

YOUR GHOST WILL WALK ...

BETTY LIVED FOR THE MOMENTS she spent with Bob, and he, in turn, lived for the moments he spent with her. Naturally, those moments were limited by their duties in the Wade household, but quite often those same duties brought them together, as, for instance, when Bob assisted in the preparation of the nightly outdoor dinner. Their eyes would meet, then, over the sizzling tenderloins or pork chops or frankfurters, and Bob would say, *"You'll love me yet!—and I can tarry your love's protracted growing—"* and Betty would answer with one of her own lines: *"Say over again, and yet once over again, that thou dost love me . . ."*

Sometimes they would become so engrossed in each other that the tenderloins or the chops or the frankfurters would be burned to a crisp—even on the microwave grill, which was supposed to be above such culinary atrocities. On such occasions Mr. Wade would become furious and threaten to have their tapes cut out. Being androids, they could not, of course, distinguish between basic motives and apparent motives, so they did not know that Mr. Wade's threat stemmed from deeper frustrations than burnt tenderloins, chops and frankfurters. But, androids or not, they were aware that without their tapes they would cease to be themselves for each other, and, several times, after Mr. Wade threatened them, they nearly ran away, and—once upon a time—they did . . .

Outdoor living was a cult in the Wade clan. None of them, from tall, exquisitely turned-out Mrs. Wade to little, dominating Dickie Wade, would have dreamed of eating dinner indoors during the summer months, unless it was raining cats and dogs and pitchforks. Grilled tenderloins were as much a part of their lives as the portable TV sets scattered on the disciplined sward, the two custom-built 2025 Cadillacs (Mr. Wade's gold one and Mrs. Wade's silver one) standing like juvenile spaceships in the four-lane driveway, the huge, two-toned double garage, the king-size patio fronting the one-acre ranch-style house, the outdoor swimming pool, and the pleasant vista of forested hills and dales tumbling away around them.

Outdoor living, Mr. Wade was fond of remarking, built sturdy bodies and keen minds. He usually accompanied the remark by flexing his biceps and tensing his pectorals (he was mesomorphic and proud of the fact), and appended to it by pulling out his personal talking cigarette case (he manufactured them), depressing the little button that simultaneously ejected a cigarette and activated the microscopic record containing his latest rhyme (he wrote his own), and listening appreciatively while he lit up:

*Light me up and smoke me,
Blow a ring or two,
I'm a pleasure-packed diversion ...
Created just for you!*

Ordinarily his verse had a soothing effect on him. Tonight, however, the lines irritated him, left him vaguely dissatisfied. He recognized the symptoms: the cigarette-case market was overdue for a new masterpiece, and it was up to him to compose it.

The day at the factory had been a tiring one, and he sat down in his Businessman's Lounger (which had been moved out on the patio for the summer months) and let the automatic massage units go to work on him. He called to Betty to bring him an ice-cold beer. She was leaning across the microwave grill, talking to Bob, and he had to call twice before she responded. Mr. Wade's mood, which was already dark, grew darker yet. Even the ice-cold beer, when Betty finally brought it, failed to have its usual euphoric effect.

He surveyed his domain, endeavoring to revive his spirits by reviewing his possessions. There were his three small sons, squatting, hunched and prone before their portable TV sets; there was his gold and gleaming Caddy waiting to take him wherever he wanted to go; there was his 39-21-39 wife reclining languorously in a nearby lawn chair, absorbing the last rays of the sun; there were his two rebuilt menials preparing the evening meal over the microwave grill, reciting their anachronistic poetry to each other.

Mr. Wade's face darkened to a hue that matched his mood. If they burned the tenderloins again tonight ...

