



Weak on Square Roots
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Transcriber's Note:

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AS HIS COACH sped through dusk-darkened Jersey meadows, Ronald Lovegear, fourteen years with Allied Electronix, embraced his burden with both arms, silently cursing the engineer who was deliberately rocking the train. In his thin chest he nursed the conviction that someday there would be an intelligent robot at the throttle of the 5:10 to Philadelphia.

He carefully moved one hand and took a notebook from his pocket. That would be a good thing to mention at the office next Monday.

Again he congratulated himself for having induced his superiors to let him take home the company's most highly developed mechanism to date. He had already forgiven himself for the little white lie that morning.

"Pascal," he had told them, "is a little weak on square roots." That had done it!

Old Hardwick would never permit an Allied computer to hit the market that was not the absolute master of square roots. If Lovegear wanted to work on Pascal on his own time it was fine with the boss.

Ronald Lovegear consulted his watch. He wondered if his wife would be on time. He had told Corinne twice over the phone to bring the station wagon to meet him. But she had been so forgetful lately. It was probably the new house; six rooms to keep up without a maid was quite a chore. His pale eyes blinked. He had a few ideas along that line too. He smiled and gave the crate a gentle pat.

CORINNE WAS at the station, and she had brought the station wagon. Lovegear managed to get the crate to the stairs of the coach where he consented to the assistance of a porter.

"It's not really heavy," he told Corinne as he and the porter waddled through the crowd. "Actually only 57 pounds, four ounces. Aluminum casing, you know ... "

"No, I didn't ... " began Corinne.

"But it's delicate," he continued. "If I should drop this ... " He shuddered.

After the crate had been placed lengthwise in the rear of the station wagon, Corinne watched Ronald tuck a blanket around it.

"It's not very cold, Ronald."

"I don't want it to get bounced around," he said. "Now, please, Corinne, do drive carefully." Not until she had driven half a block did he kiss her on the cheek. Then he glanced anxiously over his shoulder at the

rear seat. Once he thought Corinne hit a rut that could have been avoided.

Long after Corinne had retired that night she heard Ronald pounding with a brass hammer down in his den. At first she had insisted he take the crate out to his workshop. He looked at her with scientific aloofness and asked if she had the slightest conception of what "this is worth?" She hadn't, and she went to bed. It was only another one of his gestures which was responsible for these weird dreams. That night she dreamed Ronald brought home a giant octopus which insisted on doing the dishes for her. In the morning she woke up feeling unwanted.

Downstairs Ronald had already put on the coffee. He was wearing his robe and the pinched greyness of his face told Corinne he had been up half the night. He poured coffee for her, smiling wanly. "If I have any commitments today, Corinne, will you please see that they are taken care of?"

"But you were supposed to get the wallpaper for the guest room... ."

"I know, I know, dear. But time is so short. They might want Pascal back any day. For the next week or two I shall want to devote most of my time ... "

"Pascal?"

"Yes. The machine—the computer." He smiled at her ignorance. "We usually name the expensive jobs. You see, a computer of this nature is really the heart and soul of the mechanical man we will construct."

Corinne didn't see, but in a few minutes she strolled toward the den, balancing her coffee in both hands. With one elbow she eased the door open. There it was: an innocent polished cabinet reaching up to her shoulders. Ronald had removed one of the plates from its side and she peeped into the section where the heart and soul might be located. She saw only an unanatomical array of vacuum tubes and electrical relays.

She felt Ronald at her back. "It looks like the inside of a juke box," she said.

He beamed. "The same relay systems used in the simple juke box are incorporated in a computer." He placed one hand lovingly on the top of the cabinet.

"But, Ronald—it doesn't even resemble a—a mechanical man?"

"That's because it doesn't have any appendages as yet. You know, arms and legs. That's a relatively simple adjustment." He winked at Corinne with a great air of complicity. "And I have some excellent ideas along that line. Now, run along, because I'll be busy most of the day."

CORINNE RAN along. She spent most of the day shopping for week-end necessities. On an irrational last-minute impulse—perhaps an unconscious surrender to the machine age—she dug in the grocery deep freeze and brought out a couple of purple steaks.

That evening she had to call Ronald three times for dinner, and when he came out of the den she noticed that he closed the door the way one does upon a small child. He chattered about inconsequential matters all through dinner. Corinne knew that his work was going smoothly. A few minutes later she was to know how smoothly.

