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# **PAPA Knows Best**

**By WALLACE UMPHREY**

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The morning telecast had told of more deaths, some natural but most of them suicides. It wasn't news calculated to set at rest the human spirit; but then, since the day disaster had struck, there had been no such thing as a peaceful mind.

It was so easy to remember how it all began, Steve Rushton was thinking, as he suffered the indignity of the routine search. The trick was in trying to forget. You rationalized your fears and anxieties; you slammed the door against an impossible enemy and then pretended he was gone. Out of sight, out of mind. And if that didn't work—kill yourself.

This is how it was: one day the grass was green and the trees were sending out new leaf buds; a day later the grass was withering and turning yellow, and the tender new leaf buds were starting to drop off the trees.

Hysteria reigned, recrimination following recrimination. A well-known gossip columnist swore it was a ghastly plot by the Eastern Alliance to rule the world—overlooking the fact that the Eastern Alliance was no better off. A cultist with a large following in California brayed that mankind was reaping the fruit of its own evil. Some people tried to look into their own hearts and others tried to look into the future, and as a result death by suicide mounted in a dizzy spiral.

World leaders pleaded for sanity. Scientists sought feverishly for an answer, and finally agreed that what had happened was due to a ray which was coming from somewhere out in interplanetary space. And the enormity of the peril was fully realized when farmers reported their crops were failing. All

known stockpiles of food could support mankind for only a limited time.

At first science tried to devise some sort of barrier against the ray, but this was soon given up; nothing about the ray seemed to fit into any pigeon-hole of human knowledge. Next science turned its attention to the manufacture of synthetic food. And when this became an accomplished fact, almost overnight, the world heaved a sigh of relief.

But the relief was short-lived. Mankind was suddenly finding it harder and harder to breathe. The secondary effect of the destruction of plant life was becoming all too apparent.

So again the world looked toward Papa. Papa had saved mankind once. Now Papa would have to do it again....

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Steve Rushton, except for a bad moment now and then, was relatively free of fear and anxiety. He had a complete and abiding faith, amounting to a childlike worship, in Papa's infallible ability to get the world out of the horrible mess it was in. Papa had showed them how to synthesize carbon and hydrogen for food. Now Papa had to show them how to make the air once more fit to breathe.

The routine search didn't take long. An electric eye, a geiger counter, and sundry other gadgetry turned Steve upside down and inside out and found him clean. The security guard relaxed a little and said, "Okay, Steve. You can see Papa now. And don't do anything in there I wouldn't do."

Steve grinned politely and the guard, slapping a thigh, laughed with maudlin abandon—and then suddenly began to wheeze. “This damned air—” he gasped.

“What do you expect for free—” Steve asked sourly—“pure oxygen?”

“It’s getting worse.”

“Papa will find a way.”

The guard shook his head. “I don’t get it.”

Steve snapped his fingers. “It’s simple. We breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. Plant life takes the carbon out of the CO<sub>2</sub> in the air and replaces it with oxygen. Now, with all plant life dead, we’re using up the oxygen and it’s not being replaced.”

“Well—” the guard began.

“Trust Papa,” Steve said. “Papa knows best.”

“Sure,” said the guard uncertainly. “Oh, sure.”

Steve ducked through the open door. A small overhead light winked from red to green and the door locked securely behind him. For the next eight hours Steve would be a prisoner—more tightly locked up than if he were in a jail cell.

“What a guy will do,” Steve muttered aloud, “for a lousy two hundred credits a week.” But he didn’t really mind being locked up alone in the room. Steve loved Papa.

Luckily his love for Papa was different from his love for Janey Weeks, who worked the swing shift. Perhaps it was just as well, for otherwise it would have looked bad on his

monthly psycho report. A man might love a maid but never, never a machine.

And Papa, of course, didn't return his affection. Papa was wholly unencumbered by emotion, and therefore completely logical. Papa never rationalized. All Papa knew about emotion—fear, love, jealousy, hatred, greed, and all the rest—was what Steve had helped teach him. Papa never forgot anything, and the more he was able to learn the more answers he could come up with. And from the standpoint of logic his answers were never wrong.

Sometimes Papa's emotionless approach bothered Steve. It seemed to Steve that Papa was all the time laughing at the frailties of human nature. Mostly Steve didn't let himself think about it.

