

Compassion Circuit

by John Wyndham

There have been many stories in the past, both fictional and science-fictional, dealing with man's fear of the machines he has created, but here is one in which his fear seems more than justified... Did you ever stop to think how horrible it would be if there were a machine that wouldn't permit you to hurt yourself, or to do anything which might hurt you? Give it a moment's contemplation, and then read this tinger by one of England's best-known modern science fantasists.

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

BY the time Janet had been five days in the hospital she had become converted to the idea of a domestic robot. It had taken her two days to discover that Nurse James *was* a robot, one day to get over the surprise, and two more to realize what a comfort an attendant robot could be.

The conversion was a relief. Practically every house she visited had a domestic robot. It was the family's second or third most valuable possession, the women tending to rate it slightly higher than the car, the men, slightly lower. Janet had been perfectly well aware for some time that her friends regarded her as a nitwit or worse for wearing herself out with looking after a house which a robot would be able to keep spick and span with a few hours' work a day.

She had also known that it irritated George to come home each evening to a wife who had tired herself out by unnecessary work. But the prejudice had been firmly set. It was not the diehard attitude of people who refused to be served by robot waiters, or driven by robot drivers or who disliked to see dresses modeled by robot mannequins.

It was simply an uneasiness about them, about being left alone with one—and a disinclination to feel such an uneasiness in her own home.

She herself attributed the feeling largely to the conservatism of her own home which had used no house-robots. Other people, who had been brought up in homes run by robots, even the primitive types available a generation before, never seemed to have such a feeling at all. It irritated her to know that her husband thought she was *afraid* of them in a childish way. That, she had explained to George a number of times, was not so, and was not the point, either. What she *did* dislike was the idea of one intruding upon her personal, domestic life, which was what a house-robot was bound to do.

The robot who was called Nurse James was, then, the first with which she had ever been in close personal contact and she, or it, came as a revelation.

Janet told the doctor of her enlightenment, and he looked relieved. She also told George when he looked in in the afternoon, and he was delighted. The two of them conferred before he left the hospital.

“Excellent,” said the doctor. “To tell you the truth I was afraid we were up against a real neurosis there—and very inconveniently, too. Your wife can never have been strong, and in the last few years she's worn herself out running the house.”

“I know,” George agreed. “I tried hard to persuade her during the first two years we were married,

but it only led to trouble, so I had to drop it. This is really a culmination. She was rather shaken when she found out the reason she'd have to come here was partly because there was no robot at home to look after her."

"Well, there's one thing certain. She can't go on as she has been doing. If she tries to she'll be back here inside a couple of months," the doctor told him.

"She won't now. She's really changed her mind," George assured him. "Part of the trouble was that she's never come across a really modern one except in a superficial way. The newest that any of our friends has is ten years old at least, and most of them are older than that. She'd never contemplated the idea of anything as advanced as Nurse James. The question now is what pattern?"

The doctor thought a moment. "Frankly, Mr. Shand, your wife is going to need a lot of rest and looking after, I'm afraid. What I'd really recommend for her is the type they have here. It's something pretty new, this Nurse James model. A specially developed high-sensibility job with a quite novel contra-balanced compassion-protection circuit. A very tricky bit of work, that.

"Any direct order which a normal robot would obey at once is evaluated by the circuit, weighed against the benefit or harm to the patient, and unless it is beneficial, or at least harmless, it is not obeyed. They've proved to be wonderful for nursing and looking after children. But there is a big demand for them, and I'm afraid they're pretty expensive."

"How much?" asked George.

The doctor's round-figure price made him frown for a moment. Then he said: "It'll make a dent. But, after all, it's mostly Janet's economies and simple-living that's built up the savings. Where do I get one?"

"You don't. Not just like that," the doctor told him. "I shall have to throw a bit of weight about for a priority, but in the circumstances I shall get it, all right. Now, you go and fix up the details of appearance and so on with your wife. Let me know how she wants it, and I'll get busy."

"A proper one," said Janet. "One that'll look right in a house, I mean. I couldn't do with one of those levers-and-plastic-box things that stare at you with lenses. As it's got to look after the house, let's have it looking like a housemaid."

"Or a houseman, if you like?"

She shook her head. "No. It's going to have to look after me, too, so I think I'd rather it was a housemaid. It can have a black silk dress, and a frilly white apron and cap. And I'd like it blonde—a sort of darkish blonde—and about five feet ten, and nice to look at, but not *too* beautiful. I don't want to be jealous of it..."

