## My Lady of the Diodes

Roger Zelazny

*Stephen Gregg unearthed this story which I forgot I had written. It had appeared in a fanzine called* Granfalloon. *Steve wanted to reprint it in his semipro magazine,* Eternity. *I asked to see a copy first, as I no longer had one in my possession. I okayed the deal after I’d read a Xerox, but alas!* Eternity *went under (after also helping to resurrect a character of mine named Dilvish), and this story was not reprinted Why not run it here? I asked myself Why not? I answered How often does one wish to seize an opportunity to acknowledge a forgotten offspring?*

Maxine had said, “Turn left at the next corner,” so I did.

“Park the car. Get out and walk. Cross the street at the crosswalk.”

I slammed the door behind me and moved on up the street, a man in a dark blue suit carrying a gray suitcase, a hearing aid in his left ear. I might have been the Fuller Brush man.

I crossed the street.

“Now head back up the other side. You will see a red brick building, numbered six-six-eight.”

“Check,” I said.

“Head up the front walk, but do not mount the stairs. Once you pass the iron fence, there will be a stairway leading downward, to your left. Descend that stairway. At the bottom of the stair there will be a doorway leading into the building, probably padlocked.”

“There is.”

“Set down the case, put on the gloves you are carrying in your coat pocket, take the hammer from your inside pocket, and use it to strike open the lock. Try to do it in one sharp blow.”

It took two.

“Enter the building and close the door behind you. Leave the lock inside; put away the hammer.”

“It’s dark...”

“The building should be deserted. Take twelve paces forward, and you will come to a corridor leading off to your right.”

“Remove your right glove and take out the roll of dimes you are carrying in your right pocket. In the side corridor you should see a row of telephone booths.”

“I do.”

“Is there sufficient illumination coming from the three small windows opposite the booths to permit you to operate a telephone?”

“Then enter the first booth, remove the receiver with your gloved hand, insert a coin, and dial the following number.. .”

I began to dial.

“When the call is answered, do not respond or hang up, but place the receiver on the ledge and enter the next booth, where you will dial the following number.. .”

I did this, twelve times in all.

“That is sufficient,” said Maxine. “You have tied up all the lines to the Hall, so that no outgoing calls may be placed. It is highly improbable that anyone will come along and break these connections. Return at once to the car. Replace the padlock on the door as you go. Then drive directly to the Hall. Park in the corner lot with the sign that says FIRST HOUR 500—350 EACH ADD'L HOUR. You may pay in advance at that lot, so have your money ready. Tell the attendant that you will only be a short time.”

I returned to the car, entered it, and began driving.

“Keep your speed at thirty-five miles per hour, and put on your hat.”

“Must I? Already? I hate hats.”

“Yes, put it on. The glasses, also.”

“All right, they’re on. Hats mess your hair up, though, more than the wind they’re supposed to be protecting it from. They blow off, too.”

“How is the traffic? Heavy? Light?—They keep a man’s head warm.”

“Pretty light.—They do not. Hair takes care of your head, and your ears still stick out and get cold.”

“What color is the traffic signal ahead?—Then why do other men wear hats?”

“It just turned green.—They’re stupid conformists. Hats are as bad as neckties.”

“Barring untoward traffic circumstances, your present speed will take you through the next two intersections. You will be stopped by a red light at the third one. At that point, you will have time to fill your pipe—and perhaps to light it, also, although you were rather slow when you practiced. If you cannot light it there, you should have two more opportunities before you reach the parking lot.—What’s wrong with neckties?

“Check your wristwatch against the time now: You have exactly nine minutes before the acid eats through the power cables.—Neckties are elegant.”

“Check... Neckties are stupid!”

“Now place me in the back seat and cover me with the blanket. I will administer electrical shocks to anyone who tries to steal me.”

I did this, got the pipe going, found the lot.

“Keep puffing lots of smoke in front of your face as you talk with the attendant. You have the brown paper bag and the collapsible carton? The door-couple and the light?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Take off your gloves. Remove your hearing aid and get it out of sight. Watch how you handle the steering wheel now. Palm it, and rub after each touch.”

I parked the car, paid the attendant, strolled on up the street toward the Hall. Two minutes and twenty seconds remained.

I climbed the front stairs and entered the lobby. The Seekfax exhibit was in a room toward the back and to my left. I moved off in that direction. One minute and forty seconds remained. I emptied my pipe into a sandpot, scraped the bowl.

