

Gordy is perhaps best known for the group of stories and novels involving Dorsai – the world which produces as its only export the finest mercenary soldiers in known space. (The Hugo-winning "Soldier, Ask Not" is part of this cycle, which is itself only a part of a much larger scheme Gordy calls the Childe Cycle. Ultimately this should involve historical novels, mainstream novels, and possibly a series of concertos for the kazoo – if I recall correctly.) The Dorsai are among the most memorable characters in sf, dark and somber and inflexibly honorable to a man; not (as Gordy has said) men of the military, but men of war. The following story is the only representation of the Dorsai Saga in this collection – and a strikingly atypical one (well, the typical ones are already heavily anthologized). It is also one of my personal favorites. History says that very often it is the people who do the most for their race that suffer most greatly: Prometheus, Moses, and a Nazarene carpenter come to mind. But the Law of Karma insists that the books always balance in the end – that inherent in every destruction is an . . .

ACT OF CREATION

Now that I have had time to think it over, the quite commonsense explanation occurs to me that old Jonas Wellman must have added an extra, peculiar circuit to cause the one unusual response. He was quite capable of it, of course – technically, that is. And I don't know but what he was equally capable of it psychologically. Nevertheless, at the time, the whole thing shook me up badly.

I had gone up to see him on a traditionally unpleasant duty. His son, Alvin, had been in my outfit at the time of Flander's Charge, off the Vegan Warhold. The boy was liaison officer from the Earth Draft, and he went with the aft gun platform, the Communications Dorsai Regulars, when we got

pinched between a light cruiser and one of those rearmed freighters the Vegans filled their assault line with.

The cruiser stood off at a little under a thousand kilometers and boxed us with her light guns. While we were occupied, the freighter came up out of the sun and hit us with a CO beam, before we caught her in our laterals and blew her to bits. It was their CO beam that did it for Alvin and the rest.

At any rate, Alvin had been on loan to us, so to speak, and, as commanding officer, I owed a duty-call to his surviving relatives. At that time, I hadn't connected his last name – Wellman – with Jonas Wellman. Even if I had, I would have had to think a long minute before remembering just who Jonas Wellman was.

Most people using robots nowadays never heard of him. Of course, I had, because we Dorsai mercenaries were the first to use them in combat.

When I did make the connection, I remember it struck me as rather odd, because I had never heard Alvin mention his father.

I had duty time-off after that – and, since we were in First Quadrant area, I shuttled to Arcturus and took the short hop to Sol. I had never been on the home world before and I was rather interested to see what Earth looked like. As usual, with such things, it was somewhat of a disappointment. It's a small world, anyway, and, since it lost its standing as a commercial power, a lot of the old city areas have been grubbed up and turned into residential districts.

In fact, the planet is hardly more than one vast suburb, nowadays. I was told that there's a movement under way to restore some of the old districts as historical shrines, but they'd need Outsystem funds for that, and I can't, myself, see many of the large powers sparing an appropriation at the present time.

Still, there's something about the planet. You can't forget that this was where we all started. I landed in the South Pacific, and took a commuter's rocket to the Mojave. From there, I put in a call to Jonas Wellman, who lived someplace north and west of the mountain, range there – I forget the name of it. He was pleased to hear from me, and invited me up immediately. I located one of these little automatic taxi-ships, and we pattered north by northwest for about half an hour and finally set down in a small parking area

in the Oregon woods. There was nothing there but the glassy rectangle of the area itself, plus an automatic call station for the taxis. A few people were waiting around for their ships to arrive, and, as I sat down, what looked like an A-5 robot came across the field to meet me.

When he got close, I saw he wasn't an A-5, but something similar – possibly something a bit special that Jonas had designed for himself.

"Commandant Jiel?" he asked.

"That's right," I said.

I followed him across the parking area, toward a private hopper. The few people we passed on the way turned their backs as we passed, with a deliberateness and uniformity that was too pointed to be accidental.

For a moment, it occurred to me that I might be the cause of their reaction – certain creeds and certain peoples, who have experienced wars, have no use for the mercenary soldier.

But this was the home world nobody would think of attacking, even if they had a reason for doing so, which, of course, Earth will never be able to give them, as long as the large powers exist.

Belatedly, it occurred to me that the robot with me might be the cause. I turned to look at him. An A-5 – particularly an A-5 – is built to resemble the human form. This was, as I have said, a refined model. I mulled the matter over, trying to phrase the question, so I could get information out of the mechanical.

"Are there Anti-R's in the community here?" I asked finally.

"Yes, sir," he said.

Well, that explained it. The AR's are, in general, folk with an unpleasant emotional reaction to robots. They are psychopathic in my opinion and in that of any man who has used robots commercially or for military purposes. They find robots resembling the human form – particularly the A-5 model and the rest of the A-series – *obscene, disgusting*, and so forth. Some worlds which have experienced wars are almost completely AR.

