

A BAD DAY FOR SALES

by **Fritz Leiber**

The big bright doors of the office building parted with a pneumatic whoosh and Robie glided onto Times Square. The crowd that had been watching the fifty-foot-tall girl on the clothing billboard get dressed, or reading the latest news about the Hot Trucescrawl itself in yard-high script, hurried to look.

Robie was still a novelty. Robie was fun. For a little while yet, he could steal the show. But the attention did not make Robie proud. He had no more emotions than the pink plastic giantess, who dressed and undressed endlessly whether there was a crowd or the street was empty, and who never once blinked her blue mechanical eyes. But she merely drew business while Robie went out after it.

For Robie was the logical conclusion of the development of vending machines. All the earlier ones had stood in one place, on a floor or hanging on a wall, and blankly delivered merchandise in return for coins, whereas Robie searched for customers. He was the demonstration model of a line of sales robots to be manufactured by Shuler Vending Machines, provided the public invested enough in stocks to give the company capital to go into mass production.

The publicity Robie drew stimulated investments handsomely. It was amusing to see the TV and newspaper coverage of Robie selling, but not a fraction as much fun as being approached personally by him. Those who were usually bought anywhere from one to five hundred shares, if they had any money and foresight enough to see that sales robots would eventually be on every street and highway in the country.

Robie radarred the crowd, found that it surrounded him solidly, and stopped. With a carefully built-in

sense of timing, he waited for the tension and expectation to mount before he began talking.

“Say, Ma, he doesn’t look like a robot at all,” a child said. “He looks like a turtle.”

Which was not completely inaccurate. The lower part of Robie’s body was a metal hemisphere hemmed with sponge rubber and not quite touching the sidewalk. The upper was a metal box with black holes in it. The box could swivel and duck.

A chromium-bright hoopskirt with a turret on top.

“Reminds me too much of the Little Joe Paratanks,” a legless veteran of the Persian War muttered, and rapidly rolled himself away on wheels rather like Robie’s.

His departure made it easier for some of those who knew about Robie to open a path in the crowd.

Robie headed straight for the gap. The crowd whooped.

Robie glided very slowly down the path, deftly jogging aside whenever he got too close to ankles in skylon or sockassins. The rubber buffer on his hoopskirt was merely an added safeguard.

The boy who had called Robie a turtle jumped in the middle of the path and stood his ground, grinning foxily.

Robie stopped two feet short of him. The turret ducked. The crowd got quiet.

“Hello, youngster,” Robie said in a voice that was smooth as that of a TV star, and was, in fact, a recording of one.

The boy stopped smiling. “Hello,” he whispered.

“How old are you?” Robie asked.

“Nine.No, eight.”

“That’s nice,” Robie observed. A metal arm shot down from his neck, stopped just short of the boy.

The boy jerked back.

“For you,” Robie said.

The boy gingerly took the redpolly-lop from the neatly fashioned blunt metal claws, and began to unwrap it.

“Nothing to say?” asked Robie.

“Uh—thank you.”

After a suitable pause, Robie continued, “And how about a nice refreshing drink of Poppy Pop to go with yourpolly-lop?” The boy lifted his eyes, but didn’t stop licking the candy. Robie waggled his claws slightly. “Just give me a quarter and within five seconds—“

A little girl wriggled out of the forest of legs. “Give me apolly-lop, too, Robie,” she demanded.

“Rita, come back here!” a woman in the third rank of the crowd called angrily.

Robie scanned the newcomer gravely. His reference silhouettes were not good enough to let him distinguish the sex of children, so he merely repeated, “Hello, youngster.”

“Rita!”

“Give me apolly-lop!”

Disregarding both remarks, for a good salesman is singleminded and does not waste bait, Robie said winningly, “I’ll bet you read Junior Space Killers. Now I have here—“

“Uh-uh, I’m a girl. He got a pony-lop.”

