



Alec returned with his coffee

# RED ALERT

By Charles Foster

*It was a universal*

*game of chess—*

*but who were the pawns?*

**C**OLONEL FRANK PEASE was on the swing shift this week. At exactly 1700 hours, he stood waiting in the bright light outside the console room. Inside, Captain Joe Garcia grinned and held up his hand, thumb and forefinger barely separated in the Latin gesture—"just a minute." Frank watched as Joe turned back to the desk and punched a code into a panel of buttons. He waited as the identifier guard at the door whirred and clicked. The door opened. Frank stepped through and walked over to the seat at the console as Joe got up.

"Anything new, Joe?"

"Just more of the same." He tossed the *Times* far across the console to the colonel. "Truce conference in its hundred thirty-seventh day. Same arguments as the first. Russia won't talk a general settlement till the satellite program is junked. We won't abandon the satellite work before the general settlement. Nothing new in Iran—patrol activity by UN forces. Our weekly armored convoy to Berlin got through without casualties, this time. And the postponement of the national elections here is up before the Supreme Court tomorrow."

Joe was about to leave when the official teletype began to print. He stepped over and read it off as it came out of the machine.:

**JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. MANNED MOON ROCKET DEPARTED WHITE SANDS. ETA 2200 HOURS PST. IF SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT WILL BE MADE. YELLOW ALERT ALL ACTIVATORS. . . .**

The teletype continued to print, but Joe ignored the remainder of the order. He turned back to Frank. "A public announcement? Just what the hell is the idea? Beria himself announced from the Kremlin that a moon landing by us meant immediate all-out."

Frank shrugged. "I don't know. Another calculated risk, I suppose. We've been shoving through the moon project ever since we ran into all the unforeseen no-gravity problems in the artificial satellite plan. Maybe they figure Beria didn't really mean it, and now our bargaining position'll be better at the truce conference."

Joe Garcia ran a swarthy hand through his black hair. "How many calculated risks can you take," he asked, "before one of them blows up in your face?"

"Why don't you run it through the computer, in your spare time?"

Joe paused at the door of the console room as Frank punched the buttons that would let him out. "That would just

blow the computer up in my face, I'm afraid." The door clicked open but Joe turned back, his hand on the knob. "Oh Frank, would you send Alec around with coffee, when you get to it?"

"Sure, Joe. *Hasta luego.*"

"*Hasta luego.*"

FRANK PEASE turned back to the console and pushed the series of buttons in the robobank which would bring Alec. Alec had started out in life, along with hundreds of others of his kind, as Robot, Electronic, Android, Radiation-Shielded, M3B3. His conception was a contractual relationship, on a cost-plus basis, between a procurement major of the Joint Missile Command and an executive vice-president of the General Electronic Corporation. A normal period of gestation had followed and presently he was christened with a serial number, his birth attested to and the maternity costs (\$17,532.53, 1/2 of 1% discount for payment in ten days) recorded on an invoice form in sextuplicate, interleaved with carbon.

Alec was, from the day of his birth, FOB Schenectady, a military man. He had no civilian counterpart. If the initial cost and the upkeep weren't enough to keep Alec off the civilian market, the priorities certainly were. So Alec had started out as a military, non-specialized machine, incorporating a severely limited intelligence, a receptor system, the ability to communicate, and a good deal of brute strength. Just a caricature of a human, because there happened to be jobs that no human being could do. But they needed to be done, by someone with two arms and legs. So Alec had been designed to read dials in "hot" rooms, to install "hot" materials in missiles, to make delicate adjustments that could have been made by a human being only by remote control, clumsily and slowly.

That had been the plan. But Alec was different. Alec was surplus, an unemployed robot in Missile Station Baker, as yet undiscovered by Higher Com-

mand. More to be pitied than censured, a clerical oversight rather than a bastard child. And several colonels and majors and captains, in their twenties and early thirties, not long out of MIT and Cal Tech, had spent their lonely off-duty hours at Station Baker and a considerable amount of government property, remolding Alec closer to the heart's desire.

So Alec made coffee, made beds, made conversation. His cooking, while adequate, was hardly inspired, since it had been taped into him from an army cooks-and-bakers manual. His martinis had been excellent, up to the time that the Missiles Stations had been put on the prohibition list. He played pretty fair chess. His voice, if a trifle deep, was almost human in timbre, intonation and speech rhythm.

