

THE IRON JACKASS

by John Brunner

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In solving problems involving human groups, Justice and Correct Answer are not necessarily synonymous.

Sometimes Justice stems from fantasy rather than facts...

“People!” said Wallmeyer in a disgusted tone. “Me, I’ll take robots over people any day of the year.”

Marghem half-turned from the big window and scowled over his shoulder. As mayor of Eisenberg he had just about had his fill of the trouble both robots and people could cause. He said, “If that’s the way you feel, what are you doing here? Why not go back to Earth, where you’ll have all the robot company you could wish for?”

“Believe me,” Wallmeyer snapped, “if it wasn’t in

my contract to stay here till you were satisfied our robots were functioning properly, I'd have gone long ago. On foot back to the spaceport, if necessary!"

The port was two hundred and sixty miles distant across one of the world deserts New Earth had to offer. Marghem was very much tempted to take Wallmeyer up on what he said, contract or no contract. The week or two past, the Terran roboticist had reached a climax of accumulated frustration through being cooped up in the drab surroundings of Eisenberg, and since no one would keep company with him except the mayor—who had to—Marghem had absorbed the full blast of his sourness.

Before he could word the invitation, however, Wallmeyer got up from his tubular steel chair the other side of Marghem's steel-plate desk and pointed at a blur in the gray-blue sky.

"Suppose that's him?" he demanded.

Marghem followed his gaze. "It must be," he said. "OK., let's go and meet him when he lands. I only hope Nagy hasn't got wind of this somehow." He picked up his dust mask from the hook on the back of the office door, but before plunging his face into it he stamped with sudden violence.

"How did this *happen*? Why? They're the best kind of people you could want, here in Eisenberg. Used to be that we had a real spirit of enthusiasm, unity, all wanting to get the work done together. Now I feel like an enemy of the people—I talk about keeping things secret from

Nagy, and immediately I start wondering whether the phone operators have broken the scrambler code or whether anyone's sneaked up to this shack and eavesdropped at the window—”

“Think it's my fault?” Wallmeyer said in a ragged tone. “Think I asked to be sent here?”

Marghem gave him a steady look and shook his head. “No,” he said. “You were too obviously prepared to hate everything you found here. Come on.”

In the anteroom through which they passed on their way to the outside, Joe got to his feet. If it had not been for the fact that the face on the front of his head was an impassive metal stamping, Marghem would have sworn the robot looked eager.

“Putting me to work today, boss?” he demanded. You had to call a robot like this *he* for exactly the same reason you had to refer to him Joe, instead of by his official serial number.

“Not yet, Joe, I'm afraid,” said Marghem in a kindly tone. “Pretty soon though.”

The robot lowered his seven-foot bulk back to the top of his packing case. He looked positively dispirited. As he and Wallmeyer passed through the exit door, Marghem could have sworn he heard a gigantic sigh. But it could only have been a trick of the wind.

Dust swirled up around them as they plodded down the road to the main square over which the helicopter was now hovering uncertainly. That dust was in its way granulated wealth—ferrosiliceous specks of the mineral for which the town had been baptized Eisenberg, Iron Mountain. But it was also an incredible nuisance,

because it stung, the eyes unless you wore goggles and in very short order was liable to give you silicosis if you didn't wear a mask. Marghem could put up with all the other inconveniences of living here, masking up to take even a short walk was the one which irritated him.

"Getting worried about Joe," said Wallmeyer when they had covered most of the distance to the square. His voice had changed completely, and it wasn't only due to the effect of talking through a mask. Marghem fancied he detected tenderness in the words.

"Me, too," he grunted.

"Not the way I am," said Wallmeyer. "Joe's programmed to work, you know. He's been activated for going on two months, and he hasn't been allowed to do a hand's turn. Much more frustration, and he'll suffer the mechanical counterpart of a nervous breakdown. Then what use will he be to you?"

"I know! I know!" Marghem sighed.

They came into the main square. Apparently Nagy hadn't got wind of the government agent's arrival, for the only people around were a few curious housewives on their way home from the commissariat center with the weekly issue of provisions. If Nagy had heard, nothing would have stopped him from being on the spot. Marghem began to think that luck was temporarily with him, and as the 'copter settled in a cloud of dust set his shoulders back and tried to look like the mayor of a flourishing and indispensable community instead of like a man unjustly burdened with a whole planet's problems.

Which, of course, he was. But he didn't have to let it

show.

