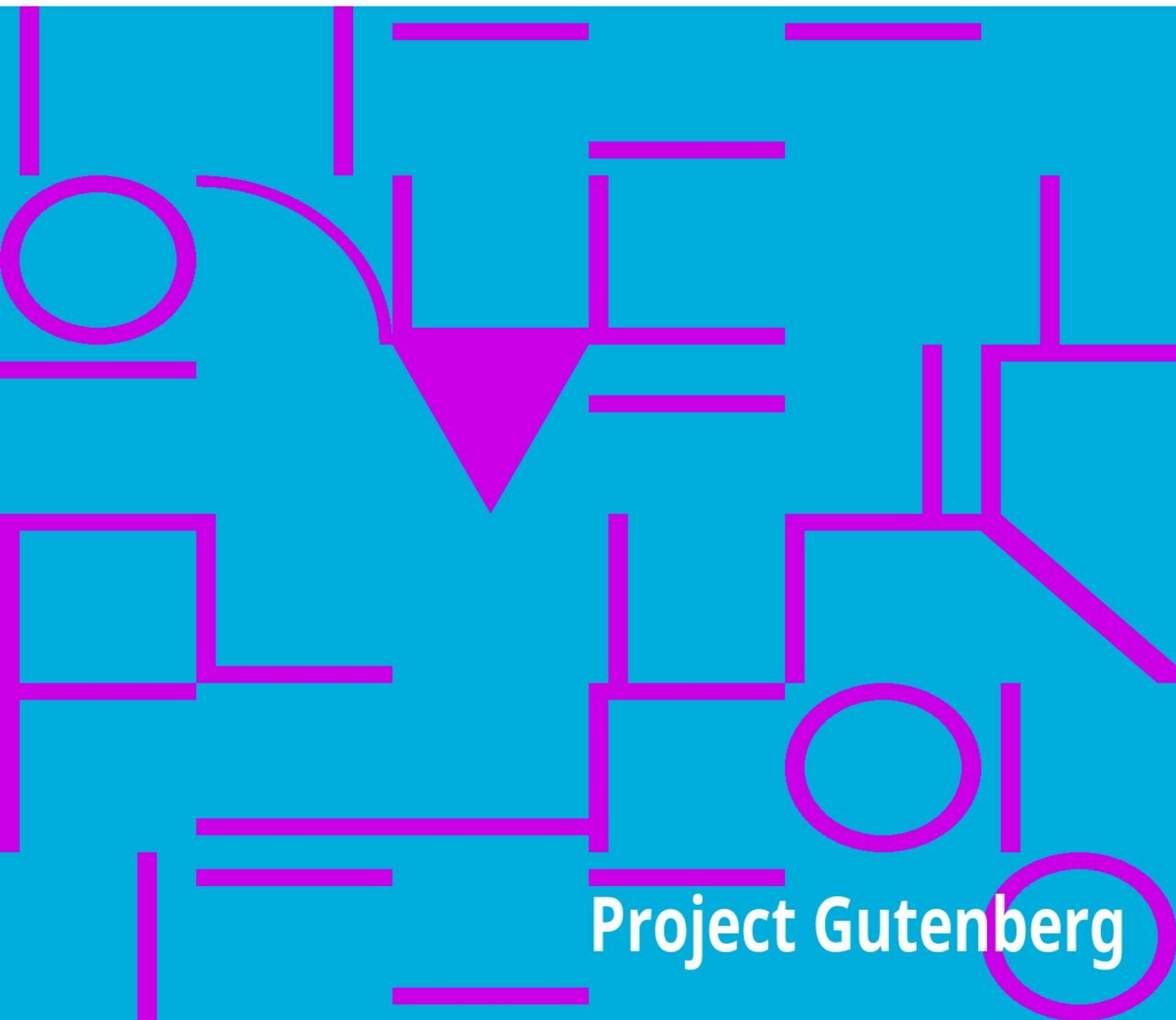


There Will Be School Tomorrow

V. E. Thiessen



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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THERE WILL BE SCHOOL TOMORROW ***

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You will possibly shudder, but you will certainly remember for a long time, this story of what happens when Tomorrow's gently implacable teachers are faced with a problem for which there seems to be only one solution....

there

will

be

school

tomorrow

by ... V. E. Thiessen

There is a quiet horror to this story from Tomorrow....

EVENING had begun to fall. In the cities the clamor softened along the streets, and the women made small, comfortable, rattling noises in the kitchens. Out in the country the cicadas started their singing, and the cool smell began to rise out of the earth. But everywhere, in the cities and in the country, the children were late from school.

There were a few calls, but the robotic telephone devices at the schools gave back the standard answer: "The schools are closed for the day. If you will leave a message it will be recorded for tomorrow."

