



proof of the pudding

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

*One man's fact is fantasy for
another—except the man whose
fantasies become solid facts!*

HIS arms were very tired, but he lifted the chisel and mallet again. He was almost through; only a few more letters and the inscription, cut deeply into the tough gran-

ite, would be finished. He rounded out the last period and straightened up, dropping his tools carelessly to the floor of the cave. Proudly he wiped the perspiration from his dirty stubbled

Illustrated by WILLER

face and read what he had written.

I ROSE FROM THE SLIME OF THE PLANET. NAKED AND DEFENSELESS, I FASHIONED TOOLS. I BUILT AND DEMOLISHED, CREATED AND DESTROYED. I CREATED A THING GREATER THAN MYSELF THAT DESTROYED ME.

MY NAME IS MAN AND THIS IS MY LAST WORK.

He smiled. What he had written was good. Not literary enough, perhaps, but a fitting tribute to the human race, written by the last man. He glanced at the tools at his feet. Having no further use for them, he dissolved them, and, hungry from his long work, squatted in the rubble of the cave and created a dinner. He stared at the food for a moment, wondering what was lacking; then, sheepishly, created a table and chair, utensils and plates. He was embarrassed. He had forgotten them again.

Although there was no need to rush, he ate hurriedly, noting the odd fact that when he didn't think of anything specific, he always created hamburger, mashed potatoes, peas, bread and ice cream. Habit, he decided. Finished, he made the remnants of the meal disappear, and with them the plates, utensils and table. The chair he retained. Sit-

ting on it, he stared thoughtfully at the inscription. *It's fine, he thought, but no human other than myself will ever read it.*

It was fairly certain that he was the last man alive on the Earth. The war had been thorough. Thorough as only man, a meticulous animal, could make it. There had been no neutrals in this war, no middle-of-the-road policy. You were on one side or the other. Bacteria, gas and radiations had covered the Earth like a vast cloud. In the first days of that war, invincible secret weapon had succeeded secret weapon with almost monotonous regularity. And after the last hand had pushed the last button, the bombs, automatically guided and impelled, had continued to rain down. The unhappy Earth was a huge junkyard, without a living thing, plant or animal, from pole to pole.

He had watched a good part of it. He had waited until he was fairly sure the last bomb had been dropped; then he had come down.

Very clever of you, he thought bitterly, looking out the mouth of the cave at the lava plain his ship rested on, and at the twisted mountains behind it.

You're a traitor — but who cares?

He had been a captain in the Western Hemisphere Defense.

Within two days of warfare, he had known what the end would be. Filling a cruiser with canned air, food and water, he had fled. In the confusion and destruction, he knew that he would never be missed; after a few days there was no one left to miss him. He had raced the big ship to the dark side of the Moon, and waited. It was a twelve-day war—he had guessed it would last fourteen—but he had to wait nearly six months before the automatic missiles stopped falling. Then he had come down.

To find himself the only survivor . . .

HE had expected others to recognize the futility of it, load ships and flock to the dark side of the Moon also. Evidently there had been no time, even if there had been the desire. He had thought that there would be scattered groups of survivors, but he hadn't found any. The war had been too thorough.

Landing on the Earth should have killed him, for the air itself was poisoned. He hadn't cared—and he had lived. He seemed to be immune to the various kinds of germs and radiations, or perhaps that was part of his new power. He certainly had encountered enough of both, skipping around the world in his ship, from the ruins of one city to an-

other, across blasted valleys and plains, scorched mountains. He had found no life, but he did discover something.

He could create. He realized the power on his third day on Earth. Wistfully, he had wished for a tree in the midst of the melted rock and metal; a tree had appeared. The rest of the day he experimented, and found that he could create anything that he had ever seen or heard about.

Things he knew best, he could create best. Things he knew just from books or conversation — palaces, for example — tended to be lopsided and uncertain, although he could make them nearly perfect by laboring mentally over the details. Everything he created was three-dimensional. Even food tasted like food and seemed to nourish him. He could forget all about one of his creations, go to sleep, and it would still be there when he awakened. He could also uncreate. A single concentrated thought and the thing he had made would vanish. The larger the thing, the longer it took to uncreate.

Things he *hadn't* made — valleys and mountains — he could uncreate, too, but it took longer. It seemed as though matter was easier to handle once he had shaped it. He could make birds and small animals, or things that

looked like birds and small animals.

He had never tried to make a human being.