Abruptly he got up and sauntered over to the grill. He caught a fragment of verse as he came up—"I shall never, in the years remaining, paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues—" Then Bob, who had been speaking, lapsed into silence. It was always so. There was something about Mr. Wade's presence that dampened their dialogue. But that was all right, he hastily reassured himself: he couldn't endure their poetry anyway. Nevertheless, he was piqued, and he did something he had never condescended to do before: he came out with some of his own stuff—a poetic gem that dated back to his Early Years when he was still searching for his Muse—and threw it in their faces, so to speak:

*My heart's on the highways,
My hand's at the wheel
Of my brilliant and beautiful
Automobile.*

They looked at him blankly. Mr. Wade knew, of course, that the blankness was no reflection on his art, that it was merely the result of his reference to an object outside the realm of their responses. Mrs. Walhurst, their original owner, had considered it inappropriate to include automobiles in their memory banks, and when Mr. Wade had had them converted, he hadn't bothered to have the deficiency corrected, not only because he hadn't thought it necessary that a maid and a butler should be conversant with such phenomena, but because of the additional expense it would have entailed.

Just the same, his pique intensified, turned into anger. "So maybe it isn't immortal," he said aggressively. "But it's in tune with the times and it pays a tribute to a vital economic factor!"

"Yes, Mr. Wade," Betty said.

"Certainly, Mr. Wade," said Bob.

"The trouble with you two," Mr. Wade went on, "is your lack of respect for an economic system that guarantees the prosperity and the leisure necessary for the creation of art. It's an artist's duty to fulfill his obligations to the system that makes his art possible, and the best way he can do so is by helping to make that system permanent. Maybe no one will make an animated dummy out of me when I'm gone, but my talking cigarette-case line is one of the foundations on which Tomorrow will be built, an economic, practical foundation—not a bunch of silly words that no one wants to hear any more!"

"Silly words . . . ?" Betty said tentatively.

"Yes, silly words! The silly words you two whisper to each other every night when you're supposed to be cooking dinner."

Abruptly Mr. Wade paused and sniffed the air. Something was burning. He didn't have to look far to find out what it was. His anger leaped the fence of his common sense, and he threw up his arms. "I will," he shouted. "So help me I will! I'll have your tapes cut out!" And he turned and strode furiously away.

But he doubted if he ever would. If he did, he'd have to buy new tapes to replace the old ones, and tapes ran into money. Betty and Bob had cost enough already without deliberately letting himself in for more expense!

Still, he reconsidered, resuming his seat on the patio, they hadn't cost anywhere near as much as a pair of made-to-order menials would have. So maybe they were a couple of antediluvian poets: they could—and did—do the work they'd been converted to do. And so maybe they did burn a tenderloin or two now and then and whisper nonsensical verse to each other whenever they got the chance: he was still getting away cheap.

In a way, he'd started a trend. Everybody was buying up eccentric androids now and having them converted for practical tasks. But he'd been the first to see the possibilities. None of the other businessmen who'd attended the auction following Mrs. Wallhurst's death had recognized the potentialities of a pair of androids like Betty and Bob. They'd all stood there on the unkempt lawn in front of Mrs. Walhurst's crumbling Victorian mansion, and when Betty and Bob had been led up on the auctioneer's block, all any of them had done was laugh. Not that there hadn't been sufficient justification

for laughter. Imagine anyone, even a half-cracked old recluse like Mrs. Walhurst, having two *poets* built to order! It was a miracle that Androids, Inc. had even taken on the job, and Lord only knew how much they'd charged her.

Mr. Wade had laughed too, but his reaction hadn't stopped there. His mind had gone into action and he'd taken a good look at the two poets. They'd been a couple of sad-looking specimens all right, with their long hair and period clothing. But just suppose, he had thought: Suppose you were to call them by their informal, instead of their formal, names, and suppose you were to get a good barber and a good hairdresser to go to work on their hair, and a good tailor and a good dressmaker to fit them out in modern clothing—or maybe even uniforms. And then suppose you were to get a good android mechanic to convert them into, say, a—a—why, yes, a maid and a butler!—the very maid and butler Mrs. Wade had wanted for so long. Why, with the money he'd save, he could easily buy the new auto-android *he'd* wanted for so long, to service his and Mrs. Wade's Caddies!

Nobody had bid against him and he'd got them for a song. The cost of converting them had been a little more than he'd anticipated, but when you compared the over-all cost with what a brand-new pair of menials would have set him back, the difference was enormous.

