

The Hewlett-Packard Personal Calculator DIGEST

The HP Magazine and Product Catalog

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**“Thank you,
Beep....!”**

Sci-Fi Author Gordon Dickson
writes about calculators
in 2050 A.D.

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Calculators and Learning—page 34.
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In this story, written especially for the Digest, science-fiction writer Gordon Dickson takes us to the mid-21st century where we discover the amazing HP-XX2050, a handheld calculator with surprising capabilities. Dickson is the author of more than 150 short stories and thirty-three novels including SOLDIER, ASK NOT, winner of the World Science Fiction "Hugo" Award in 1965, CALL HIM LORD, winner of the Science Fiction Writers of America Nebula Award in 1966, and DRAGON AND THE GEORGE, winner of the 1976 August Derleth Award of the British Fantasy Society.

"Thank you, Beep...!"

by Gordon Dickson



WALTER JENSEN, a middle-management executive in the year 2025, had just left a meeting in Tahiti, and was on his way to a conference in London, England, hand-carrying some very secret and valuable commercial information. He had taken a short-hop shuttle from Tahiti to Melbourne, Australia, and there caught the sub-orbital flight from Melbourne to London. The day had been a long

one, and the pressures of business in the twenty-first century were severe. He sank into his seat compartment aboard the sub-orbital rocketliner of Pacificon Flight number 859 with a sigh of relief. Closing his eyes, he dozed off.

He woke with a start some time later, to find the rocketliner jarring to a landing. The vision screen before his seat showed an unfamiliar airport, dark with night and rain. This was

not England. He buzzed for a steward and a neatly mustached face under a uniform cap appeared on the screen before him.

"Our apologies to our passengers," said the seat speaker. "A malfunction has aborted flight 859. We are now landing at the airport in Jakarta, Indonesia. Would you please proceed to the terminal, where schedule adjustments and other arrangements can be made?"

The rocketliner ceased moving. Walter snatched up his portfolio and stumbled out with the other passengers.

The crowd turned right into a wide corridor, and still thick with sleep, Walter followed them.

As he went, he began to awaken; and after some little distance he became aware that he had become separated from the others. He was alone in the corridor, with advertising signs in a language he could not read.

A small, slim man with golden skin and an oriental fold over his eyes, came hurrying by in the opposite direction.

"Say," said Walter, stopping in the other's path. "Could you tell me—"

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But the other only rattled briefly at him in some unfamiliar language, then hurried out of sight. Walter was left alone, lost in an airport terminal he had never seen before.

He fumbled in his pockets, but without finding what he searched for.

"Beep!" he said, desperately, "Beep, where are you?"

A soft, musical tone sounded from his portfolio. Walter opened it and fished out an instrument looking like a slim, handheld calculator, with the upper third of its surface a vision screen. As soon as the heat of his hand enfolded it, the tone stopped; and the instrument, his Hewlett-Packard XX2050 autosecretary, spoke to him.

"What can I do for you, Walter?"

Its voice had, by Walter's choice, been factory-set to the same range as that of the voice of his wife, Enid. It was not Enid's voice, however, but a similar, cheerful, impersonal one he had come to identify with the code name Beep.

"I'm lost, Beep," Walter said now. "My flight aborted. I'm somewhere in a terminal at Jakarta, Indonesia. Also, I'm out on my feet, and I don't know where to go, and how do I get to London now in time for tomorrow's conference?"

"Don't concern yourself, Walter," said the HP-XX2050. "I'll take care of everything. Tell me, do you see any tie-in computer consoles near you?"

Walter looked up and down the corridor.

"No."

"Very well then. I'll scan and locate some for you. Follow the arrow, please."

Walter looked down and saw an image of the corridor on the screen of the XX2050—with a glowing arrow pictured as lying on the floor just before him. As he stepped forward, the arrow moved ahead of him, pointing the way he should go.

He followed it for some distance down the corridor, and up a branching one. It led him finally into a carpeted area, where half a dozen comfortable chairs sat facing tables holding vision screens. He sat down at one of the tables and slid the HP-XX2050 into a slot in the tabletop. The large screen before him lit up with the concerned face of a clean-shaven middle-aged man.

"Mr. Jensen!" said the console, in slightly accented English. "Your autosecretary is now in contact with all local service computer nets. Our apologies for finding yourself astray in our terminal. If you'll wait where you are for just a minute or two, we'll send a vehicle for you. Would you care for anything in the way of food or drink at this time?"

"Not right now," said Walter, heavily. "I just want some sleep."

"Your autosecretary has already been put in touch with local hotel services," said the speaker. "Unfortunately, there're no further flights to London tonight, but a booking has been made for you on a rocketliner leaving tomorrow at ten a.m.. As soon as you clear customs, you'll be brought to a hotel room, selected on information from your autosecretary as to your personal taste."

