

THE LAST POET AND THE ROBOTS

BY

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Freeditorial 

NARODNY, the Russian, sat in his laboratory. Narodny's laboratory was a full mile under earth. It was one of a hundred caverns, some small and some vast, cut out of the living rock. It was a realm of which he was sole ruler. In certain caverns garlands of small suns shone; and in others little moons waxed and waned over earth; and there was a cavern in which reigned perpetual dawn, dewy, over lily beds and violets and roses; and another in which crimson sunsets baptized in the blood of slain day dimmed and died and were born again behind the sparkling curtains of the aurora. And there was one cavern ten miles from side to side in which grew flowering trees and trees which bore fruits unknown to man for many generations. Over this great orchard one yellow sun-like orb shone, and clouds trailed veils of rain upon the trees and miniature thunder drummed at Narodny's summoning.

Narodny was a poet—the last poet. He did not write his poems in words but in colors, sounds, and visions made material. Also he was a great scientist. In his peculiar field the greatest. Thirty years before, Russia's Science Council had debated whether to grant him the leave of absence he had asked, or to destroy him. They knew him to be unorthodox. How deadly so they did not know, else after much deliberation they would not have released him. It must be remembered that of all nations, Russia then was the most mechanized; most robot-ridden.

Narodny did not hate mechanization. He was indifferent to it. Being truly intelligent he hated nothing, Also he was indifferent to the whole civilization man had developed and into which he had been born. He had no feeling of kinship to humanity. Outwardly, in body, he belonged to the species. Not so in mind. Like Loeb, a thousand years before, he considered mankind a race of crazy half-monkeys, intent upon suicide. Now and then, out of the sea of lunatic mediocrity, a wave uplifted that held for a moment a light from the sun of truth—but soon it sank back and the light was gone. Quenched in the sea of stupidity. He knew that he was one of those waves.

He had gone, and he had been lost to sight by all. In a few years he was forgotten. Fifteen years ago, unknown and under another name, he had entered America and secured rights to a thousand acres in what of old had been called Westchester. He had picked this place because investigation had revealed to him that of ten localities on this planet it was most free from danger of earthquake or similar seismic disturbance. The man who owned it had been whimsical; possibly an atavist—like Narodny, although Narodny would never have thought of himself as that. At any rate, instead of an angled house of glass such as the thirtieth century built, this man had reconstructed a rambling old stone house of the nineteenth century. Few people lived upon the open

land in those days; most had withdrawn into the city-states. New York, swollen by its meals of years, was a fat belly full of mankind still many miles away. The land around the house was forest-covered.

A week after Narodny had taken this house, the trees in front of it had melted away leaving a three-acre, smooth field. It was not as though they had been cut, but as though they had been dissolved. Later that night a great airship had appeared upon this field—abruptly, as though it had blinked out of another dimension. It was rocket-shaped but noiseless. And immediately a fog had fallen upon airship and house, hiding them. Within this fog, if one could have seen, was a wide tunnel leading from the air-cylinder's door to the door of the house. And out of the airship came swathed figures, ten of them, who walked along that tunnel, were met by Narodny, and the door of the old house closed on them.

A little later they returned, Narodny with them, and out of an opened hatch of the airship rolled a small flat car on which was a mechanism of crystal cones rising around each other to a central cone some four feet high. The cones were upon a thick base of some glassy material in which was imprisoned a restless green radiance. Its rays did not penetrate that which held it, but it seemed constantly seeking, with suggestion of prodigious force, to escape. For hours the strange thick fog held. Twenty miles up in the far reaches of the stratosphere, a faintly sparkling cloud grew, like a condensation of cosmic dust. And just before dawn the rock of the hill behind the house melted away like a curtain that had covered a great tunnel. Five of the men came out of the house and went into the airship. It lifted silently from the ground, slipped into the aperture and vanished. There was a whispering sound, and when it had died away the breast of the hill was whole again. The rocks had been drawn together like a closing curtain and boulders studded it as before. That the breast was now slightly concave where before it had been convex, none would have noticed.

For two weeks the sparkling cloud was observed far up in the stratosphere, was commented upon idly, and then was seen no more. Narodny's caverns were finished.

