ISAAC ASIMOV

THE MONKEY'S FINGER

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes,” said Marmie Tallinn, in sixteen different inflections and pitches, while the Adam's apple in his long neck bobbed convulsively. He was a science fiction writer.

“No,” said Lemuel Hoskins, staring stonily through his steel-rimmed glasses. He was a science fiction editor.

“Then you won't accept a scientific test. You won't listen to me. I'm outvoted, eh?” Marmie lifted himself on his toes, dropped down, repeated the process a few times, and breathed heavily. His dark hair was matted into tufts, where fingers had clutched.

“One to sixteen,” said Hoskins.

“Look,” said Marmie, “what makes you always right? What makes me always wrong?”

“Marmie, face it. We're each judged in our own way. If magazine circulation were to drop, I'd be a flop. I'd be out on my ear. The president of Space Publishers would ask no questions, believe me. He would just look at the figures. But circulation doesn't go down; it's going up. That makes me a good editor. And as for you-when editors accept you, you're a talent. When they reject you, you're a bum. At the moment, you are a bum.”

“There are other editors, you know. You're not the only one.” Marmie held up his hands, fingers outspread. “Can you count? That's how many science fiction magazines on the market would gladly take a Tallinn yarn, sight unseen.”

“Gesundheit,” said Hoskins.

“Look,” Marmie's voice sweetened, “you wanted two changes, right? You wanted an introductory scene with the battle in space. Well, I gave that to you. It's right here.” He waved the manuscript under Hoskin's nose and Hoskin moved away as though at a bad smell.

“But you also wanted the scene on the spaceship's hullcut into with a flashback into the interior,” went on Marmie, “and that you can't get. If I make that change, I ruin an ending which, as it stands, has pathos and depth and feeling.”

Editor Hoskins sat back in his chair and appealed to his secretary, who throughout had

been quietly typing. She was used to these scenes.

Hoskins said, “You hear that, Miss Kane? He talks of pathos, depth, and feeling. What does a writer know about such things? Look, if you insert the flashback, you increase the Suspense; you tighten the story; you make it more valid.”

“How do I make it more valid?” cried Marmie in anguish. “You mean to say that having a bunch of fellows in a spaceship start talking politics and sociology when they're liable to be blown up makes it more valid? Oh, my God.”

“There's nothing else you can do. If you wait till the climax is past and then discuss your politics and sociology, the reader will go to sleep on you.”

“But I'm trying to tell you that you're wrong and I can prove it. What's the use of talking when I've arranged a scientific experiment-”

“What scientific experiment?” Hoskins appealed to his secretary again. “How do you like that, Miss Kane. He thinks he's one of his own characters.”

“It so happens I know a scientist.”

“Who?”

“Dr. Arndt Torgesson, professor of psychodynamics at Columbia.”

“Never heard of him.”

“I suppose that means a lot,” said Marmie, with contempt. “You never heard of him. You never heard of Einstein until your writers started mentioning him in their stories.”

“Very humorous. A yuk. What about this Torgesson?”

“He's worked out a system for determining scientifically

the value of a piece of writing. It's a tremendous piece of work. It's-it's-”

“ And it's secret?”

“Certainly it's secret. He's not a science fiction professor. In science fiction, when a man thinks up a theory, he announces it to the newspapers right away. In real life, that's not done. A scientist spends years on experimentation sometimes before going into print. Publishing is a serious thing.”

“Then how do you know about it? Just a question.”

“It so happens that Dr. Torgesson is a fan of mine. He happens to like my stories. He happens to think I'm the best fantasy writer in the business.”

“ And he shows you his work?”

“That's right. I was counting on you being stubborn about this yam and I've asked him to run an experiment for us. He said he would do it if we don't talk about it. He said it would be an interesting experiment. He said-”

“What's so secret about it?”

“Well-” Marmie hesitated. “Look, suppose I told you he had a monkey that could type Hamlet out of its head.”

Hoskins stared at Marmie in alarm. “What are you working up here, a practical joke?” He turned to Miss Kane. “When a writer writes science fiction for ten years he just isn't safe without a personal cage.”

Miss Kane maintained a steady typing speed.

Marmie said, “You heard me; a common monkey, even funnier-looking than the average editor. I made an appointment for this afternoon. Are you coming with me or not?”

“Of course not. You think I'd abandon a stack of manuscripts this high”-and he indicated his larynx with a cutting motion of the hand-”for your stupid jokes? You think I’ll play straight man for you?”

“If this is in any way a joke, Hoskins, I’ll stand you dinner in any restaurant you name. Miss Kane's the witness.”

