

# AREN'T HUMANS LUCKY?

By

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*Lurton Perlock didn't much like robots. And some of them didn't much like him either!*

"Shut up, door," called out Lurton Perlock before the door could even utter a word on his approach. Then he strode straight into the door as though he had expected it to open. He fell backwards uttering nasal moans, hand wrapped around his wounded appendage.

"You've crushed my nose," he yelled, but it came out a little muted. "It's all gone soft. It moves in places where it never used to." He prodded with

a careful forefinger. "Ah," he groaned, "it's done for."

"Master, master," said the door, its eye-stalks waving about in despair, "I only did your bidding. 'Shut up, door,' you said. I can but obey, most generous master. Sir," it added as an afterthought.

Perlock's hand went to his head and tugged at the strands of hair spread sparsely over his scalp. "Quiet, I meant." He stood up and forgot his nose for

a while. "You are perhaps the most stupid door it has ever been my misfortune to pass through -- or attempt to pass through."

"Fair master, reason for my being, I deduced that you could not mean 'Be quiet' as I had not said anything. I deduced wrongly, it seems," concluded the door on a sad note.

"Do you think I'm in the habit of trying to enter doors which I've just told to shut."

He stood there, hands on hips, staring at the door defiantly.

"Humans have funny tastes, master mine, if you will excuse me being personal for a moment. I have heard that some

people actually still keep the knobs on their doors so that they can use them for -'

"DOOR!" screamed Perlock. "That's why I told you to shut up before you said anything. You're a loud-mouthed door."

"I beg to differ, Sir, but I have no mouth at all."

Perlock clenched his teeth until his jaws ached. He thumped his left fist into his right palm, winced a little and said, as calmly as he was able, "For the sake of my sanity open up and

shut up or I'll have you replaced by a hole in the wall." The door slid open, mumbling "Sorry, kind and good master."



Perlock entered and put down the briefcase he carried more for show than use and hung up his leatherette jerkin and helm. A small box on top of his old-fashioned bubblex desk flashed several gay lights at him and said, "Good morning, Sir."

Perlock humphed. He wasn't about to start being civil with robots. His twinging nose reminded him of that. He sat down on the heavy glassulate chair which, like the desk, was ancient but practical (it didn't argue, for one thing) and which was the envy of his acquaintances. But while he allowed himself little luxuries he did not yield to his feelings about mechanisation where work and the customer were concerned.

After all, due to some unfortunate quirk of nature, he had been born the son of the man who had owned this small distribution company for

mechanical contrivances to the world. For someone of his taste it was sacrilege to have to do this work but he had to live - and earn sufficient extra to pay for those little luxuries.

"Any calls?" he asked.

There was a strange humming from the secretary.

"Are you about to break down," he asked, worried in case of expense, "Do you need any new parts?"

"Mr Perlock," said the secretary primly. "Really! I can look after my own parts. I was only trying to make your day pleasant with melody while you waited for me to complete the task you set me in the tiny, but finite, time it would take."

"Oh."

"The information you required, Sir, is as follows: yes, there have been some calls."

Perlock waited a few seconds then said, "Well."

"Well, what, Sir?"

"Well, what calls, dumb robot?"

"I'm sorry, Sir. I thought you were frowning on initiative today. The calls were from Luggoni and Saggermakker, a business whose products are not usually up to our standard, and BiK, the pen people. The former have sent samples. The latter will soon. The samples are on the sample shelf, Sir."

"Surely not," said Perlock, feeling quite pleased with the riposte.

He looked across to the shelf and a tiny pair of eyes looked back at him. He blinked, but the eyes remained. He shuddered at the malevolence of their glare. They were red and threatening.

"Good God," said Perlock. "What did you say was on the sample shelf?"

"Was that question directed at me, Sir, or were you praying?"

Perlock swallowed heavily. "You."

"It is the Luggoni and Saggermakker Home Help, Sir," the secretary replied, flashing knowledgeably.

"But it's looking at me." Perlock was worried.

"It is programmed to keep a careful watch for when help is needed then go to the aid of the housewife without being called. It could be a great time-saver if I may be so bold as to comment, Sir."

Perlock shook his head in astonishment. Before he could reply, the secretary said, "Sir, though this may sound impertinent, I think you should speak to door. He's sulking."

"Forget the door. Make a note to tell Luggoni and ThingyThinger that one primary purpose of a home-help is not to intimidate the housewife." He glanced into the shadows across the room wherein lurked the Home

Help. "It's making me nervous. I think I'll give it a look now."