It was also gratifying. Mr. Wade began to feel better. He felt even better after consuming three medium-rare tenderloins (Betty and Bob had made haste to atone for the fiery fate of the first batch), a bowl of tossed salad, a basket of French fries, and another ice-cold beer, and he was his Normal Self again when he got up from the rustic back-yard table for his nightly Walk Around.

It was fun walking over your own land, especially when you owned so much of it. The swimming pool was like a big silvery cigarette case in the light of the rising moon, and the portable TV sets bloomed on the lawn like gaudy chrysanthemums. The staccato sound of the cowboys shooting the Indians blended nicely with the distant hum of the traffic on highway 999.

Mr. Wade's footsteps gravitated, as they so often did of late, to the double garage. Charley had the gold Caddy up on the hydraulic lift and was underneath it, giving it a grease job. Fascinated, Mr. Wade sat down to watch.

Watching Charley was a pastime he never tired of. Charley had cost ten times as much as Betty and Bob, but he was worth every cent of it, from the visor of his blue service-station attendant's cap to the polished tips of his oil-resistant shoes. And he just loved cars. You could see his love in the way he went about his work; you could see it in his shining eyes, in his gentle, caressing hands. It was an inbuilt love, but it was a true love just the same. When Mr. Wade had set down his specifications, the man from Androids, Inc., who had come around to take the order, had objected, at first, to all the car-love Mr. Wade wanted put in. 'We're a bit diffident about installing too much affection in them;' the man from Androids had said. "It's detrimental to their stability."

"But don't you see?" Mr. Wade had said. "If he loves cars, and particularly Caddies, he's bound to do a better job of servicing them. And not only that, I'll keep his case in the garage and leave it open all the time and he'll make a fine guard. Just let anybody try to steal my Caddy, eh?"

"That's precisely the point, Mr. Wade. You see, we wouldn't want any of our products manhandling, or perhaps I should say—ha ha—'android-handling' a human, even if the human in question is a thief. It would be bad publicity for us."

"I should think it would be good publicity," Mr. Wade had said. "Anyway," he went on, in a sharper tone of voice, "if you expect to sell me an auto-android, he's going to love my Caddy and that's all there is to it!"

"Oh, of course, sir. We'll build you anything you like. It's just that I felt duty-bound to point out that affection is an unpredictable quality, even in humans, and—"

"Are you going to make him the way I want him or aren't you!"

"Yes, sir. Androids, Inc. has but one aim in life: Happy Customers. Now what else in the way of personality did you have in mind, sir?"

"Well—" Mr. Wade had cleared his throat. "First of all . . ."

"Good evening, Mr. Wader Charley said, wiping off a fitting.

"Good evening yourself," Mr. Wade said. "How's tricks?"

"Not bad, sir. Not bad." Charley applied the grease gun to the fitting and pumped in precisely the right amount of grease.

"Car in good shape, Charley?"

"Well . . ." The synthetic tissue of Charley's face was one of Android, Inc.'s latest triumphs. He could—and actually did—frown. "I hate to be critical, sir, but I don't think you should take her on newly tarred roads. Her undercarriage is a sight!"

"Couldn't help it, Charley. You can get the stuff off, can't you?"

"In time, sir. In time. It's not that I mind the work, of course. It's the sacrilegious nature of the act itself that irks me. Couldn't you have detoured?"

It was on the tip of Mr. Wade's tongue to say that he could have but that he hadn't, and it was none of Charley's G.D. business anyway. But he caught himself just in time. After all, wasn't this the very reaction he had wanted in an auto-android? And didn't it go to show that Androids, Inc. had built Charley exactly according to specifications?

He said instead, "I'm sorry, Charley. I'll be more considerate next time." Then he got down to the real reason for his visit. "You like poetry, don't you, Charley?"

"I'll say, sir. Especially yours!"

A warm glow began in Mr. Wade's toes, spread deliciously upward to the roots of his hair. "Been mulling over a new rhyme. Kind of like to get your reaction."