Half of the rock from which they had been hollowed had gone with that sparkling cloud. The balance, reduced to its primal form of energy, was stored in blocks of the vitreous material that had supported the cones, and within them it moved as restlessly and always with that same suggestion of prodigious force. And it was force, unthinkably potent; from it came the energy that made the little suns and moons, and actuated the curious mechanisms that regulated pressure in the caverns, supplied the

air, created the rain, and made of Narodny's realm a mile deep under earth the Paradise of poetry, of music, of color and of form which he had conceived in his brain and with the aid of those ten others had caused to be.

Now of the ten there is no need to speak further. Narodny was the Master. But three, like him, were Russians; two were Chinese; of the remaining five, three were women— one German in ancestry, one Basque, one an Eurasian; a Hindu who traced his descent from the line of Gautama; a Jew who traced his from Solomon.

All were one with Narodny in indifference to the world; each with him in his viewpoint on life; and each and all lived in his or her own Eden among the hundred caverns except when it interested them to work with each other. Time meant nothing to them. Their researches and discoveries were solely for their own uses and enjoyments. If they had given them to the outer world they would have only been ammunition for warfare either between men upon Earth or men against some other planet. Why hasten humanity's suicide? Not that they would have felt regret at the eclipse of humanity. But why trouble to expedite it? Time meant nothing to them because they could live as long as they desired—barring accident. And while there was rock in the world, Narodny could convert it into energy to maintain his Paradise—or to create others.

The old house began to crack and crumble. It fell—much more quickly than the elements could have brought about its destruction. Then trees grew among the ruins of its foundations; and the field that had been so strangely cleared was overgrown with trees. The land became a wood in a few short years; silent except for the roar of an occasional rocket passing over it and the songs of birds that had found there a sanctuary.

But deep down in earth, within the caverns, were music and song and mirth and beauty. Gossamer nymphs circled under the little moons. Pan piped. There was revelry of antique harvesters under the small suns. Grapes grew and ripened, were pressed, and red and purple wine was drunk by Bacchantes who fell at last asleep in the arms of fauns and satyrs. Oreads danced under the pale moon-bows and sometimes Centaurs wheeled and trod archaic measures beneath them to the drums of their hoofs upon the mossy floor. The old Earth lived again.

Narodny listened to drunken Alexander raving to Thais among the splendors of conquered Persepolis; and he heard the crackling of the flames that at the whim of the courtesan destroyed it. He watched the siege of Troy and counted with Homer the

Achaean ships drawn up on the strand before Troy's walls; or saw with Herodotus the tribes that marched behind Xerxes—the Caspians in their cloaks of skin with their bows of cane; the Ethiopians in the skins of leopards with spears of antelope horns; the Libyans in their dress of leather with javelins made hard by fire; the Thracians with the heads of foxes upon their heads; the Moschians who wore helmets made of wood and the Cabalians who wore the skulls of men. For him the Eleusinian and the Osirian mysteries were re-enacted, and he watched the women of Thrace tear to fragments Orpheus, the first great musician. At his will, he could see the rise and fall of the Empire of the Aztecs, the Empire of the Incas; or beloved Caesar slain in Rome's Senate; or the archers at Agincourt; or the Americans in Belleau Wood. Whatever man had written—whether poets, historians, philosophers or scientists—his strangely shaped mechanisms could bring before him, changing the words into phantoms real as though living.

He was the last and greatest of the poets—but also he was the last and greatest of the musicians. He could bring back the songs of ancient Egypt, or the chants of more ancient Ur. The songs that came from Moussorgsky's soul of Mother-earth, the harmonies of Beethoven's deaf ear, or the chants and rhapsodies from the heart of Chopin. He could do more than restore the music of the past. He was master of sound. To him, the music of the spheres was real. He could take the rays of the stars and planets and weave them into symphonies. Or convert the sun's rays into golden tones no earthly orchestras had ever expressed. And the silver music of the moon—the sweet music of the moon of spring, the full-throated music of the harvest moon, the brittle crystallizing music of the winter moon with its arpeggios of meteors—he could weave into strains such as no human ears had ever heard.

So Narodny, the last and greatest of poets, the last and greatest of musicians, the last and greatest of artists—and in his inhuman way, the greatest of scientists—lived with the ten of his choosing in his caverns. And, with them, he consigned the surface of earth and all who dwelt upon it to a negative Hell—Unless something happening there might imperil his Paradise!