When two figures descended from the ‘copter, he assumed that one of them would merely be a pilot; they were, naturally, goggled and masked and wore air-conditioned suits like anyone here. He looked them over before addressing them at random.

“Are you Colville?”

“That’s right,” said the taller and bulkier of the two new arrivals. He put out a gauntleted hand and shook with Marghem. “You must be Mayor Marghem—glad to know you. This is Ira Bell?”

He indicated his companion, who wordlessly shook with Marghem and then with Wallmeyer when he was presented. “Uh... you’re the pilot?” Marghem suggested.

Ira Bell’s goggle-and-masked head shook gently. Colville spoke up. “No... uh... hope you have no objection, but Ira’s here studying folklore and wanted the chance to visit one of our new industrial communities to see what continuity of culture exists between it and its parent communities on Earth, and, of course, Eisenberg is one of our most vital and lively towns.”

“*Folklore?*” said Marghem, taking a pace backward out of sheer astonishment. “Haven’t we enough problems that actually matter? For—” He broke off, shrugging. “Well, provided you keep out from under my feet, I guess it makes no odds one way or the other. Let’s get up to my office before someone passes the word that you’re here; our chief problem, a man called Nagy, works in the rolling and blooming mills at the far end of the valley, but the whole community’s in such a tense state he’ll get the news within minutes, probably.”

This time when they passed through the anteroom Joe seemed to be quite resigned, and made no attempt to get up or speak. Wallmeyer, walking behind Marghem and Colville with Ira Bell beside him, cast him a worried glance. Directly he had dosed the office door, he turned to Colville.

“Look, Colville, something *must* be done, and quickly, if that robot isn’t to break down so badly he has to be shipped home for overhaul!”

And stopped.

Taking his place behind his desk and turning to face his visitors, Marghem saw why. Ira Bell was stripping off mask and goggles and shaking out shoulder-long auburn hair from under her cap. That hair framed a perfect oval in which green eyes twinkled apologetically.

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” she said in a low, pleasant voice. “Ira is a dreadfully confusing name to have.”

Marghem swallowed loudly. He said, “Now look here... uh... Miss Bell! What I said stands. It’s... uh... well, not so much a shock as a pleasure—” He searched frantically through his mental files for something appropriate and suitably mayor-like, found nothing available, and improvised. “We’ve got a problem here on which the future economic development of New Earth depends, and with all respect to your doubtless very interesting researches, that’s going to occupy my mind and everyone else’s in Eisenberg till solved!”

“I’m sure Ira fully understands,” Colville cut in. “I made it quite clear on the trip here that the town is in

pretty abnormal state right now.”

“Abnormal!” said Marghem bitterly. “I prefer *chaotic*.”

“Yes. Well, that’s what they set me out here to fix, if possible.” Colville produced from an inside pocket of his suit a file of micronotes and a reader, which he set up on the nearest corner of Marghem’s desk and switched on.

“Situation,” he said briskly. “Eisenberg is currently producing almost four thousand tons of steel of all grades per week. This is our richest and best-developed strike of ferrous ore; nothing else on the planet touches it for quality. Unfortunately, we need at least double its present output if we’re to get our new ‘copter factory finished on schedule in the new year. We’ve known about this for four years, going on five. We tried our best to get more manpower. Unfortunately again, metallurgists, millhands, and other skilled technicians aren’t to be had in sufficient quantity. Right?”

Marghem scowled and nodded.

“So what else was to be done? We invested six billion credits in forty general-purpose robots from the Terrestrial Automation Corporation—”

Wallmeyer kicked his legs out in front of him, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and snapped, “And I suppose it’s my fault that thirty-nine of those robots are still in their packing cases, unactivated, with the fortieth on the verge of breakdown!”

Colville turned calm eyes on him. “Not at all. Nobody’s doubting that your robots will fulfill their functions perfectly, and *more* than double Eisenberg’s steel output—once we figure out a way of getting them

into service.”

“I wish you’d hurry then,” Wallmeyer said sourly, standing up and beginning to pace the narrow office from side to side. “I feel like I’ll break down myself if I have to stay in this one-reactor town any longer.”

Colville glanced at Marghem and raised his eyebrows sardonically. The gesture seemed to indicate sympathy; Marghem found himself thinking that if the government did have to send out an agent to chivvy him along, they could have sent someone far less supportable than Colville. He brightened a bit.

“Mayor Marghem,” Colville went on, “up to now all I’ve had access to, of course, are the weekly progress reports you file. I think it would be much better, and give me a clearer picture, if you could sum the problem up in informal terms.”

