

SOMEWHERE OUT THERE

BRON FANE

They dragged the unidentifiable body of a man out of the Thames: Routine enquiries led nowhere and the case was shelved. Superintendent Harry Lee retired and reopened the case for his own satisfaction. An orthodox approach had led nowhere, so Lee tried a few unorthodox methods. That was when he heard the story of the Flying Saucer. Lee was experienced enough to tell a crank from a reliable witness. The Saucer-man was no crank. At last Lee saw the disc-ship for himself and met its pilot. He went aboard and took a trip into the unknown. Apparently the Saucer-pilot was working on the same case from a different angle and Lee realised why it had been impossible to identify the body . . . *it didn't belong*. There were some more disappearances to account for. . . .

This is a sophisticated novel of complex human problems set against a compellingly authentic science fiction background. The trouble is, it might really happen!



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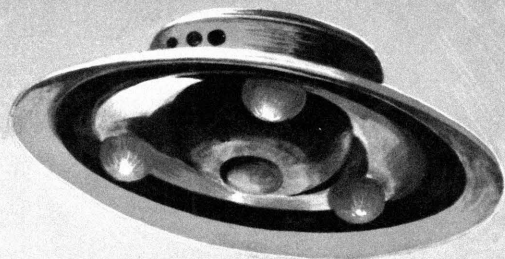
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Time and space
meant nothing
to the killer
from tomorrow



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**Science
Fiction**



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by

BRON FANE



*All characters in this book are fictional,
and any resemblance to persons, living or
dead, is purely coincidental.*

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INTRODUCTION

They dragged the unidentifiable body of a man out of the Thames. Routine enquiries led nowhere, and the case was shelved. Superintendent Harry Lee retired, and re-opened the case for his own satisfaction. An orthodox approach had led nowhere, so Lee tried a few unorthodox methods. That was when he heard the story of the Flying Saucer. Lee was experienced enough to tell a crank from a reliable witness. The Saucerman was no crank. At last Lee saw the disc ship for himself, and met its pilot. He went aboard and took a trip into the unknown. Apparently the saucer pilot working on the same case from a different angle. Lee realised why it had been impossible to identify the body . . . *It didn't belong!*

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by **Bron Fane**

"Time and Space meant nothing to the killer from Tomorrow."

CHAPTER ONE

The Floater

THE burly stevedore paused and looked thoughtfully at a pink object bobbing gruesomely in the oily black water.

" 'Ere, Fred," called the stevedore, as he put down the sack he was carrying.

Fred, an equally burly specimen of dockside life, came across. Charlie pointed.

"Don't like the look o' that," commented Fred. "Don't like the look o' that at all, Charlie !"

Fred set his sack down also. The two men stood look-

ing at the sinister pink object that floated near the dock wall, fifteen feet below them. The foreman came across.

"What's the matter, then? Workers' playtime?"

His sarcasm died half finished. Fred pointed mutely to the silent thing on the water. The foreman's eyes narrowed.

"I've seen one o' them before," he went on grimly.

"Keep an eye on it, lads. I'll call the police."

In those middle reaches of the docks the mighty Thames moved slowly, his water brackish, his depths very great. The dock foreman raced back to his office and panted a little as he picked up the telephone. He dialled 999 and asked for the police.

"Police Emergency Service," said a strong, practical, efficient voice at the other end of the wire.

"This is Len Coningsby," said the dock foreman.

"I see, Mr. Coningsby. Now what's the emergency?"

"I'm foreman on the No. 7 Wharf, Victoria Dock. I think there's a body in the river. Two of my chaps spotted it as they walked by the edge of the dock this morning, about two minutes ago."

"I'll get one of our River Patrols up there immediately. No. 7 Wharf of Victoria Dock."

"Yep. My chaps are keeping an eye on it. It's floating," said Coningsby again.

"Thank you very much for your help," said the police telephone operator, and hung up. Coningsby walked back to the edge of the dock. The thing was still bobbing horribly, in the water. A passing tug, fifty yards away across the basin, set up a wash. The wash rolled the thing over. Bloated, water-logged, mud-and-oil-caked

features of what had once been a man, looked up at them with sightless eyes.

Len Coningsby was tough, Fred and Charlie were tough; but all three of them felt excusably nauseated at the sight of that hideously distorted face.

The thing rocked from side to side in the wash, and the tug, innocent of what it had done, passed on, out of sight, up the river. It seemed a long time to the waiting, watching dockers and stevedores, before the River Police launch arrived. Coningsby waved and beckoned as the police launch hove into sight. . . .

In actual fact the launch had been very quick indeed. It had only seemed a long time to the men on the dock with that unwelcome object bobbing about below. The River Police had seen objects like that before. Strong practised hands and boat-hooks dragged the piece of pitiful human flotsam out of the water. They got it into the back of the launch. A smell wafted up to the men on the dock. The two burly River Police officers seemed quite unmoved by the smell. They were strong men, doing a job that required strength and fortitude. They got the launch tied up to a flight of old stone steps and made their way swiftly to the top of the dock wall. The River Police took statements from Fred and Charlie and from foreman Len Coningsby.

At last they left the Number Seven Wharf of Victoria Dock, taking with them the horribly still, blanket covered thing, that had been fished out of the water.

Superintendent Harry Lee was a grisled old bulldog of a man, only a few days away from retirement. Despite his age he had a remarkably fine set of teeth which he

attributed to his habit of chewing gum with monotonous regularity.

From the moment he left his home and arrived at his office, he paused only to drink tea and coffee during his morning and afternoon breaks. When there wasn't food in his mouth there was chewing gum in it—unless he was asleep. He had been reprimanded by those who outranked him, and considered that a certain dignity should be preserved. Harry Lee was the kind of man who laughed at such pettifogging restrictions, on a man's freedom.

Chewing gum wasn't just a hobby, it was a kind of fetish. He was chewing now and chewing viciously, as he watched the police pathologist completing his post mortem on the pathetic body that had been fished out of the Thames.

"He was about forty years old, perhaps a little younger," commented the pathologist. Dr. Sanders was a short, bald individual, with glasses, and a head that was disproportionately large for his body. He looked like a tadpole. The brain inside that massive skull was nevertheless extremely accute.

"What killed him?" asked the superintendent.

"Oddly enough," said Sanders, "he wasn't drowned."

"Well, that makes sense," replied Lee, grinding another wafer of gum to destruction between his molars. "If he wasn't drowned, what killed him?"

"That wasn't easy to determine at first," said the pathologist, he smiled a little.

"Never mind playing Sherlock Holmes. I want to know what killed him!"

"Patience, patience," said Sanders. "You shall know in good time, my dear Superintendent!" He pointed to a small round red mark, not much larger than a bee sting, above the dead man's heart.

"That killed him?" enquired the superintendent, with interest.

"I think that whoever passed a needle thin stiletto between his ribs at that juncture," answered the pathologist, "had been hoping that the body would be in the river long enough for decomposition to have completely destroyed the evidence, but thanks to those keen-sighted gentlemen on the dock, we got to the body before the pathologist's enemies, the jolly little microbes of disintegration, had completed their working sufficiently to hide the traces of that stiletto wound."

"Very interesting, very interesting indeed," commented the superintendent. "So we have a man of about forty years of age, who has been murdered by a stiletto thrust and thrown into the Thames. What else can you tell me about him?"

"Somebody didn't want him identified," said the doctor.

"What about the teeth? Any dental work?"

"Badly decayed, most of them," said the doctor. "Seems to have been suffering from drastic malnutrition. Calcium and vitamin shortage, I would suggest. The teeth are in the state of a man who had never had dental treatment."

"That's a bit odd, in this enlightened day and age, isn't it?" demanded Lee. "I mean there's no need to wander around with a mouth looking like a set of broken

snooker balls. He could have got them fixed up. If he couldn't afford the minimum charges the National Assistance would have paid them for him, wouldn't they?"

"I believe so," answered Sanders. "There's certainly no need for this kind of neglect, but it's in keeping with the general malnutrition."

"There's something here that doesn't make all the sense that it might," said Lee. "If he's what he appears to be, a half-starved tramp, why go to all the trouble of stiletto punctures, and hiding his identity. If he's what he appears to be, men of his type get found in docks with monotonous regularity throughout the world."

"But he isn't what he appears to be. Look at the hands. The hands of a tramp are normally deeply ingrained with dirt. This man's hands are not. He's what I'd have called 'poor-but-honest.' He's a worker. The hands are dirty, I agree, but it's industrial dirt, not what I'd call indolent dirt."

"What kind of job do you suggest?" asked Lee.

"Well, I can only give you certain pieces of evidence. For instance there are minute metal filings in the nails."

"Metal filings?" asked the superintendent, with considerable interest. "Now, that's interesting."

"He looked to me," said Dr. Sanders, "as though he might well have been working on some kind of process where metal was being turned or filed."

"What kind of metal is it?"

"Oh, one of the new alloys," said the pathologist rather vaguely. "I've got it over here for you. I scraped out what I could . . ."

"I'll get it down to the forensic lab and see what the boys down there can do with it," said Lee.

"Then," said Sanders, "there's a great deal of this metal dust in the lungs, in spite of the fact that there's a modicum of water in there as well."

CHAPTER TWO

Routine Investigation

"IS that in accord with modern conditions?" asked Lee.

"No, definitely not," answered the pathologist. "I'd have thought that this man was working in some kind of conditions which were, well—certainly below the standard of 20th century industrial welfare."

"You mean somebody's running an underground sweat shop, somewhere, do you?" asked the superintendent. "This fellow perhaps threatened to talk."

"I don't know of any sweat shop owners who would murder a man," answered Sanders. "After all, it's a comparatively minor crime."

"All depends what's being turned out in the sweat shop," mused Lee, as he chewed gum viciously.

"Oh, there is another thing about this fellow," said

Sanders. "I've examined the eyes pretty closely. I would have thought he needed glasses, but there's no trace of his ever having worn them."

"Bad teeth and no dentures; bad eyes and no glasses," said Lee. "This is very queer." He looked at the doctor again. The pathologist was carefully studying the pages of his own report, as though picking out the highlights.

"One more fact that is obviously intended to complete the disguise and to render the identification more difficult . . ." he began.

"What was that?" asked Lee.

"He was shaved after death," said the pathologist.

"Shaved after death?"

"It's difficult to tell, because of the effect the water has had on the man's skin and flesh," said Sanders, "but microscopic tests lead me to assume that he had either had a beard, or very long sideboards. I'm sorry I can't be more specific about it. He may have had a combination of the two . . ."

"This is really interesting," said Lee, "but I can't see where it's leading."

"Neither can I," agreed the pathologist. "I can just give you the facts for what they're worth."

"I'm grateful," said Lee.

The pathologist completed his post mortem.

"I'll send you a full and finalised report first thing in the morning," he said, "but I thought you'd like to have the facts as they were, to be going on with."

"I appreciate that very much," said Lee.

He left the pathological laboratory. The tadpole-like Sanders completed his tests on the unfortunate corpse.

Harry Lee drove back to his office at Scotland Yard, chewing viciously on his gum, and turning over the facts as he had them.

He consulted the pad of notes he had made. Certainly there wasn't much to go on—yet. The body had been spotted in the river by some dock workers. The body had been fished out of the river. The body turned out to be that of a forty-year-old man with bad teeth, bad eyes, suffering from undernourishment and who had apparently been shaved as an additional disguise, after being stabbed to death with a needle thin stiletto. He had been found floating in the Thames. He could have been dumped in from anywhere. All Lee's routine instincts, as an investigator, with forty years of service, were to begin on the docks themselves.

The following morning, bright and early, Harry Lee, with a plain clothes sergeant in attendance, began a routine tour of enquiry along the dock pubs and cafés, the warehouses . . . It was a long tour, but he drew a blank. The carefully reconstructed print of the dead man's face did not produce any signs of recognition among the dock-side characters whom the superintendent interrogated. Apparently, as far as these docksiders were concerned, the mystery man had appeared out of the blue, either literally, metaphorically, or a little of both.

Other routine enquiries were undertaken. There were no medical scars on the body, and the state of the mouth made it pretty obvious that there would be no sense in checking dental records. The finger prints were not on record anywhere in Scotland Yard's massive finger print department.

The days passed slowly, and the case remained completely unsolved. There was no lead, no clue, absolutely nothing . . . Nothing except the enigmatical corpse of a forty-year-old man, with bad sight and bad teeth . . . a man who had been killed by a stiletto prick over the heart, a man in whose nails metal filings had been found, a man in whose lungs there had been metallic dust.

The forensic report from the laboratory lay on Superintendent Harry Lee's desk. He picked it up. The metal was mainly beryllium. That, he decided, was particularly odd. Beryllium, one of the new alloys . . . vaguely it rang a bell at the back of Lee's mind in connection with rocketry and ballistic missiles. This case, he thought, might be bigger than it looked. Might be a *great deal* bigger! A man suffering from malnutrition, working in some kind of badly protected factory, gets his nails and his lungs full of beryllium dust, beryllium scrapings, beryllium filings . . .

He obviously knew something he shouldn't know. So, he's killed. He is killed and thrown into the Thames. According to Sanders' typewritten report, the body had been in the water about five days. The River Police checked on tides, and flow currents, and estimated that it could have travelled something like six-five miles. But it was unlikely. It had probably been bogged down somewhere . . .

Lee's search took him right up the Thames, past warehouses, wharves and factories, mile after mile of them. The industrial Thames gave way to the residential Thames, the beauties of Richmond and Kew. But still there was nothing . . . no clue, no trace of a clue. Uni-

formed men explored every avenue, every possibility, for Harry Lee's dogged determination was a by-word at Scotland Yard. All their efforts uncovered absolutely nothing.

The day for Lee's retirement came round as inevitably as the crack of doom. He felt a certain sympathy with a condemned man under sentence of death, as he watched the days coming off his calendar. He thought of the old 'September Song': "The days dwindle down to a precious few." They had dwindled all right! Over forty years a policeman, the last ten of them as a Detective Superintendent. Now, he was being retired. Harry Lee didn't particularly want to retire. He loved his work, he knew it inside out, and back to front. Every stick of furniture in his office was familiar to him. He drew a deep breath as he tore the last day off the calendar. There was quite a nice little send-off for him, in the canteen.

They presented him with a gold watch, suitably engraved. Harry Lee was one of the toughest men at the Yard, and the Yard has a justifiable tradition for tough, but good-hearted, detective superintendents.

Harry Lee would empty his wallet in aid of widows and orphans with the same alacrity with which he would arrest a felon or tackle a dangerous gunman alone. Somehow, towards the end of the retirement ceremony Harry knew that he would have to make a speech. His throat felt strangely dry and his eyes felt strangely moist. He ground savagely on the chewing gum, and looked round on his old colleagues, his young colleagues, his friends.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly. "Gentlemen, the day

has at last arrived. I've been dreading this day for two reasons. One, I've got to make a speech; two, I shall miss you lot! But don't think you've got rid of Harry Lee as easily as that. Old Father Time is sitting on my head pretty heavily now. But I've always been headstrong, as you know, and I reckon he'll be able to sit there for a lot of years yet. Now, I'm not one of these conventional film, or stereotype police superintendents. I'm afraid I'm not the type of man to take a sudden, fanatical interest in rose growing, or fishing, or stamp collecting, or any of these quiet, sedate and sensibly recommended hobbies. My hobby is criminology. I have heard some of these up and coming young psychologists say that the definition of 'play' is something you like doing. I don't suppose that there are many people in my position who would suggest that the work of a detective superintendent is play. But if the psychologists are right, and if the correct definition of play is something you enjoy doing," he clamped down savagely on his chewing gum—"then I have been at play for forty years! And I'm not going to give it up now. I love the law. I feel that it has a vital part to play in the running of the community. I can't give you the philosophy or the sociology of that, because I haven't been trained in philosophy or sociology. Upholding the law is the only thing I know. I've enjoyed doing it. I know that many times I've been a bad tempered old what's-it, and I'm sorry. There have been times when I've snarled at my friends and my colleagues . . . Well, I'm going to keep hanging about. I'm going to keep pottering back to see you whenever I want to, and maybe I'll still snarl at you, but I know that

you'll put up with me. As time goes on, I shall get to be like the furniture about here. I shall be known as 'Old Harry.' I believe that 'Old Harry' is one of the nicknames of the devil," he grinned. "I think that's about all I want to say, except—thanks for the watch, and if you want to know the time, ask a policeman, even a retired Detective Superintendent."

There were several eyes that were not quite dry when Harry Lee sat down.

CHAPTER THREE

The Irish Clue

ONE of his minor regrets was that the Thames Body Case remained unsolved. He would have liked to have finished that case; it was a challenging problem; it was a gauntleted enigma, and Harry did not like to be challenged by problems which he was no longer in a position to solve with the full, august majesty of his office of detective superintendent. But there was nothing to stop him re-opening the shelved, unsolved case privately, as an ordinary citizen, with inside influence as far as Scotland Yard was concerned.

Ex-Superintendent Harry Lee used his rank and his influence to get himself a job. He went to one of the big dockland security organisations, and offered his services

as a guard. When the security organisation checked Harry's credentials, and his magnificent record at the Yard, he was offered a post as a guard supervisor.

He jumped at it, with the proviso that he could choose his own region of operation. The security firm were glad to have a man like Lee on their books, and were only too delighted to let him pick his area. Harry chose that section of the waterfront very close to the spot where Fred and Charlie had seen the body which had led Len Coningsby to telephone the police.

It took Harry Lee only a comparatively short space of time to get himself settled into the new routine. On the course of his rounds he began making new friends. It was just a week after he had taken over as chief security officer for this particular section of the dock that he met Spud O'Leary. Spud O'Leary was a little grey man in a drab macintosh, with hair that fringed his ears like a conjuror's curtain secreting rabbits. Spud O'Leary was what was known on the docks as a 'character.' Officially he was a night watchman. Unofficially he was a fey Irishman, a combination of visionary, prophet and general all-round mild eccentric. But there was a strange sincerity below the eccentricity which made Spud O'Leary much more than an object of fun. He was in fact such a little man that, as he sat by the brazier, he made the superintendent think of a leprechaun.

"You'll be the new security officer, then?" said Spud, looking up with sudden interest, as Lee strode up to him.

"That's right," agreed Harry.

"Come and sit down, and have a mug o' tea, then," invited O'Leary.

Harry Lee glanced at his new watch.

"I've got five minutes, if you insist," he said.

He removed his chewing gum rather reluctantly, and deposited it into the gently lapping waters of the almost still Thames beyond the dock wall. O'Leary disappeared into his hut and reappeared with two massive, chipped, tin mugs. They bore the strain of decades of tea. The ex-superintendent looked at them with a wry grin.

"Where did you get the mugs from, then—Institute of Public Health and Hygiene?"

"They're a little on the stained side, but a little honest muck never hurt nobody, to be sure!" grinned O'Leary. "You see that spot there? That little spot, right there in that mug, where the enamel has been eaten away——"

"I thought it was just a chip," murmured the new supervisor as he shone his torch inside the grubby enamel.

"That's where you're entirely wrong, my friend," answered O'Leary, "that little spot on the enamel was eaten away by night when me grandfather—that would be Timothy O'Leary—was testing out some new poteen in this very mug!"

He shook his head and crossed himself piously. "Poor grandfather! They buried him the following week! Ah, that was wonderful poteen!"

"You mean it killed him?" asked Lee.

"Well—I wouldn't so much say it killed him as it lifted him to heaven. It was a fine recipe. It was his dying secret. He bequeathed it to me father who bequeathed it, in turn, to me. Now, you begin with three tins o' shoe blacking, and you stir them all thoroughly with methylated spirit——"

"Ye gods," echoed the inspector of security, "and he actually drank that?"

"Ah, yes, they were drinking men. But that was back in County Sligo, long before they came over here," said the Irishman. He began boiling an old tin kettle on the brazier.

"I hope there's nothing more lethal than water in that thing?" enquired the ex-superintendent.

"Now, Your Honour, I wouldn't take the risk of giving good poteen to a security man, would I?"

"I suppose you wouldn't," answered Harry Lee.

"Well, then," answered the Irishman.

The old tin kettle, dented and blackened by age, boiled joyously.

The Irishman poured the water on to some leaves in an equally battered tin. He stirred vigorously with the handle of a fork whose tines had long since disappeared. Looking at that fork, Harry Lee wondered whether it had been used on some nefarious errand. It looked very much like the kind of tool a 'do-it-yourself-enthusiast' cracksman would use on a small, but recalcitrant, safe, with an old fashioned tumbler lock.