Aware of the possibility of that danger, among his mechanisms were those which brought to eyes and ears news of what was happening on earth's surface. Now and then, they amused themselves with these.

It so happened that on that night when the Warper of Space had dealt his blow at the space ships and had flung a part of the great Crater of Copernicus into another

dimension, Narodny had been weaving the rays of Moon, Jupiter and Saturn into Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. The moon was a four-day crescent. Jupiter was at one cusp, and Saturn hung like a pendant below the bow. Shortly Orion would stride across the Heavens and bright Regulus and red Aldebaran, the Eye of the Bull, would furnish him with other chords of starlight remoulded into sound.

Suddenly the woven rhythms were ripped—hideously. A devastating indescribable dissonance invaded the cavern. Beneath it, the nymphs who had been dancing languorously to the strains quivered like mist wraiths in a sudden blast and were gone: the little moons flared, then ceased to glow. The tonal instruments were dead. And Narodny was felled as though by a blow.

After a time the little moons began to glow again, but dimly; and from the tonal mechanisms came broken, crippled music. Narodny stirred and sat up, his lean, high-cheeked face more Satanic than ever. Every nerve was numb; then as they revived, agony crept along them. He sat, fighting the agony, until he could summon help. He was answered by one of the Chinese, and soon Narodny was himself again.

He said: "It was a spatial disturbance, Lao. And it was like nothing I have ever known. It came in upon the rays, of that I am sure. Let us look out upon the moon."

They passed to another cavern and stood before an immense television screen. They adjusted it, and upon it appeared the moon, rapidly growing larger as though it were hurtling toward them. Then upon the screen appeared a space-ship speeding earthward. They focused upon it, and opened it to their vision; searching it until they came to the control room where were Bartholomew, James Tarvish and Martin, their gaze upon Earth rapidly and more rapidly expanding in the heavens. Narodny and the Chinese watched them, reading their lips. Tarvish said: "Where can we land, Martin? The robots will be watching for us everywhere. They will see to it that we are destroyed before we can give our message and our warning to the world. They control the governments—or at least control them sufficiently to seize us upon landing. And if we should escape and gather men around us, then it means civil war and that in turn means fatal delay in the building of the space fleet—even if we should win."

Martin said: "We must land safely—escape the robots—find some to control or destroy them. God, Tarvish—you saw what that devil they call the Wrongness of Space can do. He threw the side of the crater out of our dimension as a boy would throw a stone into a pond!"

Bartholomew said: "He could take Earth and break it up piecemeal!"

Narodny and Lao looked at each other. Narodny said: "That is enough. We know." The Chinese nodded. Narodny said: "I estimated that they would reach Earth in four hours." Again Lao nodded. Narodny said: "We will talk to them, Lao; although I had thought we were done with mankind. I do not like this which they call so quaintly the Wrongness of Space—nor the stone he threw into my music."

They brought a smaller screen into position before the larger one. They oriented it to the speeding space-ship and stepped in front of it. The small screen shimmered with whirling vortices of pallid blue luminescence; the vortices drew together and became one vast cone that reached on and on to the greater screen as though not feet but thousands of miles separated them. And as the tip of the cone touched the control room of the space-ship mirrored in the screen, Tarvish, upon the actual ship, gripped Martin's arm.

"Look there!"

There was an eddying in the air, like that over roads on a hot summer day. The eddying became a shimmering curtain of pallid blue luminescence— steadied until it was an oval doorway opening into vast distances. And then abruptly, within that doorway, stood two men—one tall and lean and saturnine with the sensitive face of a dreamer and the other a Chinese, his head a great yellow dome and on his face the calm of Buddha—and it was strange indeed to see in the cavern of earth these same two men standing before the blue-coned screen and upon the greater one their images within the imaged room on which the tip of the cone rested.

Narodny spoke, and in his voice there was a human indifference and sureness that chilled them, yet gave them courage. He said: "We mean you no harm. You cannot harm us. We have long been withdrawn from men. What happens on the surface of Earth means nothing to us. What may happen beneath the surface means much. Whatever it is you have named the Wrongness of Space has already annoyed me. I perceive that he can do more than annoy. I gather that the robots in one way or another are on his side. You are against him. Therefore, our first step must be to help you against the robots. Place me in possession of all facts. Be brief, for we cannot maintain our position here for more than half an hour without discomfort."

