

THE PLOT MACHINE

By David H. Keller

Here's advice to those of you who want to write science fiction—from the old master himself. This is an actual speech he gave at a science fiction convention in Ohio.

THE night was warm, so the cellar door had been left open for complete circulation of air through the house. Colonel Bumble and his wife, Helen, were sleeping soundly in their first floor bedroom.

Up the cellar steps, slowly from step to step, slid a mass of protoplasm. At last, it arrived in the kitchen, oozed over the linoleum into the bedroom. There, by the bed, stretching a long, slender pseudopod upward, it started disappearing under a finger nail, into Mrs. Bumble's hand. Once in the bloodstream it floated rapidly to the woman's brain where it impressed memories. It then re-entered the circulation and passed out of her left hand, entered the body and brain of Colonel Bumble where it deposited similar memories. Happy in the consciousness of a worthy task well done, it returned to the cellar.

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Helen Bumble awoke with a start. "I had a wonderful dream,"

she exclaimed to her husband. "It was the plot of a fine story. The sad part is that I have completely forgotten it."

"That's funny, I also dreamed of a story," her husband replied. "Knowing the remarkable telepathy which exists between us I'll bet anything that we dreamed the same plot. It is strange but I, too, have completely forgotten it. If we could remember the plot, write and sell it, it would be a welcomed addition to our bank account."

He was silent while dressing and equally wordless during breakfast. At last he finished his coffee, lit a cigarette and started to talk.

"Stories, my dear, are dependent on plots. Most of these are very old. To me it is evident that plots have life, otherwise they could not exist for so many centuries. I am going to try to prove their existence and then find some method of communicating with them."

"You are growing more peculiar every day, Horatio," Helen replied.

"You know that plots are not alive, but even if they were, how could you talk to them?"

"I'll be able to find some method. In every historical and actual exploration into distant parts of the earth, as well as imaginary visits to the planets, the heroes have always been able to learn easily the language of the inhabitants, no matter how different. If they couldn't talk to them they, at least, were able to read and interpret each other's thoughts. I think I have as much basic intelligence as these explorers, at least I am going to experiment. Several problems have arisen and I won't be content until they are solved."

"Horatio, try to talk sensibly for once in your life. You and I both know that plots have no existence except in the imagination. I mean, they don't run around a cellar like ants or centipedes."

"You may be right, but I'm not so sure of it. Suppose we look at it from every angle. Since men started to tell stories they had to have plots. Some of these stories are very old and they have been repeated again and again, generation after generation. Very occasionally a writer uses a new plot and all the critics acclaim it; then some old man, who has done nothing but ruin his eyes reading, proves that this supposedly new plot was used by a story teller in India four thousand years before Christ. That gives us one definite bit of informa-

tion about plots; they never die. They may sleep for years, like the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, then someone finds them, wakes and revives them and they are as lively as ever, so he uses them in a suppositively new story.

"We really know a great many facts about plots. We have their description tucked away in the various pigeon holes of our mental literary desks. There are only a few basic plots, but each has many variations. We use them for stories and novels. Their physiology is well known, *but no one has ever seen a plot!* And no one knows how they enter the consciousness of the writer so he is able to employ them, either for his own pleasure or commercially.

"Yet plots must have an existence, and if so, they must live somewhere, for it is impossible for something which exists not to have a place to exist in. I don't believe they float through the air like stars in the sky. If that were true, there would be millions of writers."

"I seldom take you seriously," Helen said with a laugh, "but you certainly talk like no one I've ever heard."

"That is because there is only one Colonel Horatio Bumble. But—to continue—these plots probably live in isolated places—old houses, dark cellars, neglected attics — waiting for some ambitious young writer who will find them and want to release them from their seclusion.

Finally, the embryonic Shakespeare or Poe begins a precarious existence in a cellar or attic and the plots living there know their hour of victory is at hand. They enter the writer's brain, he writes the story and at once it is sold—"

"Sometimes," interrupted Helen.