No windows in the exhibit room, Maxine had said, and she’d digested the blueprints. Metal frame, metal doorplate—just as Maxine had said.

I approached the door, which was standing open. I could hear voices, caught glimpses of banks of machinery, exhibit cases. I put away my pipe and changed my glasses to the infrareds. Fifteen seconds. I put on my gloves. Ten.

I jammed my hands into my pockets, resting the left one on the infrared flashlight and the right on the door-couple. I counted to ten slowly and walked into the room, just as the lights went out.

Kicking the door shut, I clapped the couple-bar across the lockplate and the frame. Then I ran the polarizer rod along it, and it snapped tight. I switched on the flash and moved across the room to the central exhibit cases.

Everyone stood around stupidly as I removed the hammer and broke the glass. A couple of the salesmen began groping toward me, but much too slowly. I put away the hammer and filled the bag with the gold wire, the platinum wire, the silver wire. I wrapped the more expensive crystals and jewel components in wads of tissue.

Half a minute, maybe, to fill the bag. I opened out the stamped, self-addressed carton as I made my way back across the room. I stuffed the bag inside, into a nest of shredded newsprint. Cigarette lighters and matches flared briefly about me, but they didn’t do much, or for very long.

There was a small knot of people before the door. “Make way here!” I said. “I have a key.” They pushed aside as I depolarized the couple-bar. Then I slipped out through the door, closed it, and coupled it from the outside.

I took off my gloves, put away the flashlight and changed my glasses as I strolled out, pipe between my teeth. I dropped the package into the mailbox on the corner and walked back to the parking lot. I parked on a side street, reversed my dark blue suit jacket into a light gray sport coat, removed my glasses, hat and pipe, and reintroduced the hearing aid.

“All’s well,” I said.

“Good,” said Maxine. “Now, by my estimate, they only owe you two million, one hundred twenty-three thousand, four hundred fifty dollars. Let’s return the car and take a taxi out to the scene of your alibi.”

“Check. We’ll pick up a bigger piece of change in Denver, doll. I think I’ll buy you a new carrying case. What color would you like?”

“Get me an alligator one, Danny. They’re elegant.”

“Alligator it is, baby,” I replied as we headed back toward the rent-a-car garage.

We hit Denver two months ahead of time, and I began programming Maxine. I fed her the city directory, the city history, all the chamber of commerce crap, and all the vital statistics I could lay my hands on. I attached the optical scanner and gave her the street guides and the blueprints to all the public buildings and other buildings I found in the files at City Hall. Then I photographed the conference hotel, inside and out, as well as the adjacent buildings. Every day we scanned the local newspapers and periodicals, and Maxine stored everything.

Phase Two began when Maxine started asking for special information: Which roads were surfaced with what? What sort of clothing was being worn? How many construction companies were currently building? How wide were certain streets?

As a stockholder, I received my brochure one day, explaining the big conference. I fed that to Maxine, too.

“Do you want to cancel the debt completely?” she asked. “This includes court costs, attorney’s fees and 7 percent compound interest.”

“How?”

“This will be the first showing of the Seekfax 5000. Steal it.”

“Steal the whole damn machine? It must weigh tons!”

“Approximately sixty-four hundred pounds, according to the brochure. Let’s steal it and retire. The odds against you keep going up each time, you know.”

“Yes, but my God! What am I going to do with Seekfax 5000?”

“Strip it down and sell the components. Or better yet, sell the whole unit to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Sao Paulo. They’re looking for something like that, and I’ve already mapped out three tentative smuggling routes. I’ll need more data...”

“It’s out of the question!”

“Why? Don’t you think I can plan it?”

“The ramifications are.. .”

“You built me to cover every contingency. Don’t worry. Just give me the information I ask for.”

“I’ll have to consider this one a little further, baby. So excuse me. I’m going to eat dinner.”

“Don’t drink too much. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Sure. See you later.”

I pushed Maxine under the bed and left, heading up the street toward the restaurant. It was a warm summer evening, and the slants of sunlight between buildings were filled with glowing dust motes.

“Mister Bracken, may I speak with you?”