"Ah, its' a fine thing, a fine thing," said O'Leary to himself. He held the boiling billy up against his nose and sniffed appreciatively. The ex-superintendent hoped that it was a purely one-way traffic!

"I think that's ready," announced Spud.

The tea smelt pungently strong.

"Where did you get that stuff from?" asked Lee.

"Ah, it comes from a friend of mine in India. It's the very finest quality tea that's made!"

"It seems pretty indescribable!" commented the security supervisor.

"Ah, well, you see, this is a very special mixture-brew of me own."

"As long as it doesn't bear too close a resemblance to grandfather Timothy's poteen recipe, I should think it will be palatable," remarked Lee.

He picked up one of the battered mugs.

"How often do you wash this out?" he asked.

Spud grinned.

"Well, now, that's a question. The only water is over there, and I can't reach it unless there's a flood, so I reckon you might as well scour it out with the hot tea. That'll kill the bug. They can't live in that."

"Well, if I was a bug I certainly wouldn't want to live in it," agreed the security man.

He looked at his watch again.

"That's a pretty fine watch you have there. Would I be right in thinking it was a retirement present when you gave up some other job?"

"You would," replied Harry Lee.

He passed the watch across so that the old night watchman could see it.

"Well, now, that's a fine thing," said O'Leary. "Detective Superintendent, was you? Some of you blokes can't give it up, can you?"

"It's in my blood," confessed Harry Lee.

"You must have tramped a lot of miles and caught a lot of strange men and women," said O'Leary philosophically.

Lee nodded his agreement.

"I know your name is Harry Lee, because it said so on the back of your watch, but you don't know my name, do you?" said the night watchman.

"Well, you're an Irishman, aren't you? It's either Timothy or Pat . . ."

"My grandfather was Timothy, and me father was Pat. My father was Patrick O'Leary, my grandfather was Timothy O'Leary——"

"Murphy," suggested Lee.

"Well, now, you're so nearly right, I'll give you half a mark," grinned the Irishman. "You know the famous Spud Murphies——"

"I know that's a pretty frequent appellation in the Green Isle," said the supervisor.

"Although I was christened Murphy O'Leary, they call me Spud."

"Well, I'm very pleased to meet you, Spud, and thank you for the tea," smiled Harry with mock gravity.

"Well, would you be wanting a second one?"

"I haven't finished this yet," said Harry.

"That's all right, there's plenty in the pot." The Irishman peered into the battered billy. "There's plenty in there to be sure, begorrah, for six security men!"

"I know I'm pretty hefty," said Harry, "but I'm not as big as six men. I'll have another *one*."

"I was saying you must have seen a lot of strange things in the course of a life time of police work," said the Irishman.

"And I was saying that I agree with you!"

"Well, you probably won't believe this; you'll think that it's just like Finnegan's Rainbow, but I could tell

you a tale of something that I saw one night." The old man looked around as though to be careful that he wasn't overheard. "I've got the *second sight*, you know."

"That's interesting," said Harry Lee. He was drinking the old man's tea, he couldn't very well be rude to him. Besides, there was something infectiously likeable about Murphy O'Leary.

"I got the second sight; I can see things that other people can't see." He said it as a kind of challenge, as though he expected the ex-superintendent to disagree with him.

"Tell me then," said Harry, "what have you seen that other people haven't seen?"

"You remember all this fuss in the papers a few years ago about the flying saucers?"

"Yes, I know about that. Dozens of people came to Scotland Yard at the time with all kinds of queer notions. Some of them, I think, were genuine victims of hoaxes, others were trying to hoax us, a few of them would have benefited from a spell in a nursing home——"

"Ah, you mean an asylum," interrupted the Irishman. "Well, now then, out of all those people who came to the Yard with their reports of flying saucers, did you take any of them as genuine?"

"There may have been one or two," replied Lee. He took another sip of the powerful tea. "Yes, there may certainly have been one or two . . ."

"Well, now, I've seen one," said the Irishman.

"Do you mean when everybody else was seeing them?" asked the ex-super.

"No. I saw one recently."

"Recently? I haven't heard any reports of saucer sightings for some considerable time," said Lee.

"Have you heard anybody talking about the North Pole recently?" asked O'Leary.

"No, come to that, I haven't," smiled Harry Lee.

"But you believe the North Pole exists, even though nobody's mentioned it recently?" said the Irishman, with a kind of dogged logic.

"It's a good point," agreed the ex-superintendent.

"All right, now tell me about this saucer of yours."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Saucer

"A GREAT big round thing it was, with little lights twinkling around the edges. It came straight down out of the sky and landed here on the dock. I couldn't believe me eyes."

"A flying saucer landed here, on the dock?" said the ex-superintendent in amazement.

"As sure as I'm sitting here drinking a cup of tea with you, and may the blessed St. Michael, St. Patrick, and all the angels, throw me into that river if I'm telling a lie," said Murphy O'Leary.

"That's a pretty pungent oath," commented Lee. "This isn't a leg pull, Mr. O'Leary?"

"No, it's not a leg pull at all," said the Irishman. "I saw this thing come down out of the sky."

"Well, did anybody else see it?" demanded Lee.

"Not a soul. It was two o'clock in the morning. Everybody was asleep and in bed. There was nobody about here. You see, when everybody's gone home at the end

of the working day there's nobody on the docks at all, at all."

The ex-superintendent was thinking hard. What the old man said was true. At that hour of the morning the docks would be as empty as the graveyard; as quiet as the tomb; as silent as a crypt.

"Now, the thing is this. I liked the look of you the moment I saw you, young fella," went on Spud.

"A long time since I've been called 'young fella'," said the supervisor of security.

The leprechaun-like Irishman chuckled to himself and took a long pull at his mug of tea. "Well, in a manner of speaking——" said Spud.

"All right—in a manner of speaking——" agreed Lee.

"There was a fella got out o' this thing, and he was very tall, and broad-shouldered. He wore a funny sort o' little tunic that glimmered and glistened as he walked. His eyes were very bright, and he had a high, intelligent forehead. His skin was a light, bronzed tan, like some o' these Greek wrestlers you see sometimes, when they come over here on tours."

Harry Lee was nodding, as he listened.

"What about this man?" he asked.

"Well, the fella came right up to me and spoke to me."

"Do you mean he could understand our language? He could speak English?" asked Lee.

"He spoke English as well as you or I could speak it," said the Irishman, "but he had a funny accent."

"A funny accent?" asked the ex-superintendent.

"Well, I suppose what was so funny was—there wasn't

an accent at all. Now listen to yourself, you've got a little twang of Cockney about you."

"That's not surprising. I was born in the East End of London," said Harry proudly.

"And you can tell I'm from the Green Isle, now, can't you?"

"Anyone listening to you could certainly tell that you were an Irishman," said the security chief.

"Well, now, this fella, you couldn't tell where he was from."

"You mean he had a sort of B.B.C. announcer's accent?" suggested Lee.

"Well, he had and he hadn't. It wasn't even as warm as a B.B.C. accent. At least you can recognise B.B.C. English as B.B.C., if you know what I mean. But this was a sort of mechanical English. It was like listening to a gramophone record that had been recorded by a man with a thin voice."

"That's an incredible thing," said Harry Lee.

"It was a very incredible ship!"

"What did this fellow say?" asked the security supervisor.

"He asked me all kinds of questions," said the night watchman.

"Such as?" prompted Harry.

"He asked me if I had been here very long. If I knew what was made in the factories over there, and then he showed me a big ingot of some kind of shining, whitish metal. He said it was something beginning with B——"

"Beryllium?" asked the ex-superintendent. The incredibly long arm of coincidence was waving up and

down at the back of his mind. This story might be no more than the wild talk of an accentric old man, but . . . *but* . . . Harry Lee was always ready to accept the well-nigh impossible if he thought it was going to lead anywhere. Certainly orthodoxy had got him nowhere on this case. Even with the backing of the magnificent facilities available at Scotland Yard.

"Now—where was I?" demanded O'Leary.

"You were telling me that this fellow showed you an ingot of beryllium."

"That's right. This fellow showed me this piece of white metal, and he said did I know where metal like this was made? and I said, 'No, I didn't.' And he said he was looking for somebody, and I asked him who he was looking for, and he said he didn't know. I said that as there were about eight million people living in London, it was going to be *terrible difficult* to find the man he wanted! He said yes, he supposed it would be. I asked him what made him suppose the man might be about here somewhere, and he said his detector gear had picked up the personality vibrations of the man, but that they had gone out shortly before he could land. He said *perhaps* the man was dead, but he'd died recently . . ."

The long arm of coincidence continued to wave . . .

"This is extremely odd," said Lee, half to the Irishman and half to himself.

"You're interested," said the Irishman.

"I most certainly am interested," declared Lee.

"You're the first person who hasn't laughed at my story," said the Irishman a little petulantly.

"It's not the sort of story everyone would go for, is it?" said Lee.

"Well, now, seeing you've believed the first part, you'll be the first man to whom I've dared to tell the second part."

"There's more?"

"I like me job as a watchman, and I wouldn't want to get meself locked up as one o' *them*, in the big house."

"You mean, a nut case?" enquired Harry Lee.

"I wouldn't put it as strongly as that, but you know what happens when they think you're gettin' eccentric. They might even think I was getting senile, but I like my little job, I like to sit here and look at the stars. You never know, there may be another flying saucer come! In fact, if the second part o' me story's true, I could *make* it come!"

"You could *make* it come?" asked Harry Lee.

"Look at this," said the Irishman.

From the back of his hut he produced a little metal cylinder, about the size of a bullet.

"Now this little cylinder is supposed to be a signalling device. The man from the saucer gave it to me, and he said if I ever heard anything interesting I could signal him with this, and he'd come and he'd ask me questions again."

"Well, where's he from?" asked the supervisor of security.

The Irishman waved vaguely in the direction of infinity.

"Somewhere out there," he said. "*He's from somewhere out there!*"

The supervisor heaved a heavy sigh.

"HmMMM!" he said. "It's a big place."

"What's a big place?" asked the Irishman.

"*Somewhere out there*," said the ex-superintendent.

"Ha, that's Infinity, that is," affirmed the Irishman.

"That's a good word for this time of night," grinned Harry Lee. "How's this little metal cylinder supposed to call your man back again?"

"He did tell me, but I can't quite remember. You're supposed to do something with it."

The security man picked it up. It appeared to have no opening at all.

"Well, what are you supposed to do with it?" he asked.

"If only I could remember, I could call him back . . ." said Spud O'Leary.

Harry Lee smiled and handed the little metal cylinder back to the night watchman.

"If you ever remember how to call him back, call him back. I'd like to meet him."

"He's a fine fella!"

"Did he tell you his name?"

"To be sure he did! Any civilised man 'd tell another civilised man his name!"

"Well, what did he call himself?"

"Chronol," answered O'Leary.

"Chronol, that's an unusual name!" said Lee. "Any other name?"

"No, just Chronol. They only have one name where he comes from."

"I see," murmured Harry Lee. He threw away the

dregs of his tea mug and handed it back to the Irishman. "I shall have to go a bit further, Spud, but I'll see you again."

"Perhaps tomorrow night now," said the Irishman hopefully.

"I'll see where duty takes me," answered Lee. He was too old a hand to fall into prognosticable routines. If they didn't know where you were likely to turn up next you could have them on the hop. The only way they couldn't know where you were likely to be was if you didn't know yourself till you set off on your rounds. Harry Lee was a great believer in playing hunches. He wandered on through the gaunt black shapes of ancient warehouses, crumbling by the oily mud of the Thames.

It was five days before his beat again took him past the Irish night watchman's hut.

"Is that you, Your Honour," called Spud O'Leary from the infernal glow of his brazier.

"It's me," called Lee.

"Sure, sure, I thought it was!" said Spud. "Bejabbers, will you come and have a cup of tea with me again?"

Lee's stomach did a neat gyration. He deposited his chewing gum once more in the Thames. The tea was a small price to pay for the interesting company which the Irishman offered.

Harry Lee sat himself down on an upturned packing case by the side of the brazier.

"Well, now, have you found out how to get into that cylinder of yours yet? Have you found out how it works?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'd been

trying to unscrew it, I'd been trying to pull it apart, then I suddenly remembered what the man said. You just take hold of the two ends and press them in together, and a thing comes out at the side. And you talk into it . . ."

"Do you?" said the ex-superintendent.

The Irishman handed him the cylinder.

"Now you just press here and there, that's what the man said, that's what Chronol said," repeated the Irishman.

"Like this, you mean?" asked Lee as he took it.

"That's it, that's it. Now squeeze it and something will come out."

"I hope this doesn't turn out to be one of those jokes where ink comes out all over my uniform," said the grizzled old security officer.

"There's nothing like that at all," said the Irishman.

"How do you know, if you haven't tried it?"

"I haven't tried it! To tell you the truth, I'm half afraid of it. I've got nothing to tell the man. And he might come a long way."

"That's true," agreed the supervisor as he pressed the ends of the shining cylinder.

It began to glow strangely.

CHAPTER FIVE

Communication

THE metal cylinder began to vibrate, when he looked at it, it seemed to be there and yet not there. He shook his head, snapped his eyes open and looked at it, shut them, then looked at it again.

"That's damned odd," he said.

"What is?" asked the Irish night watchman.

"This cylinder, it seems to be there and yet not there. I can't make it out."

Something was coming out from the centre of it, like a thin wire mesh. It was surrounded by a peculiar, misty, translucent substance, that made the security man think vaguely of the ectoplasm which spiritualist mediums claim is their means of communication with the dead.

He grinned. "Are you there, Chronol?"

"Perhaps the line's engaged," said the Irishman.

"Maybe he's asleep," said Lee. "Chronol, are you there? I've got a message for you. Your friend O'Leary

says that you are interested in finding a man who died somewhere about here, or so we think, several weeks ago. Now I'm interested in finding out about that man, too. If you like to come over we'll talk about it, because maybe it's the same man." He laughed.

"There you are," he said to Spud, "that's given an excuse for calling him."

"That has, to be sure," agreed the Irishman.

The supervisor looked up with a grin.

"I don't see any flying saucers," he said.

"Give him a chance," protested Spud. "He may be a long way away."

The cylinder had stopped vibrating.

"It's a most incredible little piece of machinery," commented Lee. "I wish I knew what it was."

"What's that?" hissed O'Leary, as he pointed skywards.

The ex-superintendent looked up, following the direction of the night watchman's gaze.

Something was coming down out of the sky, something round, with lights twinkling along its perimeter.

"Ye gods and little fishes," ejaculated Harry Lee, "it's a flying saucer." He clutched at the packing case for support. "I never thought the thing would work! I didn't say you were a liar, but I did not believe it, Murphy!" Lee sounded more Irish than O'Leary.

"Well, you've got to believe it now, for here he comes," said the Irishman. "I told you so! I told you it was the truth! I'm glad I remembered how that little capsule worked! It's nice to be vindicated sometimes."

"I'll say you're vindicated. Is there anyone about?"

"No. It's about the same time as he came before. Nobody saw him then."

The flying saucer landed. It was an enormous, convex disc with a dome above the centre, and four spherical pieces of landing gear beneath it. A hatch slid open inside and a light, soft and diffuse, streamed out. The shadow of a man appeared in the aperture. He strode down a sliding ramp, and came across to the brazier, where the astonished ex-superintendent and the voluble little Irish night watchman waited.

"I knew you'd come," greeted the Irishman. "Chronol, I want you to meet my friend, ex-Superintendent Harry Lee. He's now in charge of the security men on this area of the dock front."

A lean, strong, bronzed hand grasped Lee's surprised paw, and pumped it vigorously and sincerely.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Superintendent. My name is Chronol. I understand you have some information which you think may be of use to me."

"I must be dreaming," mumbled Harry Lee.

"No, you're not dreaming," said the man from the saucer. "Pinch yourself, I believe that's the time-honoured formula. You're wide awake, Superintendent."

"I'm not a superintendent now," said Lee rather inconsequently. "I used to be, but I've retired."

"'Be' and 'used-to-be' are very similar terms. Time is only a matter of a relative standpoint. Eternity is only a matter of finding your way back to the beginning, of where you used to be," explained the saucer pilot.

"Sounds like double Dutch to me," replied the ex-superintendent.

"Yesterday is too strong to be destroyed," said the man from the saucer. "The past is the only reality, but this is neither the time nor the place to talk metaphysics. I think you've got some information which would help me."

The security man's eyes were glued to the saucer.

"My ship interests you?" asked Chronol.

"All my working life I've been taught to be observant," said Harry Lee. "I can't help being interested by anything as unusual and extraordinary as your ship."

"Would you care to come aboard?"

"Are you seriously inviting me aboard?" said the security supervisor.

"Yes," said Chronol. "I think by the time you and I have had a little conversation you will agree that we have more in common than you originally thought."

"All right," agreed Lee. This was the opportunity of a life time! Maybe he was dreaming, maybe he was just going to step across the edge of the dock and walk straight into the Thames! Maybe that ship didn't exist—but maybe it did . . .

He followed Chronol up the ramp. The ramp slid into the ship behind them. The door closed.

The interior was wonderfully comfortable and furnished in a style of such picturesque beauty that it took Harry Lee's breath away, and he was by no means a man with an over-developed æsthetic sense. He was practical, solid and down-to-earth.

"It's magnificent," he said. "I've never seen anything so lovely."

"I'm glad you like it," replied Chronol.

"Where are your crew—it's a big ship."

"This is only a one-man ship," answered Chronol.

"But it's so big!"

"I like my comforts," said the saucer pilot.

"It's like a flying flat!"

"Yes, it is rather," agreed Chronol.

Harry Lee looked round the luxurious interior. Most of it was padded with what appeared to be a plastic quilting material. It had a soft and pleasant texture, and it seemed to exude faintly, a smell that was a cross between disinfectant and the air on top of a pine clad mountain.

"Do you like my air conditioning?" asked Chronol with a smile.

"Is that what it is?" asked Harry Lee. "After the kind of air I've been used to for the last sixty years it smells a bit too pure—like a hospital, or a Swiss sanatorium." He grinned. "When you get used to living in the stink of the London smoke you get suspicious of air that's really clean and pure, you wonder what's the matter with it. You wonder what's missing."

Chronol smiled.

"Yes, I can understand how you feel; it's a perfectly natural, psychological reaction."

"Where are you taking me?" asked Lee, as Chronol motioned him to one of the superbly padded chairs.

The chair swivelled as Lee made himself comfortable. It seemed to have the knack of contouring itself to the ex-superintendent's rugged body.

"Let me take you first," said Chronol.

Lee looked again at the luxurious fittings.

"I can't believe this is really happening," he said. "This must be happening to someone else. This isn't real; it's a legend, a fallacy of some kind. I'm having an illusion, a delusion, or an hallucination. I——" he broke off. "This isn't really happening to *me*," he repeated.

"Yes, it is," affirmed Chronol.

"All my life," said Lee, "I've had my two feet firmly on the ground, both literally and metaphorically."

He inserted a fresh wafer of chewing gum and bit on it heavily.

"Where are you from?" he asked suddenly.

"I prefer to show you, then we can talk properly." Lee relaxed.

"All right," he agreed. "If that's how you want it, I don't mind."

He still had that strange feeling of unreality. He couldn't convince himself that he wasn't dreaming. The tall, bronzed, handsome figure of Chronol looked more like something out of a science fiction film than a real human being. He looked as if he might have stepped from the race of Golden Men in Plato's republic. He looked as if he might have come from Butler's fabled land of Erewhon, or from Moore's Utopia. But as his fingers touched the arm rests, the chair felt real beneath his body.

"You're having a job to convince yourself that this really exists, aren't you?" asked Chronol.

Lee nodded.

"When we actually begin our journey," went on Chronol, "you'll experience a tingling, vibrating sensation. It's nothing to worry about, this will increase a

little, then it will diminish. You may feel slightly sick and giddy, and then again, you may not."

"What about the gravitational pressures? I've seen these films; I've read these books," said Harry.

Chronol laughed.

"I saw one character whose face got pulled out of shape by the excess g, doesn't that happen every time you blast off?" asked Lee.

"It doesn't happen on my ship," assured Chronol; he smiled. "*It's not that kind of ship.*"

"What kind of ship is it?" demanded Harry.

"Later . . . I promise I will satisfy your curiosity later."

"In my profession curiosity is an asset," remarked Lee. "As long as I have your assurance that it will be satisfied subsequently . . ."

