

## A GREAT DEAL OF POWER

*Eric Frank Russell*

*The concept of bungling aliens and fallible robots, as opposed to the super-beings who had been overwhelming the human race since the days of H. G Wells' War of the Worlds (1898), owes much to the British writer, Eric Frank Russell, who wrote a seminal group of stories around these themes in the Forties and early Fifties. In stories such as 'Diabologic' (1955) and novels like The Space Willies (1956), inept creatures from space were easily outwitted by lone earthmen, while his Jay Score series featured a robot with a sense of humour, who looked and acted exactly like a human being. Russell's inspiration for these pioneer stories had been the theories of Charles Fort, the American student of inexplicable phenomena, and in particular his belief that the human race was the 'property' of aliens. Indeed, for some years Russell served as the British representative of the Fortean Society until the demands of his work forced him to give up the post.*

*However seriously Eric Frank Russell (1905—1978) took Fort's concepts, this did not prevent him letting loose his sense of humour on them, which quickly brought him acclaim—especially in the United States where his wisecracking style often seemed more quintessentially American than that of home-grown authors. Not surpris-ingly, Russell proved a major influence on a number of important SF writers, and one of his greatest American admirers, Algis Budrys, commented about him in Fantasy and Science Fiction in August 1984, 'He was a writer of much delightfully entertaining work with an unexpected sting to it—but what a wise, witty and twinkle-eyed man he was, the sort of writer a field ought to be proud to be judged by.' Despite this esteem, Russell virtually gave up writing after 1960, although several collections of stories were subsequently issued including With a Strange Device (1964) and Like Nothing on Earth (1975). Among his robot stories, one of the funniest is 'A Great Deal of Power' which appeared in the August—September issue of Fantastic Universe. It is a tale of the apparently perfect automaton who follows instructions faultlessly—but in true Eric Frank Russell style there is a sting in the tail which is typical of his work and at the same time re-emphasises the importance of his contribution to the humorous fantasy genre.*

\* \* \* \*

Wurmser—fat, balding, with eyes like marble—gloated over William Smith, smacked his lips and said, 'There you are—complete, tried and tested, a soldier of the Sixth Reich.'

'With a thousand to follow,' added Speidel. 'Or ten thousand. Or one million.' He was tall, thin, angular and looked like a hungry vulture.

The third man in the room, Kluge—crop-headed, with heavy jowls and the cold authoritative stare of a high-ranking officer—observed harshly, 'It would be better not to count one's conquests before one has made them.' He favoured William Smith with an expression of mixed disapproval and doubt. 'We have first to discover whether this civilian-styled dummy is as efficient as you claim.'

‘Want to bet?’ asked Speidel.

‘I am not interested in profiting by failures,’ Kluge told him stiffly. ‘I am concerned only with successes.’

‘You’ll see,’ Wurmser told him. He turned, snapped at William Smith, ‘Stand up!’

William Smith stood up. He was of medium height, handsome, thirtyish, well-groomed and looked intelligent.

‘Your name?’

‘William Smith.’

‘Your purpose?’

‘To destroy power at the direction of my masters.’

Kluge lowered his brows and demanded, ‘How?’

‘I shall request each nominee to surrender power voluntarily. If he refuses he dies.’

‘How?’ persisted Kluge.

‘I create within him the desire to die and he nourishes it to the very end.’

‘You hate power?’ prompted Wurmser.

‘I hate power,’ confirmed William Smith, his complete lack of emphasis somehow lending force to his words.

Kluge complained to Speidel, ‘It is about this that I have some misgivings. I have gone to the trouble of reading several authorities upon hypnosis. All say the same—a man cannot be compelled to do anything against his natural inclinations, anything which infringes upon his moral code.’

‘That is true—of hypnosis.’ Speidel grinned, exposing his teeth. ‘This faculty of his is not hypnosis. Don’t ask me what else it is because we don’t know. It is something we stumbled upon by accident and developed.’

‘Complete mental mastery,’ suggested Wurmser. ‘And it works!’ He paused, went on. ‘Certain Eastern mystics can and occasionally do will themselves into Nirvana or, in other words, death. Usually it takes them several days. No autopsy reveals an organic cause.’ He gestured towards William Smith. ‘He can make every victim go one better. We know—we’ve tried him out on a couple of handy deadbeats. They expired within hours, minutes’—he chuckled flatly— ‘*Of natural causes.*’

‘A dim-witted guinea-pig is one thing,’ opined Kluge, unimpressed. ‘A strong-willed man is another. In time of war—any kind of war—one has to overcome strong-willed opposition.’