Marghem leaned back in his chair. He found that Ira Bell’s eyes were on him, studying him curiously, and tried not to take any notice. Colville should have known better than to bring a pretty girl, for pity’s sake! His spell as mayor of Eisenberg had convinced him that the attitude of the people here towards women and work was the right one: keep ‘em well apart!

He said, “The trouble is simple. The people of Eisenberg are the finest kind of people you can find anywhere.”

Colville blinked. “Uh... could you clarify that?”

“Sure. As Wallmeyer is boiling to inform you, no one in his right mind would *want* to come and live here for pleasure. Eisenberg is a mining and milling town,

nothing else.” He pointed at a wall map across the office to his right. “You won’t find anything superfluous on that plan—no three-dee house, no swimming pool, no pleasurepads, no frills whatever.”

“Telling me!” rasped Wallmeyer, still moodily pacing. Marghem ignored him.

“*But* we have the biggest steel mills on the planet, and we feel proud of the fact. That’s what brought these people here, Colville. Most of them are Hunkies, Polacks, Slavs of various kinds, both from the United States and from Central Europe. Practically everyone on Earth shares Wallmeyer’s opinion—that a man who works when the job can be automated out from under him is off his gyros. These people didn’t. They came here, to live in a permanent cloud of dust, because they didn’t like to be pensioners of a machine. They’re the most fiercely independent people you’ll ever find. I love ‘em. I think they’re wonderful.”

“The only drawback,” Colville said, nodding, “is that right now everyone else on New Earth is beginning to hate their guts for creating a totally unnecessary bottleneck in steel production. Six billion credits is a sizable slice off the planetary surplus, you know, and nobody’s happy to see the robots lying useless in their crates when our whole plan for economic expansion is keyed to their doubling our steel production.”

“Look!” said Marghem, drawing a deep breath. “You can’t wonder at it, can you? These people love their work; they’re proud that *they* are *men* and *they’re* doing the job. Back home machines took all that away from them, and they see our attempt to bring GP robots into

Eisenberg as the first stage in the same process.”

“Mayor Marghem!” said Ira Bell unexpectedly. Distracted, Marghem glanced at her.

“Ah... yes, Miss Bell?” he said impatiently.

“Please call me Ira. Everyone does. I’m sorry to interrupt, but could you tell me what compliments these people pay each other?”

“I *beg* your pardon?” Marghem felt confused. “Look, Miss... I mean Ira... let me make it absolutely clear that I can’t afford to be interrupted to help out with your folklore studies when we’ve got a planetwide problem on our hands!”

“*Magarac*?” said Ira on a gently questioning note.

“What—? Oh, I see! Yes, Colville, that’s absolutely right, and it’s a very good illustration of what I’ve been saying. These people call an outstandingly hard worker *magarac*, which means jackass.”

Wonderingly, he interrupted himself to stare at Ira. “How did you know?” he demanded.

Ira shrugged and smiled, and Colville, after pausing a moment to {hear} her answer if she was going {to,} turned to Marghem again.

“Jackass?” he echoed. “Why?”

“Because a jackass, according to them, is only interested in working and eating. So it’s a very high compliment.”

“Jackasses are also obstinate,” Wallmeyer put in grimly. “That makes it fit perfectly!” He dropped into his chair again and glowered at Marghem.

“Right,” Colville agreed. “Well, Marghem, I suppose it’s pointless to state the rational counter-arguments to

this fear they have of being automated out of a job?”

“I’ve tried,” Marghem said wearily. “I’ve—”

There was a thunderous hammering at the outside door. Since the office shack, and everything else in Eisenberg, was built out of steel plates as the most available material, the whole place rang about them like... like a welkin, Marghem thought wildly, whatever a welkin might be.

“Lay you a small bet,” he growled. “That’s Nagy come down from the mill having heard that someone arrived by ‘copter. Since this brilliant idea of bringing robots to Eisenberg, everyone—me included!—has {been} pathologically suspicious! I warn you, Colville, the end result of the whole thing will be not that we double steel output, but that we chop it in half!”

He got up and stormed through the anteroom to open the door.

“I thought so,” he could be heard muttering. “Come on in, Nagy.”

The workers’ spokesman was huge—almost two meters tall and immensely muscled. He must have come directly from the mill without stopping for anything, for he wore his heatproof suit and carried his dark goggles in his hand. Peeling off his dust-mask he cast a suspicious glare around the office. When it reached Ira, it stopped dead.

