



SUSPENSION

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BRON FANE

Catherine Wilder was a strange girl, lovely but lonely. Sir Henry Wilder, her father, was the kind of eccentric, medical researcher who preferred to work in complete isolation. Catherine withdrew deeper into herself as the oppressing loneliness of her father's remote mansion weighed upon her mind.

When she first heard *the voice* she wondered whether the mansion was haunted, then she feared for her sanity. But it was neither madness nor the supernatural which threatened her.

Mezak appeared to her suddenly in the twilight of the mansion's gloomy corridors. He was more romantic than her wildest dreams. Although some of his language was beyond her understanding at first, it gradually became possible for them to communicate. Mezak was from *the future*, the remote future, but Catherine slowly realised that she was in love with him! Her father's strange research into super-freezing and suspended animation gave her only a remote chance of reaching him, but she was prepared to take that chance. As Catherine placed herself in the freezing chamber, numbness and darkness crept over her. . . . Would she ever open those beautiful eyes again?

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animation
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future



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by

BRON FANE



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

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INTRODUCTION

Catherine Wilder was a strange girl, lovely but lonely. Sir Henry Wilder, her father, was the kind of eccentric medical researcher who preferred to work in complete isolation. Catherine withdrew deeper into herself as the oppressing loneliness of her father's remote mansion weighed upon her mind. When she first heard *the voice* she wondered whether the mansion was haunted, then she feared for her sanity. But it was neither madness nor the supernatural which threatened her.

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CHAPTER ONE

CATHERINE

"SOME more tea, father?" Catherine looked up at Sir Henry enquiringly.

"Eh . . . Eh . . . what's that, my dear?"

"Tea."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so." Sir Henry was buried in the paper. Not the inevitable *Times* or *Telegraph* of the popular conception of men like Sir Henry Wilder, but a medical publication loaded with so many obscure technicalities and so much jargon that it made little or no sense to even the most intelligent of laymen.

Sir Henry reached a hand for the cup which Catherine placed deftly in front of him. He stirred vaguely spilling tea into the saucer as he did so.

"Careful, father, you're spilling it."

"Oh! am I? How silly of me!" Sir Henry tore himself away from the medical journal long enough to guide his cup rather unsteadily towards his mouth and then his attention was focused again exclusively on his magazine.

"Father, you're spilling tea down your beard."

"Oh, dear me, I'm getting so dreadfully careless."

Sir Henry put his magazine down with a weary sigh, took a silk handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket and began mopping at his leonine grey beard. It

was a wild, bushy affair but it had about it something of the magnificence of a victorian academician. Sir Henry Wilder was very much a victorian at heart. He was a victorian by preference; he was a victorian insofar as Victoria's reign was the era of time which, from his limited knowledge of history, appealed to him most.

He was an anachronism of 1964, thought his daughter. He looked so much like a character from Rider Haggard or Conan Doyle, even perhaps from Kipling. But he didn't really seem to merit a place in the harsh realities of the mid-1960's.

Catherine gave up the unequal attempt to conduct a conversation with her father and delved instead into her own breakfast. Food in "Grey Gables" was not accompanied by the normal social pleasures of mealtime to which most families look forward.

Catherine had been looking after her father ever since she had left school. It had not, in fact, been more than five or six years, she thought, but it *seemed* a great deal more. The old man was so inadequate as a human being thought Catherine wearily, that neither food nor conversation had any impact on him, and it was only at mealtimes that she saw him anyway. On all other occasions he was either asleep in his room or working down in that peculiar laboratory of his in the cellar.

She reflected that she had a great deal to be thankful for, old Sir Henry might have been oppressive, heavy handed or interfering; he was certainly none of these things. It was just his complete and utter lack of interest in anything outside his work. Whether the old man did feel any normal paternal affection Catherine was undecided. Occasionally he would look at her with the warmth of a jolly, be-whiskered Father Christmas, and she would imagine that, just for a moment or so, she detected a spark of love in his eyes.

On other occasions, living with her father was like living with a machine or an automaton. He lived for his work. Ever since Catherine's mother had left the old scientist, Catherine had really wondered whether he had really

missed her. His food appeared on the table and as Catherine put away the cornflake packet, she realized just how deep was the rut into which they had fallen. But what, she asked herself, was the point of preparing anything interesting for a man who was only a mouth behind a medical periodical.

Catherine kept her feelings tightly under control. She wanted to stand up, snatch the cloth from the table and to scream at him over and over again but what was the point. He would probably look at her disapprovingly, prescribe a mild sedative and tell her to go to bed for a couple of days. It was the very imperturbability of the man that made him difficult to contend with, thought his daughter.

There was one oasis which broke up the desert of loneliness as far as Catherine was concerned. That was their cat Pippin. Normally, he was rubbing himself against her ankles at this hour of the morning, waiting for some little titbit from the table but as Catherine stood up and took the cornflakes back to the cupboard the familiar slinky black shape was missing.

"Pippin," she called.

"Eh . . . what's that my dear?" Sir Henry looked up.

"I was just calling the cat, father."

"Oh! Um . . . er . . . er," he said again, each monosyllable vaguer and less interested than the last, then his face disappeared into the medical journal once more and Catherine went in search of the cat.

The corridors of "Grey Gables" were like the corridors of other old Cumberland granges. They were long, wide and although solidly built, possessed a tendency to echo rather disconcertingly. Even in the full, though grey light of the morning, there was an eerie, rather frightening quality to the rambling old house. And, although the knowledge that her father was there saved Catherine from physical loneliness, there was a mental and spiritual isolation because of her father's love of solitude, which seemed somehow far worse to the girl, than the knowledge that she was completely alone would have done.

Living with Sir Henry was like living with half a man.

When his physical presence was in a room with you, you still got the impression that his mind was elsewhere. Catherine had the feeling that for ninety per cent of her father's time, at least, his mind lived down in the laboratory in the cellar. As she walked down the corridor towards the kitchen carrying a stack of breakfast things she wondered just what on earth it was that Sir Henry got up to in that cellar.

He had always been most secretive about it. He was always singularly withdrawn if she tried to broach the topic to him. He would refer to it vaguely as 'my work' or 'my experiments.' More than this he blankly refused to disclose.

Catherine was still calling Pippin as she walked down the stone flagged corridor. There was no answer. She opened the doors of one or two of the last rooms which were rarely, if ever, used. There was still no sign of the cat.

"Pippin," she called again, louder, this time. "Puss, puss, come on nice pussy; kitty, kitty, *kitty*." Pippin still refused to put in an appearance. This, decided Catherine, was singularly unlike him.

It worried her a little. She paused at an angle in the corridor and listened, there was a noise. She listened again. That's strange, she told herself; that sound, it was almost like a *voice*. She held her breath and froze into silent immobility. It was a voice, low and soft with a rather mellow timbre to it. She heard the voice as though she were listening to one end of a telephone conversation. The voice seemed to be running through a list of numbers, as though it were checking off numbers on a sheet.

She crept towards the door of the room nearest to this angle of the corridor from which she now stood. Scarcely daring to breathe she unfastened the handle, tiptoed inside. The room was quite empty. A thin layer of dust over everything had not been disturbed.

Catherine gave a little gasp of surprise, she had almost expected to find an intruder in the room. This emptiness was more frightening than the presence of an interloper. Her gasp echoed strangely from the tall, thick walls.

"Is there anybody there?" she asked, feeling foolish as she posed the question, for there were no footsteps in the dust and it was quite obvious that this room was utterly undisturbed. The dust moved a little, stirring discontentedly at her voice.

"Is there anyone there?" asked Catherine again. There was silence; silence like the silence of the grace. The whole house often seemed to her like a tomb or mausoleum. She backed out of the room quickly.

In the corridor she fancied she could hear the voice again, growing fainter all the time. She caught more numbers; they sounded vaguely like dates. But they were too soft and indistinct to be heard very clearly. Catherine considered the possibility of going back for her father. She was trying to imagine his reaction if she made a remark like "Father, I've just heard some voices in the corridor and there was nobody there!" Sir Henry would be certain to think in purely medical terms. He would assure her that she was suffering from some kind of auditory delusions. He would probably prescribe something and send her to bed for a day or two.

Catherine shuddered a little at the prospect and decided not to tell Sir Henry after all. Instead she went on as far as the kitchen, put down the tray of breakfast things which she had been carrying until she heard the voice, and which, on hearing the voice, she had set down silently on a small occasional table in the hall. On coming out of the room she had taken the tray up again, and now, as she put it down with the slight rattling sound on the kitchen table she wondered whether the noise she had originally supposed was a voice, was, in actual fact, nothing more sinister than the faint 'talking' murmur, murmured by stacked crockery. She looked at the tray, none of the crockery on there could be said to be stacked.

One thing about having such a small establishment was that her father and herself made practically no washing up. She began calling Pippin again. Sometimes he did laze in the kitchen until after breakfast but it was very unusual.

She opened the door and looked out on to the slope of

the mountain beyond. In the morning light two or three sheep were cropping the sharp sparse grass in a rather desultory manner.

"Pippin," she called. One of the sheep raised its head and looked enquiringly in her direction as though to assure himself that the message was not for him; he turned his back and continued cropping the grass with redoubled interest.

Something about the sheep made Catherine want to laugh. He was so very human she thought. Maybe this was one of the perils of loneliness. Perhaps this was the psychological danger of a place like "Grey Gables," isolated as it was from its nearest neighbours by several miles. Maybe after a time you got to the point where you thought that sheep were people and people were sheep. Maybe a lonely girl, thought Catherine, could get to the point of imagining that animals had personalities. Who was to say that they hadn't, she asked herself. Pippin was very certainly a personality and it became a matter of some moment with her that Pippin was missing. Something would have to be done.

There was a wild, untamed streak in Catherine Wilder. She knew that it was there and it was a thing that she deliberately fostered and nurtured. It seemed to her one weapon in the battle for independence which might give her any chance at all of victory.

Catherine picked up a coat and scarf hanging from the back of one of the broad old-fashioned wooden kitchen chairs and tying the scarf swiftly around her head she buttoned the coat loosely and rather casually around her. She set off along the little path leading from the back of the manor house up the gentle slopes immediately outside. She kept on calling Pippin over and over again but there was no answering mew; there was no reciprocal sound.

The further she walked in search of the cat the more important it became to her to find him. Pippin to her had now become something more than a mere cat and as she extended her search her anxiety became increasingly deep rooted. As well as worry and concern over the cat her

mind was also filled with the strange voice she thought she had heard in the corridor. The strange voice had been reciting numbers. It couldn't have been the tray she told herself. The tray had been standing absolutely stationary on the occasional table and the voice, or whatever it was, had still been going on.

Her mind explored several romantic possibilities; ghosts? A secret passage? She wasn't sure that she believed in the former and secret passages are difficult to construct in thick-walled old houses built on the solid grey stone of Cumberland. True, the walls of "Grey Gables" were thick enough and to spare, but the blunt straightforwardness of the building material did not really permit the construction of elaborate internal labyrinths.

She gave up the idea of ghosts and secret passages and paused to sit on a lichen-covered boulder and think. The third prospect was romantic in a rather horrifying way. She wondered whether she was going out of her mind. It was a possibility. She tried hard to examine her immediate environment. She was alone in a huge rambling old country house, alone with her thoughts and with her eccentric old father, who kept himself so much to himself. If anybody had an excuse to start hearing voices she did. She wondered for a few moments whether this really was the answer. But if it really was an hallucination, if it was in some way a product of her own unhappy mind, why hadn't the hallucination come in some more orthodox or understandable form.

The lonely girl, particularly the lonely girl with romantic inclinations, thought Catherine, was expected to project romantic images and there was nothing particularly romantic about the auditory fancy of a voice, quiet and rather matter-of-fact, methodically checking off a list of numbers.

The skies above the mountainside were growing grey and heavy and as Catherine looked up into the greyness she felt the first warning spot of rain. Not that rain was a stranger to "Grey Gables."

She made her way swiftly down the path again. The storm clouds began to gather; the raindrops fell with in-

creasing speed and became bigger and heavier as she hurried down the mountain side.

Catherine reached the gentler, lower slopes and her progress became easier, quicker. It was really raining now; raining hard. Catherine pulled the coat tightly about her. She could feel the rain soaking through her head-scarf.

The path, which also did duty as a road went not only past "Grey Gables" but continued on up to a shepherd's cottage in the invisible distance beyond the line of Scafell. As she looked along the path she saw a postman waving gaily and beckoning to her. She paused and ran quickly towards him.

If he was on his way to the shepherd's hut several miles distant across the mountain she would save him a few hundred yards by intercepting him at the point where he now stood. She moved eagerly and interestedly towards the spot where the postman waited. He was an old friend whom she knew well, a cheery, weather-lined individual with eyes that twinkled like boot buttons set in wrinkled brown leather.

"Hello, Smithy."

"Hello, Miss Catherine, a registered one for your father." He held out a grimy stub of pencil. With his cape raised to hold off the worst of the rain he pointed to the spot where Catherine was to sign the registration receipt. She wrote her signature clearly and boldly with a resolution which she was far from feeling deep down within herself.

They exchanged a few more of the simple pleasantries which people in lonely parts of the country are wont to exchange on the rare occasions when they are able to meet.

Pocketing his grimy pencil stub and putting his receipt carefully away Smithy went on his way cheerfully despite the rain.

Catherine held the registered letter inside her coat to keep the rain from doing any more damage than it had already received. The path went to the house, it became something of a miniature river, the going was slippery, treacherous, but Catherine didn't mind, she was used to

movement on the tortuous mud paths and storms in Cumberland were no rarity at all.

Jagged lightning ripped the sky with frightening suddenness and the deepest, most primitive instincts of Catherine's nature moved towards the surface of her being for a transitory moment. Very temporarily she felt at one with the storm. The clouds seemed to speak to her innermost being, she felt in communion with nature.

The lightning continued to flash. Forked jagged tongues of flame danced and pirouetted over the wet grey rocks. The rumble of thunder came up like the voice of an angry sea-god calling over the hills.

Catherine reached the porch of "Grey Gables" and called again for Pippin. If the cat had strayed outside, she argued with herself, then surely the storm would have driven it in. There was still no sign of her little black four-legged companion.

She opened the kitchen door and hung up her coat and scarf to dry. She changed her boots for slippers and waving the letter went in search of her father. The house seemed emptier than usual and when she reached the breakfast-room there was no sign of him . . .

CHAPTER TWO

SIR HENRY

CATHERINE walked from the breakfast-room slowly and rather dejectedly in the direction of the cellar. She had the strongest suspicions that her father had already gone down to his laboratory. Really, she thought, it was too bad of him, she saw practically nothing of him. The feeling of futility and loneliness which obsessed her for most of the time returned with increased strength.

Near the cellar door she paused for a moment or two. Something small and metallic was glinting by the side of the worn coco-matting that lined the corridor at this point. Catherine stooped quickly and picked it up. Her heart skipped a beat; it was a key. It was the key of the cellar padlock as far as she could tell.

On impulse Catherine slipped the key into her apron pocket. The cellar door stood ajar; the padlock was unfastened; a light showed dimly and dully in the distance.

"Father," she called loudly.

"What is it, what is it?" his voice quavered back at her from the cellar.

"I've just met the postman, he has a registered letter for you. Shall I bring it down?"

"No! No, no, no, my dear, *no*." The hastiness of his reply was in marked contrast to his usual absent, rather mumbling speech. "I'll come up, my dear." She heard his steps on the cellar stairs. He reached the doorway and they stood awkwardly face to face for a few seconds. Then he moved past her, pulled the door to and snapped the lock shut. The old man put his fingers in his waistcoat pocket and groped there for a moment rather uncertainly. A faint frown crossed his features. He stood lost in thought tugging at his bushy white beard.

"That is very funny, my dear, I seem to have lost my key." He looked at her inquisitively. "You haven't seen it, I suppose?"

"No, father." Catherine's answer was cold and implacable. "You are always losing things, you know you are."

"Yes, yes, I know; I often lose things that are not very important. Life is too short to be wasted on trivialities, but I can't understand what I've done with this cellar key. I don't regard that as a triviality, it is something I take a certain amount of pains with. I always put it in my waistcoat pocket. I wonder what I can have done with it. I don't suppose I left it in the lock, did I? It hasn't fallen on the floor anywhere?" He began peering myopically on the floor below the lock. He fumbled in his pocket for his spectacle case, found it, took out the spectacles, put them on

and continued his short-sighted gropings. There was a grunt as he straightened up; he put his hands to his back after the fashion of a man who feels twinges of lumbago.