He was about to stand up when the secretary spoke again. "There are messengers from BiK waiting outside, Sir. I will ask them in."

Before Perlock could say anything the door said, "Just a moment, tell-tale secretary to my beloved master, I think that job enters into my domain."

"You're more pleasant when you are sulking, door. Now don't be so pompous," said the secretary. "I think you will find that it is the secretary's job to decide who comes in or not."

Perlock felt like screaming. He was trying to control himself enough to speak.

"If that is true, little secretary, then what is my function?"

"Why," said the secretary, "to open, of

course, when I decide who to let in."

The door fell silent for a moment then began mumbling, "I'm sure that's not right. I shall look it up in my conditions of employment."

"Shall I open the door now, Sir," asked the secretary.

Perlock parted his lips quickly, trying to get a word in while he had the chance, but the door shouted, "Ah hah, secretary robot, you have to ask our kind master who to allow in. You have no control. You are merely a go-between, relaying the appropriate information to me. I think

"Damn what you think," yelled Perlock, twitching below his left eye. "Let the messenger in. Don't you realise BiK are my largest clients?"

"If I may be allowed to make a comment, oh dream of a master, which may possibly be

misconstrued as an attempt to be humorous in a human way, the clients do not seem to be very large at all."

The door opened and revealed a horde of mouse-sized robots each clinging to a short, blue plastic rod. They staggered forwards, paused, each one seemed to bunch up, then in turn they leaped onto the desk-top. In a gruff and rather static-laden voice one said, "I am asked to convey my masters' apologies with regard to the mode of delivery but the appropriate robot is out of action."

As they laid down their burdens they started to chant in unison,

"BiK BiK BiK writes thin or thick,

And BiK writes quick quick quick."

Perlock leaned towards his secretary and, behind his hand, said, "What are these?"

The secretary swivelled an eye to the small robots. "Free sample distributors, Sir." Then she added, "There's nothing to worry about."

"I wasn't worried, you stupid tin thing." He turned back to the tiny robots and saw they were running towards the door. The door opened and squealed, "See, I let them out without asking you, undoubtably industrious secretary."

Perlock shouted, "You idiot, I wanted to find out something about those pens."

"I'm sorry, sweetest of masters, but the robots are already in the corridor."

"Never mind. I shall perform a brief investigation."

"Why not fone BiK, Sir?" said his secretary.

"And let them think I'm inefficient. Use some common sense."

"I am not equipped with common sense, Sir. Would

extrapolation using relevant data be of any help?"

Perlock drummed his fingers on the desk-top, scattering pens and infuriatingly revealing many tiny scratches from the robots' feet. The twitch worsened. He slowly picked up one of the pens and, under the pretence of examining it, calmed himself. After a long time, he said, "There seems to be little difference between this pen and the last BiK pen we saw. There is a slight haziness at one end that I cannot explain but it doesn't seem to affect the working."

The secretary gave the robotic equivalent of a cough. "Perhaps it is to do with the interior, Sir."

"Very astute," said Perlock, lost in thought. Then he glanced up and looked around. He saw his secretary perched on the desk in front of him. "Hum," he amended, "fairly astute."

He inspected the pen once more. There did not seem to be any place to unscrew it. He twisted and pulled at the plastic but nothing moved. So he decided to break it open. After all, he thought, there are plenty more.

He snapped the pen in half and instantly everything went black, sticky and nasty-tasting. He felt he was drowning in a sea of tacky, dirty water. He also felt very frightened. Then something began buzzing near him and crawling over his clothes and face. He shuddered and raised a hand to brush it off but, before he could, he felt a terrible burning on his face and his hand went to that. He screamed in agony at the same time and something flew into his mouth and began moving around. He spat it out but not before it had squirted a fiery substance down his throat. Then it was too painful to scream. For a second everything

became clear again although it hurt him to open his eyes. He could see his secretary's lights flashing and hear her shouting, "Sir. Sir. Sir."

Then he saw a tiny pair of evil eyes watching him and coming closer before he once more lost his sight. This time, however, his face was covered by something soft and cool. He relaxed in it for a moment before realizing it was becoming so tight he couldn't breath. In a panic, he stood up and began running around the room, waving his arms, trying to get away from his assailant. He smashed into his heavy chair. With a muffled scream he fell to the floor.

As the murderous pain shot up his legs he heard something say, "You have scratched me, dearest master."