The doctor kept Janet ten days more in the hospital while the matter was settled. There had been luck in coming in for a cancelled order, but inevitably some delay while it was adapted to Janet's specification. Also it had required the addition of standard domestic pseudo-memory patterns to suit it for housework.

It was delivered the day after she got back. Two severely functional robots carried the case up the front path, and inquired whether they should unpack it. Janet thought not, and told them to leave it in the outhouse.

When George got back he wanted to open it at once, but Janet shook her head.

"Supper first," she decided. "A robot doesn't mind waiting."

Nevertheless it was a brief meal. When it was over George carried the dishes out to the kitchen and

stacked them in the sink.

“No more washing-up,” he said, with satisfaction.

He went out to borrow the next-door robot to help him carry the case in. Then he found his end of it more than he could lift, and had to borrow the robot from the house opposite, too. Presently the pair of them carried it in and laid it on the kitchen floor as if it were a featherweight, and went away again.

George got out the screwdriver and drew the six large screws that held the lid down. Inside there was a mass of shavings. He shoved them out, on to the floor.

Janet protested.

“What’s the matter? *We* shan’t have to clean up,” he said, happily.

There was an inner case of woodpulp, with a snowy layer of wadding under its lid. George rolled it up and pushed it out of the way, and there, ready dressed in black frock and white apron, lay the robot.

They regarded it for some seconds without speaking.

It was remarkably lifelike. For some reason it made Janet feel a little queer to realize that it was *her* robot—a trifle nervous, and, obscurely, a trifle guilty...

“Sleeping beauty,” remarked George, reaching for the instruction-book on its chest.

In point of fact the robot was not a beauty. Janet’s preference had been observed. It was pleasant and nice-looking without being striking, but the details were good. The deep gold hair was quite enviable—although one knew that it was probably threads of plastic with waves that would never come out. The skin—another kind of plastic covering the carefully built-up contours—was distinguishable from real skin only by its perfection.

Janet knelt down beside the box, and ventured with a forefinger to touch the flawless complexion. It was quite, quite cold.

She sat back on her heels, looking at it. Just a big doll, she told herself—a contraption. A very wonderful contraption of metal, plastics, and electronic circuits, but still a contraption, and made to look as it did only because people would find it harsh or grotesque if it should look any other way.

And yet, to have it looking as it did was a bit disturbing, too. For one thing, you couldn’t go on thinking of it as “it” any more. Whether you liked it or not, your mind thought of it as “her.” As “her” it would have to have a name; and, with a name, it would become still more of a person.

“ ‘A battery-driven model,’ ” George read out, “ ‘will normally require to be fitted with a new battery every four days. Other models, however, are designed to conduct their own regeneration from the mains as and when necessary.’ Let’s have her out.”

He put his hands under the robot’s shoulders, and tried to lift it.

“Phew!” he said. “Must be about three times my weight.” He had another try. “Hell,” he said, and referred to the book again.

His brow furrowed.

“The control switches are situated at the back, slightly above the waistline. All right, maybe we can roll her over.”

With an effort he succeeded in getting the figure on to its side and began to undo the buttons at the

back of her dress. Janet suddenly felt that to be an indelicacy.

“I’ll do it,” she said. Her husband glanced at her. “All right. It’s yours,” he told her.

“She can’t be just ‘it.’ I’m going to call her Hester.”

“All right, again,” he agreed.

Janet undid the buttons and fumbled about inside the dress. “I can’t find a knob, or anything,” she said.

“Apparently there’s a small panel that opens,” he told her.

“Oh, no!” she said, in a slightly shocked tone.

He regarded her again. “Darling, she’s just a robot—a mechanism.”

“I know,” said Janet, shortly. She felt about again, discovered the panel, and opened it.

“You give the upper knob a half-turn to the right and then close the panel to complete the circuit,” instructed George from the book.

Janet did so, and then sat swiftly back on her heels again, watching.

The robot stirred and turned. It sat up, then it got to its feet. It stood before them, looking the very pattern of a stage parlormaid.

“Good day, madam,” it said. “Good day, sir. I shall be happy to serve you...”

“Thank you, Hester,” Janet said, as she leaned back against the cushion placed behind her. Not that it was necessary to thank a robot, but she had a theory that if you did not practice politeness with robots you soon forgot it with other people.