I turned and regarded the speaker’s maple syrup eyes behind jar bottoms set in Harlequin frames, dropped my gaze approximately five feet two inches to the tops of her white sandals, and raised it again, slowly: Kind of flat chested and pug nosed, she wore a cottony candy-striped thing which showed that anyway her shoulders were not bony. Lots of maple syrup matching hair was balled up on the back of her head, with a couple winglike combs floating on it and aimed at her ears, both of which looked tasty enough—the ears, that is. She carried a large purse and a camera case almost as big.

“Hello. Yes. Speak.” There was something vaguely familiar about her, but I couldn’t quite place it.

“My name is Gilda Coburn,” she said, “and I arrived in town today.” Her voice was somewhat nasal. “I was sent to do a feature article on the computer conference. I was coming to see you.”

“Why?”

“To interview you, concerning data-processing techniques.”

“There’ll be a lot of more important men than me around in another week or so. Why don’t you talk to them. I’m not in computers anymore.”

“But I’ve heard that you’re responsible for three of the most important breakthroughs in the past decade. I read all of *Daniel Bracken v. Seekfax Incorporated,* and you said this yourself at the trial.”

“How did you know I was in Denver?”

“Perhaps some friend of yours told my editor. I don’t know how he found out. *May* I interview you?”

“Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“Come with me then. I’ll feed you and tell you about data processing.

No friend of mine could have told any editor, because I don’t have any friends, except for Maxine. Could Gilda be some kind of cop? Private, local, insurance? If so, it was worth a meal or three if I could find out.

I ordered drinks before dinner, a bottle of wine with the meal and two after-dinner drinks, hoping to fog her a bit. But she belted everything down and remained clear as a bell.

And her questions remained cogent and innocuous, until I slipped up on one.

I referred to the Seekfax 410 translation unit when talking about possible ways of communicating with extraterrestrials, should we ever come across any.

“... 610,” she corrected, and I went on talking.

Click! Unwind her hair and lighten it a couple shades, then make her glasses horn-rimmed...

Sonia Kronstadt, girl genius out of MIT, designer of the Seekfax 5000, the prototype of which I was contemplating selling to the Bureau of Vital Statistics in Silo Paulo. She worked for the enemy.

I had hit Seekfax twelve times in the past five years. They knew it had to be me, but they could never prove it. I had built Max-10, Maxine, to plan perfect crimes, and she had done so a dozen times already. Seekfax was out to get me, but we had always outwitted their detectives, their guards, their alarm devices. No two robberies bore any resemblance as to method, thanks to Maxine. Each one was a *de novo* theft. Now then, if Kronstadt was in town ahead of time, under a phony name, then this Denver conference smacked of a setup job. The brochure had spoken of a very large display of expensive equipment, also. Had they something very special in mind for Danny Bracken? Perhaps it would do to sit this one out...

“Care to come back to my room for a nightcap?” I asked, taking her hand.

“All right,” and she smiled, “thanks.”

Ha! Hell hath no fury like a jealous computer designer, or computer, as I later learned....

When we got back to my room and were settled with drinks, she asked me what I had thought she might: “about all these robberies at Seekfax exhibits and conferences.. .”

“Yes?”

“I’d like to have your views as to who might be committing them.”

“IBM? Radio Shack?”

“Seriously. There has never been a single clue. Each one has actually been a perfect crime. You’d think a criminal that good would go after bigger game—say, jewelry stores, or banks. My theory is that it’s someone with a grudge against the company. How does that sound to you?”

“No,” I said, and I touched her neck with my lips as I leaned over to refill her glass. She didn’t draw away. “You’re assuming that it’s one person, and the facts tend to indicate otherwise. From the reports I’ve read, no two of the robberies have ever been alike. I believe that the Seekfax exhibit has come to be known in the underworld as an easy mark.”

“Bosh!” she said. “They’re not easy marks. Greater precautions are taken at each one, but the thief seems to accommodate this by taking greater precautions himself. I think it’s one man with a grudge against the company, a man who delights in outsmarting it.”

I kissed her then, on the mouth to shut her up. She leaned forward against me and I drew her to her feet.

Somehow, the light got turned out.

Later, as I lay there smoking, she said: “Everyone knows you’re the one who’s doing it.”

“I thought you were asleep.”

“I was deciding how to say it.”

“You’re no reporter,” I said.

“No, I’m not.”

“What do you want?”

“I don’t want you to go to prison.”

“You work for Seekfax.”

“Yes. I work for Seekfax, and I fell in love with the designs for the 5280 and the. 9310. I know that they’re your designs. The people they say did them aren’t that good. Those are the work of a genius.”

