

Fiction

A Friend to Man

By Harlan Ellison



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COVER DESIGN BY CHRIS HARDWICK

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Twin globes, polished surfaces buried in golden sand, still staring at a face-down universe. Molybdenum claws, powered from a groin of metal, futilely stretched in the golden sand. Powerpak dead ... counterweights thrown from sockets ... rust making the first microscopic smearings on gloss-bright indestructable hide.

Most Unworthy One lay on his face mid the shock-blasted wreckage of His home. Most Unworthy One's right arm was extended, as he had fallen, reaching for the last can of lubricant. Blessed oil, that could pick him up, start his synapses sparking, trigger his movements, send him to His aid, wherever He might be, whatever danger surrounded Him.

Instead, he lay face down, whirling motes of dust rising shape-into-shape up flues of moist green sunlight. A sky diseased, leprous and shimmering in a world-socket turned to ash.

While Most Unworthy One stretched short of life.

Life gauged in millimetres, ball bearings and closed circuits. Life imparted on a production line in a now-fled time in a now-dead place he had known very well as Detroit. Where cars had been made, and vacuum sweepers, and generators, and robots.

It had never been difficult, the knowing. There was flesh, and there was the way *he* was, not-flesh. It was his honor, his destiny to serve flesh; and when they had sent Most Unworthy One to serve Him, it had been the sun and the warmth and the hunger for work. It had been so very, very good.

He had been an artist. Working with palette and brush and cassein He had often called over His shoulder from the high stool in front of the easel: "See, friend (He had indulged Himself by treating the servant, at all times, with friendship); see how the paleness of

the eyes attracts your attention before the red of the mouth. Do you see it?"

Or other words that drew Most Unworthy One's attention to something in His work. And oddly, Most Unworthy One *did* see, *did* sense, *did* revel in the wonder there on canvas.

Then He would turn, wiping his fingertips dry on the square of muslin, and stare deeply at Most Unworthy One. "My art," He would say, "is nothing compared to yours. The beauty of you ... can you know what I mean?"

And Most Unworthy One's gears would mesh, for he did not completely understand, but he knew that His words held affection, and they had programmed affection, so it had value, it had merit.

"May I serve you forever?" Most Unworthy One would ask at those times, hoping the answer would be the same as it had always been; hoping silently, hoping.

"I'll always take care of you," He would say, which had no meaning, really. For everyone knew that the robots took care of the flesh. That was the way the world was set up. But it was kind of Him

to say it, and again, oddly, Most Unworthy One believed it. He would take care when the time came. Though Most Unworthy One watched over Him, if ever the robot needed succor, it would come from Him, or others like Him.

For Man was good and strong and forever. Metal was flawed by the ills of time and rust and climatic caprice. So Most Unworthy One lay and waited, confidently, knowing He would one day come and lift the robot from the sand, and pour the life-bringing oil into the proper feeder channels. Then Most Unworthy One could return to his tasks of seeing after Him.

Minor chores, the looking-afterness? Yes, that was for men of metal. But the *real* chores, the work that could only be done by Him ... that must come when He came.

As He would come. Some time soon.

He did not forget His friends.

* * * *

Across the moor that had once been a borough, nine men huddled inside a shell that had been a lobby. Behind a frosted, melted non-shape that had been a florist's booth, they crouched, rifles only slightly off-ready. One of the men had been a plumber. Another had been a statistical consultant. A third had been a chassis dynamometer technician in a large automobile agency. A fourth had used a stick with a nail at its end in parks.

One had been an artist and had owned his very own robot, who now lay face down in the rubble of the artist's former home. The artist was unaware of the robot's condition or needs.

Right now, he was thirty-five minutes from possible death.

"They came in the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel," the taxidermist murmured, shovel-fingering back his long, grey hair. "I saw a smoke signal about an hour ago from down there." The others nodded their

heads knowingly, imperceptibly. "George Adams told me they had a battalion of robots with them," the taxidermist concluded.

