

Imitation of Life by Albert E. Cowdrey

'Twas not long ago--perhaps two years--when our sometime contributor Ms. Karen Joy Fowler attained bestsellerdom with her examination of modern-day life's foibles through the lens she called The Jane Austen Book Club. Now our more frequent contributor, Mr. Albert Cowdrey of New Orleans, undertakes to show us a glimpse of the future as one might perceive it if viewed through a lens ground by Ms. Austen herself.

* * * *

Milly Murphy welcomed Emma Smythe-Denby to the Igloo, not quite with open arms--Emma didn't favor huggy-kissy--but with a perfectly genuine smile.

"So you survived Town!" she cried, and Emma replied, "Barely!"

Reflecting a bygone fashion for Eskimo architecture, Milly's parlor was dome-shaped and painted white. A banquette cushioned in scarlet faux silk ran around the room, except where the outside door and a smaller door leading to her private quarters interrupted it. Hidden from view behind the banquette were narrow spaces where Milly stored old clothes, retired furniture, and--on occasion--one of her lovers, when another put in an unexpected appearance.

Today a silver kettle and a seedcake waited on the circular table in the center of the room, and the two ladies settled down for tea and a good chat.

"Well, did you look at any love bots?" Milly demanded. (She had never been good at letting others speak first.)

Emma frowned, deliberately inserted a nice slab of cake into her mouth, and chewed slowly, letting her overcurious friend wait. Though tempted to reprove her for prying, she really needed to talk to someone with experience, and Milly had that--in spades.

"It was most embarrassing," she said at last, after washing the cake down with a long sip of Earl Grey. "Men and women standing around, ignoring one other and staring at those--those things."

"Now, Emma. Some of them look perfectly delicious. Whatever that stuff is they use for skin looks so much more real than, you know, skin."

"In spite of their attractiveness, I notice that you, Milly, stick to human beings."

"Well, yes. So much warmer and more complex, and ... and *dangerous*, you know."

Emma was far too shrewd not to see that Milly had recommended a bot because she despaired of her friend ever winning a human lover. Feeling regretfully inclined to agree with her, Emma sighed.

"There are times when I feel quite lonely," she admitted. "And of course a bot is so convenient--when you don't want it, you just put it in a corner and turn it off. So difficult to do with a man. But no: Such a relationship too much resembles a ghastly adult version of playing with dolls."

Milly hitched her ample backside forward and cut them both more cake. She could see that her old-maid friend needed encouragement.

"You know, Emma, you needn't get one as anything but a companion. Later on, if you decide you want more, you can have him retrofitted."

"Milly, let us discuss some other topic. After a day among the tiring throngs of Town, and the embarrassment of that awful store--the Hot Bot Spot, have you ever heard such a name?--I'm in no

mood for anything but old-fashioned village gossip.... Has new information surfaced on Miss Choy's affair with the butcher in 3030 Zeta?"

As a matter of fact, Milly's Instantmail had been updated on that very subject less than twenty minutes ago. Reluctant as she was to put aside, even for a moment, the enthralling task of helping her friend find love, she was consoled by being able to impart new and fascinating information about romance in distant Sinkiang.

Anyway, it wasn't so far off the main topic, was it? Love conquers all, including Chinese butchers. She proceeded to tell Emma just exactly what had happened, and when and how--after all, she'd watched it in MD (for multidimensional) Telly, and knew every detail.

Her friend listened in shocked fascination. At least, she reflected, there was this to be said for a bot: unless you commanded it to, it didn't go on anybody's Instantmail. How much more ... decent that seemed, rather than joining the planetary gossip mill that made all the world's villages one.

Tall, angular and erect, Emma strode rather than walked down the main street of 1220 Alpha, feeling the familiar sights and sounds enfold her like a well-worn, comforting garment.

Everything needful to human life lay close at hand. Lined up along faux-stone streets and well-raked earthen lanes stood some two hundred neat houses, the Micromarket, and those eternal elements of British life--a tea room (the Lemon Tree) and two pubs (the Gnashing Tusk and the King's Evil).

The Village Playhouse staged pantomimes using local children and light operas enacted by touring companies. Medical and dental needs were met by a Nursing Bot who kept in twenty-four-hour-a-day contact with a Physician Superbot stored in a cavern in the Alps. The Constable's Office, the Town Hall, and the Anglican Meditation Pavilion represented the authority of Church and State.