"Oh dear, oh dear." He muttered more to himself than to Catherine. "I may have left it in the cellar; that is most unfortunate. If I have gone and locked the door with the keys down there I shall have to get another key from somewhere. It will mean bringing in the locksmith or the ironmonger's man. Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh why did you disturb me, what was it you wanted?" He spoke sharply, testily.

"I've told you father; I've seen the postman; there is a registered letter for you, I thought it might be important." Catherine's voice was still under control but the inflection in it was rising. There was an undercurrent of anger which was not entirely lost on the old man.

"I'm sorry, my dear. I didn't mean to speak sharply." The testy petulance had already vanished from his voice like morning snow melting on a mountainside in the spring. "Postman you said, old Smithy, isn't it? He has been about here a number of years. Ah yes, Smithy was here in your mother's time. I do wish she hadn't gone away . . . how inconsiderate. Oh well, I suppose she didn't like the loneliness." The old man had apparently gone off into some distant reverie of his own. "I really think I ought to have left you in Switzerland at the finishing school. I think you would have been happier there somehow. I don't really feel that you have settled in here very well. You never seem comfortable in the place. Is it too lonely for you?"

"No, father, I'd rather be here than in Switzerland, thank you."

"Well, suit yourself, suit yourself, my dear. As long as you are not unhappy. I'm sorry that my work keeps me so busy."

"Father," said Catherine as he tore open the letter with some difficulty. "Can I help you with your work?"

"Oh no, no, my dear. No, no, *no*; nobody can help me with my work; it has to be done alone. I am very particular about that; it is very secret you see."

"Father, you know perfectly well that you can trust me.

I wouldn't breathe a word to anyone about what we were doing."

"I dare say you wouldn't but it is not the same thing, a secret shared is a secret halved, don't you know?"

"Well, surely, father, with me, your own daughter, your secret wouldn't be in any danger? I am sure it is something clever. I know I would be very proud of you if you would tell me something about it."

Catherine was making a desperate effort to find some point of common ground, some psychological rendezvous where she and her father could meet as human beings.

He patted her on the head rather absently, rather after the manner of a man who strokes a cat.

"No, I am sorry, my dear, but my work is mine and mine alone. Mine *alone*," he repeated with a great deal of emphasis on the last two syllables. Catherine sighed wearily.

"Very well, father," she said, "there is no point in bringing it up again." What is the use, she thought to herself. What was the use?

The old man's face changed colour as he read the contents of his registered letter.

"Dear, oh dear, I've got to go up to London, isn't that a nuisance?"

"What is the matter, father?" she asked. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Oh no, my dear; it just has to do with the equipment. It is very trying of them, apparently certain formalities have to be complied with in person you know. I don't really understand the forensic side of this too well but . . ." he shrugged his wizened old shoulders. "It may take two or three days. I know how slowly these wretched people move. Committees and things meet so irregularly. Oh dear! Oh dear!" He was tutting away to himself rather angrily.

"When do you wish to leave then father?"

"Oh, well, when is the next train?" said the old man. He laughed. "I suppose we ought to get a decent car really but I don't know. I never get round to it. Buying a car is such a big job somehow."

"You always said that you wouldn't get a new car on these roads," the girl reminded him.

"They are so expensive," said the old man.

"Father, you can't say we are short of money!"

"I want all I've got for my work," said Sir Henry petulantly. "The wretched Government Departments won't give to genuine research and then I read about an Arts Council, or some such body, giving money to long-haired young men in Chelsea to ride bicycles across pieces of board; they call it art! I never heard anything like it; it is . . . ludicrous." He was stuttering and stammering in his anger. "Of course that old car of ours won't get up to London; you will have to take me to the station."

"Very well, father." Catherine was growing increasingly impatient with the old man. He seemed somehow a symbol, a symbol of the trap in which she felt she was caught.

The glorious, rugged beauty of the countryside was no recompense for loneliness as far as Catherine was concerned. The isolation, far from giving her a sense of freedom, made her feel imprisoned. It didn't give her a sense of wide open spaces in which she could wander freely. Rather, it was like the vast envelope of space cutting off the life forms of Earth from their cosmic neighbours on the other planets.

Catherine went back to the kitchen, put on her boots and still-wet coat and clumped out to the garage.

The garage was actually a three-sided cartshed, with a corrugated iron roof and a cement floor that sloped to facilitate the egress of excess rainwater.

The car, although large, looked small in comparison with the garage. The big battered old pre-war saloon settled defiantly with considerable squeaks and creaks on its soggy tyres as Catherine got in and slammed the door angrily.

She tugged at the starter button and to her considerable annoyance it came off in her hand. She fumbled for it on the unswept floor below the driving seat. Failing to find it, she clutched at the control rod underneath it. As she did so she found that she had broken a nail on the recalcitrant rod. When current finally hit the starter motor it made an

unhappy slow grinding noise, which made it quite obvious to Catherine that whatever else it might accomplish, it was incapable of starting the car. It had been over a fortnight since the vast old saloon had been out of the garage. The weather had not been exactly clement and Catherine wondered whether it was going to start at all or whether they would have to get a mechanic up from the garage.

The nearest garage was seven miles away. Sir Henry had positively refused to have the telephone installed under any circumstances and Catherine did not relish the prospect of cycling down to the village to get a mechanic to attend to the car.

With a viciousness that was not normally part of her nature she flung open the door and scrabbled under the seat for the starting handle. The far end of the garage was dark by comparison with the opened portion and it was several seconds before she succeeded in getting the teeth at the end of the handle to engage in the sockets at the base of the engine. Having got the handle in she went back furiously to the dashboard, yanked out the choke to its fullest extent, checked that the gear lever, a long knobbly affair, was in neutral and fumbled with the key to make sure that the ignition was switched on and was not merely in the on position without having made a genuine contact. The red ignition light that glowed at her from the dashboard had about it a dullness which amplified the evidence already given by the dull noise from the starter motor that the battery was low.

The engine of the vast old saloon was in a state comparable to its battered bodywork. The huge old eight cylinder engine was a mass of valves that either stuck or had burned out altogether. The compression was negligible and as Catherine took the handle, having inserted a piece of rag between her hand and the metal and taking care to keep her thumb on the same side of the handle as her fingers in case of kickbacks. She wound the aged machine up as easily as a sturdy toddler winding up a toy gramophone in the nursery. The engine squeaked and protested as Catherine's lithe young feminine muscles got it turning. There was a

dull, half-hearted, coughing '*phut*'. She paused for breath wondering whether the antique monstrosity was going to pick up. It didn't.

She sighed again, wishing that there was a man on the establishment who would have been able to take jobs like this off her hands. A wry, grim smile crossed her face as she imagined the sort of effort her father would have been able to produce if she had asked *him* to wind up the aged saloon!

It took her fully five minutes to get the beast firing and then its firing was so intermittent that she wondered whether it was going to stall again at any second. She dared not risk increasing the acceleration for a few moments for fear the divine spark of life that she had ignited somewhere in the rumbling bowels of the engine would go out again.

She took the handle out slowly, delicately, and placed it back under the seat; she climbed back behind the wheel and taking a few seconds more touched the throttle with the gentleness of a trained nurse taking a thermometer from under the tongue of a seriously ill patient. The engine spluttered and gasped as the throttle opened. The sticking valves protested at the new injection of fuel and air with which they were unable to cope. Catherine hastily released the accelerator and the engine settled down again to its more or less spasmodic banging. She gave it another half minute and this time when she pressed her foot on the loud pedal the engine picked up considerably.

Sliding the loose, knobbly, jointed gear lever into reverse, Catherine eased the brute back out of the garage and drove rather uncertainly round to the front of the house. She blasted the ancient horn with all the vigour that the dying battery could command. Her father's grey-white bearded chin appeared outside the front door and wobbled up and down incongruously. It was all she could do to catch his words over the rumble of the engine.

"Just coming, my dear." He appeared, flustered, bewildered, coat half-open flying behind him, brief-case in hand. She leaned across and undid the passenger door. Something had gone wrong with its handle some years ago

and now it could only be opened from the inside.

The old man scrambled in a trifle breathlessly.

"You were a long time getting the car out my dear. Was it all right?"

"No, it wasn't all right," said Catherine, "I had to wind it up like a wretched gramophone. Father, you really must do something about the car."

"Well, can you drop it in at the garage on the way back from the station?" asked the old man. "You can get the young man from the garage to run you back to the house and then he can bring the car up when he has done something to it."

"All right, father. Why don't we get another one?"

"Too . . . too much money," said Sir Henry firmly, "far, far too much money, and, besides, why spend all that money to get it knocked to pieces on these roads?"

"All right, father, let's say no more about it."

Catherine engaged gear and let out the clutch with the fury of a Roman charioteer determined to hurl a hated rival to death beneath the iron wheels of the machine. The old car lumbered on down the apology for a road until they came to the so-called main road at the bottom of the valley. Here they drove along beside the lake for a considerable distance and for a fleeting instant Catherine Wilder's anger almost tempted her to give the wheel a sharp tug and plunge the old car into the deep black waters. Then, she thought grimly, they would *have* to get another one.

"You seem a little angry, my dear," said Sir Henry mildly.

"I am angry," said the girl, "angry with this wretched old car."

"I'm . . . I'm sorry, my dear; I have told you to have it done."

"Father, we'd spend less on a new car than we spend on this."

"But the initial outlay would be very great and I'm afraid they wouldn't allow very much for this one as a trade in, would they?" The old man chuckled a little into

his beard as though he had cracked the funniest joke of the season. By his own standards he probably had.

Catherine sighed and concentrated on her driving. The road was tortuous; the gradients were steep. Now they had left the valley floor and were winding their way through a narrow pass towards the village. The old man drew a large Victorian pocket watch from his waistcoat and looked at it querulously.

"Shan't have a lot of time to spare; I wish the post came a little earlier."

"We are lucky to get a post at all living in a wretched place like this," said Catherine.

"Oh dear, you do sound full of grumbles today," said the old man. He spoke with a strange mildness which was more the result of his antiquated vocabulary than of the impression which he had intended to convey.

"If you say anything else about Switzerland I shall scream," said Catherine. "If we can't afford a new car you can't afford to send me back there."

"Oh, I suppose not, really," said the old man, "but it is a matter of your happiness, my dear."

"If you want to make me happy let's get another car," said Catherine.

CHAPTER THREE

PIPPIN

CATHERINE and her father reached the station without further incident, but without any noted improvement in their relationship. As she parked the pre-war chariot outside the grey stone wall of the station building some of her anger departed, and though she was far from feeling affectionate towards the querulous Sir Henry, she opened the door for him and helped him to get down.

"Come along, father," she sighed rather wearily, "I'll get your ticket for you."

She led him up the steps, through the newly re-painted green door, and into the booking office. The station was in the hands of a *largo el factotum* who carried on as many duties as the legendary Figaro of operatic fame.

"Hello, George," Catherine smiled at the Station Master-cum-everything-else.

"Oh, hello, Miss Wilder! Hello, Sir Henry. Pleasure to see you!"

"Yes, yes. Pleasure to see you," quavered the old man. His thoughts were far away.

"You'll be wanting the London train, will you, Sir Henry?"

"The London train, yes, that's right. The London train." It was obvious to Catherine that her father's thoughts were far away.

"I want a period return, please."

"You going as well, Miss?"

"Oh, no, just father."

"I see. First class, Miss?"

"No, no, it doesn't matter, I'll have a third."

"No thirds now, sir. Just first and second."

"Well, then, the cheap one, please."

The old man's mind was so obviously elsewhere that George smiled a little.

"Will he be all right to change at Seascale, Miss Wilder?"

"Yes, I think he'll be all right," rejoined the girl.

"Change at Seascale. Oh, I see! Is that the usual route, George?"

"Yes, that's the usual route, Sir Henry."

"Oh! I don't like going up to London very much; interrupts my work . . . getting older you see . . . time is more important when you get older . . . seems to go so fast . . . get nothing done any more . . . work all day and get nothing done in the time . . . get tired so much more easily . . . Pity, pity! Such a lot to do!"

"What are you working on now, Sir Henry?"

"Secret!" replied the old man. His manner changed almost immediately. "Completely secret!" he said gruffly.

"Sorry, sir."

"It's all right; it's all right," said the old man, but his eyes had come to life for just a second and he had regarded the station master-cum-everything with such shrewd hostility that George had taken a pace backward. It was rather like looking at Father Christmas and seeing that behind the whitish-grey beard and the rubicund countenance, there were eyes like the eyes of a tiger.

Catherine stayed with her father until the train arrived, and then she showed him into a compartment, completely empty, made sure he had his brief case and umbrella and made her own way thankfully back to the car. As she backed away from the station wall she saw the train moving slowly away from the platform. She drove back to the village and called in at the garage. The mechanic was one of those old-fashioned, very obliging men who were interested in engines for their own sake and didn't regard customers as nuisances.

He spent quarter of an hour tinkering about under the bonnet, diagnostically. He straightened up, wiping his hands on an oily rag, and beamed at Catherine Wilder. Catherine Wilder, had she had time to dress appropriately, would have been the kind of girl whom it was very easy to smile at.

"Well, now, miss, far as I can tell you there are a lot of big jobs wrong in here. It would take the best part of a month, maybe more, to try to get the parts. As I see it, what you want for the time being is for me to do the best I can with it so it will start for you. I can make several important improvements in about an hour and a half. I was wondering if you'd like to go across to the hotel and have a spot of lunch. The other job I've got is not urgent. It's for Farmer Henderson and he's not coming in till five o'clock. I'll do yours straight away and his a bit later. How will that suit?"

"It's awfully kind of you," said Catherine, "you sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all. Glad of the custom." He winked. "It's a sprat to catch a mackerel, Miss Wilder, maybe you'll come in later and have the big job done?"

"I can't go anywhere else, it wouldn't run that far! And if I could, I wouldn't!" replied Catherine. "It's very kind of you. Thanks!" She went across to the hotel and enjoyed her lunch a great deal more than she had enjoyed her breakfast. The storm passed and the pale north-western sun was shining across into the hotel window. She had a cup of coffee in the lounge when she had finished her lunch and sat reading the paper for a few minutes. She did the crossword, and then sauntered round the shops. This did not take long; the village had three. She bought a few provisions and then wandered back to the garage. The mechanic had just finished.

"That should make starting easier for you. I've had the old battery on the rapid charger. I've put a knob back on the starter control; there're six new plugs in there. I've cleaned the points and adjusted the carburettor. Try it now."

Catherine pulled the starter and smiled delightedly as the old engine rumbled into life at the first touch of a button.

"Why, that's wonderful," she said. "Absolutely wonderful! I had to wind the old beast up just like a gramophone this morning!" She patted the dashboard affectionately. "I mustn't call it an 'old beast' now! I was trying to persuade Dad to get a new one—but I don't know!—Perhaps she has her good points."

"There aren't many of them left now, ma'am," rejoined the mechanic, with a grin. "The old bodywork's as tough as a tank. However they stick it up and down these roads I shall never know! Suspension's pretty good! Made to last in those days!"

"Yes, I suppose they were," agreed the girl. "Perhaps Daddy's right after all."

"I don't think some of the new 'uns 'ud stick at as well as these old tanks!" commented the smiling mechanic. "Shall I send the bill to your father, as usual, miss?"

"Yes, please." She fished in her bag and took out two half crowns. "Please have a drink, or something. I'm ever so pleased with the car, really I am. It's such a help. I used to dread going to our garage to get it."

"I know, miss. They can be a bit of a problem. Still, that's what we call the 'joys of motoring!'"

"Especially in this weather," rejoined the girl. "But it's bucked up a lot now, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it has," agreed the mechanic.

