**Robot AL-76 Goes Astray**

Isaac Asimov

Jonathan Quell’s eyes crinkled worriedly behind their rimless glasses as he charged through the door labeled “General Manager.”

He slapped the folded paper in his hands upon the desk and panted, “Look at that, boss!”

Sam Tobe juggled the cigar in his mouth from one cheek to the other, and looked. His hand went to his unshaven jaw and rasped along it. “Hell!” he exploded. “What are they talking about?”

“They say we sent out five AL robots,” Quell explained, quite unnecessarily.

“We sent six,” said Tobe.

“Sure, six! But they only got five at the other end. They sent out the serial numbers and AL-76 is missing.”

Tobe’s chair went over backward as he heaved his thick bulk upright and went through the door as if he were on greased wheels. It was five hours after that-with the plant pulled apart from assembly rooms to vacuum chambers; with every one of the plant’s two hundred employees put through the third-degree mill—that a sweating, disheveled Tobe sent an emergency message to the central plant at Schenectady.

And at the central plant, a sudden explosion of near panic took place. For the first time in the history of the United States Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation, a robot had escaped to the outer world. It wasn’t so much that the law forbade the presence of any robot on Earth outside a licensed factory of the corporation. Laws could always be squared. What was much more to the point was the statement made by one of the research mathematicians.

He said: “That robot was created to run a Disinto on the moon. Its positronic brain was equipped for a lunar environment, and only a lunar environment. On Earth it’s going to receive seventy-five umptillion sense impressions for which it was never prepared. There’s no telling what its reactions will be. No telling!” And he wiped a forehead that had suddenly gone wet, with the back of his hand.

Within the hour a stratoplane had left for the Virginia plant. The instructions were simple.

“Get that robot, and get it fast!”

AL-76 was confused! In fact, confusion was the only impression his delicate positronic brain retained. It had started when he had found himself in these strange surroundings. How it had come about, he no longer knew. Everything was mixed up.

There was green underfoot, and brown shafts rose all about him with more green on top. And the sky was blue where it should have been black. The sun was all right, round and yellow and hot-but where was the powdery pumice rock underfoot; where were the huge clifflike crater rings?

There was only the green below and the blue above. The sounds that surrounded him were all strange. He had passed through running water that had reached his waist. It was blue and cold and wet. And when he passed people, as he did, occasionally, they were without the space suits they should have been wearing. When they saw him, they shouted and ran.

One man had leveled a gun at him and the bullet had whistled past his head-and then that man had run too.

He had no idea of how long he had been wandering before he finally stumbled upon Randolph Payne’s shack two miles out in the woods from the town of Hannaford. Randolph Payne himself-a screwdriver in one hand, a pipe in the other and a battered ruin of a vacuum cleaner between his knees—squatted outside the doorway.

Payne was humming at the time, for he was a naturally happy-go-lucky soul-when at his shack. He had a more respectable dwelling place back in Hannaford, but that dwelling place was pretty largely occupied by his wife, a fact which he silently but sincerely regretted. Perhaps, then, there was a sense of relief and freedom at such times as he found himself able to retire to his “special deluxe doghouse” where he could smoke in peace and attend to his hobby of reservicing household appliances.

It wasn’t much of a hobby, but sometimes someone would bring out a radio or an alarm clock and the money he would get paid for juggling its insides was the only money he ever got that didn’t pass in driblets through his spouse’s niggardly hands.

This vacuum cleaner, for instance, would bring in an easy six bits. At the thought he broke into song, raised his eyes, and broke into a sweat. The song choked off, the eyes popped, and the sweat became more intense. He tried to stand up—as a preliminary to running like hell—but he couldn’t get his legs to cooperate.

And then AL-76 had squatted down next to him and said, “Say, why did all the rest of them run?”

Payne knew quite well why they all ran, but the gurgle that issued from his diaphragm didn’t show it. He tried to inch away from the robot.

AL-76 continued in an aggrieved tone, “One of them even took a shot at me. An inch lower and he would have scratched my shoulder plate.”

