with a mind like a steel trap, the other with an I.Q. that would probably freeze water, and yet I can’t take my eyes off the woman who asked that ridiculous question. Poor Dr. Calvin; Nature has such a malicious sense of humor.*

Calvin noticed a number of the men staring admiringly at her questioner. It was not the first time that men had found something more fascinating than Calvin to capture their attention, nor the hundredth, nor the thousandth.

What a shame, she thought, *that they aren’t more like robots, that they let their hormones overwhelm their logic. Here I am, explaining how I plan to spend twelve billion dollars of their money. and they’re more interested in a pretty face.*

Her answer completed, she launched into a discussion of the attempts they were making to provide stronger bodies for those robots designed for extraterrestrial use by the application of titanium frames with tight molecular bondings.

I wonder, thought Geller, *if she’s ever even had a date with a man? Not a night of wild passion, God knows, but just a meal and perhaps a trip to the theater, where she didn’t talk business. He shook his head almost imperceptibly. No, he decided, it would probably bore her to tears. All she cares about are her formulas and equations. Good looks would be wasted on her.*

Calvin caught Geller staring at her, and met and held his gaze.

What a handsome young man, she thought. *I wonder if I’ve seen him at any previous meetings? I’m sure I’d remember if I had. Why is he staring at me so intently?*

I wonder, thought Geller, *if anyone she’s loved has ever loved her back?*

Probably he’s just astounded that a woman can have a brain, she concluded. *As if anything else mattered.*

In fact, thought Geller, *I wonder if she’s ever loved at all?*

Look at that tan, thought Calvin, still staring at Geller. *It’s attractive, to be sure, but do you ever work, or do you spend all your time lazing mindlessly on the beach? She fought back an urge to sigh deeply between sentences. Sometimes it’s hard to imagine that people like you and I even belong to the same species, I have so much more in common with my robots.*

Sometimes, thought Geller, *when I listen to you wax rhapsodic about positronic brains and*

molecular bonding, it's hard to imagine that we belong to the same species, you sound so much like one of your robots.

Still, thought Calvin against her will, you are tall and you are handsome, and you certainly have an air of self-assuredness about you. Most men won't or can't match my gaze. And your eyes are blue and clear. I wonder...

Still, thought Geller, there must be something there, some core of femininity beneath the harsh features and coldly analytical mind. I wonder...

Calvin shook her head inadvertently and almost lost track of what she was saying.

Ridiculous, she concluded. Absolutely ridiculous.

Geller stared at her one more time, studying the firm jaw, the broad shoulders, the aggressive stance, the face devoid of makeup, the hair that could have been so much more attractive.

Ridiculous, he concluded. Absolutely ridiculous.

Calvin spoke for another fifteen minutes, then opened the floor to questions.

There were two, and she handled them both succinctly.

"I want to thank Dr. Calvin for spending this time with us," concluded Linus Becker, the young chief operating executive of United States Robots and Mechanical Men. "As long as we have her remarkable intellect working for us, I feel confident that we will continue to forge ahead and expand the parameters of the science of robotics."

"I'll second that," said one of the major stockholders. "When we produce a positronic brain with half the capabilities of our own Dr. Calvin, the field of robotics will have come of age."

"Thank you," said Calvin, ignoring a strange sense of emptiness within her. "I am truly flattered."

"It's we who are flattered," said Becker smoothly, "to be in the presence of such brilliance." He applauded her, and soon the entire audience, including Geller, got to their feet and gave her a standing ovation.

Then each in turn walked up to her to introduce himself or herself, and shake her hand, and comment on her intellect and creativity.

"Thank you," said Calvin, acknowledging yet another compliment. *You take my hand as if you expect it to be tungsten and steel, rather than sinew and bone. Have I come to resemble my robots that much?*

"I appreciate your remarks," said Calvin to another stockholder. *I wonder if lovers speak to each other in the same hail-fellow-well-met tones?*

And then Geller stepped up and took her hand, and she almost jumped from the sensation, the electricity passing from his strong, tanned hand to her own.

"I think you are quite our greatest asset, Dr. Calvin," he said.

"Our robots are our greatest asset," she replied graciously. "I'm just a scientific midwife."

He stared intently at her for a moment, and suddenly the tension left his body. *Impossible. You're too much like them. If I asked you out, it would be an act of charity, and I think you are too proud and too perceptive to accept that particular kind of charity.*

She looked into his eyes one last time. *Impossible. I have my work to do—and my robots never disappoint me by proving to be merely human.*

"Remember, everyone," announced Becker, "there's a banquet three hours from now." He turned to Calvin. "You'll be there, of course."

Calvin nodded. "I'll be there," she said with a sigh.

She had only an hour to change into a formal gown for the banquet, and she was running late. She entered her rather nondescript apartment, walked through the living room and bedroom, both of which were filled to overflowing with scientific journals, opened her closet, and began laying out her clothes on the bed.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you have the most beautiful blue eyes?” asked her butler robot.

“Why, thank you,” said Calvin.

“It’s true, you know,” continued the butler. “Lovely, lovely eyes, as blue as the purest sapphire. “

Her robot maid entered the bedroom to help her dress.

“Such a pretty smile,” said the maid. “If I had a smile like yours, men would fight battles just for the pleasure of seeing it turned upon them.”

“You’re very kind,” said Calvin.

“Oh, no, Mistress Susan,” the robot maid corrected her. “ *You’re* very beautiful. “

Calvin noticed the robot chef standing in the doorway to her bedroom.

“Stop staring at me,” she said. “I’m only half-dressed. Where are your manners?”

“Legs like yours, and you expect me to stop staring?” said the chef with a dry, mechanical chuckle.

“Every Bight I dream about meeting a woman with legs like yours.”

Calvin slipped into her gown, then waited for the robot maid to zip up the back.

“Such clear, smooth skin,” crooned the maid. “If I were a woman, that’s the kind of skin I would want.”

They are such perceptive creatures, reflected Calvin, as she stood before a mirror and applied her almost-clear lipstick. *Such dear creatures,* she amended. *Of course they are just responding to the needs of First Law—to my needs—but how very thoughtful they are.*

She picked up her purse and headed to the door.

I wonder if they ever get tired of reciting this litany?

“You’ll be the belle of the ball, “ said the robot butler proudly as she walked out of the apartment.

“Why, thank you very much,” said Calvin. “You grow more flattering by the day.”

The robot shook its metallic head. “It is only flattery if it is a lie, my lady,” it said just before the door slid shut behind her.

Her emotional balance fully restored, as it always was whenever she came home from dealing with human beings, she headed toward the banquet feeling vigorous and renewed. She wondered if she would be seated near that handsome August Geller, who had listened to her so intently during her speech.

Upon reflection, she hoped that she would be seated elsewhere. He aroused certain uneasy feelings within her, this handsome young man—and fantasies, when all was said and done, were for lesser intellects which, unlike herself, couldn’t cope with the cold truths of the real world.