Trouble and disorder were far away. The nearest school stood half an hour distant in 1315 Alpha, while Town--the large market center of Mulling Crucis, with its throng of 6,000 restlessly jostling people--lay some two hours distant by omnibus. *Thank Heaven*, thought Emma, *that I am no longer there!*

She had just finished giving thanks when she spotted a small card nailed to a linden tree. Something was written on it in almost invisible letters. Frowning, she approached and read:

*big is for pigs
small is all*

"The Progress Gang!" she exclaimed aloud.

For a long moment, Hot Bots were replaced in her thoughts by a hot issue--indeed, the hottest issue then dividing the village.

Even though dear old 1220 was so small that every cross-street ended in woods or meadows, and so quiet that even the roosters slept late, a group of activists were demanding that the town be made smaller and stiller yet.

Led by an irritating schoolmaster named Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn, this cabal of malcontents proposed to drive out the market, the pubs, and the tea room. As Ffrench-Dobbyn pointed out by Instantmail, residents could order everything needful from a Regional Supply Depot, and the nuisance of stocking goods and drawing vermin would be done away with entirely. The drunken noise of the pubs would fade to agreeable silence; the flyblown sweets of the tea room would cease to spread intestinal disease. He even rejected the Village Playhouse as unnecessary, since professional productions could be seen every night, not only on large parlor Tellys, but on hand-held Tellyphones.

That, he said, was how progressive villages acted, citing 1919 Beta in the Pas de Calais, which had been rendered so peaceful that any noise greater than the brushing of one's teeth brought a citation from the gendarmes.

The issue mattered most to the tradesmen--to the market owner; his tenants the grocer, the butcher, and the fishmonger; the tailor; Miss White who ran the Lemon Tree; the publicans; and the waiters, bag-boys, checkers, barmaids, etc., who worked for them. But many leisured people (including Emma, who'd been left a nice competence by her father, Colonel Smythe-Denby) supported the tradesmen. She suspected that Ffrench-Dobbyn was reacting to the screaming horror of life as a schoolmaster by trying to silence every sound in the village where he lived. But that was no reason to impose his own needs on others. She loved village life, but not when it was entirely deprived of the life part.

The market and the tea room provided most of her opportunities to meet her fellow citizens in the flesh; as for the Playhouse, she was not only a playgoer but a volunteer backstage, finding in the creation of costumes, masks, and scenery a welcome outlet for her artistic instincts. She needed public meeting-places quite as much as their owners and workers needed her patronage, and the theater needed her talents.

As these thoughts raced through her mind, Emma's brows contracted, disturbing the placidity of her high smooth forehead. Yet she resisted her first impulse, which was to tear the sign down. Better to leave vandalism to the Americans, for whom it was natural. Instead, sniffing with magnificent disdain, she strode on, heading for home.

* * * *

Her cottage was a two-story cylinder with a conical roof covered in faux thatch, reflecting a fashion for African architecture that had flourished a generation ago. She let herself in with profound gratitude that her day was over at last. The housebot had finished its work, and the tiles and woodwork glistened.

Emma changed into a lounging robe, settled down with a glass of dandelion wine in front of her Telly, and murmured softly, "Update." She got a replay of the Choy-butcher saga, which she hastily tuned out; a Virtual Football Championship game between 961 Xi and somebody, which she dismissed as well. Surfing on, she encountered a tumultuous scene in the Town Hall. The Progress Gang under their leader Ffrench-Dobbyn were staging a silent demonstration against the stores, linking arms and blocking access to the podium, while defenders of the status quo shouted and stamped in rage.

Disgusted, she turned off the wretched tube and set about fixing dinner. Unlike many residents of Alpha, she did her own cooking, because bots could not seem to learn how to adjust the flavours properly for her palate. (Emma always spelled the word *flavour* the ancient British way, because it seemed more, well, flavourful.)

The time was quite late, past Twenty-two, when at last she settled down with a glass of hot milk spiked with two teaspoons of brandy, and began getting in the mood to sleep. Ignoring the Late News, she tuned in the Oxbridge Channel because--years ago, as a student--she'd learned that nothing produced peaceful slumber more quickly than being lectured to.

Tonight a don wearing a scholar's gown and spadelike black beard was holding forth on Recent History, which turned out to mean the last three centuries. Well, she reflected, at any rate that was better than a paleontologist she'd once heard, whose idea of Recent Time was the last sixty-five million years." The planet Earth has not always been the peaceful, rational place we know today," the beard began. "Once it was oppressed by gigantic cities and bustling throngs."

A file clip followed, showing a demonic landscape of antlike humans swarming among piles of appalling

architecture. The air reeked visibly with coffee-colored fumes; vehicles crept by like a horde of metallic beetles at work on a dunghill; the noise was deafening; the towers seemed about to topple on the people's heads. The scene was so disturbing that Emma would have switched it off, if the lecturer himself hadn't done so.