Martin said: "Whoever you are, wherever you are, we trust you. Here is the story—"

For fifteen minutes Narodny and the Chinese listened to their tale of struggle against the robots, of their escape and of the blasting of Copernicus in the effort of the Wrongness of Space to prevent their return.

Narodny said: "Enough. Now I understand. How long can you remain in space? I mean—what are your margins of power and of food?"

Martin answered: "Six days."

Narodny said: "Ample time for success—or failure. Remain aloft for that time, then descend to where you started—"

Suddenly he smiled: "I care nothing for mankind—yet I would not harm them, willingly. And it has occurred to me that I owe them, after all, a great debt. Except for them—I would not be. Also, it occurs to me that the robots have never produced a poet, a musician, an artist—" He laughed: "But it is in my mind that they are capable of one great art at least! We shall see."

The oval was abruptly empty; then it too was gone. Bartholomew said: "Call the others. I am for obeying. But they must know." And when the others had heard, they too voted to obey, and the space-ship, course changed, began to circle, as slowly as it could, the earth.

Down in the chamber of the screens, Narodny laughed and laughed again. He said: "Lao, is it that we have advanced so in these few years? Or that men have retrogressed? No, it is this curse of mechanization that destroys imagination. For look you, how easy is this problem of the robots. They began as man-made machines. Mathematical, soulless, insensible to any emotion. So was primal matter of which all on earth are made, rock and water, tree and grass, metal, animal, fish, worm, and men. But somewhere, somehow, something was added to this primal matter, combined with it—used it. It was what we call life. And life is consciousness. And therefore largely emotion. Life established its rhythm—and its rhythm being different in rock and crystal, metal, fish, and so on, and man, we have these varying things.

"Well, it seems that life has begun to establish its rhythm in the robots. Consciousness has touched them. The proof? They have established the idea of common identity—group consciousness. That in itself involves emotion. But they have gone further. They have attained the instinct of self-preservation. And that, my wise friend, connotes fear—fear of extinction. And fear connotes anger, hatred, arrogance—and many other things. The robots, in short, have become emotional to a degree. And therefore

vulnerable to whatever may amplify and control their emotions. They are no longer mechanisms.

"So, Lao, I have in mind an experiment that will provide me study and amusement through many years. Originally, the robots are the children of mathematics. I ask—to what is mathematics most closely related. I answer—to rhythm—to sound—to sounds which will raise to the n th degree the rhythms to which they will respond. Both mathematically and emotionally,"

Lao said: "The sonic sequences?"

Narodny answered: "Exactly. But we must have a few with which to experiment. To do that means to dissolve the upper gate. But that is nothing. Tell Marigny and Euphrosyne to do it. Net a ship and bring it here. Bring it down gently. You will have to kill the men in it, of course, but do it mercifully. Then let them bring me the robots. Use the green flame on one or two—the rest will follow, I'll warrant you."

The hill behind where the old house had stood trembled. A circle of pale green light gleamed on its breast. It dimmed, where it had been was the black mouth of a tunnel. An airship, half-rocket, half-winged, making its way to New York, abruptly dropped, circled, and streaked back. It fell gently like a moth, close to the yawning mouth of the tunnel.

Its door opened, and out came two men, pilots, cursing. There was a little sigh from the tunnel's mouth and a silvery misty cloud sped from it, over the pilots and straight through the opened door. The pilots staggered and crumpled to the ground. In the airship half a dozen other men slumped to the floor, smiled, and died.

There were a full score robots in the ship. They stood, looking at the dead men and at each other. Out of the tunnel came two figures swathed in metallic glimmering robes. They entered the ship. One said:

"Robots, assemble."

The metal men stood, motionless. Then one sent out a shrill call. From all parts of the ship the metal men moved. They gathered behind the one who had sent the call. They stood behind him, waiting.

In the hand of one of those who had come from the tunnel was what might have been an antique flash-light. From it sped a thin green flame. It struck the foremost robot on the head, sliced down from the head to base of trunk. Another flash, and the green

flame cut him from side to side. He fell, sliced by that flame into four parts. The four parts lay, inert as their metal, upon the floor of the compartment.