"Good," said Walter, closing his eyes.

The familiar musical tone jerked him back from the sleep he had begun to fall into immediately.

"Oh. Sorry, Beep." He reached out and took the XX2050 out of its slot, placing it in his shirt pocket.

"Everything's taken care of, Walter," it said to him from the pocket. "I made all the necessary arrangements through the local computer networks. But don't fall asleep again. Your transportation will be here in five seconds."

"Five seconds?" But Walter had already heard the whisper of blowers, and a small, two-seater automated personnel carrier slid up to him, floating on the cushion of air from its underbody fans.

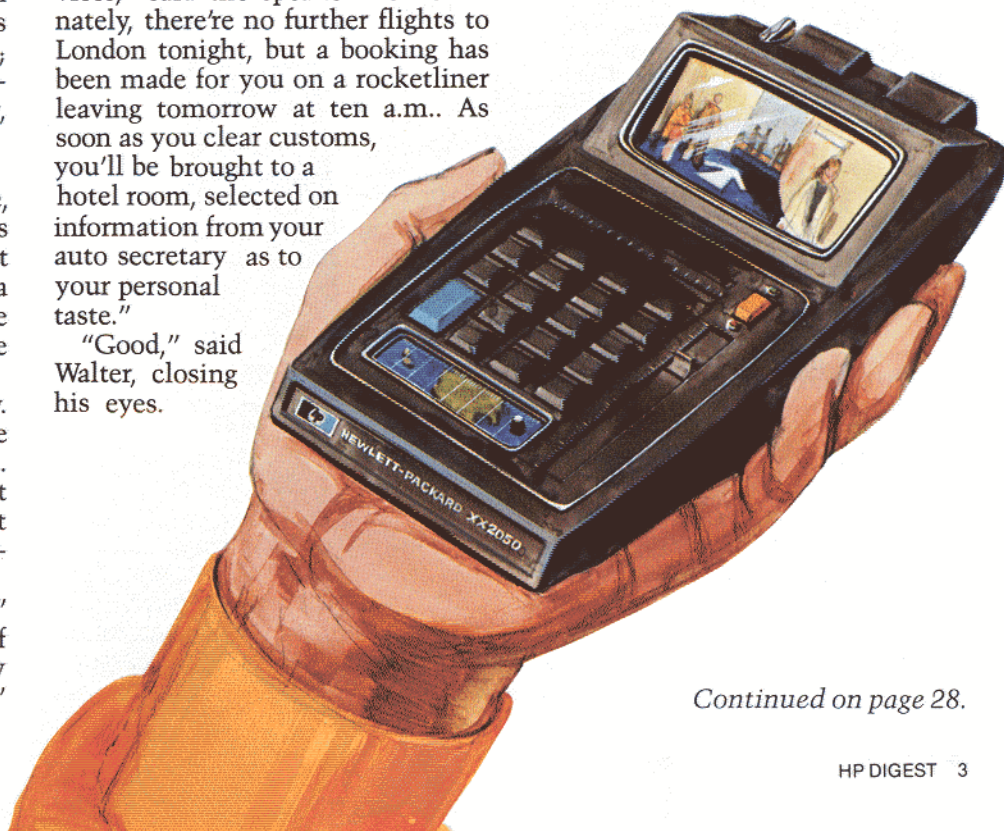
"If you'll take a seat, Mr. Jensen," the carrier said. "I'll bring you directly to the customs area."

Walter grunted an acknowledgment, got up and climbed into the nearest of the two seats. The vehicle moved off. In no time at all, it turned in through a doorway and stopped before another table with a vision screen.

"Slot me, Walter," The HP-XX2050 instructed him from the shirt pocket.

He fumbled it out and slid it into the slot provided. The screen lit up with the smiling face of a young lady.

"Mr. Jensen! Sorry we lost you earlier. Your luggage is already through custom check and passed on to the



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cab rank. Would you place your portfolio on the table, please?"

Walter did so. There was a faint hum for a moment.

"Very good, sir. Now, if you'll just give us your thumbprint. Thank you. You are now cleared through customs. We hope, in spite of the unscheduled nature of your stay in Jakarta, that you find matters here to your comfort."

"Yes. Well..." began Walter, taking back his portfolio. But his vehicle was already moving him off through glass doors into a pleasant tropical night, where an air-cushion automated taxi waited at the curb. He woke with the stopping of the cab some little time later to find himself once more at curbside. A live door-man—evidence of a luxury hotel—opened the cab door.

"Mr. Jensen!" he said. "Your room is ready, sir. If you'll step through the doors ahead, you'll find a bellcart waiting to take you to it."

"Thanks," said Walter. Clutching the portfolio, he went in and took a seat in the bellcart—an air-cushion vehicle not unlike the one that had transported him in the terminal. Three minutes later, it slid him through automatically opening doors into his room.