"Fortunately," the beard went on, "war, terrorism, and the progress of science worked together to transform this hellish landscape. As weapons steadily shrank in size and cost, and their destructive power just as steadily increased, cities became too dangerous to inhabit. At the same time, improving methods of communication rendered them unnecessary.

"Throughout history, people have abandoned great cities--Uxmal and Nineveh, Mohenjo-Daro and Petra, Knossos and Babylon and Angkor Wat--leaving them to the jungles and deserts, to the animals and birds. The people of three hundred years ago did the same, only they remained united by electronic bonds in the dispersed cells we call villages. More than five million of these charming settlements now exist worldwide, the smallest identified only by numbers and by Greek letters representing the twenty-four time zones...."

Emma had heard enough. Flicking off the tube, she finished her toddy and fumbled her way upstairs to bed. Hot milk, brandy, and scholarship proceeded to perform their customary magic, and she hardly fluttered an eyelid until dawn.

* * * *

Morning brought a fresh, well-boiled egg and a cup of strong tea. After enjoying both, Emma--more from a feeling of duty than from any desire to be informed--turned on the Oh-Seven News. Thus she learned belatedly that shocking events had taken place last night at Town Hall.

Experience had shown that few things were more annoying to opponents than silent demonstrations--which was why the Progress Gang staged them. The sight of people refusing to engage in reasoned debate on a public issue of major importance, yet preventing others from doing so, so enraged the local tradesmen that they fell upon Gang members with fists and folding chairs, sending a quartet of battered wretches to the Nursing Bot for treatment. The other Progress Gangsters had fled into the night.

Interviewed, the Constable--whose brother owned the Micromarket--said that he hadn't made any arrests because "in a free society, obedience to the law must be optional." He did, however, say that he planned to restore order by a show of force, and he'd sent a request to Town for a heavy-weapons team (who carried billy clubs) to aid him in quieting the agitated public. Emma didn't agree with the Constable's view of law *at all*. Nor did she find it amusing (as he seemed to) that Miss White from the Lemon Tree and a mob of butchers, bakers, waiters, waitresses, barmaids, checkout girls from the Micromarket, two stout publicans, the tailor's assistant, and their sympathizers from all walks of life had spent the night hunting Gang members through the woods with cricket bats and packs of beagles.

At this moment her Tellyphone chimed. Her caller was Milly, and her usually cheerful red face betrayed her state of shock.

"My dear," she cried, "have you heard about the riot? Why, you'd think we lived in the twenty-first century!"

"Quite, quite appalling," Emma agreed. "Repulsive as Gang members are, they are harmless if ignored--as they ought to be, by all decent people."

At this Milly appeared to grow suddenly hesitant and unsure of herself.

"Emma," she faltered, "I really called to ... that is, I wonder if ... if I might ask a great favor of you."

"Certainly you may."

"The fact is," Milly whispered, "that at this moment I am sheltering a member of the Progress Gang from the violence of the mob!"

"Oh, Milly! How brave of you!"

"I've got him crammed into a rather small space behind my banquette; I felt morally obliged to save his life, but not to make him comfortable. He's that priggish schoolmaster Ffrench-Dobbyn, who started all the trouble in the first place."

"Milly, this is none of my business, but ... is he one of your--your--"

"My lovers? Good heavens, no. He's absolutely a frozen fish. If he's got a sweetheart, it's probably at the end of his right arm. On the other hand--so to speak--he may be a leftie!"

Though Emma was shocked by her friend's Rabelaisian wit, she couldn't repress a shriek of laughter when Milly scored this hit on the obnoxious Ffrench-Dobbyn.

"However, I can't let him stay there. I may need the space at any moment, and I've found by hard experience that when two gentlemen are stored under the banquette at the same time, they rarely get along. Could you--would you--"

"Of course," replied Emma at once. She would rather have done anything else than what Milly wanted, but duty was duty.

"This person may take refuge with me," she ruled, "until public order is restored, which I can only hope will be done quickly."

"Emma, you *are* an angel. I shall pack him into the boot of my Minibile, and bring him over at once."

Sighing, Emma clicked off. She'd been looking forward to a quiet, peaceful day: digging up a little bindweed in the garden; docking a plantain leaf or two; painting some puppets she'd promised the Playhouse for a children's Punch and Judy show; later, perhaps, trying out a new recipe for Lukewarm Rabbit Curry with Turnips and Parsnips she'd recently heard praised on a Telly program called *Ye Olde Englishe Cooke-Booke*. Now, instead of these peaceable pursuits, she found herself condemned to play hostess, not merely to a member of the Progress Gang, but to its leader! Well, if she must, she must. She dressed for the day in severe tweeds and avoided the least touch of makeup, in order to exclude every bit of sympathy from her appearance, as well as from her heart.