“M-must have b-been a nut,” stammered Payne.

“That’s possible.” The robot’s voice grew more confidential. “Listen, what’s wrong with everything?”

Payne looked hurriedly about. It had struck him that the robot spoke in a remarkably mild tone for one so heavily and brutally metallic in appearance. It also struck him that he had heard somewhere that robots were mentally incapable of harming human beings. He relaxed a bit.

“There’s nothing wrong with anything.”

“Isn’t there?” AL-76 eyed him accusingly. “You’re all wrong. Where’s your space suit?”

“I haven’t got any.”

“Then why aren’t you dead?”

That stopped Payne, “Well—I don’t know.”

“See!” said the robot triumphantly, “there’s something wrong with everything. Where’s Mount Copernicus? Where’s Lunar station 17? And where’s my Disinto? I want to get to work, I do.” He seemed perturbed, and his voice shook as he continued. “I’ve been going about for hours trying to get someone to tell me where my Disinto is, but they all run away. By now I’m probably way behind schedule and the Sectional Executive will be as sore as blazes. This is a fine situation.”

Slowly Payne unscrambled the stew in which his brain found itself and said, “Listen, what do they call you?”

“My serial number is AL-76.”

All right, Al is good enough for me. Now, Al, if you’re looking for Lunar Station 17, that’s on the moon, see?”

AL-76 nodded his head ponderously. “Sure. But I’ve been looking for it—”

“But it’s on the moon. This isn’t the moon.”

It was the robot’s turn to become confused. He watched Payne for a speculative moment and then said slowly, “What do you mean this isn’t the moon? Of course it’s the moon. Because if it isn’t the moon, what is it, huh? Answer me that.”

Payne made a funny sound in his throat and breathed hard. He pointed a finger at the robot and shook it. “Look,” he said—and then the brilliant idea of the century struck him, and he finished with a strangled “Wow!”

AL-76 eyed him censoriously. “That isn’t an answer. I think I have a right to a civil answer if I ask a civil question.”

Payne wasn’t listening. He was still marveling at himself. Why, it was as plain as day. This robot was one built for the moon that had somehow gotten loose on Earth. Naturally it would be all mixed up, because its positronic brain had been geared exclusively for a lunar environment, making its earthly surroundings entirely meaningless.

And now if he could only keep the robot here-until he could get in touch with the men at the factory in Petersboro. Why, robots were worth money. The cheapest cost $50,000, he had once heard, and some of them ran into millions. Think of the reward!

Man, oh, man, think of the reward! And every cent for himself. Not as much as a quarter of a snifter of a plugged nickel for Mirandy. Jumpin' tootin' blazes, no!

He rose to his feet at last. “Al,” he said, “you and I are buddies! Pals! I love you like a brother.” He thrust out a hand. “Shake!”

The robot swallowed up the offered hand in a metal paw and squeezed it gently. He didn’t quite understand. “Does that mean you’ll tell me how to get to Lunar Station 17?”

Payne was a trifle disconcerted..'N-no, not exactly. As a matter of fact, I like you so much, I want you to stay here with me awhile.”

“Oh no, I can’t do that. I’ve got to get to work.” He shook his head. “How would you like to be falling behind your quota hour by hour and minute by minute? I want to work. I’ve got to work.”

Payne thought sourly that there was no accounting for tastes, and said, “All right, then, I’ll explain something to you-because I can see from the looks of you that you’re an intelligent person. I’ve had orders from your Sectional Executive, and he wants me to keep you here for a while. Till he sends for you, in fact.”

“What for?” asked AL-76 suspiciously.

“I can’t say. It’s secret government stuff.” Payne prayed, inwardly and fervently, that the robot would swallow this. Some robots were clever, he knew, but this looked like one of the early models.

While Payne prayed, AL-76 considered. The robot’s brain, adjusted to the handling of a Disinto on the moon, was not at its best when engaged in abstract thought, but just the same, ever since he had gotten lost, AL-76 had found his thought processes becoming stranger. The alien surroundings did something to him.

