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THAT OLD COMPUTER

by C. S. FORESTER

JENNINGS WAS AN ELECTRONIC ENGINEER employed by Electric Subsidiaries, Ltd. He was explaining at dinner the work to which he had persuaded his employers to assign him.

"They've handed the two old computers over to me," he said. "I'd sooner start afresh, but I suppose I'm lucky anyway."

"And what are you going to do with them?" asked Arabella, his wife, showing as much interest as she could.

"I'm going to use ~~them~~ in two stages of integration," went on Jennings. "I think there might be some interesting results."

"How do you mean?" asked Babcock—he was dining with the Jenningses, as he usually did two or three times a week.

"With two stages of integration the process will be necessarily slower," said Jennings heavily. "But the results may be on a far higher scale of accuracy and over a far wider range; it should be the product, and not the sum, of the two stages."

"Clear enough to you perhaps, old man," said Babcock, "but remember I'm no mathematical genius."

"Tell us more about it, dear," said Arabella, with no appearance of resignation.

"It should be possible to obtain reasonably accurate answers to more general questions than usual," explained Jennings. "It's a matter largely of the correct selection of the data to be fed in. With proper selectivity there might be solutions to problems of everyday life as well as to mathematical equations."

"That doesn't really sound like you, dear," said Arabella.

"Could you pick a winner at Goodwood?" asked Babcock.

"I thought you might ask that," replied Jennings. "It's a question of the relevant data, as I said. In horse racing the number of unknowns is kept deliberately high. And there are the unpredictables as well—the state of the weather and the condition of the track. With the unknowns outweighing the certain data, the result would be hardly more satisfactory than your guess—or mine, for that matter." Jennings smiled at Babcock with wintry politeness.

"It doesn't seem as though you're going to do much good then," said Arabella.

"Perhaps not. I've been associated with failures before," said Jennings, turning the same rather wintry smile on his wife. "But negative results have their value, dear. It may be worth trying."

"How long before you get results, old man?" asked Babcock.

"One never knows. Months—weeks—perhaps even a few days will be enough to prove if I'm on the right track. Those two computers need a good deal of adjustment in any case. Then I can run some test propositions."

"And you'll be working Saturdays and Sundays, I suppose?" said Arabella. "You always are."

"If you can spare me, dear," said Jennings.

It was only a matter of weeks afterward that Arabella and Babcock were sitting by the window having a drink before dinner.

"Here he comes," said Arabella,

watching the car swing into the garage. "We'll have to ask about that old computer. He was going to make it work today."

"Well, I'll listen," said Babcock.

Jennings came in, treading heavily like a very weary man. He looked stooped and much older.

"Well, dear," asked Arabella brightly, "did you get that old computer going?"

"Yes," said Jennings. He looked from one to the other of them but added nothing to that single word.

"Did you ask the thing any questions?" asked Babcock.

"Yes," said Jennings.

"Did you get any results?"

"Yes."

"What ever's the matter, dear?" asked Arabella.

"I only asked one question," said Jennings. "And I received the answer I did not want."

It was then that Arabella saw the gun in his hand.