"Definitely," agreed the pilot of the strange disc ship.

"We're going somewhere out there," thought Lee aloud. "I wonder where? . . ."

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Chronol was doing things to a large gleaming plastic and chromium control panel. He was pressing buttons, moving switches. They didn't click; they moved softly in their housings.

CHAPTER SIX

Forward

'AS Harry Lee watched Chronol, he became aware of the tingling sensation. It was not unpleasant; it began rather like a mild electric shock. It grew stronger, just as Chronol had said it would. Harry Lee bit firmly on his chewing gum. Chronol smiled quietly to himself as he continued to manipulate the controls.

"If you look through that porthole," he said quietly, "you will see a kind of flickering effect, which will gradually give way to a thin, grey, misty appearance."

Harry looked out in the direction that Chronol indicated. As the saucer pilot had said, there was a thin grey mist outside. The ex-superintendent had just caught the end of the flickering. There was a high pitched whining sound accompanying the vibration.

"Shan't be long," said Chronol brightly. He got up and moved across to a large spherical object that re-

minded Lee more of an astrolabe than anything else he had ever seen.

"What's that?" he asked with interest.

"It's a Space-Time co-ordinator," answered Chronol.

"What's it for?" asked the supervisor of security.

"It gives me my position relative to the continuum," explained Chronol. "It acts like a sort of Time compass."

"A Time compass," echoed Lee. Somehow the words sent a strange chill running down his spine.

"What exactly is the function of a Time compass, Chronol, my friend?"

"It gives you your direction in Time, in the way that an ordinary compass on the surface of a planet gives you your direction with regard to the north and south poles of that planet," explained Chronol.

Lee drew a deep breath, and bit hard on his gum.

"Are we by any chance moving in Time?" he asked.

"We spend our entire lives moving in Time," replied Chronol. "It shouldn't be a new experience for you."

"Yes, I realise that," said Lee, "but I mean, are we moving in some artificial way through Time?"

"You will appreciate a frank answer, I'm sure," said Chronol. "Yes—we are!"

"So this isn't a space ship, it's a Time ship?" said the ex-superintendent in a dazed voice. His jaw sagged. Harry Lee was a tough character, but there are some things which come as surprises, even to the toughest of men.

"I could have understood an alien from some other planet. It always seemed reasonable to me to assume that amid the millions of stars in the universe at least a few

must have had planetary systems like ours. On some of those, life—intelligent life—may well have developed. Ours is not by any means the oldest star, I'm quite prepared to accept that. But *time travel* seems such a paradox in itself . . ."

"Life is very largely a paradox in itself, nevertheless we live," said Chronol. "I said that you and I had certain things in common. Very well, Mr. Lee, let me begin to tell you what they are. We have a few moments ship-time before we actually land, or before we come out of Transit Course. During those minutes I'll tell you all I can about myself, my job, and how it is that our paths cross."

Chronol paced quietly back and forth in the disc as he told his story to Harry Lee.

"I am a Time Warden, a kind of Time Policeman, if you like to think of it that way."

"I see," said Harry.

"If you can imagine your own problems in detection multiplied by infinity, and laced with a thousand indescribably important technical details, then you will realise something of the task which confronts a Time Warden," said Chronol.

"You have my sympathy," said Lee. "I thought my problems were enough for any man, without being multiplied by infinity!"

"I don't want sympathy," smiled Chronol, "but I would appreciate some help."

"It is part of my principles to help any other officer at any time," said Lee, chewing hard on the gum.

"I felt certain I could count on you," said Chronol.

"You see, the past is normally kept clear of all except genuine professional parties of historians travelling with Time Rangers and Time Guides, in government sponsored craft. They touch nothing. They observe. From time to time, perhaps, our ships have been seen."

"There were a lot of flying saucer scares just after the war," said Harry Lee.

"Yes, these sightings, by your people, coincided, of course, with the early stages of atomic development. The prosperity of our civilisation has been built upon the economic power of atomic production. Quite naturally the economists and the sociologists of our own generation——"

"By the way," interrupted Harry, "what is your time?"

"I was born in 2530," answered Chronol.

"You're pretty well five hundred years ahead, then," said Harry.

"Over five hundred," said Chronol, "nearly six hundred."

"And how long has Time travel been known among your people?" asked Lee.

"The first Time ships were developed during my life time," said Chronol.

"I see," answered the ex-superintendent. "Have you visited the future as well as the past?"

"The future doesn't exist," said the Time Warden.

"You mean humanity is going to obliterate itself?" asked Lee.

"Oh, no," answered Chronol, "but unless you believe in pre-destination, you cannot possibly expect the future

to be set out in front of you, like a map. The future does not exist because it has not been made. Imagine millions of threads being woven together into one great, thick rope. Once woven the rope is set and fixed. The point at which the threads are fixed is the eternal present, the everlasting moment, the perennial *Now*, but until the threads come together the rope could be woven in a variety of different ways by the movements of *Now*. Even if it was possible—which it isn't—to fly ahead of *Now* all that an observer would see would be possibilities, so there's no point in going, even if it was possible to pass the *Now* barrier."

"Yes, I think I understand that," said Harry Lee, chewing hard. He moved in his chair.

There was silence for a moment in the saucer. Then Chronol said:

"I was telling you that nearly all space travel was confined either to men like myself—Time Wardens—and the official Time Couriers who carry government sponsored parties of students and the like. You see the past is a deadly dangerous place. A time ship is more deadly and devastating than an atomic bomb. To injure one man in the past can wipe out a thousand people in my own time—perhaps more, perhaps fifty thousand."

"The dead man in the Thames?" asked Harry Lee. "The dead man whose murder I was investigating, shortly before my retirement?"

"That is the cause of my journey, as I explained to you," said Chronol.

"How many men have died because of him?" asked Harry Lee.

"Four hundred and seventy people disappeared as though by magic," said the Time Warden.

"Four hundred and seventy people!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes. It's a lot, isn't it? We've been trying to trace the records back as far as we can from our end. We find that they are all descendants of the same family. It's not easy, because the name is 'Smith'!"

"I see your problem," agreed Lee.

"Some of them were women and children, which didn't improve the problem. Marriage had made all kinds of difference to the names, but as far as our expert historians and archivists can tell us, they all went back to at least the 20th century; possibly a little earlier, the 19th, we think. The records are vague in some places, but in the main they have been meticulously kept."

"What's your theory about this?" asked Harry Lee.

"Well, so far it is only a theory, but I believe that somebody from our own time, somebody from what you would call 'tomorrow,' is a killer. A killer with a time machine, a killer to whom time and space mean nothing."

Harry Lee nodded.

"It sounds rather frightening," he said. "Time and Space mean nothing to the killer from Tomorrow."

He chewed rather whimsically for a few moments in silence.

"Such a man could hide anywhere at all, in the past," suggested Harry Lee.

"It is bad enough having to comb a planet, when you're confined to the present," said Chronol, "but I have to

comb a planet through immeasurable ages of history. He could be anywhere."

"But you've obviously got more to go on than that!" said Harry Lee.

"Yes, I have," said the Time Warden. "There is, in our department of criminological detection, a device known as a personality frequency detector. This is, if you like, something like a psychic finger print department. I can't explain it more specifically, because for one thing, the abstract psycho-electronics by which it works are a very complex field, I don't fully understand it myself, and secondly even if I did understand it fully, the words don't exist in the English that you speak for me to explain it to you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Theories

"FAIR enough," said Harry Lee, "just tell me how the thing works." He grinned. "I've been driving a car for years, but I'm no mechanic. I pull a starter, depress a clutch and press an accelerator. I can clean a sparking plug, top up a battery, check my tyre pressures and see that the brakes are efficient. But I couldn't tell a differential from a camshaft. I couldn't tell a crown wheel and pinion from a big end."

"Well, I'm in very much the same position with this personality detector," smiled Chronol, "but basically the function of the personality detector is to pick up a series of electro-psychic vibrations, wave lengths and emissions, from a particular personality. And they are all as individual as finger prints. Having got these vibrations taped, having got the gestalt or pattern of them, it is then possible to amplify them up and hunt for them. Now, when I said they were absolutely unique, they are predictable.

We began compiling a dossier of personality traits and characteristics of the missing Smiths. When we had got that we analysed certain basic, genetic features, and from those we built up a fairly accurate picture of what we might call a basic Smith personality, eighty per cent of which at least would hold good for this ancestor, who must have met an untimely end."

"I see," said Harry Lee.

"Now, following these with a detector is rather like coming in on a radio beam."

"Yes," agreed Lee, "that makes sense."

"I was pretty close to this man when he was killed. In fact, I was within six or seven days of him, which is pretty close moving when you've come nearly six hundred years. It means getting your calculations right to .006 and when there are two or three hundred co-ordinates to take into account on your computer programming, that's quite a calculation!" he went on.

"You're telling me," said Harry. "I'm no statistician, but I can guess the amount of work it must involve."

"I knew I'd got the area pin-pointed pretty exactly. I came down and met your old friend Spud O'Leary the night watchman."

"I see," said Lee, chewing hard on his gum. "Yes, this does all make sense. Let's go into your theory a little further."

"I'm looking for the body of a man who was killed either deliberately or accidentally by the interference of a time traveller, an illegal time traveller. Killed before he was able to beget part at least of his family. This means in effect, that normally, those children who would have

been born to him, and all their descendants—and remember in my day, that came to 470—are doomed. They have vanished. There may be a great many more serious and far reaching effects. As I say, I can't see into the future. Four hundred and seventy people is a lot. Many of them are good people. A lot of them held high ranking and responsible posts. University lecturers, politicians, a lot of them were just ordinary, decent, citizens, but whether they were high ranking government officials, or ordinary citizens, they are all equally important in our society. The vital thing is not a man's office, but a man's life, and a man's happiness. Four hundred and seventy people having disappeared. It doesn't just mean that their happiness has gone. It means that the happiness of those who loved them, those who depended on them, their families, their friends, all that happiness has been spoiled as well."

"Do you think that happiness is the highest human good?" asked Lee.

"I do, if you fully understand the meaning of the term happiness," answered Chronol. "Whichever way you look at it the thing's a tragedy."

"Why would a man from your generation—why would this killer from tomorrow want to kill?" asked Lee.

"That's difficult to say," answered Chronol. "Let's just assume that some illegal time traveller from the 26th century had come across some scheme for making money, manufacturing something, perhaps. Maybe he's manufacturing something illegal. We don't have the historical prohibition that you used to have in the U.S.A., but we

do have certain kinds of prohibition. Certain kinds of weapons, for example, are forbidden, because of side effects, or because they are considered to be inhumane."

A flash of illumination lit up Harry Lee's mind.

"Would these weapons be made of beryllium?" he asked.

"Yes, they would. Why do you ask? Tell me all you know, please; it's most important."

"I'll tell you all I know so far, in case we're after the same man," said Lee. "Very close to the spot on the dockside where you met O'Leary, the night watchman, my river police department fished the body of an unidentifiable man out of the water. There were a lot of things about the body that didn't make sense. He had bad eyes, but he didn't wear glasses. He had rotten teeth and he'd never been to a dentist. His lungs were full of beryllium dust, it looked as though he had been working in a factory where the air conditioning was either non-existent or so hopelessly sub-standard that it was completely inefficient. He was also suffering from the kind of malnutrition, which, thank God, isn't often met with any more. None of this made sense until the incredible fact of your time ship forced itself into my consciousness."

Lee was grinding on his chewing gum as he spoke.

"Let's just assume, Chronol," he said, "that somebody from your century—our killer from tomorrow—came back. He comes back to manufacture something which he's not allowed to manufacture there. He wants somewhere to hide, so he picks a factory site somewhere along the banks of the Thames, somewhere near the

Victoria Dock. In this factory, perhaps under cover of making something else, he's busily turning out these forbidden weapons, whatever they may be—or something else, made from beryllium. His factory conditions are primitive. Now, he wants labour, he wants to make the maximum possible profit out of this, so, he gets his labour through Time."

"I'm beginning to follow your theory," said Chronol, "and I think it's brilliant, Mr. Lee. I think it's absolutely brilliant."

"Well, can the compliments," said Harry, "I haven't finished yet." He was chewing hard. "Now let's just assume that he's something of an amateur historian. He's got all the facilities for that if he's a time traveller. He wants cheap labour. Now where's he going to get it from? Which century was noted for its cheap labour?"

"The Victorian age, you could get a man for a few shillings a week, couldn't you?" asked Chronol.

"You could, also there was enough old Victorian silver and old Victorian copper still floating around in our century to make it possible for a man to pay his workmen in coins that would allow no suspicion. You can't very well give them modern money, they wouldn't be able to spend it, and they would certainly ask a lot of awkward questions. The whole thing would cause a big enough stink to finish his operations. That might give us something to go on, a man who's avidly collecting Victorian silver . . . Of course, he may not be doing that, all he's got to do is to go back to the Victorian era with a few slabs of carefully melted gold, and he can come back with all the money he wants."

"That's going to lose him quite a bit of his profit; that's going to do away with the idea of using Victorian labour, surely," said Chronol. "If he has to pay inflated prices, 1963 prices for gold, and then sell it for the deflated Victorian prices, in terms of real value he'll be paying his men a fair wage."

"Yes. I'm not the economist that you are," admitted Lee. "I hadn't spotted that point. All right, Chronol, let's think this out a little more deeply. Here's our man setting up his illegal sweat shop, picking up his workmen——" Lee paused and looked thoughtful.

"By the way, how would he do that?"

"Well, these disc ships aren't the only method of getting back through time," said Chronol. "You can set up vortex tunnels as well."

Harry Lee closed his eyes as though putting up a picture of some kind on an internal, mental screen.

"A tunnel," he said. "Now let's just think that out. Imagine grimy, Victorian warehouses, and men, miserable, half-starved, making their way through dingy tunnels, one other dingy tunnel wouldn't make any difference to them. Then they'd go through this vortex that you mentioned, and come out in this factory. If they were not allowed to leave the factory till they went home again, they would go back through the tunnel, although they had been working in 1963, they'd see nothing of 1963. They are paid with Victorian silver or copper."

Chronol suddenly snapped his fingers.

"There's something that might have been the cause of the whole problem," he said. "Assume that as far as the workers in this sweat shop are concerned the date is 1880,

just assume that. It will do for a round figure. They get paid their three or four shillings a week, or whatever they may draw in silver, and one of them is given a coin dated 1880 or 1879 perhaps. When he looks at it he is surprised, because he is a little more intelligent than his fellow wage slaves, or perhaps a little less down-trodden by the force of circumstances."

"What is he surprised by?" asked Harry Lee.

"Surely, that although the coin is now according to its date, it has had sixty or seventy years' wear and looks old. Suppose, having an inquisitive nature, he shows it quite innocently to the foreman, or one of the men in the know, and says, 'Look, sir, isn't this strange. I wonder who's given this coin all this wear?'"

"I can imagine what would happen next," replied the Time Warden. "If this curious gentleman is our missing Mr. Smith, he's invited into the office. 'Now, what's your problem?' asks our killer from tomorrow, and our Mr. Smith, flattered and pleased at the interest the boss is taking in him, quacks away about this coin and how strange it is . . ."

"Exit Mr. Smith," said Lee.

"Precisely," said Chronol. "By the way, how did the body that you found, meet its end?"

"Stiletto wound in the heart, needle thin, just a small puncture. If the body had been in the water much longer I don't suppose we'd have seen the puncture."

"I see," murmured Chronol. The man from the disc ship lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"Of course, you realise that we are working in the realm of speculation entirely," said Harry Lee.

"Definitely," agreed the Time Warden.
He suddenly consulted his dials.
"We're practically there," he said.

"Two weeks ago I bought a 'Joan the Wad' and today I have won £22 15s. Please send me more." B.C. Tredegar, 8. Wales.—Extract from "Everybody's Fortune Book, 1931"

JOAN THE WAD



GUARANTEED DIPPED IN WATER
FROM THE LUCKY SAINTS' WELL

"For 10 years I have enjoyed the most unbelievable good fortune and have always had my J.T.W. by me. Unfortunately I have lost her and feel exactly as if I had lost a human relative. My friend tells me his wife's mother has had Joan for 40 years and would not part with her for all the tea in China."

SUCCESS FOR SEVEN YEARS. Another writes "... I sent for Joan the Wad seven years ago, during which time I have had many wins on Pools, including one of £72 2s. 0d. and another of £542 15s. 0d. I lost Joan and things immediately began to go wrong. Please send me another, for which I enclose P.O. 6s." Mr. D. H. R. Greattham, Hants. 26.1.56.
WON HOLIDAY CONTEST. Mrs. B. E. H., of Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, writes, 12.4.56 "... I really feel I must write and tell you of my good fortune. After having J.T.W. for only a month or so I have just won a Holiday Contest and I feel I owe my good luck to the little lady. It has made me feel very happy."

ANOTHER POOLS WINNER. "Please send me 3 Histories. Enclosed is 3s. I want them for friends. By the way, you may be interest to know that I had only received my J.T.W. two weeks when I won £1,065 on the Football Pools—thanks to Joan the Wad, and since I have sent for 4 others for friends and now want 3 more as soon as possible please," writes Mrs. E. M., of Bebbington, Cheshire, 6.2.56.

COMPLETELY CURED, FOUND A JOB, PROMOTION TWICE, OWN HOME. Mrs. D. J., of Stockport, writes, 29.5.56: "On coming to England 24 years ago we were dogged by ill-health. A friend told me I ought to have 'Joan' for my husband and 'Jack O' Lantern' for myself. I did, and from that very week all our luck changed for the better. My husband was a very sick man and is now completely cured. He had no job, and very soon he got a job and promotion twice. I myself bettered my position. We are now in our own house, which we are succeeding to buy. We are a happy and most contented little family and attribute all our present happiness and success to J.T.W. and J.O.L. Thank you for all you have done for us. I tell everyone about it."

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Utopia

"THIS is like Interpol with a difference," remarked Lee.

"Interpol?" asked the Time Warden, and scratched his head. "Oh, I know, your international police organisation. Collaboration between police of different countries for the apprehension of criminals who know no frontiers."

"That's about it," agreed Harry. "Quite useful, you know." He smiled. "It should be possible to extend the service. Have an interpol through time."

"Use chaps like you as agents," said Chronol. "Contact you whenever we want a case solved in 1963. Use one of those gadgets like I gave the old night watchman."

"It could be done, no doubt," said Harry Lee.

"It's a fascinating thought," murmured the Time

Warden. "I'd like to give it some serious consideration. I may put it forward to some of the senior officers in my department!"

The ship began to vibrate again. There was a change in the texture of the grey mist that was flashing past outside. It began to flicker. The flickers grew slower—became a succession of easily distinguishable blacks and whites.

"What is that?" asked Harry Lee.

"A succession of day and night. The effect is caused by the deceleration of the ship, in its trajectory," explained Chronol. Lee nodded.

"Interesting," he said.

Gradually the movement ceased altogether.

"We're here," said the Time Warden. He moved across, slid down the ramp, and opened the door of the time ship. He led the way out of the disc. Harry Lee stepped out and drew a deep breath as he paused to admire a landscape of unsurpassed beauty. It was not a natural landscape. It hadn't got the wild, rugged untamed beauty of moors and fells, or mountains and lakes. This was a world in which man had established his absolute superiority. This was a planet that had been tamed but not exploited. There were lawns and fountains, tall, colonnades of whispering poplars, pillared temples and broad white pavements. Men and women strolled along deep in earnest conversation with one another; children played on the lawns and the fountains changed colour, even as Harry Lee looked at them.

"This place is like paradise," he said. "It's like something from a Disney film come true. Or is it?"

"Most of the earth is like this now, I'm glad you like it."

"Like it! I think it's paradise. I've never seen anything so beautiful," said Harry Lee. He sniffed hard at the air. "I can't smell any smoke," he remarked.

"You won't, there isn't any. Our power is all either nuclear or electric. Such electric power as we generate is either derived from fission, fusion, or hydro-electric sources underground."

"I don't see any pylons or cable; I don't see anything to spoil the horizon. Everything is underground?"

"Everything that would spoil the park."

"What's that building over there?" said Lee, pointing to the temple-like structure he could see nearby.

"A church. Don't you recognise it?"

"Not really," answered Lee. "I've never seen a church quite like that before. It's more like a Greek temple."

"It's a perfectly ordinary church, I assure you," said the Time Traveller. "You'll find one like it in every living community." He smiled. "Look for the biggest brightest, and newest building, and you'll see that it is a place of worship."