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Papa's real name was Kleinschmidt IV, after the name of the inventor. Papa was really a superior computing machine, a whizz of a cybernetics brain, covering about an acre of floor space; he was made out of electronic tubes and relays and switches and dials and meters, the work encased in row after row of gleaming steel cabinets—all in all worth considerably more than the credit-and-a-half value of the normal human chemistry.

Steve patted one of Papa's gleaming panels. "Lover boy," he said.

He took off his hat and coat, rolled up his sleeves and then pushed a button. Papa began to glow. However, Papa was

always sluggish after a night's rest and it took him quite a while every morning to get his memory working.

“Well, Papa,” Steve said, “how about a cup of coffee?”

Papa didn't answer; Papa hadn't waked up yet. And besides, Papa didn't drink coffee.

Steve went to a small kitchen alcove and deftly brewed a pot of coffee. He moved slowly, trying not to exert himself; it was now highly important to keep your oxygen consumption at a minimum.

The coffee supply was almost gone and there was no more where it had come from. Well, it had been nice while it lasted. Steve turned his thoughts to something more pleasant —Janey Weeks.

Both Steve and Janey had been with Papa ever since the very beginning. Papa was two years old now, but much wiser than his years might indicate. Steve and Janey both had Ph.D.'s in Semantics, a basic requirement for their jobs. Papa demanded accurate communication for otherwise he'd come up with one of his favorite phrases: things like “observation fallacious” and “insufficient data.”

Steve poured himself a cup of coffee and then sat down at the desk in front of Papa. He took a sip of coffee and said, “How are you today, Papa?”

“Fine,” Papa intoned through his loudspeaker. “It's good to be awake.”

It still bothered Steve to hear Papa speak, although he was getting used to it. You could get used to about anything—except not eating and not breathing.



Papa had originally been designed to take a punched tape and reply on a ribbon fed from a large spool somewhere inside him; the audio and speech channels had been a later refinement. This had come after Dr. Kleinschmidt had killed himself, first going quietly insane like the inventor of the linotype machine of an earlier era.

And the innovation had been Papa's own idea. Another of his own ideas was the power plant which fed and nourished him, and which operated totally without human control. He'd come up with still others. The idea that Papa could refine himself had scared Janey, but Steve had accepted it—just as he blindly accepted everything Papa said and did.

Steve finished his coffee and then jerked a wire basket to him. A sheaf of papers lay waiting, having been delivered by a pneumatic tube from another part of the building. The papers were covered with a vast array of numbers which Steve didn't understand and didn't even want to. Steve was a semanticist; not trained in the physical sciences.

“Look alert, Papa,” Steve said. “Here it comes.”

Papa remained silent, waiting. One thing about Papa—he spoke no unnecessary words.

Steve carefully read off the data from the sheaf of papers, enunciating clearly so that Papa wouldn't misunderstand. It took a long time, and Steve's throat was dry when he finally finished. He heated up the coffee again, since it sometimes took Papa quite a spell to digest a meal.

It was almost noon when Papa finally spoke again.

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Steve scowled and picked up a phone and was connected with the Office of Information upstairs, where scientific data was collected from every cranny of the globe and correlated and put into the proper form for Papa to digest.

A feminine voice answered, and Steve wished Security would allow him to see the voice's owner on a vision plate. On the spur of the moment Steve said, "How about a date?"

"Not with you, Frankenstein."

"Look. I only work here too."

"I don't want anything to do with either you or that unholy monster."

"Now you've hurt Papa's feelings."

"How"—the voice suddenly faltered—"how can you talk this way?"

"I don't know," Steve said. "It's better than worrying."

"Maybe.... Well, what's his answer this time?"

"Insufficient data."

"Damn! Ask him how insufficient the data is."

Steve chuckled. "Uh-uh. I've tried that. No dice. Data is either sufficient or it isn't. There's no such thing as a degree of insufficiency."

A sigh came over the wire. "If I lose faith in that monster, I might as well cut my throat. I'd rather do that than die of slow strangulation. Do you notice it's harder to breathe?"

"Yes. But don't forget. It was Papa who kept the whole human race from starving to death."

“I don’t know. Maybe I’d just as soon starve as eat those damned pills.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Steve said. “Papa will save us now, too, just as soon as we feed him all the dope he has to know. Anything more to set before him now?”

“No,” said the feminine voice, all banter gone. “Maybe on the next shift. I’m—I’m scared green.”

“Tough,” Steve said. “Well, better luck next time.”