At the word “girl,” Robie broke off. Rather ponderously, he said, “I’ll bet you read Gee-Gee Jones, Space Stripper. Now I have here the latest issue of that thrilling comic, not yet in the stationary vending machines. Just give me fifty cents and within five—“

“Please let me through. I’m her mother.”

A young woman in the front rank drawled over her powder-sprayed shoulder, “I’ll get her for you,” and slithered out on six-inch platform shoes. “Run away, children,” she said nonchalantly. Lifting her arms behind her head, she pirouetted slowly before Robie to show how much she did for her bolero half-jacket and her form-fitting slacks that melted into skylon just above the knees. The little girl glared at her. She ended the pirouette in profile.

At this age-level, Robie’s reference silhouettes permitted him to distinguish sex, though with occasional amusing and embarrassing miscalls. He whistled admiringly. The crowd cheered.

Someone remarked critically to a friend, “It would go over better if he was built more like a real robot.

You know, like a man.”

The friend shook his head. “This way it’s subtler.”

No one in the crowd was watching the newsprint overhead as it scribbled, “Ice Pack for Hot Truce? Vanahdin hints Russ may yield onPakistan .”

Robie was saying, “... in the savage new glamor-tint we have christened Mars Blood, complete with spray applicator and fit-all fingerstalls that mask each finger completely except for the nail. Just give me five dollars—uncrumpled bills may be fed into the revolving rollers you see beside my arm—and within five seconds—“

“No, thanks, Robie,” the young woman yawned.

“Remember,” Robie persisted, “for three more weeks, seductivizing Mars Blood will be unobtainable from any other robot or human vendor.”

“No, thanks.”

Robie scanned the crowd resourcefully. “Is there any gentleman here . . .” he began just as a woman elbowed her way through the front rank.

“I told you to come back!” she snapped at the little girl.

“But I didn’t get mypolly- lop!”

“...who would care to . . .”

“Rita!”

“Robie cheated. Ow!”

Meanwhile, the young woman in the half-bolero had scanned the nearby gentlemen on her own. Deciding that there was less than a fifty per cent chance of any of them accepting the proposition Robie seemed about to make, she took advantage of the scuffle to slither gracefully back into the ranks. Once again the path was clear before Robie.

He paused, however, for a brief recapitulation of the more magical properties of Mars Blood, including a telling phrase about “the passionate claws of a Martian sunrise.”

But no one bought. It wasn’t quite time. Soon enough silver coins would be clinking, bills going through the rollers faster than laundry, and five hundred people struggling for the privilege of having their money taken away from them by America’s first mobile sales robot.

But there were still some tricks that Robie had to do free, and one certainly should enjoy those before starting the more expensive fun.

So Robie moved on until he reached the curb. The variation in level was instantly sensed by his under-scanners. He stopped. His head began to swivel. The crowd watched in eager silence. This was Robie’s best trick.

Robie’s head stopped swiveling. His scanners had found the traffic light. It was green. Robie edged forward. But then the light turned red. Robie stopped again, still on the curb. The crowd softly ahhed its delight.

It was wonderful to be alive and watching Robie on such an exciting day. Alive and amused in the fresh, weather-controlled air between the lines of bright skyscrapers with their winking windows and under a sky so blue you could almost call it dark.

(But way, way up, where the crowd could not see, the sky was darker still. Purple-dark, with stars showing. And in that purple-dark, a silver-green something, the color of a bud, plunged down at better than three miles a second. The silver-green was a newly developed paint that foiled radar.)

Robie was saying, “While we wait for the light, there’s time for you youngsters to enjoy a nice refreshing Poppy Pop. Or for you adults—only those over five feet tall are eligible to buy—to enjoy an exciting Poppy Pop fizz. Just give me a quarter or—in the case of adults, one dollar and a quarter; I’m licensed to dispense intoxicating liquors —and within five seconds ...”

But that was not cutting it quite fine enough. Just three seconds later, the silver-green bud bloomed above Manhattan into a globular orange flower. The skyscrapers grew brighter and brighter still, the brightness of the inside of the Sun. The windows winked blossoming white fire-flowers.