But when Milly's car arrived at her back door by way of a hidden lane, Emma's first impression of Ffrench-Dobbyn was horrified amazement. He looked as if the mob had not only captured but tortured him, for he was bent into an approximation of a pretzel and seemed unable to straighten out.

"The boot was even smaller than the place I had him in," Milly explained. "But I could hardly have let him sit in a seat, where he might have been observed."

Aided by the housebot, who was exceptionally strong, the two ladies got the twisted man onto Emma's sofa, where he lay moaning softly, his knees pressed against his chin. One ankle was bent very oddly, and his arms had disappeared among the folds of his torso like the ends of the famous Gordian Knot.

"Actually, he's quite two meters high when stretched out," said Milly. "I just don't know how to get him

unraveled."

"I do," said Emma, "for I used to assist dear Father when he slept crookedly and got a wry neck. You go along, dear; early-bird lovers may already be lining up at your door, and you know how prone men are to start fights when competing for the favors of the fair."

After Milly had left, Emma ordered the housebot to fetch heating pads, witch hazel, and a warm iron. With these simple implements, she gradually loosened Ffrench-Dobbyn up, until he was lying flat on the sofa and whispering his thanks. Meantime the housebot had brewed tea, and a hot sweet strong cuppa quickly completed his recovery.

"Thank you so much, Miss--Mrs--"

"*Miss* Smythe-Denby. You had, I understand, rather a close call of it."

"I couldn't have imagined that our fellow-citizens were capable of such violence! Never, never shall I forget the howls of the hunters, nor the baying of the beagles."

"You were attempting to take away your neighbors' livelihood," she pointed out. "That does tend to exasperate people."

He sighed. "I suppose so. I must admit that I never gave sufficient weight to that factor. I was seeking the general good, and expected others to see things as I do."

"How can you expect them to see your point of view, if you ignore theirs?" asked Emma severely. "In any case, I've noticed that the general good means very little to most of us, if it entails a private disaster."

To this he returned no answer. He knew he was in the wrong, and she was somewhat surprised to see that he made no attempt to wriggle out by making excuses. That indicated greater maturity than she would have expected from a schoolmaster, and so she gave up her plans to berate him further, saying only:

"But enough of all that. I hope you will try to rest, after what must have been a most trying experience. Are you perhaps hungry?"

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I'm starving."

Promptly Emma put on her favorite apron over her tweeds and made him a good breakfast with eggs, toast, a rasher of bacon and a fresh pot of jam. Though tempted to point out that everything he was wolfing down had come from the same Micromarket that he wanted to close, she firmly rejected the temptation to crow over this beaten man.

Instead, when he was full, and looking quite human if a bit dishevelled, she asked if he needed anything else.

Ffrench-Dobbyn thoughtfully rubbed his bristly chin and muttered, "If I might just clean up a bit--unfortunately, I haven't got my razor or a change of clothes--"

"I've kept all Father's personal items just as he left them," she replied, "and he was not unlike you in size. You will find his bathroom at the head of the stairs, and I shall bring you a razor and some clean--er, some clean things."

She meant underwear, of which the Colonel had owned an enormous supply, including many brand-new combinations, Y-fronts, vests, and singlets that he died without ever having worn. Emma handed a

selection of these items in through the quarter-opened door of the bathroom, plus a clean towel and a dressing-gown, receiving in return her guest's smudged and wrinkled clothing, which she gave the housebot to be cleaned and pressed.

Then she went downstairs to think over the many surprises of the morning.

"Just listen to the shower run!" she reflected. "Gentlemen seem to need so much water. But of course they have more to get clean than we do.... I wonder if I should have brought him a washcloth. I suppose not--Milly says that most men don't use them.... Goodness, look at those eggshells! He's got quite an appetite, for the bloodless creature I imagined him to be!"

As she tidied up, she began to reinterpret her adventures of yesterday in light of those of today.

"To think that I was considering the purchase of a love bot, which would never eat, never bathe, never shave, be incapable of suffering, and that consequently would not actually need me--not even for sex. All would be pretense and play-acting. No wonder Milly sticks to human beings, annoying as they often are!"

When Ffrench-Dobbyn emerged from the bath, wrapped in the dressing-gown and looking much improved, she directed him to the Colonel's bedroom to rest, first lowering the shades so that no enemy could spot him. She was heading out to work in the garden when a sound began to emerge from that long-empty room: a sound that was strange and yet--somehow--not strange at all.