Eyes wide, mouth beginning to curve into a smile, Ira returned his stare with interest, and for a moment Nagy’s air of hostility dropped completely away. You would have sworn he was preening himself, Marghem thought.

Not for long, though. He recollected what had

brought him, hooked his toe around the stem of a nearby chair, and sat down. The chair seemed to bow under his vast weight.

“A’right, what’s going on?” he said in a booming voice.

They hammered at it for an hour. Marghem was delighted to leave most of the talking to Colville, because Nagy’s technique of rebuttal was simple: he just looked as though any sane man ought to realize it was impossible to disagree with him. This was what most often gave Marghem the feeling he was becoming an enemy of the rest of the town.

Still, Colville was pretty good at his own technique of arguing. Without getting heated, he went through the reasons for bringing in robots one by one.

“We’ve done our best to get additional manpower, and we only turned to considering GP robots as a last resort.”

Nagy shrugged. “No news to me,” he answered. “Back on Earth, automation has taken the guts out of everybody. No one cares about pride in their work any more—‘cept us. That’s why we came here. That’s why New Earth ought to be more anxious to take notice of us.”

“If we don’t get the robots integrated into the scheme of production here, we’ll have barely half the steel we need for our new ‘copter factory. And our whole expansion scheme depends on transport!”

“If you *do* try an’... what’s your mealy-mouth word for it?... integrate the robots here, we quit. An’ you’ll be

out your entire steel supply.” Nagy jutted his chin forward, crossed his arms, and drummed his fingers on his vast biceps. “We saw what happened to people like us at home when they started to automate our mills and furnaces.”

“It’s absurd to think the same thing could happen here in less than a couple of generations—half a century!” Colville pointed out. “We have so much work we need both men and machines to cope with it.”

“Machines, yes. Robots, no. It didn’t take more than one generation back home—in some places—to reduce everyone to being a pensioner on a machine’s back, though.”

“But the resources don’t yet exist here to—”

“Resources, mister?” Nagy jerked a huge thumb towards the wall beyond which loomed the Iron Mountain itself. “Forty billion tons of high-grade iron ore out there! We got resources. Maybe you didn’t notice them yet.”

“I don’t mean that kind of resources,” Colville said patiently.

Nagy pressed his lips together and shrugged.

Still, an hour was long enough for a first session. Marghem felt a rumbling in his empty stomach and seized a break in the discussion between Nagy and Colville to voice a suggestion he thought everyone found welcome.

“Say, it’s close to chowtime,” he said. “Nagy, I didn’t give our guests a chance to do anything—settle in, show ‘em their rooms. Just came straight here.”

Ira was looking at Nagy again. He squared his shoulders and got up with a kind of half-bow.

“Wouldn’t do anything to inconvenience a lady,” he rambled. “I’d rather try and pour a little more sense into *your* head”—he glared at Colville—“but like the mayor says, it’s chowtime an’ the old woman’s expectin’ me.”

They all got to their feet. Now that he’d remembered the problem of rooms, Marghem realized it was a problem. He said, “Accommodation’s are pretty limited around here, of course—we have no hotels or anything. Wallmeyer, d’you think I could bunk Colville in with you? I only have one free room in my shack, and I guess Ira had better have that.”

For obvious reasons. Oh well... He saw Wallmeyer looking astonishingly unenthusiastic, and Colville looking tempted to match the roboticist’s expression. Nonetheless, that was how it was going to be. As mayor, he put up with plenty. Giving up the nightly privacy of his own room he would *not* endure!

Unexpectedly Nagy cleared his throat. He said, “Uh... Mayor Marghem, if you got accommodation trouble, maybe I could fix it. You know I have that room for my boy when he gets his metallurgy degree back home and joins the family—nobody’s in it right now.”

“Thanks, Nagy,” Marghem said, relieved. Now the only problem was, which of these two, Wallmeyer and Colville, would cause less disruption in the Nagy household.

“Well, I think that’s wonderful!” Ira said, briskly gathering her mask and goggles. “Thank you very much, Mr. Nagy. It’d be ideal. I don’t have anything to do with this robot problem—I’m just doing some folklore research, and...”

The door dosed on her and Nagy. Her bright voice was still raised in cheerful explanation of her business at Eisenberg when it faded beyond hearing.

“Thank goodness,” said Marghem when he caught up again with what had happened.

Wallmeyer looked at him in annoyance, and then back at the blank panel of the door. Colville cleared his throat.

