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STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER WORLDS—

PLANET

stories

A.M.C.

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BRYAN BERRY
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Madness - gurgling madness - struck
Mary when the radiant **EMILEY** landed...
OH MESMERIST FROM MIMAS!
A Unique Novel by **ROGER DEE**

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Steel-blue eyes brightened in the fierce metal face. Fingers that had steel bones kept their hold . . . squeezing.

THE FINAL VENUSIAN

By
BRYAN BERRY

First published *Planet Stories*, January 1953

That evening. That strange and fateful evening, robot John sat by the fire as he had for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and three days . . . but waiting now for nothing in the whole world to happen. Nothing at all.

Silently, among the tall and luxuriant trees, the city slept as it had slept for the past thousand years and more upon the planet Venus.

The white towers of the city pointed at the graying sky like skeleton fingers rising from the dead hands of the buildings. Where smaller houses on the outskirts of the city had nestled there were creeping greeneries and exotic plants. Where great canals had channeled across the land bearing water to all the outposts of the Terrestrial colony there were only the white arms of broken concrete, broken and scarred and crumbled where the trees had pushed themselves

up with a great straining and a great heaving, to break through and gasp and rear upwards towards the sky in exhilaration.

The city was a dead city, turning its sightless, ancient eyes to gaze at the creeping bushes and grasses that swarmed over its limbs. And the rains that swept Venus washed its bones and the winds of Venus picked them clean through the long years.

This silent and misty afternoon there was not a movement to be seen throughout the whole city, but on the outskirts, from a small and crumbled building, came a plume of smoke, rising and curling steadily upwards from a tall chimney.

Within the building the two sat at the table as they always sat at this time of the day, watching the fire burning in the ancient grate as they had done through the centuries since Old Paul had sat with them doing that very same thing. Their faces were without wrinkle, without a line to tell of age or illness or worry. Their lips were fine and red and warm-looking, and their eyes the palest blue steel. On their heads were bushy shocks of hair that never grew long and never needed cutting and never fell out. And in the firelight, teeth that were rows of the finest pearls glistened without a spot of yellow on them, without a mark of decay.

"I wonder when he will come," said the first robot, Thomas.

"Perhaps this year, perhaps the next, perhaps the one after, but it will be one of the three. He allowed a five year margin of error when he entered the Time Capsule. Two of the years have already gone," replied the second robot, whose name was John.

"It seems funny, doesn't it, to sit here knowing that we are going to see him again after so long?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember him as well as I do, I wonder?"

"Of course I do. He made us both the same, didn't he? My memory is just the same as yours."

"Do you remember his white hair and his stoop? His hands yellowed with chemicals?"

"Naturally I do."

"And the way he kept on wearing that old suit, despite the money he made with his inventions?" Thomas went on.

"Of course."

They were silent for a while, then. The fire flickered in the room and gave off its warmth to the two beings who had no need of warmth.

No need at all.

"You know, the only things he never tried to make money on were robots. He never made any after us, did he?" mused John.

"No, that's true. He didn't. I remember him talking about that, once, too. He said that he didn't mind making robots to be used as servants or even friends but he wasn't going to make them for use as cannon fodder. Do you remember him saying that?"

"Of course I do. It was at nine o'clock on the evening of July seventeenth, 1979. Am I right?"

"You are," said Thomas.

"And that's what would have happened, you know. If they had started making robots like us on a large scale either here or on Earth they would have been made to fight in the war."

Thomas nodded and poked the fire, stirring up a spray of sparks. "Yes, men wouldn't have passed over an opportunity like that. The side with the robots would have won any war at all.

And that was why Old Paul wouldn't give in when the government tried to make him cooperate."

John got up from the chair and walked over to the wide window. "How long has it been, Thomas? How long since he left in the Time Capsule?"

"One thousand four hundred and twenty-seven years, three months and eight days."

John nodded slowly. "I often wonder what happened to him, why he never came back. I've thought about it more and more since the last colonists died out. We're the only animate, thinking beings on Venus now, you know. When Old Paul comes we must stay with him all the time. We must never let him out of our sight, for if we do and something happens to him . . ."

"We should never forgive ourselves, and we should be the losers."

"Yes. It will be good to talk to him again and remember the days when there were men in the city and rockets in the sky. Think of it. We can have him here for the rest of his life, for he never returned through the Time Capsule. We can talk to him just as we used to."

Thomas got up and joined John at the window. "And we must never let him stray far from us in case something should happen to him," he said.