She drove back to "Grey Gables." The drive was as uneventful as her journey to the station had been. It was close to half past three when she garaged the car in its three-sided shed, and made her way back into the kitchen. The ground outside "Grey Gables" was still wet and muddy, though little wisps of steam were rising from the puddles as the afternoon sun did its best to evaporate the enormous quantities of water which had fallen. Catherine's mind went straight to the cellar and the mystery of her father's work there. Opportunity, she felt, had knocked with an insistence that was not to be ignored. She went straight to the kitchen door where her apron hung, and took a key from the pocket. She felt a little guilty at having deliberately lied to Sir Henry, but the mood in which he had been that morning had persuaded her that there was some justification for her action. She made her way to the cellar rather furtively, put the key in the lock, sprang the padlock and hooked it carefully on the hasp. Then, opening the cellar door she fumbled around the corner for the switch and walked down the steps, feeling like a school-girl who is breaking bounds, and feeling that at any moment the headmistress or some senior member of staff will appear and utter a reprimand in stertorian tones.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and turned on the second light. She was surprised at the brightness of the illumination. Although from the top of the cellar stairs the light looked dull and faint, it was only because of the angle of the staircase. At the bottom the cellar was as well lit as any modern laboratory. Many of the lights were shadowless, glare-free, neon tubes. Catherine moved quickly

through the cellar, glancing curiously at the desks which were crammed with rows and racks of complex apparatus. Although she had taken advanced level biology, there were many pieces of apparatus which mystified her completely. She had always known that her father was a research worker of some eminence, but his eccentricities had cut him off from the main stream of research, and he was not in contact with the vast majority of his colleagues, working in the medical sphere.

Here and there, Catherine recognized a piece of apparatus. But those that she was able to identify had an almost sinister atmosphere about them, and the overall impression which the cellar induced upon the girl was one of fear. She shuddered a little as she continued her exploration. At the far end of the long benches loaded with equipment, she saw some very expensive-looking pieces of high-powered refrigeration gear. She walked around them, and realized that each piece was connected to a container of some sort. A sudden sound made her look up. There were cages arranged beside the refrigeration equipment, and in one of the cages was a black cat. It was pawing pathetically at the bars, and as she looked at it, it began to mew.

"Pippin!" she exclaimed in a mixture of horror and anger. Thoughts of vivisection leapt through her mind, and she felt suddenly furious with her father. The laboratory revealed a completely different side of his character. She had never dreamt, in her wildest flights of fancy, that the doddering old man, who was incapable of ordering a train ticket, or conducting an intelligent conversation at breakfast time, had the ability to design and work in a laboratory like this. It was superb. It was far in advance of anything which she had seen in the school laboratory where she had taken her advanced level. She had, on occasion, been on tours of Universities; it was an essential part of sixth form life, at her school, but she had seen very few University laboratories which could equal this. She understood now why her father was reluctant to buy a new car. She had always known that he was by no means a poor man, but this equipment must have cost the earth. It could

easily account for a very large portion of his considerable wealth. She went quickly to the cage where Pippin was imprisoned and released the cat with deft, angry fingers.

"How could he?" she muttered angrily.

As far as she could tell, Pippin had not been harmed in any way. He snuggled up to her, and his eyes opened wide as though in fear.

"How could he?" she whispered again. She suddenly felt a wild, destructive desire to smash this laboratory and everything in it, then she realized that even the releasing of her pet would show that she had been down there. She looked carefully at the door of the cage; it was quite firm, but it might have been possible for a frenzied animal to shake the catch loose. Catherine had a large, old-fashioned brooch on her dress. She unpinned it and used the point of the brooch's pin to scratch the inside of the open cage door until it looked as though Pippin had been going wild inside it. Then she allowed the door to swing open and put a few more scratches close to the area of the catch. It might, or might not, succeed in deceiving Sir Henry, thought the girl, but at least it would throw something of a red herring across the track.

She made her way out through the cellar with a mixture of fear, revulsion and disgust. She wondered what that deep-freeze equipment was for, why there were containers, and why the animals in the cages had been taken into the cellar. At the back of her mind she realized that medical researchers had to use animals in their work, and she supposed, as far as she had ever gone towards examining the ethics of that situation, she was in agreement with the general principle, although reluctantly, that experiments on animals were a necessary evil, providing that they led to the alleviation of human suffering, and the curing of human disease. She was far from happy about the whole thing, however, and it seemed to have put a cold, psychological barrier between her father and herself. Feeling hurt and angry at the same time, she slammed the cellar door behind her and snapped the lock closed. Pippin looked at her with big, round, grey-green eyes. She took him into the

kitchen and poured him a saucer of milk. He lapped it hungrily and purred contentedly. Then he sat in a small square patch of sunlight coming in through the large window, and began washing himself, as though to eradicate finally any vestigial traces of the laboratory cage.

Satisfied now that Pippin was safe, Cathering made her way back along the corridor to finish clearing the breakfast things, only half of which had been taken through into the kitchen. At the identical point where she had originally heard the strange sound which she had taken to be a voice, she heard the voice again. It was louder this time, and the inflexion made it undeniably clear that it was human speech. It had seemed pleasant and melifluous before. Now that it was clearer there was something almost *excitingly* pleasant about the intonation. It sounded a cultured, civilized voice, yet it was rich and strong at the same time. As far as Catherine could tell, it seemed to be checking off a list of numbers, and she again got the impression that she was listening to one end of a telephone conversation. She went into the other room quickly, the room that she had examined before, the room from which it had originally seemed possible that the voice was emanating. The room was still empty . . .

She looked in the room next to it. That, too, was empty. She came back to the point in the passage. The point near the angle of the corridor. Here the voice was certainly at its loudest and clearest.

When she moved the voice faded, like the fading of a radio set that is turned in the hand. Her first thought was that it must be a ghost, but what a strange ghost! And why, she asked herself, should a ghost be reciting a list of numbers? It was most peculiar.

She made her way back into the breakfast room, surprised that she hadn't been more frightened. Looking down inside herself and analysing her own emotions she felt that she was surprised rather than unnerved. When she had recovered herself a little she came back into the passage, but the voice had stopped, and the passage was as silent and empty as it had been before.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEZAK

CATHERINE WILDER went into the big library that stood on the far side of the breakfast room. She took a writing case from a bureau standing against the northern wall of the large high ceilinged book repository. She was trembling with a mixture of fear and uncertainty as she fumbled for her pen. She opened the case, extracted a sheet of paper and began to write. She wondered, even as the ink flowed in a neat feminine hand across the surface of the paper, whether or not she was being stupid and childish. Above all, she wondered what her father would say, but, somehow, it didn't matter. All she knew was that she was alone in this great empty mausoleum of a house, alone and slightly frightened and there was that voice. Yet, was she frightened, she asked herself, was it more *excitement* than fear? Anything that relieved the monotony of life in "Grey Gables" was welcome as far as Catherine Wilder was concerned.

She finished her letter and reached for an envelope. It occurred to her suddenly that she wasn't certain of the address. A number of papers littered the library table, most of them were considerably out of date. She picked one up and turned it round to the back page, looking for the editorial address. She found it. As she had more than half expected, the editorial address was Fleet Street. She began filling in the inviting surface of the envelope.

V. Stearman, Esq.,
c/o The Daily Globe,
Fleet Street,
London, W.C.1

The filled-in envelope became a kind of charm or talisman. It was a token, an amulet. It seemed to reach out like a beacon of hope shining across dark waters. The rational everyday part of her mind which tried to tell her she was being silly, was bludgeoned into quiescence by the sight of the envelope.

She read through her letter again carefully before folding it up and slipping it inside. She wasn't by any means satisfied with it, but it was not the sort of letter, she reflected, which people are often called upon to write.

Dear Mr. Stearman,

I hope you will forgive my writing to you just out of nowhere like this, but having read your column in the 'Globe' from time to time, and having read also of a number of your own exploits and adventures, I wondered if you would be willing to help me.

I have heard a strange voice in an empty corridor of the house. I do realize that it may be nothing more than imagination or that there may be some perfectly ordinary, rational solution.

However, I can't think of it and it is beginning to worry me. If you would be able to help, I really would be tremendously grateful.

Yours sincerely,
Catherine Wilder.

She took a stamp from the writing case, fixed it on the top right hand corner of the envelope and went rather slowly and reluctantly from the house in the direction of the garage.

The yard at the back of the house seemed somehow dark and forbidding. Bats flew past in the twilight fluttering ominously like the harbingers of some strange evil destiny

that was even now attempting to overtake her.

The twilight was gloomy, crepuscular and sinister. Somewhere an owl hooted and at the back of the garage old boards settled down a little with a faint creaking sound.

Catherine got into the car feeling very thankful that she didn't have to walk to the dark end of the garage and insert the crank. The old saloon started at the first press of the button and she offered up a silent prayer of gratitude for the mechanic who had made such a tremendous difference in the pre-war chariot.

There was no reversing light on the aged jalopy and Catherine backed out of the garage more by luck than judgment. Some of the dents in the ancient machine owed their existence to the fact that Catherine had a tendency to back and park by ear in the dark! Now that the battery had been re-charged the headlights, although tinged with yellow, provided a reasonable adequate illumination. Strange soft-edged shadows fled away on either side as she piloted the antiquated machine along the narrow way in the direction of the post box.

The post box was two miles away. She reached it, slipped her letter into the slot, heaved a sigh of relief feeling that she had accomplished something, climbed back into the car, reversed around in the gateway opposite the post box and began driving back towards the rambling old house.

As she drove up the drive of "Grey Gables" she was obsessed by a feeling of anxiety and foreboding. She thought of the animals in the cellar, in cages. She thought of Pippin. She thought of her father and she grew very angry indeed. The hurt, hostile feeling that had filled her being when she had first found Pippin in the cellar came back to her tenfold. She frowned angrily at the shadows retreating in the yellowing headlights.

She reached the garage, turned off the lights and the engine, climbed from the car and walked back quickly towards the house as though trying to escape from the darkness gathering all around her.

The house was making little creaking noises to itself as though it was settling down for the night. Outside she could

hear an owl hooting again and as she went to the kitchen window another bat fluttered by.

She put the kettle on and made herself a cup of tea. Having drunk it she felt better, but the feeling of eerie foreboding stayed with her. The feeling condensed and crystallized itself into an idea that she was not alone. But, for all this, she did not feel that whatever presence was in the house with her belonged to the supernatural realm. She had read many ghost stories in the past, she was an ardent fan of writers like Poe, Derleth, Blackwood and Fanthorpe but the pleasurable sensation of induced supernatural excitement which she obtained from such stories, was a vastly different thing from the sensation which she was experiencing now.

The feeling that assailed her now was a feeling of the imminence of something from beyond the world as she understood it, yet, something that was nevertheless as human as she was. Catherine Wilder was far too young to remember the war, but, if she had been old enough to recall the dark and sombre days when our Island Bastion was threatened by the Fascist hordes, she would have said that the feeling she had now was somewhat akin to the feeling of a man who waits for an invasion.

It was like standing on a lonely beach and wondering whether the next wave would bring with it the dark silhouette of an invasion barge. She washed up the teacup and then she looked around the library. She couldn't find any book at all that looked even remotely interesting. Most of the books were very old. Some went back almost as far as the house itself. Many of them were outdated medical tomes. She drew an old anatomy from the shelf and began examining it.

The book depressed and frightened her. The gruesome reality of its diagrams left her feeling a little dizzy and nauseated. She put it back and found an 18th Century edition of some Reformist sermons. They were couched in quaint phraseology and their perennial harping on damnation and the state of the lost after death, formed a far from cheerful subject as far as Catherine Wilder was concerned.

She replaced the book of sermons with more speed and dexterity than she had displayed in her replacement of the medical tome.

Tiring of the library, Catherine walked out into the corridor. For some reason the generator in the shed across the yard had apparently faltered for a split second. The lights dipped warningly. Catherine looked apprehensively at the dimming bulbs, but the generator picked up and the lights came on again. Catherine wished fervently that the isolation of their grey stone domicile had not precluded the possibility of the installation of mains electricity.

It was frightening, she thought, to be dependent on the generator in a house as lonely and dark as this. Her father wasn't much company but he was better than nothing.

She stood in the corridor listening intently, telling herself that she was listening for the generator, but knowing at a deeper level of intellectual honesty, that she was really listening for that voice. Would it come again? Could it come again? And, if it did, would she be as surprised and nervous as she had been on the last occasion or would curiosity replace the slight fear?

Somehow, it occurred to her that the voice would be more welcome than the awful empty loneliness of the house. She thought of her letter lying in the postbox addressed to a man who she had never met. A man whom she knew only by reputation. She wondered if, perhaps, the mental image that she carried of Val Stearman was anything like the man. In her mind Stearman must be big, powerful, debonair, a 20th Century pirate, a 1960 version of a swash-buckling adventurer. But, were there any swash-buckling adventurers left in the 1960's? She laughed wryly to herself. Perhaps it was all the creation of the mind, like this voice that she had thought she had heard earlier? Perhaps, it was some wizened old journalist who wrote those daring articles? Perhaps Val Stearman was only the product of somebody's imagination. But, as she read the 'Globe' the articles in it seemed so alive and so vibrant, that she felt he had to exist; he was so much a real character; he was so alive; he was more than alive. What she had

come to think of as his personality, emanated from the pages of the 'Globe.'

Catherine heard the voice again so suddenly and so loudly that it made her jump. It was no longer murmuring or muttering quietly. It no longer sounded like a radio turned on in a distant room. It was as clear and strong as though someone was standing in the corridor a few feet ahead of her. She strained her eyes deliberately as though to see some invisible figure that had previously eluded her gaze.

And then, just as she heard the words, "1964 co-ordinate pattern 17," a figure materialized out of thin air and stood in the corridor. He was tall, broad-shouldered and handsome in a clean-cut, mature way. His features were finely chiselled without being delicate or over-refined. He wore a helmet with a single round light-source in the centre. The helmet was steep-sided and gently bevelled at the top. The collar of the tunic below the helmet came up quite high, close to the neck. There were some kind of earphones or ear-pieces which appeared to be part of his equipment and which were attached to the helmet. A cloak hung romantically from his shoulders and the slim but strong looking athletic waist was adorned with a gleaming belt buckled in the centre. There was some kind of insignia on the chest of the uniform—if it was a uniform—but it had no particular significance as far as Catherine was concerned.

It was quite obvious to her that the man could see her, for he suddenly stopped talking and smiled in her direction. He spoke and she got the gist of what he was saying, although a number of his words were pronounced oddly and differently and there were some words that she had never heard before.

As far as she could understand him, the man said:

"I hope I have not frightened you."

"No," she blurted.

"My name is Mezak," he said, he held out a hand in her direction, "please allow me to introduce myself."

"Mezak," she whispered, "that is an unusual name." It seemed to Catherine as she shook hands with the strange

figure that had materialized in the corridor that she was being as incongruous as Stanley when he had found the famous Missionary-Explorer and said "Doctor Livingstone, I presume?"

After they had shaken hands, they stood and looked at each other in silence for a few moments as though wondering what to say next . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNICATION

CATHERINE WILDER stood in that awkward silence until she could stand awkward silence no more. Mezak was smiling, trying to put her at ease, trying to make her feel comfortable, but even the smile on that strong, handsome, romantic face was not sufficient compensation for the awkwardness that Catherine felt at that moment.

She spoke suddenly, impetuously.

"Would you like to come into the lounge and sit down?"

"Thank you." Still smiling Mezak followed her into the lounge. The room seemed lighter and brighter for his presence.

"Why have you come here?" asked Catherine breathlessly. "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"As I've already told you," he smiled, "my name is Mezak."

"Mezak," she said again, "it's a nice name; it is unusual, but I like it."

"I'm glad you like it. What is your name?"

"Catherine."

"It is a very beautiful name." She felt a warm glow inside herself as he spoke, his accent and inflection were very strange but at the same time interesting and exciting. They were musical, but at the same time strong. It sounded like

the language of a race that was both cultured and virile, it was not an effete language.

"Where are you from?" she asked again.

"I'm English; I'm from England; is that what you mean?"

Catherine creased her brows into a frown of disbelief.

"You can't be."

"I am," he assured her.

"What part of England?" she demanded. It seemed incredible that this man was English, this man with the cloak and the strange uniform, this man with the insignia emblazoned on his chest, this man with the helmet and the strange accent. He couldn't be English. He was like someone from another world, thought the girl.

"I'm from the County of Yorkshire."

"But, you haven't got a Yorkshire accent," said Catherine.

"Yorkshire accent?" he asked, then smiled, "no, I suppose I haven't." He looked at her with warm gentle amusement. It was obvious to Catherine that he was enjoying some private joke of his own but she did not get the impression that he was laughing *at* her. He seemed to be laughing *with her* at something which amused him greatly about his accent. And yet, although Catherine was no expert on either semantics, philology or linguistics, she knew perfectly well that the words he spoke were not spoken in the strong broad terms of Yorkshire as she understood it.

There was a brief pause and then Mezak said: "If I told you where I was from would you keep it a secret? Would you keep my secret?" he asked again.