"But *dammit* that's against the treaties; no gas, no germs, no fusion bombs, no robots," snarled the plumber. "What the hell are they trying to prove?"

The artist mused ruefully, "They're trying to kill us, man. And they've gotten far enough so they don't have to worry about treaties. If they want to use robots, there isn't really a lot we can do to stop them, is there?"

Agreeing mutters went up.

The old man, the one who had taught comparative philosophy in one of the greater Midwestern universities, thrust, "We should have attacked *them* before they attacked *us*! It was foolish to have gone on letting them bait us, killing us here and there, and when they were ready ... they jumped. We should have attacked them *first*!"

They all knew there was something wrong with his concept, but they could not voice their objection. There was no doubt he had a point.

A tall, emaciated man with pants legs flapping stumped into the lobby. "Hey, y'round?"

The plumber stood up and waved the rifle over his head. "Over here, and *shut up*, you goddam bigmouth!"

The thin man flap-legged to the florist's booth. "I seen 'em. I seen 'em comin' down Fifth Avenue. They got a rank'a robots in the front. Everybody's scatterin'!"

"Well, we won't scatter," the philosophy professor made a fist and his shadow did the same. "Come along! Let's get them..."

The artist gripped the rising man's shoulder. "Sit *down*. Don't be an imbecile. They'd cut us into strips if we wandered out there.

There's only ten of us, with sporting rifles. They've got flame throwers, robots, tanks, what the hell's the matter with you?"

"I can't stand to see Americans running like—"

"Cut the patriotism!" The park attendant chopped him off.

"Anybody got a suggestion," the garage mechanic ventured, tired of the bickering.

There was silence.

Tehuantepec, thought the artist absently, illogically, *how I'd love to be back in Tehuantepec, doing the mountains with brush strokes like flowing gold or burning in the sun's death.*

But Mexico had long since fallen to the locust-like advance of the Enemy.

The last patriots in America's greatest city huddled and hummed silently, and were without direction or plan.

One of the ten was a bowlegged, withdrawn man who had, at one time, combed his thinning hair straight back over the bald spot that lay accusingly in the center front of his scalp. His eyes were watery behind corrective lenses. He had been an optometrist.

"I have a suggestion," he offered. Heads turned to him; they looked at him, but received only an image. People saw *at* this man, they did not see *him*. But he had an idea.

"In del Castillo's service under Cortes—" he began, and was cut off by a rueful snort from the professor, which, in turn, was cut off by a slap on the back from the plumber "—he reports in his book how they defeated an unwary group of hostile Aztecs by rolling boulders down on them from above."

"Yes, very nice," the professor said, clearly irritated. "You, sir, are a monumental ass. How does a book written in the 16th Century help us? Grow up!"

The artist's face lit. He remembered Mexico, the look of it, the smell and sound of it. And now, in the landscape of dreadful imagining, he saw rock basins and craters and smoking carnage where paradise had once been. "Shut up, you," he said, mean and crossly. "I know what he means. Fella, I think you've got something there. I do, I really do..."

* * * *

The Enemy came down the street rank on rank. There was no need for reluctance, no need for hesitation or skulking. The preparatory seeding of the city had been an eminent example of pre-consolidation softening. There was a light-hearted manner to them. They had paused to camp in the Battery, changing to dry socks, filling their bellies with rice and fish heads, regaining the topness of their morale.

Now they were here, the conquerors.

First came the file of robots, their sleek and shining hides decorated with yellow calligraphy, connoting ferocity, intrepidity, or ancestor honor.

Behind them, in a marsh-wagon adaptable to any terrain, came the coxswain, his electronic megaphones aimed at the rank of robots, ready to order them at an instant's awareness. Then came the troops.

The artist, the plumber, the optometrist, the other seven, they watched from above as the robots passed beneath. "Get the coxswain," the artist directed. "Get him and the robots won't have direction."