The telephones between houses began to ring. "Is Johnny home from school yet?"

"No. Is Jane?"

"Not yet. I wonder what can be keeping them?"

"Something new, I guess. Oh, well, the roboteachers know best. They will be home soon."

"Yes, of course. It's foolish to worry."

The children did not come.

After a time a few cars were driven to the schools. They were met by

the robots. The worried parents were escorted inside. But the children did not come home.

And then, just as alarm was beginning to stir all over the land, the robots came walking, all of the robots from the grade schools, and the high schools, and the colleges. All of the school system walking, with the roboteachers saying, "Let us go into the house where you can sit down." All over the streets of the cities and the walks in the country the robots were entering houses.

"What's happened to my children?"

"If you will go inside and sit down—"

"What's happened to my children? Tell me now!"

"If you will go inside and sit down—"

Steel and electrons and wires and robotic brains were inflexible. How can you force steel to speak? All over the land the people went inside and sat nervously waiting an explanation.

There was no one out on the streets. From inside the houses came the sound of surprise and agony. After a time there was silence. The robots came out of the houses and went walking back to the schools. In the cities and in the country there was the strange and sudden silence of tragedy.

The children did not come home.

The morning before the robots walked, Johnny Malone, the Mayor's son, bounced out of bed with a burst of energy. Skinning out of his pajamas and into a pair of trousers, he hurried, barefooted, into his mother's bedroom. She was sleeping soundly, and he touched one shoulder hesitantly.

"Mother!"

The sleeping figure stirred. His mother's face, still faintly shiny with hormone cream, turned toward him. She opened her eyes. Her voice was irritated.

"What is it, Johnny?"

"Today's the day, mommy. Remember?"

"The day?" Eyebrows raised.

"The new school opens. Now we'll have roboteachers like everyone else. Will you fix my breakfast, mother?"

"Amelia will fix you something."

"Aw, mother. Amelia's just a robot. This is a special day. And I want my daddy to help me with my arithmetic before I go. I don't want the roboteacher to think I'm dumb."

His mother frowned in deepening irritation. "Now, there's no reason why Amelia can't get your breakfast like she always does. And I doubt if it would be wise to wake your father. You know he likes to sleep in the morning. Now, you go on out of here and let me sleep."

Johnny Malone turned away, fighting himself for a moment, for he knew he was too big to cry. He walked more slowly now and entered his father's room. He had to shake his father to awaken him.

"Daddy! Wake up, daddy!"

"What in the devil? Oh, Johnny." His father's eyes were sleepily bleak. "What in thunder do you want?"

"Today's the first day of roboteachers. I can't work my arithmetic. Will you help me before I go to school?"

His father stared at him in amazement. "Just what in the devil do you think roboteachers are for? They're supposed to teach you. If you knew arithmetic we wouldn't need roboteachers."

"But the roboteachers may be angry if I don't have my lesson."

Johnny Malone's father turned on one elbow. "Listen, son," he said. "If those roboteachers give you any trouble you just tell them you're the Mayor's son. See. Now get the devil out of here. What's her name—that servorobot—Amelia will get your breakfast and get you off to school. Now suppose you beat it out of here and let me go back to sleep."

"Yes, Sir." Eyes smarting, Johnny Malone went down the stairs to the kitchen. It wasn't that his parents were different. All the kids were fed and sent to school by robots. It was just that—well today seemed sort of special. Downstairs Amelia, the roboservant, placed hot cereal on the table before him. After he had forced a few bites past the tightness in his throat, Amelia checked the temperature and his clothing and let him out the door. The newest school was only a few blocks from his home, and Johnny could walk to school.

The newest school stood on the edge of this large, middlewestern city. Off to the back of the school were the towers of the town, great monolithic skyscrapers of pre-stressed concrete and plastic. To the front of the school the plains stretched out to meet a cloudy horizon.

A helio car swung down in front of the school. Two men and a woman got out.

"This is it, Senator." Doctor Wilson, the speaker, was with the government bureau of schools. He lifted his arm and gestured, a lean, tweed-suited man.

The second man, addressed as Senator, was bulkier, grey suited and pompous. He turned to the woman with professional deference.

"This is the last one, my dear. This is what Doctor Wilson calls the greatest milestone in man's education."

"With the establishing of this school the last human teacher is gone. Gone are all the human weaknesses, the temper fits of teachers, their ignorance and prejudices. The roboteachers are without flaw."

The woman lifted a lorgnette to her eyes. "*Haow* interesting. But after all, we've had roboteachers for years, haven't we—or have we—?" She made a vague gesture toward the school, and looked at the brown-suited man.

"Yes, of course. Years ago your women's clubs fought against roboteachers. That was before they were proven."