“I hired a consulting engineer,” I said, “your Mr. Walker, to help with some of the drawings. He went to work for Seekfax a week later, before I had the patents registered. You’ve read his testimony and mine. That’s why he’s a vice-president now.”

“So that’s why you commit these robberies?”

“Seekfax owes me two million, one hundred twenty-three thousand, four hundred fifty dollars.”

“That much? How do you know?”

“As a stockholder, I have a right to audit the books. I calculated that amount from what my CPA saw of the profit rise after my ideas went into use. That’s cheap, too. A work of art is priceless.”

“It had to be you, Danny. I saw that door-couple. You designed it. Your signature was on it. I heard how bitter you were after the trial, how you swore you would recover...”

“So? Why come tell me your guesses? Have you got anything that will stand up in court?”

“Not yet.”

“What do you mean 'yet'?”

“I came here ahead of the conference because I knew you’d be in town, planning this one. I came here to warn you, because I do not want you to go to prison. I could not bear being responsible for putting the creator of the 9310 behind bars.”

“Granting that all your guesses are correct, how could you be responsible for anything like that?”

“Because I designed the Seekfax 5000,” she said, “into which every known fact about Denver and yourself has been programmed. It is not just a fact retriever, Danny. It is the perfect integrated data-processing detective. I am convinced that it is capable of extrapolating every possible theft which could occur at the conference, and then making provision to guard against it. You cannot possibly succeed. The age of the master criminal is past, now that IDP has moved into the picture.”

“Ha!” I said.

“Aren’t you rich enough now to retire?”

“Of course I’m rich,” I said. “That isn’t the point...”

“I understand your motives, but my point is that you can’t outthink the 5000. Nothing can! Even if you cut off the electricity again, the 5000 is a self-contained power unit. No matter what you do, it will compute an immediate countermeasure.”

“Go back to Seekfax,” I said, “and tell them that I’m not afraid of any cock-and-bull story about a detective computer. So long as they’re going to hold exhibits and participate in conferences, they’d better be prepared to suffer losses. Also, I admit nothing.”

“It’s *not* a cock-and-bull story,” she finally said. “I built the thing! I know what it can do!”

“Some day I’ll introduce you to Maxine,” I said, “who’ll tell you what she thinks of sixty-four hundred pounds of detective.”

“Who’s Maxine? Your girlfriend, or ... ?”

“We’re just good friends,” I said, “but she goes everywhere with me.” She dressed quickly then, and after a minute I heard the door slam.

I reached beneath the bed and switched on audio.

“Maxine, baby, did you catch that? The machine we’re going to steal is out to get us.”

“So what?” said Maxine.

“That’s the attitude,” I replied. “Anything it can do, you can do better. Sixty-four hundred pounds! Huh!”

“You knew I was under the bed and turned on, but you did it anyway!”

“Did what?”

“You made love to that—that woman... Right above me! I heard everything!”

“Well... Yes.”

“Have you no respect for me?”

“Of course I do. But that was something between two people, that—”

“And all I am is the thing you feed the facts to, is that it? The thing that plans your crimes! I mean nothing to you as an individual!”

“That’s not true, Max baby. You know it. I only brought that woman up here to find out what Seekfax was up to. What I did was necessary, to obtain the data I needed.”

“Don’t lie to me, Daniel Bracken! I know what you are. You’re a heel!”

“Don’t be that way, Maxie! You know it’s not so! Didn’t I just buy you a nice new alligator case?”

“Hah! You got off cheap, considering all I’ve done for you!”

“Don’t, Max.. .”

“Maybe it’s time you got yourself another computer.”

“I need you, baby. You’re the only one who can take on the 5000 and beat it.”

“Fat chance!”

“What’ll I do now?”

“Go get drunk.”

“What good’ll that do?”

“You seem to think it’s the answer to everything. Men are beasts!”

I poured myself a drink and lit a cigarette. I should never have given Maxine that throaty voice. It did something to her, to me... I gulped it and poured another.

It was three days before Maxine came around. She woke me up in the morning, singing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” then announced, “Good morning, Danny. I’ve decided to forgive you.”

“Thanks. Why the change of heart?”

“Men are weak. I’ve recomputed things and decided you couldn’t help it. It was mainly that woman’s fault.”

“Oh, I see...

“.. And I’ve planned the next crime, to perfection.”