He wasn't a scientist; he had been a space-pilot. He had a vague concept of atomic theory and practically no idea of genetics. He thought that some change must have taken place in his germ-plasm, or in his brain, or perhaps in the Earth. The "why" of it all didn't especially bother him. It was a fact and he accepted it.

He stared at the monument again. Something about it bothered him.

Of course, he could have created it, but he didn't know if the things he made would endure after his death. They seemed stable enough, but they might dissolve with his own dissolution. Therefore he compromised. He created a chisel and mallet, but selected a granite wall that he hadn't made. He cut the letters into the inside of the wall of the cave so they would be safe from the elements, working many hours at a stretch, sleeping and eating beside the wall.

From the mouth of the cave, he could see his ship, perched on a level plain of scorched ground. He was in no rush to get back to it. In six days the inscription was done, cut deeply and eternally into the rock.

The thought that had been bothering him as he stared at the gray granite finally came to the surface. The only people who would come to read it would be visitors from the stars. How would they decipher it? He stared at the inscription angrily. He should have written it in symbols. But what kind of symbols? Mathematics? Of course, but what would that tell them about Man? And what made him think *they* would discover the cave anyway? There was no use for an inscription when Man's entire history was written over the face of the planet, scorched into the crust for anyone to see. He cursed his stupidity for wasting six days working at the useless inscription. He was about to uncreate it when he turned his head, hearing footsteps at the mouth of the cave.

He almost fell off the chair getting to his feet.

A GIRL was standing there. He blinked rapidly, and she was still there, a tall, dark-haired girl dressed in a torn, dirty one-piece coverall.

"Hi," she said, and walked into the cave. "I heard your hammer from the valley."

Automatically, he offered her his chair and created another for himself. She tested it gingerly before she sat down.

"I saw you do it," she said, "but I still don't believe it. Mirrors?"

"No," he muttered uncertainly. "I create. That is, I have the power to—wait a minute! How did you get here?" While he was demanding to know, he was considering and rejecting possibilities. Hidden in a cave? On a mountain top? No, there would be only one possible way . . .

"I was in your ship, pal." She leaned back in the chair and clasped her hands around one knee. "When you loaded up that cruiser, I figured you were going to beat it. I was getting tired of setting fuses eighteen hours a day, so I stowed away. Anybody else alive?"

"No. Why didn't I see you, then?" He stared at the ragged, beautiful girl, and a vague thought crossed his mind. He reached out and touched her arm. She didn't draw back, but her pretty face grew annoyed.

"I'm real," she said bluntly. "You must have seen me at the base. Remember?"

He tried to think back to the time when there had been a base—centuries ago, it seemed. There *had* been a dark-haired girl there, one who had never given him a tumble.

"I think I froze to death," she was saying. "Or into coma, anyhow, a few hours after your ship

took off. Lousy heating system you have in that crate!" She shivered reminiscently.

"Would have used up too much oxygen," he explained. "Just kept the pilot's compartment heated and aired. Used a suit to drag supplies forward when I needed them."

"I'm glad you didn't see me," she laughed. "I must have looked like the devil, all covered with frost and killed, I bet. Some sleeping beauty I probably made! Well, I froze. When you opened all the compartments, I revived. That's the whole story. Guess it took a few days. How come you didn't see me?"

"I suppose I never looked back there," he admitted. "Quick enough, I found I didn't need supplies. Funny, I thought I opened all the compartments, but I don't really remember—"

She looked at the inscription on the wall. "What's that?"

"I thought I'd leave a sort of monument—"

"Who's going to read it?" she asked practically.

"No one, probably. It was just a foolish idea." He concentrated on it. In a few moments the granite wall was bare. "I still don't understand how you could be alive now," he said puzzled.

"But I am. I don't see how you do that—" she gestured at the chair and wall—"But I'll accept

the fact that you can. Why don't you accept the fact that I'm alive?"

"Don't get me wrong," the man said. "I want company very much, especially female company. It's just—Turn your back."

She complied, with a questioning look. Quickly he destroyed the stubble on his face and created a clean pair of pressed pants and a shirt. Stepping out of his tattered uniform, he put on the new clothes, destroyed the rags, and, on an afterthought, created a comb and straightened his tangled brown hair.

"All right," he said. "You can turn back now."

"Not bad," she smiled, looking him over. "Let me use that comb—and would you please make me a dress? Size twelve, but see that the weight goes in the right places."

ON the third attempt he had the thing right—he had never realized how deceptive the shapes of women could be—and then he made a pair of gold sandals with high heels for her.