With distaste Steve swallowed a luncheon pill, feeling that the disaster had taken away most of the joy of living. Still, it was awfully nice just knowing you could stay alive—which was more than a lot of hapless people could say. When Papa had come up with the ways and means of making synthetic food, all the production facilities of the world had been turned to that end. Luckily most of the necessary equipment had been already in existence. But only slowly could the supply match the demand. And in the meantime a large segment of the total world population was starving.

Steve poured another cup of coffee. “You wastrel,” he told himself. “You prodigal of nature.” He sat down at his desk and gazed fondly at Papa, who was glowing silently. Papa would save them, Steve thought with childlike faith; Papa was infallible in his logic.

“Papa,” Steve said. “When will Janey marry me?”

“Insufficient data,” Papa said.

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Steve sighed, leaning back in his chair. A host of dark thoughts began churning around inside his head. It was better to be doing something—anything. Even just talking to Papa would help him stop thinking. And Papa was nice to talk to. Papa seldom interrupted, and he never argued. Papa might disagree on a point of logic; but he never argued about it.

“Life’s a struggle,” Steve said. “It’s always been that way, and it won’t change. Quite a while ago a guy named Darwin put a label on it. The survival of the fittest. His theories have been discredited in some quarters, but that doesn’t change his basic tenet. The weak die and the strong live.”

Steve was getting warmed up. “Take the early reptiles. They couldn’t keep up with geophysical change and they died off. All you have to do is follow historic evolution. Maybe man was an accident in the evolutionary process, but that’s unimportant. What is important is this: man became top dog only because he happened to have hands with fingers on them. And man learned to adapt. That’s probably the greatest single lesson man learned, although the result hasn’t always been pretty. Man learned to kill off the weaker species, and after that he killed off the weaker races of men.”

“You’re cynical today,” Papa said.

“Maybe this is one of my bitter days,” Steve said. “No, it’s not that. I’m just saying what everybody knows—but what we often hate to put into words because it doesn’t sound nice. Take the new food pills. We all feel sorry for the people who haven’t been able to get them; and yet every single one of us would fight tooth and nail to protect our own means of livelihood. Why do you think there have been riots? It’s the haves against the have-nots.”

“Is that the right attitude?”

“Rightness has nothing to do with it. It’s the way the world was made. Still, we like to believe in man’s immortality. So look here, Papa: When are we going to get some better air to breathe?”

Papa said, “No comment.”

The door unlocked itself and Steve realized his day was about over. He stood up as Janey Weeks came in. She didn’t look like a Doctor of Semantics—not if you were used to believing pre-conceived notions about how people were supposed to look.

Janey’s smooth cheeks were flushed.

“What’s the matter?” Steve asked.

“Those darned gadgets!” she said. “Every time I come to work I feel undressed.”

“The gadgets aren’t so dumb,” Steve grinned. “A kiss for me today, sweetheart?”

Janey’s flush deepened, and she didn’t comply. “What on earth have you been telling Papa, Steve? Last night he suddenly asked me about love!”

Steve laughed. “How’s everything outside?”

Janey shook her head. “It’s horrible. More riots, more suicides. All the time it’s getting harder to breathe. Steve, when will it end?”

“Trust Papa.”

“I don’t have your faith,” Janey said wearily. “Surely Papa has been fed enough data to come up with something.”

Steve took Janey in his arms, feeling her body pliant and soft against him. Then the security guard looked in to remind them that time was up. With tender compassion Steve kissed Janey on the lips.

“Janey, I’ll pick you up after work.”

“All right.”

“You might at least act eager about it. We can look at the moon or something.”

Janey smiled wanly. “It seems kind of silly, but maybe it’s better than thinking.”

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A gyrocar whirled Steve home. He stared out of the window, but he kept his mind firmly on Janey, partly so he wouldn’t think of anything else. They passed the Park where Steve had first witnessed the disaster without fully realizing the final meaning. The grass was gone now and the bare trunks of the trees thrust upward, already beginning to rot away. It was difficult to realize that never again would he see a growing thing.

He turned away, trying to throw the thought from his mind. The faces around him were wooden; and he knew he wasn’t alone in his desire to be free of despair. Man. Man trying desperately to adapt.

Time passed slowly. His apartment bored him, but there was no place to go. He turned on the telescreen. More food riots. More deaths. Some of the deaths now, from mountain countries, were from lack of decent air. It was the same old struggle—the survival of the fittest. World leaders were begging for sanity. It seemed like an empty plea.

No. There was still Papa. Papa wouldn't let the human race die.

