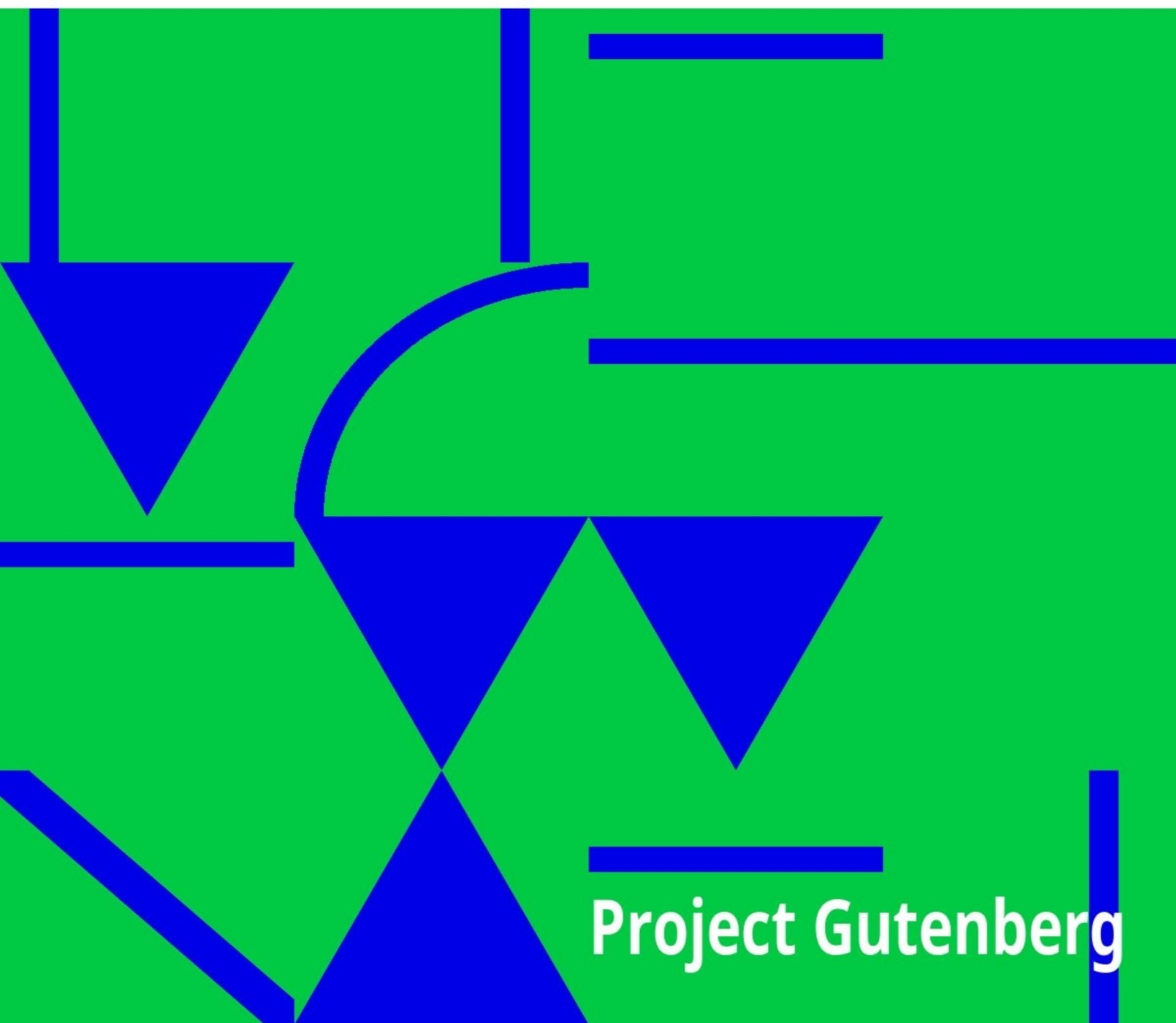


The Success Machine

Henry Slesar



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SUCCESS MACHINE ***

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Mechanical brains are all the rage these days, so General Products just had to have one. But the blamed thing almost put them out of business. Why? It had no tact. It insisted upon telling the truth!