I didn't, however, expect to find it on Earth, especially so close to the home of Jonas Wellman. Still, a prophet in his own country, or however the old saying goes.

We took a ground car, which the robot drove, and, eventually, reached a

curious anachronism of a house, set off in the woods by itself. It was a long, rambling structure, made in frame of native stone and wood, the only civilized thing about it being vibratory weather-screens between the pillars of the frame, to keep out the rain and wind.

It had a strange aura about it, as if it were a dwelling place, old not so much in years as in memories, as if something about it went back to the very dawn of the race. The rain and the falling night, as we approached it, heightened this illusion so that the tall pines, clustered closely about house and lawn, seemed almost primeval, seemed to enclose us in an ancestral past.

Yet, the house itself was cheerful. It's lighting was inlaid in the archaic framing, and it glowed internally, with a subdued, casual illumination that did not dim the flames in a wide, central fireplace. Real flames from actual burning wood – not an illusion! It touched me, somehow. Few people, unless they have seen the real article, appreciate the difference between the actual flames of a real fire, and those of an illusion.

I, who have experienced the reality, on strange planets, of a need for warmth and light, know the difference very well. It is a subjective reaction, not easily put into words. Perhaps, if you will forgive my straining to be fanciful, who am not a fanciful man, it's this – there are stories in the real flames. I know it can mean nothing to those of you who have never seen it but – try it for yourself, sometime.

"Adam, come here," I ordered



Illustration by RICK BRYANT

Jonas Wellman, himself, came forward to meet me, when we stepped through the front screen lens. He was a short, slim man, a little bent about the shoulders, who had let his hair go completely white. He had a gnome's face, all wrinkled, sad and merry in the same instant. He came forward and held out his hand.

"Commandant Jiel," he said.

His voice was as warm as the hissing flames of his fireplace. I took his hand without hesitation, for I am no hater of old traditions.

"Good of you to come," he said. "Sorry about the rain. The district requires

it for our trees, and we like our trees around here."

He turned and led the way to a little conversation-area. The robot glided on silent feet behind us, towering over both of us. Though I have the hereditary Dorsai height, the A-5 run to a two-and-a-quarter-meter length, which is possibly one of the reasons the AR dislike them so.

"Sit down, Commandant, sit down, please," Jonas said. "Adam, would you bring us some drinks, please? What would you like, Commandant?"

"Plain ethyl and water, thanks," I said. "It's what we get used to on duty."

He smiled at me in the light of the fire, which was dancing to our right and throwing ruddy lights on his time-marked face.

"Whatever is your pleasure," he said.

The robot brought the glasses. Jonas was drinking something also colorless. I remember I meant to ask him what it was, but never got around to doing so. Instead, I asked him about the robot.

"Adam?" I said. Jonas chuckled.

"He was to be the first of a new series," he answered.

"I didn't mean that," I said. "I meant your naming him at all. Very few people do, nowadays."

"The vogue has passed," he said. "But I've had him for a long time, and I live alone here." The last words reminded us both of my errand, and he stopped rather abruptly. He hurried back into conversation, to bridge the gap. "I suppose you know about my connection with robotics and robots?"

"We used them on Kemelman for land scouts, first, eighty years or so back."

"That's right," he said, his gnome's face saddening a little. "I'd forgotten."

"They were very successful."

"I suppose they were – militarily." He looked squarely at me, suddenly. "No offense to you Dorsai, Commandant, but I was not in favor of military use of my robots. Only – the decision was taken out of my hands. I lost control of the manufacturing and licensing rights early."

"No offense," I said, but I looked at him curiously. "I didn't know that."

"Oh, yes," he said. "It was a little too big for one man, anyway. First the Earth Council grabbed it, then the Solar Commission. Then it went out in all directions, with every system grabbing a chunk and setting up their own manufactories and regulators."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Don't be." He shook his head, sticking out his lower lip like someone deprecating something already so small as to be beneath notice. "It was probably inevitable. Then, I think my robots have done more harm than good in the long run, no matter what's been accomplished with them." He shook his head again, smiling. "Not that I was always so resigned to the situation."

"No?"

"No – I had my dreams, when I was younger. To build a better universe, to better people – I was an idealist."

"An idealist?" I repeated. "I don't know the word."

"It's an old one," he answered. "Almost lost its meaning, now. It means – well, that you have a very high opinion of the human race, or people. That you expect the best of them, and want the best for them."

I laughed. "It sounds like being in love with everyone at once."

He nodded, smiling.

"Something like that, Commandant – perhaps not so violent. Tone it down a little and call it being fond of people. I'm a fond sort of person, I suppose. I've been fond of a great many things. Of people, of my robots, of my first wife, of . . ." His voice trailed off and he looked into the firelight. He sighed.

