

THE ARBITER

By John Russell Fearn

The thing was of metal—but it walked and thought like a man, and was a grim object of deadly peril and menace!

An A|NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

THE year of 2016—and peace... The wreckage of past ages of barbarism had been cleared away. All over the Earth stood flawless cities. The peoples had nothing to complain of. They lived in a tempered, happy world of smoothly working machines and vast foolproof control panels. But in this there perhaps lay the seeds of danger.

Selby Doyle, President of the Earth, voted into office by common consent, was a shrewd man. Slim, wiry, with gray hair swept back from an expansive brow, there was little to stamp him as extraordinary, unless it was the resolute tightness of his lips or the squareness of his chin. Here was a man who reasoned, decided, and then acted.

He had accomplished all that he had set out to do and molded the world afresh. It gave him pleasure to sit as he was now, in the dim half light of the lowering night, his chair tilted back on its hind legs, his gray eyes gazing on the lights of Major City as they sprang automatically into being at the scheduled times. The lower lights first, then the higher ones, as the tide of day ebbed from the deeper walks.

Presently he glanced round as the warning light on his great desk proclaimed somebody's approach. Instantly he was the chief magistrate—self-possessed, ready for his visitor. He closed the switches which filled the room with an intense yet restful brilliance.

The automatic door opened. Doyle sat looking at the tall man who crossed the threshold. Vincent Carfax, chairman of the Committee for Public Welfare, inclined his bald head in greeting.

“Your excellency!” he acknowledged, and stepped forward to shake hands.

Doyle waved him to a chair. Carfax was an inhuman index of a man who carried endless statistics in his agile brain. Poker-faced, emaciated as a skeleton, it was his proud boast that he had never been known to smile.

“You will overlook the lateness of the hour, Mr. President?” he asked at length, in his precise voice.

“I was about to leave,” Doyle answered. “However, only an important matter could bring you here, Carfax. What is it?”

“Unrest.”

“Unrest?” President Doyle raised his eyebrows. “Unrest in Major City? My dear fellow!”

“Unrest!” Carfax insisted. “I have suspected it for a long time, but I’ve refrained from bringing it to your notice until I was absolutely certain. Now I have conclusive evidence. Major City is resting on quicksand, your excellency.”

DOYLE pondered for a moment. “Tell me about it,” he invited.

“The facts are plain,” Carfax answered slowly. “The reaction of perfect security after many years

spent in wars and struggle is going directly against the adaptive strain Nature builds up. I have had the First in Biology check on that. The human body and mind, keyed to every emergency, had until recently something it could grapple with. Now there is nothing but perfection. The mind has of necessity to find a new form of excitation in order to maintain its equilibrium. Do I make it clear?"

"I provided science for the people," President Doyle said quietly. "Is not that exciting enough?"

"Science, sir, is for the chosen few. Men such as you and I, and all the other master-brains who have brought this sublime state into being, are different. Call them geniuses if you will. At least they do not represent the masses. I have been forced to the unpleasant realization that very few minds are adapted to scientific study. Just as in the pre-Wars Era a man accepted the electric light for what it is without involving himself in the electronic processes embodied in it, so today there is that same aspect of laziness and torpor—and there, Mr. President, lie the seeds of unrest and mischief."

Doyle smiled. "It can be stopped. The Congress has the power."

"This goes deeper than you realize," Carfax said, shaking his bald head, "It is not confined to Major City. It exists nearly everywhere. So much so I felt it my duty to warn you. If this unrest is not quelled it means—back to war!"

The Chief Executive was silent.

"There is a way," Carfax said presently.

"There is?"

"It is becoming increasingly clear that the Last War did not entirely kill the belief in men's minds that force of arms is the only sure way to Right. The element of unrest now present will grow rapidly. At the moment it takes the form of vicious words. It would like to build up a barrier against all things scientific and tear down the perfect structure we have created. But I say—if I may—that the close of the Last War really did end war for ever!"

"Perhaps." The President smiled grayly.