It started when she began to put on her apron to do the dishes. "Let that go for now, dear," Ronald said, taking the apron from her. He went into the den, returning with a small black box covered with push buttons. "Now observe carefully," he said, his voice pitched high.

He pushed one of the buttons, waited a second with his ear cocked toward the den, then pushed another.

Corinne heard the turning of metal against metal, and she slowly turned her head.

"Oh!" She suppressed a shriek, clutching Ronald's arm so tightly he almost dropped the control box.

Pascal was walking under his own effort, considerably taller now with the round, aluminum legs Ronald had given him. Two metal arms also hung at the sides of the cabinet. One of these rose stiffly, as though for balance. Corinne's mouth opened as she watched the creature jerk awkwardly across the living room.

"Oh, Ronald! The fishbowl!"

Ronald stabbed knowingly at several buttons.

Pascal pivoted toward them, but not before his right arm swung out and, almost contemptuously, brushed the fishbowl to the floor.

Corinne closed her eyes at the crash. Then she scooped up several little golden bodies and rushed for the kitchen. When she returned Ronald was picking up pieces of glass and dabbing at the pool of water with one of her bathroom towels. Pascal, magnificently aloof, was standing in the center of the mess.

"I'm sorry." Ronald looked up. "It was my fault. I got confused on the buttons."

But Corinne's glances toward the rigid Pascal held no indictment. She was only mystified. There was something wrong here.

"But Ronald, he's so ugly without a head. I thought that all robots—"

"Oh, no," he explained, "we would put heads on them for display purposes only. Admittedly that captures the imagination of the public. That little adapter shaft at the top could be the neck, of course... ."

He waved Corinne aside and continued his experiments with the home-made robot. Pascal moved in controlled spasms around the living room. Once, he walked just a little too close to the floor-length window—and Corinne stood up nervously. But Ronald apparently had mastered the little black box.

With complete confidence Corinne went into the kitchen to do the dishes. Not until she was elbow deep in suds did she recall her dreams about the octopus. She looked over her shoulder, and the curious, unwanted feeling came again.

THE FOLLOWING afternoon—after Ronald had cancelled their Sunday drive into the country—Pascal, with constant exhortations by Ronald at the black box, succeeded in vacuum cleaning the entire living room. Ronald was ecstatic.

"Now do you understand?" he asked Corinne. "A mechanical servant! Think of it! Of course mass production may be years away, but ... "

"Everyone will have Thursday nights off," said Corinne—but Ronald was already jabbing at buttons as Pascal dragged the vacuum cleaner back to its niche in the closet.

Later, Corinne persuaded Ronald to take her to a movie, but not until the last moment was she certain that Pascal wasn't going to drag along.

Every afternoon of the following week Ronald Lovegear called from the laboratory in New York to ask how Pascal was getting along.

"Just fine," Corinne told him on Thursday afternoon. "But he certainly ruined some of the tomato plants in the garden. He just doesn't seem to hoe in a straight line. Are you certain it's the green button I push?"

"It's probably one of the pressure regulators," interrupted Ronald. "I'll check it when I get home." Corinne suspected by his lowered voice that Mr. Hardwick had walked into the lab.

That night Pascal successfully washed and dried the dishes, cracking only one cup in the process. Corinne spent the rest of the evening sitting in the far corner of the living room, thumbing the pages of a magazine.

On the following afternoon—prompted perhaps by that perverse female trait which demands completion of all projects once started—Corinne lingered for several minutes in the vegetable department at the grocery. She finally picked out a fresh, round and blushing pumpkin.

Later in her kitchen, humming a little tune under her breath, Corinne deftly maneuvered a paring knife to transform the pumpkin into a very reasonable facsimile of a man's head. She placed the pumpkin over the tiny shaft between Pascal's box-shaped shoulders and stepped back.

She smiled at the moon-faced idiot grinning back at her. He was complete, and not bad-looking! But just before she touched the red button once and the blue button twice—which sent Pascal stumbling out to the backyard to finish weeding the circle of pansies before dinner—she wondered about the gash that was his mouth. She distinctly remembered carving it so that the ends curved upward into a frozen and quite harmless smile. But one end of the toothless grin seemed to sag a little, like the cynical smile of one who knows his powers have been underestimated.

Corinne would not have had to worry about her husband's reaction to the new vegetable-topped Pascal. Ronald accepted the transformation good-naturedly, thinking that a little levity, once in a while, was a good thing.