Just as he finally sank into oblivion a voice near his ear said, "My lateness

is inexcusable. Apologies," and began chanting:

"BiK writes red. BiK writes blue,

BiK writes every time like new.

Sample, Sir? Sample, Madam?"

**L**urton Perlock awoke in a very white room. There was a calendar clock on the wall and it gave the date as Wednesday. He had been here for a whole day. He sat up horrified and looked around. Must be a hospital, he thought. He touched his face. It was very tender but seemed to be all there. He called for a nurse. One came trundling in.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked.

The nurse, her uniform looking a bit incongruous on her shiny metal body, said, "Well, Sir, since you ask, your nose is too long, your eyes slightly too wide apart and ..."

"Damn robot. I can't move my legs."

"That's not surprising. They're covered in plastex. We repaired your face in a day but your legs will take longer."

"What's the matter with them?" asked Perlock, stealing himself for the worst.

"They're fractured."

"Fractured! I want to speak to my secretary. Get me a fone."

"Please," said the nurse, sweetly.

Perlock gave a splutter. "You're only a robot."

"And you can't move. Bye now." The robot began to leave the room.

"Please," The word came out reluctantly. The nurse continued on her way out. Perlock gulped. "Please," he said, quite loudly.

The nurse turned. "Yes, Sir," she said, and left to return soon with an ancient fone.

Perlock said, "Thank you," to prevent further trouble and dialed his personal code.

"Good morning, caller," he heard his secretary say, "I'm afraid Mr Perlock is late for work."

"I'm not late for work you idiot, I'm in hospital."

"You may well be in hospital, Sir, but Mr Perlock is late for work. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"Damn you, I am Lurton Periock. Are you tone deaf?"

"No, I am not tone deaf, Sir, and you sound very unlike Mr Perlock. Are you perhaps another gentleman with the same name?"

Perlock switched off the fone. His voice did sound a bit peculiar as far as he could tell, he had to admit. His throat still hurt a bit.

"Nurse," he shouted.

"Yes, Sir," said the nurse cheerfully as she rolled

into the room. "Do you require assistance?"

"You're a different nurse, aren't you?" asked Perlock looking at her carefully.

"No, Sir, I'm the same nurse I've always been."

"But you're not the one that came in before."

"That is a correct statement, Sir. I am the second-call nurse. This way we make sure no one nurse is monopolized by any robophile patients."

"Well, second-call nurse, can you take this fone away and get me one with vision?"

"Yes, Sir," replied the nurse but made no move.

Perlock thought for a moment then asked, "Will you take this fone away and get me one with vision?"

"Certainly, Sir. Right away, Sir."

The vision fone was only a few minutes coming and once more

Perlock dialed his number.

As soon as he got through and found himself looking at his box of a secretary, he heard her say, "Mr Perlock, Sir. I think I should tell you I have informed the police that there is a strange man going around impersonating you. He foned me a few minutes ago. I could tell by his voice he wanted to make improper suggestions so I tried to keep him talk-"

"Something," said Perlock, slowly and deliberately, "has happened to my voice. I was hoping you could tell me what."

"Do you mean you want to know what happened yesterday, just before you were taken away by those white robots?"

"Of course. What was wrong with that pen?"

His secretary wriggled an eye-stalk. "There was nothing wrong with it, Sir. It was, I can now

inform you, an experimental pen with a large store of ink in another dimension. To all intents and purposes everlasting. And you broke into the reservoir when you snapped the pen in two."

Perlock's brow wrinkled in thought. He went through what he could remember of the previous day's horror. "What happened after that?"

"The Luggoni and Saggermakker Home Help began to clean the room with a powerful, patented cleanser and it failed to distinguish between you and your surroundings, Sir. Then, realizing that you were in pain it placed bandages about you, but rather indiscriminately. I'm afraid."

The memory returned. "And I fractured my legs when I ran into what I believe was the chair."

"Oh, no, Sir. That happened later. You see,

deducing from your screams that you were in some kind of distress I took the liberty of calling the hospital, and when the robots were sent round door would not let them in. He thought they looked very rough. They were indeed rough, Sir. They broke door down and he fell on your legs."

Perlock sat back, at a loss as to what he could say. Eventually, when he had digested all he had been told he leaned forward. "What's that strange noise? Are you malfunctioning?" he asked the secretary.

The secretary moved the camera so that it was directed onto the floor. "It's door, Sir. I think it's fatal."