"Listen," Carfax resumed, tapping his finger emphatically on the desk. "We must forever outlaw war as a disease. Until now Man has not had sufficient power at his disposal—scientific power that is—to make his dreams come true. The earlier men tried it with pacts, treaties, and leagues of nations—and they all came to grief—because there was no science back of them."

"And now?"

"Now, with tremendous scientific resources at our command, we can make a stand against this eternal enemy of progress, destroy it while it is still young." Carfax hesitated briefly and looked apologetic. "What I am about to say, your Excellency, may make it appear I am teaching you your business. You will forgive that?"

Doyle shrugged. "Only a fool refuses to learn. Continue."

"Many years ago men adopted the principle of arbitration," Carfax resumed. "They were enlightened enough, in civil matters at least, to place any matter of dispute, particularly in instances of capital and labor, before a council usually composed of three experts. That council was vested with complete power to say 'Yes' or 'No' upon the point at issue. Thus matters were arbitrated. Endeavors were made, futilely enough, to devise an arbitration scheme between nations.

"The principle of arbitration relied on the good faith of nations to seek arbitration, but lost in a welter of power politics and overcome with greed, backed by terrific man power and armaments, wars

followed wars. Arbitration was ignored. But, sir, the idea was not lost. Why cannot a new arbiter arise? Not a man, not three men—but twelve! In olden times a jury was usually composed of twelve men and women. So in respect to that judicial tradition let it still be twelve. Twelve—to arbitrate!”

President Doyle sighed a little. “An excellent idea, old friend. But what twelve men or women, however competent, would be accepted by the masses as sole judges?”

“There comes the difference!” the Statistician said calmly. “I have been investigating on my own account. Ever since this unrest began I have pondered the idea of an Arbiter. I have interviewed, at great length, twelve men, each one of them equipped with the finest brain in the world for his particular sphere. The twelve major sciences of present day civilization can each have a master at the head. Yes, I have talked with them. Each one of them has foreseen as we have the grim fate that awaits mankind if unrest is allowed to prevail. Now I have their assurance, once the word is made lawful by you, that each one of them is prepared to sacrifice his life for the particular science he controls in order that the future of mankind may be assured.”

DOYLE sat bolt upright. “Sacrifice his life!” he cried. “What on earth do you mean, man? Why should they?”

“Because there can be no other way to make a true Arbiter!”

The President got to his feet, stood by the window with his hands clasped behind him.

“Go on,” he said, lost in thought.

“Twelve brains will be pooled for the common good,” Carfax explained. “Twelve brains will work in unison to provide a common answer, and a just one, for every conceivable difficulty in every walk of life. Twelve brains, functioning as one unit, will be the judge of humanity’s future actions and set discord at naught.”

“Even brains die,” President Doyle pointed out, turning. “It is only putting off the vital issue for a short period. When the brains die the old trouble will be back. This is just—just a temporary panacea, making things comfortable for the present age. What of posterity, Carfax? That is the problem we must consider.”

“The brains will never die!” the Statistician said, and at Doyle’s look of astonishment he was tempted to smile. But remembering his one boast he didn’t.

“I said we could outlaw unrest and war forever, Mr. President. This is no hasty plan. I have conferred with Gascoyne, the First in Anatomy. He says the plan I have devised is feasible. Did it ever occur to you what a poor instrument the brain is for the interpretation of thought?”

“Often. What of it?”

“Gascoyne has asked himself that question long enough to find an answer. We of this age know science agrees that thought is everywhere, that it is expressed in greater or lesser degree according to the quality of the ‘receiver’ or brain interpreting it. According to Gascoyne a brain is basically an electric machine—a radio receiver, if you wish it. In proportion to its quality it absorbs and uses the ideas of all-pervading mind and expresses ideas clearly or badly through the medium of a physical body, which in itself is an expression of mind-force.”

Doyle was clearly interested now. A faint, unaccustomed flush of pleasure stole into Carfax’s pallid cheeks.