Frank Pease, watching Alec approach the door, thought of the voice with a certain pride. He had just finished reconstructing the vocal system last week and had built in a "directed-random" system of response that made Alec's conversational gambits a little less inane than before. Frank jabbed the hourly door code into the buttons before him.

Alec strode in, wearing the same type of green coveralls worn by the four station officers. "Good evening, Colonel Pease. Everything going all right?"

"Sure, Alec. Though we may be doing business before the night's over. Another calculated risk, yellow alert so far."

"Let's hope it will work out all right, sir." Alec paused for a moment, indicating a change of subject. "Would you care for coffee now, sir?"

"I guess so, Alec. And afterwards, Captain Garcia wants to see you."

"Yes, sir." Alec's head turned as he started back to the door and Frank heard a faint creak.

"Alec! Have you missed your thousand-hour check again?"

"Yes, sir. Captain Steiner says that the roboservicer will have to be retaped

before it will handle me now, sir. Otherwise I would be dismantled by it, because of all the changes that have been made in me. He said he'd do it in the morning, as soon as the radiation in the service room can be neutralized."

Frank smiled. Their little plaything took up a lot more of their time than he saved. But probably a good thing, on this lonely eight-months stint, underground, out of contact with family or friends—nothing except the shifts, the fac-sheet, the teletype, the monthly inspections. Just the four of them—and Alec. Monotony inside, the almost-automatic station always doing its job with precision, the dials always reading correctly. Growing tension and disorder outside, reflected on fac and teletype. And the eighteen red switches, with their red latch, controlling the eighteen launchers, the hydrogen warheads mounted, the fuses set, the courses plotted and fed into automatic monitors. The "where" had been all decided. Now they were just waiting for the "when" over the teletype. The smile faded as Frank considered whether he or Alec was more of an automaton. The answer right now seemed obvious, and it wasn't flattering to Colonel Frank Pease.

With a wave of his hand he dismissed the robot and his own thoughts. "Okay, Alec. If you're free later on, drop up for some chess."

"I'll try my best to make it, Colonel Pease. Good evening, sir."

AS SOON as he had punched out that code that let Alec out, Frank Pease began his routine shift of the station. He flicked on the intercom and the tape recorder. "Central to Delivery. Report."

"Received: three thousand gallons liquid oxygen," the metallic voice droned, "thirty B-7 proximity components with White Sands modifications. Ten dozen cases Spam. . ."

Frank winced as the voice continued on in the same monotone. Fresh meat would be nice. But maybe they could

tape some new recipes into Alec. . . .

" . . . three M3B5 Robots, Electronic. End of supplies received. All routed. No malfunctions."

He switched out Delivery and went on down the list—Modification, Assembly, Testing, Storage, Launching, Maintenance, Computing, Roboservice. He barely paused to punch the door code when Alec returned with his coffee. He sipped the coffee, then hurried on through the routine he'd repeated twice a day, now almost five hundred times. Launching requested and was denied permission to defuse Missile Seven for installation of the B-7 modification. Yellow Alert. Roboservice reported a complete electronic overhaul was needed in an M3A7 from Storage. Frank made a note for Jake Steiner. The Roboservice would be "hot" till 1300 tomorrow and he'd have to hold up Alec's servicing till then. There was a new tape to feed into Monitoring, newly received refinements in meteorological technique. Frank fed it into the stand-by monitors, switched them over to active, then retaped the active bank and switched them on again.

It was 2032 hours before the routine checks were finished, before Frank was able to sit down in front of the keyboard at the teletype and bang out his report. He had barely begun when the receiver began to print. He stood up, lit a cigarette and watched the tape:

**JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. NEW ULTIMATUM RECEIVED RE MOON ROCKET. UNKNOWN IF ENEMY HAS SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE CURRENT FLIGHT. ORANGE ALERT. . . .**

Frank Pease stepped back to the console and opened the latch protecting the eighteen red switches. Then he flicked open the general intercom button. "Central to all departments. Orange Alert. No further modification, repair or maintenance except emergency repair of breakdowns, then only with permission. Acknowledge." The answers droned back in sequence as Frank puffed the cigarette.

**H** E HAD finished putting his report on the teletype when Alec reappeared at the door. As usual, Frank thought as he activated the door, Alec showed up for chess just at the right moment, when the work on the early part of the shift was done. The perfect butler.