His next remark was almost shrewd. He said slyly, “What’s my Sectional Executive’s name?”

Payne gulped and thought rapidly. ” Al,” he said in a pained fashion, “you hurt me with this suspicion. I can’t tell you his name. The trees have ears.”

AL-76 inspected the tree next to him stolidly and said, “They have not.”

“I know. What I mean is that spies are all around.”

“Spies?”

“Yes. You know, bad people who want to destroy Lunar Station 17.”

“What for?”

“Because they’re bad. And they want to destroy you, and that’s why you’ve got to stay here for a while, so they can’t find you.”

“But-but I’ve got to have a Disinto. I mustn’t fall behind my quota.”

“You will have. You will have,” Payne promised earnestly, and just as earnestly damned the robot’s one-track mind. “They’re going to send one out tomorrow. Yeah, tomorrow.” That would leave plenty of time to get the men from the factory out here and collect beautiful green heaps of hundred-dollar bills.

But AL-76 grew only the more stubborn under the distressing impingement of the strange world all about him upon his thinking mechanism.

“No,” he said. “I’ve got to have a Disinto now.” Stiffly he straightened his joints, jerking erect. “I’d better look for it some more.”

Payne swarmed after and grabbed a cold, hard elbow. “Listen,” he squealed. “You’ve got to stay—”

And something in the robot’s mind clicked. All the strangeness surrounding him collected itself into one globule. Exploded, and left a brain ticking with a curiously increased efficiency. He whirled on Payne. “I tell you what. I can build a Disinto right here—and then I can work it.”

Payne paused doubtfully. “I don’t think I can build one.” He wondered if it would do any good to pretend he could.

“That’s all right.” AL-76 could almost feel the positronic paths of his brain weaving into a new pattern, and experienced a strange exhilaration. “I can build one.” He looked into Payne’s deluxe doghouse and said. “You’ve got all the material here that I need.”

Randolph Payne surveyed the junk with which his shack was filled: eviscerated radios, a topless refrigerator, rusty automobile engines, a broken-down gas range, several miles of frayed wire, and, taking it all together, fifty tons or thereabouts of the most heterogeneous mass of old metal as ever caused a junkman to sniff disdainfully.

“Have I?” he said weakly.

Two hours later, two things happened practically simultaneously. The first was that Sam Tobe of the Petersboro branch of the United States Robots and Mechanical Men Corporation received a visiphone call from one Randolph Payne of Hannaford. It concerned the missing robot, and Tobe, with a deep-throated snarl, broke connection halfway through and ordered all subsequent calls to be rerouted to the sixth assistant vice-president in charge of buttonholes.

This was not really unreasonable of Tobe. During the past week, although Robot AL-76 had dropped from sight completely, reports had flooded in from all over the Union as to the robot’s whereabouts. As many as fourteen a day came—usually from fourteen different states.

Tobe was almighty tired of it, to say nothing of being half crazy on general principles. There was even talk of a Congressional investigation, though every reputable roboticist and mathematical physicist on Earth swore the robot was harmless.

In his state of mind, then, it is not surprising that it took three hours for the general manager to pause and consider just exactly how it was that this Randolph Payne had known that the robot was slated for Lunar Station 17, and, for that matter, how he had known that the robot’s serial number was AL-76. Those details had not been given out by the company.

He kept on considering for about a minute and a half and then swung into action.

However, during the three hours between the call and the action, the second event took place. Randolph Payne, having correctly diagnosed the abrupt break in his call as being due to general skepticism on the part of the plant official, returned to his shack with a camera. They couldn’t very well argue with a photograph, and he’d be hornswoggled if he’d show them the real thing before they came across with the cash.

AL-76 was busy with affairs of his own. Half of the contents of Payne’s shack was littered over about two acres of ground, and in the middle of it the robot squatted and fooled around with radio tubes, hunks of iron, copper wire, and general junk. He paid no attention to Payne, who, sprawling flat on his belly, focused his camera for a beautiful shot.