‘He can do it,’ said Speidel, betraying not a shadow of doubt. ‘He can fight a war so cunningly that the enemy won’t even know it has started.’

‘The days of map-battles are through,’ contributed Wurmser with a touch of malice. ‘No more throwing of masses of pawns against other masses of pawns. This is twenty-first-century super-chess. We leave the pawns undisturbed while we snatch away the big pieces one by one. They just vanish from the board—of natural causes.’

‘I know the proposed technique.’ Kluge waved an impatient hand. ‘After all, I had a share in devising it. The fact that our methods will be radically different from any employed in the past does not make the war any the less a military operation. I

view it from that aspect. Therefore I am duly cautious.'

'No more careful than we.' Speidel handed him a list. 'See for yourself. This is his first short list of victims. All are strong-willed men possessed of considerable personal power. Do you notice any-thing peculiar about them?'

'None are key-members of the opposition,' said Kluge, examining the list.

'Therefore the opposition will not smell danger before our first real test is completed,' Speidel pointed out. 'Not being affected by it they won't be interested, won't be suspicious. Indeed, all these powerful men have so little to do with the enemy military machine that their preliminary passing will serve only to confuse the issue when we do get started in earnest.'

'I approve.' Kluge gave him back the sheet of paper. 'You have exercised your imagination. I compliment you on it.'

'Thank you, Colonel-General.' Speidel was openly gratified. He passed the list to William Smith. 'Deal with these.'

Pocketing the list, William Smith picked up his hat. His clear-cut features were impassive. He might have been a young suburban husband casually going out to post a letter.

Watching him, Wurmser said, 'You have all your papers and passports?'

'I have them.'

'And you can think?'

'I can think.'

'On no account will you return before completion of your task?'

'I shall not return,' agreed William Smith evenly.

'And in a grave emergency, the last resort.. .?'

'I shall press the red button which is set in my chest and thus destroy myself.' His hand moved to his jacket.

'Don't touch it *here*,' yelled Wurmser, involuntarily backing away fast.

'Don't touch it at all unless there is positively no other way out.'

'Jumpy, aren't you?' said Speidel. 'The red button isn't set that delicately. I wouldn't give him ten minutes if it were. Believe me, it takes some pressing.'

'That may be,' said Wurmser, 'but a hand like his is pretty heavy and you can't judge his touch by yours or mine.' He shuddered, licked dry lips, said to William Smith, 'You may go.'

Putting on his hat William Smith departed without a word. The trio in the room watched in silence until the door closed behind him. A long minute later Wurmser heaved a sigh of relief.

Kluge remarked, 'You can make ingenious soldiers of plastics and metals, you and Speidel. You would not shine as soldiers yourselves.'

'What of it? The cannon-fodder days have gone.'

'Humph!' Kluge's air was that of one accommodating himself to a vastly changed present while still hankering for the past. Old-style wars were easier to handle—they embodied established and familiar rules.

Newton P. Fisher heaved his ample bulk out of the limousine, puffed his hanging chops. His slightly protruding eyes were cold as they observed the meek

well-dressed young man waiting nearby.

‘No comment,’ he growled. ‘Beat it—scram!’

‘But, Mr Fisher, please allow—’

‘Allow *nothing*.’ Newton P. Fisher glowered at him. ‘I’ve been taken many a ride by you reporters. Now it’s your turn. Skip back to your garbage dump.’

‘Look, Mr Fisher, my name is Smith, William Smith.’ His words came swiftly, trying to hold the other while something in his eyes burned steadily through. ‘If only you would permit me a minute of your time . . .’

‘Pawson.’ Fisher turned to the blue-jawed, burly man who followed him out of the car. ‘This thing smells. Do something about it.’ He jerked his jacket straight with a defiant pull at the lapels, marched pompously into the building. The eyes followed him all the way.

Folding thick arms across his big chest Pawson stared belligerently at the frustrated interviewer, noted that the other was not fazed. ‘Now,’ began Pawson, ‘what’s the idea of chivvying the boss?’

‘Mr Fisher has much power.’

‘You bet he has,’ agreed Pawson. ‘So what?’

‘He must give it up.’

‘Yeah? To whom? To you?’

‘Heaven forbid,’ said William Smith fervently. ‘I couldn’t dream of such a thing.’

‘Neither could Fisher,’ assured Pawson. He made shooting motions. ‘All right, Nutski, on your way.’