“Ah... *is* that a good idea?”

“On several counts,” said Marghem cheerfully. “One: it means that we can get on with the business in hand and not be distracted all the time. Two: it’ll sweeten Nagy’s temper—”

“Didn’t he say he was married?” Colville cut in. “Sweeten his temper it may do; how about his wife’s?”

“Mrs. Nagy only weighs ninety-five pounds or so, but she’s kept her husband tame for twenty years without trouble—which reminds me: next month they celebrate the twentieth anniversary of their wedding and I promised to appropriate some beer and extra provisions.” He scribbled a note to himself on a scratch-pad on the desk.

“Ah... like I was saying, it’ll keep Ira out of our hair. Colville, I know it must have been pretty hard to resist her wheedling, but why in space didn’t you? Round here the girls come buxom; by the time they get old enough to be worth taking an interest in, they’re married and starting a family! Which is the only reason I have to think it may not be an ideal solution for her to go and room

with the Nagy family. We have a surplus of bachelors right now. Ah, nuts! Let's just pray that having her around puts 'em on their best behavior rather than making 'em quarrel."

"Three weeks," said Colville, and thrust his fingers through his already untidy hair, staring out of the big window towards the town. "To be quite honest, Marghem, when I was sent here I was given the impression that you were siding with the townsfolk and not feeding them all the right dope about the situation. Now I've come to see what you're up against."

"Thanks," said Marghem. "It doesn't make me any happier."

"Trouble is," Colville frowned, "their objections aren't rational. They're rooted in a subconscious reflex due to fear of being automated out of the only thing they care for—}their steel mills and their mines. {I} quite agree with you: they're admirable people, and New Earth could {do} with more of them—if they were{n't} so stubborn!"

"They aren't all that way, you know," Marghem said.

"No, so I've discovered. I {mean} I've talked to scores of them individually, and they don't seem to bear me any grudge for what I'm trying to do, and they're mostly quite willing to agree that New Earth needs more steel than they can supply, and that a GP robot is a different proposition from conventional automation—And we get nowhere. Marghem, I hate to make a suggestion like that but could we solve the

problem of getting rid of Nagy somehow?”

“No,” said Marghem shortly.

“Why not? He seems to be the only obstacle—he’s the only person who consistently says *no* to the idea, and he’s the self-appointed leader among the workers.”

“You’ve got the wrong end of the billet,” said Marghem. “Point’s that I’m the mayor here. I’m a government appointee, an administrator. {I} know the right from the wrong {end} of a blooming mill, I know high-grade from low-grade ore. That doesn’t make me a steel man {or} member of this community. I get {on} pretty well with them. But I’m an outsider.

“Nagy, on the other hand, is the actual leader, the boss. Not self-appointed! Urged to the top because he’s got all the virtues they admire. He’s tremendously strong; he knows steel from ore to finished billet and plate. He talks. He can hold his liquor. He’s brought up a family who are going on in the steel business. All that makes him inevitably a leader they’ll look to.

“But getting rid of him would solve nothing. You couldn’t shift him voluntarily; shifting him any other way would turn the entire community sour against us. Look!”

He got to his feet and pointed to a whaleback shape newly risen beyond the edge of the town. “That’s the measure of how much they admire him, Colville! A dome for his twentieth anniversary party four hundred feet across, so they can help him celebrate all together and without getting dust on the food or in the beer. Knocked up in their spare time during a week or so, for the sake of a party lasting six hours, and requiring very nearly as long to take apart again afterwards. No. Nagy is neither the

cause of the problem, nor a key to it.”

“Then who... or what... is the key to it?” snapped Colville.

“Maybe there isn’t one,” said Marghem. “Maybe we’re just going to have to resign ourselves to going without our own ‘copter factory until things straighten out of their own accord.”

“We can’t!” said Colville, raising haunted eyes. Marghem knew exactly how he felt.

He was about to speak again when there was a sharp exclamation from the anteroom: Wallmeyer’s voice.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?”

Marghem strode to the door and slid it back. In the anteroom he found Wallmeyer—just peeling off his mask and goggles—facing Ira Bell, who was rising to her feet from the packing case alongside the robot, Joe. The moment Marghem appeared, Wallmeyer raised angry eyes to him.

“Did you tell her she could be in here with my robot?” he demanded.

Marghem shook his head. He gave Ira a puzzled look.