**THE
SUCCESS
MACHINE**

By HENRY SLESAR

THE Personnelovac winked, chittered, chortled, chuckled, and burped a card into the slot. Colihan picked it up and closed his eyes in prayer.

"Oh, Lord. Let this one be all right!"

He read the card. It was pink.

"Subject #34580. Apt. Rat. 34577. Psych. Clas. 45. Last Per. Vac.

"An. 3/5/98. Rat. 19. Cur. Rat. 14.

"Analysis: Subject demonstrates decreased mechanical coordination. Decrease in work-energy per man-hour. Marked increase in waste-motion due to subject's interest in non-essential activities such as horseracing. Indication of hostility towards superiors.

"Recommendation: Fire him."

Colihan's legs went weak. He sat down and placed the card in front of him. Then, making sure he was unobserved, he broke a company rule and began to Think.

Something's wrong, he thought. Something is terribly wrong. Twenty-four pink cards in the last month. Twenty-four out of forty. That's a batting average of— He tried to figure it out with a pencil, but gave it up as a bad job. *Maybe I'll run it through the Averagovac, he thought. But why bother? It's obvious that it's high. There's obviously SOMETHING WRONG.*

The inter-com beeped.

"Ten o'clock department head meeting, Mr. Colihan."

The steel brain was having more fun than people.

"All right, Miss Blanche."

He rose from his chair and took the pink card with him. He stood before the Action Chute for a moment, tapping the card against his teeth. Then, his back stiffened with a sense of duty, and he slipped the card inside.

The meeting had already begun when Colihan took his appointed place. Grimswitch, the Materielovac operator looked at him quizzically. *Damn your eyes, Grimswitch*, he thought. *It's no crime to be three minutes late. Nothing but a lot of pep talk first five minutes anyway.*

"PEP!" said President Moss at the end of the room. He slammed his little white fist into the palm of his other hand. "It's only a little word. It only has three little letters. P-E-P. Pep!"

Moss, standing at the head of the impressive conference table, leaned forward and eyed them fixedly. "But those three little letters, my friends, spell out a much bigger word. A *much* bigger word for General Products, Incorporated. They spell PROFIT! And if you don't know how *profit* is spelled, it's M-O-N-N-E-Y!"

There was an appreciative laugh from the assembled department heads. Colihan, however, was still brooding on the parade of pink cards which had been emerging with frightening regularity from his think-machine, and he failed to get the point.

"Naughty, naughty," Grimswitch whispered to him archly. "Boss made a funny. Don't forget to laugh, old boy."

Colihan threw him a sub-zero look.

"Now let's be serious," said the boss. "Because things *are* serious. Mighty serious. Somewhere, somehow, *somebody's* letting us down!"

The department heads looked uneasily at each other. Only Grimswitch continued to smile vacantly at the little old man up front, drumming his fingers on the glass table top. When the President's machine-gunning glance caught his eyes, Colihan went white. *Does he know about it?* he thought.

"I'm not making accusations," said Moss. "But there is a let-down someplace. Douglas!" he snapped.

Douglas, the Treasurer, did a jack-in-the-box.

"Read the statement," said the President.

"First quarter fiscal year," said Douglas dryly. "Investment capital, \$17,836,975,238.96. Assets, \$84,967,442,279.55. Liabilities, \$83,964,283,774.60. Production costs are—"

Moss waved his hand impatiently. "The meat, the meat," he said.

Douglas adjusted his glasses. "Total net revenue, \$26,876,924.99."

"COMPARISON!" The President screamed. "Let's have last first quarter, you idiot!"

"*Ahem!*" Douglas rattled the paper in annoyance. "Last first quarter fiscal year net revenue \$34,955,376.81. Percent decrease—"

"Never mind." The little old man waved the Treasurer to his seat with a weary gesture. His face, so much like somebody's grandmother, looked tragic as he spoke his next words.

"You don't need the Accountovac to tell you the significance of those figures, gentlemen." His voice was soft, with a slight quaver. "We are not making much p-r-o-f-i-t. We are losing m-o-n-e-y. And the point is—what's the reason? There must be *some* reason." His eyes went over them again, and Colihan, feeling like the culprit, slumped in his chair.

"I have a suggestion," said the President. "Just an idea. Maybe some of us just aren't showing enough p-e-p."

There was a hushed silence.