“Since, then, mind contains the quintessence of every known science,” he went on, “certain brains—or receivers—are better fitted than others, and can be completely duplicated in a mechanical, imperishable mould! Every convolution of a brain, every neuron, every synaptic resistance, can be imitated just as surely as in old days an impression could be taken of a man’s gums for the fitting of false dentures. It can be done just as surely as the artificial leg of today has false muscles.”

President Doyle came back to the desk and stood waiting.

“With your sanction,” Carfax finished slowly, “I propose to model twelve synthetic, imperishable brains on the exact convolutions and measurements belonging to these twelve scientists. It will be done in the fashion of taking a death-mask. The image of the face at death remains in the mask forever. In this case the mechanical brains will be modeled over the real ones, duplicating them in every detail. When this has been done, the mechanical equivalent will take over from the natural organ, probably with even better results because it will be devoid of the inevitable clogging of human construction. The real brain will shrivel and die afterwards, leaving the mechanical image.

“Once the operation is complete these mechanical brains will be linked together, will go on gaining knowledge with a speed compatible with that of an ordinary brain if it were permitted to live for eternity. That is how the Arbiter will become indestructible and a paragon of justice for all mankind.”

Doyle thought, then shook his head.

“Even though I am the elected executive of all Earth, Carfax, I am still human. Twelve men to die if I give the word—it is unthinkable!”

The Statistician got to his feet, his pale face adamant.

“As the Chief Magistrate, Doyle, you have, to a certain extent, to be devoid of emotion. You spoke of posterity. Posterity can be assured by your word—now. And remember, the twelve will give their lives voluntarily. Think of the thousands of scientists in the past who have given their lives willingly for a less cause.”

“But the decision to slay twelve did not rest with one man,” President Doyle pointed out. Then he turned impatiently. “Carfax, don’t misunderstand me. I see the value of your idea. I appreciate the great lengths you must have been to, to get the plan worked, but it would be better if the decision did not rest so completely with me!”

CARFAX shrugged. “The facts are plain enough,” he said quietly. “The personal brain power of the twelve best men will be pooled. Twelve will die, in order that thousands to come may live in peace!”

After a brief silence Doyle began to hedge with vague desperation. He drummed his fingers on the desk. There was an inhuman persuasion in Carfax’s cold, emotionless voice.

“What guarantee have we that opposing factions will consult the Arbiter in any case?”

“We have the guarantee of twelve imperishable brains in a mobile machine—a machine controlled by thought waves reacting on special mechanisms. In the event of two opposing factions, the Arbiter will cut off all possible means that might lead to force between the parties concerned. Compulsory arbitration will come into being. It’s that—or decay!”

“It is ruling by force,” Doyle muttered. “Our present method is by votes.”

“It is common sense! All other scientists are strongly in favor of the plan. I convinced them of its value. That leaves only your sanction.”

“Not immediately, my friend. I must think.” The President pressed a hand to his forehead. “Leave me for a while. I must talk with Gascoyne first. I’ll acquaint you with my decision later.”

As something apart he heard the soft click of the door as Carfax went...

Even after he had heard Rolf Gascoyne’s fully detailed surgical description of the idea of the Arbiter, it took President Doyle several more days of deliberation before he finally gave his consent to the project. And he did it then only when he was assured of the willingness of the twelve men concerned to sacrifice themselves in order that posterity might have an assured peace.

So he gave the order—and with the twelve men and Gascoyne he shut himself away from city affairs for a while in the surgical laboratories.

He answered no calls except those which demanded his personal attention, leaving everything else to Carfax, his deputy.

From then on Doyle watched activity in a field which was unfamiliar to him. He saw the twelve human beings go willingly under the anaesthetic. He saw the brains, still living, being fed by synthetic bloodstream and artificial heart. Then, under orders from Gascoyne, the first brain was duly imprisoned within a soft mould of ductile metal.

Atom by atom, molecule by molecule, under the control of instruments so sensitive that light-vibration disturbed them, metallic moulds were set up, fitted into place by slender rods of force timed to a split thousandth of a second, the slightest error in which would have meant utter failure.