"Correct. Now, when they find a writer who harmonizes with them, they move into him by the dozen, by the hundred. Safely housed in his subconscious they bide their time till he has the all-compelling urge to write and then they pass over the threshold into his conscious and he writes.

"As you are too well aware, ever since we started to live in this house I have been writing stories. That convinces me that our home is a habitat for plots. They must be tenacious and optimistic to survive the treatment accorded to them."

"My opinion is that you don't believe a word you say," his wife remarked firmly.

"Then the only thing for me to do is to show you that I am right," he answered confidently.

BUMBLE spent most of the day in the cellar with his ultra violet movie camera. After supper he went to his dark room and developed the reel. When he projected it on the screen it so astonished him that he woke Helen. Even though it was nearly midnight, he insisted that she look at the pic-

tures.

Protoplasmic life, shaped like enormous amoeba, moved twisting pseudopods. They resembled octopi of many sizes, but all had similar features. Occasionally a large one would seize and devour a smaller one. Helen watched in silence. Finally, at the end of the picture she asked:

"What are they?"

"I'm not certain," Bumble answered, "but I think they are plots. There is no doubt they are hungry. Tomorrow I will experiment with different kinds of food. Of course they wouldn't be able to eat bacon or even soft-boiled eggs but I have an idea that I'll be able to feed them."

"Perhaps they have been eating my jelly!"

"No. That is the favorite food of mice. Now I would advise you to go back to bed."

"I need coffee," she exclaimed. "Plots in the cellar and—goodness knows what will happen next."

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The following morning Bumble looked over his stock of old magazines, selecting one of each kind: Science Fiction, Weird, Horror, Western, Space Opera, True Confessions and Slicks. These he shredded and separately macerated in hot water. He then strained the liquid through filter paper. Carefully labeling pie pans, he filled them with the different solutions and placed them on the cellar floor.

Before supper he inspected the pans.

"Very interesting," he told Helen. "Some of the pans: Science Fiction, Weird and Fantasy, were completely dry. Other pans were full of liquid. The difference cannot be explained by evaporation. At least we now know what they want to eat, so I will prepare an abundance of their favorite food. This will make them grow rapidly and may end their cannibalism. Perhaps with proper nourishment a short-story plot will grow to a full length novel in a few days."

Helen sighed. "Of course it won't cost much to feed them for we certainly have a lot of old magazines, but how is all of this going to help us?"

"That is an important question. This business of being an author is getting me down, flat on my back, prostrate to the earth. If I were young and considered the world my oyster, I'd take a crowbar, pry open the bivalve and find the pearl of great price, the Great American Novel. But I find the crowbar heavy and unwieldy. However, I have a very interesting idea for a new machine."

"You always have ideas."

"Yes, but this one is important. My invention, if it works, will be a notable contribution to literature. Of course I don't know that it will work but it is worth trying. Unless a person tries, he accomplishes nothing. I will brood over the de-

tails while I am going to sleep and tomorrow I will build the machine."

At breakfast the next morning the Colonel announced that he intended to pre-empt the kitchen for the furtherance of his invention. He promised to clean up any mess he made.

AS Helen busied herself with the dishes, making the bed and other household chores she watched her husband gather a weird assortment of utensils and apparatus. Though she hadn't the slightest idea what he was making, it looked interesting.

He ran a thin copper tube through the key hole of the cellar door and joined it to the bottom of a funnel which he fastened to the door knob. Then he put a small table on the kitchen side of the door and on it placed his electric typewriter. He bored a number of very small holes through twelve inches of the tube, flattened it and ran it over the keyboard of the machine. Turning the tube, he ran it through a hole he had bored through the door and on the cellar side fastened another funnel to the tube. He then built a wire rack above the machine to hold and feed paper into it and another rack in front of the machine to receive the typed pages. All this took the best part of the day. At last he proudly announced that his invention was complete.

Helen looked at it in amazement

and asked:

"What is it? What is it for?"