"Why," she thought, "he's snoring! Just like Father used to do. How very human of him!"

Then she went after the bindweed, and was quite surprised to find herself singing softly as she dug.

* * * *

Ffrench-Dobbyn was still being human at noon, and so Emma watched the Satellite News alone. Though concerned mainly with events of planetary significance, the tail end of the program gave a brief summary of what the announcer called "the Alpha Disorders."

With a pang, Emma learned that the heavy-weapons team now had arrived in 1220, and that the village had returned to its accustomed condition of orderly somnolence. *So*, she thought, *Mr Ffrench-Dobbyn will soon be going home. I wonder if he'll want lunch first?*

But the news hadn't quite finished with the local story.

Among the crimes committed by the mob, the most serious was arson: the cottage belonging to the leader of the Progress Gang (misidentified as "Finch-Dumbkin") had been burned to the ground, and all its contents lost. A fire company from 1616 Alpha had arrived too late to do anything but warm itself by the embers.

An investigation was beginning, but the Constable held out little hope of finding the arsonist(s) in view of the chaotic conditions under which the crime had happened. *Translation*, thought Emma: *He doesn't intend to look very hard.*

But the basic fact was that Mr Ffrench-Dobbyn no longer had a home to go back to.

Emma hated the thought that she must now become the bearer of bad news, and spent some time planning how to break it to him. She decided to make fresh tea and bake a batch of treacle tarts; then, after a nourishing lunch (cold tongue and mince jelly?), a jolt of sugar and caffeine, and a little light talk on this subject or that, she would say gently: "Martin, I am afraid that I have some rather distressing news for you ... you have been burned out of house and home."

Suddenly she paused, startled by her own thoughts. Martin? Had their friendship progressed far enough that she could properly address him as Martin?

After reflection, she decided to do exactly that. He would be in need of a friendly word. Besides, a man who had showered in the upstairs bathroom and was wearing Father's underclothes could not be entirely the stranger that he had been, only this morning.

As matters turned out, all her thought and preparations were needless, for Martin slept through the afternoon. It was past Seventeen when at last she heard him stirring about--and by then, new and terrible news had arrived via the Telly.

The Village Council, after listening to some impassioned words from 1220's most substantial citizens--meaning the many enemies of the Progress Gang--resolved that the mob had exercised "the right, nay the duty of free Britons to defend hearth, home and livelihood against any who might threaten their ancient liberties."

The Council then ordered the Constable to arrest all Gangsters on sight, upon a charge of "provoking public disorder," and offered a reward for their capture.

"Why," Emma exclaimed in outrage, "this is a legal lynching! We have descended to the level of the Americans, and almost to that of the French!"

She was gazing moodily at a news item reporting the total destruction by a vast earthquake of the abandoned city of Los Angeles--which fortunately had resulted in no casualties--when a flash from 1315 Alpha put the cap on a day of extraordinary happenings. The Schools Committee of that village had discharged and blacklisted Martin as a "criminous disturber of the peace."

At this moment she heard him descending the stairs. Neatly turned out, he looked rested, fit and strong--but the smile faded from his lips, when his eyes fell upon Emma and he saw that hers were brimming with tears.

* * * *

What was to be done?

Long into the night, Martin and Emma sat, canvassing the possibilities. Clearly, he was the victim of a great injustice; a solicitor must be retained, and the action of the Village Council reversed by the courts.

At first Martin proposed to go to the Constable and give himself up. But Emma had had plenty of time to think over the situation, and vetoed this proposal at once.

"No, Martin," she said firmly. "You shall not put yourself into the power of your enemies until British Law has once more asserted its majesty, and your right to a fair trial, far from the bigots of 1220, has been assured!"

"I have no place to live," he pointed out grimly, "no possessions, and no means of livelihood. What shall I do?"

"Remain here," she replied promptly. "I shall go to Town, contact a solicitor, and place your case in his capable hands. Meantime you may occupy Father's room, whose masculine ambiance suits you so well, and utilize his wardrobe, which I have no personal need of. No one resides in this house save myself and my housebot, and I shall embed commands in its memory to prevent it from gossiping about you with other bots of the neighborhood."

"What about your friend, Milly?"

"I shall tell her that you have escaped and are preparing your defense from some refuge in the Beta, or even the Gamma, time zone."

"And meantime I must remain a prisoner in this house, afraid even to show my face!"

"Only for a little while. Soon you will be able to come and go as you please."

"How can that be, with a price on my head?"

"Listen, and I shall tell you."

* * * *

The Hot Bot Spot!

Hesitating on the walk outside the garishly lighted store--all the furious traffic of Mulling Crucis roaring past the kerb behind her--Emma reflected how happy she would have been, never to see the horrid place again!