The others nodded. The statistician, who had done some bear hunting in the Adirondacks, had been labeled the sharpshooter of

the group, but three others backed him in case of a miss. They weren't expecting one, but safety, you know, fella, just safety.

The last rank of troops—there were only fifteen waves in this group—turned onto the street, and the sharpshooter raised the 30.06, removed from a gutted sports store, to his shoulder. The cheek welded down tight to the metal behind the sight, and the eye came close to the tiny hole. The polished wood of the stock fit under the shoulder as though it had grown there, and the left hand cupped gently but firmly along the barrel and receiver grouping. The right hand moved without hesitation to the trigger housing and paused on the curved bit of metal before moving on to the trigger itself. The sharpshooter followed with his eye and the muzzle of the rifle, tracking the marsh-wagon and plotting the course of the coxswain's helmeted forehead.

Then, as the sun rode behind a ridge of cloud, the finger curled around the trigger, the sight came down to a micro-point three feet in front of the marsh-wagon, and as the vehicle slid between the crossed hairs of the sight, the finger lovingly squeezed the tongue of metal.

The rifle leaped, bucking against the statistician's shoulder, a wisp of muzzle gas lifted away on the wind, and the report echoed between the buildings like a steel casting, thrown from a great height.

The coxswain shrieked and slapped a hand to his erupting forehead, tearing away the megaphone control helmet with the other hand. His mouth opened wide in a toothy, wordless scream, and as the dark fluid blinded him, he pitched forward, over the raised-high side of the marsh-wagon. His body sprawled on the street. It was a signal.

The laboriously-handmade fire bombs cascaded from the building-tops. They landed and spattered and napalm blossomed among the ranks. The robots, unguided, milled about an instant, then silently, fluidly gathered into a knot away from the center of destruction.

An attack team—ringed in by fire and weirdly dancing comrades faced with flames—bracketed up their heavy mortar and lobbed a shell at the building. The shell dropped short, smacked the outcropping cornice of the building and plummeted to explode amidst their own men.

In a matter of minutes the fifteen ranks were decimated, all but one atomic artillery piece, manned by three men in heat-suits. They brought the weapon into play, and on the third shot tore away the first two floors of the building, killing the tiny knot of guerrillas, and ending the sortie.

Before they could escape, however, the flames enveloped them (for the street itself had been pre-soaked—deadly bathroom mechanics those Americans) and within their heat-suits they blistered, gagged and died.

The street was silent. The line of robots, now a glittering array of metal as the sun broke through once more, milled uncertainly, and finally moved off.

For a long while the city was filled with noise, then as though a cosmic symphony had concluded ... silence leaf-dropped and this particular war was ended. The winner had won.

* * * *

Most Unworthy One could not know death. His was a life easily imbalanced, but never ended. He lay face down, one arm extended

in hungry prayer to the cask of oil, and remorselessly waited for total darkout.

Then the sand and rubble clattered and snapped.

Someone was coming, and Most Unworthy One knew it was Him, it could only be Him. The silent promises and the spoken promises He had always made to take care of His servant were coming true. He was coming.

Most Unworthy One felt the footsteps progress past to the can of oil, and heard its bulk being wrenched from the sand and debris. Then the footsteps came back, and someone knelt beside Most Unworthy One. The feeder box was gently opened, the telescoping funnel was extended, and a moment later the golden-crimson-violet stream went gurgling into the proper channels.

"You'll be all right now," a voice said. "The war's over and we've got a lot of work to do." It was colloquial, it was the way He had

talked, it was the master and the protector back from death to help His Most Unworthy One.

"Let me help you," the voice said. And strong arms went under Most Unworthy One's shoulders, lifting him.

Strong arms of metal.

Most Unworthy One looked up as he stood, into multi-faceted eyes that burned with Man-given intelligence. The friend of Man had returned.

Sadly, he felt it would not be difficult to re-form allegiances. Times change, and few things are forever.

The day would be chilly, but it didn't really matter.

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