‘But—’

‘Skedad!’ insisted Pawson. ‘Go some place else and brood—and wish the boss dead if you want.’

‘I have already done so.’ Tipping his hat slightly William Smith walked away, impassive, unhurried, peculiarly self-confident.

Watching him go Pawson threw a grin at the chauffeur, put a hairy finger to his forehead and made screwing motions. The chauffeur grinned back. ‘He didn’t hand out any pamphlets.’

‘Saves me tearing them up.’ Pawson strolled towards the building into which Fisher had disappeared. ‘Stick around, Lou, the boss won’t be long.’ He went through the door.

Leaning on the wheel, the chauffeur picked his teeth, mooned up the street, pondered about crazy folk in general and the recent sample in particular. The sample was now out of sight.

Pawson reappeared three or four minutes later. He emerged from the doorway at a cumbersome run. Reaching the car he braced himself against its nearside door while he panted for breath. His eyes were searching the street—his features seemed moulded in stale dough.

After a while he wheezed, ‘*Christmas!*’

‘Something wrong?’ asked the chauffeur.

‘Not much’—Pawson sucked in another lungful—‘only the boss just curled up his toes for keeps.’

There was nothing about this Brussels office to suggest that Raoul Lefevre was the biggest man in Belgium and one of the forty biggest in the world. Neither was there anything outstanding in appearance about Lefevre himself. Slight, dapper, dark, he would pass anywhere as the normal nondescript component of a crowd.

‘Sit down, Mr Smith.’ His English was perfect. ‘So you had contact with the late Newton P. Fisher. His end was a great shock. It upset quite a lot of things.’

‘It was intended to,’ said William Smith.

‘Many of them may not be readjusted for months, perhaps years, and .. .’ He perked up, gave his caller a sharp look. ‘What was that remark you just made?’

‘It was intended to.’

‘Just what do you mean by that?’

‘The Fisherless chaos was created.’

Leaning forward, elbows on desk, Lefevre said slowly and deliberately, ‘Press reports make no suggestion that Fisher’s death was engineered. Are you asserting that he was murdered?’

‘Executed,’ corrected William Smith.

Studying him carefully Lefevre asked, ‘Who sent you to tell me about this?’

‘I have come more or less automatically.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are next on the list.’

‘Next?’ Lefevre was puzzled. ‘On *what* list. *Whose* list?’

‘Mine.’

‘Let me get this straight. Are you trying to warn me that you have obtained from somewhere a roster of persons who are fated for death, that Fisher was first on that list and that I am second?’

‘Precisely,’ agreed William Smith, his eyes burning strangely at the other.

‘Though you may save yourself by voluntarily surrendering all your considerable influence.’

‘Who says so?’ demanded Lefevre.

‘I do.’

‘Ah!’ Standing up, his expression pained, Lefevre pressed a wall-stud. ‘I perceive that you have gained an interview under false pretences. You are not connected with Fisher in any way. You are merely another crank. I have long been the target of cranks—in my position it is inevitable.’ He turned to the one who had answered his call. ‘Emile, please show Mr Smith out. See that he does not return.’

‘There will be no necessity,’ William Smith assured. ‘My purpose has been served.’ He went out, accompanied by the silent Emile and conscious of the other’s grim stare behind him.

Crossing the road he found a bench in the tiny gardens facing Lefevre’s office, sat there gazing steadily at the second floor window. Now and again his attention moved off to follow the visivox wires as if speculating what unhearable unseeable stirrings might be running within them—but always his gaze returned to the window.

One hour and fourteen minutes later a long silvery automobile slid up to the main door, a bearded man got out. Bearing a small black case he hustled through the

front door. Still William Smith watched the window and the wires.

After a while someone pulled curtains across the window. William Smith did not bother to wait until the death-wagon arrived.

Ignace Tatarescu smoothed his black skin-tight uniform, adjusted the black-and-gold ribbon of a jewelled order around his neck, carefully centred its sparkling cross in line with his triple row of brag-rags.

‘This Smith does not offer himself at a convenient time,’ he grum-bled to his valet. ‘However, he is well introduced and I suppose I had better afford him a few minutes.’ He studied himself in a full-length mirror. ‘Always I am affording a few minutes for someone. Where would the world be if I had not enough minutes?’

‘It is a problem, excellency.’

‘Oh, well, show him in. Have the small table set with brandied coffee and sweetmeats.’ He paraded to his favourite spot by the fireplace, struck his favourite pose and held it until his visitor entered. ‘Mr Smith?’