"Yes, of course."

"I am from the Yorkshire of nearly four hundred years in the future."

"The future!" echoed the girl.

"Yes."

"Oh, tell me about the future," said Catherine. He smiled.

"What do you want to know?"

"What are people like? Are they happy?"

"In the main they are happy."

"Happier than we are now?" asked the girl.

"I would think about the same."

"Are things better? I mean, are people still lonely in the future?"

"A few," he answered.

"What about disease and war?"

"There are still some diseases that we cannot completely conquer but we have made great progress since this time of yours."

Catherine rubbed her eyes and looked at him again as though to be sure that he was still there.

"You aren't a dream; you really are from the future?"

"Yes, I am really from the future and I am not a dream."

"Have you tried to get here before, I thought I heard your voice, were you checking off numbers or something?"

"I was checking some time co-ordinates a little while ago by my own personal time."

"What do you mean by *personal* time?" asked Catherine.

"It is the little private envelope of time that surrounds a man who must travel through time itself. Imagine that you are travelling through water surrounded by a few drops of water that cling closely to you. You could call these your own personal drops, the little envelope of water that belongs to you, though you are moving through an ocean."

"Would that really happen if you were swimming?" asked Catherine.

"I don't think it would," he said, "but it is an idea that is easier to grasp than little particles of time."

"If small quantities of water are drops?" asked Catherine, "what are small quantities of time?"

"The technical term that we use is the word *instanton*," said Mezak. "The smallest quantity of light is a photon and the smallest quantity of time is an instanton."

"Oh!" said Catherine. She found the word instanton vaguely frightening. "Well, what is an instanton like?" she asked.

"What is a photon like? What is a sub-atomic particle like?" She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know."

"We understand some of their behaviour," said Mezak, "but we understand little or nothing of the things themselves."

"I suppose not," said Catherine. He sighed.

"Believe me I would try and tell you more if I could."

"May I ask another question or am I behaving badly?" asked Catherine.

"You are not behaving badly at all, I think you are behaving extremely well. I don't know how I would have reacted if, knowing nothing of time travel, I had suddenly been confronted with a stranger. Are you sure I didn't frighten you?"

"Well, perhaps just a little," said Catherine, "but you are so interesting I find it very difficult to be frightened of you."

"You are too kind," smiled Mezak. Something that might have been the faintest tinge of a blush was warming his cheek.

"What are the girls like in the future?" asked Catherine suddenly, as though she had noticed the blush.

"Girls," he asked, "I suppose they are like girls in your own time, pretty, gay, good company, interested in fashion and dance music."

"Dances," said Catherine, "what kind of dances do you have?"

"It is a little difficult to explain as the names wouldn't mean anything to you."

"Do you still have big dances all together in ballrooms and things?" asked Catherine.

"Oh, yes; they are very popular."

"What kind of music?" she enquired eagerly.

"Electronic organs and other things that I couldn't really describe in terms that you would understand. We have a lot of music and colour programmes. There is a very popular entertainment we call a colour organ, you listen to the music and watch coloured patterns being projected all

around the room in time to the music, it is very complicated. They are very difficult to play I understand."

"Can you play one?" asked the girl.

"Not very well. I can throw a few patterns and play a few very simple melodies, but that is all. It takes nearly a life-time of study to be a master of the colour organ."

"I expect it would," said Catherine, "I'd love to see one." He smiled.

"There are many things in your century that men and women of my century would love to see, things that are to us just names in history books."

"Well, surely there is nothing here that you envy or desire that you haven't got in greater quantities or better qualities?" asked Catherine.

"Oh yes, there are many things," said Mezak, "many things; the future isn't all progress in the right direction."

"You said there wasn't any war."

"There hasn't been a war for centuries, thank God," said Mezak, "mind you, there have been one or two nasty incidents that made us all hold our breath, but the World Government is pretty stable."

"World Government!"

"Yes, the World Government."

"Is it a democracy?" said Catherine.

"Yes, you could say it is a democracy, but perhaps the voting wouldn't be carried on in the way that you'd understand now. It is democratic for 90 per cent. of its functions."

"That sounds fine," said the girl, "your world of the future sounds beautiful. When is it? What is your exact date?"

"Well, in my own time I am living in 2320," said Mezak.

"2320" said Catherine, "why that is like me coming back to the year 1590, or 1600, or something like that."

"That would be roughly it," agreed Mezak.

"How strange," said the girl, "I can't believe that this is really happening. I am sure you only exist in my dream; you *are* a dream. Go on, say you are a dream."

"I am not." He held his hand out towards her and took her hand in his.

"Does that feel like the hand of a dream," he asked.

"No," she confessed, "it is the hand of a man, a strong hand." He looked at his own fingers as he released her hand.

"Flesh and blood," he said, "bone, sinew; I am as human as you are Catherine."

The thought thrilled her and as she remembered the touch of his fingers she felt a deep warm glow radiating her whole being.

He clapped a hand to his ear with a suddenness that made her jump. She looked at him enquiringly but said nothing; it was obvious he was listening to some message that was coming to him through the long earpieces depending from the sides of the gleaming metallic helmet that he wore.

His face changed suddenly and grew grave. Then he took something from his tunic pocket and spoke into it so rapidly that Catherine had difficulty in catching the words. He put the microphone-like device away and looked at her.

"I must go," he said.

"Something is wrong?" said Catherine interrogatively.

"A lot of things are wrong. I would have liked to have told you more, but remember to keep my secret. It is possible that you will see other men dressed just as I am dressed and with equipment like mine. Above all, say nothing to them; keep away from them, *well away*."

"Why?" she asked.

"They could be evil and dangerous. I must stop no longer." He got up, looked round anxiously, "I'm afraid I have lost my bearings a little. Could you please show me back to the exact spot where I first saw you."

"Yes I think so," said Catherine.

She led him to the angle of the corridor where she first heard him.

"That's it," he said, "that's it; I can feel the vibrations. Thank you very much. Now, please stand a little clear. There shouldn't be any danger but there is always a possi-

bility and I wouldn't want it to happen to you." She felt a warm glow inside as he said that. Just for a moment she tried to tell herself he really cared and then she put down the thought before it could blossom into hopefulness. Why should she think that this stranger from nearly four hundred years in the future would care or want to care? Why should he? There was no reason for him to want to do so. Her own father didn't care for her.

She lapsed back into the bitter shell of loneliness that had wrapped her heart for so long.

Mezak faded like the image on a screen when a cathode ray tube has been switched off. Catherine looked at the spot from which he had vanished for several minutes, there was something there that might well have been a tear. She moved forward slowly; hesitantly and delicately she prodded at the air in the place that Mezak had stood but there was only air. The corridor was as empty as Mother Hubbard's proverbial cupboard.

Catherine went through to the kitchen and made herself some supper and a cup of cocoa. She let Pippin out and waited by the door till the little black cat returned. Then, snuggling her pet in her arms she went through to her bedroom.

All that night she lay dreaming of Mezak. When she awoke the light of dawn was streaming in through the window. Could it be that she was in love with a vision, she asked herself. Could it be that she was in love with a figment of her own imagination, with a man who didn't exist? Was Mezak only a powerful hallucination? She had touched his hand; she had heard his voice; these things were not hallucinations. She wished now that she had not written to Val Stearman. Mezak had asked for secrecy. She felt that this was the least she could give in return for the wonderful thrill of meeting him. The whole thing seemed almost unbelievably romantic. Mezak himself was more romantic than her wildest dreams; could he be real, was it possible that even in the future time travel would be a reality?

She wondered about it as she got up and made herself

some breakfast. If time travel was a reality why hadn't others come back, or had they, she asked herself. There were strange episodes in the lives of men who were said to be ahead of their time. She thought of some of the old Greek philosophers. She thought of sages like Leonardo Da Vinci. If Da Vinci had been a man from the future trapped in the past in some strange way, then all his "inventions" would have been easily explained.

She thought of the great Greek thinkers who had also been ahead of their time. She thought of men like Hero of Alexandria and his steam engine. Was it possible that these men had been unrecognized time travellers? What of those who had predicted the future with uncanny accuracy? Old Mother Shipton, the Yorkshire wise woman, had she been a time travelleress from the future, cast back and trapped in the past, her only relaxation the prophecies of what she knew must surely come to pass?

Catherine looked out of the kitchen window thinking of Nostradamus the French Seer who had forecast Hitler and the Great Wars. Was it possible that *he* had been from the future? Maybe there were time travellers and perhaps those who got themselves stuck became the Seers or the advanced thinkers of the epoch in which they lived entombed? She thought of the legends of King Arthur and his Knights and of Merlin's magic. If Merlin had really lived might not Merlin have been a man from the future?

Her thoughts were suddenly interrupted by the sight of Smithy the postman making his way along the mountain top in the direction of the shepherd's hut. She wondered whether he might have anything for her and on impulse slipped on her boots and coat and hurried out along the path to intercept the postman on his round.

She had covered barely half the distance to the intersection when she saw the early morning sunlight gleaming on something round and metallic which bobbed down behind a rock with furtive suddenness as she approached.

Catherine increased her pace. There had seemed something so sinister about that gleam of metal that she felt worried and alarmed. She hurried along the remainder of

the mountain path towards the intersection until only fifty or sixty yards separated her from the slowly but doggedly climbing figure of the postman. Old Smithy had paused and was looking in her direction. Then she suddenly saw another metallic flash from behind the boulder where she had seen the first. She pointed towards it and shouted a shrill warning to the postman. Smithy, whose hearing was not as acute as it had once been, turned slowly and followed the direction of her pointing finger.

Catherine began running towards the spot sensing danger with an instinct so deep that it must have been a kind of feminine intuition, a sixth sense which is often denied to the mere male when nature is handing out her largesse.

As Catherine began to run two metal helmeted figures, dressed in cloaks and white uniforms like the one which Mezak had worn, leapt out and began struggling with the postman. Smithy was no longer young and he was not by any means a strong or massive man, but like all Cumberland folk he was fit and surprisingly tough for his age. In his youth he had won several mountain walking and mountain running contents and the stamina and hardness which he had developed inbred with rugged Cumberland stamina had not deserted him in the latter part of his life.

He tipped one of the two attackers with a neat Cumberland wrestling back-heel move and stood grappling with the other for several seconds. The man whom he had tripped, however, recovered himself and taking a long cylindrical object from his belt struck the old postman a cowardly blow at the back of the head. Smithy collapsed and Catherine screamed as she saw his assailants stooping over him kicking and bludgeoning the helpless old man as he lay on the ground.

She had never considered herself a heroine, but now, heedless of Mezak's warning, and not pausing to consider what good she could do when she got there, she ran wildly forward shouting angrily at the two gleaming helmeted thugs to leave the old man alone . . .

CHAPTER SIX

INTERVENTION

CATHERINE reached the spot where the two metal helmeted strangers were still bludgeoning the inert figure of old Smithy the postman. It seemed that they were taking a fiendish delight in their work. So engrossed had they been in their murderous attack on the old man that they had been almost impervious to Catharine's presence.

Now, however, they turned their attention to the girl. She struck the nearer man full in the face with her fist. The blow stung and he staggered back holding a bleeding nose. But the blow only stung, it didn't render the metal helmeted aggressor *hors de combat*.

The other stranger seized Cathrine by the wrist and drew her angrily towards him. He said something which she was hard put to it to understand, although the language he used was in some way very similar to the words which she had heard from Mezak. Where Mezak's voice, however, had been pleasant this man's voice was harsh and grated on her ears. Where Mezak's tone had been harmonious and his enunciation clear and precise these men spoke clumsily, casually. They spoke as though they had been reared in some area where correct speech was never heard.

She wondered why they were dressed as Mezak had been dressed. She thought at first that the costume he wore was some kind of uniform but listening to these men and remembering what they had done to the helpless old postman, Catherine realized that they were not likely to be in the same organization as Mezak. If Mezak's tunic was in fact a uniform. It occurred to her suddenly that they might have stolen uniforms and equipment similar to Mezak's.

That may have been what he had begun to tell her when he had been summoned back to 2320, or wherever it was he had been coming from.

It was all very mysterious and confusing as far as Catharine was concerned. The man who held her had now twisted her wrist so savagely that she could scarcely move. She gave a little cry of pain. But, as she looked down at the recumbent figure of the old postman her pain turned entirely to anger. She wanted to strike at these brutes again and again, but as she was now held it was impossible to hit them.

The man whom she had hit moved around in front of her and brought his hand across her face hard. She winced and gasped; she had never been hit like that before and the experience shook her considerably. The man, who was still dabbing at his face where she had hit him, growled something that sounded positively blasphemous and obscene. She wished that she could have closed her ears to the hideous oath that he used. It was not that Catherine Wilder had led such a sheltered life that normal rough language shook her. It was more the venom in the man's voice as he spoke. She contrasted these two thugs with Mezak. They were as different as it was possible for men to be and yet the similarity of uniforms and helmets was frighteningly deceptive.

One of them, the one who held her turned to the other. "Shall we kill her?" She heard that all right and the casual way in which the man said it sent fear pulsing through her young body.

"I would like to," said the other.

The fear that had been trickling down her spine now became a veritable cascade of icy water.

"We must check first, there is no knowing who she is. Could have serious repercussions." They seemed to be speaking more slowly, deliberately as though they wanted her to hear and be frightened.

"Very well, we must find somewhere to hide her."

"I think there is a cave on that hill over there."

"That will do."

She found herself being dragged up the lonely mountain slopes in the direction of a small cave, the mouth of which was almost completely hidden by bushes and heather. They threw her roughly inside and one of them produced a length of thin plastic cord with which he proceeded to tie her hands and feet with unnecessary and painful tightness.

As they threw her into the cave she caught her head a glancing blow on a small stone and lay semi-conscious for some time. She was aware that time was passing, but she had no idea how long had elapsed. She came to herself and wriggled into an upright position. What were they doing, she wondered, whom had they got to consult and why did it matter who she was if they killed her? The thoughts went milling round in her mind, puzzling and confusing.

* * *

Val Stearman sat behind the broad expanse of his desk in his private office at the *Daily Globe* building. The copy boy brought him a cup of tea, Stearman thanked him, gave him a shilling, and stirred the tea vigorously. Val Stearman did everything vigorously; he was a big, direct, vigorous kind of man. He drained the cup almost at a single gulp, replaced it in the saucer with a sharp clink and ran strong bronzed fingers through his crop of wiry grey hair. It was a typical Stearman gesture.

He sat down, scanning the copy on which he had just been working. He made three minor corrections and rang for the copy boy, handed it to him with a grin and began work on a mountainous pile of correspondence. There were a number of complaints about some of the things he had said recently. Stearman in his column, had a devastating habit of shooting down various holy white cows of which he disapproved. The defenders of the said holy white cows, who were old ladies of both sexes, protested with strong protestations, couched usually in archaic Victorian prose. Stearman consigned their letters to the waste paper basket and his grin broadened.

He opened the next letter and the next; they were rou-

time enquiries; where could the radar obtain further information about some items which Val had mentioned? He flipped them into the pending tray and opened another. This was different. He read it quickly and with interest. This was the kind of letter that livened up the days which might otherwise be dull.

Val read it through a second time, wondered what kind of girl Catherine Wilder was, picked up the internal telephone and dialled Mac's office. Mac, the wizened old Scots editor of the *Daily Globe*, flipped up his receiver and barked.

"Hallo. Editor's desk."

"This is Val," said Stearman quietly.

"And why, may I ask, are you disturbing my peace?" enquired Mac acidly.

"I didn't know you had got a *piece* in there," chortled Val, "you dirty old man!"

"Stearman, you are incorrigible, utterly incorrigible," roared Mac.

"Steady," said Stearman, "you'll be bursting a valve and making a nasty sticky mess all over the floor in there; we shall have to send copy boys in with blotting paper to clear it all up."

"One day," said Mac, "I shall have a brainstorm and I will come in there with a wee chopper to carve you into lumps the size of beef cubes."

"First, catch your hare," said Stearman quoting Mrs. Beeton's famous recipe for the jugging of the aforementioned animal.

Mac suddenly laughed.

"All right Val, the pantomime being over, what is it that you want?"

"Something interesting in the post," said Stearman.

"Tell me more," said the dour old Scot.

"A girl called Wilder living up in Cumberland," said Val.

"That's a suitable name for those parts," mused Mac, "what does the afore-mentioned Miss Wilder want?"