"And your religion?" asked Harry.

"Christianity, of course!" answered the Time Traveller, "what did you expect? It's a universal religion. Been the universal religion for three or four centuries now."

"What happened to the others?"

"Oh, there are a number of other faiths, but they are in the minority, and they all recognise the essential truths of Christianity!"

"What brought about this tremendous revival? In my

day some pessimists were predicting the end of religion of any kind," said Harry.

"It's quite an interesting historical study, but I think briefly men became aware of the need which science alone was able to supply. Men became aware of deep spiritual needs."

"What are your own views?" asked Lee.

"I looked at history from the vantage point of a Time machine," said Chronol. "I have to believe in history because I've seen it. From all the history I have seen I have formed a conviction. To me it is impossible to believe in history without believing in God."

"I find your words very gratifying," answered Lee.

"There are many other things I want to show you," said the Time Traveller. "As we make our way to headquarters I'll point out various things to you. Over there, is the healing centre."

"It looks quite small," said Lee. "It doesn't look anything like as big as the hospitals I'm used to."

"Can you suggest a reason?" smiled Chronol.

"Is it government policy not to spend money on hospitals?" asked Lee.

"Oh, no," said Chronol. "Small as it is, that place contains the most elaborate equipment, the latest healing technique and the most highly trained surgeons and technicians."

"Well, then why is that building so small?"

"How large an area do you think that building serves?" asked Chronol.

"This community, five or six thousand people?" suggested Lee.

Chronol shook his head.

"Serves half a continent," he said.

"What, that building!"

"We have specialised in *preventive* medicine," said Chronol. "A hospital is housed in one medium-sized building, because on an average we have six patients a year! We have pure water, pure food and pure air. Our people are happy; there are no stress diseases; life is full of purpose."

"I can see now why it was such a tragedy when four hundred and seventy of your people disappeared," remarked Harry Lee. "Even in my time men love life, and we think that now and again we catch hold of that fleeting something, we call happiness. But in a world like this to lose life must be a far greater tragedy."

They walked on in silence.

"Here is one of our schools," said Chronol.

Lee glanced through the window and saw bright, smiling children working quite independently with machines that buzzed and flashed as the children pressed buttons.

"It's like the teaching machine techniques which were just being discussed in my time," said Lee.

"Oh, they've been common practice for four or five hundred years, universally adopted. Education is the key to social progress. An educated people are not automatically a happy people, but their chances of happiness are a lot greater than those of nations who live in ignorance."

"Are there any such nations now?" asked Harry.

Chronol shook his head.

"Oh, no," he said. "We long since recognised our responsibilities to our brother nations, irrespective of race, creed or colour."

"Is there a world government?" asked Lee.

"Yes, there has been world government for several centuries."

"Is it just?"

"Yes," answered Chronol, "it is very just. It is a splendid government."

Harry Lee and the Time Warden continued their walk through the clean, sweet air of the beautiful 26th century community. Many coloured birds flew in the trees. From time to time one of the strolling pedestrians would take some titbit of food from his pocket and hold it up. The birds would descend with the grace and colour of the living rainbow. Harry and Chronol reached the Time Wardens' headquarters. It was a tall, glass palace of a building; it gleamed like crystal in the bright sunlight of the clean pure air. There was no grit, no grime, to discolour the magnificent glass.

"What do you think of our H.Q.?" asked Chronol.

"I was just comparing it with my office," said the ex-superintendent with a smile. "I'm afraid that our premises won't stand the comparison."

"Somebody had to start," said Chronol.

"Yes, I suppose somebody did." Lee laughed. "Our conditions were better than those the Bow Street runners worked in. Things aren't quite so primitive for us as they were for the old Peelers."

They were travelling up in a noiseless elevator.

The elevator stopped—apparently of its own volition.

Chronol led the way out on to an upper landing where a gentle breeze caressed their faces refreshingly. It was pleasantly warm, but not uncomfortably hot. Chronol ran his hand over an identification panel and a door on their left, about half way up the corridor slid open. They advanced on the door, and Chronol stepped back to allow Harry Lee to precede him. Lee looked around, and found himself in a well-furnished office. Various stenographic machines, whose function he could guess at, but which were an incredible advance on anything he had seen in the 20th century, were standing on various desks. Behind an enormous crescent of gleaming plastic covered with screens and microphones, sat a stately grey-haired man who had a distinguished, dignified look. He glanced up and smiled as Harry Lee came in.

Then he stood up and held out a hand courteously. Chronol stood a little behind the ex-superintendent. Lee, still chewing gum unashamedly, shook hands and was surprised at the strength of the other man's grip.

"I am very pleased to meet you, Mr. Lee. Chronol has already furnished me with the facts."

"But how? He's been with me all the time!"

"I'm afraid that our mastery of time gives us a rather unfair advantage," smiled the man behind the desk. "You see the historians would put it this way. The mastery of transport gives man command of space. The mastery of time gives man the next best thing to eternity."

"I'm not altogether sure that I follow," said Harry Lee, interrogatively.

"It's like this," said the senior Time Warden, "people

who are bounded by time are like those playing a television show, live. Or you're like people doing a play on the stage. If something goes wrong, if somebody forgets his lines or somebody's make-up slips, there's nothing very much they can do about it. But with us it's different. We're like a film company; you only see the finished product. It at this moment there is a piece of information I required I could get it via a time movement, and then come back."

"I thought you said that you couldn't land very accurately, after a trip of six hundred years," said Lee, turning to Chronol for confirmation.

"Oh, there's short, medium, and long distance time travel," explained the Senior Warden before Chronol could answer. "You see, if at this moment, I required a little piece of back-ground information, about what had been going on, since you had met Chronol, I could take a trip half an hour into the past, have a glance at you and Chronol as you left the time ship and came across here; then I could be back here before you realised I'd gone. These short trips can sometimes be very useful, for purpose of interrogation."

"Well, how do I," began Lee, and then paused, scratching his head. "This is damned complicated," he said.

"Don't let it worry you," said the Senior Warden.

"Now, Chronol, I've devised a plan while you were picking up Mr. Lee . . ."

CHAPTER NINE

Dangerous Assignment

"WHAT'S that, sir?" asked Chronol.

"It occurred to me that we're tackling this thing from the wrong end."

"Yes, sir," said Chronol, hopefully.

"I have a feeling that we ought to track this man who has disappeared, this unfortunate Mr. Smith, from his life end, rather than from his death end."

Chronol looked interrogatively at his chief.

"What do I take that to mean, sir?"

"Well, let's assume that he had been taken from some earlier age."

"That was my theory," said Harry Lee.

"Oh, that's interesting," said the Senior Warden.

"Chronol and I were talking about it. Perhaps you did one of your short back flips and know about it already?"

"No," answered the Senior Warden. "I didn't. I only

used the brief back flips to take a report on you generally."

"I see," replied Lee.

"Go on with your theory," prompted the Senior Warden.

"I have an idea that this fellow might be a Victorian labourer. That would account for his malnutrition, his poor teeth, and inability to afford treatment, his poor sight, and his inability to afford glasses."

"You're getting a little ahead of me," said the Senior Time Warden.

Lee and Chronol filled in all the background information that they had on the dead man.

"I see, I see," concurred the Senior Warden. His keen eyes lit up. "There is possibly a great deal in what you say." He looked at Lee thoughtfully.

"Let's just assume that in common with other Victorians of the period," said the ex-superintendent, "this gentleman whose body we fished out of the Thames, out of Time," he grinned rather ruefully, "was, at his time of life, halfway through fathering quite a large family. Suppose he had three or four children before he got killed . . . if history had not been interfered with he would have produced two or three more. From those subsequent children, who were never begotten because of his untimely murder—these four hundred and seventy missing people in your own time, ultimately descended."

"Yes, all this makes good sense," said the Time Warden.

"Now," went on Lee, if we can get a rough idea of the time these activities are going on, we might be able

to plant one of your Time Wardens actually in this period. If we could once get a job inside our mystery man's factory, we've got him."

"It's quite a dangerous assignment," said the Senior Time Warden. He looked at Lee.

"Would you be willing to go?"

"Definitely," said the ex-superintendent. "I may be getting up the tooth a bit, but I'm not ready to go out to grass yet."

"I'd like to volunteer, sir," said Time Warden Chronol.

"Of course, of course; I quite realise that, but you may be up against a pretty big organisation. Is there anyone else you'd like to take?" he asked.

There was a thoughtful silence.

"Is there anyone else you'd like to take?" he asked again.

"Can't think of anybody off-hand, sir," answered Chronol. He in turn looked across at Harry Lee. "Have you got any adventure-hungry colleagues in your own time who might like to assist us?" he asked.

"I have actually," answered Lee, "and this would be right up his street . . . He is the kind of man who wouldn't need much convincing, and this would certainly be right up his street."

"He must be an unusual man," said the Time Warden, "the concept of Time travel is usually a most startling and revolutionary one."

"This is a pretty revolutionary and startling sort of man," said Lee.

"Who is he? Have we got records of him?"

"You may well have, but I don't know," said the ex-superintendent.

"Is he the sort of character who's likely to go down in history?"

"He's a 20th century journalist."

"A famous one?"

"One of the most widely read men of his time," said Lee. "I would think that every other home in the United Kingdom takes the *Daily Globe*."

"Oh, yes, I've heard of that. It was one of the last daily papers to cease publication when the great video services came into being," explained the Senior Time Warden. "I think it was with mixed feelings that we watched our newspapers go, to be replaced by the screens."

He glanced swiftly at Chronol. Chronol glanced back. There was silence for a moment.

"What's your friend's name?" asked the Time Warden.

"Stearman," said Harry Lee. "Val Stearman. He specialises in rather unusual cases."

"Unusual in what sense?"

"He calls himself a psychic investigator," replied Harry Lee. "If anything is outside the normally accepted sphere of everyday life you can bet your bottom dollar that Val Stearman will be there. If it's mysterious and inexplicable Stearman will be there. Above all, if it's dangerous, Stearman will be there. He has a nose for danger; he is what we call in our own slang a 'professional trouble shooter'."

"A phycic adventurer would be the man with just the kind of imagination to accept time travel without

quibbling. This man Stearman, would he be useful in a tight corner?"

"Useful?" exclaimed the ex-superintendent. "He's like me, he's not getting any younger, but—" he grinned expressively, "I'd back Stearman against any six ordinary men—quite tough ordinary men, too, in any kind of fight. He's got skin like leather, bones like old oak, and muscles like steel springs."

"Sounds quite an interesting biological combination," said Chronol, smiling.

"On the subject of interesting biological combinations, you ought to see Mrs. Stearman," said the ex-superintendent. He licked his lips. "As I said, I'm no longer a young man, and my hormones ought to have settled down and stopped sizzling, but they begin to sizzle again when I look at her."

"I gather she's a very attractive woman," said the Senior Time Warden.

"Attractive is the understatement of the century. I should say it's the understatement of any century. She looks like a combination of Cleopatra and Helen of Troy. She's as new as tomorrow, as fresh as a second that's just ticking on a man's watch".

"She's younger than Mr. Stearman, then?" asked Chronol.

"Well, they've been together as long as I've known them, which is getting on for twenty years, but the incredible thing is, that although old Val begins to give way a little to the ravages of Time, the fabulous La Noire doesn't."

Chronol and the Senior Time Warden exchanged

glances. The ex-superintendent looked at them.

"What's wrong?" he enquired.

"Oh, just thinking," answered the Senior Time Warden.

"You wouldn't have a picture of them, would you?" asked Chronol.

"I don't know. I carry a few snaps in my wallet," said Harry Lee. He was still thumping the inoffensive wafer of gum between his mighty molars.

The ex-superintendent produced his wallet and began looking through it.

"Yes, we're in luck," he announced. "Here." He passed over a snap of Val and La Noire.

Chronol looked at the photograph in silence for several seconds. He handed it silently to his chief.

"What do you make of that, sir?" he asked after the silence had been prolonged for unspeakable seconds. The Time Warden sat down, what looked like drops of cold perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"You'd better have this back," he said to Harry Lee.

"Whatever's the matter?" asked Lee.

The Time Warden drew a deep breath.

"It may only be coincidence, of course," he said, "*but that young woman is very much alive now.*"

"What?" gasped Harry Lee.

"She looks exactly the same as she does in that photograph!"

"But, but it's impossible!" said Lee. "Nobody can live six hundred years!"

"That isn't the only thing," said the Time Warden. He looked at Chronol, as though prompting him to speak.

"I have seen that woman in the past," said Chronol, "not even in the 20th century, nor even in the 10th. I have seen her in Ancient Greece, in Ancient Rome, and in Ancient Egypt."

Harry Lee put the photograph back in his pocket.

"Your friend Stearman is married to an Immortal."

"I don't believe it," gasped Harry.

"You said yourself that she hadn't aged in fifteen or twenty years, ask yourself whether that's possible."

"No, I suppose it isn't," said Lee. "She's alive today you say? Could I—could I see her?"

"The Immortals like to guard their secrets closely," warned the Senior Time Warden. "I think perhaps it would be best if what we have just said is forgotten at once."

"I think you're right, sir," agreed Chronol.

"You can count on me," said Harry Lee.

CHAPTER TEN

Nostalgia

"NOW, this assignment then," went on the Senior Time Warden, changing the subject as briskly as though it had not arisen. "You'd like to pick up your friend Stearman and go back to some appropriate date, say 1880 or 1890, we'll suggest for a start, to see whether you can detect any untoward activities."

"That's the long and short of it, yes," agreed Harry Lee.

"I'm ready to leave when you like, sir," said Chronol.

"Good," replied the Senior Time Warden. "If there's one thing I like, it's enthusiasm."

Chronol stood up; Harry Lee stood up.

"It's been a great pleasure to meet you, Mr. Lee. I hope that pleasure may be renewed at some subsequent time."

"You use the word 'subsequent' in a relative sense, I suppose," said Harry.

"As I said before," said the Senior Time Warden, "the command of Time gives man what is tantamount to eternity. It takes a lot of thinking out, but I assure you it's true."

"I can understand that," said the old superintendent.

"Understand that it's true?"

"No, I can understand that it needs a lot of thinking out."

"There's a tremendous number of paradoxes associated with this business," said Chronol.

The Senior Time Warden nodded as a sign that the interview was at an end.

"Well, gentlemen, may I wish you *bon voyage*, and a successful outcome."

They walked back along the corridor, Lee and Chronol together, down in the elevator and back to the waiting Time ship.

A crowd of children stood at a respectful distance watching the ship. They buzzed with excited conversation as Chronol drew nearer.

"Time ships are romantic and glamorous to the young," said the Time Warden. He smiled at the children; a little girl of about seven came forward and asked timidly for an autograph. Chronol smiled and scrawled his name across the page of the book which she held out.

"You see, that's one hobby that still persists among

the young," remarked Chronol.

Lee nodded.

"It's healthy and harmless," said Chronol.

"Psychologically speaking," said Lee, "the collecting urge is found almost everywhere, isn't it? In every time, and among every race?"

"Yes. It isn't always harmless," smiled Chronol. "I took a trip back to North America in connection with some historical research, made the mistake of getting out of the ship. Got in the way of a gentleman who collected scalps!"

"What did you do?" asked Lee, weighing up the build of the big Time Warden. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have had much difficulty."

"Ah, now thereby hangs a tale," said Chronol.

"How come?" asked the ex-superintendent.

"You see, it didn't matter very much if he killed me," said Chronol, "but if I'd killed him I would have destroyed several hundred of his descendants, possibly. I had to fight only defensively. That can be extremely difficult when a gentleman is trying to collect your scalp."

"You obviously got away."

"It was a near thing, though," answered Chronol. "The North American braves are some of the fiercest and most determined fighters of any place or any time."

"I was just thinking," said Lee, "if it wouldn't have made making too much alteration in the ordered events of history it would have been very interesting to match heavyweight boxing champions against each other. I wonder if Joe Louis at his best could have beaten Jack

Johnson. Whether Ingemar Johansen in his prime could have out-slugged John L. Sullivan when he was at the top?"

"Interesting thought," agreed the Time Warden. "It's one of the things we have to be on our guard against."

"What is?" asked Lee.

"A small minority of our people, a very very small minority, would be prepared to do things like that if they could get their hands on a Time ship, quite regardless of the consequences. They might also want to do it on a bigger scale. They would want to pit the wits of Alexander the Great against Napoleon, or Field Marshal Montgomery."

"I can see the complications that would arise there. All sorts of interesting bets would be made on the outcome. But those men wouldn't meet on equal terms, the man with modern armour against the Napoleonic armies—or the Napoleonic armies against the gunpowderless phalanxes of Alexander."

Oh, they'd devise ways round that. The thing could be done with models. Played like a sort of three-dimensional chess," said the Time Warden.

"Sounds a bit mind-staggering," said Harry Lee. They were on board the ship now. Chronol had closed the hatch and they were preparing for blast-off.

"Better try and find somewhere a little less conspicuous than that dockside," said Chronol. "We shall have to hide the ship for a little while till you contact your friend Stearman."

"It's a bit big to hide, isn't it?" asked the ex-super-

intendent. Then a bright idea occurred to him. "There's a disused airfield that I know of in north Norfolk. There are some hangars there that are not used now for anything at all. If you like to put the ship in one of those while I go and get Stearman . . ."

"Good idea," agreed Chronol.

"This thing does negotiate space as well as time, doesn't it? I mean, you can fly from London to Norfolk in it?"

"Oh, easily," answered the Time Warden. He made one or two minor adjustments to the dials. The grey mist began to thin, black and white checker-board of nights and days flashed past them.

"I think we're there," said Harry Lee, staring through the checker board.

The ship was very high, and before the next darkness descended on them Harry Lee got a glimpse of a city that was unmistakably Norwich.

"North-west of here," he said, "about twenty-five miles."

Chronol made the necessary adjustments.

The gleaming disc ship, the Time saucer, flew on, making a trajectory of pure flashing silver, a path of mercury across the sky. Like a comet, a meteorite, a shooting star, the saucer raced north-west from the beautiful old cathedral city capital of the county, until the keen eyes of ex-Superintendent Harry Lee spotted the unmistakable outlines of a disused airfield.

"I believe that one of the local farmers occasionally uses a hangar for agricultural purposes," said Lee. "If you find half-a-dozen Jerseys in possession you'll have

to settle the saucer in quietly so as not to disturb them too much."

"Why is that?" asked Chronol.

"Interferes with the milk yield," grinned Lee, "and milk is an essential commodity. I'm very partial to a nice cup of tea, even the way Spud makes it!"

The saucer landed on the grass-strewn, cracked and neglected concrete from which Superforts and Liberators had taken off, to shake the black monster of Nazism during the '39-'45 war.

Lee, despite his toughness, was not a man in whom nostalgia could find no resting place. Over the vibrating whine of the saucer, as it landed, and as its incredibly complicated engines—engines that could conquer Time and Space—died into silence, Lee could hear mentally the ghostly reverberations of the Superforts and the Liberators. He looked whimsically through the port, the ghostly outline of an obsolete aircraft seemed to imprint itself upon his retina for a fading second, and then the phantasmagoria was gone and Lee was back to reality. Reality, he reflected, was strange. Stranger than the ghostly images of obsolete planes . . .

Reality was a ship that defied reality, and he was in it—a passenger of the Time Warden. He shook his head slowly.

"What are you thinking," asked the Time Warden.

"Many things," smiled Lee.

"That's no answer," commented the Time Warden.

"I was indulging in a little nostalgia," admitted Lee.

"A harmless enough pursuit," conceded Chronol.

"A pleasant one," said Lee.

"What direction did your nostalgia take?" asked the saucer pilot.

"I was thinking of the Anglo-American forces of twenty years ago, who took off from this runway: I was thinking of the days when it was as clean, shining and efficient as only an R.A.F. station could be, or as only a U.S.A.F. station could be. I was thinking of men who went out, risking their lives by day and by night, fighting against the dark evil of Nazism, fighting against tyranny and oppression and cruelty, fighting against the political insanity of Fascism, with its prejudice and its hatred."

The saucer pilot was silent while he and Lee descended. The ex-superintendent's feet strode across the concrete and he thought of the many feet which had strode across the concrete—never to stride that way again.

"You lost friends?" asked Chronol.

"Many friends," said Lee. "More than friends, some of them."

"If it's any consolation," said Chronol, "now that Time is conquered in my generation, nothing is ever lost. Time is transient. Qualities matter."