But there was no error. Gascoyne saw to that. He was coldly efficient, intolerant of mistakes. The controlling forces made no slip. They had no human qualities in them to err.

Day after day the scientists worked on. From time to time Doyle received disquieting reports from Carfax concerning the rapid increase of unrest amongst the unscientific populace. He handed the information on to Gascoyne who promptly made a speed-up all round.

In a month the first brain was complete. The dried shell of the dead brain was removed and the mechanical counterpart, deadly precise in its way of reasoning, came into being. The actual entity of Unwin Slater, First in Mathematics, had vanished and given place to the computations of Brain Unit No. 1.

Thereafter it was not difficult. Assured now of success in the operation, Doyle felt a little more easy in mind—and the experts worked steadily on. Brain after brain was linked up, until at the end of three months the transference was complete. The knowledge of each was unified to the other by delicate vibratory wires, and thence carried back to a central brain pan—in truth a contrivance of machinery of profound complexity, reactive only to the thoughts of twelve combined brains.

Gascoyne had been clever here. Without twelve brains in unity the machinery would not function, and since this seat of all motivation and pooled knowledge was protected by metals of interlocking atoms, the Arbiter was absolutely foolproof. In fact, the more the atoms of the housing metal continued to disorganize, the more impossible it would be to break down.

ON OCTOBER 9, 2016, the Arbiter became visible in public for the first time. In appearance it resembled a great circle of metal about fifty feet wide, studded at regular intervals round the edge with unbreakable domes which sheathed the metallic brains inside. The wires, protected by similar armor, led directly to the circle’s center wherein stood the governing machine-unit. For locomotion the thing possessed skillfully jointed metal legs, perfectly balancing the circle of metal they carried. In many ways

the Arbiter resembled an enormous wheel studded with twelve nodules and supplied with feet.

In response to public demand, after Doyle's initial introduction of it and outline of its purpose, it gave a brief speech, world-relayed. Its thought waves, passing into photoelectric devices, which in turn forced air through replicas of human vocal cords, produced a voice that was completely impartial and yet arresting.

"People of the world, you are asked to forget that this contrivance is the carrier of twelve brains," the great machine said. "It is a unity, a single unity with a twelve-fold purpose. That purpose is peace on earth and goodwill towards men. To that end I, the Arbiter, will work. Let any man or woman who thinks of transgressing the peace pause now and think! The Arbiter stands ready!"

Thereafter the Arbiter was allowed complete liberty. It was entirely self-contained, sleepless. It moved as it chose, but usually stayed pretty close to Major City.

Its first decisive action was to subdue to a considerable extent the activities of the restive ones. With an uncanny sense of deduction it unearthed a plot whereby a thousand unscientific insurgents were plotting to seize a territory between Major City and its nearest neighbor one hundred miles away. The insurgents had hoped to establish a colony for themselves. Had they succeeded they would undoubtedly have been the first to break the unity of a great worldwide nation in which all class distinction and creed had been leveled into one brotherhood.

But the Arbiter sifted the rebels' plans from top to bottom, and since in this case there was no question of arbitration between parties the mechanical judge took the next most effective step.

One by one the entire thousand met death, ruthlessly, inexplicably—but certainly. The scientists became a little worried. That the first act of the Arbiter should be to slay without question was something of a shock.

If it did nothing else, the action at least quelled all the other restive spirits. They turned in increasing numbers to scientific study, finding an unexpected pleasure in the struggle to wrest the ultimate secrets from Nature.

Thereafter, for a year, the Arbiter had little of importance to do. It sorted out minor disputes with calm, emotionless words and its decision was implicitly obeyed. President Selby Doyle felt satisfied. His first fears had vanished. The Arbiter was a panacea after all. Then came the affair of Grenson, the physicist.

Grenson, a young and ardent man of the New Era, was sure that he had discovered the real meaning of an electron's wave and particle motion. Working alone in his laboratory he knew that he was on the verge of probing the long sought for secret of power from the atom.

Immediately, he went to the President, stood at the desk and looked for the first time upon the quiet, calm personage who ruled the world.