The crowd around Robie bloomed, too. Their clothes puffed into petals of flame. Their heads of hair were torches.

The orange flower grew, stem and blossom. The blast came. The winking windows shattered tier by tier, became black holes. The walls bent, rocked, cracked. A stony dandruff flaked from their cornices. The flaming flowers on the sidewalk were all leveled at once. Robie was shoved ten feet. His metal hoopskirt dimpled, regained its shape.

The blast ended. The orange flower, grown vast, vanished overhead on its huge, magic beanstalk. It grew dark and very still. The cornice-dandruff pattered down. A few small fragments rebounded from the metal hoopskirt.

Robie made some small, uncertain movements, as if feeling for broken bones. He was hunting for the traffic light, but it no longer shone either red or green.

He slowly scanned a full circle. There was nothing anywhere to interest his reference silhouettes. Yet when-ever he tried to move, his under-scanners warned him of low obstructions. It was very puzzling. The silence was disturbed by moans and a crackling sound, as faint at first as the scampering of distant rats. A seared man, his charred clothes fuming where the blast had blown out the fire, rose from the curb. Robie scanned him.

“Good day, sir,” Robie said. “Would you care for a smoke? A truly cool smoke? Now I have here a yet unmarketed brand ...”

But the customer had run away, screaming, and Robie never ran after customers, though he could follow them at a medium brisk roll. He worked his way along the curb where the man had sprawled, carefully keeping his distance from the low obstructions, some of which writhed now and then, forcing him to jog. Shortly he reached a fire hydrant. He scanned it. His electronic vision, though it still worked, had been somewhat blurred by the blast.

“Hello, youngster,” Robie said. Then, after a long pause, “Cat got your tongue? Well, I have a little present for you. A nice, lovely polly-lop.”

“Take it, youngster,” he said after another pause. “It’s for you. Don’t be afraid.”

His attention was distracted by other customers, who began to rise oddly here and there, twisting forms that confused his reference silhouettes and would not stay to be scanned properly. One cried, “Water,” but no quarter clinked in Robie’s claws when he caught the word and suggested. “How about a nice refreshing drink of Poppy Pop?”

The rat-crackling of the flames had become a jungle muttering. The blind windows began to wink fire again.

A little girl marched, stepping neatly over arms and legs she did not look at. A white dress and the once taller bodies around her had shielded her from the brilliance and the blast. Her eyes were fixed on Robie. In them was the same imperious confidence, though none of the delight, with which she had watched him earlier.

“Help me, Robie,” she said. “I want my mother.”

“Hello, youngster,” Robie said. “What would you like? Comics? Candy?”

“Where is she, Robie? Take me to her.”

“Balloons? Would you like to watch me blow up a balloon?”

The little girl began to cry. The sound triggered off another of Robie’s novelty circuits, a service feature that had brought in a lot of favorable publicity.

“Is something wrong?” he asked. “Are you in trouble? Are you lost?”

“Yes, Robie. Take me to my mother.”

“Stay right here,” Robie said reassuringly, “and don’t be frightened. I will call a policeman.” He whistled shrilly, twice.

Time passed. Robie whistled again. The windows flared and roared. The little girl begged. “Take me away, Robie,” and jumped onto a little step in his hoopskirt.

“Give me a dime,” Robie said.

The little girl found one in her pocket and put it in his claws.

“Your weight,” Robie said, “is fifty-four and one-half pounds.”

“Have you seen my daughter, have you seen her?” a woman was crying somewhere. “I left her watching that thing while I stepped inside—Rita!”

“Robie helped me,” the little girl began babbling at her. “He knew I was lost. He even called the police, but they didn’t come. He weighed me, too. Didn’t you, Robie?”
But Robie had gone off to peddle Poppy Pop to the members of a rescue squad which had just come around the corner, more robotlike in their asbestos suits than he in his metal skin.