And at this point it was that Lemuel Oliver Cooper turned the bend in the road and froze in his tracks as he took in the tableau. The reason for his coming in the first place was an ailing electric toaster that had developed the annoying habit of throwing out pieces of bread forcefully, but thoroughly untoasted. The reason for his leaving was more obvious. He had come with a slow, mildly cheerful, spring-morning saunter. He left with a speed that would have caused any college track coach to raise his eyebrows and purse his lips approvingly.

There was no appreciable slackening of speed until Cooper hurtled into Sheriff Saunders’ office, minus hat and toaster, and brought himself up hard against the wall.

Kindly hands lifted him, and for half a minute he tried speaking before he had actually calmed down to the point of breathing with, of course, no result.

They gave him whisky and fanned him and when he did speak, it came out something like this: “—monster-seven feet tall-shack all busted up-poor Rannie Payne—” and so on.

They got the story out of him gradually: how there was a huge metal monster, seven feet tall, maybe even eight or nine, out at Randolph Payne’s shack; how Randolph Payne himself was on his stomach, a “poor, bleeding, mangled corpse"; how the monster was then busily engaged in wrecking the shack out of sheer destructiveness; how it had turned on Lemuel Oliver Cooper, and how he, Cooper, had made his escape by half a hair.

Sheriff Saunders hitched his belt tighter about his portly middle and said, “It’s that there machine man that got away from the Petersboro factory. We got warning on it last Saturday. Hey, Jake, you get every man in Hannaford County that can shoot and slap a deputy’s badge on him. Get them here at noon. And listen, Jake, before you do that, just drop in at the Widow Payne’s place and lip her the bad news gentle-like.”

It is reported that Miranda Payne, upon being acquainted with events, paused only to make sure that her husband’s insurance policy was safe, and to make a few pithy remarks concerning her foolishness in not having had him take out double the amount, before breaking out into as prolonged and heart-wringing a wail of grief as ever became a respectable widow.

It was some hours later that Randolph Payne—unaware of his horrible mutilation and death—viewed the completed negatives of his snapshots with satisfaction. As a series of portraits of a robot at work, they left nothing to the imagination. They might have been labeled: “Robot Gazing Thoughtfully at Vacuum Tube,” “Robot Splicing Two Wires,” “Robot Wielding Screwdriver,” “Robot Taking Refrigerator Apart with Great Violence,” and so on.

As there now remained only the routine of making the prints themselves, he stepped out from beyond the curtain of the improvised darkroom for a bit of a smoke and a chat with AL-76.

In doing so, he was blissfully unaware that the neighboring woods were verminous with nervous farmers armed with anything from an old colonial relic of a blunderbuss to the portable machine gun carried by the sheriff himself. Nor, for that matter, had he any inkling of the fact that half a dozen roboticists, under the leadership of Sam Tobe, were smoking down the highway from Petersboro at better than a hundred and twenty miles an hour for the sole purpose of having the pleasure and honor of his acquaintance.

So while things were jittering toward a climax, Randolph Payne sighed with self-satisfaction, lighted a match upon the seat of his pants, puffed away at his pipe, and looked at AL-76 with amusement.

It had been apparent for quite some time that the robot was more than slightly lunatic. Randolph Payne was himself an expert at homemade contraptions, having built several that could not have been exposed to daylight without searing the eyeballs of all beholders; but he had never even conceived of anything approaching the monstrosity that AL-76 was concocting.

It would have made the Rube Goldbergs of the day die in convulsions of envy. It would have made Picasso (if he could have lived to witness it) quit art in the sheer knowledge that he had been hopelessly surpassed. It would have soured the milk in the udders of any cow within half a mile.

In fact, it was gruesome!

From a rusty and massive iron base that faintly resembled something Payne had once seen attached to a secondhand tractor, it rose upward in rakish, drunken swerves through a bewildering mess of wires, wheels, tubes, and nameless horrors without number, ending in a megaphone arrangement that looked decidedly sinister.

Payne had the impulse to peek in the megaphone part, but refrained. He had seen far more sensible machines explode suddenly and with violence.

He said, “Hey, Al.”