"Qualities?" asked Harry Lee.

"Courage, loyalty, faith in a vision, the inspiring examples of men who have fought and died for what they believed in. These can be seen over and over and over again. They are immortal. Your glimpse of our world has surely shown you that men who died for freedom, for honour, and for democracy, did not die in vain. Your century and the centuries immediately preceding and suc-

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Helpers

"I'M no hero," said Harry Lee. "What have I done?"

"You fight evil in the form in which it presents itself to you. You fight evil in the form of crime," said Chronol.

"Well, I suppose you could put it that way, but it seems a bit melodramatic," said the ex-superintendent.

"Law is an integral part of our Utopian society," said the saucer pilot.

"I see," said Lee.

"Now," went on Chronol, "without men like you to uphold the law in the days when the upholding of the law was difficult, there would have been no law upon which our society could have been moulded."

"You really believe that the law is as important as all that?" asked Lee.

"I definitely believe so. Law is the basis of society. No man should be outside its protection and no man is above its demands."

They were walking towards the hangar.

"I hope there are no curious sightseers on the way to spend the day at the coast," commented Lee. "That ship is rather exposed at the moment."

"True," agreed Chronol. They quickened their pace.

It took the combined efforts of both men to open the hangar doors.

"Splendid," said Harry Lee. "Absolutely splendid!"

"It's empty," said Chronol.

"Not even any cows!"

"Can you steady the bottom of that door, the wind is catching it," asked Chronol. "I'll get the ship."

Lee hung on to the door while Chronol taxied the disc-ship slowly into the gigantic mouth of the hangar.

"Splendid," said Lee again, as Chronol rejoined him. They fastened the doors, and tied them with a length of rusty chain that hung like the impedimenta of Marley's ghost, in Dickens' immortal classic.

"And now?" said the saucer pilot.

"Like Miriam watching over the infant Moses from the reeds at the side of the Nile," said Harry Lee, "you keep watch, and see that no Egyptian princess, in the form of a local inhabitant, comes along and prods at your Time ship."

"What happens if somebody does come?" asked Chronol.

"You'll have to get back into the Time ship and vamoose; contact me when and how you can."

"Right," agreed the Time pilot.

Harry Lee made his way down the road until he reached the nearest telephone box. From there he phoned for a hire car. It came out from Fakenham, ten miles away and took him to the station. He had an hour to wait for the London train. It was not a fast train when it came. He changed at Dereham, and again at Norwich. By mid-afternoon he was walking up the steps of Val Stearman's apartment. He kept thinking of the incredible revelation which Chronol and the Senior Time Warden had made to him. Only by a conscious effort of will could he force the thought entirely from his mind.

It was the voluptuous, mysterious, Cleopatrine La Noire who opened the door in answer to his ring. She looked at him in amazement for a second, and then her face widened into a broad smile of welcome.

"Superintendent! It's ages since we've seen you. I didn't recognise the uniform." She smiled mysteriously. "Are you on some kind of mysterious, undercover work?"

"More mysterious than you'd ever believe," answered Harry Lee. "But it's unofficial."

"Who's that?" Stearman was in the bath. His voice echoed and sounded loquacious. He appeared clad in a towel and accompanied by a cloud of steam. He looked rather like a middle-aged Greek God descending from Olympus to satisfy the whim of some cherished mortal favourite. He wiped steam from the air, and soap and water from his eyes.

"Well, I'm damned," he said. "My sins caught up with me at last?" He extended his massive hands. "All

right, Superintendent, I'll come quietly. I confess. I was Jack the Ripper."

"You're remarkably well preserved for your age, aren't you?" said the superintendent. He grinned. "Anyway, it's ex-Superintendent now!"

"Oh, *your* sins have finally caught up with *you*, have they?" grinned Val. "What did they sling you out for?"

"I committed the crime of reaching the age of sixty," said the policeman.

"Get this man a drink while I go and get myself respectable," said Val.

La Noire led the ex-superintendent through into the lounge. He settled himself on the comfortable sofa and watched while La Noire mixed Scotch and soda in perfect proportions, and with absolute expertese. He thought that the perfection of the proportions was not confined to the whisky and soda, as he watched the magnificent raven-haired La Noire walking gracefully across the room with the drink.

"Tell me where you've been?" she said.

He was rather enjoying the attention she was lavishing on him.

"Since we last met, I've had a little trip into the 25th century, but I don't suppose that would interest you."

"He's been drinking again," commented Val.

La Noire looked intently into the eyes of Harry Lee. For a second he felt that his very soul was naked to that penetrating glance. It was as though her mind was speaking to his. The message that he flashed back was a confirmation of the trust which she had placed in him by innuendo.

"Val, you've had some strange adventures," said Lee.

"I won't deny that," affirmed Stearman.

"You've been mixed up with things natural and supernatural. You also, quite recently, got yourself tangled up with a rather strange planet."

"Oh, you mean the adventure which my friend Bron Fane chronicled under the title *The Intruders*," answered Val.

"That's the one," agreed Lee.

"Yes, we've been getting around," said Val.

He wiped a soupçon of lather from behind his ear, with a silk handkerchief. "Blasted towels are not as absorbent as they ought to be."

"There's a lot of you to dry!" said La Noire.

"True, true," agreed Val.

"Do you ever take anything seriously?" asked Lee.

"Not if I can avoid it," grinned Stearman, but his eyes belied the words. "Look, Harry, I know you too well to think that you would have dropped in on me wearing that sinister-looking uniform, to exchange pleasantries. What's all this about a Time ship?"

"I didn't say anything about a Time ship. I just mentioned a voyage to the future."

"You didn't do it standing on your head and practising yogi exercises, I suppose?" rejoined Val.

"No, I didn't," agreed Lee.

"How did you do it?" asked Val.

"Are you prepared to believe me?"

"Age," answered Stearman, "is a matter not of years, but of experiences. Chronologically, my friend, you are a decade or two in advance of me, but in terms of ex-

periences of the unusual, I would suggest that in all honesty and humility that I am in all probability a decade or two in advance of you, if you like to take such interchangeable terms and make any kind of coherent logic from them."

Harry Lee nodded.

"I'll give you that, Val," he agreed. "You're a specialist in this kind of thing."

"I'm a specialist in the incredible, a connoisseur of the unusual. I am one of the cognoscenti of the peculiar."

"That sounds almost vulgar," said the ex-superintendent with a raised eyebrow.

Val laughed.

"That wasn't the sense in which I meant it, and you know it!" he said. "If you've come here, hoping to shock me with some fantastic yarn, made even more fantastic by the fact that it's true, you're trying it on the wrong man, Harry, and you know it. If you suddenly fished in your pocket and produced two little green Martians, I wouldn't be very surprised."

"I'm afraid I can't quite do that, but I want to take you up to Norfolk to meet a friend of mine."

"Where does Norfolk figure in with this Time travel?" asked La Noire.

"I've got a Time ship and its pilot hidden in a disused hangar, just north of Fakenham," said Harry Lee.

"Where do I come in?" asked Val. "Do you want me to write a story about it?"

"I don't think that will prove feasible," answered Lee, "unless you like to write it as fiction."

"It would make a nice innuendo article for one of my

columns," said Val. "I'm incredibly interested in your Time ship and its pilot, but where do I come in?"

"It's a long story," said Harry Lee.

"Give him another drink," said Val.

La Noire poured out another whisky and soda.

"I shouldn't this time of day," said Val, "but I'll also have another."

La Noire poured him one as well.

Lee finished his drink in reflective silence. Then he inserted a wedge of chewing gum between his powerful and well-preserved rear molars. Val waited until he got it broken down to a nice, plastic consistency.

"Right," he said, "you have drunk your drink, and you have got your gum into manageable proportions. Now can we have the story."

"We found a body in the Thames before I retired," said ex-Superintendent Harry Lee. "There were a lot of things very odd about that body. We couldn't trace it. It wasn't on the missing persons' list, he had bad sight—but didn't wear glasses, bad teeth but hadn't visited a dentist; he was undernourished in a way that no 20th century Englishman has a right to be, and his lungs and fingernails showed every sign of his working in a factory where sub-standard health and safety precautions were the order of the day."

"Sounds like a corpse from a Victorian sweat shop," commented Val.

"Incredibly enough, that's what we believe it to be," said Harry.

"What was it doing in the Thames?" asked Stearman.

"This is where my Time ship comes in," answered Lee.

"Go on," urged Val.

"The victim was the centre of interest as far as Chronol was concerned. Chronol is a Time Warden. I met him near Number Seven Wharf on Victoria Docks. I was talking to 'Spud' Murphy O'Leary, a night watchman there, and apparently Chronol had visited him already, making enquiries about this mysterious body that he was trying to trace."

"I suppose a Time Warden," said La Noire, "is a kind of four-dimensional version of the Man from Inter-pol?"

"That's about it," agreed Harry Lee, and as he spoke he looked at her, thinking that six hundred years from now this woman would still be alive, would still be just as young, just as beautiful, and that she would then know all about Time Wardens. It was a strange thought.

"You're looking very ponderous," commented Val.

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Lee. "Sorry! I was getting a bit ahead of myself in the story." He looked back at Val. "Where was I?"

"You were telling me about the Time Warden—what's his name?—Chronol?"

"Yes, Chronol," agreed Lee.

"What about him?" asked Val.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Point of Departure

"WHEN anyone monkeys around with the past, nasty things happen in the future, in Chronol's era," said Lee.

"I see," put in Val. "Just what has happened?"

"Well, four hundred and seventy people have vanished."

"That's mass murder on the grand scale," commented Val.

"That's why Chronol and the other Time Wardens are so concerned. You see, the dead man was obviously taken out of his own time, killed and dumped in ours, before, in what would have been the natural course of history, he had been able to beget the forebears of those four hundred and seventy missing people."

"Yes, I can follow the mathematics of that," said Val.

"It's complicated, and it's riddled with paradoxes, but I can nevertheless follow it."

"The long and short of it was that I took a voyage into the future. I took a trip into Chronol's time. I met his chief, and came back with a commission."

"A commission?" said Val. He sounded interested.

"The general theory is that somebody from their time, or near it, somebody with no morals, but a high degree of imagination and ruthlessness, has got hold of a Time ship. We think that he had also set up a Time vortex."

"Hold your horses," said Stearman. "You're getting ahead of me with all these technicalities."

"Chronol told me," explained Lee, "that there are two alternative methods of Time transit, the vortex and disc ship. The vortex can be set up, disguised to look rather like a tunnel."

"That has possibilities," said Stearman.

There was silence for a moment. Then Harry Lee went on again.

"The theory, basically, is this, Val. Somebody from their times wishes to manufacture something which it is illegal to manufacture—possibly weapons. We think so from the beryllium. He also wants to make the maximum profit on these weapons. So he uses the cheapest possible labour."

"Hence our unemployed Victorian?" said Val.

"Yes. He goes back to the '*good old days*' and gets a labour force in a land of dark tunnels, grimy warehouses, and industrial gloom; one more dark tunnel doesn't make any difference; men walk through it unquestioningly.

Men go to the factory, work in bad conditions, filling their lungs with beryllium dust; they stagger out again, having done an eighteen hour shift, perhaps, and go back through the tunnel, clutching their pittance."

"Hold on," said Val. "How are they paid?"

"We suggested Victorian silver," said Harry Lee.

"Yes, that makes sense," agreed Val.

There was silence again for a few moments, then La Noire asked:

"How does the theory go on from there?"

"Let's assume one of these men got curious. I'm only hazarding a wild guess, but let's say he was paid in half-crowns and he notices that although one of them bears what to him is this year's date, it seems to have all the characteristics of fifty years' wear. He takes it along to the boss, and says, 'Please, sir, what's this?' Too dangerous to let him live, so he disappears."

"That makes sense," agreed Stearman, "makes good sense."

"It's only a possibility. Anything could have made him suspicious. Maybe he looked out of the factory window one day when he shouldn't have done, perhaps through that tiny little strip of sky which he wasn't supposed to have seen, an aeroplane went flashing past. In great excitement he goes running to the boss and says, 'Please, sir, I've just seen a flying machine!'"

"I should have thought the boss would have taken care to see there were no windows . . ."

"It was decided," went on Lee, "that if we are going to solve this case at all, then we must get the devil in among the tailors, or the cats into the pigeon loft."

"Got to work from the inside, is that it?" asked Val.

Lee nodded, "And it's going to be dangerous," he said.

"You're telling me it's going to be dangerous," agreed Stearman.

"It's going to be a job for two or three men at most . . ."

"You're beginning to make sense," agreed Val. "I think I see through the dark mysterious purpose of your visit. You want another cloak-and-dagger man, is that it?"

"Are you interested?"

Val squared his broad shoulders.

"You bet I'm interested," he said. "It will be like going back to the days of Sherlock Holmes. I'll be your Doctor Watson, if you like."

"I don't think you have the necessary qualifications," laughed Lee, "but I'll be very glad to have you."

"Now," said Val, "let's get a plan formulated. I take it that what you want us to do, is to fly back with you to some unspecified date in the late 19th century, pose as unemployed labourers, find the factory, get in and break up the operation."

"That's it, by and large," said Lee.

Val exchanged a swift glance with La Noire.

"I can't see that we can involve you in this, safely," said Lee, looking meaningfully at her.

"I want to come," said La Noire. "You'd be surprised what a shawl and a few smudges of dirt can do."

"I didn't think anything could have disguised your beauty," said Lee, gallantly.

"I'll go and get the car," said Val.

La Noire looked at Harry Lee very intently. There was power, almost frightening power, in her eyes.

"You *know*," she said.

"Yes, I know," he replied. "What's going to happen if you go back into the past. *You already exist in the past.*"

La Noire nodded again.

"What if you meet yourself? What if Val should see your other self? Your 19th century self?"

"That's unlikely," said La Noire. "I don't think our investigations will take us anywhere near my 19th century habitat."

"But if they do," persisted Lee.

"Everyone has a double," said La Noire.

The ex-superintendent shrugged his burly old shoulders resignedly.

"O.K.," he said. "Let's go."

Val was back with the car.

"What about packing?" asked La Noire as Lee led them towards the door.

"Oh, don't bother," said the ex-superintendent. "We shall have to have everything Victorian if we're going to make any kind of job of this."

"What we want is some kind of cashable money," said Val.

"I think Chronol will manage that part of the job for us."

"How's he going to manage that part of the job?" asked Stearman.

"Well, I don't know exactly, but I'm quite sure that

he has ways and means of his own," said Lee.

"Well, then, the sooner we contact him the better," said Val. He and La Noire sat in the front of the big sports saloon that was so characteristic of the big journalist-adventurer. Val Stearman, that car, and the supernatural column in the *Daily Globe* went together like eggs, bacon and beans. It would have been difficult to think of them separately. Val had once been asked which was the most important aspect of that important triumvirate, to which he had replied, 'Which is the most important leg of a three-legged stool?'

They left London on the A11, drove through Woodford and Epping Forest into Harlow, Sawbridgeworth and Bishop's Stortford. From there Val stayed on the A11 through Great Chesterford into Newmarket, driving through that great home of the sport kings, he ran on through picturesque Barton Mills, and up the A1065 into Brandon. Heathland lay all around them in the gathering gloom; crepuscular shadows moved in and Stearman turned on the headlights of the powerful sports saloon.

From Brandon they drove through Mundford and followed the A1065 through Swaffham and Castle Acre, past the charming old-world village of Weasenham All Saints, through Raynham, Fakenham and Houghton. At Houghton they left the B1388, which they had taken after leaving Fakenham, and wandered off into the by-ways and mysteries of the unclassified semi-roads that straddled like an uncouth spider's web across north Norfolk. It was Harry Lee who was directing their progress now with precise navigational details. He piloted Stear-

man to the side of the hangar, which loomed dark and mysterious in the creeping dusk. They got out, and Lee walked across to the hangar.

"Chronol," he shouted. "Chronol, are you there? It's me, Harry Lee!"

As he spoke he began unwinding the chains that still secured the door as he had left them.

Stearman and La Noire had followed him. They went into the hangar and stood looking up at the Time ship.

"I wonder where the blazes Chronol has got to," said Harry.

"I am here, friend Lee," said the Time Warden, as he stepped out of the shadows on the other side of the hangar.

"How come you're *inside*, when the chains are still on the door?" asked Lee.

Chronol pointed to the shadows behind him.

"There's a small door over there," he said, pointing behind him. "It began to get cold outside."

"Why didn't you get into the ship?" asked Harry.

"I wouldn't have heard you come, if I had," answered Chronol.

"No, I suppose not," said Lee.

"I'll give you a hand with the main door," said Val.

"Let me introduce you, first," suggested Lee. "Mr. Val Stearman—Chronol the Time Warden."

"I've heard a great deal about you, Mr. Stearman," said Chronol. "I've also read some of your work, in the archives."

"That gives me a nasty shuddering feeling," returned Val. "I feel as though I were already dead."

"In my time you have been dead for six hundred years," said Chronol. "But Time travel makes us all immortal."

"In a manner of speaking, I suppose," said Val.

La Noire's eyes narrowed a little in the gloom.

"Let's change the subject, darling," she said, looking at Val with a strange wistfulness. The expression was not lost on Harry Lee, and he got a fleeting glimpse into the heart of an Immortal, who knows that ultimately time must march on.

Chronol taxied the great ship outside. Val and Harry Lee closed the doors, Chronol lowered the ramp, La Noire, Val and Harry walked up the ramp, which folded in behind them; the ramp closed; the Time disc was ready to take off.

"It's beautiful," said La Noire, looking round the interior.

"I described it as a flying flat," said Harry Lee.

"Good description," said Val. He looked at Chronol. "A photograph of this on the front of tomorrow's *Globe* would boost the sales!"

"Plus an interview with me, I suppose, explaining how it works," said Chronol.

Val laughed.

"It would either make us the biggest thing that ever happened to journalism, or we should be laughed off the streets."

"I should tell you that the *Globe* is the last paper ever to fold up," said Chronol. "The greatest Fleet Street ever saw, and the last of the black and white warriors to go down on the tablets of history."

"I can't imagine a world without newspapers," remarked Val.

"We managed," said Chronol, with something that might have been a smile playing round the corners of his lips.

"I suppose," said Val, as the ship began to vibrate, "that I am rather in the position of the primitive Eastern chieftain who cannot imagine how you win a war without elephants."

"I wouldn't say that it was an absolutely perfect analogy," returned Chronol, "but it's reasonably apt."

Val Stearman nodded.

"What exactly is happening at the moment?" he asked. "I can hear the ship moaning and vibrating . . ."

"In a few moments you will see what looks like a flickering black and white background through the viewport, over there; it will actually be a checker work of nights and days . . ." said the Time Warden.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Time Flight

THE flickering quickened its pace. Now there was a uniform greyness, a misty greyness.

"We are now travelling rapidly forward through time," said Chronol.

"Forward?" questioned Val.

Chronol looked at his controls.

"Yes," he said. "What on earth am I doing? I thought we were going back to R.H.Q." He shook his head as though to clear it. "That's odd," he commented.

"I was talking to you," said Val. "I took your attention."

"Tell me," said the ex-superintendent, "not that I was particularly concerned with the traffic division—but are there any rules for dangerous driving in Time, just as

we used to have rules in our time for dangerous driving on the road. I mean, is there a Time-way code, like we had a Highway code? A code to which drivers must adhere if they are going to get safely back to their destination . . ."

"The Time-way code, if you like to call it that," said Chronol, "must be even more rigidly adhered to. A mistake, an accident in Time, could have far more serious repercussions than even an accident on the road." He made a gesture, a sweeping, inclusive gesture. "One dangerous criminal got into the past and killed a man," he said. "As a result four hundred and seventy people died. The most terrible road accident of your time wouldn't have killed four hundred and seventy at one blow."

"No, it would take three Bank Holidays to reach a total like that," said the ex-superintendent, grimly.

There was silence in the disc ship for a few moments, and then Chronol said:

"We should soon be reaching our destination."

"Are we still in the same *place* spacially speaking?" asked Val.

"Yes," replied Chronol, "this north Norfolk agricultural country would be pretty deserted. Of course, as soon as we go back beyond 1940 we'll lose the hangar."

"I was wondering what we could use for cover. There is an alternative, you know, in fact it may prove the only workable alternative."

"What's that?" asked the Time Warden.

"It may be necessary for you to leave us here and take the ship back to your own time."