"Sit down, young man," Doyle invited at last, eyeing his visitor steadily and inwardly deciding that he liked him. "Sit down and give me the full details."

Grenson gathered his courage. President Doyle snapped a recording switch then he sat back to listen to the rush of eager, excited phrases. For fifteen minutes Grenson held forth on the possibilities of his invention, still theoretical, and through it all the Chief Executive sat in silence, linking up the points in his keen mind, fitting together postulation with postulation, bringing his own far-reaching knowledge to bear on the subject.

At last Grenson became silent, flushed with his own energies.

Doyle gave him an encouraging smile. "In theory, young man, I should say your scheme is feasible. If so, you may be sure that Major City will fully reward you. But first we must have advice in this very specialized field." He pressed the switch of his intercom. "Send in the First in Physics," he ordered.

FOR ten minutes President and worker sat in silence, the young man looking round the great office and Doyle busy at his desk. Then Horley Dodd, the First in Physics, arrived—a sharp-nosed, scrub-headed man with thick-lensed eyeglasses.

"You want me, sir?" His tone was by no means pleasant.

"Yes, Dodd, I do. This young man here, if his theory is as good as it sounds, has the secret of atomic power. Just listen to the playback of his exposition."

President Doyle flicked a button. There was silence as Grenson's eager voice came forth from the audiograph. The First in Physics stood with his hands locked behind him, biting his lower lip and staring up at the ceiling. The voice ceased at last. An automatic switch started the sound track ribbon reeling back to the start again.

"Well?" the President asked, leaning back in his chair.

"Frankly, I'd say it's impossible!" Dodd said briefly. "It is at best a mere theory, and as such does not advance us one iota beyond what we already know."

"That is a very narrow viewpoint," the President observed.

Dodd's sharp little eyes sparked defiance. "It's the only viewpoint, your Excellency."

"But, sir, I have it all worked out!" Grenson sprang to his feet earnestly. "Naturally, I am a man of only moderate means. I cannot afford the costly apparatus necessary to prove my idea. That is why I brought the scheme to the President. Now you say it's no good."

"You had no right to bring it here!" Dodd snapped.

"He had every right," the President said. "What is more, Dodd, I have neither time nor patience for this unseemly wrangling." He got to his feet decisively. "We have the Arbiter to decide such things for us. Come into the laboratory, both of you."

He preceded the pair to a sealed interdoor and opened it. They passed within to the monster of legs and nodules occupying the center of the floor.

"Arbiter, a question arises," President Doyle stated quietly, stopping before the thing's sensitive pickup. "Is the theory of atomic force about to be given to you practical—or not?" He turned aside and switched on a relay of Grenson's voice-record. Again that silence and Grenson stood with his gaze uncertainly watching the glittering monster that was to determine his life's ideal.

After long thought at the close of the exposition the Arbiter spoke.

"The theory of Grenson is not practicable! The secret of atomic power will never be found because the very nature of the atom makes it impossible. The judgment is awarded to Horley Dodd."

The First in Physics smiled acidly and glanced at the President. Doyle was stroking his chin slowly. Then he turned to the dazed Grenson and patted him gently on the shoulder.

"I am sorry, my boy—I really am. I did feel that you had something, but the Arbiter cannot be wrong. The decision is final."

“Final!” Grenson shouted. “Do you think I am going to take the opinion of a thing like this—this Arbiter? Do you think I shall give up a theory because a few canned brains say so? Not on my life! I’m going on, and on. Yes, I’ll make the money somehow to prove my idea.”

He swung round, red-faced with anger, and vanished through the doorway. Doyle watched him go, then shrugged.

“You’re too sentimental, Mr. President,” Dodd said brusquely. “You allow too many of these crack-brained theorists to take advantage of you. He has the wrong idea entirely. What he and his sort need is control, not encouragement.”

“As long as I am Chief Magistrate I shall make my own decisions,” Doyle answered quietly. “I shall not need to detain you any longer, Dodd. Thank you for coming.”