And, anyway, Hester was no ordinary robot. She was not even dressed as a parlormaid any more. In four months she had become a friend, a tireless, attentive friend. From the first Janet had found it difficult to believe that she was only a mechanism, and as the days passed she had become more and more of a person.

The fact that she consumed electricity instead of food came to seem little more than a foible. The time she couldn’t stop walking in a circle, and the other time when something went wrong with her vision so that she did everything a foot to the right of where she ought to have been doing it. These things, certainly, were just indispositions such as anyone might have, and the robot-mechanic who came to adjust her paid his call much like any other doctor. Hester was not only a person; she was preferable company to many.

“I suppose,” said Janet, settling back in the chair, “that you must think me a poor, weak thing?”

A thing one must not expect from Hester was euphemism.

“Yes,” she said, directly. But then she added: “I think all humans are poor, weak things. It is the way they are made. One must be sorry for them.”

Janet had long ago given up thinking things like: “That’ll be the compassion-circuit speaking,” or trying to imagine the computing, selecting, associating, and shunting that must be going on to produce such a remark. She took it as she might from—well, say, a foreigner.

She said: “Compared with robots we must seem so, I suppose. You are so strong and untiring,

Hester. If you knew how I envy you that!”

Hester said, matter of factly: “We were designed. You were just accidental. It is your misfortune, not your fault.”

“You’d rather be you than me?” asked Janet.

“Certainly,” Hester told her. “We are stronger. We don’t have to have frequent sleep to recuperate. We don’t have to carry an unreliable chemical factory inside us. We don’t have to grow old and deteriorate. Human beings are so clumsy and fragile and so often unwell because something is not working properly.

“If anything goes wrong with us, or is broken, it doesn’t hurt and is easily replaced. And you have all kinds of words like pain, and suffering, and unhappiness, and weariness, that we have to be taught to understand, and they don’t seem to us to be useful things to have. I feel very sorry that you must have these things and be so uncertain and so fragile. It disturbs my compassion-circuit.”

“Uncertain and fragile,” Janet repeated. “Yes, that’s how I feel.”

“Humans have to live so precariously,” Hester went on. “If my arm or leg should be crushed I can have a new one in a few minutes. But a human would have agony for a long time, and not even a new limb at the end of it—just a faulty one, if he were lucky. That isn’t as bad as it used to be because in designing us you learned how to make good arms and legs, much stronger and better than the old ones. People would be much more sensible to have a weak arm or leg replaced at once, but they don’t seem to want to if they can possibly keep the old ones.”

“You mean they can be grafted on? I didn’t know that,” Janet said. “I wish it were only arms or legs that’s wrong with me. I don’t think I should hesitate...”

She sighed. “The doctor wasn’t encouraging this morning, Hester. I’ve been losing ground and must rest more. I don’t believe he expects me to get any stronger. He was just trying to cheer me up before... He had a funny sort of look after he’d examined me. But all he said was I should rest more. What’s the good of being alive if it’s only rest—rest—rest?”

“And there’s poor George. What sort of a life is it for him, and he’s been so patient with me, so sweet. I’d rather anything than go on feebly like this. I’d sooner die...”

Janet went on talking, more to herself than to the patient Hester standing by. She talked herself into tears. Then presently, she looked up.

“Oh, Hester, if you were human I couldn’t bear it. I think I’d hate you for being so strong and so well. But I don’t, Hester. You’re so kind and so patient when I’m silly, like this. I believe you’d cry with me to keep me company if you could.”

“I would if I could,” the robot agreed. “My compassion-circuit—”

“Oh, *no!*” Janet protested. “It can’t be just that. You’ve a heart somewhere, Hester. You must have.”

“I expect it is more reliable than a heart,” said Hester.

She stepped a little closer, stooped down, and lifted Janet up as if she weighed nothing at all.

“You’ve tired yourself out, Janet, dear,” she told her. “I’ll take you upstairs. You’ll be able to sleep a little before he gets back.”

Janet could feel the robot’s arms cold through her dress, but the coldness did not trouble her any

more. She was aware only that they were strong, protecting arms around her.

She said: "Oh, Hester, you are such a comfort. You *know* what I ought to do." She paused, then she added miserably: "I know what he thinks—the doctor, I mean. I could see it. He just thinks I'm going to go on getting weaker and weaker until one day I'll fade away and die. I said I'd sooner die, but I wouldn't, Hester. I don't want to die..."

The robot rocked her a little, as if she were a child.