The camera showed the door on the floor, eye-stalks twisted peculiarly. Perlock's name-plate was buckled and weird groans issued from the grill.

"Call maintenance, will you. You have my

permission." He went to switch off, then he added, "And expect me in this afternoon."

"Yes, Sir, Goodbye, Sir. I hope your normal voice returns soon, Sir."

He put the fone onto the bedside table and shouted for the nurse. When she arrived he said, "Remove this contraption and get me some clothes."

"Please."

"Just a minute," said Perlock, aggrieved. "I thought you were first-call nurse."

"Odd numbers actually. We're short-staffed."

Perlock glared at the robot. "All right, please."

"You really should not be leaving in your condition but I'm not allowed to prevent you. You'll have some difficulty walking though."

"I do not intend to walk. Kindly fone me a cab."

He looked at the nurse and the nurse scanned

him. "Please," he added, a beaten man.

The nurse's eyes took on a sterner red glow. "We cannot allow our patients to leave this hospital in anything other than our vehicles."

"Well, get me one of your vehicles."

"They are all out on jobs or out of order."

"That's great," shouted Perlock. "I've been hit by a door, drowned in a flood of ink from another dimension, ravaged by a mad Home Help, crushed by the same door and now I'm being thwarted by the petty rules of an inefficient hospital."

The nurse's eyes glowed a pleasant orange again. "Just a moment, Sir. I believe we have a pair of robot crutches. Would those be of any use?"

"Nurse," said Perlock loudly, but with an amount of restraint that surprised him, "anything to get me out of here."

But the nurse was not listening. She was scurrying out of the room and the even-numbered-call nurse was taking her place. "You called, Sir," said the nurse.

Perlock went red. "I was merely shouting at the other stupid robot, not calling you, but," he continued hastily, as the robot turned to leave, "maybe you could get me I some robot crutches."

"How many would you like, Sir?"

Perlock sighed. "Two crutches, PLEASE."

Half an hour later Lurton Perlock found himself being transported along the edge of the street by his pair of robot crutches. There had been no human passers-by, which wasn't surprising as most people travelled by municipal transport. It saved him some embarrassment.

Suddenly, there was a moan from the crutches.

"Keep still. You're upsetting our balance."

"I'm just trying to get comfortable," retorted Perlock. "And be a bit more civil."

"They left our civil circuits out, softy. Now, keep still or we'll lay one on you."

Perlock was speechless but he continued to try to achieve a happier position.

"Right," said the crutches in unison, "we're going back to the hospital. Metal and oil can only stand so much."

"I don't want to go back to the hospital," wailed Perlock.

"Who said anything about you?" inquired the crutches nastily, and they tipped Perlock into the road. When he had recovered his senses the crutches had hopped out of sight.

"Come back," he called in vain.

He sat, stupefied, in the road for a short while then he heard a peculiar noise. He looked up and there, bearing down upon him, was a vast machine, with a profusion of huge steel jaws and arms, crying, "Litterlitterlitterlitter."

"No," screamed Perlock, "I'm human."

The enormous robot screeched to a halt and, through a cloud of exhaust fumes and dust, said, "You're lying in the road, ergo you are rubbish. I have not got all day to argue about your place in the scheme of things."

Perlock went white, whiter when he glanced into the vast, filthy, clashing, metal mouth. He thought quickly. "Does rubbish usually talk to you?"

"One finds some very intelligent rubbish about these days. The time had to come when it began to talk. You rubbish are

getting very clever. Sometimes it takes me a long time to find out where you're hiding sometimes. Luckily, you hadn't the wit to hide. But to call yourself human? Rubbish."

Then it mumbled to itself for a while and said, "Did you hear that, non-human rubbish. It was quite humorous. I said, 'Rubbish' meaning... Just a moment, why am I still talking to you? Besides, now that I think about it you may well be a malfunctioning robot."

One of its eye-stalks wriggled close to Perlock. "In fact, I do believe you are. Well, play the game. Hop in. You're rubbish all right."

Suddenly, as the cleaning robot was reaching out for Perlock, a blue police robot arrived at the scene, one of its enormous blasters at the ready.

"What's all this then?" it asked.

The garbage robot turned to the other and in an aggrieved voice said, "This rubbish is trying to get out of being collected by pretending to be a human. Look," it said as it faced Perlock once more, "it's almost on the pavement."

With a careful flick of one of its many grasping appendages it conveyed Perlock back in front of it.

"It looks suspiciously like a human to me," said the police robot. "Not a very good specimen, but quite possibly human even so."