The two robots looked out together at the dead and skeletal city.

About a year passed; a year that was to Thomas and John no more than the blinking of an eyelid, for they had known so much of time through the long and silent years.

Within the crumbled building a clock chimed six. John and Thomas pushed back the sheets that covered them and rose from the two beds where they had been lying for seven hours, imitating sleep. They dressed and went downstairs.

"Raining," said John, pulling back the metal curtain and peering outside.

"John," said Thomas, softly.

John turned. "What is it?"

Thomas pointed with a finger that looked human but which, of course, was not. In the middle of the room there was a glowing. A blue glowing and a blue shimmering.

"It's Paul, Old Paul," said John.

The shimmering became a solid egg of blue light, vibrating in the center of the room.

The robots looked at each other happily. "After all these years," said Thomas.

"Yes. After all these years."

They waited, their eyes eager.

Old Paul stepped out of the blue vibrating egg, his white hair just as they remembered it, and his moustache, and—yes—and his old suit with the bottom button missing from the jacket. Just as he had stepped into the Time Capsule on that sunny morning one thousand four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and two days before, so he stepped out of it.

"Paul, Old Paul," from two metal throats.

"Hullo, boys."

"Paul, you're back. We waited so *long*."

"I didn't think I should find you still here, somehow."

The robots laughed. "Oh, we're still here," said John. "You made us to last, remember? We're good for another thousand years or so."

The old man sat down in one of the chairs and looked around the room. "You've made some changes. None of my apparatus left here." His voice sounded sad.

Thomas and John shifted their feet. They knew that the old man was thinking that they might at least have kept some of it there to remember him by.

“We didn’t destroy it, Paul,” said Thomas.

“Then who did? Did I, after I went back?”

“No, Paul, the Government came and took it away. They thought you might have been working on something that would help in the war.”

A mass of wrinkles gathered themselves into a scowl across Paul’s face. “And didn’t I stop them? Or was it after I died?”

The robots looked at each other undecidedly. Then John said: “You never came back from the future, Paul.”

“I never came back? You mean I stayed in the future and died there? Stayed and died here? Now?”

Behind him the Time Capsule reduced itself to a blue shimmering once more, then a faintly luminous patch, then nothing at all. It had gone, its purpose served.

“All we know is, Paul, that you never returned. This is the first time we have seen you since you first stepped into the capsule.”

Paul shook his head, bewildered. “But why? The duplicate capsule is still in the vacuum vault below, where I erected it before I went into the future, isn’t it? You haven’t used it?”

“You never taught us how to use it. It is still there.”

“Then why did I not return? I *could* have done. Besides, I wanted to.”

Silence in the room.

Old Paul closed his eyes. “So I never went back,” he said. “I never finished my work on dimensional ratios or—or anything.” He was silent for a moment. Then he shook himself and turned, his eyes open and bright. “Well, boys, you’d better show me Venus. It’ll be a lot different from the Venus I knew.”

Quietly Thomas led the old man to the window and drew back the metal curtain so that he could see just how different Venus was.

Paul gazed out for a long and quiet minute, his eyes misting and his breath coming more heavily, pumping up from his aged lungs. “It’s all like that?” he asked, his face twisted slightly with the strain of seeing things no other man had ever seen.

John nodded and spoke from behind him. “Yes, Paul, it’s all like that now.”

Paul still stood at the window, watching the bright whiteness of shattered towers that had become the playgrounds of green and exotic creepers, watching the once glorious roads cracked and splintered with time. “How long?” he asked.

“Many, many centuries it has been like that. About ten years after you went into the capsule a lot of the colonists were recalled to Earth to fight a war. Some of them revolted and were presented with a war dust bomb for their trouble. Those that managed to survive the bomb died off without children. Since then the forest has closed in.”

Paul shook his head. “All that trouble, all that money and enthusiasm and energy to get to Venus and they throw the planet away like a rotten apple.” And there was a great and terrible sadness in the old man’s eyes as he let the metal drape fall back.

That night Paul raided the deep-freeze food cached in the vaults below the building and, afterwards, sat in the lounge while Thomas and John busied themselves preparing a meal for their maker, their lord, their master, their friend.

And oh, what a meal it was!