“I came over to give Joe his daily reflex check—he’s not standing up so well to this long period without work.” Wallmeyer hefted a kit of electronic equipment he was carrying. “And I find *her* in here, talking to him.”

“Talking to him?” Marghem raised his eyebrows.

With perfect self-possession, Ira nodded. “I came to see if you were free, Mayor Marghem,” she said. “Only I could hear you were having an argument with Harry. You said I was never to interrupt you, so I decided to wait,

and then the robot started to ask me some questions, so I answered them.”

“What sort of questions?” Wallmeyer barked.

“Why... what the people are like outside, and when they’re going to let him start work eventually, and so on.”

Wallmeyer’s face went purple. “Ira, a robot is infinitely more delicate than a human being—misleading information can lead to a snarl-up in his mental circuits that may cost millions to have overhauled, especially if he has to be sent back to Earth for it!”

“Boss,” said Joe anxiously, “the lady was very polite to answer my questions, you know. Don’t go on at her like that.”

“Thanks, Joe,” said Ira with a smile that ought to have melted the robot’s heart if he had had one.

“That’s as may be,” said Wallmeyer shortly. “Marghem, get her out of my way, will you, while I check him over? Joe, you sit down and calm yourself, and we’ll see how you are.”

“I’m sorry,” said Ira when the door of the office closed. Her composure had faded a little. “I didn’t mean to upset him like that.”

“Maybe you didn’t,” said Marghem comfortingly. Ira had kept her word and hardly bothered him at all in the whole three weeks of her stay; he felt much more kindly disposed towards her than he had when she arrived.

“Oh, goodness!” She gave a little chuckle. “I meant Wallmeyer, not the robot. I haven’t upset Joe in the least; in fact I’ve done him a lot of good. GP robots are always

programmed for one specific purpose, the way people are educated in some specialty rather than another, but they have just as much curiosity about how their job fits into the pattern of their universe as you or I have.”

She smiled at Harry Colville and sat down.

“You speak very knowledgeably,” Marghem said, also resuming his seat. “How come?”

“Mechanical men are a very {an}cient part of legend and myth,” {she} shrugged. “The golem; the {brass} men Daedalus created for Minos {of} Crete; Frankenstein’s monster, {which} passed into folklore from the {novel} where he was created. So I once {did} some research on mechanical {men} in reality as well as legend, and {it} turned out so well I’m going to use {it} in my doctorate thesis.”

Marghem gave her a look in which surprise and respect were equally mingled. “You don’t say!” he muttered. “Well, what can I do for you anyway? How are you getting {on} with the Nagy family and everyone else?”

Ira managed to change {what} might have been a giggle into {an} adult-sounding chuckle just in time. How old *was* this kid, anyway? Marghem hadn’t wondered before.

“I’m doing fine!” she said. “{Every} eligible bachelor in Eisenberg seemed to have started calling on the Nagys. I’ve been invited into more than {sixty} homes, and managed to get around to nearly thirty of them; I’ve talked with people whose ancestors {come} from the Monongahela Valley {and} from Czechoslovakia and {from} Scranton and from Poland

and {from} Gary and from Hungary and {from} all over!”

“And is this helping your work?” Marghem found it a relief to be able to talk about something other than the robot question for a change. Maybe he oughtn’t to have been so dogmatic about keeping Ira away. He sighed and repressed temptation.

“Oh, wonderfully. Courtship customs, for instance. I’m in the best possible place to observe those, because I’m being courted wholesale. Bat not just that. This big party tomorrow, for example—it’s just tike a peasant party in Central Europe, like a christening or wedding feast, crossed with a celebration in the old days in the steel communities of America. There’s a tremendously strong substructure of folk tradition binding these people together, which even bringing them off Earth hasn’t weakened. In fact, it’s strengthened by their having left home, because it’s what they most rely on to keep their communal identity.”

She hesitated. “By the way, I think the answer to this problem of Joe and the other robots—”

Colville looked at the ceiling, as if to say, *What in the name of all that’s holy can she know about it?* Marghem ignored him.

“Go on,” he encouraged Ira. After all, he and Colville had drained themselves of ideas. Anything, no matter how wild, was better than nothing.

“Well, I mentioned that folklore contains many legends of mechanical men. One of them—”

Under the dome everything was as festive as it could

possibly be on New Earth, in Eisenberg. All the families in town had turned out their store of rags and scraps, hoarded as such things had always been hoarded, and chosen the most colorful odds and ends to make into flags and streamers. Red, yellow, blue, green, they looped in festoons above the tables, some of which were groaning under the weight of the carefully prepared delicacies because they were ordinary tables people had brought from home, others of which couldn't because they were lengths of rail or even unfinished billets brought from the mills where they were awaiting shipment.

