

# ...AND MILES TO GO.

by Kathy Davis

"He's here again today," the head nurse remarked, glancing up from her desk.

"Who?" asked another nurse.

"Him. Standing outside 1131. See him?"

"Oh, that one. He was here yesterday."

"And the day before. Sure is devoted to that old guy."

"Or his money, maybe."

"Maybe."

"I may see him today?"

He was in his late thirties or early forties. His face was carefully expressionless, but somehow the intensity of the clear blue eyes was haunting.

"As you know, your great-uncle is an extremely old man," the doctor told him kindly. "He may not recognize you."

"He seldom does."

"Yes. Well. He seems rather lucid today. One can only hope." He motioned for one of the nurses.

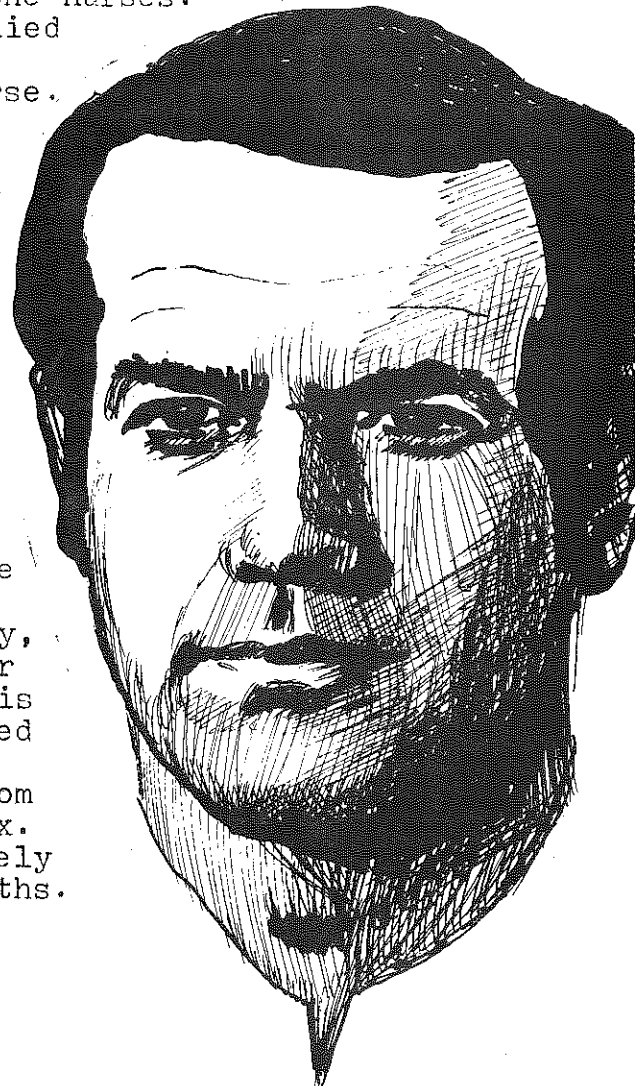
"It would seem so," the man replied stoically.

"This way, please," said the nurse.

He followed her through the sterilization chamber that was standard now, at least in the intensive care units, just as an earlier era might have seen him donning a mask and gown.

It was a stark, gloomy cubicle, lit for now only by the table lamp and the faint glow of the Patient Monitor Screen. There were no frills to give the room a "human" look--or to collect dust. The window was not much help, either; the gray skies and drizzling rain outside provided little cheer.

The man in the bed seemed so tiny, so terribly old. Tubes fed him, other tubes carried away his body wastes; his vital signs were electronically patched in and displayed on screens both here and in the Central Patient Monitor Room somewhere deep in the hospital complex. He had not walked in years, had scarcely been out of bed in almost as many months.



"You have company." It was the nurse who broke the silence. A fingertouch on a nearby control raised the head of the bed slightly.

The ancient eyes stared vacantly outward for a moment longer, then slowly turned, gradually focused upon the visitor. The withered lips painfully formed a half-smile across toothless gums.

The younger man forced a smile to his own lips. "Hello, Uncle Jerome," he said levelly. A curt gesture dismissed the nurse.

The reedy voice was so faint that another man would have had to strain to hear it. "H-hello, Questor."

"You know me today, my friend," Questor said.

"Of...course. How could I...forget...you...haven't changed a...bit." His words came slowly, in halting gasps as uneven as the pumping of the exhausted lungs that forced them out.

Questor was puzzled. "Changed? My physical appearance has undergone minor alterations--"

"No, no...a figure of speech, Questor. Which emphasizes my point." He made a feeble attempt to sit up, and was restrained by the IV's embedded in his neck and arms. He glared at the offending tubes in annoyance.

Questor's eyes flicked toward the monitor. "Please. Do not tire yourself."

"Machines," the old man murmured querulously. "Surrounded by 'em. All that's keeping me going...No offense, Questor."

"No offense is taken." Questor moved a chair to the left of the bed--by Jerry's good ear--and sat down.

For a moment there was no sound save for the old man's shallow breathing. Then, "The doctors. What do they say? How much longer do they give me?"

"They do not know," Questor replied truthfully. "They have the means to sustain you for another year at least."

"A year." He tried to snort and coughed instead. "A year at least--for my body. How long do they give my mind?"

"You...were in a coma for some time," Questor answered evasively.

"I never thought I would live this long," he mused, not hearing. "You never do...never think of yourself as old...senile...as a vegetable..." His voice trailed off.

Questor watched him closely. It seemed for a moment that Robinson's mind had slipped away again, gone back into itself and its memories.

But the brown eyes that met his were suddenly still young, still held a hint of a twinkle.

"I've...we've known each other a good long time, now."