One of the shrouded figures said: "Do you want further demonstration —or will you follow us?"

The robots put heads together; whispered. Then one said: "We will follow."

They marched into the tunnel, the robots making no resistance nor effort to escape. Again there was the sighing, and the rocks closed the tunnel mouth. They came to a place whose floor sank with them until it had reached the caverns. The machine-men still went docilely. Was it because of curiosity mixed with disdain for these men whose bodies could be broken so easily by one blow of the metal appendages that served them for arms? Perhaps.

They came to the cavern where Narodny and the others awaited them. Marinoff led them in and halted them. These were the robots used in the flying ships—their heads cylindrical, four arm appendages, legs triple jointed, torsos slender. The robots, it should be understood, were differentiated in shape according to their occupations. Narodny said:

"Welcome, robots. Who is your leader?"

One answered: "We have no leaders. We act as one."

Narodny laughed: "Yet by speaking for them you have shown yourself leader. Step closer. Do not fear—yet."

The robot said: "We feel no fear. Why should we? Even if you should destroy us who are here, you cannot destroy the billions of us outside. Nor can you breed fast enough, become men soon enough, to cope with us who enter into life strong and complete from the beginning."

He flicked an appendage toward Narodny and there was contempt in the gesture. But before he could draw it back a bracelet of green flame circled it at the shoulder. It had darted like a thrown loop from something in Narodny's hand. The robot's arm dropped clanging to the floor, cleanly severed. The robot stared at it unbelievably, threw forward his other three arms to pick it up. Again the green flame encircled them, encircled also his legs above the second joints. The robot crumpled and pitched forward, crying in high-pitched shrill tones to the others.

Swiftly the green flame played among them. Legless, armless, some decapitated, all the robots fell except two.

"Two will be enough," said Narodny. "But they will not need arms— only feet."

The flashing green bracelets encircled the appendages and excised them. The pair were marched away. The bodies of the others were taken apart, studied and under Narodny's direction curious experiments were made. Music filled the cavern, strange chords, unfamiliar progressions, shattering arpeggios and immense vibrations of sound that could be felt but not heard by the human ear. And finally this last deep vibration burst into hearing as a vast drone, hummed up and up into swift tingling tempest of crystalline brittle notes, and still ascending passed into shrill high pipings, and continued again unheard, as had the prelude to the droning. And thence it rushed back, the piping and the crystalline storm reversed, into the drone and the silence— then back and up.

And the bodies of the broken robots began to quiver, to tremble, as though every atom within them were in ever increasing, rhythmic motion. Up rushed the music and down—again and again. It ended abruptly in midflight with one crashing note.

The broken bodies ceased their quivering. Tiny starshaped cracks appeared in their metal. Once more the note sounded and the cracks widened. The metal splintered.

Narodny said: "Well, there is the frequency for the rhythm of our robots. The destructive unison. I hope for the sake of the world outside it is not also the rhythm of many of their buildings and bridges. But after all, in any war there must be casualties on both sides."

Lao said: "Earth will be an extraordinary spectacle for a few days."

Narodny said: "It's going to be an extraordinarily uncomfortable Earth for a few days, and without doubt many will die and many more go mad. But is there any other way?"

There was no answer. He said; "Bring in the two robots." They brought them in.

Narodny said: "Robots—were there ever any of you who could poetize?"

They answered: "What is poetize?" Narodny laughed: "Never mind. Have you ever sung—made music—painted? Have you ever— dreamed?"

One robot said with cold irony: "Dreamed? No—for we do not sleep. We leave all that to men. It is why we have conquered them."

Narodny said, almost gently: "Not yet, robot. Have you ever— danced? No? It is an art you are about to learn."

The unheard note began, droned up and through the tempest and away and back again. And up and down—and up and down, though not so loudly as before. And suddenly the feet of the robots began to move, to shuffle. Their leg-joints bent; their bodies swayed. The note seemed to move now here and now there about the chamber, they always following it, grotesquely. Like huge metal marionettes, they followed it. The music ended in the crashing note. And it was as though every vibrating atom of the robot bodies had met some irresistible obstruction. Their bodies quivered and from their voice mechanisms came a shriek that was a hideous blend of machine and life. Once more the drone, and once more and once more and again the abrupt stop. There was a brittle crackling all over the conical heads, all over the bodies. The star-shaped splinterings appeared. Once again the drone—but the two robots stood, unresponding. For through the complicated mechanisms which under their carapaces animated them were similar splinterings.