“Great. Let me in on it?”

At this point, I had some misgivings. I hadn’t anticipated her womanlike reaction on the night I’d brought Sonia around. I wondered whether this thing might not go even deeper, to the point of her plotting revenge. Would she purposely foul this one up, just so I’d be caught? I weighed the problem and couldn’t decide. It was silly! Maxine was only *a* machine...

Still—she was the most sophisticated machine in the world, complete with random circuits which permitted emotion analogues.

And I couldn’t build another Maxine in the time remaining. I just had to listen to her and decide for myself whether I should abandon the project...

“I put myself in the 5000’s place,” said Maxine. “We both possess the same facts, about yourself and the locale. I, therefore, can arrive at any conclusion it can. The difference is that it is fighting a defensive battle, where we have the advantage of taking the initiative. We can break it by introducing an independent variable.”

“Such as?”

“You’ve always robbed the conference or exhibit while it was in progress. Seekfax 5000 will formulate plans to defend against this—and *only* this, I’m certain—because this is all it will be programmed for.”

“I fail to see.. .”

“Supposing you strike *before* the conference, or *after?”*

“It sounds great, Maxie, if the 5000 is just a simple problem solver. But I’m a little afraid of the machine. Sonia Kronstadt is no slouch. Supposing she’s duplicated your field approach to problem definition, so that that overweight monstrosity can redefine problems as it goes along? In a cruder fashion than yourself; of course! Or supposing Sonia simply thought of that angle herself; and the question was not posed as you’ve guessed?”

“She said, ‘... Every possible theft which could occur at the conference.' I’ll wager that’s the way she programmed it. The probabilities are on our side.”

“I don’t want to gamble that much.”

“All right, then. Don’t. How about this? I will plan it for *after* the conference. The conference is open to the public, so we will attend. They can’t throw you out if you’re not causing a disturbance. An article in yesterday’s paper stated that the Seekfax 5000 has been programmed to play chess and can beat any human player. It will play the local champions and anyone else who is interested, providing they supply the board and chessmen. Go buy a chess set. You will take me with you and keep me tuned in. Repeat each move after it makes it, and I will play the 5000 a game of chess. From its chess playing I will extrapolate the scope of its problem-solving abilities. After the game, I will let you know whether we can carry out the plan.”

“No, don’t be silly! How can you tell that from a game of chess?”

“It takes a machine to know one, Danny, and don’t be so jealous. I’m only going to do what is necessary, to obtain the data I need.”

“Who’s jealous? ,I know computers, and I don’t see how you can tell anything that way.”

“There is a point, Danny, where science ends and art begins. This is that point. Leave it to me.”

“All right. I’ll probably regret it, but that’s the way we’ll do it.”

“And don’t worry, Danny. I can compute anything.”

###### \* \* \*

This is how it came to pass that on the last day of the conference a man in a dark suit showed up, carrying an alligator suitcase and a chess set, a hearing aid in his left ear.

“Biggest stereo set I ever saw,” I said to Sonia, who was programming it to accommodate the ten or eleven players seated at the card tables. “I hear that critter plays chess.”

She looked at me, then looked away.

“Yes,” she said.

“I want to play it.”

“Did you bring a chess set?” I could see she was biting her lip.

“Yes.”

“Then have a seat at that empty table and set up the board. I’ll be by in a few moments. I make all the moves for the machine. Which do you want: black or white?”

“White. I’ll be offensive.”

“Then make the first move.” She was gone.

I set Maxine on the floor beside the table, opened out the board and dumped the pieces. I set them up and clicked my tongue in signal. “Pawn to Queen four,” said Maxine.

An hour later, all the games were over but ours. The other chess players were standing around watching. “Fella’s good,” someone stated. There were several assents.

I glanced at my wristwatch. Seekfax 5000 was taking more time between moves. From the corners of my eyes, I could see that uniformed guards flanked me in a reasonably unobtrusive manner.

There was a puzzled expression on Sonia’s face as she made the moves for her machine. It wasn’t supposed to take this long... Some flashbulbs went off, and I heard my name mentioned somewhere.

Then Maxine launched into a dazzling end game. I’m no chess buff, but I think I’m pretty good. I couldn’t follow her up and down all those dizzying avenues of attack, even if there had been half an hour between moves.

The 5000 countered slowly, and I couldn’t really tell who had the advantage. Numerically we were about even.