She'd put off her visit as long as she could. After arriving in Town by omnibus, she had first visited the firm of solicitors (Jawse, Fickel & Blather) who had prepared her father's will and done other legal chores for him.

Her business there went quickly: in return for a substantial retainer, Mr Blather promised that within a few days such a barrage of writs and torts would descend upon the Village Council that its members would wish they had never heard the name of Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn; further, that when the case came to trial, his favorite barrister (a Scotsman bearing the evocative name of Angus McGrit) should defend Martin with eloquence and fire.

This task completed, Emma had felt justified in providing herself an exotic yet substantial lunch at Chow's Oriental. But after the fortune cookie had been disposed of, she had no further legitimate reason for delay: she must return to the wretched purveyor of artificial lovers, and attempt to learn certain things she needed to know in order to carry out the next step of her plan.

So, stiffening her spine, she gripped the Hot Bot Spot's ornate door handle, drew a deep breath, and marched inside.

At once the owner sidled up: a dingy-looking little man hailing from an obscure Eurasian tribal region, where the people spent most of their time weaving rugs and practicing infanticide. He was constantly rubbing his palms together--which might have done him some good, Emma thought, if only he'd had a piece of soap between them!

"Yess, lady?" he articulated greasily. "Haven't I seen you in here before?"

"Quite right," she answered. "I have not yet made up my mind whether to buy or not, and I thought that another view of your stock might help me to decide."

"Oh, yess, lady, go ahead and look. Everybody say my bots are most artistic."

"Quite. Especially that extraordinary skin substitute they wear. It is so distinctive--makes human skin look drab and a trifle unreal by comparison. Might I ask what it is? Or is that a trade secret?"

"No, lady, all superior bots use it. It is called dermaplast, and was developed by eminent physicians to promote healing in people who get burned up. It breathes," he said, and demonstrated by inhaling and exhaling several times.

"And the hair--is it plastic, too?"

"No, the hair is real human hair. The head hair is real head hair; the armpits hair is real armpits hair; and the public hair is--"

"I see," said Emma hastily. How like a foreigner to tell you either too little, or else entirely too much!

"And the eyes," she went on. "So lovely, and the constantly changing expressions--it all looks so real! How is it done?"

The little man became professional, revealing a sharp mind beneath his unattractive exterior. "The bot's sensors receive cues from its sex partner that activate pre-set algorithms. Fuzzy logic does the rest. Most people are pretty stereotyped when they f--make love, so the bot learns quickly how to respond."

"In short," she remarked acidly, "when a person makes love with a bot, both are enacting the roles of real people."

"Precisely, precisely," he enthused, showing off a row of badly stained teeth. "And a lovely, beautiful bot is so much superior to the 'real thing'--if, in fact, there is in love such a thing as a real thing, which I doubt!"

Suppressing her disgust at this sentiment--one of the most unethical she'd ever heard--Emma put him off with promises she did not intend to keep, and left the shop feeling that she needed a bath worse than Martin ever had.

Yet she had learned what she needed to know. She would ask the Nurse Bot to order her a couple of square meters of dermaplast from a Medical Supply Depot. Then her own skills, honed in years of volunteer work at the Playhouse, would enable her to shape a convincing mask and sew a pair of gloves for Martin to wear when he appeared in public. So accoutered, she saw no reason why he should not imitate a bot successfully for as long as he might need to.

"I should like to name his new persona Roderick," she meditated, while riding back on the omnibus. "I was thinking of Heathcliff, but I've never considered Emily Bront characters to be entirely *nice*. I shall wait to ask Martin what he thinks of the name until some evening when he's had a good meal, ending with one of my treacle tarts, which he seems to like so much!" As to the metaphysical question of whether a man pretending to be a bot was any realer than a bot pretending to be a man, Emma was willing to bet the answer was *yes*.

* * * *

The news that 1220 Alpha's most persistent spinster had acquired a love bot was a nine-days' wonder in the village.

Of course Milly put the item on her Instantmail, and soon villages in places as far away as Oklahoma (in the Tau time-zone) and Cte d'Ivoire (Omega) were debating the subject of human/bot passion.

Meantime, a legal action filed on Martin's behalf by Mr Blather began moving slowly through the courts. Needless to say, judges, jurors, attorneys, and witnesses did not actually meet. All attended the trial virtually, from wherever they happened to be at the time, through a technology derived from the conference calls of the ancient world.