The boss pushed back his chair and walked over to a cork-lined wall. With a dramatic gesture, he lifted one arm and pointed to the white sign that covered a fourth of it.

"See that?" he asked. "What does it say?"

The department heads looked dubious.

"*Well, what does it say?*" repeated Moss.

"ACT!" The department heads cried in chorus.

"Exactly!" said the little old man with a surprising bellow. "ACT! The word that made us a leader. The word that guides our business destiny. The word that *built* General Products!"

He paced the floor. The chairs in the conference room creaked as the department heads stirred to follow him with their eyes.

"ACT is our motto. ACT is our password. ACT is our key to success. And why not? The Brains do the thinking. All of us put together couldn't think so effectively, so perfectly, so honestly as the Brains. They take the orders, designate raw materials, equipment, manpower. They schedule our work. They analyze our products. They analyze our people."

Colihan trembled.

"There's only one important function left to us. And that's ACT!"

The President bowed his head and walked slowly back to his seat. He sat down, and with great fatigue evident in his voice, he concluded his polemic.

"That's why we must have pep, gentlemen. Pep. Now—how do you spell it?"

"P! E! P!" roared the department heads.

The meeting was over. The department heads filed out.

Colihan's secretary placed the morning mail on his desk. There was a stack of memos at least an inch thick, and the Personnel Manager moaned at the sight of it.

"Production report doesn't look too good," said Miss Blanche, crisply. "Bet we get a flood of aptitude cards from Morgan today. Grimswitch has sent over a couple. That makes eleven from him this month. He really has his problems."

Colihan grunted. *He deserves them*, he thought.

"How did the meeting go?"

"Huh?" Colihan looked up. "Oh, fine, fine. Boss was in good voice, as usual."

"I think there's an envelope from him in the stack."

"What?" Colihan hoped that his concern wasn't visible. He riffled through the papers hurriedly, and came up with a neat white envelope engraved with the words: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT.

Miss Blanche watched him, frankly curious. "That will be all," he told her curtly.

When she had left, he ripped the envelope open and read the contents. It was in Moss's own cramped handwriting, and it was a request for a three o'clock "man-to-man" talk.

Oh, Lord, he thought. *Now it's going to happen.*

President Moss was eating an apple.

He ate so greedily that the juice spilled over his chin.

Sitting behind his massive oak desk, chair tilted back, apple juice dappling his whiskers, he looked so small and unformidable, that Colihan took heart.

"Well, Ralph—how goes it?"

He called me Ralph, thought Colihan cheerfully. *He's not such a bad old guy.*

"Don't grow apples like they used to," the President said. "This hydroponic stuff can't touch the fruit we used to pick. Say, did you ever climb a real apple tree and knock 'em off the branches?"

Colihan blinked. "No, sir."

"Greatest thrill in the world. My father had an orchard in Kennebunkport. Apples by the million. Green apples. Sweet apples. Delicious. Spy. Baldwin." He sighed. "Something's gone out of our way of life, Ralph."

Why, he's just an old dear, thought Colihan. He looked at the boss with new sympathy.

"Funny thing about apples. My father used to keep 'em in barrels down in the basement. He used to say to me, 'Andrew,' he'd say, 'don't never put a sour apple in one of these barrels. 'Cause just one sour apple can spoil the whole derned lot.'" The boss looked at Colihan and took a big noisy bite.

Colihan smiled inanely. Was Moss making some kind of point?

"Well, we can't sit around all day and reminisce, eh, Ralph? Much as I enjoy it. But we got a business to run, don't we?"

"Yes, sir," said the Personnel Manager.

"Mighty big business, too. How's your side of it, Ralph? Old Personnelovac hummin' along nicely?"

"Yes, sir," said Colihan, wondering if he should voice his fears about the Brain.

"Marvelous machine, that. Most marvelous of 'em all, if you ask me. Sizes up a man beautifully. And best of all, it's one hundred percent *honest*. That's a mighty important quality, Ralph."

Colihan was getting worried. The boss's conversation was just a little too folksy for his liking.

"Yes, sir, a mighty fine quality. My father used to say: 'Andrew, an honest man can always look you in the eyes.'"

Colihan stared uncomprehendingly. He realized that Moss had stopped talking, so he looked him squarely in the eyes and said: "He must have been a fine man, your father."