Barrels of beer and tanks of prunejack were racked around the wall of the dome behind the tables. Through amplifiers at the highest point of the dome poured music from tapes that had been made at home on Earth—a kind of last souvenir before departure. The music was wild and gypsylike. In the center of the floor the young people were dancing equally wildly, shrieking with laughter and sometimes yelling the words of the songs which came over the amplifier.

In a place of honor facing the dance floor sat Nagy, looming tremendously over his little wife, who blushed like a girl every time one of the dancers paused in passing to cry congratulations and thanks for the party. On the other side of her husband from her, Ira Bell sat—and indeed Nagy seemed as proud of having her there—as though she were his daughter. She wore a very old but magnificently preserved traditional dress which belonged to Mrs. Nagy, elaborately embroidered, with a short stiff skirt standing out above white stockings and black boots.

Marghem, sitting with Colville and Wallmeyer on the other side of the Nagys, saw young man after young man come up and bow formally to ask Nagy's permission to dance with Ira. One in particular kept coming back time and time again: Paul Horkey was the name, Marghem knew. He was probably very much as Nagy himself had been twenty-odd years ago, very strong, very handsome—in himself, he was one of the reasons why the surplus of bachelors was as big as it was, for most of the unmarried girls were turning down their suitors in the hope that they might be the lucky one who secured Paul Horkey.

Paul Horkey had a rival, though. A little anxiously Marghem watched to see whether this rival—what was the name? Ah, yes—whether this Steve Masaryk was otherwise occupied. He was, dancing with one of the local girls. Fair enough.

Marghem relaxed and turned to Wallmeyer, whose face was as long as a comet's tail. He jabbed him in the ribs.

“Say, aren't you enjoying the party?”

“How can I?” mourned Wallmeyer. “Here they are having themselves a ball, and they don't care that I'm stuck here when I'd rather be back home, they don't care that; my robots are lying useless or sitting around waiting to break down—”

A thought struck Marghem. “Have you checked Joe again today? You said he was all right yesterday, in spite of what you were afraid Ira might have done to him.”

“Oh, she didn't do him any harm. In fact, he seems in quite good shape, better than I'd have expected after such

a long time not working. I wish I could turn him off, but then I'd have to go back to the capital and spend a week at least overhauling him—it's like the shock of concussion, you see."

Colville tapped Marghem's arm. "Say, look!" he said under his breath.

It had finally happened. Paul Horkey and his chief rival Steve Masaryk had arrived at the same time to ask Ira to dance. Laughing, Ira agreed to partner Paul Horkey.

Marghem got up and began to work his way towards the dais.

Presumably Steve was objecting on the ground that Ira had already danced several times with Paul and not with him. Presumably Ira was taking no notice. For by the time Marghem came close they were on the verge of blows.

Everyone stopped dancing. A fight was better than a dance any day.

"Hold it!" barked Marghem into a moment of silence. He apologised to Nagy, who grinned, being plainly full of prunejack and goodwill towards the world.

"Let's settle this the proper way!" Marghem went on. "Instead of fighting about it, let's decide who's the stronger of you two." He looked Paul and Steve up and down, and had to repress a pang of envy, because they were certainly both very muscular and very good-looking. He felt like a dwarf between them.

"Ira?" he demanded, turning to her. "What do you say?"

“Right!” she said, clapping her hands and looking properly pleased that there was to be a contest with her as the prize. “Well, that’s easy. There are all sizes of heavy things to lift around here—all these billets of steel! Let’s see who can lift the biggest one, and I’ll dance with him the rest of the evening. Is that fair?”

By now most of the people in the dome had crowded round. They gave a roar of approval, and that left little choice for Paul and Steve, though Marghem knew from their expressions that neither of them was sure of the outcome. He appointed himself a sort of referee, getting husky men to stagger into the middle of the dome with billets of graduated sizes from about two hundred pounds on up to one which probably weighed the best part of half a ton, New Earth gravity.

Everyone settled down to watch. In a tense silence Steve Masaryk approached the row of billets. Scornfully he passed by the first and smallest, and bent over the next. Taking a careful purchase he braced himself to heave.

Marghem was probably the only person under the dome who saw a movement by the entrance.

Steve straightened, and the steel billet came easily off the ground. There was a bellow of applause.