"I am," yelled Perlock. "Here's my card."

He withdrew the small, plastic identicard and held it to one of the police-robot's eye-stalks.

"Now do you believe me?"

The police robot saluted with a creak and fired a small salvo in Perlock's honour. The cleaning robot mumbled, "Dust on

my lenses again. No proper maintenance,"

"Could one of you please get me to my office now?" asked Perlock, feeling a little more in command of the situation.

"I think that's up to transport. I'll give them a ring."

Perlock heard the police robot muttering into a fone, then it looked at him and said, "There'll be a cab here presently, Sir."

Suddenly, from along the street came a terrible screech and crash. The police robot glanced up. "An accident," it cried joyfully. "Good day, Sir," it shouted as it sped towards the scene.

The cleaning robot revved its motor. "Litterlitterlitterlitter," it chanted joyfully and followed in the tiremarks of the police robot.

Perlock found himself momentarily stunned, though happily so. Then he saw that the traffic which had been swerving

to avoid the police robot was no longer doing so. Hurriedly, he crawled onto the pavement and sat there exhausted. He felt a tap on his shoulder, "Get up, vagrant," said a voice.

Perlock turned. Another police robot, this one slimmer and more humanoid, was there. "Look," said Perlock, "I've been the victim of one mistake already, now go away."

"Watch yourself, vagrant. I saw what happened. You crawled off the road and onto the pavement and that's my territory. I say you're a vagrant. Now get up."

"I can't," said Perlock, in a triumphant voice. "I've fractured my legs."

"Then you want the hospital."

"NO!" shouted Perlock.

"So you're only pretending."

"I've just come from the hospital."

"A likely story. You crawled here from the hospital. Sure." Perlock thought the police robot sounded sceptical.

"I was carried here by two robot crutches which have since departed."

"So robot crutches make a habit of dropping patient in the street."

"I suspect these do. Look, officer, all I want to do is get to my office. Here's my identicard and credit rating."

The robot looked them over. "All right," it said, "I'll call you a cab."

"But..." began Perlock. The robot wasn't listening.

Soon a cab pulled up. "There you are, Sir," said the police robot. "Good afternoon, Sir". It departed.

Perlock then crawled towards the cab. He was getting quite close when another cab pulled up.

"Hey," it shouted "that's my fare."

"Get off," snarled the other. "You must be a rogue cab. A cop called me."

"And a cop called me, too."

"Well, my cop called me first."

"Do you wanna bet?"

Perlock was just about to climb into the first cab when its door slammed and it backed down the street to get a run-up at the other. There was a squealing, grinding noise and they started fighting.

Perlock wept for a while then began crawling. But he hadn't got far when the first police robot returned.

"Accident all sorted, Sir. Then I detected that you were in trouble and, under Regulation **7,459,532** of the Provision of Help to Inadequate Humans in Need of Robot Assistance Act, I can carry you to your destination."

It picked Perlock up, placed him on its vast back, and trundled away.

**S**ome hours later Lurton Perlock was lying on the floor outside his office, croaking, even more sore all over from the violent journey back on a robot unused to the gentle function of carrying humans.

"Open up, door. It's me, your boss."

"I see no-one," said the door. "Is this a joke. Secretary, what day is this?"

"April 4<sup>th</sup> came the reply.

"See, invisible joker," said the door, "you are too late."

"I'm down here, you robotic buffoon," gasped Perlock. "Get me some water."

The door looked down.

"My, my, it is you too, dear late master. Enter, enter pray do."

The door slid open and Perlock crawled in, muttering.

The secretary screamed. "Sir, what's happened? Are you all right? I've been terribly worried."

"We've been terribly worried," corrected the door.

"Water," mumbled Perlock. "Must have water."

His secretary stretched out an arm to the water-cooler then, taking the cup, she placed it on the floor. Perlock drank his fill, and sighed. With great difficulty he climbed onto his chair. The secretary began making soothing noises and placed two aspirins and several tranks on the desk-top.

The door spoke. "Aren't humans lucky, dearest of all masters, to have robots always at hand to look to every need?"

"Door is right, isn't he, Sir," said the secretary.

After she was repaired, she often wondered why her master had thrown her with such vehemence at door.

And, as he told his maintenance robot later, door wondered too.

In the next Awesome issue:

**THE PREPOSTERATOR ....**  
Virgil Benson Clyde

He had invented a machine that could make the wildest things happen. But could he switch it off before it wrecked the planet?