"That, my dear, may not solve the problem of all authors but it will make life easier for at least one author and his wife. This is how it works: A plot comes creeping up the stairs and finding a funnel marked 'Entrance' creeps into the funnel and starts passing through the copper tube. The tube, when it passes over the key board, has a number of small holes in it and is so flat that only one word can go through at a time. Thus, word by word, the plot passes over the keyboard, and as it does the machine writes the story. When a page is written it falls into the lower basket and a new one is fed into the machine. After the plot passes through the tube it returns to the cellar.

"Comes the dawn! All we need to do is gather the completed manuscript, see that the pages are in proper order, slip it into an envelope and mail it to an editor. If it runs over sixty thousand words there will probably be only one a night. If short, we may have three or four stories by morning. Our production will be terrific; our income most gratifying."

"May I ask one question?"

"You certainly may. I am delighted that you so readily and completely grasp the essentials of such a complicated machine that you need ask only one question."

"Will it work?"

"That is a very vital question. How can I tell? The only answer is to wait and see. Either it will or it won't."

"Do you suppose the plots have sufficient intelligence to dictate the story as it should be written?"

"That also is for the future to decide. I believe these plots are very proud and think they know exactly how to express themselves. There is every reason to believe they are highly intelligent. Of course we do not know the type of story they'll write, but there is a market for every kind. They will write the stories and our job will be to find the right magazine or publisher for them."

The end of the day found the Colonel exhausted. There hadn't been too much physical exertion but the emotional strain had been intense.

"I feel like a creator," he said, relaxing in the deck chair in front of the pony house. "This invention may have far-reaching results. Conceivably, it might completely revolutionize the entire field of literary endeavor. I can imagine authors traveling from place to place hunting for plot colonies. They will try to find bait to lure plots to enter their machines. I'm pretty sure letters of acceptance would be some inducement, though publisher's checks would certainly work better. An author with a lengthy bibliography would receive more sympathetic and prompt treatment

than an amateur. I can imagine one plot remarking to another; I'm going to hunt for a man who is internationally famous and widely quoted on every subject of importance, or even otherwise, just so he's quoted.'

"When an author dies, his house will bring a big price, for many ambitious authors will be sure that it is full of plots. Criminal writers will buy adjacent property and tunnel into his cellar in an attempt to steal his plots. If scientists can determine that there are male and female plots they may make an effort to breed them. We could build a profitable business if we could breed and sell matched pairs. What do you think of it?"

"I think you are psychotic."

"You may be right. But tonight our sleep will be undisturbed. If we hear the clicking of the typewriter it will sound like distant waves beating against a rock-bound coast or wind sighing in the pine trees. Tomorrow will be an important day for us, my dear."

THE Colonel woke several times during the night, heard the typewriter tap-tapping and went to sleep feeling very happy. The next morning he rose earlier than usual and went at once to the kitchen. Helen was still asleep when he returned to the bedroom. He raised the shades, woke his wife and handed her a thick package of paper.

"What is this?" she asked

drowsily.

"That, my dear, is a two hundred page story, written while we slept. Everything is there from title page to the final line—*The End*. My experiment was a remarkable success."

"Get me a cup of coffee and my glasses, please. I must read it at once."

Bumble put a kettle of water on to boil and went over to the machine. "It worked," he murmured with a smile. "It actually worked. No matter what else I've done in life *this* is important. Of course I won't know just how good or bad the story is until Helen has read it, but if plots can write their own tales it will make life much easier for both of us."

Arranging two breakfast trays he took them to the bedroom and there, as Helen read, they breakfasted. As she continued to be deeply interested in the story he cleaned the kitchen and went into the garden. After some time he looked through the window, saw that Helen was still engrossed in the story, so returned to weeding the long flower bed.

At eleven o'clock Helen, with the manuscript under her arm, joined him. There was a peculiar glint in her eyes.

"This is a most interesting story, Horatio. Are you sure the plot wrote it on the machine? Maybe you stayed awake all night and wrote it yourself."

"How many pages?"

"Two hundred."

"That is the answer. You know I never wrote more than twenty-nine pages in one day."

"But it reads like one of your compositions. It has many of your trademarks."