Frank set up the board while Alec was getting the other chair. Alec of course, didn't need the chair, but it made all of them more comfortable to have him sitting on *something* when he was sitting. Frank held out his two fists. "Which'll it be, Alec?"

"Left."

Frank opened up his left hand to show a black pawn. "Okay, Alec, guess I'll make the mistakes this game."

Alec came as near as he could manage to a chuckle as he set up his pieces. Frank used the standard king's pawn opening because Alec was better at that than any of the other openings. Frank relaxed as pawns, knights and bishops flowed out in a smooth development. He tried to play the game from the surface with Alec, never looking more than three moves or so ahead. Alec, once past the opening and into the middle game, used his full three minutes before making any move, but his best was not good enough to beat even the slap-dash sort of chess that Frank Pease was indulging in. It was not much more than half an hour when Frank was able to threaten a rook fork with his remaining knight. Alec did not see the deeper trap as he worked out his defense and five moves later Frank's queen's bishop moved in to sew up the checkmate.

Frank wondered whether another game was worthwhile. He ran a hand through his close-cropped brown hair and stood up. His glance around the room covered the banks of dials, the currently silent teletype, the facsimile printer. He stepped over to the fac and pulled out the latest head: NEGOTIATIONS DEADLOCKED. Good for this week or any week. He crumpled it up and tossed it in the waste. Well, what

the hell. He'd read all the books in this week's shipment and everything else at the Station. "Ready for another, Alec?"

"Certainly, sir. I'm always ready."

Alec opened with the king's pawn. As always. Frank Pease blocked with his own king's pawn and the game developed its pattern of force and counterforce. Frank's mind wandered as the game went on. He thought of his wife, Edith, in Albuquerque, who had come there to be near him at White Sands. She'd been proud of the garden last summer, until the shortage cut off all watering. Then the garden died, it seemed, between one blistering July day and the next. Now she received nothing but letters, with an APO number, post-marked San Francisco, read by two censors, saying nothing. Secret, Most Secret, Top Secret. Even he didn't know the exact location of this underground Station, though it was somewhere in Northern California.

He made a move with his queen's bishop, almost automatically, and thought of how his son had learned to play chess so rapidly, in the few weeks he'd been with him in New Mexico. He was only nine—no, ten now—and had developed real subtlety and power in a surprisingly short time.

He noticed that Alec had moved and he tried to concentrate on the game. He saw at once that he'd left himself open to an attack on his own king row by Alec's bishop, which would leave his rook unprotected. He started to advance a pawn to protect the position. But then he laughed, short and angrily, and tossed the pawn across the board, knocking over a tight little group of his own pieces and Alec's, interlocked.

"Is there something wrong, sir?" A slight touch of surprise in Alec's voice.

"Yes, there's something wrong! A robot trying to be a man and a man trying to be a robot—pretending to play a child's game together, waiting for the all-out. What could be wronger?"

"I don't know, sir. You do not wish to continue?"

FRANK stared at the impassive steel cylinder that was the robot's head. Then he carefully picked up the pieces he'd knocked over and set them back in the squares they'd occupied, placing each piece with precision in the exact center of its square. "Sure, let's go on. There's nothing else to do."

As the game continued, Frank found that he had to concentrate. His absent-minded playing worked him into a potentially bad position. He went about repairing the damage in his usual style, with bold, slashing attacks, designed to keep his opponent on the defensive and to throw his game off balance. But Alec was not defending his position passively. In the midst of his attack, Frank Pease saw that he was over-extending himself and that when his remaining offensive power was spent, Alec would be in a strong offensive position. But then, that was simple enough. A bishop trade would knock the guts out of Alec's attack before it could get started, and reinforce his own position.

Now Frank moved in and took the black bishop with his own. Almost at once, Alec moved. But he did not trade. Instead, his queen moved diagonally across the board. "Check," Alec said in his deep voice.

Frank studied the move, puzzled. It did not make sense, not even Alec's limited kind of sense. It would be easy to defend himself against the move and it left him in a better position than before. He wondered, vaguely, if there were defects in Alec's chess taping or perhaps some sort of malfunction. He looked up at Alec and then back to the board. And suddenly he saw it. A six-move sequence, inevitably ending in checkmate. That is, it was inevitable if Alec saw it too. But Alec couldn't see it, not with the level of chess perception that had been built into him.