Hoskins sat back in his chair. “You’ll buy me dinner? You, Marmaduke Tallinn, New York's most widely known tapeworm-on-credit, are going to pick up a

check?”

Marmie winced, not at the reference to his agility in

overlooking a dinner check, but at the mention of his name in all its horrible trysyllabicity. He said, “I repeat. Dinner on me wherever you want and whatever you want. Steaks, mushrooms, breast of guinea hen, Martian alligator, anything.”

Hoskins stood up and plucked his hat from the top of the filing cabinet.

“For a chance,” he said, “to see you unfold some of the old-style, large-size dollar bills you've been keeping in the false heel of your left shoe since nineteen-two-eight, I'd walk to Boston…”

Dr. Torgesson was honored. He shook Hoskin's hand warmly and said, “I've been reading Space Yarns ever since I came to this country, Mr. Hoskins. It is an excellent magazine. I am particularly fond of Mr. Tallinn's stories.”

“You hear?” asked Marmie. “I hear. Marmie says you have a monkey with talent, Professor.”

“Yes,” Torgesson said, “but of course this must be confidential. I am not yet ready to publish, and premature publicity could be my professional ruin.”

“This is strictly under the editorial hat, Professor.”

“Good, good. Sit down, gentlemen, sit down.” He paced the floor before them. “What have you told Mr. Hoskins about my work, Marmie?”

“Not a thing, Professor.”

“So. Well, Mr. Hoskins, as the editor of a science fiction magazine, I don't have to ask you if you know anything about cybernetics.”

Hoskins allowed a glance of concentrated intellect to ooze out past his steel-rims. He said, “Ah, yes. Computing machines-M.I.T.-Norbert Weiner-” He mumbled some more.

“Yes. Yes.” Torgesson paced faster. “Then you must know that chess-playing computers have been constructed on cybernetic principles. The rules of chess moves and the object of the game are built into its circuits. Given any position on the chess board, the machine can then compute all possible moves together with their consequence and choose that one which offers the highest probabilityof winning the game. It can even be made to take the temperament of its opponent into account.”

“Ah, yes,” said Hoskins, stroking his chin profoundly.

Torgesson said, “Now imagine a similar situation in which a computing machine can be given a fragment of a literary work to which the computer can then add words from its stock of the entire vocabulary such that the greatest literary values are served. Naturally, the machine would have to be taught the significance of the various keys of a typewriter. Of course, such a computer would have to be much, much more complex than any chess player.”

Hoskins stirred restlessly. “The monkey, Professor. Marmie mentioned a monkey.”

“But that is what I am coming to,” said Torgesson. “Naturally, no machine built is sufficiently complex. But the human brain-ah. The human brain is itself a computing machine. Of course, I couldn't use a human brain. The law, unfortunately, would not permit me. But even a monkey's brain, properly managed, can do more than any machine ever constructed by man. Wait! I'll go get little Rollo.”

He left the room. Hoskins waited a moment, then looked cautiously at Marmie. He said, “Oh, brother!”

Marmie said, “What's the matter?”

“What's the matter? The man's a phony. Tell me, Marmie, where did you hire this faker?”

Marmie was outraged. “Faker? This is a genuine professor's office in Fayerweather Hall, Columbia. You recognize Columbia, I hope. You saw the statue of Alma Mater on 116th Street. I pointed out Eisenhower's office.”

“Sure, but-”

“And this is Dr. Torgesson's office. Look at the dust.” He blew at a textbook and stirred up clouds of it. “The dust alone shows it's the real thing. And look at the title of the book; Psychodynamics of Human Behavior, by Professor Arndt Rolf Torgesson.”

“Granted, Marmie, granted. There is a Torgesson and this is his office. How you knew the real guy was on vacation and how you managed to get the use of his office, I don't know. But are you trying to tell me that this comicwith his monkeys and computers is the real thing? Hah!”

“With a suspicious nature like yours, I can only assume

you had a very miserable, rejected type of childhood.”

“Just the result of experience with writers, Marmie. Ihave my restaurant all picked out and this will cost you a pretty penny.”

Marmie snorted, “This won't cost me even the ugliest penny you ever paid me. Quiet, he's coming back.”

With the professor, and clinging to his neck, was a very melancholy capuchin monkey.

“This,” said Torgesson, “is little Rollo. Say hello, Rollo.”

The monkey tugged at his forelock.

The professor said, “He's tired, I'm afraid. Now, I have a piece of his manuscript right here.”