"Perhaps," he added, "you'd better tell me about my son, now, Commandant."

I told him briefly. It is always best that way. Make it like a news report, impersonal, then sit back for the questions. There are always the questions. Jonas Wellman was no different. He sat a little longer than most, after I had finished, staring into the fire, but he came to it at last.

"Commandant," he said, "what did you think of Alvin?"

"Why," I told him, "I didn't know him too well, you know. He was liaison officer from another outfit – almost a visitor aboard our ship. We had different customs, and he kept pretty much to himself." I stopped, but when I saw him still waiting, I had to go on. "He was very quiet, a good sort of officer, not self-conscious with us Dorsai, the way a lot of outsiders are . . ."

I talked on, trying to bring my memory of Alvin Wellman back into focus, but it was not too good. You try to remember the best on these occasions, to forget the worst. The truth was, there was very little to remember. Young Wellman had been like a ghost among us. The only clear memory I could bring to mind was of his sitting back in his corner of the table at mess, his pale young features withdrawn from the place and the technical conversation that went on among the rest of us.

"He was a good man," I wound up finally. "We all liked him."

"Yes." The old man lifted his face from the flames. "He was drafted, you know."

"Oh?" I said – although, of course, I had known it perfectly well. It was why we had called the Solar Contingent the Earth Draft among ourselves. None of them had any real stake in the war, and few had wanted to come. It was Arcturus' doing, as everybody knew. The home system is under Arcturus' thumb, and probably always will be. But you don't tell that to an old man who has lost his only son in a war resulting from such a situation.

"His mother never wanted him to go – but there was no choice." Jonas picked up his drink, sipped it, as an old man will, then put it down again. But his voice was a little stronger when he went on.

"His mother was my second wife, you know. We separated when Alvin was six. That was – that was . . ." His voice took on a fretful note. For the first time a true note of his age rang through it. "When was that, Adam?"

"Eighteen years ago," said the robot suddenly, startling me. I had almost forgotten that he was still with us. His voice, coming unexpectedly out of the fire-cast shadows behind us, made me start.

"Oh, yes – yes. Eighteen years ago," said Jonas, with a sigh of pleasure and relief. He looked over at me with something that was almost like shyness. "Adam is my memory," he said. "Everything that I forget, he remembers – everything! Tell the Commandant what the house was like, then, Adam."

"It was as it is now," said the robot. "The lawn was the same, except that we had a bed of roses along the south edge."

"Ah, yes – those roses," said Jonas, nodding. "Alvin was very fond of those roses. Even as a baby – even when he stuck himself with the thorns."

"Did they have thorns?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes," he answered. "Yes, indeed. I'm very old-fashioned in some ways, Commandant, as you can tell by this house. Something in me has always yearned toward the past. That's why I like it here, with the trees all around me and the mountains standing over and behind them, unchanging, year after year."

"And you were the man who came up with the first practical humanoid robots," I said.

"Why should that surprise you?" He looked at me almost wonderingly. "I didn't intend them to lead us farther away from old virtues, but back to them again."

I shook my head. "I don't see how," I said.

"Why, I wanted to set people free," he said. "I wanted to unite their hands, and their minds. The average man is essentially good, Commandant. A hundred and forty years of life have never changed my mind about that. He wants to be fond of his fellowman and will, given half a chance."

I shook my head again, but without saying anything. I did not want to argue with him.

"Love is life," he said, "and life is love. All the accidents in the world can't prove that false. Did the accident that took my first wife's life prove that I didn't love her when she was alive? Did the accidental combination of political powers that took my robots from me negate the love for people that caused me to create those robots in the first place?"

"Did the accident that my second wife never really loved me deny the life that was given to Alvin, or my love for him, or his for me – before she took him away? I tell you, he loved me as a baby – didn't he, Adam?"

"He loved you, Jason."

"And I was very fond of him. I was already an old man then. I didn't remarry for many, many years, after my first – my Elaine – died. I thought I would never marry again. But then she came along – and she gave me Alvin. But then she took him away again, for no good reason, except that she knew I was fond of him, and wanted him. She was very bitter against me for not having what she believed I had when she married me." He paused.

"Money," said the robot quietly.

"Yes, money. She thought I still controlled some part of the robot franchise, here in the system, that no one knew about. She was too cautious, too clever, to check fully before she married me. After we were married, it was too late.

"She tried to make a go of it, though, which is much more than another woman might have done in her place. She gave me Alvin. But she had never really liked me, and her dislike grew worse and worse, until she couldn't stand it. So she left me, and took him."

He stopped. The fire flickered on the pillars of the house.

"That's too bad," I said awkwardly. "It – is she still alive?"