"I seem to recall something of that. Oh well, it doesn't matter." The lorgnette gestured idly.

"Shall we go in?" the lean man urged.

The woman hesitated. Senator said tactfully, "After all, Doctor Wilson would like you to see his project."

The brown-suited man nodded. His face took on a sharp intensity. "We're making a great mistake. No one is interested in educating the children any more. They leave it to the robots. And they neglect the children's training at home."

The woman turned toward him with surprise in her eyes. "But really, aren't the robots the best teachers?"

"Of course they are. But confound it, we ought to be interested in what they teach and how they teach. What's happened to the old PTA? What's happened to parental discipline, what's happened to—"

He stopped suddenly and smiled, a rueful tired smile. "I suppose I'm a fanatic on this. Come on inside."

They passed through an antiseptic corridor built from dull green plastic. The brown-suited man pressed a button outside one of the classrooms. A door slid noiselessly into the hall. A robot stood before them, gesturing gently. They followed the robot into the classroom. At the head of the classroom another robot was lecturing. There were drawings on a sort of plastic blackboard. There were wire models on the desk in front of the robot. They listened for a moment, and for a moment it seemed that the woman could be intrigued in spite of herself.

"Mathematics," Doctor Wilson murmured in her ear. "Euclidean Geometry and Aristotelean reasoning. We start them young on these old schools of thought, then use Aristotle and Euclid as a point of departure for our intermediate classes in mathematics and logic."

"REAHLLY!" The lorgnette studied Doctor Wilson. "You mean there are several kinds of geometry?"

Doctor Wilson nodded. A dull flush crept into his cheeks. The Senator caught his eyes and winked. The woman moved toward the door. At the door the robot bowed.

The lorgnette waved in appreciation. "It's reahlly been most charming!"

Wilson said desperately, "If your women's clubs would just visit our schools and see this work we are carrying on ..."

"Reahlly, I'm sure the robots are doing a marvelous job. After all, that's what they were built for."

Wilson called, "Socrates! Come here!" The robot approached from his position outside the classroom door.

"Why were you built, Socrates? Tell the lady why you were built."

A metal throat cleared, a metal voice said resonantly, "We were made to serve the children. The children are the heart of a society. As the children are raised, so will the future be assured. I will do everything for the children's good, this is my prime law. All other laws are secondary to the children's good."

"Thank you, Socrates. You may go."

Metal footsteps retreated. The lorgnette waved again. "Very impressive. Very efficient. And now, Senator, if we can go. We are to have tea at the women's club. Varden is reviewing his newest musical comedy."

The Senator said firmly, "Thank you, Doctor Wilson."

His smile was faintly apologetic. It seemed to say that the women's clubs had many votes, but that Wilson should understand, Wilson's own vote would be appreciated too. Wilson watched the two re-enter the helicopter and rise into the morning sunshine. He kicked the dirt with his shoe and turned to find Socrates behind him. The metallic voice spoke.

"You are tired. I suggest you go home and rest."

"I'm not tired. Why can they be so blind, so uninterested in the children?"

"It is our job to teach the children. You are tired. I suggest you go home and rest."

How can you argue with metal? What can you add to a perfect mechanism, designed for its job, and integrated with a hundred other perfect mechanisms? What can you do when a thousand schools are so perfect they have a life of their own, with no need for human

guidance, and, most significant, no failures from human weakness?

Wilson stared soberly at this school, at the colossus he had helped to create. He had the feeling that it was wrong somehow, that if people would only think about it they could find that something was wrong.

"You are tired."

He nodded at Socrates. "Yes, I am tired. I will go home."

Once, on the way home, he stared back toward the school with strange unease.

Inside the school there was the ringing of a bell. The children trooped into the large play area that was enclosed in the heart of the great building. Here and there they began to form in clusters. At the centers of the clusters were the newest students, the ones that had moved here, the ones that had been in the robot schools before.

"Is it true that the roboteachers will actually spank you?"

"It's true, all right."

"You're kidding. It's only a story, like Santa Claus or Johnny Appleseed. The human teachers never spanked us here."

"The robots will spank you if you get out of line."

"My father says no robot can lay a hand on a human."

"These robots are different."

The bell began to ring again. Recess was over. The children moved toward the classroom. All the children except one—Johnny Malone, husky Johnny Malone, twelve years old—the Mayor's son. Johnny Malone kicked at the dirt. A robot proctor approached. The metallic

voice sounded.

"The ringing of the bell means that classes are resumed. You will take your place, please."

"I won't go inside."

"You will take your place, please."

"I won't. You can't make me take my place. My father is the Mayor."

The metal voice carried no feeling. "If you do not take your place you will be punished."

"You can't lay a hand on me. No robot can."