The robot looked up. He had been lying flat on his stomach, teasing a thin sliver of metal into place. “What do you want, Payne?”

“What is this?” He asked it in the tone of one referring to something foul and decomposing, held gingerly between two ten-foot poles.

“It’s the Disinto I’m making-so I can start to work. It’s an improvement on the standard model.” The robot rose, dusted his knees clankingly, and looked at it proudly.

Payne shuddered. An “improvement"! No wonder they hid the original in caverns on the moon. Poor satellite! Poor dead satellite! He had always wanted to know what a fate worse than death was. Now he knew.

“Will it work?” he asked. ”

“Sure.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s got to. I made it, didn’t I? I only need one thing now. Got a flashlight?”

“Somewhere, I guess.” Payne vanished into the shack and returned almost immediately.

The robot unscrewed the bottom and set to work. In five minutes he had finished. He stepped back and said, “All set. Now I get to work. You may watch if you want to.”

A pause, while Payne tried to appreciate the magnanimity of the offer. “Is it safe?”

“A baby could handle it.”

“Oh!” Payne grinned weakly and got behind the thickest tree in the vicinity. “Go ahead,” he said, “I have the utmost confidence in you.”

AL-76 pointed to the nightmarish junk pile and said, “Watch!” His hands set to work-

The embattled farmers of Hannaford County, Virginia, weaved up upon Payne’s shack in a slowly tightening circle. With the blood of their heroic colonial forebears pounding their veins-and goose flesh trickling up and down their spines-they crept from tree to tree.

Sheriff Saunders spread the word. “Fire when I give the signal-and aim at the eyes.”

Jacob Linker-Lank Jake to his friends, and Sheriff’s Deputy to himself-edged close. “You think maybe this machine man has skedaddled?” He did not quite manage to suppress the tone of wistful hopefulness in his voice.

“Dunno,” grunted the sheriff. “Guess not, though. We woulda come across him in the woods if he had, and we haven’t.”

“But it’s awful quiet, and it appears to me as if we’re getting close to Payne’s place.”

The reminder wasn’t necessary. Sheriff Saunders had a lump in his throat so big it had to be swallowed in three installments. “Get back,” he ordered, “and keep your finger on the trigger.”

They were at the rim of the clearing now, and Sheriff Saunders closed his eyes and stuck the corner of one out from behind the tree. Seeing nothing, he paused, then tried again, eyes open this time.

Results were, naturally, better.

To be exact, he saw one huge machine man, back toward him, bending over one soul-curdling, hiccupy Contraption of uncertain origin and less certain purpose. The only item he missed was the quivering figure of Randolph Payne, embracing the tree next but three to the nor'-nor'west.

Sheriff Saunders stepped out into the open and raised his machine gun. The robot, still presenting a broad metal back, said in a loud voice—to person or persons unknown—"Watchl” and as the sheriff opened his mouth to signal a general order to fire, metal fingers compressed a switch.

There exists no adequate description of what occurred afterward, in spite of the presence of seventy eyewitnesses. In the days, months, and years to come not one of those seventy ever had a word to say about the few seconds after the sheriff had opened his mouth to give the firing order. When questioned about it, they merely turned apple-green and staggered away.

It is plain from circumstantial evidence. however. that. in a general way. what did occur was this.

Sheriff Saunders opened his mouth; AL-76 pulled a switch. The Disinto worked, and seventy-five trees, two barns, three cows and the top three quarters of Duckbill Mountain whiffed into rarefied atmosphere. They became, so to speak, one with the snows of yesteryear.

Sheriff Saunders’ mouth remained open for an indefinite interval thereafter, but nothing-neither firing orders nor anything else-issued therefrom. And then—

And then, there was a stirring in the air, a multiple ro-o-o-oshing sound, a series of purple streaks through the atmosphere radiating away from Randolph Payne’s shack as the center, and of the members of the posse, not a sign.