"He was honest," said Moss. "I'll say that for him. He was honest as they come. Did you ever hear of Dimaggio?"

"It sounds familiar—"

"It should. Dimaggio was a legendary figure. He took a lantern and went out into the world looking for an honest man. And do you know something? He couldn't find one. You know, Ralph, sometimes *I* feel like Dimaggio."

Colihan gulped.

"And do you know why? Because sometimes I see a thing like *this*—" the boss's hand reached into the desk and came out with a thick bundle of pink cards—"and I wonder if there's an honest man left in the world."

He put the cards in front of Colihan.

"Now, sir," said Moss. "Let's talk a little business. These cards are all pink. That means dismissal, right? That's twenty-four people fired in the last month, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir," said Colihan unhappily.

"And how many cards went through the Personnelovac this month?"

"Forty."

"So that's twenty-four out of forty. A batting average of—" The boss's brow puckered. "Well. Never mind. But that's quite an unusual record, wouldn't you say so?"

"Yes, sir, but—"

"So unusual that it would call for immediate ACTION, wouldn't it?" The President's face was now stormy.

"Yes, sir. But I checked the Brain—"

"Did you, Ralph?"

"Yes, sir. And the Maintainovac said it was perfect. There's nothing wrong with it."

"*Nothing* wrong? You call twenty-four firings out of forty *nothing*?" The old man stood up, still holding the core of his apple.

"Well, I don't understand it either, Mr. Moss." Colihan felt dew on his forehead. "Nothing seems to satisfy the Brain anymore. It seems to develop higher and higher standards, or something. Why, I'm not sure it wouldn't even fire—"

"WHO?" said Moss thunderously. "WHO wouldn't it even fire?"

The thunder hit Colihan squarely. He swallowed hard, and then managed to say:

"Anybody, sir. Me, for instance."

The President's face suddenly relaxed.

"I'm no tyrant, my boy. You know that. I'm just doing a job, that's all."

"Of course, sir—"

"Well, all I want you to do is keep your eye on things. It could be a coincidence of course. That's the *logical* explanation." He narrowed his eyes. "What do you think, Ralph?"

"Me, sir?" said Ralph, wide-eyed. "I don't *think*, sir. I ACT, sir!"

"Good boy!" The boss chuckled and clapped his hand on Colihan's shoulder. Moss was momentarily satisfied.

The Personnelovac burped.

Colihan picked up the card with a groan. It was pink.

He walked over to the Action Chute and dropped it inside. As it fluttered down below, Colihan shook his head sadly. "Thirty-one," he said.

He placed the next personnel record into the Information chamber. He flipped the lever, and the Personnelovac, now hot with usage, winked, chittered, chortled, and chuckled with amazing speed. The burp was almost joyful as the card popped out. But Colihan's face was far from joyful as he picked it up.

Pink.

"Thirty-two," he said.

The next card was from Grimswitch's department. It was Subject #52098. The number was familiar. Colihan decided to check the file.

"Sam Gilchrist," he said. "*Couldn't* be anything wrong with Sam. Why, he's a blinkin' *genius!*"

Flip. Wink. Chitter. Chortle. Chuckle. BURP!

Pink.

"Poor Sam!" said Colihan.

He fed the other records through quickly.

Pink.

Pink.

PINK.

At the end of the day, Colihan worked laboriously with a blunt-pointed pencil. It took him fifteen minutes for the simple calculation.

"Sixty-seven tests. Twenty-three okay. Forty-four—"

Colihan put his hands to his head. "What am I going to *do*?"

Grimswitch followed Colihan down the hall as he came out of the boss's office for the third time that week.

"Well!" he said fatuously. "Quite the teacher's pet, these days. Eh, Colihan?"

"Go away, Grimswitch."

"On the carpet, eh? Temper a little short? Don't worry." Grimswitch's beefy hand made unpleasant contact with the Personnel man's shoulder. "Your old friends won't let you down."

"Grimswitch, will you please let me alone?"

"Better watch that think-machine of yours," Grimswitch chuckled. "Might fire *you* next, old boy."