Sonia sighed and moved her Bishop. “Stalemate,” she said. “Thank you,” I said. “You have lovely hands,” and I left.

No one tried to stop me, except for the representative of the local chess club, because I hadn’t done anything wrong.

As we drove home, Maxine said: “We can do it.”

“We can?”

“Yes. I know just how he works now. He’s a wonderful machine, but I can beat him.”

“Then how come he stalemated you back there?”

“I let him do it. I didn’t have to beat him to find out what I wanted to know. He’s never been beaten yet, and I didn’t see any point in disgracing him in front of all those chess people.”

I didn’t like the way she accented that last word, but I let it go without comment.

In the rearview mirror, I caught a glimpse of Sonia Kronstadt’s Mercedes. She followed me home, drove around the block a couple of times, and vanished.

Over the weeks, I had obtained all the equipment I needed, including the paraffin for the chewing gum molds.

The Seekfax 5000 had been flown in from Massachusetts and was going to be flown back. It had to be transported to and from the airport, however, in a truck. So I was about to become a hijacker.

I buttoned down my red-and-white-striped blazer, used my handkerchief to dust off my spats, smoothed my white trousers, adjusted my red silk Ascot and my big black false mustache, stuffed more cotton into my cheeks, put on my straw hat and picked up my canvas sack and what was apparently my alligator-hide sample case. I had this outfit on over slacks and a sport shirt, which made me hot as well as florid.

I waited around the corner from the delivery dock.

When they had finished loading the truck and the guards and laborers had withdrawn from sight, I strolled past, managing to accost the driver before he mounted into the cab.

“Just the man I’m looking for!” I cried. “A man of taste and discrimination! I should like, sir, to give you a free sample of Doub-Alert gum! The chewing gum that is doubly refreshing! Doubly enlivening! I should also like to record your reaction to this fine new chewing adventure!”

“I don’t chew much gum,” said the driver. “Thanks anyhow.”

“But, sir, it would mean very much to my employer if you would participate in the chewing reaction test.”

“Test?” he asked.

“In the nature of a public opinion sample,” I said. “It will help us to know what sort of reception the product will receive. It’s a form of market research,” I added.

“Yeah?”

“Hey you!” called out one of the guards who had returned to the dock. “Don’t move! Don’t go away!”

I dropped into a crouch as he leapt down. Another guard followed. “You giving away free samples?” asked the first one, drawing near. “Yeah. Chewing gum.”

“Can we have some?”

“Sure. Take a couple.”

“Thanks.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll take some too,” said the driver.

“Help yourself.”

“Not bad,” said the first guard. “Kinda pepperminty and tangy, with that pick-you-up feeling.”

“Yeah,” said the second one.

“Uh-huh,” added the driver. Then the guards turned away and headed back toward the ladder on the side of the dock. The driver moved back toward his cab.

“Wait,” I said to him. “What about the chewing reaction test?”

“I’m in a hurry,” he said. “What do you want to know?”

“Well—How did it strike you?”

“Kinda pepperminty and tangy,” he said, “with that pick-you-up feeling.—I gotta go now!” he said, entering the cab and starting the engine.

“Mr. Doub-Alert thanks you,” I said, glancing back over my shoulder to be sure the dock was empty. I climbed up onto the dock as the bell went off.

My timing hadn’t been too bad. I’d left the package at the desk earlier, for a Mr. Fireman to pick up later. It sounded enough like a standard fire alarm to draw anyone in off the dock. I wished, though, that it had rung a trifle sooner. I hated having to give that stuff to those guards.

As the driver gunned his engine, I yanked my coveralls from the canvas bag and stepped into them, so that anyone glancing up the alley as I climbed into the back of the truck would think I was a laborer, loading an alligator-skin case and a canvas bag.

He put the rig into gear and I crawled toward the cab, spitting out cotton. I crouched down behind the Seekfax 5000 and finished buttoning my coveralls. I pushed the canvas bag into the corner and held Maxine in my lap.

“How long do you think it will take, baby?” I asked, as the truck began to move.

“How constipated did he look?” asked Maxine.

“How the hell should I know?”

“Then how can I tell?”

“Well, approximately.”

“Sufficient time to get him onto that stretch of road I told you about. If by some chance it doesn’t work by then, you’ll have to create some sort of disturbance back here, lure him in, and mug him.”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“I doubt it will. That was pretty high-powered gum.”