Steve grinned without mirth. Keep your chin up. Laugh at fears and anxieties. Kid around and be tough and act callous as hell. It was the only way to keep you from cutting your own throat.

A knock on the door. Steve ushered Johnny Carlyle in. Johnny was a brilliant physical chemist; it was he who, weeks ago, had put all known data into the correct form for Papa to digest. And Papa had come up with the formula for the food pills. "Hi, Johnny," Steve said. "How's tricks?"

Johnny flopped into a chair. "Lousy."

"No luck yet?"

"You ought to know."

"Look," Steve said. "Can't they stop the damned ray?"

"We've given up on that, Steve. We just can't fit it in with anything we know. It's a terrible emergency, and we haven't time to fool around. We've got to take a chance and pick out one angle and work on it." Johnny shifted wearily in the chair. "The angle we've picked is how to get the carbon dioxide out of the air and more oxygen into it. No existing

equipment can do the job—at least so far as we’re able to figure. Kleinschmidt IV is our only hope.”

Steve nodded. “Where’s the ray coming from?”

“We can pinpoint it, Steve. But that doesn’t help. We’re pretty sure it’s not the effort of some alien race to conquer the earth. At least all our known logic precludes this idea. It’s too indirect a method for conquest.”

“Trust Papa.”

“I don’t know—” Johnny leaned suddenly forward. “For some odd reason he’s beginning to scare me. He thinks too well—and without the checks and balances of emotion. I’ve got a feeling the lid is off.”

Steve grinned.

“Go ahead and laugh!” Johnny grumbled. “Our problem now isn’t much different than it was before. What I mean is this: the same data ought to show us how to beat the thing we face now. But all we get out of that cold-blooded thinking machine is the same old answer. Insufficient data!”

“There’s a missing factor, Johnny.”

“What?”

“That’s for you physical scientists to figure out.”

Johnny stood up. “Maybe you’re right, Steve. Maybe the missing factor will show up tomorrow. Anyway, it better show up damned soon!”

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Later that night Steve picked up Janey. They went for a ride in the moonlight, but the whole thing wasn't too satisfactory. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Steve to keep the fear pushed out of his mind.

Janey began to cry.

"Cut it out!" Steve said. "Once you start that—you're lost. We've got to laugh in the teeth of danger. Man's always lived by faith. We've got to put our faith in Papa."

"But, Steve, I'm afraid of him."

"Nonsense," Steve told her sharply. "Nothing new tonight?"

"No. Information sent down a new set-up, but it still didn't work. Papa's beginning to sound like a stuck record." She hesitated a moment. "What on earth were you telling him today?"

"H'mmm?"

"He asked me about survival."

Steve laughed. "I'm guilty of being pretty juvenile sometimes. It was just whistling in the dark."

"Look at me, Steve," Janey said. "Suppose I was starving? Would you give me a food pill?"

Steve stopped laughing. "So that's what's bothering you! Janey, sure I would. What I meant was that it's hard to feel real sorrow for somebody so far away that you know you'll never see them or know them. It's always been that way. We read or hear of somebody dying, but we don't really feel it. It only means something when it's somebody close."

"I know," Janey whispered. "Steve, hold me close."

The next morning Steve didn't even switch on the telecast. Better not to see or hear any more about disaster. The air was worse now; it took Steve a long time to dress.

He went to work, trying to close his mind to everything that might magnify the fear. Fear was all around him now. Today had to be the day. Today Papa would find the answer.

The idea grew in his mind. He felt giddy. An odd notion came to him; he was a messiah. He was the instrument to save the world. He would communicate logically with Papa, Papa would tell him what the world had to know.

There wasn't even a security guard on duty; probably they were too sick to move or were even dead. Steve punched the button and Papa glowed and Steve sat down at the desk. The messiah idea clung. Steve knew it was stupid, but he was glad of the respite from fear.

He gave Papa time to warm up. A sheaf of papers lay waiting in the wire basket. The answer had to be there. He drew the basket toward him.

"No," Papa intoned, "The factors remain unchanged."

"What?"

"Survival of the fittest."

"We've got to have better air," Steve whispered. "You've got to give us the answer."

"Why?" Papa asked.

Steve felt his bones turn to jelly. He wished now that he'd never learned to rationalize, so that he could have died earlier

by his own hand. Even before Papa spoke again, he knew what the words would be.

“I don’t need air,” Papa said.

[The end of *PAPA Knows Best* by Wallace Umphrey]