Colihan was glad when Morgan, the production operator, hailed Grimswitch away. But as he entered his own office, Grimswitch's words still troubled him. *Grimswitch*, he thought. *That fat piece of garbage. That big blow-hard. That know-it-all.*

Almost savagely, he picked up the day's personnel cards and flipped through them carelessly.

Grimswitch, that louse, he thought.

Then he had the Idea.

If Grimswitch was still chewing the fat with Morgan, then his secretary would be alone—

If he called her and asked for Grimswitch's record—no, better yet, got Miss Blanche to call—

Why not? he thought. *After all, I am the Personnel Manager. Sure, it's a little irregular. He IS a department head. But it's my job, isn't it?*

Colihan flipped the inter-com and proceeded to call Miss Blanche.

His hand shook as he placed Grimswitch's card into the Personnelovac.

The machine, though still heated by the day's activity, seemed to take longer than usual for its chittering, chuckling examination of the pin-holed facts on the record.

Finally, it gave a satisfied burp and proffered the result to Colihan's eager hand.

"Aha!" cried the personnel man gleefully.

He walked over to his desk, wrote a quick note on his memo pad, and placed both note and card into an envelope. He addressed it to: OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT. Then he dropped it into the Action Chute. When it was out of sight, he rubbed his hands together in happy anticipation.

When Miss Blanche announced that President Moss himself was in Colihan's outer lobby, the Personnel Manager spent a hasty minute in straightening up the paper debris on his desk.

The old man came striding into the room, exhibiting plenty of p-e-p, and he seated himself briskly on Colihan's sofa.

"Sharp eyes, Ralph," he said. "Sharp eyes and a quick wit. This business demands it. That was a sharp notion you had, doing a run-through on Grimswitch. Never trusted that back-slapping fellow."

Colihan looked pleased. "Trying to do a job, sir."

"Put your finger on it," said Moss. "Hit the nail on the head. It's just like my father said: 'Trees go dead on the top.' Colihan—" The boss leaned forward confidentially. "I've got an assignment for you. Big assignment."

"Yes, sir!" said Colihan eagerly.

"If Grimswitch is a sour apple, maybe *other* department heads are, too. And who knows? IT knows."

Moss pointed a finger at the Personnelovac.

"I'm rounding up all the aptitude records of the department heads. They'll be in your hands in the next couple of days. Feed 'em in! Root 'em out! Spot the deadwood, Colihan! ACT!"

"ACT!" echoed Colihan, his face flushed.

The old man got up and went over to the Brain.

"Marvelous machine," he said. "Honest. That's what I like about it."

As Moss went out the door, Colihan could have sworn he saw the Personnelovac wink. He walked over to it and fingered the lever. It was turned off, all right.

It was an interesting week for Colihan.

Morgan, the production man, was fired.

Grimswitch came up to see the Personnel man and tried to punch him in the nose. Fortunately, he was a little too drunk, and the blow went wild.

Seegrum, the Shipovac operator, was fired.

Douglas, the Treasurer, was permitted to keep his job, but the Personnelovac issued a dire threat if improvement wasn't rapidly forthcoming.

Wilson, the firm's oldest employee, was fired.

In fact, seven out of General Product's twelve department heads were greeted by the ominous pink card.

Colihan, no longer plagued by doubt, felt that life was definitely worth living. He smiled all the time. His memos were snappier than ever. His heels clicked merrily down the office hallways. He had p-e-p.

Then, the most obvious thing in the world happened—and Colihan just hadn't foreseen it.

His record card came up.

"Have you run through the stack yet?" Miss Blanche asked.

"Er—just about." Colihan looked at her guiltily. He pushed his glasses back on the bridge of his nose. "Couple more here," he said.

"Well, we might as well finish up. Mr. Moss would like to have the schedule completed this afternoon."

"It will be. That's *all*, Miss Blanche."

His secretary shrugged and left. Colihan went to the Personnelovac with the record in his hand. The file number was 630.

"Don't let me down," he told the Brain.

He placed the pin-holed card into the machine and flipped the lever. It winked, chittered, chortled, and chuckled with almost sinister softness. When the card was burped out at the other end, Colihan took it out with his eyes firmly shut.

He walked over to the Action Chute mechanically. His hand hesitated before he dropped it inside. Then he changed his mind, walked back to the desk, and tore the pink card into the smallest possible shreds.