"Sixty-seven years, four months, and twenty-three days," Questor said with a slight smile.

"How many hours?---No, don't bother. I was joking." He coughed again. "I remember it all...Most of it. The beginning...Yours...I put you together...called you friend, then younger business partner...nephew...and--now what?"

"Grandnephew. As you grew older, it became necessary to employ these ruses--"

"Yes, yes." A feeble hand waved the explanation away. "I know. I remember. Sometimes..."

"Jerry," Questor broke in abruptly. "I fear I have caused you many hardships."

Robinson stared at him. "What're you talking about? D'you think I regret one minute of all that's happened? With all I've seen...done...I've got enough memories for quite a few lifetimes. After all, how many men get to watch the saviour of the human in action?" An interesting analogy occurred to him then and he chuckled softly to himself.

"An intriguing parallel," Questor commented. "However, I have never thought of myself in quite the capacity that you imply."

"No, but it's quite a thought. Maybe one of your predecessors..."

"Possibility. However, it is a rather fruitless speculation, since there can be no means of proving it. Moreover, as my own mission is only one-third complete, it is perhaps too early to judge how well I shall save humanity."

"I have faith in you. Faith." Jerry chuckled again. "You, at least, have plenty of time..."

"By all calculations, it should be sufficient."

"Calculations...You haven't changed, Questor."

"That is the second time you have made that statement," Questor observed.

"And you still haven't learned to use a contraction," Jerry sighed.

"If by 'change' you refer to a learning experience, I must differ with you. I have learned much from you... and your kind."

"And we have learned much because of you and your kind," Jerry wheezed. He closed his eyes. "Sometimes I think of Emil Vaslovik...how he lay on that slab, unable to move..."

"He was unprepared for the new radiation," the android recited, uncomprehending.

"Yes...a great man, if I may use that word. Cut...cut down before his usefulness was over."

"And I fear I have outlived mine."

Questor started. "No, my friend, Jerry."

"I was to counsel you in our ways. You learned almost faster than I could teach you."

"No. There are many things I still do not understand. I learned to simulate 'emotion', which I lacked. Or at least, which was missing from my original programming. Yet often I have wondered...is it mere simulation? I feel that... I feel."

"I've never doubted that," Jerry mumbled.

"But my first lesson was friendship," the android reminded him. "Perhaps I have learned it too well." He cocked his head slightly. "Strange. I find that, although

I have always known that you would not be--that your life-span was considerably shorter than mine, I find it curiously difficult to think of you...not present."

He glanced toward the bed. Robinson's eyes were still closed; his breathing was irregular and almost obscured by the sound of the rain drumming on the window. Questor rose and moved slowly toward the door.

The whisper was almost not there. "Ques...tor?"

He turned, walked back to the bed. "You are weary, my friend."

"Yes...that happens...so often...lately..."

Tenderly, he took the gnarled hand in his. "Sleep now, my friend. I will return another day."

There was no sign that Robinson heard.

Again the nurses glanced up to see the silent man standing outside 1131.

"Doesn't he ever get tired?"

The memory tapes were extensive. But for Questor, each took mere seconds--fractions of seconds.

Jerry Robinson. His life was a long one. Questor "saw" him, young, healthy. Saw his quick smile, heard him speak, laugh. Saw his agile hands skillfully working on some new positronic toy. He saw him begin to show signs of age, saw his hairline recede, saw his waistline widen. He saw him marry, saw his wife divorce him, and, years later, he saw her die. There were no children, no family--no other family. He saw his eyesight start to dim, saw the stroke that nearly paralyzed him. Saw the artificial heart and kidneys that kept his aged body functioning.

All the sides of this man's life played before him. It bore so little resemblance to the withered thing on that hospital bed. An old man, crippled in body and soon in mind, always in pain...there were no cures for his diseases.

"Mr. Questor?"

It was the doctor's too-gentle voice again. "I'm afraid your great-uncle has lapsed back into a coma. You might as well go home and get some rest. We'll call you if there is any change in his condition."

"But he will still live?"

"He should. I must tell you, however, we have no way of knowing when or if he will regain consciousness."

Questor regarded him. The memory tapes had recorded the sensation of the pale, cool, thin hand that had lain limply in his, and he contrasted it with the warm, firm, handshake of years ago.

"May I see my great-uncle for a moment, doctor?"

The physician was properly puzzled. "He is unconscious. I hardly think--"

"I merely want to see him. Please. I know that it is irregular."

There was still hesitation.

"Please."

The doctor shrugged. "All right, then."

He leaned over the bed again. The ancient eyes were closed; tiny purple veins showed on the waxen eyelids.

He touched the old man's forehead, withdrew his hand sharply, and was frankly surprised to find that it was shaking.

More resolutely, he took his great-uncle's head firmly between his two hands and held it for a moment. It seemed that he murmured something to the old man, far too low for the attending nurse to hear.

No one could know of the careful placement of those fingers. Of the proper pressure at just the correct spot.

Gently, he withdrew his hands and smiled sadly at the nurse. Slowly, without a backward glance, he walked from the room, the corridor, the hospital.

Warning lights began blinking in the Central Patient Monitor Room. Room 1131 EEG readings abnormal. CPM computer readout: all symptoms severe stroke.

The doctor's arrival was a mere technicality. It was the patient's second stroke. It was his last one.

Straightening, he regarded the body of Jerome Baker Robinson and shook his head.

And in the dark, rainy street below, a figure stood and gazed solemnly at the lighted windows of the hospital complex, heedless of the rain--for it had to be rain--that spattered his face and trickled down his cheeks.

"Pass on, my friend," Questor said softly.