"Can't leave you to tackle this alone. You don't know who you're looking for, or who you're up against. You don't know the kind of 26th century weapons he may have to use against you. You can't handle him without me," said Chronol.

"We'd do much better with you," agreed Val. "But the problem of hiding the ship still remains."

"What about the problem of his ship?" asked the ex-superintendent. "He must have hidden that somewhere, somehow."

"That will be our best clue, once we can pinpoint the time in which he is actually operating," said Chronol, "unless he is using only a vortex."

"It occurs to me," said La Noire, breaking in thoughtfully, "that he may not actually be *staying* there."

She went on: "Having set up his operations, he may have moved back, back into his own time, back into the future."

"I see what you mean, an absentee landlord, an absentee industrialist, an absentee factory owner," replied Chronol. He sat rather in the position of the classic Greek 'Thinker,' one hand on his head, his eyes closed in concentration. He sat more upright and removed the hand.

Harry Lee chewed gum impassively. Val Spearman looked at the Time Warden.

The silence continued. Stearman ran strong, bronzed fingers through iron grey curls.

La Noire, statuesque and Cleopatrine in her loveliness, regarded the three men silently. The quietness continued.

"If he has set up a base and then left it," said Chronol, "it will make him that much easier to deal with."

"How's that?" asked Val.

"A web is less dangerous when the spider is away," commented the Time Warden.

"Very true," agreed Lee, "on the other hand, you can't catch the spider if it isn't there to be caught."

"If you three walk into the web," said La Noire, "the flies will turn out to be very dangerous wasps."

"Once I saw a fight between a spider and a wasp," said Val. "Pretty gruesome sight. The old spider nearly got him, but the wasp, being quite a tough character, whipped in one stab from the old pointed bazooka at the rear end, and *bingo!*"

"I sometimes find your 20th century idioms a little difficult to follow," said Chronol.

Harry Lee laughed.

"Sometimes those of us who are born and bred in the 20th century find the modern idiom a little hard to follow!" he exclaimed.

"My business is words," commented Stearman.

Harry Lee nodded.

There was another silence.

"I still haven't decided what to do with the ship," said Chronol.

Val grinned.

"Don't ask me where to put it," he chuckled, "because *I might be tempted to give you the old military answer!*"

Chronol paced around the luxuriously upholstered interior of his Time vessel. He made Val think of a powerful genie, in a singularly comfortable bottle.

"I think it would be best," he said, "to find some remote spot which would be very difficult of access."

"There is always the Outer Hebrides!" said Stearman.

"On the other hand, if we get too remote an address it won't be very easy for us to get down there to London to start looking——"

"London," said La Noire, "reminds me of the Thames."

It was obvious that her remark was only the prelude to something much more profound.

"Go on," said Lee.

"Is your ship capable of being stored under water?" asked La Noire.

Chronol snapped his fingers.

"That's the answer!" he exclaimed. "Under water! It's not only capable of being stored under water; it's capable of being summoned by remote control."

"How very convenient," said Val. "It sounds like one of those cowboy yarns where the heroes could whistle up their horses."

"It wasn't only cowboy heroes who could whistle up their horses. I believe Sir Lancelot, of medieval mythology, had a similar trick up his sleeve, when caught in a quagmire," Chuckled Chronol.

"Of course, you are in the singularly fortunate position," said Harry Lee, "if being able to solve many of the enigmatical problems of medieval mythology. All you have to do is to go back and have a look. Which reminds me—I know I'm changing the subject—of when you told me about the great religious revival which has taken

place among your people; wouldn't it have been possible for your theologians to go back to first century Palestine and see what really did happen?"

"That was one of the very first projects into history," he said.

"What did you see?"

"As much as we were permitted to see," answered Chronol.

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Harry Lee.

"Certainty would preclude faith," answered Chronol.

"You cannot prove a victory until it's won. You cannot prove a man who leads, to be a leader worth the following, until you follow to the death, and out beyond mere death, which is not anything but Satan's lie upon eternal life'."

"You're quoting," said Harry Lee.

"Yes, I am," agreed Chronol, "some of the greatest words ever penned."

"You haven't answered my question," said the ex-superintendent.

"I didn't know you were particularly interested in religion," said Stearman.

"Beneath this gruff exterior," said Harry Lee, "there beats a surprisingly human heart!"

Val nodded.

"I have often found," he said, "that some of the most terrible men, some of the strongest men that I have ever encountered, have also been capable of the utmost sympathy. Sometimes the distortion is quite bizarre."

"Such as?" said Harry Lee interrogatively.

"I knew a mass murderer once who loved birds!" said Stearman.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Into the Drink

VAL looked at Chronol.

"You never answered Harry's question," he reminded him.

"Our observers saw no evidence to disprove the claims of the Christian church," answered the Warden.

"And that was all they were able to discover?"

"It was enough," replied Chronol. "Faith can say 'I believe' and reason can ramify faith by testifying logically that belief is rational and feasible. To go beyond this is to deny a man the very essence of that free will which is an essential concomitant of faith itself."

"Exemplify that," said Stearman.

"Do you believe in me?" asked Chronol. "I mean, do you believe that I exist?"

"My senses tell me that you do," replied Val. "I per-

ceive you with eyes and ears. I can put out my hand and touch you."

"There is no virtue in believing that I exist; in other words, you have *no choice*. Unless you were mentally deranged, you could not fail to believe in my existence," said Chronol.

"True," said Stearman.

"If, on the other hand, I was to tell you that outside the ship, somewhere in that greyness, there exists a spirit being whom we call Mr. X, if I tell you that spiritually, in a way that is quite impossible to prove physically, I am in telepathic communion with Mr. X, would you believe that?"

"I might," said Stearman.

"You see, science can't prove that Mr. X does not exist. It can put forward a number of theories which would make the existence of Mr. X very unlikely, but such theories do not themselves amount to *proof* as such. Now, if you were to believe in Mr. X there would be some virtue in your belief. You see, as I exist and my existence can be demonstrated by tactile, visual and auditory sensation, you have no choice but to believe in my existence, but you have a choice of believing in Mr. X."

"I see," agreed Stearman. "Well argued, very well argued."

La Noire was smiling rather cryptically. The Time Warden looked at her interrogatively.

"If you yourself had an additional sense which gives you the power to contact Mr. X telepathically in a purely psychic and non-physical way, have you any choice

about whether or not to believe in Mr. X?" she asked.

"This is a fascinating question! It presses the simile a little more deeply than the simile is able to stand, I feel," said Chronol.

"It does, and it doesn't," said La Noire. "Those of us who are able to experience the existence of Mr. X very directly by means of certain extra-sensory perceptions, are not really forced to believe in the existence of Mr. X, in quite the same way as people with normal sensations are forced to believe in the existence of other normal people whom they can see, hear and touch."

"This is getting very deep," replied Chronol.

"It could be argued," said Val, "that the extra-sensory perceptions are not really supplying accurate sense data at all, but are only creating illusions of the mind, hallucinations . . ."

"It is also possible to argue that the senses themselves are supplying false data," countered Chronol.

"This argument is all very interesting, and as a piece metaphysical philosophy it is no doubt highly valuable," said ex-superintendent Harry Lee, with a grin, "but it is taking us rather a long way from the solution of our immediate problem."

"What is the solution of our immediate problem?" prompted Val.

"The solution of our immediate problem," said Chronol, apparently glad of a chance to change the topic of conversation, "is to find somewhere to hide the ship." He looked at La Noire. "You had suggested some kind of sub-marine activity," he said.

"Yes, I had," answered La Noire.

"We'll do that," said Chronol.

"Are you going to ditch it in the Thames?" asked Val.

"I think so," said Chronol.

"And you're sure you can summon it again by remote control?"

"Yes, I can, provided I don't lose the control unit."

"That would be splendid," ejaculated Val. "I can just imagine us being stuck in the 1890's with our ship stuck under twenty feet of Thames water and mud; the ship would take us back to our own century, but we can't reach it because we have no means of getting it up. In our guise of poor labourers we would have great difficulty in raising capital to have it salvaged for us by more orthodox means."

"Yes, what *are* we going to do about money?" asked Lee.

"How are we going to get the stuff we need? *We* and *you* can't go wandering in there dressed like twenty-five-hundred-and-something!"

"This certainly presents problems!" said Val.

"All right," said Chronol, "we'll solve the problems." He looked at Lee. "You remember when we were in the Senior Time Warden's office?" he said.

"Yes," said the ex-superintendent.

"There are other departments in the Time Warden service. Once it had been decided, those other departments went into action. Our ship was loaded and supplied for us in the few minutes that we were strolling back through the park."

"I find that difficult to believe," said Harry Lee.

"It is nevertheless true. As time proceeds, so man

becomes increasingly efficient. Twentieth century standards of efficiency would make even the most advanced-looking Victorian manufacturer appear clumsy and hopelessly old fashioned. So, in our own time, personal efficiency and the efficiency of machines and production techniques, and, above all, the efficiency of our organisation, has improved out of all recognition. Jobs can be done, by careful planning and thought, by a big organisation, in a matter of minutes that would have taken half-a-day, or even two or three days, in your century, and would have taken a week in earlier times," explained Chronol.

"I certainly agree that what I saw of your people didn't lead me to assume that they were slouchers."

"I'm glad they impressed you," said Chronol.

"You mean to say that we have all the gear on board already?"

"We have got most of what we shall need. The resources of the Time Wardens are as unlimited as Time itself. You want some disguises? Right, here they are!"

"How did you know the sizes?" asked Val.

"Our filing system extends throughout the whole of history," explained Chronol. "If we want to know anything we go back and have a look."

"It makes sense," said Stearman.

"Makes excellent sense," said Chronol. "In fact, compared with other methods, it's the *only* method."

"I suppose you will admit to a certain quite justified prejudice?" smiled Harry Lee.

"Oh, yes," agreed Chronol pleasantly.

They went to the storage locker, and a few moments

later they looked as much like a group of working class, late 19th century human beings as it was possible to look.

"If anything," said Chronol, "we probably look more genuine than the genuine article!"

"That's rather a contradiction in terms, isn't it?" asked Val.

"The greatest truths are paradoxes," said Chronol. The ship touched down.

"Well, as far as I can tell from these little Norfolk semi-roads, and the absence of the hangar, plus the absence of anything that looks even remotely like agricultural machinery," said Val, "we are down just north of Fakenham again."

"I think we are," agreed Chronol. "Now our Time ship becomes a flight craft."

They took off again, flying down the eastern edge of England, a little to the south, and a little to the west.

The Thames in the evening dusk lay before them like a great aqueous snake. The ship hovered by the margin of the river.

Chronol began to make some very fine adjustments to the controls and the ship dipped slowly.

The waters of the great Thames seemed to lie a matter of mere inches below the great Time-craft.

Stearman looked down at those waters, and felt that he could have stretched out a hand and touched them.

The extending ramp slid out from the portal of the ship and Chronol motioned to Val, La Noire and Harry Lee to step out on to the bank. He himself unhooked a small gleaming, metallic device, about the size of a goose's egg. He stepped across the ramp after them,

doing things to the gleaming, metallic spheroid in his hand. It was rather weird, reflected Harry Lee, to watch the ship obeying instructions although it was empty. The ramp folded up; the portal closed. The ship tilted a little, then it's bevelled perimeter dipped softly, silently, below the water. For a few moments they watched it gently sinking. Its outline shimmered and came back to them weirdly distorted until the dark turgidity of the water cut out all trace of outline. Their last glimpse of it was a huge, darker shadow disturbing the dark shadows of the depths.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Room with a View

CHRONOL consulted the thing, which looked like a metal goose's egg. It was equipped with a number of minute dials and levers. There were buttons and studs which gave it a highly complicated appearance.

"I hope it's deep enough," commented Harry Lee. "I should hate somebody with a deep-keel tea clipper to come sailing up here and perform a neat bisection."

"Yes," agreed Chronol. "I could think of pleasanter places to get stuck than a Victorian working class environment."

"Well, if the worst came to the worst," said Val, "and we found we were stuck here, surely we could use our technology, our knowledge, to lift ourselves out of the rut a bit."

"If you modify things before they are due to be modified, or invent things before they are due to be invented, you may change the whole course of history. We must do as little as possible. Even the small things we do could have repercussions," warned Chronol.

"Yes, I hadn't thought of that," agreed Stearman, "it's a most essential point."

"To interfere with the past is to destroy or modify the present," said Chronol. "*Our* present I mean. Of course, it could also destroy yours."

"I think you're exaggerating this a bit, aren't you?" said Harry Lee.

"Let me give you a concrete example," said the Time Warden.

"Go on," murmured La Noire, looking at Chronol with interest.

"If," began Chronol, "we were to walk down this street now, and in the course of our walking we were to kick one cobble stone loose, subsequently a horse walks down here, pulling a barge. He slips on that loose cobble stone, he falls, breaks a leg and is shot. Assume that next week that horse would have been carrying a rider who was 'destined' shall we say—though I do not like the word—to fall and be killed. Assume that that rider who is now alive when he should have been dead, marries and produces children, one of whom turns out to be a mass murderer, or something of that ilk."

"Do you really think that we could be responsible for something as serious as that?" asked Stearman, "if we merely kicked loose a cobble stone?"

"It's unlikely that the consequences would be so dire,"

agreed Chronol, "but the possibilities exist."

Val grinned.

"O.K.," he said, looking at the others. "Tread lightly on the cobble stones!"

They walked on past the enormous outlines of a huge Victorian gas works. Dim street lamps flickered like dying glow worms in the heavy smoke-laden atmosphere.

"You know," said Stearman, as he sniffed, "I thought our 1963 air was polluted until I inhaled this lot. It's terrible!"

"It's pretty grim, isn't it?" agreed Chronol. "Makes me wish I was back in my own time!"

Harry Lee was contrasting the present dismal environment with the 25th century park across which he and Chronol had walked to the headquarters of the Senior Time Warden. He thought of the purity of the air there; the green grass, the open sky, happy children and pure-minded, contented adults enjoying their ample leisure time, filling it with cultural pursuits. The dingy bricks, the stinking gas, the black river, the grey pall of cloud above the city, all spoke to the ex-policeman of human misery. His mind soared forward to that glimpse he had had of man's destiny half a millennium ahead. Then he saw a broader picture and a wider canvas. That Utopian existence could not have come into being without the blood, sweat and tears of those who lived and died in this Victorian labouring darkness. Harry Lee saw the whole thing just for a brief moment as one enormous gestalt pattern. He saw it in terms of cause and effect. He wondered if those Utopians, six centuries in the future, realised how much they owed to those who had

laid the foundations of the industry, the economics, and the sociology, that would eventually develop into that heavenly civilisation from which Chronol sprang.

The more he thought about that near-perfect environment of Chronol's the more surprising he found it that there should be criminals in that organisation at all. He looked again at the dingy streets bordering the docks, they grey grime, dirt-strewn cobble stones, litter in the gutters and an over-all aura of squalor, poverty and ignorance. It seemed to extend its influence to the group from the Time ship. The bulldog tenacity of Harry Lee began to give way to depression. Yet it was not an entirely unmixed depression. His thoughts kept going back to the super century in which Chronol and his contemporaries lived. That was the flower. This was the gnarled, ugly root from which the flower sprang. To Chronol, thought Harry Lee, this root is hidden in the soil of history.

"We ought to find somewhere to spend the rest of the night, I suppose," said Chronol.

Chronol, thought Lee, had a decidedly practical streak. It was a good thing, a useful thing. It was apparently one of the cardinal virtues of the Time Wardens.

"I agree with you," said Harry Lee.

"Do you think we could find a cheap boarding house somewhere?"

"We're hardly dressed for the grand palace!"

Chronol laughed.

"We shall have to find one of the more lugubrious types of habitation. Hello, what's this?"

A small, yellowish gaslight gleamed over an arched doorway.

"Yes, I think so," said Lee.

A card with an ornamented border and illuminated capitals in faded red type, was propped at a cobwebbed window. It simply said:

"VACANCIES"

Harry Lee went to the door. A wrought iron bell pull, dirty and worn to a polished smoothness at one point, by the touch of countless hands, met his out-stretched fingers. The tones of the bell at the other end were by no means sonorous.

The door slowly opened, and a hideous caricature of humanity hobbled over the threshold and started at them. The face was so wrinkled, lined and malformed, that it was impossible for them to tell whether it was male or female. Wisps of thin grey hair depended over that time-devastated forehead. There was a pathetic little woolly nightcap on the back of the head, the body was hunched and broken, as though accident or disease had wasted the skeletal structures to a point where it was no longer capable of sustaining the weight of the meagre flesh. A gnome, perhaps, a brownie, a cobbold, or a troll, the thing might have been; but that this piece of human wreckage could once have been a man or a woman, much less a boy or a girl, seemed beyond the bounds of possibility.

Chronol looked as though he were going to be sick. La Noire gave a little gasp, but stifled it almost at once. Val and the ex-superintendent appeared to be made of somewhat sterner stuff.

"We're looking for rooms, please," announced Harry Lee.

"It's a funny time o' night to be looking for rooms, isn't it?" came the question.

The voice that issued from the caricature was as divorced from normal human intonation, as the body was divorced from normal human physiology.

"We've got money," said Harry Lee.

"In advance," answered the thing.

"In advance," agreed Harry.

"How many rooms do you want?"

"We can manage with two," replied Harry.

"All right," said the thing. "It's three shillings a week for a double room, and no board. You've got to supply your own gas, you know. There's a meter in the room, and a ring. There's no cooking after midnight!"

"All right," consented Harry Lee. He produced two half-crowns and two sixpences. They were part of the supply of Victorian cash which Chronol had had ready and waiting in the ship.

The thing held the coins up to the light and viewed them suspiciously. Satisfied that they were what they purported to be, it secreted the coins in the folds of the indescribably sack-like garment which covered the broken figure, then, limping horribly, it led them through into the bowels of the dingy building. The passage ended in a dark staircase, a single naked mantle burned dully on the landing above.

"First on the right, first on the left," came that distorted voice.

The party from the Time ship took the stairs. Harry

Lee was in the lead, followed by Chronol; La Noire followed the man from the Time capsule, and Val Stearman brought up the rearguard. The banisters were rickety and didn't look as if they would stand more than purely nominal pressure. Boards on the aged stairs creaked; the treads were badly worn, and the risers gave when a toe encountered one, in the darkness. There was no carpet, nor any sign that there had ever been one.

"First on the right, and first on the left, I think she said," murmured Val.

"Do you think it was a 'she'?" asked Chronol. "I thought it was a man."

Lee shrugged.

"I dunno. I thought that sack-like thing was a sort of dress. A woman's dress . . ."

"You may be right," said Chronol, "but I thought it was a man."

"Let's split the difference! It's probably some form of hermaphrodite!" said Stearman.

"Do you intend that remark humorously?" asked La Noire.

"I don't really know," countered her husband. "It made me sick to look at the poor old thing, whatever it was."

"Did you get a smell of her?" asked Lee.

Val nodded in the gloom of the gaslit stairs.

"I did," he said. "By the smell of that body it ought to have been dead for years."

"Most of it probably is," said Chronol.

"Shall we take the first room?" asked the ex-superintendent, looking at Chronol.

"I think so," answered the Time traveller. They moved into the room on the right. There was no lock on the door, but the remains of a bolt could be seen on the inside.

It was not a large room. There was a bed, a cheap washstand with a marble top, a cracked jug, half full of a dirty greyish-looking water, and a basin with a large piece chipped out of it, beside the jug . . .

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Situations Vacant

THE only illumination came through the open door. Chronol fished in the pocket of his disguise and produced a shilling. He groped his way to the gas meter, which did not lie in the shaft of illumination from the door and fiddled the shilling in, more by luck than judgment. Stearman struck a match and began looking around for the gas fitting. Finally he saw one. The mantle was broken, but there was enough of it left to give some kind of incandescent illumination. The light, far from making the room look more cheerful, added to the overall impression of misery and squalor. Val and La Noire went to the room across the landing and found that it was much the same. They sat on the edge of the filthy, unkempt bed.

"So now we know how the other half lives," said Val grimly.

La Noire nodded.

"Would you believe that conditions like this ever existed? Things our parents, our grandparents, must have suffered!" went on Val.

"And at the other side of the scale," said La Noire, "almost unbelievable luxury. Wealthy Victorians had all the power that they wanted."

Val looked at her strangely in the gas light.

"I'm beginning to wish I hadn't brought you," he said.

"Why?" she demanded.

Val looked around.

"Look at this place! It's like a rat hole; it's no place for you!"