"No." He said it abruptly. "She died shortly after Alvin was drafted. I went to see her, but she wouldn't see me. And so, she died. It was then I learned that Alvin was gone. She hadn't told me about the draft."

"I see," I said.

"I was fond of her, too – still," he went on. "But it hurt me that I had not been able to see my son, before he went off to die, so many millions and millions of miles away. If she had left him with me as a boy, I would have taught him to love people, to love everything as I myself have. Perhaps he would have been a success, where I have been a failure." He flung up his head and turned suddenly to the robot.

"Adam, I've been a failure!" he cried.

"No," said the robot.

The old man heaved a heavy sigh. Slowly, the tension leaked out of him, and he slumped back in his chair. His eyes were abstracted, and on the fire.

"No," I said. "In my opinion, you're no failure, Mr. Wellman. You have to judge success or failure by concrete things. You set out to give robots to people, and you did. That's the one big accomplishment of your life."

"No." He shook his head, his eyes still locked in the heart of the fire. "Love is life. Love should create life to some good, purposeful end. I poured out my love, and all I created came to a dead end. Not the theory, but I fell down. I have Adam tell me that I didn't but this is the sort of soothing syrup an old man feeds himself. Well . . ."

He roused himself. He looked at me and I was surprised at the change in Wellman's face. The sad and merry lines were all fallen into the still mask of

great age. It was a face which sees at once the empty future and the lid of the coffin closing soon upon it.

"I get tired quickly nowadays," he said. "If you'll forgive me, Commandant, I'll have Adam take you back to the taxi-area. Thank you for coming this long distance to tell me about Alvin."

He held out his hand. I took it briefly, and stood up. "It's nothing," I said.

"We mercenaries spend our lives in moving from one place to another. I was close as star-distances go. Good-bye, Mr. Wellman."

He looked up at me from the depths of his chair. "One thing, Commandant," he said. "Just one more thing – were people fond – did the men on your ship really *like* Alvin?"

"Why . . ." I said, fumbling, for the truth was that none of us had known the young man well enough to like or dislike him – and the question had caught me off balance. "Why – they liked him well enough."

The old man sagged. "Yes," he said. His downcast eyes, as if drawn by some force greater than the life within him, wandered back to the fire. "Well, thank you again, Commandant."

"It was nothing. Good-bye," I said.

I offered my hand again, but he did not see it. He was seated staring into the flames, seeing something could not imagine. I left him that way.

Outside, the robot opened the door of the ground car for me and slid behind the controls himself. The rain had stopped falling, but the night was heavy and dark. We moved silently down the road, man and mechanical, behind a little yellow pool of light dancing before us from the headlights.

For some time, I sat without saying anything, thinking to myself of odd things the old man's words had somehow conjured up within me – memories of the Dorsai Worlds, of Hevflum, my planet, of the cobalt seas beside our home in Tunisport, of the women of our family – of my grandfather, probably dead by now. What I thought about them, I don't know. I only know that I *did* think of them, one after the other, like a man counting over his possessions.

I roused myself at last, to become conscious of the robot beside me. We were almost at the parking-area, and I could make out my waiting taxi, parked off to one side in the shadows.

"Over there," I directed the robot.

"Yes, sir," he said.

He turned the ground car a trifle in that direction, and we rolled up beside the taxi. He got out, went around to open the door on my side of the car, and let me out. I stepped from floor cushion to the glassy surface of the area and looked at the tall, black metal body of the robot, a full head above me in height.

"Adam . . ." I said.

"Sir?"

But I found I had no words for what seemed to be inside me.

"Nothing," I said.

I stepped up to the entrance of the taxi, closed the door behind me, and moved forward, into the pilot's seat. Out through the window beside me, I could see Adam standing silently, his head now at last a little below mine. I started the engine, then, on sudden impulse, throttled back to idling-power and set the window down. I leaned out of it.

"Adam, come here," I ordered.

The robot took two steps forward, so that he was standing just below the window.

"When you get back to Mr. Wellman," I said, "give him the following message from me. Say that – that. . ."

But it was no use. There was still nothing for me to say. I wanted, with a strange desperation, to send some word to Jonas Wellman, to prove to him that he was not alone in the world, that his love had not failed in its task of creation as we both knew it had. But what could I say in the face of the facts?

"Never mind. *Cancel!*" I said angrily, and turned away, reaching for the throttle. But, just as my hand touched it, the robot's voice drew me back to the window.

"Commandant," it said.

I turned and looked out. The robot had taken a step nearer, and, as I looked, his head swiveled back on its smooth bearings, his face raised to mine. I remember the twin dull gleam of his red eye-lens scanners coming up to me in the shadowy dimness, like two embers in a fire uncovered by a

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breath and glowing into sudden life.

"Rest easy, Commandant," he said. "I love him."

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