The scientist went out and President Doyle returned slowly into his own office, stood by the desk, thinking. That young man had had a great idea, and somehow he was convinced it should have been tested.

It was towards evening when the private wire buzzed. Doyle took up the receiver and Vincent Carfax’s lean, cold visage came onto the screen.

“Your Excellency, I understand from my agents that you had a young man to see you today? Chap named Grenson? And that the decision of the Arbiter went against him?”

“Correct.”

“He died at five thirty this afternoon! He was slain by mind-force from the Arbiter. I thought it would interest you.”

DOYLE stared at the screen fixedly. “You are sure?”

“I never make mistakes,” Carfax answered dispassionately. “I don’t like it, this continued display of force!”

“No. Neither do I!”

President Doyle cut off, his jaw set with uncommon hardness. He got to his feet and walked into the adjoining laboratory, stood staring at the metal monster. Even as he stood making his survey he could sense the inhuman aura the thing radiated.

“Arbiter, you slew without provocation!” he snapped suddenly. “Why? I demand to know. You told Grenson he was wrong, but what need was there to murder him as well?”

“That question is outside your province. You are the President, yes, but you had me created for the undisputed adjudication of all matters capable of argument, for the carrying out of these adjudications afterwards. The only way to prevent a continued disobedience of commands is to kill! Grenson, in spite of my decision, was determined to work in spite of me. So he died. So it must always be with those who are defiant. Otherwise, the purpose of the Arbiter is lost”

“But it’s barbarism!” President Doyle cried hoarsely. “The very thing I believed you’d stop!”

“I am not answerable to anybody for what I believe or think,” the Arbiter answered implacably.

“But suppose young Grenson had been right? Suppose he had touched the verge of unlocking atomic power? Think what it could have meant to us. We need that power. Earth’s stores of petroleum, coal,

and certain metals cannot last much longer. Supplies were drained to the uttermost in building and equipping the cities. Atomic power would solve many things at one bound. Even the correct transmutation of elements, a secret we desperately need to find. At the least you could have let Grenson go on experimenting.”

“Not in face of my decision. I acted as I saw best. So far as I am concerned the matter is finished.”

Doyle hesitated, staring at the thing bitterly, then with clenched fists he went slowly from the laboratory. Somewhere, he knew, something was wrong. The treasured plans for security had gone utterly awry.

Very gradually it was forced on the adherents of scientific progress that the Arbiter was anything but what it was intended to be. Science became divided into two camps—the strugglers and the opposers, with Dodd as chief of the opposers.

Dodd, though a scientist, firmly believed in the inaccessibility of Nature’s inner secrets, and had neither vision nor tolerance. He was too content to accept science for what it was rather than for what it might become. In that very fact lay the seed of disaster. The camp of Science, divided against itself, began to show signs of decay.

Time and again the Arbiter was called in, and every time the verdict went to Horley Dodd and his party. Baffled, sickened by the obvious breakdown in the scheme for universal peace, President Selby Doyle’s grip on things commenced to weaken. Already worn out with the cares of office, to which had been added crushing disappointment, the illness which preceded his demise was brief.

Officials were present round his death bed—but officials were all they were, men who had served him because it had been their duty to serve. To the dying President there was only one face which represented loyalty and friendship, and it belonged to Vincent Carfax.

“Carfax, you must be President,” Doyle whispered. “As—as it is my final wish, you will be chosen. All around this bed are the men who will elect you. I have their promise. I think that I have—have been too lenient, but no such emotions will trouble you, Carfax. You are younger. You are an expert scientist. You must defeat this Arbiter, my friend. Find out why it has turned traitor! You promise?”

“I promise,” Carfax answered.

President Doyle relaxed and smiled. It was a smile that remained fixed. The President of the Earth was dead.

An hour later the assembled scientists, all of them leaders on the side of the Strugglers, filed into the main office to face their new President. They found Carfax at the great desk, coldly silent. He waited until the group was fully assembled, surveyed them, then got to his feet.