He put the monkey down and let it cling to his finger while he brought out two sheets of paper from his jacket pocket and handed them to Hoskins.

Hoskins read, “ 'To be or not to be; that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a host of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; No more: and, by a sleep to say we-' “

He looked up. “Little Rollo typed this?”

“Not exactly. It's a copy of what he typed.”

“Oh, a copy. Well, little Rollo doesn't know his Shakespeare. It's 'to take arms against a sea of troubles.' “

Torgesson nodded. “You are quite correct, Mr. Hoskins. Shakespeare did write 'sea.' But you see that's a mixed metaphor. You don't fight a sea with arms. You fight a host or army with arms. Rollo chose the monosyllable and typed 'host.' It's one of Shakespeare's rare mistakes.”

Hoskins said, “Let's see him type.”

“Surely.” The professor trundled out a typewriter on a little table. A wire trailed from it. He explained, “It is necessary to use an electric typewriter as otherwise the physical effort would be too great. It is also necessary to wire little Rollo to this transformer.”

He did so, using as leads two electrodes that protrudedan eighth of an inch through the fur on the little creature's skull.

“Rollo,” he said, “was subjected to a very delicate brain operation in which a nest of wires were connected to various regions of his brain. We can short his voluntary activities and, in effect, use his brain simply as a computer. I'm afraid the details would be-”

“Let's see him type,” said Hoskins. “What would you like?”

Hoskins thought rapidly. “Does he know Chesterton's 'Lepanto'?”

“He knows nothing by heart. His writing is purely computation. Now, you simply recite a little of the piece so that he will be able to estimate the mood and compute the consequences of the first words.”

Hoskins nodded, inflated his chest, and thundered, “White founts falling in the courts of the sun, and the Soldan of Byzantium is smiling as they run. There is laughter like the fountains in that face of all men feared; it stirs the forest darkness, the darkness of his beard: it curls the blood-red crescent, the crescent of his lips; for the inmost sea of all the world is shaken by his ships-”

“That's enough.” said Torgesson. There was silence as they waited. The monkey regarded the typewriter solemnly.

Torgesson said, “The process takes time, of course. Little Rollo has to take into account the romanticism of the poem, the slightly archaic flavor; the strong sing-song rhythm, and so on.”

And then a black little finger reached out and touched a key. It was a t.

“He doesn't capitalize,” said the scientist, “or punctuate, and his spacing isn't very reliable. That's why I usually retype his work when he's finished.”

Little Rollo touched an h, then an e and a y. Then, after a longish pause, he tapped the space bar.

“They,” said Hoskins. The words typed themselves out: “they have dared the white repub lics upthe capes of italy they have dashed the adreeatic roundthe lion of the sea; and the popehas throw n his arms abroa dfor agoni and loss and called the kings of chrissndom for sords about the cross.”

“My God!” said Hoskins.

“That's the way the piece goes then?” asked Torgesson. “For the love of Pete!” said Hoskins.

“If it is, then Chesterton must have done a good, consistent job.”

“Holy smokes!” said Hoskins.

“You see,” said Marmie, massaging Hoskins's shoulder, “you see, you see, you see. You see,” he added.

“I'll be damned,” said Hoskins.

“Now look,” said Marmie, rubbing his hair till it rose in clusters like a cockatoo's chest, “let's get to business. Let's tackle my story.”

“Well but-”

“It will not be beyond little Rollo's capacity,” Torgesson assured him. “I frequently read little Rollo parts of some of the better science fiction, including some of Marmie's tales. It's amazing how some of the yarns are improved.”

“It's not that,” said Hoskins. “Any monkey can write better SF than some of the hacks we've got. But the Tallinn story is thirteen thousand words long. It'll take forever for the monk to type it.”

“Not at all, Mr. Hoskins, not at all. I shall read the story to him, and at the crucial point we will let him continue.”

Hoskins folded his arms. “Then shoot. I'm ready.”

“I,” said Marmie, “am more than ready.” And he folded his arms.

Little Rollo sat there, a furry little bundle of cataleptic misery, while Dr. Torgesson's soft voice rose and fell in cadence with a spaceship battle and the subsequent struggles of Earthmen captives to recapture their lost ship.

One of the characters made his way out to the spaceship hull, and Dr. Torgesson followed the flamboyant events in mild rapture. He read:

“…Stalny froze in the silence of the eternal stars. Hisaching knee tore at his consciousness as he waited for the monsters to hear the thud and-”

Marmie yanked desperately at Dr. Torgesson's sleeve. Torgesson looked up and disconnected little Rollo.