There were plates loaded with lobster salad with fresh green lettuce and prawns as cold and succulent and crisp as curls of pink ice. And there were long cool glasses of beer and slices of white and tender chicken breast; there were plates of warm and crunchy rock cake freshly baked in an oven that had not been used for a thousand years. There were apples and oranges and sweet ripe pears, and there were cheeses, too, soaked in rich wine. The great table groaned and protested and bowed under the weight of the food that was spread out upon a new and stiff white tablecloth, the color of new snow that was laid on top of it.

His meal finished, Paul loosened his belt and reached for a cigar, pierced the end with a cocktail stick and lit up, sighing.

Thomas and John sat in the other two chairs, cigars burning themselves away, unuffed at, between their teeth. This was the moment that they had been waiting for through the eternity of years. Yes, this very moment when they could sit again by the fire with Old Paul and speak of things that happened so long ago.

“Do you remember that time when we went to see the Government man and told him that you were not interested in making any more robots like us?” asked John.

Paul nodded, remembering clearly the occasion that, for him, had happened only a few years before. Smiling, he said: “Yes, that certainly was amusing. He was quite taken in when I introduced you as two scientist friends. And then when we left and you and Thomas opened your chests so that he could see what you were—oh, I thought he would die of fright!”

They laughed at the thought, remembering. And they went on to speak of other things, old things, things that happened in the far, far past when the Venusian colony had been a live thing and when there were mighty rockets rushing in the gray skies, burning the clouds with livid streams of fire and bringing more and more men down to the second planet. Ah, yes! the old days; days lost, days gone, days buried.

At last Paul rose to go up to his bedroom, saying good night to Thomas and John from the stairs, leaving them sitting beside the fire still.

“It was good to talk,” said Thomas at length. “So good.”

John nodded. “Tomorrow we’ll take him round the city and then in the evening we’ll sit here again and talk.”

Thomas looked across, quickly. “I was going to suggest that we take him to the city in the evening and spend the day looking over the old spaceport.”

John’s plastic and rubber and silk face twisted ever so slightly into a frown. “I think it would be far better if we took him to the city in the daylight. Then we can spend the evening here, talking as we did tonight.”

“There will be plenty of other evenings when we can sit here talking,” said Thomas, standing up. “Why not take him to the city tomorrow evening?”

“Just that I think he’d prefer to see it in daylight, that’s all. There’s no need to get cross. If he wants to see the city during the day, then we can take him there the day after tomorrow.”

Thomas and John looked at each other across the room, steel wire nerves jumping within them, coils coiling in their metal skulls, lubricating oil stirring and whirling in glass and plastic tubes deep within. Their bodies were hot beneath their clothes and there came a slight humming from tubes unaccustomed to warmth and anger.

“I think,” said Thomas, “that we had better go to bed. We can discuss this further in the morning.”

Paul was wakened in the morning by Thomas holding a cup of hot tea, and by John holding a plate of grapefruit.

“Thank you, boys,” he said, puzzled at the heat that was coming from them. “You’d better let me take a look at you after breakfast, you’re cooking up much more than you should. What’s the matter?”

No answer.

“H’mmm. Well, let me just eat this grapefruit, then I’ll come down and look you over. That heat is noticeable from here. You’ll be scorching your clothes.”

The robots left.

Old Paul sipped his tea and his eyes were troubled. He had caught snatches of their conversation late the previous evening, and what with that and the heat of their bodies this morning. . . . He sighed. So they were not perfect; more than that they were imitative. They had once lived among men and the influence had extended over a thousand years. Anger was a thing that he had never instilled into them at the beginning. Jealousy and possessiveness, too, should have been alien to them. But contact with men in those early years must have provided what he himself had not. The ways of men, the old man thought, oh, the ways of men!

He dressed and went downstairs. “Thomas, John,” he called.

They came into the room.

“Fetch the case of tools from the vault. I see all the others have gone. I want to have a look at you.”

The robots went out and returned, later, with a heavy case.

“You first, Thomas. Take off your jacket and shirt.”

Old Paul opened the case, taking out pincers, forceps, files, oil cans, scalpels, fine wires, glass tubes, plastic and rubber coils. “I’m going to put you out for a while,” he said. “Then I can have a better look at you.” He opened Thomas’s chest and switched this, clicked that. There came a faint whirring and sighing, a hissing of expelled gasses as pressures were reduced, as liquids ceased to pump.

Thomas was a dead and silent thing sitting in a chair.

“Why did you never tell us how to do that for ourselves, Paul?” asked John.

“Because when I made you I had faith in the human race. I thought that you would be useful to man after I was dead and gone. I was the only person who knew how to inanimate you. If you were to try it, even after seeing me do it just now, you would fail. Why do you ask?”