"And after all," said Corinne later that evening, "I'm the one who has to spend all day in the house with ... " She lowered her voice: "With Pascal."

But Ronald wasn't listening. He retired to his den to finish the plans for the mass production of competent mechanical men. One for every home in America... . He fell asleep with the thought.

CORINNE AND PASCAL spent the next two weeks going through pretty much the same routine. He, methodically jolting through the household chores; she, walking aimlessly from room to room, smoking too many cigarettes. She began to think of Pascal as a boarder. Strange—at first he had been responsible for that unwanted feeling. But now his helpfulness around the house had lightened her burden. And he was so cheerful all the time! After living with Ronald's preoccupied frown for seven years ...

After luncheon one day, when Pascal neglected to shut off the garden hose, she caught herself scolding him as if he were human. Was that a shadow from the curtain waving in the breeze, or did she see a hurt look flit across the mouth of the pumpkin? Corinne put out her hand and patted Pascal's cylindrical wrist.

It was warm—*flesh* warm.

She hurried upstairs and stood breathing heavily with her back to the door. A little later she thought she heard someone—someone with a heavy step—moving around downstairs.

"I left the control box down there," she thought. "Of course, it's absurd... ."

At four o'clock she went slowly down the stairs to start Ronald's dinner. Pascal was standing by the refrigerator, exactly where she had left him. Not until she had started to peel the potatoes did she notice the little bouquet of pansies in the center of the table.

Corinne felt she needed a strong cup of tea. She put the water on and placed a cup on the kitchen table. Not until she was going to sit down did she decide that perhaps Pascal should be in the other room.

She pressed the red button, the one which should turn him around, and the blue button, which should make him walk into the living room. She heard the little buzz of mechanical life as Pascal began to move. But he did not go into the other room! He was holding a chair for her, and she sat down rather heavily. A sudden rush of pleasure reddened her cheeks. *Not since sorority days ...*

Before Pascal's arms moved away she touched his wrist again, softly, only this time her hand lingered. And his wrist *was* warm!

"WHEN DO THEY want Pascal back at the lab?" she asked Ronald at dinner that evening, trying to keep her voice casual.

Ronald smiled. "I think I might have him indefinitely, dear. I've got Hardwick convinced I'm working on something revolutionary." He stopped. "Oh, Corinne! You've spilled coffee all over yourself."

The following night Ronald was late in getting home from work. It was raining outside the Newark station and the cabs deliberately evaded him. He finally caught a bus, which deposited him one block from his house. He cut through the back alley, hurrying through the rain. Just before he started up the stairs he glanced through the lighted kitchen window. He stopped, gripping the railing for support.

In the living room were Pascal and Corinne. Pascal was reclining leisurely in the fireside chair; Corinne was standing in front of him. It was the expression on her face which stopped Ronald Lovegear. The look was a compound of restraint and compulsion, the reflection of some deep struggle in Corinne's soul. Then she suddenly leaned forward and pressed her lips to Pascal's full, fleshy pumpkin mouth. Slowly, one of Pascal's aluminum arms moved up and encircled her waist.

Mr. Lovegear stepped back into the rain. He stood there for several minutes. The rain curled around the brim of his hat, dropped to his face, and rolled down his cheeks with the slow agitation of tears.

When, finally, he walked around to the front and stamped heavily up the stairs, Corinne greeted him with a flush in her cheeks. Ronald told her that he didn't feel "quite up to dinner. Just coffee, please." When it was ready he sipped slowly, watching Corinne's figure as she moved around the room. She avoided looking at the aluminum figure in the chair.

Ronald put his coffee down, walked over to Pascal, and, gripping him behind the shoulders, dragged him into the den.

Corinne stood looking at the closed door and listened to the furious pounding.

TEN MINUTES LATER Ronald came out and went straight to the phone.

"Yes! Immediately!" he told the man at the freight office. While he sat there waiting Corinne walked upstairs.

Ronald did not offer to help the freight men drag the box outside. When they had gone he went into the den and came back with the pumpkin. He opened the back door and hurled it out into the rain. It cleared the back fence and rolled down the alley stopping in a small puddle in the cinders.

After a while the water level reached the mouth and there was a soft choking sound. The boy who found it the next morning looked at the mouth and wondered why anyone would carve such a sad Jack-O'-Lantern.

THE END

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