“That's it,” said Marmie. “You see, Professor, it's just about here that Hoskins is getting his sticky little fingers into the works. I continue the scene outside the spaceship till Stalny wins out and the ship is back in Earth hands. Then I go into explanations. Hoskins wants me to break that outside scene, get back inside, halt the action for two thousand words, then get back out again. Ever hear such crud?”

“Suppose we let the monk decide,” said Hoskins.

Dr. Torgesson turned little Rollo on, and a black shriveled finger reached hesitantly out to the typewriter. Hoskins and Marmie leaned forward simultaneously, their heads

coming softly together just over little Rollo's brooding body. The typewriter punched out the letter t.

“T,” encouraged Marmie, nodding. “T,” agreed Hoskins.

The typewriter made an a, then went on at a more rapid rate: “take action stalnee waited in helpless hor ror forair locks toyawn and suited laroos to emerge relentlessly-”

“Word for word,” said Marmie in raptures. “He certainly has your gooey style.”

“The readers like it.”

“They wouldn't if their average mental age wasn't-” Hoskins stopped.

“Go on,” said Marmie, “say it. Say it. Say their IQ is that of a twelve-year-old child and I'll quote you in every fan magazine in the country.”

“Gentlemen,” said Torgesson, “gentlemen. You'll disturb little Rollo.”

They turned to the typewriter, which was still tapping steadily: “-the stars whelled in ther mightie orb its as stalnees earthbound senses insis ted the rotating ship sto od still.”

The typewriter carriage whipped back to begin a new line. Marmie held his breath. Here, if anywhere, would come-

And the little finger moved out and made: * Hoskins yelled, “Asterisk!”

“Marmie muttered, “ Asterisk.” Torgesson said, “ Asterisk?”

A line of nine more asterisks followed.

“That's all, brother,” said Hoskins. He explained quickly to the staring Torgesson, “With Marmie, it's a habit to use a line of asterisks when he wants to indicate a radical shift of scene. And a radical shift of scene is exactly what I wanted.”

The typewriter started a new paragraph: “within the ship-”

“Turn it off, Professor,” said Marmie.

Hoskins rubbed his hands. “When do I get the revision Marmie?”

Marmie said coolly, “What revision?”

“You said the monk's version.”

“I sure did. It's what I brought you here to see. That little Rollo is a machine; a cold, brutal, logical machine.”

“Well?”

“And the point is that a good writer is not a machine. He doesn't write with his mind, but with his heart. His heart.” Marmie pounded his chest.

Hoskins groaned. “What are you doing to me, Marmie? If you give me that heart-and-soul-of-a-writer routine, I'll just be forced to turn sick right here and right now. Let's keep all this on the usual I'll-write-anything-for-money basis.”

Marmie said, “Just listen to me for a minute. Little Rollo corrected Shakespeare. You pointed that out for yourself. Little Rollo wanted Shakespeare to say, 'host of troubles,' and he was right from his machine standpoint. A 'sea of troubles' under the circumstances is a mixed metaphor. But don't you suppose Shakespeare knew that, too? Shakespeare just happened to know when to break the rules, that's all. Little Rollo is a machine that can't break the rules, but a good writer can, and must. 'Sea of troubles' is more impressive; it has roll and power. The hell with the mixed metaphor.

“Now, when you tell me to shift the scene, you're following mechanical rules on maintaining suspense, so of course little Rollo agrees with you. But I know that I must break the rules to maintain the profound emotional impact of the ending as I see it. Otherwise I have a mechanical product that a computer can turn out.”

Hoskins said, “But-”

“Go on,” said Marmie, “vote for the mechanical. Say that little Rollo is all the editor you'll ever be.”

Hoskins said, with a quiver in his throat, “ All right, Marmie, I'll take the story as is. No, don't give it to me; mail it. I've got to find a bar, if you don't mind.”

He forced his hat down on his head and turned to leave. Torgesson called after him. “Don't tell anyone about little Rollo, please.”

The parting answer floated back over a slamming door, “Do you think I'm crazy?…”

Marmie rubbed his hands ecstatically when he was sure Hoskins was gone.

“Brains, that's what it was,” he said, and probed one finger as deeply into his temple

as it would go. “This sale I enjoyed. This sale, Professor, is worth all the rest I've ever made. All the rest of them together.” He collapsed joyfully on the nearest chair.

Torgesson lifted little Rollo to his shoulder. He said mildly, “But, Marmaduke, what would you have done if little Rollo had typed your version instead?”

A took of grievance passed momentarily over Marmie's face. “Well, damn it,” he said, “that's what I thought it was going to do.”