“The years have been very long, Paul. Sometimes, sitting here, we talked of the old days when men who did not want to live destroyed themselves, men who had nothing left to live for.”

The old man’s nimble fingers joined wires, substituted tubes, rearranged tiny fibres, scraped with a scalpel, swiftly. “Have either of you ever tried to disconnect yourselves?” he asked.

“Never. We have always had something left to live for. We knew that you would come here eventually.”

The old man smiled. “It means that much to you, does it, my returning?”

“We have had little else to think about for over a thousand years. And now here you are.”

“Yes, here I am.” The fingers were busy still with wires and tubes. “Yes, here I am again. And you each want me for yourselves, don’t you?”

“I suppose we do.”

“You know you do. Before, you were prepared to share me with each other. But now it is different. I am too precious a possession, am I not? You each resent the fact that I am not your own personal property. What I am doing to Thomas now will remove that resentment. Afterwards I shall do the same to you. I overheard part of your conversation last night, and your body heat this morning warned me of what was happening. But it shouldn’t take long to put you right.”

John laid a hand on the old man’s shoulder. “Paul,” he said, “Paul, we could get on very well together—alone.”

Paul’s hands came away from Thomas’s chest. Slowly he put the scalpel down on the table beside him, together with the twists of nerve wire on which he had been working. The room was quiet with the silence that held the two figures. “The years have changed you, John,” said the old man, “changed you as I never thought they could.”

John’s steel eyes were glowing brightly, his fingers twitched on the old man’s shoulder. “I’m serious, Paul. We could spend the rest of our—of your life here on Venus together—and we would never be lonely, the two of us.”

Paul straightened up. “Sit down, John,” he said heavily. “I’m going to start on you now. You seem to need it more than Thomas.”

John sat down and then stood up again, his face a spider’s web of tiny cracks where the internal heat was working on him. Within his metal skull nerve wires rose to maximum temperature and bulbs flashed redly, recording themselves on strips of microfilm winding and curling on miniature spools. But the spools slowed and the warnings did not shoot out to each limb, each part of the metal complexity that was John. Instead the wires rose higher in temperature. Three microscopic valves blew themselves to glass dust within the brain case.

John shot out both hands, gripping Paul’s shoulders. “Let’s stay together,” he said. “We can forget all about Thomas. We don’t need him.”

“Take your hands off my shoulders.”

“No.”

“Don’t be a fool, John. Sit down. You’re cooking yourself to a cinder inside there. And take your hands off me!”

Steel blue eyes brightened in the fiercely working face. Fingers that had steel bones kept their hold, squeezing. “No, no, no, no, no, no! You’re mine, mine. You shan’t belong to *us*, but to *me*! We’ll forget Thomas and everything. We’ll go out somewhere else and build a new house and start a new life, and in the evenings we can sit beside the fire like we used to do, and we can talk of the old days and watch the fire die down. We have no need of Thomas. Let him stay where he is—dead.”

The old man coughed twice and pawed at the steel fingers, quite futilely. “John, *John!*”

Slowly the brightness died away to a glimmer in John’s eyes. The heat subsided in the nerve wires, the liquids gurgled to themselves and returned to normal levels in their small and secret tubes, the twitching of metal coil muscles diminished. The fingers opened, then.

Old Paul fell in a crumpled curve on the floor of the building. At the chair beside his fallen body Thomas sat with his chest bared and a trickle of nerve wires cascading from the circular hole there.

John looked at his fingers, then at Paul.

“Paul, *Paul*,” he cried, bending. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Paul. I didn’t mean to do anything. Stand up, Paul. Get up, Paul. Oh, Paul, *Paul!*”

Desperation made a shaking within him, deep down. He pulled the old man upright and carried him to the table. He stripped off his clothes and rubbed his limbs. He went down to the vault and brought up oxygen cylinders and a pump, and for three hours he worked on the old, brittle body that was growing steadily colder. It was no good.

After that he tried to put Thomas together again, fitting nerve wires into place, examining this part, adjusting that. Thomas sat like a metal and plastic, glass and silk, rubber and fibre dead thing, as indeed he was.

John buried the two bodies on the edge of the dead and silent city, among the trees.

And that same evening he sat by the fire as he had sat for one thousand, four hundred and twenty-eight years, four months and three days; but waiting now for nothing in the whole world to happen. Nothing at all.

[The end of *The Final Venusian* by Bryan Berry]