"Shoot, sir."

"Goes like this:

*'Smoke me early, smoke me late,
Smoke me if you're underweight.
I'm delightful and nutritious
And decidedly delicious!'"*

"Why, that's terrific, sir! You should really wow 'em with that one! Gee, Mr. Wade, you must be a genius to think up stuff like that."

"Well, hardly a genius."

Charley wiped another fitting, applied the gun. "Oh yes you are, sir!"

"Well..."

Mr. Wade left the garage on light footsteps. He never sang in the shower, but tonight he broke tradition and gave his voice free rein. And all the while he sang, visions danced through his mind—visions of people everywhere, filing into drugstores and smoke shops, saying, "I'd like a Wade Talking Cigarette Case, please"; visions of more and more orders pouring into the factory and the cigarette companies vying with each other for an exclusive option on the new rhyme, and the conveyor belts going faster and faster and the production-line girls moving like figures in a speeded-up movie

"Arthur!"

Mr. Wade turned the shower intercom dial to T. "Yes, dear?"

"It's Betty and Bob," Mrs. Wade said. "I can't find them anywhere!"

"Did you look in the kitchen?"

"I'm in the kitchen now and they aren't here and the dishes are all stacked in the sink and the floor hasn't been swept and—"

"I'll be right there," Mr. Wade said.

He toweled himself hurriedly and slipped into his shirt, shorts and slippers, all the while telling himself what he'd tell *them* when he found them. He'd lay it right on the line this time: either they got on the ball and stayed there or he'd really have their tapes cut out!

Abruptly he remembered that he'd already made the same threat quite a number of times, that he had, in fact, made it that very evening. Was it possible? Could his threatening to have their tapes cut out have had anything to do with—

But of course it couldn't have! They were only androids. What could their tapes possibly mean to

them?

Still ...

He joined Mrs. Wade in the kitchen and together they searched the house from front to back. The children had retired to their rooms with their TV sets sometime earlier and, when questioned, said they'd seen nothing of Betty and Bob either. After the house, Mr. and Mrs. Wade searched the grounds, with the same result. Then they tried the garage, but there was no one there except Charley, who had just finished Mr. Wade's Caddy and was starting in on Mrs. Wade's. No, Charley said, running an appreciative hand along a silvery upswept tailfin, he'd seen nothing of them all evening.

"If you ask me," Mrs. Wade said, "they've run away."

"Nonsense. Androids don't run away."

"Oh yes they do. Lots of them. If you'd watch the newscasts once in a while instead of mooning all the time over what a great poet you are, you'd know about such things. Why, there was a case just the other day. One of those old models like yours, which some other cheapskate thought he could save money on, ran away. A mechanic named Kelly or Shelley or something."

"Well, did they find him?"

"They found him all right. What was left of him. Can you imagine? He tried to cross highway 656!"

Compared to highway 999, highway 656 was a sparsely traveled country road. Mr. Wade felt sick and his face showed it. He'd be in a fine fix if he had to replace Betty and Bob now, after putting up so much for Charley. He'd been a fool for not having had them completely converted in the first place.

The distant hum of the traffic was no longer a pleasant background sound. There was an ominous quality about it now. Abruptly Mr. Wade snapped into action. "Go call the police," he told his wife. "Tell them to get out here right away!"

He turned and headed for his Caddy. On an afterthought he called Charley. "Come along, Charley," he said. "I might need your help." They were nothing but a couple of antique poets, but you never could tell. Charley'd be able to handle them all right, though; Charley could bend a crankshaft with his bare hands.

"Get in," Mr. Wade said, and Charley slid into the seat beside him. Mr. Wade gunned the 750 h.p. motor and the Caddy shot down the drive, tires spinning.

Charley winced. "Mr. Wade, please?"

"Shut up!" Mr. Wade said.

The drive wound around forested hills, dipped deep into night-damp dales. Moonlight was everywhere: on trees and grass and macadam, in the very air itself. But Mr. Wade was unaware of it. His universe had shrunk to the length and breadth and height of the Caddy's headlights.