The robot moved forward. Two metal hands held Johnny Malone. Johnny Malone kicked the robot's legs. It hurt his toes. "We were made to teach the children. We can do what is necessary to teach the children. I will do everything for the children's good. It is my prime law. All other laws are secondary to the children's good."

The metal arms moved. The human body bent across metal knees. A metal hand raised and fell, flat, very flat so that it would sting and the blood would come rushing, and yet there would be no bruising, no damage to the human flesh. Johnny Malone cried out in surprise. Johnny Malone wept. Johnny Malone squirmed. The metal ignored all of these. Johnny Malone was placed on his feet. He swarmed against the robot, striking it with small fists, bruising them against the solid smoothness of the robot's thighs.

"You will take your place, please."

Tears were useless. Rage was useless. Metal cannot feel. Johnny Malone, the Mayor's son, was intelligent. He took his place in the classroom.

One of the more advanced literature classes was reciting. The roboteacher said metallically,

*"The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about:
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine.
Peace! the charm's wound up."*

Hands shot into the air. The metallic voice said, "Tom?"

"That's from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*."

"And what is its meaning?"

"The weird sisters are making a charm in the beginning of the play. They have heard the drum that announces Macbeth's coming."

"That is correct."

A new hand shot into the air. "Question, teacher. May I ask a question?"

"You may always ask a question."

"Are witches real? Do you robots know of witches? And do you know of people? Can a roboteacher understand Shakespeare?"

The thin metal voice responded. "Witches are real and unreal. Witches are a part of the reality of the mind, and the human mind is real. We roboteachers are the repository of the human mind. We hold all the wisdom and the knowledge and the aspirations of the human race. We hold these for you, the children, in trust. Your good is our highest law. Do you understand?"

The children nodded. The metallic voice went on. "Let us return to

Macbeth for our concluding quotation. The weather, fortune, many things are implied in Macbeth's opening speech. He says, '*So foul and fair a day I have not seen.*' The paradox is both human and appropriate. One day you will understand this even more. Repeat the quotation after me, please, and try to understand it."

The childish voices lifted. "*So foul and fair a day I have not seen.*"

The roboteacher stood up. "And there's the closing bell. Do not hurry away, for you are to remain here tonight. There will be a school party, a sleep-together party. We will all sleep here in the school building."

"You mean we can't go home?"

The face of the littlest girl screwed up. "I want to go home."

"You may go home tomorrow. There will be a holiday tomorrow. A party tonight and a holiday tomorrow for every school on earth."

The tears were halted for a moment. The voice was querulous. "But I want to go home now."

Johnny Malone, the Mayor's son, put one hand on the littlest girl. "Don't cry, Mary. The robots don't care if you cry or not. You can't hurt them or cry them out of anything. We'll all go home in the morning."

The robots began to bring cots and to place them in the schoolroom, row on row. The children were led out into the play quadrangle to play. One of the robots taught them a new game, and after that took them to supper served in the school's cafeteria. No other robot was left in the building, but it did not matter, because the doors were locked so that the children could not go home.

The other robots had begun to walk out into the town, and as they walked the robots walked from other schools, in other towns. All over

the country, all over the towns, the robots walked to tell the people that the children would not be home from school, and do what had to be done.

In the schools, the roboteachers told stories until the children fell asleep.

Morning came. The robots were up with the sun. The children were up with the robots. There was breakfast and more stories, and now the children clustered about the robots, holding onto their arms, where they could cling, tagging and frisking along behind the robots as they went down into the town. The sun was warm, and it was early, early, and very bright from the morning sun in the streets.

They went into the Mayor's house. Johnny called, "Mom! Dad! I'm home."

The house was silent. The robot that tended the house came gliding in answer. "Would you like breakfast, Master Malone?"

"I've had breakfast. I want my folks. Hey! Mom, Dad!"

He went into the bedroom. It was clean and empty and scrubbed.

"Where's my mother and father?"

The metal voice of the robot beside Johnny said, "I am going to live with you. You will learn as much at home as you do at school."

"Where's my mother?"

"I'm your mother."

"Where's my father?"

"I'm your father."

Johnny Malone swung. "You mean my mother and father are gone?"
Tears gathered in his eyes.

Gently, gently, the metal hand pulled him against the metal body.
"Your folks have gone away, Johnny. Everyone's folks have gone away. We will stay with you."

Johnny Malone ran his glance around the room.

"I might have known they were gone. The place is so clean."

All the houses were clean. The servant robots had cleaned all night. The roboteachers had checked each house before the children were brought home. The children must not be alarmed. There must be no bits of blood to frighten them.

The robot's voice said gently, "Today will be a holiday to become accustomed to the changes. There will be school tomorrow."

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TOMORROW ***

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