La Noire smiled.

"Wherever you are, my darling, that's the place for me."

"You are very loyal and very wonderful," said Val, as he kissed and held her close in his arms. "The sooner we get this business settled the better. I'm beginning to wish I'd told Harry it wasn't my cup of tea, after all!"

"Four hundred and seventy people," said La Noire. "Four hundred and seventy perfectly innocent people died because of one man's greed. That man must be found and stopped, Val!"

"True," agreed Stearman. He looked at the damp, peeling walls. "This place is certainly an incentive to quick results," he remarked. "It isn't the environment that you'd choose for a Time holiday, is it?"

Some how they slept; they were awake at the first light of morning.

"I think it's time that we joined the ranks of the Victorian unemployed and started looking for work," said Harry Lee, as he met them on the landing.

"Where's Chronol?"

"He's coming," said Lee. Chronol looked decidedly bleary of eye when he appeared.

"How do you suggest we start?" he said.

"Well, we could ask the caricature, if it's downstairs," suggested Val.

"Our friend in the sack-dress?" enquired Chronol.

Stearman nodded.

"He, she, or it may know where work is available. This looks the kind of place that caters for the——" he left the sentence unfinished. He didn't know what to complete it with.

In his own mind he had a concept, and a clearly formed concept of the kind of clientele that that terrible doss-house catered for, but it was a concept for which he had no clearly defined word. He realised, for Van Stearman was a competently read psychologist, that language is tightly tied up with concept formation. But he also knew, from his own introspective experience, that it is possible to think without using language. It is possible to think in abstract concepts, for which no words exist. He brought his train of thought back to the immediate and pressing reality of their situation.

The party from the Time disc walked out without seeing the strange proprietor of the unprepossessing lodging in which they had spent the night. The streets seemed a little less dingy by the light of morning. A burly, moustached and sidewhiskered policeman was

proceeding ponderously in the direction of the corner opposite to that on which the doss house stood.

"He might be able to give us some kind of lead," suggested Harry Lee. He walked over to the burly constable. The Victorian policeman's eyes twinkled with interest as Lee approached.

"And what can I do for you, me lad?"

It took Lee all his time not to smile. That Victorian arm of the law sounded so much like a music hall policeman, Harry felt like asking him the time! He restrained the impulse, and said instead:

"We are looking for work, officer."

"Oh, I see," said the policeman. "Do you know the district?"

"No," said Harry.

"And you are wondering whether I'd be able to direct yer to a factory where they want a few hands, is that it?"

"We hope so," replied Harry.

"Ah," the policeman looked him up and down thoughtfully. Harry was grinning inwardly. He was wondering what this stalwart constable would say if he knew that he was speaking to an ex-superintendent, a detective superintendent at that, *who was not due to be born for another twenty years!* It suddenly occurred to Harry that he didn't know the date. It is one thing to ask a policeman the time, it's quite another to ask him the date. Anybody can be excused for having no watch, particularly in times like these, thought Lee. But if any man is so far out of touch with reality that he doesn't know the date—not even the *year*—things can look suspicious, to

say the least. The question died still born, in the ex-superintendent's mind.

"Well, there's Hadlow and Winterton; Chardley and Todnacker, just down there, first on your left, along by the dock; they may have some vacancies," said the constable. "There's Ferris and Materlink, and Brown, Brown and Allsopp, over there to your right. They would be your four nearest. They'll have a notice up on the gate if they want anybody. Try them for a start. If they haven't got any vacancies, well, maybe one of the foremen can put you on to something. There's plenty of places round here."

The constable turned and proceeded on his way.

"Apparently there are two factories to the left, and two factories off to the right," said Harry, as he rejoined the group. He put his hand in his pocket, looking for a piece of gum, but Harry's favourite brand of gum was unknown in this particular place and time.

"Blast," he swore savagely.

"You'll have to take to chewing tobacco," grinned Chronol.

"Not on your life!" exclaimed the superintendent. "I'd rather chew arsenic!"

"So would I," grinned Chronol.

"I can't see what you've got to laugh about," protested Lee. "Here we are in this depressing environment, we haven't found the tunnel-factory yet—even if it exists——"

"Well, we shan't find it standing here, arguing about it," said Stearman, "come on, let's get a move on."

They tried the two factories which the constable had

pointed out to them on the left, without any success. Both had their gates locked, and both gates bore notices to the effect that no hands were required at present. They struck off to the right. Here, too, the story was the same. They didn't even see anyone to ask, although the sounds of industry could be heard on the far side of the closed gates.

"That cop said there were plenty about," remarked Harry Lee, "let's go and see what we can find."

They walked on past grimy docks that were now awakening to life. There were boats moving, some towed by horses, many under sail, some with great stern paddles threshing at the water, others with churning screws and black, belching funnels.

Finally they reached a factory gate at which a tall, bowler-hatted individual, who appeared to be a man of some authority, stood looking out from under bushy grey brows. Chronol moved forward to act as spokesman for the group. He touched his grimy check cap respectfully.

"Good day, sir, we're looking for work. I wonder if you could possibly advise us at all?"

The bowler-hatted man looked at Chronol, with every indication of a man who was used to looking down on people. Chronol was as tall as he was, and much broader.

"Looking for work, are you?" said Bowler Hat.

Chronol nodded.

"What can you do?"

"General machine hands," answered the Time Warden.

"All of you looking for work, are you?" asked Bowler Hat.

Chronol nodded.

"Might be able to fix you up. Where have you come from?"

"The other side of the river," said Chronol.

"Why did you leave?"

"Our works closed down!"

"Where were you?"

Chronol thought swiftly for a common sounding name which would be difficult to check on.

"Johnson Smith," he said.

The Bowler Hat seemed satisfied. He appeared to be the kind of individual who would claim knowledge that was not his, for the sake of appearing erudite. He had a look at them again. Val and La Noire he seemed to accept readily enough, but he flashed a inquisitive glance at Harry Lee.

"How old are you, then, mate?"

"Fifty-two," answered Lee.

"Oh," said the Bowler Hat. "Can you still do a full day's work?"

"I think so, sir," said Lee.

"In good health, are you?"

"Never felt better," said the ex-superintendent. If he could trim as many years as that off his age, and be believed, he thought, he must be wearing reasonably well!

Bowler Hat continued to look at them.

He cast a glance at La Noire, as though cogitating.

"We haven't got many women working here," he said.

"It's 'ard work, you know!"

"We don't mind hard work," said Chronol.

"All right," said Bowler Hat. "Go over there, sign

on, give your names to the timekeeper, go through that door, and tell the charge hand that Mr. Peters sent you, then he'll set you on, right?"

"Right," agreed Chronol.

"Thank you, sir," said Harry Lee.

They filed over to the timekeeper; from the timekeeper's hut they went through the door that Peters had indicated and found themselves in the presence of a sallow, cadaverous-looking charge hand. He wore a long coat and a pair of steel-rimmed glasses, behind which piggy little eyes twinkled at them. Val was not particularly enamoured with the expression with which the lecherous looking charge hand eyed La Noire. There were things about La Noire which even the darkness of a Victorian working girl's shawl could not disguise completely. She had a kind of in-built magnetic attraction that was almost irresistible. It raised the pulse beat and blood pressure of civilised men, of decent moral standards. The things that it must have done to the minds of lesser mortals could only be guessed at!

"Mr. Peters sent us," said Harry Lee.

"I see, I see," said the charge hand, who was looking them over carefully. "What experience have you had?"

"General machine work," said Chronol.

"I see. Come on, this way, then, to the number three shop."

They walked past rows of clanking, grinding, whirling, belt-driven machinery. Wisps of steam rose here and there, and from time to time white-faced, tired-looking workers would glance up without very much show of interest.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Contact Man

"NOW this first machine," said the sallow, cadaverous charge hand, beckoning to Harry Lee, "is very simple to operate. You take the metal sheet from this box, put it under here, pull this handle round so, and you'll find the machine will come down and punch those four holes out in the centre."

"That's all, is it?" asked Harry.

"That's right," said the possessor of the steel-rimmed glasses. "All right, get started," he added.

Harry Lee took his jacket off, and got to work, punching holes out of centre of the metal sheets in the box beside him.

"What do I do when I've finished these?" he asked.

"I'll come and bring you another box full," said the charge hand. "Or show you where to get 'em."

"Right," said Lee. He was surprised to find how very soon he got into the swing of the thing. It was a matter very largely of establishing a rhythm; it was a matter of establishing a series of timed movements. Lee's keen mind did a sort of time and motion study, on his own

method. He found that the only thing that kept him interested was to think of different ways of doing the job, so that he could increase his speed a little. His watch, which was his most treasured possession in his retirement, was safely tucked away with his security officer's uniform on board the submerged disc ship. His only method of computing the time was to count slowly as he worked. He knew that this was not accurate in the scientific sense, but it was accurate enough for the purpose for which he required it. From where he worked he was just able to keep an eye on Val Stearman. Val was further along the shop. His machine was a kind of milling device that put gnurled edges on brass control screws. The screws came to him in worn leather bags. They had had their threads cut, but the gnurling had not been done.

Val placed them in the jaws of the miller and watched them grind the serrated milling on the edge of the screw heads. Like Harry Lee, he found that the only thing to keep boredom in check, after a few minutes, was to try and devise ways of speeding up the process. La Noire was on the third machine. Harry Lee couldn't see her, but Val could. He couldn't quite determine what she was doing, but it appeared to be a process which required the counting and sorting of some small components and loading them into two trays.

Beyond La Noire, and out of sight of Val, Chronol was working on a drilling machine. The Time pilot was busying himself making holes in brass cases. He had no more idea of the purpose that the holes were destined to serve than Stearman had any idea of the purpose to

which the gnurled screws were to be put. La Noire was perfectly innocent of the purpose of the parts which she was counting and sorting, and Harry Lee neither knew, nor cared, for the function of the metal plates which he was stamping. Lee thought about the interest and the wide range of subjects which his job, as a detective superintendent had held. It had entailed a great deal of responsibility, but Lee was well able to bear that. He thought now of this soul-destroying monotony. He imagined what it must be like for an intelligent human being to find him, or her, self bound inexorably by economic chains, to a life of this kind. It must, he reflected, slowly destroy the mind, and only the strongest spirit could withstand the burden of the terrible repetition. There was no hope of escape for some.

Harry Lee had seen much of the seamy side of life during his long career on the force; in spite of this he was soaked in the milk of human kindness; he was a man who could extend sympathy, though his exterior was rough. He felt sympathy now for the untold thousands whose lives consisted of monotony and routine and a future that was as inspiring as a view of a blank stone wall.

Val Stearman gnurled his brass screws and thought of those whose lives consisted in the gnurling of brass screws, or similar occupations. He wondered how they stood it. He thought of his own life as a journalist, and as an adventurer; he realised just how incredibly fortunate he was. Just as Harry Lee had lived as a detective Superintendent with a load of responsibility and had realised that responsibility was a thousand times pre-

ferable to monotony, so Val Stearman, who lived with danger, who made a friend of peril, and a travelling companion of jeopardy, realised that danger was infinitely preferable to monotony.

La Noire, mysterious, immortal La Noire, counted and sorted with a minute part of her magnificent mind, and thought. Her memories went back over many, many centuries, and her sympathies, too, lay with those who, in conditions like these—and in the past it had been a thousand times worse even than this—had toiled on. La Noire remembered the days when sea transport had been powered by stricken, dying slaves at their oars. She had seen chain gangs in the mines of Ilva. The difference was that the chains were now invisible. If a man did not work, he could not eat, and this was the only work available. She thought not of her whole life, for its compass was so broad it was difficult to recall it all. She thought of things that stood out as highlights. Her beauty had always brought her love, her psychic ability had always brought her adventure. Sometimes she had been foolish, very foolish. Strange how the experience of many life times could still leave room in which the emotions could make mistakes. She remembered how, as an impetuous young reporter, with all the dash of a cavalry officer leading the charge, Val Spearman had rescued her from the clutches of the sinister Professor Von Haak, and the hideous Dr. Jules. She remembered how they had fought against the members of the coven, and against other dangers. La Noire thought of that strange spychim *something* which distinguished her from the mortal all around her, with whom she lived and

moved and had her being. She tried to imagine what it would be like if she was condemned to spend *eternity* counting and sorting little metal components. Then she thought how much worse it must be for them. Compared to hers, their lives were so short; they resembled flowers that bloomed for a short season, died, and returned to the coldness of the ground. The tragedy, the waste, the happiness that was denied them! She felt tears trying to well up inside her sensitive feminine heart. She thought of the strange separation from even the nearest and dearest which an immortal experiences. Then she thought that all the loneliness was a thousand times preferable to the boredom and monotony of the factory worker, with no chance of getting out of that terrible rut.

Chronol drilled holes in brass cases, and, as he drilled, so, symbolically, the point of the drill seemed to him to be a Time ship, cutting through the fabric of the continuum itself, penetrating the barrier of the past. He, too, was counting his blessings. He thought of all the hardship these people had to bear, he thought of the terrible repetition that the workers endured, and then he thought of his own life. He thought of their confinement, and his liberty, not only the liberty of the great park cities, of his own century, but the liberty of the whole panorama of human history up to his own day and generation. When he wanted something interesting to see and do, he could go and see the building of the pyramids; he could watch cave men hunting for aurochs; he could watch the earth being torn from the sun, with its sister planets, in a filament of gas, as another star passed by. He could watch the planets cooling. He could

watch nature's own pyrotechnic display, as volcanoes erupted and rain hissed back into steam, far from the surface of the smoking hot planet. He could see all these things from the safety of his disc Space/Time ship. There were tremendous strain concomitant with the duties of the Time Warden, but all the strain was as nothing compared to this terrible repetition. Chronol was a sensitive man, and his sensitivity was deeply stirred by the plight of those whose whole lives were spent in this kind of work.

At last a steam siren blew, the time they had been waiting for had come. Now they could meet their fellow workers and talk. Now that they could talk they might get a lead . . .

Carefully, the group from the Time-disc drifted together, like atomic particles gravitating towards one another in an environment of empty space. Val glanced up as an ageing worker walked past. The man paused not far from them. His face was lined by hard work, and finely etched by what was probably chronic pain. Sympathy welled up inside the big journalist as he looked up at this ageing Victorian labourer. The man was leaning against the factory wall, racked by heavy coughing. It began to turn cool. Now they had stopped working, Stearman realised that the savage cold which was creeping like a living thing, up the damp walls of the factory, was aggravating the man's cough. Swiftly, impulsively, Stearman peeled off his jacket and draped it over the old worker's shoulders. They felt pathetically thin and scrawny beneath his hand. The man looked round in surprise. The coughing had left him temporarily speech-

less, but his eyes held a deep gratitude.

"Come and sit over here," said Stearman.

The old man came towards him and sat down between Val and Chronol.

"You're new here, aren't you?" he asked.

"Yes," agreed Stearman, "we're new. We started today, mate."

The man raised an eyebrow.

"I've been here fifteen years," he said, "don't reckon I shall be here much longer though—Peters has got his eye on me, he knows I've got the cough. I keep turning out me work, though. Gotta keep turning it out. If they know you've got the cough, you can't get anywhere else."

Stearman looked at the line, haggard face again, and realised that the man was seriously consumptive. Perhaps he had two or three years left with rest and adequate food. But here, in the cold and the damp, and using all his strength on the machines day after day, he didn't look as though he could go more than another six or seven months. Val felt angry. Angry with his own helplessness to do anything about the situation. Angry with the vital ruling that he who alters the past alters the future, even if he alters the past beneficially. He had already flashed an unspoken message to Chronol and the Time Warden had replied with an almost imperceptible shake of the head.

Val would dearly have liked to give money and food to this wreck that had once been a worker.

"Jobs pretty tight about here, are they?" asked Val.

The man to whom Stearman had given his jacket was

not shivering quite so much now. The ample flesh and highly toned muscle on the journalist's big frame were above feeling the cold, as yet. Stearman had the kind of physique and the kind of constitution which could have survived naked in an Arctic night . . .

"Jobs are very 'ard," said the old man. "Can't get a crib anywhere."

Chronol nodded sympathetically.

"We were lucky to get in here," said Harry Lee, with a raised eyebrow.

"This place ain't so bad," said the old workman. "They don't 'ound you like some places do, but you've got to keep up a good stint, you know——"

"Yes, I can imagine," said Stearman.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Tunnel Factory

"IF we don't stay here, where could we go?" enquired Harry Lee.

The old man reeled off the names of a dozen places along the waterfront. They were names that were already familiar to the travellers from the Time disc.

The old man lowered his voice, and then, like a bolt from the blue, came the revelation that Stearman and his companions had been waiting for.

"There's always *the tunnel factory*," said the old man. "But I expect you've already 'eard about that?"

"Tunnel factory?" asked Lee.

"It's a queer place. I had a mate went there. I never seen him since," said the old man.

"How much can you tell me about this tunnel factory? Where is it? How can we get there?" asked Stearman.

The old man looked at them suspiciously. He looked at Stearman's bulging muscles, all too visible beneath the cotton shirt. He looked at their full, healthy faces, their thick, athletic bodies, even the rugged old bulldog Harry Lee looked physically superior to any other man in the factory.

"There's more in you lot than meets the eye," said the old workman quietly.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Chronol.

"You're not workers like me; there's something different about you. There's something a bit different about the way you talk as well."

"I hadn't noticed anything," said Val.

"Well, I have," said the old-timer. "I've never seen anyone like you before. Where're you from, then?"

"London," said Val.

"Don't give me that. You don't talk like a London bloke," said the old worker.

"Well, that's where we're from," said Val.

"London's a big place, you know," said Harry Lee.

"It ain't that big," said the old man suspiciously. And then he seemed to remember that Val had given him a jacket. "Still, wherever you're from you're all right," he said. "I can tell that. 'Ere, are you reformers, doing a special investigation about the factories, is that it?"

"Could be," said Val. The answer was sufficiently non-committal to sound mysterious.

"Is that why you're interested in the tunnel factory? That's the worst of the lot, that is!" said the worker.

"Tell us about your mate who disappeared," said Harry Lee.

The old man turned his face in the ex-superintendent's direction.

"My mate Smith," he said.

Val stiffened.

"Smith?"

"'Ave you 'eard about Smithy disappearing? 'Cos it

was all 'ushed up. They said he'd gone away, but Smithy wouldn't go away—wife and three kiddies, nice woman, 'ard working. Old Smithy'd have done anything for them! He wouldn't have gone away. That's just what they said. Do you know what I think?"

"No, what do you think?" asked Harry Lee.

"I think Smithy had an accident, perhaps an 'orrible accident and they were afraid there'd be some bad publicity. If there's one thing they are scared of in that place it's anyone knowing anything about 'em; that's one of the conditions o' work in there—you don't say anything."

"How do you know what you're telling us, then?" asked Chronol.

"'Cos me and Smithy were like that. He was 'ere for years before he went up there. They were offering a penny an hour more; and they'd got another one on the way, you see."

Stearman nodded.

"Disappeared," went on their tubercular friend. "Talkin' to 'im, I was, down at the pub. Only had half a pint once a week, that was Smithy's ration, and that I bought for him . . . I miss old Smithy . . ."

"Well, what happened? What did he tell you?" asked Lee.

"Well, he went to this place, you see, and they have to go up a tunnel, and you mustn't come out dinner time, you have to take some sandwiches. There's a *thing* in the tunnel. Smithy said it made a queer noise and made him feel sick. 'E didn't know what it was, but 'e had to go through it every day. And then, well," the old man

paused, "you see, Smithy got suspicious about his money. He confided in me . . ."

This was almost to good to be true, thought Stearman, this was Harry Lee's theory.

"'E showed me a new half-crown that looked as if it had had fifty years' wear," said the old man. He looked angry.

"Well, I've seen some old Georgian money floating about, and I've seen some of old George IV's coins what hadn't had so much wear as this one," he averred.

"Well, maybe something strange had happened to it; maybe someone had sandpapered it down," said Chronol, to alleviate the old man's interest.

"That 'd be a stupid thing to do," said the old workman. He was rendered temporarily speechless by another bout of savage coughing.

"I suppose it would," said Stearman, when the old worker had recovered himself a little.