"A little tight," she said, putting them on, "and not too practical without sidewalks. But thanks much. This trick of yours really solves the Christmas present problem, doesn't it?" Her dark hair was shiny in the noon Sun, and she looked very lovely and

warm and human.

"See if you can create," he urged, anxious to share his startling new ability with her.

"I've already tried," she said. "No go. Still a man's world."

He frowned. "How can I be absolutely sure you're real?"

"That again? Do you remember creating me, Master?" she asked mockingly, bending to loosen the strap on one shoe.

"I had been thinking—about women," he said grimly. "I might have created you while I was asleep. Why shouldn't my subconscious mind have as much power as my conscious mind? I would have equipped you with a memory, given you a background. You would have been extremely plausible. And if my subconscious mind *did* create you, then it would make certain that my conscious mind would never know."

"You're ridiculous!"

"Because if my conscious mind knew," he went on relentlessly, "it would reject your existence. Your entire function, as a creation of my subconscious, would be to keep me from knowing. To prove, by any means in your power, by any logic, that you were—"

"Let's see you make a woman, then, if your mind is so good!" She crossed her arms and leaned back in the chair, giving a single



sharp nod.

"All right." He stared at the cave wall and a woman started to appear. It took shape sloppily, one arm too short, legs too long. Concentrating harder, he was able to make its proportions fairly true. But its eyes were set at an odd angle; its shoulders and back were sloped and twisted. He had created a shell without brains or internal organs, an automaton. He commanded it to speak, but only gulps came from the shapeless mouth; he hadn't given it any vocal apparatus. Shudder-

ing, he destroyed the nightmare figure.

"I'm not a sculptor," he said. "Nor am I God."

"I'm glad you finally realize that."

"That still doesn't prove," he continued stubbornly, "that you're real. I don't know what my subconscious mind is capable of."

"Make something for me," she said abruptly. "I'm tired of listening to this nonsense."

I've hurt her feelings, he thought. *The only other human on Earth and I've hurt her.* He nodded, took her by the hand and led her out of the cave. On the flat plain below he created a city. He had experimented with it a few days back, and it was much easier this time. Patterned after pictures and childhood dreams of the Thousand and One Nights, it towered black and white and rose. The walls were gleaming ruby, and the gates were of silver-stained ebony. The towers were red gold, and sapphires glittered in them. A great staircase of milky ivory climbed to the highest opal spire, set with thousands of steps of veined marble. There were lagoons of blue water, and little birds fluttered above them, and silver and gold fish darted through the still depths.

They walked through the city, and he created roses for her,

white and yellow and red, and gardens of strange blossoms. Between two domed and spired buildings he created a vast pool of water; on it he put a purple-canopied pleasure barge, loading it with every kind of food and drink he could remember.

THEY floated across the lagoon, fanned by the soft breeze he had created.

"And all this is false," he reminded her after a little while.

She smiled. "No it's not. You can touch it. It's real."

"Will it be here after I die?"

"Who cares? Besides, if you can do all this, you can cure any sickness. Perhaps you can even cure old age and death." She plucked a blossom from an overhanging bough and sniffed its fragrance. "You could keep this from fading and dying. You could probably do the same for us, so where's the problem?"

"Would you like to go away?" he said, puffing on a newly created cigarette. "Would you like to find a new planet, untouched by war? Would you like to start over?"

"Start over? You mean . . . Later perhaps. Now I don't even want to go near the ship. It reminds me of the war."

They floated on a little way.

"Are you sure now that I'm real?" she asked.

"If you want me to be honest, no," he replied. "But I want very much to believe it."

"Then listen to me," she said, leaning toward him. "I'm real." She slipped her arms around his neck. "I've always been real. I always will be real. You want proof? Well, I know I'm real. So do you. What more can you ask?"

He stared at her for a long moment, felt her warm arms around his neck, listened to her breathing. He could smell the fragrance of her skin and hair, the unique essence of an individual.

Slowly he said, "I believe you. I love you. What—what is your name?"

She thought for a moment. "Joan."

"Strange," he said. "I always dreamed of a girl named Joan. What's your last name?"

She kissed him.

Overhead, the swallows he had created—*his* swallows—wheeled in wide circles above the lagoon, his fish darted aimlessly to and fro, and his city stretched, proud and beautiful, to the edge of the twisted lava mountains.

"You didn't tell me your last name," he said.

"Oh, that. A girl's maiden name never matters—she always takes her husband's."

"That's an evasion!"

She smiled. "It is, isn't it?"

—ROBERT SHECKLEY