Roderick/Martin--after removing his mask--gave testimony from Emma's parlor, speaking into her Tellyphone against a backdrop she'd painted for a performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Trial by Jury*. (Thus the Constable could not recognize where he was, and come after him.) From the beginning things

went swimmingly. Martin's profession as a schoolmaster served him well, for he was used to speaking publicly and authoritatively. When the Council members were called to testify, Mr McGrit (tuning in from the shores of Loch Ness, where he was salmon-fishing) in savage cross-examination utterly demolished their absurd attempt to portray the villains of the Disorders as its victims, and vice versa.

As a result, the court (meaning Mr Justice Jeffreys, who was seeking Enlightenment in an Indian ashram at the time) quashed the warrant for Martin's arrest, and scathingly denounced both the Council and the Constable for violating the basic human right to disrupt public business, and make an infernal nuisance of oneself.

The Council appealed the verdict, and for a time the proceedings severely strained Emma's finances. But when a series of adverse decisions forced water rates to be raised to continue the battle, its members were voted out of office. The new Council not only rescinded the obnoxious acts of its predecessor, but agreed to pay Martin and the other Gangsters reasonable damages by putting a small tax on beer.

Good news followed from other quarters: after much foot-dragging, his insurance company (Lloyd's of Mulling Crucis) paid the claim for his house, while the Schools Committee of 1315 Alpha bowed to the inevitable and bought out Martin's contract for a good round sum, plus interest. By then three years had passed since the night of the Disorders. The villagers had gotten used to Roderick, while the disappearance of Martin Ffrench-Dobbyn had long ceased to be a matter of comment. When in their cups, beer-drinkers were heard to mutter that the bugger hadn't better come back, neither: they were paying him tribute every time a pint was served at the Gnashing Tusk or the King's Evil, and they didn't like it, not 'arf they didn't.

As for Roderick, he'd gotten used to his new persona, and kept it even when he no longer had to. As he once admitted to Emma, he felt more like a man when he was a bot, than he had when he was a schoolmaster.

* * * *

Meanwhile, in the privacy of her cottage their relationship ripened and matured.

In close daily contact, she found him almost as silent as he had been when staging demonstrations. The exception was when he had information to impart; he did not precisely converse, he lectured (and, to do him justice, listened with careful attention to her replies).

Both of them enjoyed having the company of an intellectual equal: he had lived surrounded by childish people, including both real children and his fellow teachers; Emma had a firm friend in Milly, and many acquaintances amongst the ladies of 1220, but none who valued abstract thought as she did. So both found a new pleasure in intellectual intercourse.

The same could not be said of the other kind. In matters of passion, Roderick was maddeningly slow to take hints--or to take action--although a congested something about his face encouraged Emma to hope that banked fires might burn, deep within. She understood the suffering and resentment which his dependence on her had caused his male ego. But surely that ought to have vanished when his enemies paid off, and he was able not only to repay everything she had invested in him, but out of the damages he had won from the Council to take over most of their household expenses as well!

Then what was the problem? Could it be ... could it be that Roderick was of the Mauve persuasion?

Not that Emma held any vulgar prejudices against those who are attracted to their own sex. She felt deeply loyal to the King, who was one such, and--despite her firm Anglicanism--respected the Pope, who was another. Yet what a cruel irony if the one man in the world she hoped was not Mauve, turned out to be!

In the end she decided to make the best of what she had. At any rate, she was no longer lonely, and their lengthy period of adjustment had given the housemates time to become entirely comfortable in each other's company. They shared both tasks and pleasures: Roderick had become an exemplary handy-man, while Emma improved constantly in the arts of housewifery. She made it a practice to keep him supplied with tasty food, believing that men like pythons are safest to have around when their bellies are full. To disguise the fact that she was now feeding two mouths rather than one, she took to ordering supplementary supplies from the Depot at Mulling Crucis, thereby getting access to a far greater variety of raw materials than could be had from the spare and flyblown shelves of 1220's Micromarket. (In this respect, it seemed that the Progress Gang might have been onto something.)

As a result, her cooking became ever more ample, varied, and delicious, with emphasis on such traditional dishes as clear soups, Dover soles from the Sussex fish farms, roast joints, London broils, Yorkshire puddings, steak and kidney pies, and fresh berries with Devonshire clotted cream. And never any shortage of hot tea and treacle tarts!

To control his expanding waistline (a problem unknown to real bots, and therefore requiring concealment) Roderick took day-long rambles with Emma over the downs, wolds, meres, fens, holts, and tors that cluttered a neighboring heath. They became a familiar sight to the villagers, and Roderick's slow, stiff strides--so reminiscent of the classic TD (for Two-Dimensional) Frankenstein movies on late-night Telly--actually made him seem more, rather than less, convincing as a bot.