"Smithy was so suspicious and interested he said he was going to ask his boss about it. And he was going back to ask if he could explain it. He's an intelligent bloke, Smithy. If only he'd 'ad money as a young 'un, if his parents had been rich, he'd have gone a long way. Brain like his is wasted on a machine . . . Why, Smithy knew great chunks of the Bible off by heart. He could repeat it to yer, chapter and verse, and he knew *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and all o' Gray's poetry. He used to talk about a bloke called John Stuart Mill. All sorts o' interesting things, Smithy knew. He'd taught himself from books which he could beg, borrow or find. If he'd only had the chance, he'd have been a well

educated man, would Smithy. Could have been almost anything."

The four from the disc ship were exchanging meaningful glances. Val produced half-a-crown and gave it to their new-found friend.

"We want you to do something for us and for your friend Smith," he said. "We want you to show us where this tunnel factory is, as you call it."

"Willingly," said the old man. "Come on."

He rose and led the way along the darkening dock. They reached what appeared to be, at first sight, a blank wall. Parts of it were brick and parts were constructed of corrugated iron. There was a small door set into one of the corrugated iron sections.

"Through there," said the old man. "That's where they go, and that's where you'll see 'em come out of. Through there."

Stearman and his companions looked at it.

"Is there any chance I could get in now?" asked Val.

"I don't think you'll get very far, but you can try," said Smith's friend. "There's a sort o' signalling device here." He pressed a button that was set in the small corrugated iron section of the wall. Then he tried the door. It rattled, but remained closed.

"It's locked," he said. "I don't think we shall get any answer. There's usually a big bloke on duty though, a sort of gate keeper and guard."

"They don't take any chances, do they?" said Chronol. He turned to the old workman, whom it had been their incredibly good fortune to meet. Things had not been going their way until then; it had been a matter

of groping about in the dark, and this encounter had more than made up for all the time that they had wasted.

"The gods are on our side," said Stearman to Chronol. "I think I hear footsteps."

"Someone's coming," said Smith's friend. He gave another hacking cough.

"Poor devil," whispered La Noire, to ex-Superintendent Harry Lee.

"I'm afraid he's not long for this world," muttered Lee.

The coughing spasm ceased, but not before it had drowned the grating clank of the opening of the little door. A tall, broad-shouldered brute stood in the doorway. He looked like a cross between a Chinese pirate and a Mongolian slave trader. He had the most unprepossessing cast of feature which Val Stearman had ever seen, and Val Stearman had met some pretty unpleasant types!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Into the Vortex

HARRY LEE looked at this representative of the mystic East with dislike and revulsion.

"What do you want?" The thing's voice was thick and guttural. Nobody spoke for a second. Then the tubercular man said:

"I'm looking for my friend Smith."

"I told you before," said the big gatekeeper, "Smith's gone away. Gone away, do you understand? He got tired, drew his money and cleared off. Now you do the same. Hop it!"

He drew back his hand menacingly.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," said Stearman very softly.

At first it seemed that the gatekeeper hadn't heard.

"Careful," said Chronol. "Careful."

Val knew what Chronol meant, the gatekeeper apparently didn't.

"You wouldn't be talking to me, would you?" he said.

"Whatever you do, don't kill him," whispered Chronol.

The gatekeeper was even bigger than Val Stearman. And few men attained that size.

"You have an interesting confidence in my ability," said Stearman.

Chronol grinned.

"My natural caution as a Time Warden," he hissed.

"What are you muttering about?" The gatekeeper thrust his face forward aggressively. "Now, go on, clear out!" He made as if to shut the gate.

"I'm coming in to look for Smith," said Val.

"I tell you Smith has gone. Don't come any of your trespassing, or I'll call the police."

"Call the police," said Harry Lee, "go on, call 'em!" he challenged.

"Let's get an officer with a search warrant."

The gatekeeper looked a little less confident.

"I don't want any more trouble," he admitted. "You just get out o' here and nobody'll say any more about it."

"We don't want to get out," said Stearman. "We want to come in quite peacefully, and look for Smith."

"There ain't anybody called Smith here; you're in the wrong place," said the gatekeeper. "Go on, beat it."

Val edged the door open experimentally. The gatekeeper tried to shut it. For a second there was a test of strength. The gatekeeper was a big man, and tough in a scarred, rugged, rather evil sort of way.

Stearman had a better nourished, more mature and balanced strength. He was also more scientific. He was using every ounce of his weight and muscular power to obtain the maximum leverage advantage. The door opened. The gatekeeper looked at this disbelievingly, and then took a pace back, clenched two enormous fists the size of small hams, and swung a vicious punch straight

at Stearman's face. The man was completely unscientific. He telegraphed his intention seconds before the punch got under way. Stearman was nowhere near it, as it sailed over his shoulder.

Ducking and weaving, he made a complete fool of the gatekeeper. His opponents began to grow angry, Val smiled and flicked out a straight left. It landed on the bridge of the big man's nose, and it did nothing to improve his peculiar cast of countenance. It did not improve his temper. That straight left was the first aggressive blow that Stearman had struck. The rest of his boxing had been cleverly defensive . . . La Noire had never seen him fighting that way before. Val Stearman was an adept fighter, and it was not long before the big man was gagged and bound with strips of his own dirty jacket.

"What are we going to do with him?" asked Val.

"I think we'd better take him with us," said Chronol. The man was hobbled around the knees so that he could walk but not run. The look in his eyes would have incinerated the others, if only looks had possessed lethal power.

With Stearman at the front, and Lee walking beside him, and a fraction behind, they made their way along the tunnel. It was almost dark, and the gaslights that flickered along its walls were set at infrequent intervals. It was damp and it sloped deeply downwards. Here and there the sound of dripping water could be heard.

"Seems to go under the river," said Stearman.

"I believe some of these old tunnels did at one time," said the ex-superintendent, gruffly. "I remember we had a lecture about it once when I was a young policeman.

There are whole labyrinths of these places."

"How the devil did they get them under the river? Was their engineering capable of it?" asked Val.

"They did a lot more in the 17th and 18 centuries than we like to give 'em credit for," said the ex-policeman. "We like to think that the inhabitants of centuries before ours were a lot of lamb-brains."

They walked on down the strange tunnel. The gas-lights flickered as a slow air current moved past the explorers and their unwilling prisoner.

They kept on descending. The drips of water grew more frequent. Here and there miniature waterfalls coursed down the walls.

"I suppose this place is safe?" enquired Stearman.

"I wouldn't say it was 'safe'," answered Harry Lee. "I can think of places that are a dam' sight safer! But if you mean is it likely to collapse at this precise moment, no, I don't think it is . . ."

"What's that noise up ahead?" asked Val. It was a high pitched, vibrating sound. It reminded him of the noises he had heard in the saucer.

"It's the vortex," whispered Chronol.

"The vortex?" echoed Harry Lee. "You mean——?"

"Yes. The *time* vortex!"

Their prisoner was rolling his eyes wildly in his head and he was straining at his bonds. Val turned round.

"I thought I heard footsteps behind," he said.

Is was Smith's friend, the man with T.B., the man to whom Stearman had given his jacket.

"I thought we left you back at the doorway," said Val.

"I wanted to come, you don't mind, do yer? I wanted to find out what they'd done with Smithy."

"All right, come and you're welcome," said Val.

Chronol nodded.

"We may be glad of some help," he said. "We may meet a reception committee at the far end!"

Val looked at the bound prisoner.

"This gink doesn't seem very keen on the idea," he said.

The noise from the vortex, which they were now approaching rapidly, grew louder. Listening to it, Val was reminded very much of the characteristic sound which the time defying disc-ship made on landing and take-off.

There was an increase in the wind. Val looked enquiringly at Chronol.

"It's a side effect of the vortex," said the disc pilot, interpreting Stearman's glance correctly.

The big man who was their prisoner stopped walking. His fear of whatever lay beyond that vortex, was obviously greater than his fear of them.

"Our man from the other side," said Val, "would appear to be quite a ruthless character," he looked at the Time pilot. "Got any idea whom it might be?"

Chronol shook his head.

"Not any definite ideas," he said. "I have suspicions, of course. This type of crime has the mark of one or two regular customers."

Harry Lee was nodding. The phrases sounded familiar to him.

"It takes a certain kind of mentality to commit a teleological crime," said Chronol.

"Yes, I've had similar theories myself, about categories of ordinary crime carried out in our present," said Harry Lee.

"Your Time-criminal," said Chronol, "is normally found to possess certain factors. Some unfortunate accident via the genetic process, or early environment, normally contributes to the kind of defaulter who would disappear in a Time ship. Usually he is a man with a misplaced sense of adventure. He wants to be ruthless, and in some ways he has a fair amount of what could loosely be described as basic animal courage. But he's a man without a social conscience, and our criminological psychiatrists, on investigating such men, have very often found a trauma somewhere in the case history, connected rightly, or wrongly, in the subject's mind with society itself, or with a large and influential section of society. Such people seem to have a tendency to be opposed to authority, even reasonable authority."

"What about the general intelligence level of such a criminal?" asked Harry Lee.

"It would be pretty high," repeated Chronol, "for all our high flown talk about low cunning as opposed to high intelligence, a cunning man can usually score pretty highly on an IQ test, although, oddly enough, he may not reach his answers by the same route as the man who thinks along the more orthodox, intellectual lines."

"This is all very interesting," said Stearman, as he glanced from Lee to Chronol, "but there are some decisions to make which are not concerned with abstract psychology."

The disc pilot turned to Stearman. He didn't look

angry, but there was an argumentative confidence in his manner, which gave him the air of a man confident that he was in the right about everything.

"It has a psychological background, if it concerns human behaviour," he said. "One of the great errors of the 20th century was the way in which the new sciences of psychology and sociology, were not popularised as they might have been. If you had made the social sciences and the study of the mind the first priority, you would have altered the course of history."

"If we had altered the course of history," said Val, "your heaven-on-earth, as Harry Lee has described it to us, might have been different."

"Or—it might have been achieved sooner!" said Chronol.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Battle Royal

"THE wheels of 'if' turn in strange direction," said Val Stearman.

"Nevertheless," said Chronol, "they turn about the axle of reality." He paused hesitantly, as though he had been on the verge of saying more and had changed his mind, suddenly. He gave a friendly, lop-sided grin. "On

the other hand, I think you're right ! Let's do something about getting this reluctant hero to move again."

Stearman and Chronol walked one each side of the bound and gagged, Mongolian-faced prisoner. Around the next bend in the water dripping tunnel they saw the vortex itself. The air seemed to shimmer and vibrate just a little. The sides of the tunnel seemed to be slightly at variance with one another. It made Val think of the moving platforms which separated the coaches of a long corridor train. A man knew perfectly well that he was stepping from one coach to the next, even though the movement was quite small when the train was running along the straight. It also reminded him of a recent visit to the magnificent cinerama film spectacle. He was not technically minded, but he had an idea that a number of projections were required, and that their films were thrown on to the gigantic, curved screen simultaneously to produce the incredibly realistic panoramic effect. He remembered, from his visit to the show that despite the extremely high technical quality of the production there was a barely discernible fluctuation, an oscillation, a sensation of imperfect synchronisation, between the edges of the films being shown simultaneously. It was as though there were two faintly rippling margins to reality. This was the impression that he now got as he looked at that vortex. He felt for a second as though he were a character taking part in one of those cinerama productions, as though he were walking between one-third of the curved screen, across the mildly oscillating barrier, into the next . . .

The big Mongol-faced prisoner, whom they had in tow,

did not appear to relish the prospect of going through. Harry Lee went first, followed by La Noire. Val Stearman and the tall, powerful Chronol drew their prisoner with them as they stepped across the Time barrier, as they stepped across the vortex. The sound of gyration, the vibrating, mechanical noise increased. There was a period of high decibel gain, and then a falling away in sound, as they stepped across the shimmering barrier. It made Harry Lee think of a desert. He got the impression that he had stepped from the real and into an unreal mirage, only to find that he was now part of the mirage and that, to him, it was reality, and yet there was still a vestigial consciousness of the unreality of the situation, and a discomforting belief that the actual truth was the existence of the sand. Lee wished that he had some chewing gum. His mouth felt strangely empty; like a young singer on his first public appearance, he didn't know what to do with his hands . . .

Lee didn't know what to do with his teeth.

Ahead of them in the tunnel, and above them by the sound of things, they could hear the noise of machinery. The air had a sharp, brittle, metallic sort of smell to it. Chronol sniffed appreciatively.

"Beryllium," he said, "beryllium dust. I think now we're on the track."

"Flatten out against the wall," said Harry Lee, "we're walking along here like Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp ready for a gunfight at the O.K. corral."

"That was very, very good, actually," said Chronol.

"You mean you've seen the film?" asked the ex-superintendent, "you mean you've still got some of our old

Westerns in your archives?"

"Oh, yes, many, but, of course, we can see real life Westerns. It's surprising how close some of the great Western writers like Chuck Adams, came to perfectly authentic backgrounds. If you have read one of his books, and then actually seen the situation as it really was from a Time ship, you would think that the two were almost identical."

"So you saw the real gunfight at the O.K. Corral?" said Stearman.

"Yes, I did, and a pretty fantastic sight it was."

"We ought to keep our voices down," warned practical ex-Superintendent Harry Lee. Flattened against the damp walls they edged their way along. The noise of machinery grew louder although it had a muffled quality still. They saw that the muffled effect was due to the presence of two large iron doors ahead of them. They looked almost like sluice gates. Val and Chronol were still holding their prisoner.

"Ah, this is handy," said Stearman.

"What's that?" asked Lee, glancing round from the other side of the tunnel.

"There's an iron bolt in the wall," said Val. "And there's what looks like a length of rope hanging from it. I don't know what it's been used for, but it's very convenient from our point of view."

"What are you going to do?" asked Lee.

"Well, our handsome friend here has now become a liability rather than an asset," said Stearman. "I suggest that we fasten him on here."

They secured the big half-breed gatekeeper to the rope

attached to the bolt in the wall. He looked relieved rather than otherwise at not having to face the anger of the employer whom he had failed.

They pressed on until they reached the great iron gate.

"I wonder how we get through this?" asked Lee.

"My mate Smithy used to say there was a sliding gate before you got into the factory," volunteered the old worker.

"Yes, I never realised it was a slider, that's a valuable piece of information," said Harry Lee.

They got hold of the door and pushed at it sideways, experimentally. It began to roll, and was then brought up short as though it had been chained in some way, or secured. The clank that it made as it came up against its moorings had obviously attracted the attention of somebody on the other side. It was difficult to hear footsteps over and above the clank and the roar of the machinery. But some kind of sixth sense warned La Noire's hyper keen intuitive senses, that someone was coming. She made a swift, warning gesture. Val, Lee and Chronol stood tense and ready. The door slid open to reveal an aperture about eighteen inches wide. It obviously opened much wider than that. A cropped, rather evil-looking head, poked around it.

An evil voice said:

"Who are yer? Whadjerwant? Who are——?"

That was as far as the voice got. Stearman seized the shoulder just visible below the head, and heaved. The interrogator came through the hole like a champagne cork coming out of a bottle. Harry Lee grabbed him, and twisted his arm up behind his back.

"Make a sound and I'll pull your arm off!" he gritted. Wisely, the man was silent.

"Is there anybody else on the other side of that door?" asked Lee. "Or were you alone?"

"I'm not saying anything," answered the man.

Harry Lee applied a little more pressure to the arm.

"Talk!" he hissed savagely. The man's face contorted with pain, but he still refused to speak.

He was swiftly gagged and bound with his own torn-up jacket, and shoved, none too gently, to the floor of the tunnel. He writhed and mumbled behind the gag, but that was the limit of his endeavours.

The ex-superintendent and his colleagues moved swiftly forward through the aperture. Inside, men were working at a host of strange-looking machines. The machines were turning out apparently meaningless beryllium components, as far as Stearman and Harry Lee were concerned, but to Chronol, the stacks of little parts accumulating by each machine in the beryllium dust filled air, were deadly.

"It is weapons," he said to Harry Lee, "and the worst kind . . ."

Above the floor of the factory itself, in a small square cubicle, which looked for all the world like a crane driver's box, high on a gantry, were two men. Chronol immediately recognised them.

"It is as I suspected," he said swiftly to Harry Lee, "and there they are!"

In the same second that Chronol spotted his quarry, they spotted him. The men at the machines had been too intent on their work to look around as the party came in.

Now one of them was stopping work and glancing towards Stearman and his companions. Their faces held curiosity and surprise. The two ruthless looking men in the factory control box were conferring rapidly together.

"Are they both from your century?" asked Stearman.

"Yes," said Chronol.

"Right," said Val, "then it won't matter very much if anything happens to them, will it? I mean they won't have any serious effect on the future."

"We'll try to take them alive," said Chronol, "but we'll do what's necessary." He said it with a kind of flat fatal tone.

Something scorched the wall beside Harry Lee's head. It had passed his ear like an angry bee.

"They are using the forbidden weapons," remarked Chronol angrily.

"And of course," said Val, diving a hand into his trouser pocket, "all we're carrying are Victorian six-chambered revolvers!"

"It wouldn't have done to have been found carrying modern weapons, by either your standard or my standard" said Chronol.

"No, I suppose not. It would have taken a bit of explaining," said Stearman. "All right, let's see what our stuff'll do against theirs."

Most of the men around them had stopped working.

"Funny we were talking about the gun fight at the O.K. Corral just before we came in," said Lee. The experienced old security chief was an expert revolver shot. His first bullet shattered the glass in the cubic structure athwart the gantry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The End of the Line

"I THINK they're coming down," said Chronol, but the fugitives had only ducked below the level of the glass. A gleaming beryllium something appeared over the side.

"Keep under cover," warned Chronol.

Scorch marks appeared all around the machines behind which they were crouching.

"This is too dangerous," said Chronol, but his tone of voice showed that he meant something other than personal danger. He shouted to Stearman, "If any of these workers are hit by their chance fire up there, hundreds of people will disappear from our own time. One bullet could destroy a thousand lives."

"I'm going to rush the gantry," said Stearman.

"No," said Chronol, "it could happen to you, possibly with the same effect."

"I'll go," said Harry Lee. He grinned. "I'm not anticipating any further progeny!"

"That's not the point," said Chronol. "We don't know what effect your life might have during the next few years, on the ultimate population of the future. A simple act like helping a child across a road and saving its life, would mean that that child would have descendants who would go out of existence, should the child cross the road by itself. That applies to all of you." He squared his

shoulders. "I'm the only man who can go after them," he said.

"If anything happens to you," said Lee, "how do we get back to 1963?"

"You're in 1963," answered Chronol. "You're through the vortex . . ."

"What about your time ship at the bottom of the Thames?"

"It's traceable by detector beam, I left the beam on just in case I didn't—" he shrugged his shoulders "—didn't get back."

Looking round, Val, La Noire and Harry Lee, saw that the walls of the factory had no windows, there were two or three skylights of frosted, thick glass, in the roof, and that was all. They realised that if Chronol died in his attempt to arrest his prisoners they would have to break through the brickwork of the factory wall, while the workers would have to go back through the tunnel.

"Just in case anything goes wrong," said Stearman, "how do we destroy that vortex?"

"The vortex has to be recharged periodically. It will die out on its own once I have taken these two," said the Time Warden grimly.

"We'll give you covering fire," said Lee.

A fusillade of revolver shots rattled against the cubicle on the gantry, as Chronol raced up the metal ladder and on to the gantry. It was Harry Lee's brilliant shooting that hit the barrel of one of the forbidden weapons as it was actually pointing at Chronol, a split second before it could explode.

Some of the charge apparently caught the Time War-

THE BEST IN READING

den on the shoulder, for he staggered a little, but a reassuring wave of his hand told his companions that all was still well.

He kicked open the door of the control box on the gantry. There was the sound of shooting and then silence. They watched with bated breath. A moment later Chronol emerged, driving his prisoners before him.

"You O.K.?" called Stearman.

"A hot shoulder," said Chronol, "but nothing that won't patch." He prodded his prisoners along the gantry, down the stairs, and on to the factory floor.

Smithy's friend explained as best he could to the men in the factory.

Some grumbled resentfully, but they took his advice and went back along the tunnel.

When everybody was safely through, Chronol disconnected the Time vortex.

Prisoners and captors made their way out of the factory and out along the dock wall. The Time disc rose obediently out of the dark Thames in response to the remote control promptings of the metallic 'goose's egg' in Chronol's hand. The prisoners shuddered at sight of it. They obviously did not relish the prospect of returning to their own time for judgment.

The disc ship stopped in 1963 and the Stearmans alighted with Harry Lee. Chronol flew on into the Infinite, carrying the prisoners, prisoners who had cost four hundred and seventy lives in the 26th century.

THE END

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