There were various guns scattered about the vicinity, including the sheriff’s patented nickel-plated, extra-rapid-fire, guaranteed-no-clog, portable machine gun. There were about fifty hats, a few half-chomped cigars, and some odds and ends that had come loose in the excitement-but of actual human beings there was none.

Except for Lank Jake, not one of those human beings came within human ken for three days, and the exception in his favor came about because he was interrupted in his comet-flight by the half-dozen men from the Petersboro factory, who were charging into the wood at a pretty fair speed of their own.

It was Sam Tobe who stopped him, catching Lank Jake’s head skillfully in the pit of his stomach. When he caught his breath. Tobe asked. “Where’s Randolph Payne’s place?”

Lank Jake allowed his eyes to unglaze for just a moment. “Brother,” he said, “just you follow the direction I ain’t going.”

And with that, miraculously, he was gone. There was a shrinking dot dodging trees on the horizon that might have been he, but Sam Tobe wouldn’t have sworn to it.

That takes care of the posse; but there still remains Randolph Payne, whose reactions took something of a different form.

For Randolph Payne, the five-second interval after the pulling of the switch and the disappearance of Duckbill Mountain was a total blank. At the start he had been peering through the thick underbrush from behind the bottom of the trees; at the end he was swinging wildly from one of the topmost branches. The same impulse that had driven the posse horizontally had driven him vertically.

As to how he had covered the fifty feet from roots to top-whether he had climbed, jumped, or flown-he did not know, and he didn’t give a particle of never-mind.

What he did know was that property had been destroyed by a robot temporarily in his possession. All visions of rewards vanished and were replaced by trembling nightmares of hostile citizenry, shrieking lynch mobs, lawsuits, murder charges, and what Mirandy Payne would say. Mostly what Mirandy Payne would say.

He was yelling wildly and hoarsely, “Hey, you robot, you smash that thing, do you hear? Smash it good! You forget I ever had anything to do with it. You’re a stranger to me, see? You don’t ever say a word about it. Forget it, you hear?”

He didn’t expect his orders to do any good; it was only reflex action. What he didn’t know was that a robot always obeys a human order except where carrying it out involves danger to another human.

AL-76, therefore, calmly and methodically proceeded to demolish his Disinto into rubble and flinders.

Just as he was stamping the last cubic inch under foot, Sam Tobe and his contingent arrived, and Randolph Payne, sensing that the real owners of the robot had come, dropped out of the tree head-first and made for regions unknown feet-first.

He did not wait for his reward.

Austin Wilde, Robotical Engineer, turned to Sam Tobe and said, “Did you get anything out of the robot?”

Tobe shook his head and snarled deep in his throat. “Nothing. Not one thing. He’s forgotten everything that’s happened since he left the factory. He must have gotten orders to forget, or it couldn’t have left him so blank. What was that pile of junk he’d been fooling with?”

“Just that. A pile of junk! But it must have been a Disinto before he smashed it, and I’d like to kill the fellow who ordered him to smash it-by slow torture, if possible. Look at this!”

They were part of the way up the slopes of what had been Duck-bill Mountain—at that point, to be exact, where the top had been sheered off; and Wilde put his hand down upon the perfect flatness that cut through both soil and rock.

“What a Disinto,” he said. “It took the mountain right off its base.”

“What made him build it?”

Wilde shrugged. “I don’t know. Some factor in his environment-there’s no way of knowing what-reacted upon his moon-type positronic brain to produce a Disinto out of junk. It’s a billion to one against our ever stumbling upon that factor again now that the robot himself has forgotten. We’ll never have that Disinto.”

“Never mind. The important thing is that we have the robot.”

“The hell you say.” There was poignant regret in Wilde’s voice. “Have you ever had anything to do with the Disintos on the moon? They eat up energy like so many electronic hogs and won’t even begin to run until you’ve built up a potential of better than a million volts. But this Disinto worked differently. I went through the rubbish with a microscope, and would you like to see the only source of power of any kind that I found?”

“What was it?”

“Just this! And we’ll never know how he did it.”

And Austin Wilde held up the source of power that had enabled a Disinto to chew up a mountain in half a second—two flashlight batteries!