"She is wondering whether I will go and investigate a

mysterious voice that she is hearing."

"Sounds as though she might be a 20th Century Joan of Arc," said Mac dourly, "does it sound genuine or a hoax, Val?"

"Well, I'd say that it was genuine, but of course you can't tell, there are numerous hoaxes in this wicked world," said Val with a grin.

"If it is genuine, what sort of voice is it that she is hearing? Ghosts do you mean?"

"She didn't appear to know herself, which is what makes it seem genuine," said Stearman. "She has also mentioned the possibility that it could be something that she is imagining. Now, normally when somebody is imagining something the last thing they will admit is that the thing they are imagining is a figment of their own mind."

"That is not very well expressed," said Mac, "I would have expected better form you Val, but I understand your meaning none the less."

"Thank you for nothing, I'm sure," said Stearman rather huffily. Like all professionals he was sensitive about his work.

"I suppose you want time off to go galivanting up the wilds of Cumberland to see what you can find," said Mac.

"You know as well as I do that you have to speculate to accumulate," said Val.

"Aye, but you are one of the men who does far more speculating than you do accumulating," said Mac grimly.

"It is a gross libel on my unsullied name," said Stearman.

"It is no' a libel; it is a slander," said Mac. "I didn't commit it to writing, I'm no such a fool." He chuckled.

"*Touché*," acknowledged Val ruefully.

"Oh, let's no waste time," said Mac, sounding very pleased with himself over his small verbal victory, "you can leave as soon as your copy is ready."

"It has been ready for ten to twelve minutes," said Stearman. "I did it before I started the post."

"Ah, it's nice to have it early," said Mac. He scratched his bald dome as he put down the receiver. "Stearman," he

muttered to himself, "what shall I do with the man? I canna run the paper w'oot him, but it is equally difficult to run it with him!"

Mac buried his head in his work and tried to shut Val Stearman from his thoughts.

The big journalist-adventurer stood up and pushed his chair back. He was tall when he drew himself to his full height, well over six feet, but he didn't look tall because of the breadth of his shoulders and the deep expanse of his chest. Val gave an impression of massiveness rather than height. He was a walking colossus with a tousled crop of curly, iron-grey hair, as tough as seasoned oak and as resilient as well tanned leather. Val Stearman was a formidable opponent in any field. Unlike some of literature's better-known muscular heroes Val Stearman had a brain with which to consolidate the advantages of his enormous physique. He was not only a fighting machine *par excellence*. What made him a thousand times more formidable was that he was a highly *intelligent* fighting machine.

He made his way rapidly out of the office down to the vast underground garage beneath the *Globe* building. The old garage attendant, smartly uniformed, and sprightly still despite his years, saluted as Val appeared. Stearman flipped him a coin which the old veteran caught deftly and put in his pocket with a broad smile.

"Thank you, sir. Wanting the car, sir?"

"Right first time, George," said Stearman with his characteristic smile. He carried on down the ramp until he reached the spot where his powerful sports saloon was parked. He backed skilfully, threading the car among its companions like a practised seamstress threading a needle with dexterity and finesse. He climbed the ramp with the great engine scarcely purring and as the garage attendant gave him the go-head, Val put his foot on the loud pedal and swung out into Fleet Street with a swift consolidatory glance to left and right as he emerged from the garage opening.

It was a ten minute drive for Stearman to the luxury flat which he shared with La Noire, his beautiful, mysterious,

Cleopatrine wife. He reached the flat, parked the car outside and began racing up the stairs.

La Noire was brewing coffee as Val arrived.

"Hallo darling," she smiled sweetly, "I wasn't expecting you."

"In which cupboard have you hidden the milkman?" asked Val. La Noire beamed, her glorious black eyes shone with the mystery of the Eternal Eve.

"Coffee, darling?"

"Yes, please." The fact that he had had a cup of tea at the office scarcely twenty minutes earlier made no difference at all to Val Stearman's capacity to drink almost unlimited quantities of coffee.

La Noire poured him a cup which he sipped thoughtfully in contrast to the gulping avidity with which he had disposed of the tea. But then, he thought, as he compared the two movements in his mind, tea made by a copy boy was a warm, wet, sweet liquid to be gulped. It was an essential; it was a lubricant. It was as much a part of work in the *Daily Globe* as paper and desks and typewriters. On the other hand coffee made by La Noire was an experience, something to be savoured and enjoyed. Something to be experienced with more than one of the senses, the aroma alone was superb, the taste was perfection, the tactile sensation of the liquid on the tip of the tongue was something worth enjoying. La Noire made coffee as though for a connoisseur and Val believed in doing it full justice.

"What's happened?" asked La Noire suddenly.

"Well, among other things," said Val, "a letter flopped into the old correspondence tray."

"A letter," said La Noire, "makes a change from a threatening telephone call or somebody sending you a scorpion in a cigar box." Val ignored the gentle irony in his wife's voice but he could not ignore it completely. He smiled as he went on speaking.

"A certain Miss Catherine Wilder, or possibly Mrs. Catherine Wilder. I don't know, she didn't make that explicit, but I would guess Miss by the semi-immaturity of the composition."

"You old wolf, you always did like your women immature," said La Noire.

"That isn't true," said Stearman, "look at you; they don't come any maturer than that."

La Noire took half a pace back as though something he had said had struck a raw spot he had not intended to touch. He looked at her strangely for a moment.

"Darling, have I said something? I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the wrong way I just meant that you were always so poised, so confident, that kind of mature."

"I know what you meant, darling," said La Noire, and she smiled back. There was an infinite sadness in her eyes. She ran her fingers through his hair as though telling herself that it couldn't be grey already. The look in her eyes; the awful sadness seemed to echo a fear of loneliness. Val looked at the expression and wondered. There was something he had to ask her. There was something he had to know and yet Stearman, who was so absolutely fearless in every other aspect, was afraid to ask this question.

It was not a question that was by any means easy to frame in words. He and La Noire had been married for practically a score of years. When he had first met her she had looked exactly the same as she looked now. He knew that there were women who could retain a timeless quality of beauty. He knew that there were women who could hold the years in check with an ability that was practically magical. He thought of the magnificent Marlene Dietrich. And yet, there was more to La Noire than the kind of superb timelessness which even the great film star had achieved. La Noire looked as though she would never alter. It was as though something in the fabric of her being said no to time with an irrefutable negation.

Val realized that in the two decades that had passed since he and La Noire had met there had been significant changes in his own appearance. In his early twenties his hair had been black as jet and now it was the colour of iron. The iron-hard muscles of his great physique were as strong as ever, perhaps they were even more rugged and mature than they had been, but they seemed just a fraction

slower than they had been in his earlier days. The strength was still there, but he hadn't quite as much wind as he had once had and the finest of fine edges had gone from his speed.

Looking at himself quite objectively Val realized with neither conceit nor false modesty that he was still one of the toughest fighting men in the world. He had never been beaten and one of the only men who had fought him to a draw had belonged to a planetary society who lived on a higher gravity world than Earth. Stearman had not been reluctant to concede equal honours to that doughty opponent.

La Noire turned suddenly before he could phrase the question that kept nibbling at the edge of his mind. Changing the subject completely she darted off with a lithe lissome grace calling over her shoulder.

"Darling, I must hurry and pack."

"Why?" He had been so deep in his own thoughts that he had completely forgotten the reason for coming home.

"Cumberland," said La Noire. "forgotten?"

"No," he sounded a little crestfallen; the moment had passed. He had almost screwed up his courage to ask her. *Almost!* So near and yet so far he thought. *Why?* he asked himself again and again as he helped her to pack and to put cases into the car. *Why?* How does she keep that eternal youthful expression? If it hadn't been for the maturity in her eyes she could be only nineteen or twenty and yet, even if she had been only in her late teens when they had first met, she ought now to be nearly forty.

Val shook his head, what was the use? No man could understand women. Men weren't meant to understand women and only a fool would attempt it.

"Do you want to drive darling?" asked Val, as they put the last of the cases on board.

"Ummm, I think so," said La Noire.

He slid the seat forward for her, she adjusted the mirror and wriggled her back provocatively into the fine leather upholstery.

She drove superbly. Stearman, himself a driver of track

or rally standard, admired La Noire's performance and admitted, in all fairness, that it was the equal of his own.

The big car ate up the miles, heading over north-west towards "Grey Gables" and valleys and hills of Cumberland . . .

CHAPTER SEVEN

ARRIVAL

VAL and La Noire stopped in the village at the end of the valley and enquired for "Grey Gables." The shopkeeper to whom Val addressed his enquiries was a friendly though somewhat garrulous old soul who was more than willing to supply all the information that Val wanted and then some to spare.

"That would be Sir Henry Wilder's place, wouldn't it?" asked Val's informant.

"That's right," said Stearman non-committally.

"You a friend of Sir Henry's?" asked the old shopkeeper.

"Only indirectly," said Stearman. "I know the lady better."

"Oh, his daughter," said the garrulous custodian of the village store, "rather a strange girl, don't you think?"

"A little," said Val non-committally, wondering whether he had just driven somewhere in the region of four hundred miles for nothing. "How do you find her strange?" he went on.

"Such a lonely girl," said the old shopkeeper, "no life for a young woman up there, you know. Since her mother left, well!"

"She is alone with Sir Henry then?" said Val promptly.

"Oh yes, yes. Will you be staying up there?" went on the good lady of the ready information.

"Possibly," said Val.

"They say the place is damp," said the proprietress of the village store.

"Very likely," said Val.

"Of course houses don't have to be damp just because we are on the west coast," said the lady proudly, "now you take this little shop of ours, it's as tight and as snug as any you would wish to find." She sounded to Stearman like a female estate agent trying to sell a desirable residence. He grinned, tongue in cheek.

"Can you give me the exact directions for finding the house?" asked Val.

"Oh yes," said the old lady. She came as far as the door and pointed out the best route. She repeated it twice and as she did so her eyes kept on travelling to the car where La Noire waited. It was obvious to Val that the old lady was trying to work out a possible connection he and La Noire could have with the Wilders.

He was glad that she hadn't recognized him. Photographs of Stearman had appeared in the *Globe* from time to time but he consoled himself with the thought that perhaps even the *Globe* didn't penetrate to these remote areas. He negated the thought, however, as soon as it had been born, for it was obvious that the girl who had written to him must be familiar with the *Globe*. Unless, of course, he reflected, his name had come to her notice in some other way. He left that to speculation, as he climbed back into the car. He gave La Noire the directions which the old woman had given him and they reached "Grey Gables" just as dusk was falling.

Val walked boldly up to the great front door and knocked with the thunderous sound of one who is intent to wake the dead or at least to startle the living. The echoes of his knock boomed and reverberated inside the house with a rather frightening hollow emptiness.

Val waited a few minutes while La Noire turned the headlights of the car on the great door. There was no satisfactory response to Stearman's knocking. In fact, the only sign of life was a small black cat that walked cautiously into the pool of light from Stearman's car and out again

with an aloof and superior air of detachment.

Val knocked for the third and last time. There was still no answer. With more interest than he had shown to date he tried the door and was surprised it was not locked. Perhaps, he thought, there is no need to lock doors in this area. Maybe people don't bother. He slid the door open, beckoned to La Noire to follow and stepped inside. His hand encountered a light switch in the gloomy corridor. He turned it on. In the distance he could hear the hum of a generator. He and La Noire walked along the passage hand in hand.

"Is there anybody there?" called Val loudly and clearly. There was no answer.

"Is there anybody there," he shouted again. There was still no answer.

"It seems to be empty," said La Noire.

They tried the doors of various rooms but there was no one to be seen. Val moved up the stairs and tried the bedrooms. They too were empty.

"Let's go down again," said La Noire, "some of these old houses have cellars."

"Cellars," mused Val thoughtfully, "yes."

They reached the door of the cellar. A padlock was in place. Val fished in his pocket, produced a keyring on which, together with a number of legitimate and useful keys which answered his own personal requirements, there was a strong but flexible piece of wire.

La Noire looked at him interrogatively.

"Now with the aid of a skeleton key made from an old family skeleton," grinned Val, as he twisted the wire, "I shall proceed to do things."

The lock opened in just under a minute and a half. Val slipped it into his pocket. There had been occasions in the past when he had found himself locked in by the ungodly because he had not taken the simple precaution of taking the lock with him. Val had the professional adventurer's natural and understandable aversion to being locked inside a cellar.

He switched on some lights and he and La Noire were

surprised, as they descended, by the brightness of the illumination which somebody had provided.

"By the left!" said Stearman, "this is interesting; look, darling, this is a laboratory."

"It is not the work of an amateur either," said La Noire, "there is a lot of stuff here which some Universities would envy."

Val and La Noire went through the medical research set-up, glancing idly at pieces of elaborate and highly expensive medical equipment until they reached the further end of the cellar.

"Here!" Val paused and examined Sir Henry's deep freeze equipment with more than casual interest. He looked at the animals in the cages.

"This is very odd," he said.

"What is?" asked La Noire.

Val indicated the deep freeze equipment and the other pieces of apparatus which obviously augmented it.

"This is suspended animation gear," he said, "I doubt whether some of his experiments come exactly within the pale of the accepted fields of research."

"What do you mean?" asked La Noire.

"Well, I think one of the reasons why all this gear is hidden down in this cellar is that somebody is taking his research along channels which might not be accepted by the more rigid codes of ethics," said Val grimly.

"Well, is there anything wrong with the experiments?" asked La Noire, looking at the equipment.

"Oh, I wouldn't think so, personally," said Val, "but some people would. I'm not quite sure what the legal ruling is on this kind of work but it may not receive as much official blessing as the experimenter would like."

"This must be Sir Henry Wilder's work, you think?" asked La Noire.

"Well, unless he's got lodgers and doesn't know about it, I think it is," said Val.

"Does that name ring any bells?" asked La Noire.

"Henry Wilder," said Val, "Mmmmmn, vaguely, I seem to remember him in a bit of trouble with the B.M.A. be-

fore the war; he is not a young man by any means."

Val and La Noire moved back towards the cellar stairs. As Val began to mount he heard a door banging and the sound of angry footsteps. He glanced up and saw that the top of the stairs was barred by the figure of an elderly man with a bushy grey-white beard; he was armed with a shotgun.

"Put your hands up," quavered the old man petulantly, "and come out quickly." Val grinned and elevated his massive hands. La Noire followed him slowly up the cellar stairs.

Val reached the top; the old man backed away and now stood covering him with the gun from something like four yards distant. It was a massive old gun with royal cylinder on both barrels. Val calculated that it would have the devil's own spread. It would be a difficult weapon to avoid, especially in the close confines of the corridor, but Stearman knew that had he been covered by a dangerous assailant instead of a querulous old man it would have been child's play for him to distract his attention for a split second and draw the big Browning forty-five that never moved very far from his jacket pocket.

The Browning forty-five had the grace and balance of a panther and the devastation of a rogue bull elephant. When Stearman discharged the big automatic there were very few things indeed which were capable of withstanding that devastation. But, Val was not the kind of man who shot petulant old fogies with bushy grey-white beards, even when they were covering him with elephantine shotguns.

"You're a burglar," quavered Sir Henry, "it is a good job I returned when I did."

"I am not a burglar," said Stearman, "I'm a journalist."

"A journalist!" said the old man.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SEARCH PARTY

VAL STEARMAN looked at Sir Henry Wilder and grinned. The old man frowned peevishly.

"You're a burglar!" he repeated.

"Have you ever yet met a burglar who switches on all the lights in the house, who leaves his car parked outside your front door, and who makes no attempt to steal anything," said Stearman.

"You thought the house was empty," said the old man, accusingly. "You thought the house was empty and you were just going, that's why you didn't think it necessary to be cautious."

Stearman glanced down at his own immaculate, forty-guinea, Savile Row suit.

"Do I dress like a burglar?"

"You obviously find the crime pays," retorted the old man, petulantly. Val was keeping his temper, but with some slight difficulty.

"I'm sure if you put that gun down we could have a nice cosy chat and sort the whole thing out," he said.

"Oh yes, that's what you want," said Sir Henry. "As soon as I put the gun down you'll overpower me in some way, I know your sort, you great hulking brute!"

Val raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"All right," he said, "if I can't convince you, phone for the police, and have me locked up."

"I have no telephone," said the old man.

"That's very awkward for you," said Stearman, "What

are you going to do? Sooner or later your arms will begin to ache. You can't hold that gun up all night."

