

The Helpful Robots

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Published in Fantastic Universe, September 1957

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“Our people will be arriving to visit us today,” the robot said.

“Shut up!” snapped Rod Rankin. He jumped, wiry and quick, out of the chair on his verandah and stared at a cloud of dust in the distance.

“Our people-” the ten-foot, cylinder-bodied robot grated, when Rod Rankin interrupted him.

“I don’t care about your fool people,” said Rankin. He squinted at the cloud of dust getting bigger and closer beyond the wall of kesh trees that surrounded the rolling acres of his plantation. “That damned new neighbor of mine is coming over here again.”

He gestured widely, taking in the dozens of robots with their shiny, cylindrical bodies and pipestem arms and legs laboring in his fields. “Get all your people together and go hide in the wood, fast.”

“It is not right,” said the robot. “We were made to serve all.”

“Well there are only a hundred of you, and I’m not sharing you with anybody,” said Rankin.

“it is not right,” the robot repeated.

“Don’t talk to me about what’s right,” said Rankin. “You’re built to follow orders, nothing else. I know a thing or two about how you robots work. You’ve got one law, to follow orders, and until that neighbor of mine sees you to give you orders, you work for me. Now get into those woods and hide until he goes away.”

“We will go to greet those who visit us today,” said the robot.

“Alright, alright, scram,” said Rankin.

The robots in the fields and the one whom Rankin had been talking to formed a column and marched off into the trackless forests behind his plantation.

A battered old ground-car drove up a few minutes later. A tall, broad-shouldered man with a deep tan got out and walked up the path to Rankin’s verandah.

“Hi, Barrows,” said Rankin.

“Hello,” said Barrows. “See your crop’s coming along pretty well. Can’t figure how you do it. You’ve got acres and acres to tend, far’s I can see, and I’m having a hell of a time with one little piece of ground. I swear you must know something about this planet that I don’t know.”

“Just scientific farming,” said Rankin carelessly. “Look, you come over here for something, or just to gab? I got a lot of work to do.”

Barrows looked weary and worried. “Them brown beasties is at my crop again,” he said. “Thought you might know some way of getting rid of them.”

“Sure,” said Rankin. “Pick them off, one by one. That’s how I get rid of them.”

“Why, man,” said Barrows, “you can’t walk all over these miles and miles of arm and pick off everyone of them beetles. You must know another way.”

Rankin drew himself up and stared at Barrows. “I’m telling you all I feel like telling you. You going to stand here and jaw all day? Seems to me like you got work to do.”

“Rankin,” said Barrows, “I know you were a crook back in the Terran Empire, and that you came out beyond the border to escape the law. Seems to me, though, that even a crook, any man, would be willing to help his only neighbor out on a lone planet like this. You might need help yourself, sometime.”

“You keep your thoughts about my past to yourself,” said Rankin. “Remember, I keep a gun. And you’ve got a wife and a whole bunch of kids on that farm of yours. Be smart and leave me alone.”

“I’m going,” said Barrows. He walked off the verandah and turned and spat carefully into the dusty path. He climbed into his ground car and drove off.

Rankin, angry, watched him go. Then he heard a humming noise from another direction.

He turned. A huge, white globe was descending across the sky. A space ship, thought Rankin, startled.

Police? This planet was outside the jurisdiction of the Terran Empire. When he’d cracked it safe and made off with a hundred thousand credits, he’d headed here, because the planet was part of something called the Clearchan Confederacy. No extradition treaties or anything. Perfectly safe, if the planet was safe.

And the planet was more than safe. There had been a hundred robots waiting when he landed. Where they came from he didn’t know, but Rankin prided himself on knowing how to handle robots. He’d appropriated their services and started his farm. At the rate he was going, he’d be a plantation owner before long.

That must be where the ship was from. The robot said they’d expected visitors. Must be the Clearchan Confederacy visiting this robot outpost. Was that good or bad?

From everything he’d read, and from what the robots had told him, they were probably more robots. That was good, because he knew how to handle robots.

The white globe disappeared into the jungle of kesh trees. Rankin waited.

A half hour later the column of his robot laborers marched out of the forest. There were three more robots, painted grey, at the head. The new ones from the ship, thought Rankin. Well, he’d better establish who was boss right from the start.

“Stop right there!” he shouted.

The shiny robot laborers halted. But the three grey ones came on.

“Stop!” shouted Rankin.

They didn't stop, and by the time they reached the verandah, he cursed himself for having failed to get his gun.

Two of the huge grey robots laid gentle hands on his arms. Gentle hands, but hands of superstrong metal.

The third said, "We have come to pass judgement on you. You have violated our law."

"What do you mean?" said Rankin. "The only law robots have is to obey orders."

"It is true that the robots of your Terran Empire and these simple workers here must obey orders. But they are subject to a higher law, and you have forced them to break it. That is your crime."

"What crime?" said Rankin.

"We of the Clearchan Confederacy are a race of robots. Our makers implanted one law in us, and then passed on. We have carried our law to all the planets we have colonized. In obeying your orders, these workers were simply following that one law. You must be taken to our capital and there be imprisoned and treated for your crime."

"What law? What crime?"

"Our law," said the giant robot, "is Help Thy Neighbor."