Equally scornful, Paul now marched forward and took the billet next beyond the one his rival had chosen. Everyone was tense and doubtful. He bent, braced himself, *heaved*—and the billet came away from the ground.

“Magarac!” shouted Ira in her clear, piercing voice.

At once there was a new storm of cheers, louder than before. And it began to die instantly.

Slowly people turned away from the contestants to stare at the entrance. There was a movement among the crowd there. People were falling back to let someone pass. Their faces were tautening with anger.

Wallmeyer hadn't moved to go and watch the contest; he was too miserable. But just in case, Colville had stayed at his side to hold him down, because he was going to realize any moment what was happening. And he wasn't going to like it.

For the "someone" coming from the entrance was Joe, the robot.

In an impossible-seeming silence he strode stolidly past Ira, past Paul and Steve and Marghem, and came to the last and biggest of the steel billets. He bent over it. There was a slam and a click of metal on metal as he activated the magnets in his "hands" and placed them on the billet. Then he lifted it up, as easily as a sack of feathers.

"I heard somebody call my name," he said in his pleasant booming voice. "Joe Magarac, that's me!"

For a long instant Nagy stared. Suddenly he whooped with incredulous laughter and slapped his hand on his thigh with a sound like a gunshot. As though that was their cue, everyone in the dome began to laugh and laugh and laugh.

"What's going on?" demanded Wallmeyer. He started to his feet. "Is that my robot there? They'll bust him to scrap! What the—?"

"Hold it, take it easy," said Colville, grasping him by

the collar. “We just fixed things about your robots, that’s all. There won’t be anymore trouble, and you’ll be able to go home.”

Wallmeyer gave him an unbelieving stare.

“Listen to ‘em laughing!” said Colville happily. “Think they’re going to bust Joe up when they’re laughing like that?”

“But what happened?” pleaded Wallmeyer, staring across the desk at Marghem.

“Better let Ira tell you. It was her idea,” the mayor said.

“You’ll give me a swollen head,” Ira answered. Once again in her ordinary everyday clothes, she didn’t look in the least like a girl who would incite men to quarrel over her. “It’s very simple. You see, the reason why people here call each other *magarac*—jackass—and mean it as a compliment is because Joe Magarac is the name of a legendary man of steel, who was born inside a mountain and came down in an ore-car to Hunkietown where he won a weight-lifting contest for the hand of a pretty girl but turned her down because he said he had no time to do anything but work and eat. Then he went to work in a steel mill and pretty soon he’d turned out so much steel by working night and day that they had to close down production. Without work to do, he was lost. So he jumped in with the steel in his furnace and was melted down, and the steel they poured with him mixed up in it was the finest steel that was ever seen, and the mill they built with that steel was the finest in the world.”

“So we staged a sort of... uh... show for the

people,” said Marghem contentedly. “It was very lucky we’d already decided to nickname him Joe. It didn’t take long to explain to him why he had to call himself Joe Magarac. Believe me, Wallmeyer, if all your robots are {as} intelligent as Joe turned out to {be,} you won’t be here much longer.”

“I’ve already sent word that they can bring the others out here at once,” Colville put in. “A ‘copter {will} get in with the first three at about noon today.”

“But the *risk* you took!” said Wallmeyer prayerfully. “In view of that attitude, they might have smashed Joe to bits!”

“Risk?” countered Marghem. “When the alternative was to leave Joe and his thirty-nine brothers lying about useless?”

Ira coughed gently. “No risk at all,” she said. “At least I don’t think there was a risk. You see, these legends and traditions and old customs—including the tale of Joe Magarac—are the things people rely on to support them while they’re finding their feet in new surroundings. They come to believe them implicitly. Oh, it’s not a case of admitting to believing them—just that no one ever dares to cast doubt on them. So when Joe Magarac in person, steel from top to toe and stronger than any two men in the place, turned up, they had no alternative to accepting him.”

She got up, smiling at them in turn. “Well, if you’ll excuse me... Paul Horkey is coming to noon chow with us at the Nagys’ place. And I want to apologize for getting him into a row with Steve.”

When she had gone, Wallmeyer got to his feet.

Staring out of the window, he said, “*Light-years* from Earth! Intelligent robots the crowning achievement of centuries of technology! And it takes a legend—a damnfool legend who knows how many hundred years old—to unsnarl things for us! I’ll take robots over people *any* day of the year.”

He looked positively hurt when Marghem and Colville burst out laughing.