"I positively did not write it. Tell me about it."

"It is titled *The Flying Flower*, which is the name of the heroine. She is very beautiful and lives alone in a dank woods. One day she is attacked by a very bad, dark man. She resists violently and in the ensuing struggle he tears off part of her clothing. Then she is rescued by the hero who kills the villain with a Bumble gun. The happy couple wander through the woods picking flowers while he recites poetry to her. Then, without previous warning, they are swallowed by a dragon. In the dark of his duodenum, irritated by digestive juices, the hero kills the dragon by stabbing him in the gall bladder. They escape by cutting a hole through the reptile's abdomen. After that they have eleven more adventures, each more hazardous than the other. They are finally married by a hermit priest, arrive safely at the hero's castle where they live happily ever after and——"

"I know," interrupted Bumble. "They have a baby."

"How did you know?"

"Simple. They have to have a baby. You said it was a Bumble

story and always, when the characters are so nice, they have a baby. Give me the manuscript. I want to read it."

* * *

After supper Helen asked;

"What do you think of it?"

"A very fast moving tale. The plot is not new, but has some new twists that may make it acceptable. I'll set the machine tonight. Perhaps we'll get a few short stories."

Once again Bumble prepared the plot trap and placed three hundred sheets of paper in the automatic feeder rack.

"I suggest that we now try to get a good night's sleep," he said to Helen, "for, if my invention continues to work, and I hope it will, tomorrow we will have another novel to read or perhaps six short stories or thirty short-shorts."

"When will you start on my Lily pond?"

"I don't know. Perhaps tomorrow if I can control my destiny, but we have no idea what the future has in store for us. We dodge, twist and run, but when fate strikes us we cannot escape. All we can do is to accept the inevitable. Thus you realize——"

"I certainly do", Helen interrupted. "You have a one track mind and right now it is running on the plot machine track." In a few minutes she was asleep.

Bumble listened and soon heard the clicking of the machine. With a deep sigh of contentment he too

slept.

IN the morning he took the pile of typed pages from the receiving basket at the bottom of the machine. With interest he noted the title, *The Floating Flower*. Hastily he read the first fifty pages, then merely scanned the rest and checked the chapter headings. Carefully he clipped the manuscript into lots of fifty pages. While Helen still slept, he prepared toast and coffee which he took to her.

"Is there another story?" she asked.

"No, simply another manuscript. It is exactly as long as the first but with a different title and chapter headings. I've read only part of it but it seems to be the identical plot with minor changes. This novel is located in Africa instead of France and the dragon is stabbed in the pancreas instead of the gall bladder. Thus the heroine is covered with a milky secretion which adds to the beauty of her complexion instead of turning her yellow with bile. Much more of her clothing is torn off by the villain before he ties her to a tree. In fact she is so nearly nude that an artist could draw a fine colored illustration for a magazine cover."

"Why do they always tear the clothes off the heroine?"

"The answer is easy. How can the hero tell whether he wants to rescue her if she has on all of her clothing plus a rain coat. To go on

with the story—the ending will not please you and it certainly disturbs my moral sense. She gives birth to a baby before they are married."

"After all, a man and woman don't have to marry to have a baby," Helen observed.

"Not in real life, but if a story is to be published and read by nice people they have to marry sometime, even if it is on the last page. That is absolutely necessary. In many novels the hero is away from earth for many years traveling in a space ship or spends months in a jungle or on a desert island and he always has a very beautiful woman with him. Do they fall in love? Do they have babies, married or unmarried? They do not! They just remain good pals and are never troubled by the biological urge. Men and women have to be celibate if their adventures are ever printed."

When Helen finished the novel she joined her husband.

"This is perfectly terrible in places," she said. "I never thought you had such ideas."

"What do you mean? You know I did not write it."

"But it is your plot."

"No. It is simply a plot living in my cellar and in my opinion it is undergoing moral deterioration. If this continues I will get into serious trouble. Why I might even be arrested. It will be impossible to convince a jury that it was written on a machine by a plot and that I

am in no way responsible. Such a defense as this would land me in a hospital for the insane instead of a jail. It has made me do a great deal of serious thinking.