“Gentlemen, for seven years now we have been chained hand and foot by an invention of our own making—a metal dictator—and it has betrayed us. We don’t know why, yet—but we do know that unless we defy this Arbiter, or find forces which can destroy it, we are a doomed people.”

GASCOYNE shook his head. “We cannot destroy it—at least not in the light of present scientific knowledge,” he said seriously. “We made the thing of a metal whose atoms interlock, remember. It is sealed forever. We made it foolproof—and to what end?”

“It is in our own hands to determine the end,” President Carfax retorted. “Unless we act, we’re finished. It is the very law of the Universe that there must be progress. Every day now brings us up against new difficulties. Sources of power are running low. New sources, intended for us by Nature, are

barred because the brains that would develop them are prevented by this twelve-brained monstrosity. I tell you we must defeat it!”

Assured that he might be able to succeed, President Carfax went to work to prove his words. The strugglers began anew the experiments which had been truncated by the death of Grenson.

They worked to within an ace of solving the secret of atomic power. Carfax himself got far enough to extract a terrific amount of energy from a cube of copper. From incredibly small pieces of highly conductive metal he built up a model power plant which, on a giant scale, would replace the already sadly worn electric equipment from which the cities derived their light and power.

The other scientists explored different realms. Some reasoned out new methods of synthesis by which the fast waning supplies of oil and coal could be replaced. Another was convinced that he had transmutation of metals in his grip, with which the cities could be repaired as time went on. Yet another saw his chance of harnessing the waste energy of the sun.

By degrees, under Carfax’s fine leadership, the determined scientists began to lay plans for the foundation of real Utopia.

Then the Arbiter struck! In a public speech it declared that the discoveries claimed by President Vincent Carfax and his colleagues were nothing better than fancy. The Arbiter took sides with the Opposers and launched a small but savagely effective massacre against the Strugglers. In three days of desperate skirmish and slaughter Carfax and his followers were wiped out. Horley Dodd, leader of the Opposers, was killed too. Not that it signified much. The Opposers were now in complete control, backed always by the impartial Arbiter.

Languid with victory, the Opposers lazily repaired the damage and then sat back to enjoy the comforts which Vincent Carfax had sworn were coming to an end. Apathy set in, born of lack of anything to accomplish. Even the Arbiter had nothing left to judge. The final vanquishment had shown to the Opposers that progress was a form of disease and entirely unnecessary. Better to relax and enjoy the fruits of labor.

The year 2018 passed away and was followed by a gap of somnolent, drifting years until 2030. Nothing had been accomplished, nothing done. Life was one grand bliss of effortless satisfaction. The pioneers were lost in the mists of memory. Science, as an art, had ceased to be.

2030—2050—2070—and the Arbiter was still in faultless condition. Indeed it had been made indestructible.

Men and women died, children were born in limited numbers, grew up, each one knowing less of science than those before them. Astronomy, physics, mathematics? They were things the ancients had studied, said the history records. Somewhere in the smeared archives was the name of Selby Doyle.

Then in 2070 came the first warnings of the trouble Carfax had foreseen. The weather-controlling machinery broke down, its central bearings worn out from continued inattention. In consequence the weather suddenly reverted to its former unreliable state and deluged whole continents of synthetic crops, destroyed a world’s food supply for a year.

Hurricanes tore across the world. Cities which were slowly eroding through continued lack of repair eroded still more. That gray metal, so shiny at first, was cracking now, flaking under the continued onslaught of the elements.

A nervous flurry passed through the people. For the first time they were really alarmed. They rushed to the weather controlling station but could only stare helplessly at silent, useless machinery. Knowledge

was dead.

This was not all. Trouble came thick and fast. With the failure of the crops, animals began to die off. The machines that tended them only functioned so long as they received—from still other machines—steady supplies of crops, specially developed for cattle consumption. When the supply stopped the machines stopped too, and nobody knew what to do about it.

THE seed of disaster flourished with terrific speed, burst the foundations of the formerly calm cities and upset the tranquillity of the pleasure-softened people. The collapse of the weather machinery presaged the overture to the end. Blinding cataracts of rain seeped through corroded roofs, the water short-circuiting the vital power and light machinery, already at breaking point through wear and tear.