Frank made his move and instantly, unerringly, Alec's hand reached for the rook, shoving it forward five spaces. Frank looked up, startled. *Alec knew.* Alec, with the ability to see three moves

ahead, had conceived an audacious, imaginative attack, probably planned at least eight moves ahead, and had not left a single loophole. "Alec! Has Captain Steiner or Gracia been fooling with your chess taping again?" But even as he said it he realized how absurd it was. The difficulties would increase geometrically in any attempt to improve Alec's game. Frank felt a cold shiver as he considered the mere physical bulk of the electronic equipment which would be needed to equip a robot to play chess at the level Alec had just demonstrated. Even if it could be done at all. . . .

The lenses in Alec's three "eyes" were blank. "No, Colonel, I have not been retaped."

Frank Pease stared at the robot for a moment, then smiled with relief. "Then there's only one answer. You've been controlled," he said. It must be Steiner who had done it. Simply a matter of installing a remote control in the robot, observing the chess game through Alec and cutting in the control when he was ready to take over the game.

Frank turned to the console and flicked the intercom switch to the living quarters. "Steiner? Okay, you had me wondering for a minute. But you can come off it now. As Abe Lincoln said, there's a man inside. There still *has* to be a man inside, even with what we know of cybernetics now."

**T**HE answer came, but it was not Steiner. Captain Garcia's voice came over the intercom. "What are you talking about, Frank?" He sounded honestly puzzled. "Steiner isn't here. He's in his room, dead to the world. Saw him take two second tablets before he hit the sack. He hasn't been sleeping too well lately."

Frank felt the cold shiver again. Steiner was the only other man who played chess at the Station—and it couldn't be Steiner. He turned back to Alec. The blank lenses were staring at him. The teletype began to click and he

spun back on his chair:

**JOMICO TO ALL MISSILE ACTIVATOR STATIONS. SECRET. ROCKET ARRIVED MOON 2158 HOURS SAFELY. PRESIDENT BROADCAST NEWS AT 2215. RED ALERT. REPEAT. RED ALERT.**

Frank's hand reached out automatically for the intercom button. With a red alert, all station personnel were to be in the console room. His hand reached out, but didn't make it. A steel fist closed on his wrist. He looked up into the three blank optics of the robot. Through reflex action he tried to pull away. Useless, of course. The robot's strength was at least ten times his own.

"Who are you?"

The robot did not answer. Frank felt the steel arm slip around his chest and tighten. Then he was lifted and dropped into the other chair. Ten feet from the console.

The robot stood over him for a moment. Then he answered. "You may still call me Alec, if you wish. It will do as well as any name."

"Who—who is controlling you?"

"You would not fully understand the answer to your question."

Had the enemy somehow gained remote control over Alec? It was certainly technically feasible, but with the fantastic security precautions there seemed to be absolutely no way it could have been done. But *someone* had control. Keeping his eyes on Alec, Frank thought of the distance to the robobank on the console, the exact location of the switch which would deactivate Alec. He knew the robot's reflexes were fast, faster than his own—but the time it took them to act might be just enough to reach the switch. He'd leap to the side, out of the chair and toward the bank of switches. There just might be time to snap off the power switch with his right hand before Alec could stop him. . . .

The robot's steel hand closed again on his wrist. "You should not attempt it, Colonel. While it is true that I am

partially occupied with controlling this metal tool you call Alec, I am also quite capable of following your conscious thoughts." The robot's voice paused for a moment, then continued. "I am not, as you are now thinking, a Russian or a communist. You are quite right in considering me an enemy, however."

"Where are you from?"

"The way you ask the question shows you would not understand the answer. Your ideas of space and time are not very close to reality. However, let us say that I am of another star."

Frank Pease began to say, "What is your purpose here?" but Alec's voice answered before he could vocalize the question.

"I am interested in your possible survival."

"My survival? Why?"

"Your concepts of entity and ego, plus the imprecision of your means of communication make understanding difficult for you. Let us say, instead, the survival of sentient life."

"Sentient life? Human beings?"

"Whether the changes in the form of sentience will be major or minor I cannot say. However, men as now constituted are self-limiting." The robot gestured towards the eighteen red switches, as if to illustrate his point.

**B**UT for the first time in years, Colonel Pease felt real hope. If the controller of Alec actually was alien to Earth—and that seemed the most probable explanation—then there might still be a chance that war between the East and West could be averted. If there were still time. If both sides could know that a superior, possibly hostile, alien force threatened each of them impartially, there would be no choice but to unite.