‘Yes, your excellency.’

‘Please be seated.’ Lowering himself into an ornate chair Tatarescu ran finger and thumb along the creases of his colourful pants. ‘Why have you sought this interview, Mr Smith?’

‘You are strong.’

‘Of course.’ Tatarescu preened himself. ‘The world needs strong men. Therefore I am strong.’

‘Too strong,’ said William Smith, looking at him steadily without blinking.

‘What a diplomat!’ laughed Tatarescu. ‘He gains an interview and promptly uses it to criticise my position for which, permit me to tell you, young man, I have fought long and hard.’

‘More’s the pity,’ remarked William Smith.

‘Eh? What do you mean?’

‘It will be so much the more difficult for you to give it up.’

‘I have not the slightest intention of giving it up. When Tatarescu gives up Tatarescu will be dead.’

‘You said it!’ William Smith stated.

The other scowled. It was a much-practised expression. ‘If that is a threat, bear in mind that we are not as alone as we seem. One overt move on your part will mark your end.’ He raised his voice, called towards the door, ‘Escort Mr Smith to the main gates.’ Then to his visitor, ‘The interview is over. You will never be granted another one by me.’

‘No,’ agreed William Smith, still looking at him. ‘Of course not.’

Choosing that moment to gaze straight into those queer orbs Tatarescu saw in them an elusive something that should not have been there, something of pinhead size and far back, something supernally brilliant, intense, compelling, irresistible. It seemed to be twisting his own brain into a new and unwanted path. He came erect, rising like one in a dream. His voice, when it came, was low and hoarse.

‘Never—*never!*’ He shouted it.

‘We shall see.’ William Smith bowed from the waist, backed towards the

frowning guards now waiting inside the door, permitted them to conduct him away. He left the room full of silence.

Once outside the palace he climbed the path to the crest of an overlooking hill, squatted crosslegged at the top. There he brooded over the ornate edifice until dusk approached and lights began to twinkle in the neighbouring city.

He was still there, waiting in the darkness, when bells of the city's churches tolled monotonously and the loudspeakers of the civic address system boomed their news through streets and avenues.

*'Al Marechal Murte!'*

*'Tatarescu is no more!'*

Behind the slums of Tangier, at the desert end of the Street of the Ouled Nails, lay the Sharia Ahmed Hassan, a long dark dirty alley through which William Smith carefully picked his way.

Counting the low doors set in the massive wall at one side he reached the one he wanted, pulled its dangling bell-cord, waited patiently. Soon a thin-featured Arab appeared, took his card.

He heard the other's slippers shuffling away through the night shadows of the courtyard, and a distant, low mutter of *'A Giaour!'*

Many minutes crawled past before the Arab returned, beckoned to him, led him through the courtyard, through numberless passages and into a deeply carpeted room. There he paused to view the old white-bearded man facing him across a low octagonal table. The old man had a beak nose, rheumy but crafty eyes, kept his hands hidden in his capacious sleeves.

'I am William Smith.'

The oldster nodded, said in a rasping voice, 'So your card says.'

'You are Abou ben Sayyid es Harouma?'

'I am. What of it?'

'According to my list you are to be requested to return to the obscurity whence you came.'

'Indeed? You are amazingly candid.' Abou ben Sayyid drew a hand from a sleeve, used it to stroke his beard. 'In my long years I have been the subject of surprising suggestions and many highly imaginative threats. Nevertheless, as you cannot help but perceive, I am very far from dead.'

'Not far,' corrected William Smith. 'Nearer than you think.'

Abou ben Sayyid sighed resignedly and smote a gong by his side. 'The moon is full. It is always at such a time that Hakim the Cobbler becomes queer in the head. Goodbye, Mr Smith.'

Three servants came in at the run. William Smith stood staring, staring until Abou said impatiently to the servants, 'I am heavy with the burden of years and he tires me. Take him away.' He lay back exhaustedly to prove it. He was an easy mark.

William Smith got back into the lane. The courtyard door clanged shut. The bell-cord hung limp, unstimulating in the night air.

Leaning against the facing wall, hands deep in his pockets, he waited until after forty minutes a terrible keening arose from the house.

‘Aie! Aie-e-ee!’

Beneath the veiled moon he strolled away.

A certain Salvador de Marella, of Cartagena, was the last name on this brief, experimental list of guinea-pigs. Salvador was not sharp like Lefevre, nor ruthless like Tatarescu, nor cunning as Abou ben Sayyid. He was the supreme opportunist with more than his share of luck—and he enjoyed the delusion that it would never run out.