"There, there, dear. It's not as bad as that—nothing like," she told her. "You mustn't think about dying. And you mustn't cry any more. It's not good for you, you know. Besides, you won't want him to see you've been crying."

"I'll try not to," agreed Janet obediently, as Hester carried her out of the room and up the stairs...

The hospital reception-robot looked up from the desk.

"My wife," George said. "I rang you up about an hour ago."

The robot's face took on an impeccable expression of professional sympathy.

"Yes, Mr. Shand. I'm afraid it has been a shock for you, but as I told you, your house-robot did quite the right thing to send her here at once."

"I've tried to get on to her own doctor, but he's away," George told her.

"You don't need to worry about that, Mr. Shand. She has been examined, and we have had all her records sent over from the hospital she was in before. The operation has been provisionally fixed for tomorrow, but of course we shall need your consent."

George hesitated. "May I see the doctor in charge of her?"

"He isn't in the hospital at the moment, I'm afraid."

"It is—absolutely necessary?" George asked, after a pause.

The robot looked at him steadily, and nodded, said, "She must have been growing steadily weaker for some months now."

George nodded.

"The only alternative is that she will grow weaker still, and have more pain before the end," she told him.

George stared at the wall blankly for some seconds. "I see," he said bleakly.

He picked up a pen in a shaky hand and signed the form that she put before him. He gazed at it awhile without seeing it.

"Will—will she have a good chance?" he asked.

"Yes," the robot told him. "There is never complete absence of risk, of course. But there's a very good chance of complete success."

George sighed, and nodded. "I'd like to see her," he said.

The robot pressed a bell-push. "You may *see* her," she said. "But I must ask you not to disturb her. She's asleep now, and it's better for her not to be awakened."

George had to be satisfied with that, but he left the hospital feeling a little better for the sight of the quiet smile on Janet's lips as she slept.

The hospital called him at the office the following afternoon. They were reassuring. The operation appeared to have been a complete success. Everyone was quite confident of the outcome. There was no need to worry. The doctors were perfectly satisfied. No, it would not be wise to allow any visitors for a few days yet. But there was nothing to worry about. Nothing at all.

George rang up each day just before he left, in the hope that he would be allowed a visit. The hospital was kindly and heartening, but adamant about visits. And then, on the fifth day, they suddenly told him she had already left on her way home. George was staggered. He had been prepared to find it a matter of weeks. He dashed out, bought a bunch of roses, and left half a dozen traffic regulations in fragments behind him.

"Where is she?" he demanded of Hester as she opened the door.

"She's in bed. I thought it might be better if—" Hester began, but he lost the rest of the sentence as he bounded up the stairs.

Janet was lying in the bed. Only her head was visible, cut off by the line of the sheet, and a bandage around her neck. George put the flowers down on the bedside table. He stooped over Janet and kissed her gently. She looked up at him from anxious eyes.

"Oh, George, dear. Has she told you?"

"Has who told me what?" he asked, sitting down on the side of the bed.

"Hester. She said she would. Oh, George, I didn't mean it. At least, I don't think I meant it. She sent me, George. I was so weak and wretched. I wanted to be strong. I don't think I really understood. Hester said—"

"Take it easy, darling. Take it easy," George suggested with a smile. "What on earth's all this about?"

He felt under the bedclothes and found her hand. "But, George—" she began.

He interrupted her. "I say, darling, your hand's dreadfully cold. It's almost like—" His fingers slid further up her arm. His eyes widened at her, incredulously. He jumped up suddenly from the bed and flung back the covers. He put his hand on the thin nightdress, over her heart—and then snatched it away as if he had been stung. He staggered back. "God! *NO!*" he said, staring at her.

"But George. George, darling—" said Janet's head on the pillows.

"*NO! NO!*" cried George, almost in a shriek. He turned and ran blindly from the room. In the darkness on the landing he missed the top step of the stairs, and went headlong down the whole flight.

Hester found him lying in a huddle in the hall. She bent down and gently explored the damage. The extent of it, and the fragility of the frame that had suffered it disturbed her compassion-circuit very greatly. She did not try to move him, but went to the telephone and dialed.

"Emergency?" she asked, and gave the name and address. "Yes, at once," she told them. "There may not be a lot of time. Several compound fractures, and I think his back is broken, poor man... No. There appears to be no damage to his head... Yes, much better. He'd be crippled for life, even if he did get over it... Yes, better send the form of consent with the ambulance so that it can be signed at once... Oh, yes, that'll be quite all right. His wife will sign it."

The End.

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