"I don't need to telephone for the police," put in the old man, "my taxi driver is outside. The young gentleman from the garage in the village, who brought me up from the station."

"Bring him in," said Stearman.

"Young man!" called Wilder, over his shoulder. The taxi driver, who was the same mechanic who had fixed Catherine's car, came in rather hesitantly and sheepishly.

"I found this chap in my cellar," said Sir Henry. "I want you to go for the police."

"If you do," warned Val, "you'll make a fool of yourself." He looked at the mechanic, "I came here in answer to a letter. I have driven nearly four hundred miles, from London; I couldn't get any answer. Having driven that distance I didn't just want to go away again, so I opened the door and shouted to see if there was anybody there. I found no one downstairs, so I went upstairs. There was no one there either, so I went down into the cellar."

"How did you get into the cellar?" demanded the old man. "The door was locked—or, it should have been!"

"I didn't have any difficulty opening the door," said Val, choosing his words with care.

The mechanic was frowning at him a little, but there was a broad open, honesty in Stearman's features which inspired confidence.

"He doesn't look like a burglar to me, Sir Henry," said the mechanic.

"Well, he does to me," asserted the eccentric old research worker.

"I'm here because your daughter wrote me a letter," said Stearman.

"I don't believe you," said the old man.

"Do you know your daughter's handwriting when you see it?"

"Yes, of course!" said Sir Henry. Val indicated his jacket pocket. "The letter's in there," he said, "can I get it out?"

"All right! We'll see this letter," consented the old man. Val put his hand in his pocket. If, he thought to himself, the situation had been a really serious one, he could have dipped his hand into the pocket and come out with a smoking .45 that would have blasted the old man and the mechanic into the next world but one! Instead, he handed the letter over, quietly.

"That's Catherine's writing," agreed the old man, blinking myopically at the letter, "and that's our paper, too. We've had that pad a long time, I know the faint bluish tinge. Yes, the letter's genuine all right. But I don't know why my daughter sent for you. She never said anything to me about these strange noises; still, there's no doubt that this is her handwriting, and the date is correct."

"Thank you," said Stearman, "do you mind if I put my hands down, now?"

"I suppose so," grudging the old man, and put the gun away. He and the mechanic-cum-taxi driver, looked at Stearman with great interest.

"So you're the redoubtable Val Stearman that we read about in the newspapers from time to time?" The garage man held out his hand. "I've always wanted to meet you, Mr. Stearman. I've read a lot about you," he went on.

"You mustn't believe everything you read in the newspapers," said Val, smiling, as he shook the man's hand.

"I'm ever so sorry we mistook you for a burglar, sir!"

"No harm done," grinned Stearman. He introduced La Noire to the mechanic and Sir Henry.

"Yes, I do apologize. I apologize for my daughter as well. I don't know why she should write such hysterical rubbish as this . . . I'm afraid you've come up here on a fool's errand Mr. Stearman."

"I don't think so," replied Val. "Why isn't your daughter in the house?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," confessed the old medical professor. "I must devote some cerebration to that problem."

"Yes, do that," said Val, "do that," he repeated, "be-

cause it's quite possible that there really is something in this!"

"There's something in what?" demanded the old man.

"Something in the noises your daughter thought she heard. After all, 'there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies'."

"That may be your opinion, but it's not necessarily mine," retorted the eccentric medical researcher.

"You only believe what you can experience with the five senses, is that right?" said Val.

"More or less, more or less."

"It takes all sorts to make a world," grunted Stearman.

It was dark outside by this time, and the old man glanced through the window at the end of the corridor.

"It's not like Catherine to go out alone after dark. I hope she hasn't met with an accident of any kind."

"I shouldn't think that's at all likely," said Stearman.

"Shall I see if the car's in the garage, Sir Henry?" asked the mechanic.

"Yes, yes, do that, please."

The garage men went out, and returned a couple of minutes later.

"The car is still there, Sir Henry."

"Oh, then she's not gone very far," said the old medical man.

"Do you think you ought to go and look for her?" suggested Stearman. "Having come all this way I should like to meet the young lady who sent for me, before going back."

"Well, all right. But I still think it's a lot of fuss about nothing."

"You don't sound very concerned over your daughter's welfare," said La Noire, with a trace of anger in her voice.

"It just so happens, young woman," snapped Sir Henry, "that I have returned from a long round of arguments and debates with various medical councils and august bodies, who deal with the financing of experimental work, and I

have not been very successful. I lack the smooth—er—er——” he was groping for a word.

“Plausibility?” suggested Stearman.

“That’s it! That’s it! The plausibility of a good negotiator,” said the old man, querulously.

In many ways Sir Henry Wilder reminded Stearman of Mac, the irascible old Scots editor of *The Globe*. Val would have liked to put the two men together and see how they got on.

“I’ll join the search party, if I’ll be of any help,” volunteered the mechanic.

“Yes, I’ll be very glad of you,” said Sir Henry. “I’m afraid I’m not as spry as I used to be.”

“Well, we’ll certainly come along,” said Val. “It’s not a very big party, even then, is it? Four of us . . . There’s an awful lot of mountain out there.”

“Would you like me to go back to the village and see if I can get two or three of my mates to come along and help?” said the voyaging mechanic.

“Well, that would be a splendid thing! Absolutely splendid!” commended Sir Henry.

The mechanic left, and drove his taxi back in the direction of the village.

“Can you tell me something of the layout of the land about here?” asked Val.

The old man fetched an Ordnance Survey map.

“There’s a mountain—at least, what we call a mountain—at the back of my house here. It goes up about two and a half thousand feet.”

“That’s quite high,” said Val.

“Not bad, not bad,” agreed the old man. “There’s a tarn at the top, and a stream runs down from the tarn and empties itself in the lake.” He was pointing out the direction of the stream on the map as he spoke.

“That’s fair enough,” said Stearman.

“On the other side of that stream valley is another mountain,” said the old man. “It also has a tarn, and the stream from that joins my stream about half-way down.

The two little rivers run down to the lake together.”

“A charming example of ‘unity is strength,” said Stearman.

“Very facetious!” said the old man.

Sir Henry Wilder was not the kind of old man who wasted time in idle pleasantries. He paused, and consulted the map.

“There are two other mountains at the back here, as you can see by the contours. There’s a third on the other side of the lake.”

“Oh, yes, I see,” said Val.

“After that, there are ranges of the things going off in every direction till you come to the coast here . . . flattens out there, naturally enough.”

“Fair enough,” commented Stearman, as he looked at the map. “The part that will concern us is this immediate area, here.”

“Right,” said the old man.

They worked out a plan for the search party to follow.

Val went to the car, and came back with a pair of powerful electric torches. The old man found a paraffin lamp with pressure pump and reflector; he also produced a large electric lantern torch.

“I expect the other chaps will bring their own lights; we are used to this sort of thing in these parts. People do get lost on the mountains after dark. Not usually residents.” He looked up rather wickedly “You can’t trust the trippers, you know, you can’t trust the trippers.”

For some reason the phrase rather annoyed Stearman. To him the human spirit was an infinitely precious thing. People were individuals. He didn’t like to hear them collectivized, patronisingly, under a collective heading like ‘trippers’; it made them sound like second-rate citizens.

He felt like taking the point up, but decided against it. He exchanged a swift, meaningful glance with La Noire. Her eyes seemed to say, ‘this poor old man is not worth arguing with.’

Val nodded almost imperceptibly, as he read the message in her beautiful, dark eyes.

Time passed, a comparatively short time, really, before the garage man and his hastily organized searchers, turned up from the village. There were over a dozen of them, including the nearest member of the Cumberland constabulary. Sir Henry and Val consulted the policeman, who nodded his approval of the plan for search formation, which the big journalist adventurer and the old medical researcher had drawn up. Val and La Noire were among the leaders of the party, and as the group fanned out, with lights and climbing sticks, the night came alive with the sounds of their voices as they called hopefully to one another.

It happened by coincidence that it was Stearman who discovered the first clue. He and La Noire flashed their lights down on to the path which their search route had just intersected. Even without a torch, Val reckoned that he could hardly have failed to see the clue. It wore post office uniform and moaned faintly and feebly as he stooped over it. His bull-throated roar carried to all the other searchers, even though their formation had now fanned out very widely.

"I've found something!"

Men began hurrying across to him, even doddery old Sir Henry was taking part, and he, together with the constable, looked down at the cruelly battered figure of the old postman.

"It's Smithy!" said the policeman angrily. "Poor old chap; he's been coshed!"

"Yes, and more than once," said Stearman. "Whoever did this thought they'd killed him."

With almost unbelievable tenderness for so strong a man, Stearman examined the wounds on the old postman's head.

"I don't think his skull is cracked," he said, "but he's very lucky."

The old postman was no lightweight, but Val's arms scooped up the inert body and lifted Smithy as easily as though he had been a rag doll.

The constable, who was an amateur weight lifter, and

Cumberland style wrestler, by way of a hobby, raised an admiring eyebrow. It required an experienced weight lifter to admire the strength and dexterity of the deceptive ease with which Stearman had lifted the postman. The old fellow moaned again, as Val settled him comfortably in his arms.

"Do you want me to give you a hand?" asked the constable.

"I'll take him the first part of the way, anyhow," said Stearman. "It'll be quicker than going back after a stretcher," he added.

As it happened, Val did more than carry the old postman the first half of the way. He didn't set the old man down until they reached a couch in Sir Henry Wilder's lounge. As well as being a researcher the owner of "Grey Gables" was still a surprisingly competent, practical medical man. He got to work on the injured postman with a finesse and dexterity that would have done credit to a surgeon in any good hospital's casualty ward. Once Sir Henry Wilder was actually engaged in something which interested him, which came within his own sphere of reference, and his own field of knowledge, gone was the pathetic bumbling attitude, with which he met everyday life. As a medical man he was so engrossed in his work he seemed to become an entirely different character. He straightened up at last with a smile of satisfaction.

"That's the best I can do for him, till we can get him to hospital."

"How badly is he hurt?" asked Val.

"He's not too good," said Sir Henry. "In fact, he's not good at all . . ." His face brightened a little, "but he's as strong as an old horse. I think he'll pull through."

"I hope so," said Val, "I feel he could have offered us a clue."

"He may regain consciousness in a few minutes," said Sir Henry. "There's no knowing. He's got some nasty concussion there, but if he does say anything, it may well prove to be nothing more than delirium."

"I think it may be an idea if we listen for a few minutes," said Val.

"By all means," said Sir Henry. Now that the actual medical work was over, he had switched automatically to his other character, unsure of himself, and on the verge of doddering, bungling efficiency. Stearman was astounded at the transformation. A few seconds passed, and then Smithy opened his eyes and stared wildly at the ceiling.

"Help!" he quavered, "help! Miss Wilder, Miss Wilder! Stop them, please!" The burly constable had his notebook out and was scribbling furiously with a fist the size of a smoked ham. Val and La Noire exchanged swift glances.

"What did he say?" asked Sir Henry, interestedly.

"He seemed to be calling your daughter," said Val grimly, "which means she probably witnessed the attack on him. Who ever dealt with him has either dealt with her in a similar way or imprisoned her somewhere."

"We'd better get out and search again," said the constable.

"Let's think about it," said Val, "instead of searching in a haphazard direction. There was a path from the house towards the other roadway—if you can call it a roadway—where we found this fellow."

"That's right," agreed the constable.

"Well, now, if Miss Wilder was coming from the house she saw the postman being attacked and perhaps ran forward to help him."

"Sort of thing I think she would do, even though I say it about my own daughter, and perhaps I shouldn't," said Sir Henry.

"Let's say she ran forward to help him," said Stearman, "and that whoever got him overpowered her as well. One of two things will have happened; they will either have bludgeoned her, the way they dealt with him, or they've put her somewhere, and the obvious place would be a cave."

"Cave?" said the policeman. He snapped his great fingers together as inspiration came to him.

"There's one up the mountain, not very far, either. It would be almost in a straight line from the place where you picked up poor old Smithy."

"What are we waiting for?" said Stearman grimly. He

clenched his enormous right fist, and crashed it into the leathery palm of his left hand. He grinned at the policeman, but there was no humour in the grin. It was the angry smile of the warrior who wants to get at the enemy.

"They may still be there," said Stearman.

Looking at the size of the big journalist-adventurer's knuckle-scarred, leathery-hard fists, the burly Cumberland constable was glad that Stearman was on his side. Another shrewd glance at Val left the big policeman thinking that this gentleman would not make an easy subject for an arrest. Val and La Noire moved out with the policeman and the rest of the search party. They were close to the front but it was the policeman who led the way. The stalwart Cumberland constable strode sure-footedly up the gradually steepening slopes until he shone his light across the aperture of a cave that looked at them blackly out of the darkness.

Val passed his torch to the constable.

"Hold this," he said grimly, and before the worthy custodian of the law could argue, Stearman shouldered his way into the cave, with the light from the torches streaming behind him.

A girl, bound and gagged, lay on the floor at the far end. Two men bent over her, but it was obvious that she was not the object of their attention. They were deep in conversation.

Stearman had never seen anything which exactly paralleled the two men whom he saw now, but one glance was enough to tell him that they were either from another planet, or another epoch, another era of time.

They stood as he entered, and blinked angrily in the light of the torches which the policeman and La Noire were holding.

"Does he want any help?" the policeman asked La Noire. She smiled in the glimmer of the torchlight around them.

"I don't think so," she murmured.

"I feel I should be in there, that's my job," said the constable.

"You're doing more good holding the light, just for a second," replied La Noire.

Reluctantly, the policeman remained where he was.

"At least, we're cutting off their exit," he said, as though the thought represented some kind of sap to his conscience. Val moved purposefully towards the two strange looking characters with the shining helmets.

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CHAPTER NINE

THE CAVE

THE two strange figures apparently recovered a little from their surprise and moved towards Stearman with unmistakably hostile gestures. One of them said something in a language which sounded so like English that Val guessed immediately that it was English, but it was *an English that had not yet been developed*. It was the English of some future time. He wondered how well he would have been able to make himself understood in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries . . . The recognizability of the language, however, was such, that he guessed it was not more than three or four centuries in advance of his own time. One of the two gleaming helmeted figures dived a hand beneath its cloak and drew a conical, metallic device, which Stearman guessed was some kind of weapon. The thing looked

vicious and ugly. The strange, futuristic gun, as Val guessed it to be, was actually trained at him when he went for the big Browning automatic. Before the gleaming helmeted stranger could activate the firing mechanism of his conical weapon, Val Stearman's Browning had exploded with a cacophonous noise, in the narrow confines of the cave, and an accompanying potent effect.

The bullet took the strangely clad being in the shoulder of the arm that held the gun. He gave a whimpering cry and the conical weapon slid from nerveless fingers to the floor of the cave. The other futurian drew a long cylindrical rod from a belt beneath its cloak, and brandishing it like a cosh, ran wildly towards Val Stearman.

Val did not want to risk another shot in the narrow confines of the cave, in case an unfortunate ricochet should hit the girl, and there was something in his nature which was loth to use fire power on a man who was intent on mixing hand-to-hand. Val would not have felt that he had really won unless he could beat his opponent hand-to-hand. There would be no satisfaction in gunning down a man when a personal struggle was indicated and possible. Val caught the wrist of the hand that held the cosh. It was obvious to him in that second, from the way in which his opponent was brandishing the weapon, that this had been the device that the futurian had used on the poor old postman. Stearman was angered. He was more than angry, he was furious. His temper rose like the aroma of an aged Chinese culinary egg. He swung sharply, with a great deal of his enormous strength against his opponent's wrist. A neat move as well as a powerful one . . .

Val Stearman would have been able to earn his living in the professional wrestling ring quite comfortably, if he had not chosen the life of a journalist-adventurer.

His assailant cartwheeled through the air as Val executed an Irish whip. Unfortunately for the futurian, there was not enough room to turn the somersault in the confines of the cave. His heels scraped the ceiling, and instead of cartwheeling round to fall on his back, he fell on his face

with Stearman still holding his wrist.

It was not strictly accurate to say that he fell on his face, thought Val, looking down at his assailant. He had fallen face downwards, but the helmet had taken the worst of the shock. To Val's surprise the futurian took the fall considerably better than Stearman had anticipated. Bundling himself up into a tight ball he rolled forward at such speed that his wrist slipped from Stearman's grasp. This in itself was a highly unusual thing. It occurred to Val that language wasn't the only thing that had developed over the years, or from whatever distance in the future these strange, gleaming-helmeted characters had returned.