Salvador had all the jovial humour of the really successful gambler. He interviewed William Smith and laughed and laughed and laughed.

And laughed himself to death.

All three were there waiting—Wurmser, Speidel and Kluge—when William Smith came back. The first two were gleeful, triumphant—the last one stolid. They had not needed to bide their instrument’s personal account of his adventures. The radio and the video already had told them enough.

William Smith came quietly in, hung up his hat, stood in the middle of the room. It was as if standing were to him a natural lifelong pose. As became an automaton he never sat unless asked or ordered.

‘Perfect,’ declared Speidel, rubbing satisfied hands together and looking at Kluge. ‘Perfect even to the prompt and obedient return. A boomerang that comes right back so that we can use it again and again. Does this cure your scepticism?’

‘Nothing will ever cure my scepticism,’ said Kluge. ‘For instance, it would be a great improvement if he could deal effectively with his victims without the necessity of meeting them face to face and indulging in futile argument.’

‘Impossible! He must make close mental contact for a minimum period to implant a delayed death-desire. There is no way of doing it remotely. If there were we would not need him at all.’

‘I know, I know,’ said Kluge. ‘Therefore I shall concede that you have created a weapon of value.’

‘You bet we have,’ Wurmser endorsed. ‘And it has functioned precisely as designed.’

‘Of sufficient worth,’ Kluge continued, ignoring him, ‘to justify my bringing it to the attention of the proper authorities. It should no longer be a secret among ourselves.’

‘Secrecy will still be necessary,’ Speidel pointed out.

‘I am not an imbecile,’ Kluge retorted irritably. ‘Neither are the authorities imbeciles. The task of multiplying and directing this new robotic weapon will be conducted efficiently and with circum-spection.’

To divert the other’s manifest annoyance Speidel turned to William Smith and said, ‘Do you hear that? There is to be an army of Smiths.’

William Smith spoke, his tones as flat and unemotional as ever. ‘You enabled me to think. Therefore I have been thinking.’

‘So?’ prompted Speidel.



'You also conditioned me to have an intense revulsion for personal power. So I hate power.'

'Quite right too,' agreed Speidel, throwing the others an amused wink.

'Through me *you* have power,' remarked William Smith.

Speidel and Wurmser stiffened. Kluge squared his shoulders.

'The conclusion is obvious and unavoidable,' William Smith went on. 'I have reached it because you made me what I am. So you must be destroyed.'

Wurmser shuffled backwards, talking in high squeaks. 'You cannot give *us* the death-desire. We foresaw that risk and conditioned you against it. You can project your will only where instructed by us. You must obey and project it only where instructed. Understand?'

William Smith spoke with terrifying lack of morbidity. 'I understand. I know too that you could take me to pieces as easily as you put me together.' Again his eyes went over them. 'But that would not destroy your power because it is hidden in the inventiveness of your minds. You could soon make a thousand exactly like me.'

'Where's a blaster?' Speidel tensed, looked searchingly around the room. 'He has no instinct of self-preservation and would let me burn him down where he stands, like the dummy he is. Has anyone got a blaster?'

Kluge shook his head, continued to watch William Smith.

'Yet I cannot give you the death-compulsion,' William Smith mused, neither pleased nor grieved about it. 'It is forbidden. My circuits embody a block which prevents me doing what is necessary. Anyway, I would not impose it upon you.'

'Why not?' inquired Kluge.

'Because that would leave *me* possessed of power. I would stand alone, full of this aptitude which I have been conditioned to destroy.'

'You're in quite a fix, aren't you?' suggested Kluge.

'You're all tangled up in cockeyed logic,' added Speidel.

'He has a gaunt and hungry look,' quoted Wurmser, absorbing fresh courage from the others.

'Such men are dangerous,' reminded Kluge, erect as on parade.

William Smith murmured more to himself than to his hearers, 'This impasse is more apparent than real because the solution is easy. It was built into me. It is the conditioned escape—and the logical ending.' His hand, poised above his chest.

*'This is an emergency.'*

'*No!*' screamed Wurmser. '*No!*' He flapped his hands with sheer horror. Speidel ran for the door. Kluge stayed put, frozen-eyed, unmoving. '*No!*' screamed Wurmser.

The hand smacked the chest right over the concealed red button. The resulting explosion wrecked an entire street, sent a huge column of pulverised brickwork cloud-high.

Behind that button had lurked a great deal of power.