Light and power failed in each city simultaneously. Famine reared over a disturbed, turmoiled world girt about with scurrying clouds. In desperation the people turned to the Arbiter, their leader.

But the Arbiter did nothing! It ignored the wild pleas hurled at it, marched out of the insecure laboratory that was its home and departed into the storm-lashed country. In the hour of need it had deserted them.

Panic seized the people at the realization. They fled from the cities, whither they knew not, floundered in a mad exodus seeking food that was not there, cursing aloud to the heavens because synthesis had destroyed all natural growth and cultivation. Specialization had been proved a tragedy. Escape from a world which was too perfect became an obsession.

Gradually, inevitably, it was forced upon the people in those hours of mad struggle and desperation that they were face to face with certain extinction.

2080. Panic and struggle had gone. A strange calm was on the world. Cities, crumbled through disuse, ravaged by tempest and flood, poked blind, inquisitive spires to cleared skies. The sun crossed a sky which was, in the main, peaceful again. Climate had adjusted back to its normal vagaries.

But the soft winds of spring, the hot sun of summer, the cool chill of the fall, and the heavy snows of winter fell on bones that were scattered, white and forgotten, across Earth's face. Alone in this world of emptiness, where natural grass and trees were trying once more to struggle through, there moved a cumbersome affair of metal, still cold and impartial, inhuman and relentless. It climbed mountains, it prowled plains, it searched the ruins of cities, it brooded alone. The Arbiter.

3000 A.D. 3020 A.D. Then the Venusians came.

They were strange, birdlike creatures, masters of space travel, lords of their own peculiar science. They came not as conquerors but with the intention of making friends with the third-world people. Their amazement was complete when they could not find a soul alive.

Then eventually they found the Arbiter. With their superior science they analyzed it, probed its deepest secrets, broke open the supposedly impregnable sheathing by four-dimensional tools.

THE Venusians remained on Earth for several days while the leading scientist, Cor Santu, pondered over the curious mystery of a lost race. From studying the dissembled Arbiter and the still remaining records of human events, transcribed by the Leader of Languages, he built up an explanation of the problem.

“Poor earthly scientists!” was his final comment. “Brilliant men indeed—but they forgot one thing. If a world or people is to survive it must have progress, even as we have found in our own experience. Wars

are indeed evil and should be prevented. But dictators are worse. Right alone can prevail in the end.

“Selby Doyle and Vincent Carfax did not trust to Right, to a Universal mind control for guidance. No, they invented a machine of twelve mechanical brains to bring them peace. Such a device could not solve the problem. They forgot that a brain, in progressing, must expand. We have seen that, in any case, these Earth beings only used a fifth of their full brain capacity. That, later, would have developed. But in the machine they strangled it. Carfax and the surgeon Gascoyne made these mechanical brains fixed to what was, at that time, the present! To the Arbiter it was always the present! Being rigid metal the imprisoned brains could not expand, could not go a step beyond the day of their creation. That is why the Arbiter destroyed all things that suggested progress, and also because it feared any sign of progress would bring its power to an end. It was just another dictator.

“Such metal bound brains, living in a past world, could not visualize anything progressive. Conservationism gone mad! From the instant the brains were moulded of metal they deteriorated. And having no human sentiment they destroyed without question. So when the great catastrophe came the Arbiter was powerless—as powerless as all the others who had not kept pace with progress. Nature must progress, or perish. That is evolution.”

Thereon Cor Santu ended his observations. But when his fleet of spaceships soared through the sunny sky towards fresh worlds of exploration, there was left behind a smashed, irreparable mass of melted cogs, wires, and wheels. It was a rusting monument to a race that had died—a race that had fallen prey to laziness and surrendered its freedom to the ruthless whims of a machine.

Notes and proofing history

AK #24

Scanned with preliminary proofing by A/NN\A

November 13th, 2007—v1.0

from the original source: *Startling Stories*, May 1947

This story has not been reprinted to date.