One evening, after a long ramble during which she'd gathered wildflowers while Roderick discoursed on the botany and geology of the heath, they returned home, ate a delicious cold supper, and then relaxed at their ease in the parlor, sipping an elderly Madeira from crystal goblets.

The Telly sat cold and dead, for neither enjoyed it much. Their evenings were devoted to digestion, intelligent conversation, and reading aloud--of late, from the works of Jane Austen. After a chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, Emma asked Roderick why the leisurely fiction of the nineteenth century seemed to speak to modern people so much more than the fevered rantings of the twentieth and twenty-first.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "because the way we live today is closer to the rural life of an earlier time than to the urban madness of a later one."

"Precisely what I think!" she exclaimed. "Though I could never have expressed it so succinctly and clearly. Do let me have one more tiny drop of Madeira. I am so glad that you agreed to select the vintage: you are a connoisseur, whilst I," she smiled, "am merely an imbiber."

"With pleasure," answered the connoisseur, preening a bit as he added wine to her glass.

"A beaker full of the warm South," she quoted dreamily.

By now she had grown so used to Roderick, and so comfortable in his presence, that for a time she entirely forgot he was there. Warm and muzzy with Madeira, her mind drifted into pleasant thoughts of her childhood, recipes she meant to try out, the question of whether peonies could be made to grow in her garden, and the mysterious ways of Providence.

She did not know that exercise, food, and wine had combined to bring a warm blush to her once-pale skin, nor that the few kilos she had added to her weight made her figure appear less angular, more rounded, more--if the word might be used in such a context--appetizing.

She did not notice that Roderick was staring at her. Was he, perhaps, seeing her in a whole new light?

Suddenly he cleared his throat; she woke from her postprandial trance, and turned to face him.

For a startled, timeless moment they gazed deep into each other's eyes. He was still wearing his mask, and his double identity--the eyes of a living man burning through the faintly iridescent faux flesh of a bot--affected her so strangely that for half a minute she neglected to breathe. This was Roderick--her Roderick--the man she had saved, named, almost invented!

"You cannot imagine, Emma, how much I enjoy imparting knowledge to you," he whispered huskily.

"Oh Roderick," she murmured, turning her glowing face once more aside, "you are so inspiring a teacher, that I would gladly learn anything from you--anything--anything you might wish to impart!"

"Emma!" he exclaimed, grasping her two small hands with his large ones.

"Roderick!"

They embraced, and for the first time tasted each other's lips. Their goblets rolled across the floor unheeded, baptizing the rug with a few remaining drops of wine; from the corner where it stood when not in use, the housebot gawked at human behavior it had never before observed.

Neither cared. Roderick had gathered Emma into his arms, and despite her increased weight, was even then ascending the stairs with a rapidity very unlike his usual deliberate stride.

Needless to say, not a hint of these events made it into anybody's Instantmail.

Even Milly--*especially* Milly--received no hint of the changed conditions within her friend's house. And yet, experienced as she was in matters of the heart, she could not fail to observe a new glow and richness in Emma's complexion, a lilt and lightness in her step, a Mona Lisa-like smile that sometimes played over her lips when she felt that she was unobserved.

"I see!" Milly said to herself, leaping to an obvious albeit false conclusion. "She got Roderick merely as a companion, but now she's had him retrofitted!"

Secure in this delusion (which, to be fair, accorded with all the facts as she knew them), Milly was totally unprepared for the news that Emma whispered in her ear, one day when they happened to meet in High Street.

"Oh, my dear!" Milly exclaimed. "Do let me have a small gathering for you in the Igloo--a very small group of our true friends only!"

"So kind of you," Emma murmured.

Invitations quickly went out, and on the day appointed a dozen ladies of 1220 Alpha arrived at Milly's, bearing gifts done up in large or small boxes tied with white ribbons. Emma awaited them, seated upon the scarlet banquette--a figure still tall, but more ample than of yore--her full, rosy face smiling like the traditional Cat that drank the Cream.

They fell upon her neck, and to their amazement found her now ready to engage in the behavior that is customary at such gatherings--lots of huggy-kissy, shrieks of laughter, and synchronized weeping.

Roderick had accompanied Emma, but declined with a somewhat stiff and formal shake of the head Milly's invitation to join the party. Instead, having given the ladies a brief greeting in his resonant voice--a voice that awakened vague memories in Milly, though she could not place it exactly--he left the house.

Shortly afterward she spied him through a window, stalking stiff-limbed up the village High Street, having fled (just like a real male!) from the baby shower going on in the Igloo.

"My Lord," whispered Milly to herself, as she prepared to serve her guests tea and seed cake, "these new bots are absolutely *incredible!*"