"I'm certain there must be many nice plots in the cellar; stories I would be proud to sell, but with this machine only one plot can come through at a time. There must be one strong plot which is evidently an exhibitionist and very much of a bully. When evening comes it drives all the nice gentle plots into corners where they cower in fear. Then this bully plot rushes into the funnel and once again passes through the machine. It must be intelligent and very likely believes that if it changes the title and chapter headings I will think it is an entirely new plot. If this continues it will be very serious. If it was a fine tale with humor and gentle style, the constant duplication might not make any difference, but this plot shows a definite decadence and places an increasing emphasis on phases of biological life not mentioned in polite society.

"I shall try the machine again tonight and if this same plot writes the same story I'll take the necessary action."

"Fumigate the cellar?"

"No. I'll simply disconnect the machine, open the windows and bulkhead and the plots will leave."

In spite of his promises Bumble delayed dismantling the plot machine. By the end of the week he

had seven manuscripts, all with the same plot. These he carefully numbered and placed serially in his files.

"We are witnessing," he observed to Helen, "the rapid deterioration of a plot's morals. I have had an opportunity to observe something that, so far, no psychiatrist has seen. However, it is not an unusual occurrence in literature. In this case I have observed a diseased plot pass from decent writing to sheer pornography in exactly one week. From now on, I'll look for an explosion of thought, repetition of phrases, errors in grammar and construction. I can only hope that the kind, gentle and beautiful plots have not been contaminated."

THE next morning the Colonel rose early. He had not heard the now familiar steady clicking of the machine during the night, so he was not surprised to find the basket below the machine practically empty. A few sheets lay at angles and he noticed that there were only a few lines on each page, mostly disconnected sentences, meaningless combinations of words, lines typed and XXXed out. Three times the novel had been titled and each was different. The last was *The Flower in the Cesspool*. On the last sheet was only one line:

"I can write no more."

Bumble disconnected the machine, removed the copper tubes from the holes in the door and opened it.

There, just inside, on the top step, were a few little drops of colloidal material which the Colonel carefully drew into a sterilized medicine dropper.

"That is the end of the plot," he mused. "At one time it had promise of becoming great. I will send this specimen to a laboratory and have it tested."

In a few days a report came; "Wasserman Test 4 plus."

Days of anxious disinfection followed, and the difficulty was to avoid injury to the healthy plots. However, this problem, like all others in Colonel Bumble's life, was easily solved. He finally announced calmly to his wife that there would be no more such cases.

The machine was once more assembled and the next morning the Bumbles were delighted to find in the wire basket six short fantasies. All were at once mailed, and in a few days six letters of acceptance were received from editors who were highly enthusiastic and wanted more of the same kind. These letters were placed at once on little bulletin boards at the garden entrances to the cellar. It was soon evident that new plots were entering the Bumble cellar by the dozen. Every morning stories were found in the wire basket and the variety was so large that very soon the Bumbles were selling to so many magazines they had to use a dozen non-deplumes.

Six months of continued success

in selling stories passed and then the Colonel made a typical Bumble announcement.

"We are growing old, Helen, and have reached the pinnacle of fame. We know many young ambitious authors who are not too successful. The time has come to share our good fortune with them. I will prepare a small booklet describing the plots and the machine they use. We'll give them permission to use the machine and even furnish them with a pair of young plots with direction for their feeding and care. Then they can breed plots—and sell the stories."

"Horatio! You do not think that our plots are male and female?"

"They certainly are. If you read our printed stories you can easily determine whether they were written by a male or female plot. Of course I'll have to be careful in matching them before I send them out. Think of the disastrous results if I matched a Louisa Alcott plot with a Tarzan plot! But I'll work out these problems in a very short time. I am certain that several youthful writers will be delighted to get the paired plots and the little book of directions. Of course so many fine stories will be written that the young men will have to be careful not to glut the market."

Helen smiled.

"I think you are a very wonderful man, Horatio."

THE END