"Ah!" said Walter exhaustedly, collapsing in the nearest overstuffed chair. A glass in which ice tinkled was sitting on a table at his elbow. He sipped gratefully from it.

"I trust the drink is to your liking, sir," said a speaker grille in the wall of the room.

"Fine. Just right," said Walter.

"And would you want something to eat, Mr. Jensen?"

"Yes. Something simple. Clam chowder and a chicken sandwich."

"Yes sir. If I might get the details from your autosecretary...?"

Walter took the HP-XX2050 from his pocket, and looking around, discovered a slot in the table at his elbow. He inserted the XX2050.

Forty minutes later, having called home, and climbed into a luxurious, air-cushion bed, Walter was sleeping soundly. Meanwhile the XX2050, in the slot of a bedside table, was silently beaming calls to London, to make sure that the next day there would go smoothly. It wound up with an electronic note to itself to wake Walter—who was a slow starter—an hour and a half before he

was due to board his flight, and then switched itself into a wait-state.

The XX2050, of course, did not stop to be impressed by the number of things it could do to make Walter's life easier, and Walter himself, by this time, also took its services for granted.

He was, in fact, electronically pampered to a degree that was beyond the imagination of his ancestors. What made it all possible was the remarkable advances in computer science since the late twentieth century, plus a society geared to the use of such technological tools.

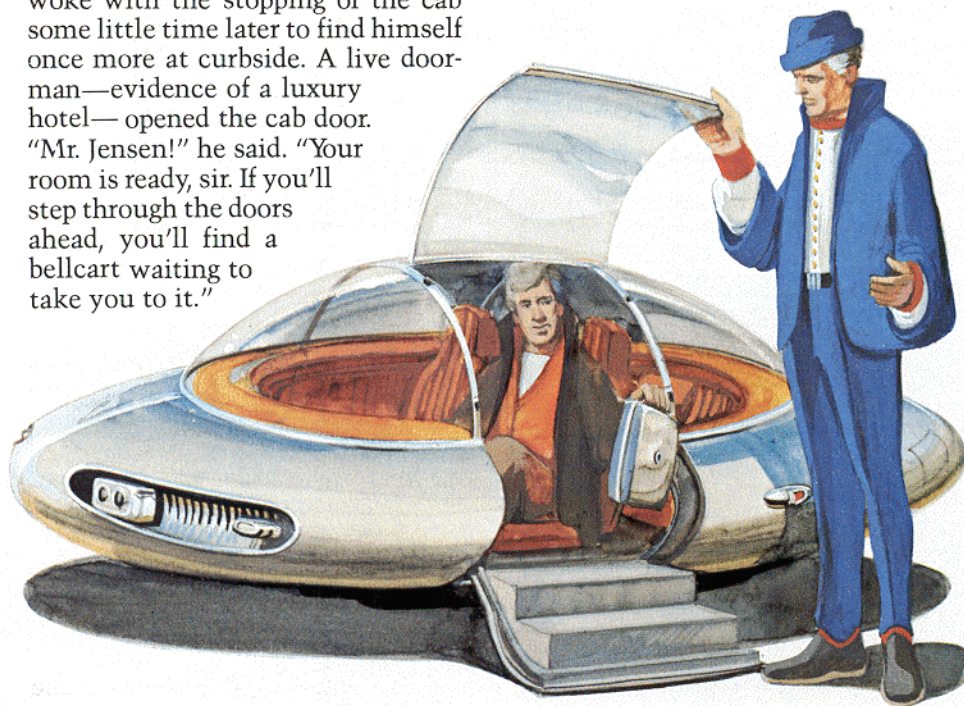
His portfolio, lying on a chair while he slept, contained information in a form as rare, nowadays, as the information itself. The form was that of printouts from the computer of the branch of Walter's company in Tahiti. Ordinarily, Walter did not see a piece of paper from one year's end to the next, any more than he normally had to deal personally with the multitude of government and other forms that influenced his life. All such things were handled for him now by the computers of the world, to which his XX2050 was an access point.

In very real fact, as long as he had the XX2050, he needed very little else in the way of material things. The XX2050 was like a latter-day Aladdin's lamp, which could summon up anything he needed and that either he or his company could afford. It did this by interlocking with the large, established computer nets wherever it happened to be, just as it had here in Jakarta.

When Walter had first found himself lost in the terminal, the XX2050 had used its built-in receiver to pick up a broadcast signal directing them to the nearest terminals of the airport computer net, translating the signal into a moving arrow of light on its screen for Walter's benefit. It could, if necessary, also have directed him to the computer terminals by voice directions.