The robots were dead!

Narodny said: "By tomorrow we can amplify the sonor to make it effective in a 3000-mile circle. We will use the upper cavern, of course. Equally of course, it means we must take the ship out again. In three days, Marinoff, you should be able to cover the other continents. See to it that the ship is completely proof against the vibrations. To work. We must act quickly— before the robots can discover how to neutralize them."

It was exactly at noon next day that over all North America a deep unexplainable droning was heard. It seemed to come not only from deep within earth, but from every side. It mounted rapidly through a tempest of tingling crystalline notes into a shrill piping and was gone... then back it rushed from piping to the drone... then up and out and down... again and again. And over all North America the hordes of robots stopped in whatever they were doing. Stopped... and then began to dance. They danced in the airships and scores of those ships crashed before the human crews could gain control. They danced by the thousands in the streets of the cities—in grotesque rigadoons, in bizarre sarabands, with shuffle and hop, and jig the robots danced while the people fled in panic and hundreds of them were crushed and died in those panics. In the great factories, and in the tunnels of the lower cities, and in the mines—everywhere the sound was heard—and it was heard everywhere—the robots danced... to the piping of Narodny, the last great poet... the last great musician.

And then came the crashing note—and over all the country the dance halted. And began again... and ceased... and began again...

Until at last the streets, the lower tunnels of the lower levels, the mines, the factories, the homes, were littered with metal bodies shot through and through with star-shaped splinterings.

In the cities the people cowered, not knowing what blow was to fall upon them... or milled about in fear-maddened crowds, and many more died...

Then suddenly the dreadful droning, the shattering tempest, the intolerable high piping ended. And everywhere the people fell, sleeping among the dead robots, as though they never had been strung to the point of breaking, sapped of strength and abruptly relaxed.

As though it had vanished, America was deaf to cables, to all communication beyond the gigantic circle of sound.

But that midnight over all Europe the drone sounded and Europe's robots began their dance of death... and when it had ended a strange and silent rocket ship that had hovered high above the stratosphere sped almost with the speed of light and hovered over Asia—and next day Africa heard the drone while the natives answered it with their tom-toms—then South America heard it and last of all far-off Australia... and everywhere terror trapped the peoples and panic and madness took their toll...

Until of all that animate metal horde that had tethered Earth and humanity there were a few scant hundreds left—escaped from the death dance through some variant in their constitution. And, awakening from that swift sleep, all over Earth those who had feared and hated the robots and their slavery rose against those who had fostered the metal domination, and blasted the robot factories to dust.

Again the hill above the caverns opened, the strange torpedo ship blinked into sight like a ghost, as silently as a ghost floated into the hill and the rocks closed behind it.

Narodny and the others stood before the gigantic television screen, shifting upon it images of city after city, country after country, over all Earth's surface. Lao, the Chinese, said: "Many men died, but many are left. They may not understand—but to them it was worth it."

Narodny mused: "It drives home the lesson, what man does not pay for, he values little. Our friends aloft will have little opposition now I think."

He shook his head, doubtfully, "But I still do not like that Wrongness of Space. I do not want my music spoiled again by him, Lao. Shall we hurl the Moon out of the universe, Lao?"

Lao laughed: "And what then would you do for moon-music?"

Narodny said: "True. Well, let us see what men can do. There is always time—perhaps."

The difficulties which beset humanity did not interest the poet Narodny. While the world governments were reorganized—factories turned out space ships for Earth's fleet—men were trained in handling these ships—supplies were gathered—weapons were perfected— and when the message from Luna, outlining the course to be followed and setting the starting date, arrived, the space fleet of Earth was ready to leave.

Narodny watched the ships take off. He shook his head, doubtfully. But soon harmonies were swelling through the great cavern of the orchards and nymphs and fauns dancing under the fragrant blossoming trees—and the world was again forgotten by Narodny.

THE END

Freeditorial 