When his universe remained empty, he began to think that perhaps they hadn't come this way after all, that maybe they'd struck off through the surrounding countryside. Then, rounding the last curve, he saw the two familiar figures far down the drive.

They were about a hundred yards from the highway, walking hand in hand, their shoulders touching. Mr. Wade swore. The fools, he thought. The ridiculous fools? Talking about the moon, probably, or some equally asinine subject, and walking serenely to their deaths!

He slowed the Caddy when he came opposite them, and drove along beside them. If they saw the car, they gave no evidence of it. They were strolling dreamily, talking now and then in low voices. Mr. Wade hardly recognized their faces.

"Betty," he called. "Bob! I've come to take you home."

They ignored him. Completely. Utterly. Furious, he stopped the car. Abruptly it occurred to him that he was acting like a fool, that they couldn't possibly react to him as long as he remained in the Caddy, because automobiles, not being included in their memory banks, could have no reality for them.

He got out his cigarette case, intending to light a cigarette and perhaps calm himself—

*Light me up and smoke me,
Blow a ring or two,
I'm a pleasure-packed diversion ...*

Created just for you!

For some reason the rhyme infuriated him all the more, and he jammed the cigarette case back in his pocket and got out and started around the car. In his eagerness to reach Betty and Bob, he skirted the left front fender too closely, and the case, which had become wedged in the opening of his pocket, scraped screechingly along the enamel.

Mr. Wade stopped in his tracks. Instinctively he wet his finger and ran it over the long ragged scar. "Look, Charley," he wailed. "See what they made me do!"

Charley had got out on the other side, had walked around the car and was now standing in the moonlight a few paces away. There was a strange expression on his face. "I could kill them," Mr. Wade went on. "I could kill them with my bare hands!"

Betty and Bob were moving away from the car, still walking hand in hand, still talking in low voices. Beyond them the highway showed, a deadly river of hurtling lights. Bob's voice drifted back:

*"Your ghost will walk, you lover of trees,
(If our loves remain)
In an English lane,
By a cornfield side a-flutter with poppies . . . "*

And suddenly Mr. Wade knew. He wondered why the answer hadn't occurred to him before. It was so simple, and yet it solved everything. Betty and Bob would be completely destroyed and yet at the same time their usefulness in the Wade ménage would be enhanced. Come to think of it, though, he'd subconsciously supplied half of the answer every time he'd threatened to have their tapes cut out. It was only the second half that had eluded him: *replace those tapes with tapes containing his own poetry!*

Exhilaration flooded him. "All right, Charley," he said. "Go get them. Go get the lousy outdated bastards! . . . Charley?"

Charley's expression was more than merely strange now. It was frightening. And his eyes—"Charley!" Mr. Wade shouted. "I gave you an order. Obey it!"

Charley said nothing. He took a tentative step toward Mr. Wade. Another. For the first time Mr. Wade noticed the 12-inch crescent wrench in his hand. "Charley!" he screamed. "I'm your owner. Don't you remember, Charley? I'm your owner!" He tried to back away, felt his buttocks come up against the fender. Frenziedly he raised his arms to protect his face; but his arms were flesh and bone and the wrench was hardened steel, as were the sinews of the arm that wielded it, and it descended, not deviating an iota from the terrified target of Mr. Wade's face, and he slid limply down the side of the fender to the macadam and lay there in the widening pool of his blood.

Charley got the flashlight and the auto-first-aid kit out of the trunk and, kneeling by the fender, began to repaint the ragged wound.

The road was a weird and winding Wimpole Street. They walked along it, hand in hand, lost in a world they'd never made, a world that had no room for them, not even for their ghosts.

And before them, in the alien night, the highway purred and throbbed. It waited . . .

"How do I love thee—" Betty said.

"The year's at the spring—" said Bob.

Making love, say?

The happier they!

Draw yourself up from the light of the moon,

And let them pass, as they win too soon,

With the bean flowers boon,

And the blackbird's tune,

And May, and June! ...

