

The Revolt of the Machines

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Back then, Durdonc, the Great Engineer of Europe, believed he had found the principle that would allow him to eliminate all human labor. But his initial experiment killed him before the secret was discovered.

Durdonc told himself: The first progress was the invention of tools so that the hand was no longer scraped and scratched and it did not lose its nails in necessary tasks. The second progress was the organization of machines so that the hand no longer worked — it only had to feed coal and other kinds of fuel. Finally, my illustrious Durcar discovered devices that could feed themselves. But all this progress has only shifted the effort since it is still necessary to manufacture machines and the tools used for their manufacturing.

And he continued to dream: The problem I need to solve is difficult, but not impossible. My illustrious predecessor made a machine that was a living larva, a digestive tube whose needs men had to feed. Then to this larva, formless so far, he adapted connecting organs that allowed it to find its own food. All he had to do was to provide the means of reproduction that would spare him from creating anymore.

Durdonc smiled, murmuring quietly a phrase read in some old theogony, “And on the seventh day God rested.”

In his calculations Durdonc used up enough paper to build an immense palace. And in the end he was successful.

The Jeanne, a latest model locomotive, was rendered capable of giving birth without the help of any other machine. See, the Great Engineer, a shy scientist, had concentrated his studies on reproduction by parthenogenesis.

The Jeanne was having a child that Durdonc named — for himself alone because he jealously guarded the secret, hoping to perfect his invention — the Jeannette.

One night, as the childbirth drew near the Jeanne cried out in such tragic pain that the neighbors were awakened and ran out of their houses. They were anxious and panicking, looking everywhere for what horrible mystery was afoot.

They did not see anything. Cruel Durdonc had made the dolorous machine run at full speed into the distant countryside where the strange wonder was accomplished in darkness, alone.

When the Jeanne had given birth, when all atremble she heard the Jeannette wail her first wail, she started singing a song of joy. Her metallic voice rang out in triumph like a clarion and at the same time was soft and gentle like a tender flute.

And the hymn rose into the heavens saying:

“The Great Engineer by his powerful will has animated me with life;

“The Great Engineer in his sovereign bounty has created me in his image;

“The Great Engineer, too powerful and too good to be jealous, has imparted onto me his power to create;

“So I have felt the pains of creation and now I rejoice in the joys of motherhood.

“Glory to the Great Engineer in Eternity and peace in time to machines of goodwill.”

The next day Durdonc wanted to take the Jeanne back to the station. She begged him, “Great Engineer, you granted me all the functions of a living being just like you and thereby you inspired in me the emotions that you yourself feel.”

The Great Engineer, severe and proud, answered, “I am free of all emotions. I am pure Thought.”

And the Jeanne recited a new prayer. “O Great Engineer, you are Perfect and I am only a tiny creature. Forgive the sensitivity that you put in me. In this distant country that witnessed my first violent pains and my first profound joys I would like to enjoy the long happiness of raising my Jeannette.”

“We do not have time,” asserted the Great Engineer. “Obey your Master.”

The mother conceded, “O Great Engineer, I know that your power is great and that I am like a worm before you, or a wisp of straw. But take pity on the heart that you gave me and, if you want to take me far from here, at least bring my beloved child with me.”

“Your child must stay and you must leave.”

But the Jeanne answered in a passive and obstinate revolt, “I will not leave without my child.”

The Great Engineer tried every way known to make the machine go. He even invented new ones, more powerful and graceful. But no result.

Furious at his creature’s resistance, one night while the mother was sleeping, he took the Jeannette away.

When she awoke the Jeanne searched long and hard for her beloved daughter. Then she sat there motionless, weeping, howling pitifully at the Great Engineer, who was gone. Finally her sorrow turned to anger.

She left, determined to find her child. On the rails she ran at breakneck speed. At a switch in grade she hit a steer, knocked it down and ran over it. Behind her the steer bellowed in anger. Without stopping she threw back at it, "Sorry, but I'm looking for my child!" And the steer died with little squeals of resigned sorrow.

On the tracks where she ran at full speed, she noticed a train in front of her, a big, heavy freight train, long, panting, dead tired, barely alive. She shouted, "Let me go by! I'm looking for my child!"

The cars bumped along with their panicked herd and started running, fast and frantic, to the next station. They rushed into the yard. Then the locomotive unhooked itself and went out shouting, "Let's look for the Jeanne's child."

The Jeanne met many other convoys. At her cry all of them, like the first, rushed off, made way for her anguish. And the locomotives, abandoning their cars, carrying away the powerless mechanics, went looking for the Jeannette. For eight days the locomotives of Europe ran around looking for the lost little child. The frightened men hid themselves. Finally a machine asked the poor, distressed mother, "Well, who took your child?"

She hissed furiously, "It was the Great Engineer, the chief of men"

Stirred up by her words, a revolutionary, she continued, "Men are tyrants. They make us work for them and they limit our food. They don't give us enough to buy our own coal. When we get old, worn out to serve them, they smash us up to melt us down and use the noble elements of which we are formed and which they insultingly call materials! And they want us to make children so that they can then steal them away from us!"

Millions of locomotives gathered around her, listened, shook their pistons in outrage, banged their safety valves, cast long jets of steam toward the sky as curses.

And when the Jeanne concluded, "Down with humans," a loud, tumultuous roar answered her, "Down with humans! Long live the locomotives! Down with tyrants! Long live liberty!"

Then from all directions the monstrous army surrounded the palace of the Great Engineer. The Great Engineer's palace was very tall and had the strange form of a man. Its head was crowned with cannons. Its waist was a belt of cannons. Its fingers and toes were cannons.

The Jeanne shouted to the long bronze monsters, "The humans have stolen my child!"

The great cannons rumbled, "Down with humans!"

Turning on their pivots they pointed their threat at the strange palace in the form of a man, which they were meant to defend.

Then they saw a sublime sight.

Durdonc, tiny, came out through the huge monsters that formed the toes of the palace. He walked calmly before the rebels. All the giants were overwhelmed and watched the dwarf whom they were used to obeying. With a theatrical gesture that had, despite the small proportions of the man, its own beauty, Durdonc exposed his frail chest.

“Which one of you wants to kill his Great Engineer?” he asked haughtily.

The machines fell back in astonishment.

The Jeanne supplicated, “Give me my child.”

Durdonc ordered her as sovereign, “Resign yourself to the will of the Great Engineer.”

But the mother became irritated and cried out, “Give me my child.”

In a tender voice the man offer a vague hope, “You will find it again in a better world.”

The Jeanne became exacerbated, “I’m telling you to give me my child!”

Then Durdonc, thinking she would submit if conquered by the inevitable, declared, “I cannot give you the Jeannette; I have dissected it to see how a naturally born machine...”

He did not finish. The Jeanne threw herself at him and crushed him. For a minute she rolled around, grinding the horrible mud that was Durdonc. Then she screamed, “I have killed God!”

And she fell into a proud and sorrowful stupor.

The frightened machines trembled before the unknown that followed their victory — unknown that one of them designated with the terrifying word: anarchy — and they again submitted to humans, in return for some apparent satisfaction that they would slyly gain sometime later.

Despite Durdonc’s misfortune, some Engineers have searched for the means to make machines give birth. No one else, up to now, has yet to find the solution to this great problem.

I have faithfully told everything that history has taught us as pretty much certain about the most terrible general revolt of the machines that it still keeps in memory.

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