Once slotted in one of the terminals, the XX2050 had been in direct connection with the airport computer net; and it had immediately contacted Pacificon Airline for a future flight, and discussed the clearing of Walter's luggage with customs.

The airport computer net was, of



course, interconnected with all the other public service nets of the Jakarta area. Through the net deal-



ing with the autotaxis, the XX2050 had arranged for a cab to take Walter to this hotel, and through the hotel/motel network, had arranged for the sort of room Walter preferred. Finally, it had given the hotel computer full instructions on Walter's choice of food and drink, so that the clam chowder and the chicken salad sandwich were made and seasoned to his personal taste.

The relationship of the XX2050 to the computer nets in Walter's work and personal life was no less intricate. It was like a staff of personal secretaries, switchboard operator, and personal business manager, combined.

Aside from the nets, all by itself, the XX2050 had some remarkable capabilities. In its slim shape it possessed a gigabyte of memory power. Also, it had the ability to transmit and receive on a number of frequencies, including a pulsed signal that could alert a special response in one of the communication satellites overhead at all times in orbit around the Earth.



But such communication was for emergency situations. Most was of the direct slot-connection type. Next most common was short-range air-wave talk with other computer nets, including those of the international telephone networks. The XX2050 could open safes, lock up or unlock offices and houses, translate for Walter in the basic vocabularies of over fifty different languages, or teach him to speak a new one. It had been programmed with a number of systems, including one that allowed it to operate as a watchdog over Walter's general health, and give instructions about him, in a medical emergency, to any adult human nearby—such as in the case of a dangerous reaction to any one of the several allergies that Walter possessed.

Aside from this, the HP-XX2050 also received information from a number of sensors which had been implanted in Walter's body to keep track of everything from his blood pressure to indications of infection. Not only did it keep a running record for Walter's doctor, it could also, in case information from the sensors warranted it, warn Walter if certain food and drink was unwise for him, advise him when it was necessary to rest, or even call aloud for help in an emergency situation.

With all this care being taken of people like Walter, it might be questioned what inhabitants of the mid-twenty-first century would do with all the spare time that their auto-secretaries gained for them. Unfortunately, as Walter himself had discovered, the more you had time to do, the more that was found for you to do; which was probably one of the reasons the world was enjoying a per-capita productivity nowadays several times that which would have been considered possible, fifty or a hundred years before.

Nonetheless, cared for in this fashion Walter slept soundly, without worries. On waking, he found what he would have ordered himself for breakfast, already laid out and waiting for him.

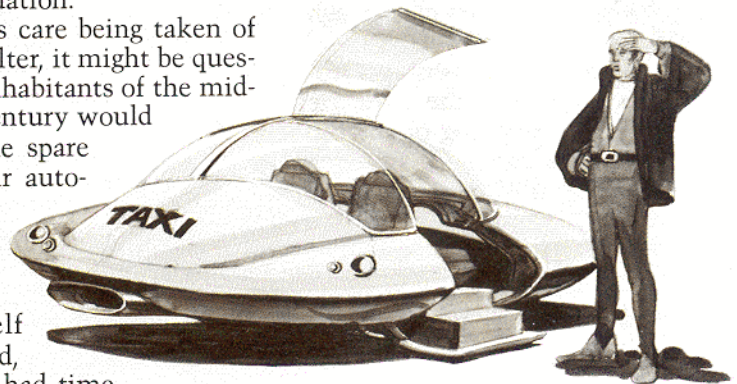
So pleasant, in fact, was breakfast, after the events of the previous day,

that he lingered over it longer than he normally would have, in spite of the warnings of the XX2050, and ended by having to rush to make his substitute flight, after all. Safe at last in the stratosphere and London-bound at nearly five thousand miles an hour, he relaxed and fell into conversation with a marine archaeologist in the opposite seating compartment, who had just finished six months of research at a station on the bottom of the Mindanao Trench, nearly seven miles beneath the surface waves of the Philippine Sea.

So interesting was this conversation that it was not until the plane had landed and he was climbing into an autocab that a nagging sense of something wrong surfaced in the shape of a sudden realization.

"Beep!" he said. "My portfolio! I forgot to take it when we left the hotel this morning. It's still there, back in Jakarta; and I'm due in an hour at the conference. The minute I get there those have to be read into the records of everyone there."

"It's all right, Walter," said the XX2050. "The hotel messaged the airport as we were taking off, to report the portfolio had been left behind. I gave directions to put it on a cargo rocket leaving right after us."



It's a completely automated cargo rocket, and scheduled to operate at trans-human accelerations. So it landed an hour and a half before us, and your portfolio is already at the conference site. You can pick it up from the Credentials Desk as you go in."

"Oh," said Walter. He sank back in his seat, wiping a suddenly damp brow. "Good. Very good. Thank you, Beep..."

"My pleasure, Walter," said the HP-XX2050, primly. ■