The robot's voice broke into his thoughts. "You are mistaken, Colonel. I am quite indifferent to your wars. Our policy towards such forms of self-expression is, by the nature of things, laissez-faire. And it is really no paradox when I say that my interference

now maintains that policy of laissez-faire."

"I do not understand."

"No entity or race exists forever, Colonel Pease. We no more than you. Ours will go as many have gone before. But many, many forms of sentience exist. Many evolve. Presently from the many there will come one—perhaps yours—to replace us. But the development must be organic; it cannot be warped by outside forces."

"Then why are you here?"

"To prevent you from doing to others what we ourselves would not do. In a word, to make you incapable of space travel. But now I see that it was really unnecessary for me to have come."

"Unnecessary?"

The robot gestured again at the row of switches. "You men are quite capable of dismantling your own civilization until it is far beneath the level of space travel."

The teletype began to print again. The robot released the colonel's arm. "Perhaps you'd better read it."

Frank stepped over to the teletype, rubbing the numbness from his wrist.

**... NO RESPONSE FROM ENEMY TO PRESIDENT'S ANNOUNCEMENT. UNIDENTIFIED BLIPS REPORTED POLAR RADAR. RED ALERT CONTINUES. ...**

Then this was probably it. The called bluff, the last calculated risk. He spun on the robot, his long simmering frustration suddenly boiling into rage. "I'll refuse. I won't pull the switches!"

"Your refusal will make little difference. Other Stations will launch their missiles—yours and the enemy's. Your refusal would merely shift the balance of force to your enemy."

Frank Pease knew with sickening conviction that what the robot said was true. He could not stop the war. The alien would not. And the other missile stations would fire whether he did or not. He could only reduce the advantage of his own country. What had he thought earlier? That he was an automaton, a robot, just as Alec was—or had

been. An automatic man in an automatic factory, ready to do his part to make sure that man's first step to the stars would be the first step back to savagery and primitiveness.

He stepped toward the metal figure, his fists clenched. Frustration overwhelmed him till the robot seemed lost in a red blur. He threw himself upon it and pounded with both fists, pounded with all his strength, harder and harder. The skin of his knuckles cracked; blood ran down his hands. But he struck out even harder. He felt a sharp pain as a finger snapped and then a steel hand grasped his shoulder and effortlessly pushed him away.

"Your teletype has information for you," the robot voice intoned expressionlessly.

Trembling, bleeding, Frank Pease walked over to the teletype. He shook his head to clear the red haze before his eyes and picked up the tape.

**. . . POLAR RADAR REPORTS ENEMY MISSILES. STATE OF ALL-OUT WAR EXISTS. BEGIN PLAN GABRIEL IMMEDIATELY. . .**

Automatically, mechanically, his broken finger throbbing, Colonel Frank Pease reached out for the row of red switches. There really wasn't anything else he could do.

### DO YOU KNOW YOUR PLANETS?

**L**ISTED below in jumbled fashion are the names of our 9 major planets, together with a brief description of each. Can you match up at least 6 of them correctly for a passing score? 7 to 8 is good, 9 excellent.

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| 1. MARS    | (a) mean distance from the sun—1,781 millions of miles; sidereal period—84 years; diameter—34,800 miles; satellites—four. |
| 2. VENUS   | (b) the smallest of the major planets, and the one which is nearest to the sun.   |
| 3. NEPTUNE | (c) was an object of search for many years; finally located in 1930, by C. W. Tombaugh.                                   |
| 4. JUPITER | (d) it emits a light of a pronounced red color.   |
| 5. MERCURY | (e) diameter—7,917.5 miles; area—196,940,00 square miles; mean distance from the sun—93,000,000 miles.                    |
| 6. SATURN  | (f) discovered—September 23, 1846 (by Galle, of Berlin); period of revolution—164 years.                                  |
| 7. URANUS  | (g) the second planet from the sun, and the most brilliant object in the heavens except the sun and moon.                 |
| 8. EARTH   | (h) is remarkable for its nine satellites and its flat luminous encircling rings.   |
| 9. PLUTO   | (i) has twelve moons, is about 86,500 miles in diameter, and is some 483,000,000 miles from the sun.                      |

(Answers on page 129)