It was obvious to Val that the noble art of self-defence, in the widest possible meaning of that term, had also progressed, and he wondered what other tricks the metal-helmeted gentleman had up his sleeve.

The futurian had retrieved his cosh, and now, diving low, he struck towards Val's ankles. It was a crippling blow and it made Stearman angrier than he had been before. There wasn't much room to dodge in the narrow confines of the cave mouth, but Stearman did just manage to twist himself aside as the vicious, cylindrical rod whistled past his feet. As it went past he brought a knee up into the stooping face of the cosh wielder. He felt that he had got somewhere; there was a solid, satisfying sound of impact. The futurian staggered back with his hands across his face. In that position he presented an ideal target. Val went in again close. His knee came up in the futurian's stomach and the wind went out with the sound of air escaping from a punctured balloon. The other futurian, the would-be gunman, was on his knees, groping and grovelling about, for the conical hand weapon which Stearman's bullet had taken from his grasp. Val was in no mood to be friendly or merciful. He was not feeling particularly humane just at that time. His imagination and his memory were filled with vivid pictures of a harmless old Cumberland postman viciously, and as far as Stearman could tell, quite unnecessarily coshed. The very senselessness of the crime made

him doubly angry. The hard edge of his great right hand came down in a judo blow with paralysing force. Val's hand was not as hard as the hands of *Kami-kazi* and *Karati* experts—those deadly fighters who can chop with the side of their hands hard enough to break a two-inch oak plank—but Stearman's hand was, nevertheless, hard and tough. It landed like the blow of a meat axe on the shoulder which had not received the benefit of a high velocity bullet from a Browning automatic.

The injured futurian gave another whimpering cry and lapsed into a crouching, cringing heap in the corner of the cave. Stearman kicked the conical weapon back towards the door, La Noire leaned forward, picked it up deftly, and slid it into her handbag before the bulky Cumberland constable could utter a word of protest.

Val scooped up the winded, breathless futurian and sat him against the wall, then, ignoring the two metal helmeted men whom he had just defeated, he picked up the girl and carried her back to the mouth of the cave, where La Noire and the burly constable set about undoing her gag. Catherine Wilder's first thoughts were not for herself, but for the postman and even before she paused to thank Val for rescuing her she asked whether they had found Smithy.

"Yes, we found him, Miss Wilder," replied the constable. "Your father's patched him up something wonderful! He's in hospital by this time."

"I'm so glad," said the girl. "I was afraid they'd killed him. The brutes! *The brutes!*" She turned to Val. "I hope I don't sound vicious, but you gave them no more than they deserved! The poor old man! They coshed him and coshed him; then they kicked him, and he didn't do anything to them!" She was almost crying in her indignation. "And Smithy's such a nice old man, he's so friendly. Everybody likes him. It just isn't fair; it isn't right!"

"I think they've had a little taste of their own medicine, Miss Wilder," said the constable.

"Perhaps I'd better introduce myself," said Val. "I wouldn't have been here if you hadn't written a certain

letter. Does that ring any bells?"

"You're Val Stearman!" The girl's eyes opened wide as she sat in the mountain cave entrance, rubbing her wrists and ankles to restore the circulation. "I wrote to you about the mysterious doings in the house."

"That's right," agreed Val.

Old Sir Henry had come puffing up to the cave mouth in time to hear his daughter's last remark.

"I'm afraid I nearly shot your Mr. Stearman. I thought he was a burglar, my dear!" said Sir Henry. "He was coming up the cellar steps when I found him."

Catherine's face darkened for a moment at mention of the cellar. Angry memories of finding Pippin in one of her father's experimental cages, creased her face into a hostile frown. But the mood passed. It was swept away by the girl's excitement at meeting Val, and finding that he was very much as she had imagined him to be from his articles. The paralysis which had affected the shoulder of the futurian whom Stearman had chopped, was apparently wearing off. The constable gave a sudden cry of warning and began moving into the cave.

Val followed him swiftly. The futurian was fiddling with something that was part of his helmet. The other thug had apparently recovered a little from the terrific beating which Stearman had administered and was making similar movements.

Scarcely a yard separated them from the constable when both men began *to fade*. There was no other way of describing it. Their bodies took on a translucent appearance, then only the transparent outlines of men in gleaming helmets could be seen against the cave wall. A few seconds more and there was nothing to be seen at all.

Val and La Noire, together with the constable, old Sir Henry, and several of the other searchers, found themselves looking in amazement at the spot where the futurians had been.

"They've gone!" exclaimed Val, "gone back to their own time!"

"Their own time?" ejaculated the constable. "I don't understand, sir!"

"I believe that those men were from the future," said Val. "They hadn't travelled through space, officer, they had travelled through *time*."

"That's impossible," said the constable, stolidly.

"Nevertheless, I'm afraid that's what they've done," said Val.

"Travelled through time?" said the burly custodian of the law. "It's like something out of a book, sir."

"Yes, I'm afraid it is," agreed Val, "only in this case it happens to be reality."

"Mezak," whispered Catherine Wilder. "He said he was from the future. He said I was to be very careful if I saw anyone dressed like him. I was to keep away from them, he said they would be dangerous."

"What's all this about, then? Who's Mezak?" asked the constable.

"May I suggest that we all go back to 'Grey Gables' and discuss it there? It would be warmer for one thing, and a lot more comfortable," said old Sir Henry Wilder.

"Yes, yes; it would be a good idea," agreed Val.

"I must confess I'm very confused by the whole business," said the constable.

They descended from the mountain, climbing down carefully towards Sir Henry's vast old grey stone house. At the door the constable paused.

"I don't think I'll come in, if you'll excuse me, Sir Henry, I'll get back to the village and write out my report. I'll come and see you again in the morning." He grinned sheepishly. "To be quite honest, I'm so confused, that if you try to explain it to me tonight I shall get so much *more* confused . . ."

"I don't blame you," said Stearman.

"I shall just say in my official report that two men we had apprehended escaped under very peculiar circumstances," said the constable.

"Yes, you do that," said Val.

The search party stayed for a few minutes while Sir Henry broached his whisky cupboard and gave them that which kept out the chill of the night air. When the last of the search party had left, Val, La Noire, Catherine and her father, gathered in Sir Henry's study.

"Tell me more about this Mezak fella," invited Sir Henry. He sounded interested, really interested, thought Val, and a lot of the vagueness had dropped from him like a cloak. The man changed as rapidly as a chameleon, thought Stearman.

Briefly, Catherine explained about the voice that she had heard, and the strange figure who had appeared near the angle of the corridor. Mezak sounded to Val a thoroughly genuine and benevolent character. The big journalist adventurer was already putting facts together in his mind. Mezak was very probably some kind of policeman, or government enforcement agent, working in *time* for his own society.

Stearman was trying desperately to think of some reason why metal helmeted assassins should have tried to kill the harmless old postman. Thinking of it from a teleological point of view Val got the impression that the time terrorists were possibly working on a singularly ingenious and fiendish form of assassination. The idea was still nebulous in Val's mind, but it made a reasonable kind of scene to him. His thoughts were interrupted by a sudden cry from the corridor outside.

Stearmans' fast reactions—though a trifle slower than they had been in his youth—took him to the door first. There, in the corridor, leaning dazedly against the wall, and with blood coming from a nasty gash on his forehead, stood a metal helmeted figure. His features were a little different from those of the two would-be assassins whom Stearman had trounced in the cave.

Catherine ran past Val with a wild cry.

"Mezak, *Mestk!*" she shouted, and rushed towards the wounded man. He staggered towards them. Val reached them, too, as Catherine put her arms around Mezak, and

the big journalist adventurer supported the injured futurian. Mezak looked weakly into Val's face.

"Help me, whoever you are. Help me!" He panted.

"Hide me, I'm outnumbered. It's essential they don't find me. Not just for my sake—essential—thousands depend—depend——" his voice was faltering.

"All right," said Stearman, "we'll hide you."

"T-t-take him into the b-b-bedroom," stuttered old Sir Henry. "This one," he pointed from the foot of the stairs to a door visible at the top.

Val scooped the injured futurian up in his arms, hurried up the stairs with him, and carried him to the bed in the room which Sir Henry had indicated. He closed the door quickly and came out.

"If they're after him they'll probably materialize in the same spot. It's obviously the end of a time transmitter that they've rigged up," said Stearman.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when metal-helmeted figures began appearing in the corridor very close to the spot where Mezak had materialized. Stearman clenched his massive fists and stood like a lion at bay.

CHAPTER TEN

A TIME TO COME . . .

VAL STEARMAN in the course of a long and chequered career had been in as many tight spots as a flea in the fur of a small leopard. Now, as he looked at the metal helmeted futurians he wondered whether he had ever been in quite so tight a spot as this. He thought of the old Greek legend of the weird troops who had appeared when the dragon's teeth were sown, and thought there was a terrible similarity between the predicament of that Hellenist hero and his own present environment.

As the metal-helmeted futurians appeared out of no-

where, as though by some ghastly process of spontaneous generation, Stearman wondered just how many there were going to be.

There had been occasions in the past when time had definitely been on Val's side. Now, as he looked at the growing ranks of the opposition, he realized that on this occasion, both literally and metaphorically, *time* was not on his side! That being the case, decided Val, the best form of defence was to attack. He leapt down the corridor like an angry bull of Bashan. There were times—there were frequent times—when Val Stearman, journalist and adventurer extraordinary, would fight with skill, cleanliness and a *finesse* which would have delighted the sporting heart of the Marquis of Queensbury. There were other occasions, usually to be gauged by the size of the opposition, when Stearman regretfully disregarded the sporting Marquis' code of conduct and went into battle with the sole intention of winning. It was as though some deep jungle instinct from countless generations back, surged up in his blood and took temporary control of his mind.

Against the unknown quantity which now confronted him, Stearman's deep, ferocious, jungle instinct took over. It was the pithecanthropic part of his mind which now seized his volition and activated his will. Val Stearman at any time was formidable. Val Stearman in a wild fury of the kind that had delighted the chroniclers of the old Irish heroes, was as close as any man of flesh and blood could come to being a completely invincible fighting machine.

The sheer speed and fury of his charge took the nearest of the emerging futurians with the force of a battering ram being applied to a thin balsa wood sheet. The metal helmeted futurian folding up in the middle and was flung backwards to land in an incongruous sitting position, dazed, winded and *hors de combat* for some considerable time. Before that first shock of impact was lost, Stearman's left hand, its fingers pointed like the edge of a dangerous trowel, had jabbed into the throat of the next nearest

futurian. His right crooked around the throat of the man on that side, and he pin-wheeled around so that his hip came under the futurian's back. A deft heave and Stearman executed a cross-buttock throw of such viciousness that the futurian lay senseless as his metal helmet struck the floor. All this had happened in less time than it takes to write or to read. Three of the futurians were out of the fight before they had had a chance to make a move for a weapon, or to do anything at all to antagonize Val Stearman. His steel hard knee came up with a resounding thwack into the stomach of the fourth futurian and the hard edge of his right hand chopped down in a vicious rabbit punch at the neck of the fifth man. The two futurians joined the incongruous heap on the floor. Stearman picked up number six as though he were a rag dummy in one of the old, silent epics, beloved of Chaplin and Keystone. With the real life dexterity of a swashbuckling hero from a "cliff-hanger" serial, Val crashed the futurian whom he held into the heart of the group which was still upright. The group collapsed with the obliging facility of a stack of cards or dominoes. Val, grinning delightedly, gave the kind of war whoop that would have delighted his ancestors of three millenia ago. Boring in with the fury of Neanderthal man, and with his jaw set in a fair impersonation of the spurious Piltdown skull, Val piled on top of the group whom he had just sent sprawling. At close quarters his great fists travelled scarcely six inches, but they travelled with the speed of the piston rods of a high powered engine. When Stearman hit a man, that man drifted into the arms of Morpheus, to remain there for some considerable period of time. Val had delivered three such blows within as many seconds of landing on top of the sprawling heap.

He felt somebody trying to wriggle up into a standing position. His iron-hard legs hooked the futurian's feet from under him, and as the man crashed down, Stearman applied a wrestler's scissor grip to the futurian's soft ribs. There was a sound as though a melon had been run over by a

steam roller. It was a very satisfying, squashing sound. The futurian's face changed colour and Stearman relaxed the bisecting scissor-hold and kicked the man clear. He took two of the metal helmets in his hand and clanged them together in such a way that it was the heads below them, and not the helmets, that took the main force of the impact. There were the sounds of cranium contacting cranium, in a way that reminded Stearman of coconuts being hit with hard wooden balls at a fun fair. The two men, for whose heads he had arranged the collision, drifted into a state of sleep. Val scrambled to his feet, and stood leaning against the wall panting heavily. One of the futurians whom he had downed had been groping for a weapon. He had been doing it with an unpleasant degree of concealment. Stearman's eyes flashed in the futurian's direction but he was not quite quick enough. Before he could make a move, however, Sir Henry Wilder, who had shuffled off to fetch his shotgun whilst Stearman had been fighting the futurians, let fly with a royal cylinder from devastatingly close range. The metal helmeted stranger who had been fumbling for his gun, gave a wild, convulsive scream, and lay still. An ominous pool of blood began to spread from beneath his prone figure.

"Thanks!" shouted Stearman. Old Sir Henry, trembling a little, covered the rest of them with the gun. No one spoke. The old man's eyes gleamed brightly. There was no need for anyone to speak . . .

Stearman was breathing heavily as he looked at the group.

"May I see what you have done to him?" asked one of the futurians, in recognizable English, although the inflection was strange, pointing to the inert form of the man whom Sir Henry Wilder had shot.

Without taking his bright old eyes off the main body of the group Sir Henry motioned with a spare finger to signify his approval. The futurian bent over his injured companion. He straightened up.

"He is alive, but seriously wounded."

"As far as I am concerned," replied Sir Henry, petulantly, "you can take him back wherever you came from. The sooner the better!"

"Do you think we ought to let them go?" asked Catherine.

"I've a good mind to shoot some more of them," said the old man, menacingly. His voice, although thin and reedy, held a note of menace which it was impossible for the dispirited futurians to ignore. There was an ominous murmuring among them, and then, before Val, La Noire or Sir Henry could make a move, the futurians began to fade. It was exactly the same effect which Val had observed in the cave when he had fought two previous assassins—the futurians who had captured the girl. There was nothing they could do except watch; within a few seconds nothing at all remained of the would-be assassins, except the barely discernible shimmering in the air. Another half minute passed, and then, even that had gone. There was nothing. Not even a spot of blood on the floor to show them that the whole incredible adventure had taken place. Val had recovered his breath, and now he looked enquiringly at La Noire.

"What do you suggest we do now?" he enquired.

"I think it's about time we had some kind of explanation," she said.

"So do I," agreed Val.

"I think we ought to go and see Mezak," said the old man. "He may well be able to tell us something by this time."

Val, La Noire, Catherine and her father, made their way upstairs to the room where the wounded Mezak lay hidden. When they reached the bed, they found that he was sitting up, looking considerably better.

"You have made a very astonishing recovery," said Sir Henry.

"I haven't completed it," answered Mezak.

"Your metabolic rate is nearly back to normal," said the old man. "It was quite low when you staggered in here."

"We carry a certain amount of zip packs with us," said Mezak, guardedly.

"Medical equipment, you mean?" said Sir Henry, interrogatively.

"That's, right," agreed Mezak.

"Do you think I might see some?"

"I'm afraid not. I would like to be able to give it you, but,"—and Mezak's eyes looked sad—"one of the things I am here to prevent is the passing on of information out of its teleological context."

"You mean your job is to prevent things getting out of their time sequence, eh?" asked old Sir Henry. Listening to him, Catherine was amazed at the shrewdness in her father's voice. Gone was the weary uncertainty to which she was accustomed. Mezak looked around the group.

"I was listening to the noises," he said. "I feel very guilty about having brought this trouble on you."

"Trouble?" said Val, with a grin. "Who said anything about trouble?"

Mezak looked Stearman straight in the eye.

"You like fighting?" he said. It was part question, part statement.

"I like fighting, I like drinking," he looked at La Noire, "I like women." La Noire pursed her lips a little.

"I also like eating . . . Is there anything else in life?" Val was being facetious, but just for a second Mezak looked at him and wondered whether the big journalist-adventurer had posed the question seriously.

"I think that I owe you some kind of explanation," said Mezak.

"We would be most interested if you felt that you were in a position to tell us something about yourself," said Sir Henry.