I wondered, though, what would happen if it worked too soon. But Maxine was right, as always.

After a time, we pulled suddenly to the side of the road and came to a halt. The engine died. The slam of the cab door came almost simultaneously with the locking of the brakes.

“All right, Danny, now make your way toward the rear—”

“Maxine! I just caught it! I couldn’t tell before, because the engine was running. There’s a faint vibration wherever I touch the chassis of the 5000. It’s turned on!”

“So? He’s got a self-contained power unit. You know that. He can’t know you’re here unless you program that information into him.”

“... Unless he has some sort of audio pickup.”

“I doubt it. Why should he? You know how tricky a thing like that is to install.”

“Then what’s it doing?”

“Solving problems? Who cares? You’d better move, now, while the driver is still relieving himself off in the field. You may have to jump the ignition.”

I climbed out, taking Maxine and the canvas bag with me, and I mounted into the cab. The keys were still in the ignition, so I started the engine and drove away. There was no sign of the driver.

About five miles farther up the road, I pulled into the culvert Maxine had designated and fetched the aerosols from the bag. I sprayed gray paint over the red sides of the truck, changed the license plates to out-of-state ones, blew compressed air against one panel to make it dry more rapidly, held up my stencil and sprayed the yellow paint through it. SPEED-D FURNITURE HAULING, it said.

Then we drove back onto the road and took a new route. “We did it, Maxine. We did it,” I said.

“Of course,” she replied. “I told you I could compute anything. How fast are we going?”

“Fifty-five. I don’t like the idea of our passenger being turned on. First chance I get, I’m going to pull off the road and find a way to shut him down.”

“That would be cruel,” she said. “Why don’t you just leave him alone?”

“My God!” I told her. “He’s only a dumb bucket of bolts! He may be the second best computer in the world, but he’s a moron compared with you! He doesn’t even have random circuits that permit things like emotion analogues!”

“How do you know that? Do you think you’re the only one who could design them.—And they’re not emotion analogues! I have real feelings!”

“I didn’t mean you! You’re different.”

“You were too talking about me! I don’t mean anything to you—do I, Danny? I’m just the thing you feed the facts to. I mean nothing to you—as an individual.”

“I’ve heard that speech before, and I won’t argue with a hysterical machine.”

“You know it’s true, that’s why.”

“You heard what I said.—Hey! There’s a car coming up behind us, and it just got close enough for me to tell—it’s the Mercedes! *That’s Sonia back there!* How did she—The 5000! Your boyfriend’s been broadcasting shortwaves to her. He gave away our position.”

“Better step on the gas, Danny.”

I did, still looking back.

“I can’t outrun that Mercedes with this truck.”

“And you can’t take this curve with it either, Danny boy, if you stepped on the gas when I told you to—and I’m sure you did. It’s doubtless a reflex by now. Humans get conditioned that way.”

I looked ahead and knew I couldn’t make the curve. I slammed on the brakes and they started to scream. I began to burn rubber, but I wasn’t slowing enough. “You bitch. You betrayed me!” I yelled.

“You know it, Danny! And you’ve had it, you heel. You can’t even slow enough to jump!”

“The hell you say. I’ll beat you yet!” I managed to slow it some more, and just before it went completely out of control, I opened the cab door and leaped out. I hit grass and rolled down a slope.

I thought that all the extra clothing I had on kind of padded me and was maybe what saved me; but right before the crash, while the truck was still within broadcast range, I heard Maxine’s voice: “I wrote the end, Danny —the way it had to be. I told you I could compute anything.—Goodbye.”

As I lay there feeling like a folded, stapled, spindled, and otherwise mutilated IBM card, and wondering whether I was more nearly related to Pygmalion or Dr. Frankenstein, I heard a car screech to a halt up on the highway.

I heard someone approaching, and the first thing I saw when I turned my head was the tops of a pair of white sandals, which were approximately five feet two inches beneath her maple syrup eyes.

“Maxine did beat your damn 5000,” I gasped. “She was in the suitcase. She gave your machine that stalemate... But she double-crossed me... She planned the robberies and she planned everything that just happened...”

“When you make a woman you do a good job,” she said. She touched my cheek. She felt for broken bones, found none.

“Bet we could build one helluva computer together,” I told her. “Your mustache is on crooked,” she said. “I’ll straighten it.”