The inter-com beeped.

"Mr. Moss wants you," said his secretary.

"Colihan!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't act so innocent, Colihan. Your report isn't complete. It should have been ready by now."

"Yes, sir!"

"You're not ACTING, Colihan. You're stalling!"

"No, sir."

"Then where's *your* Personnelovac report, Colihan? Eh? Where is it?"

Colihan wrung his hands. "Almost ready, sir," he lied. "Just running it through now, sir."

"Speed it up. Speed it up! Time's a'wastin', boy. You're not *afraid*, are you, Colihan?"

"No, *sir*."

"Then let's have it. No more delay! Bull by the horns! Expect it in an hour, Colihan. Understand?"

"Yes, *sir*!"

The boss clicked off. Colihan groaned audibly.

"What can I do?" he said to himself. He went to the Brain and shook his fist helplessly at it. "Damn you!" he cursed.

He had to think. He had to THINK!

It was an effort. He jerked about in his swivel chair like a hooked fish. He beat his hands on the desk top. He paced the floor and tore at the roots of his hair. Finally, exhausted, he gave up and flopped ungracefully on the office sofa, abandoning himself to the inevitable.

At that precise moment, the mind being the perverse organ it is, he was struck by an inspiration.

The Maintainovac bore an uneasy resemblance to Colihan's own think-machine. Wilson, the oldest employee of General Products, had been the operator of the maintenance Brain. He had been a nice old duffer, Wilson, always ready to do Colihan a favor. Now that he had been swept out in Colihan's own purge, the Personnel Manager had to deal with a new man named Lockwood.

Lockwood wasn't so easy to deal with.

"Stay out of my files, mister," he said.

Colihan tried to look superior. "I'm the senior around here, Lockwood. Let's not forget that."

"Them files is my responsibility." Lockwood, a burly young man, stationed himself between Colihan and the file case.

"I want to check something. I need the service records of my Brain."

"Where's your Requisition Paper?"

"I haven't got *time* for that," said Colihan truthfully. "I need it *now*, you fool."

Lockwood set his face like a Rushmore memorial.

"Be a good fellow, can't you?" Colihan quickly saw that wheedling wasn't the answer.

"All right," he said, starting for the door. "I just wanted to help you."

He opened the door just a crack. Sure enough, Lockwood responded.

"How do you mean, help *me*?"

"Didn't you know?" Colihan turned to face him. "I'm running through an aptitude check on the Personnelovac. Special department head check. Mr. Moss's orders."

"So?"

"I was just getting around to yours. But I figured I'd better make sure the Brain was functioning properly." He grew confidential. "You know, that darned machine has been firing *everyone* lately."

A little rockslide began on Lockwood's stoney face.

"Well ..." he said. "If that's the case—"

"I knew you'd understand," said Colihan very smoothly.

Eagerly, the Personnel Manager collated the records of the Personnelovac. They were far more complex than any employee record, and it took Colihan the better part of an hour.

Any moment he expected to hear the President's angry voice over the inter-com. His anxiety made him fumble, but at last, the job was done.

He slipped the record, marked by a galaxy of pinholes, into the Brain.

"Now we'll see," he said grimly. "Now we'll find out what's eating this monster."

He flipped the switch.

The Personnelovac winked.

It was several minutes before it digested the information in its chamber. Then it

chittered.

It chortled.

It chuckled.

Colihan held his breath until the BURP came.

The card appeared. It read:

"Subject #PV8. Mech. Rat. 9987. Mem. Rat. 9995. Last Per. Vac.

"An. None. Cur. Rat. 100.

"Analysis: Subject operating at maximum efficiency. Equipped to perform at peak level. Is completely honest and does not exhibit bias, prejudice, or sentiment in establishing personnel evaluations. Cumulative increase in mnemonic ability. Analytic ability improving."

Colihan walked slowly over to the Action Chute as he finished reading the card.

"However," it read, "because of mechanistic approach to humanistic evaluation, subject displays inability to incorporate human equation in analytical computation, resulting in technically accurate but humanistically incorrect deductions.

"Recommendation: Fire him."

Colihan dropped the pink card into the chute. In half an hour, the Action wheels of General Products concluded their work, and the Personnelovac had winked for the last time.

THE END

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