"It's like this," said the futurian. "I am a Time Patrol agent. My own time is 2320."

"2320" repeated the old man, and did a swift calculation, "that's about 360 years in the Future."

"That's it," agreed Mezak.

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"Quite a long way," said Sir Henry.

"In my world," went on Mezak, "we have central world government, global government."

"Good old 'Globe'," said Stearman with a grin.

"Pardon?" queried Mezak.

"I'm being funny again," said Val, "or trying to. I work for a paper called the *Daily Globe*."

"Oh, the *Daily Globe*." Mezak heaved a sigh, as though he were a little nostalgic.

"I hadn't better press that question any further," said Val. "Besides, I think I already know the answer. Maybe the answer I think I know belongs to a period that's more remote than yours. Let that pass."

Mezak continued his story.

"Now, our world government is democratic. I'm not asking you to believe that it's perfect, but I'm asking you to believe that it is a fair government and a good government in the main. You know the old saying about not being able to please all the people all the time . . ."

"Well, I don't know it in quite that form," said Stearman, "but I know what you're driving at."

"We do keep the majority happy for most of the time, at least we try to," said Mezak, "and I think that with all their faults the majority of the politicians are doing a fair job. But there is a resurgence of something that you would understand best by the term 'Facism'—"

"You mean a ruthless, totalitarian sort of organization?" asked Stearman.

"Yes, some would-be totalitarians."

"That sounds bad," said Val.

"The old idea of the super race, with the rest of the people of the world subordinate to it, among other things," said Mezak.

"I don't like that," commented Stearman.

"No, and neither do we. In fact, although this neo-Fascist organization is small—pathetically small—it is dangerous out of all proportion to its size, because of the ruthlessness and the fanaticism of its members."

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"That makes sense," said Stearman. "We suffer from those troubles, even today."

"This organization," went on Mezak, "is doing its best to assassinate the leaders of our democratic world government. They won't succeed."

"Why not?" asked Val.

"Although I said they were ruthless and fanatical," said Mezak, "in their own way they are quite efficient. Our security is, as near as matters, impenetrable . . ."

La Noire snapped her fingers.

"I think I'm beginning to get ahead of you," she said.

"So?" asked Mezak, with a curious inflection.

"Are these neo-Fascists trying to assassinate the leaders of the democratic world government by going back through time and killing their ancestors?" asked La Noire.

"That's it exactly," said Mezak.

"I see," commented Val.

"Time is only open to Time Patrol agents, uniformed men like myself. Members of the patrol are the only ones allowed near a Time Ward transmitter, or a Time ship."

"I understand," said Stearman, "this means that those other characters that I just dealt with are dressed like you because they have stolen uniforms from the Time Patrol, or had them duplicated, or something like that."

"I don't know whether the uniforms have been stolen or copied, but they've got that kind of wild courage that enables them to slip past the security on the Time Warps and the Time Ships."

"I see," said Stearman.

Catherline looked thoughtful.

"But the man they tried to kill was old Smithy the postman," she said. "He's sixty and a bachelor . . ."

"We don't often disclose the future, to people in the past," said Mezak, "but it's on record that old Smithy is destined to marry next year, a much younger woman. They'll have two children. One of those children is the direct ancestress of one of the most important figures in the present world government. If Smithy was killed before

he married, then that government leader—and a great many other people, too, would disappear in rather nasty puffs of smoke! I'm speaking metaphorically and allegorically but if anything happens in the past it must affect the future. Normally the Time Patrol agent merely observes. He doesn't actually penetrate the living fabric, the exact Time Vibration of any particular period that he is observing. He only does so when he is aware that unauthorized Time Travellers are there. It is then his job to get those unauthorized travellers back before they can do any damage."

"I see," said Stearman, thoughtfully.

Sir Henry had moved up beside the bed and was taking the Time Patrol agent's pulse quietly and unobtrusively; Sir Henry had a gloriously Edwardian bedside manner. His beard wagged up and down on his chest as he spoke.

"Despite whatever wonder medicine this young man may have in his pack," said the medical research worker, "he's tiring himself with all this talking. I'm as anxious to hear his explanation as any of the rest of you, but it's time he slept now."

"Yes, I do feel a little tired," agreed Mezak.

He settled down comfortably.

Catherine fetched him hot water bottles and a glass of milk. He thanked her and smiled. She put one hand on his brow. Sir Henry had stitched the wound expertly, and this, combined with the incredible medicines which were part of Mezak's emergency pack from the 24th century, had gone a long way towards healing the wound. Val, La Noire and Sir Henry left the room. Catherine turned out the light and sat beside Mezak's bed for a few minutes, his hand in hers and her thoughts centred entirely on him as he dropped off into a deep refreshing sleep.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

... AND A TIME TO GO

CATHERINE was still sitting beside Mezak's bed a few hours later when the futuristic Time Patrol agent awoke.

He looked at her in the semi-darkness. Her eyes were accustomed to the gloom, and she knew that he was smiling at her.

"Mezak," she whispered softly, "I know that by the standards of your own time I must seem an uncultured, uncivilized female savage—"

"Of course not," said Mezak, "whatever gave you that idea?"

"I just thought I might be. Then, by the standards of your Time I must be appallingly ignorant. I know nothing of your culture or your society. I know nothing of your civilization and its complexity, but I feel as though I could talk to you as I couldn't talk to anyone from my own time. Do you know how easy it is to pour out troubles to a complete stranger?"

"I have heard of such things," he replied, noncommittally.

"Well, I suppose the 'completer' the stranger is——" she laughed, "What I'm really trying to say is that the further away the stranger is from—— Oh, dear, I haven't put that very well, either, have I?"

"I know what you're trying to say," Mezak encouraged her. "Go on, Catherine, say it, you'll feel so much better." Their eyes met in the semi-darkness. She reached out a hand and turned on the little bedside light. It gave a soft, pink glow.

"I've been very lonely for years," she said. "I've never

had a boy friend, like other girls. I don't know why. I've danced with boys and talked to them, but there was never anyone serious; there was never anything steady. All my heroes lived in books. All my romance was the romance of literature, films or television. I never had a real romance of my own. Living here in this lonely old house, father being so wrapped up in his research work," she laughed softly. "He's fanatical when he's talking about something he's interested in, but otherwise, it's as if he had switched his brain off."

"I think I understand," murmured Mezak softly.

"Then you came along, just out of nowhere," said Catherine. "I know I shouldn't be saying this, but I've got to . . . You came along, just as though it was magic, or an answer to my prayer."

"It's very flattering to think I'm an answer to someone's prayer," rejoined Mezak, smiling.

"You're laughing at me," accused Catherine.

"No, I'm not," he assured her.

"I think I *love* you," she blurted out, suddenly. There was silence for a few moments.

"And does this make you sad?" he asked.

"I don't know how it makes me feel," said Catherine. "I'm—I'm—confused——" she hesitated.

"Can I help you?"

"Mezak, you're not making it very easy for me!"

"It is not very easy for me, either," said the Time Patrol agent. His face was soft and gentle as he looked at her in the subdued light. "You see, Catherine, I think that I love you, too. The training of a Time Patrol agent is a long and rigorous business. We live somewhat spartan lives. It is not easy for us to meet girls. Like you, I am lonely. My work keeps me very fully occupied. There is no shortage of ambitions and goals to strive for. My life is full of excitement and adventure. I see not only the world of my own day, but great stretches of the past, wonderful stretches of the past, thrilling epochs and eras are open to me. All the same, a man can be in

the midst of a great many people and still feel lonely, deep down within himself. The body can be surrounded by crowds of other bodies, but unless the soul, the mind, is making contact, unless the *psyche* is able to make contact with other *psyches*, then there is no real communication; there is no real communion, and without communication and communion there is no real living. I have never been able to communicate as much as I would like to have done. Much of my training has been technical in nature. My acquaintances have been fellow students, who have all been busy with their own studies. We have been denied the opportunity for social development, which is granted to other trades and professions, and other forms of training. I am not complaining. I am not complaining about my lot. I *chose* to be a Time Patrol agent. It is a great honour to be accepted and trained as a Time Patrol agent. I would not change my job for any other, but I am saying that, like you, I have experienced loneliness, a certain starvation of basic emotions—basic emotions which are essential to the development of a full, rounded, mature, human personality.” He smiled. “Rather a long speech, isn’t it?”

“Please go on.”

“I said,” continued Mezak, “that you made it difficult for me.”

“How *difficult*?” asked the girl.

“If—as we suspect—we really are in love with one another, then, as far as I know, our love is destined to be the sad and unfulfilled love. We are a Romeo and Juliet, a Troilus and Cressida.”

“Why?” asked Catherine. “*Why*?”

“It is not that we are born in different times that keeps us apart because of our cultural backgrounds, and our societies. You could soon learn to live in my century, I could learn to live in yours . . .”

“Then what is the difficulty?” demanded Catherine.

“The difficulty is, that as a Time Patrol agent I am bound to see that the smallest possible quantity of interference takes place in Time. Just think what would happen

if I were to take you back with me to 2320. Suppose that you were destined, unbeknown to me, to marry some man in this century, to have children who would become the ancestors of many people in our own time.

“The further back you go in Time the more descendants are dependent upon a common ancestor, or ancestress. If I took you now to my own century, and thereby prevented you from marrying a man whom you should have married in this century, prevented you from having the children you should have had in this century, do you realize how many people would vanish as though they had never been?”

She shook her head.

“It could well amount to hundreds!” said Mezak, vehemently, “and much as we might believe we love each other, would we dare to think we have the right to deny life to three hundred people, perhaps more, in the future?”

Tears sprang to Catherine’s eyes.

“You understand why I cannot take you with me? I must not alter the past. I must not take you through a Time Warp.”

“Is there no other way that I could reach you?” she asked.

“I can think of none,” he said quietly. She heaved a long, weary sigh.

“*None*?” she asked again.

“The only legal way for you to reach the future, that I can think of, would be to get there entirely on your own, and without any help from any future age, which would count out any advice I could give you. Construct a Time Machine. If you did that, working on your own, you would not have contravened any of the Time Travel regulations.”

“Has anybody ever done such a thing?”

He shook his head.

“No!”

“Is it possible that I could?”

“It is almost incredibly unlikely that you could invent a machine in your own Time. If you had the necessary knowledge the technical barriers are practically insurmountable

in this century." Catherine was still crying.

"I must come with you," she said. "I've *got* to be with you."

"It is time that I returned," said Mezak. "I am strong enough now to make the journey. The longer I stay the more difficult I make things for you."

"How will you go?"

"As far as you are concerned I will walk to the angle of the corridor and vanish," he said quietly.

He got out of bed and gathered his cloak around him.

Suddenly, for one glorious moment out of time, he and Catherine were in each other's arms. He kissed her long and tenderly. When at last they released each other he whispered, "Good-bye," in a low, sad voice, turned, strode from the bedroom, down the stairs, and into the corridor.

Catherine came as far as the head of the stairs and looked after his retreating back.

"Oh, Mezak, Mezak," she muttered. It was as though the whole of her soul was in that soft murmuring of his name. It was dark in the corridor. She fancied she could still see him.

She descended the stairs and turned on the light; for one brief instant she saw a faint image of the man she loved. Then *nothing* . . . The corridor was empty. *Mezak was gone.*

Catherine went back to her own room, flung herself down on the bed and sobbed bitterly into her pillow.

There had to be an answer, she told herself there had to be an answer.

Pippin came and rubbed himself against her comfortingly. At the touch of his black fur an idea was born in Catherine's brain. Her father's equipment! Her father's deep freeze, his refrigeration; suspended animation experiment! *That* was her way into the future without contravening the Time laws! If she put herself into suspended animation then she would be able to sleep through the centuries until Mezak's time. He would awaken her like Prince Charming awakened Snow-white, after she had eaten the

poisoned apple. He would awaken her as the Prince had awakened the Sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale. In Catherine Wilder's present mood to think was to act.

She rose from the bed and tiptoed softly and furtively down to the cellar door below. She held the key of the padlock in her hand, the key that she had originally found and secreted in her apron pocket. Now, to her, it was more than a key to the door of the cellar. It was the key to the future!

Catherine's A level biology gave her more than an amateur inkling into the workings of the machinery, although, as she had realized on her earlier visit, a great deal of the equipment that her father had in the cellar laboratory was completely beyond her understanding.

What knowledge she had of biology was giving her the basic facts of the equipment that she was going to try to use. She knew that freezing had to be very rapid if the subject was to be restored without damage being done to the highly delicate cells of the brain. She looked at her father's equipment and saw where the main switches were located. She turned them on. A faint humming filled the cellar. She looked at the largest of the reception cabinets. Would it be big enough she asked herself. She realized that if she lay on the base of the cabinet with her knees drawn up a little she ought to be able to fit into it.

She let the machine run for a few moments to be quite certain that it was freezing at maximum capacity. She was wondering about the revival process. This always presented the greatest possible difficulty, she knew, in theory. Whether her father had overcome it she had no idea. If the thawing was not practically as instantaneous as the freezing, then the result of attempting to restore the suspended animation would merely be the death of the subject. She hoped that Twenty-fourth Century medicine was as good as Mezak had led her to believe. She hoped that her father would not try to restore her. She hoped that nobody else would bring her out of her trance before Mezak could reach her. She knew that the suspended animation cham-

ber was her only chance of reaching the future without contravening the Time laws. She knew, too, that all the odds pointed to her death rather than to her revival in the century she longed to reach.

She placed herself tentatively in the freezing chamber and lay back. Her hair spread out behind her. She placed her hands in her lap, closed her eyes, and was aware, not so much of a sensation of cold, as a powerful sensation of numbness. Even if she had wanted to she could not now have climbed from the chamber.

The numbness and darkness crept over her. 'Crept' was hardly the word, they were moving much faster than that. Consciousness faded from her. She lay as though asleep. Her heart ceased to beat; the blood stopped circulating. Every nerve and sinew, every tissue, every part of her metabolic process stopped. The temperature in the freezing chamber was very low indeed, far far below zero. It was the kind of temperature which could only be measured in degrees absolute and not many of them!

Catherine lay entirely motionless in that freezing compartment. She was utterly devoid of feeling, completely without sensation.

Time meant nothing to her any more . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE TRUST

SIR HENRY WILDER rose at his usual hour and made his way to the cellar as was his wont. Sir Henry was an early riser, and like so many men of his generation, he believed that a good stint of work before breakfast was not only beneficial to the health and appetite, but was, in some way, a commendable trait in the character. He was sur-

prised to find the padlock unfastened and his frown deepened as he made his way down the steps. The lights were burning. Sir Henry's eyes narrowed as he walked past the rows of trays and equipment until they focused clearly on what must have happened. He knew now what had become of the missing key. It was obvious that Catherine had picked it up. If it wasn't Catherine, who was it? It didn't seem quite so obvious as he gave it some deeper thought. The journalist adventurer Stearman had got into the cellar without difficulty, but then, a man like Stearman, reflected Sir Henry, did not seem the type of man who would be kept out of anything by mere locks and bolts. As Sir Henry thought about Stearman, he realized that the journalist adventurer was not the type of man who could be kept *in* by locks and bolts, either, if he did not wish to be kept in! What Val's nefarious skill failed to accomplish, thought Sir Henry, his massive, muscular physique could probably achieve. The door that Stearman could not unfasten by stealth he would unfasten by brute force, and, reflected Sir Henry, 'unfasten' in that sense would be an euphemism. 'Shatter' would be a more appropriate verb. His thoughts of Val Stearman cut off suddenly, as he paused at the suspended animation chamber, and listened to the whirring of the deep freeze motor. In the chamber he saw the stiff body of Catherine.

He looked down in dumb disbelief and helpless amazement.

"Catherine," he called, helplessly.

He looked down at the motionless figure of his daughter in the icy tomb, in which she had placed herself. Old Sir Henry fell down on his knees beside the equipment. His beard rested on his chest. He looked like some strangely sad Old Testament prophet, praying that a national disaster should be averted from his beloved people.

"Catherine," he sobbed, again and again. Tears trickled down his face, lodged in his beard like shining pearls and then fell slowly to the floor, below the freezing chamber. One, heavier than the others, trickled up to the end of the

suspended animation chamber itself despite the insulation of the suspended animation area; the tear froze into a solid white pearl of misted ice. Sir Henry blinked and looked at it. It seemed significant to him. He got slowly to his feet again and looked carefully at the equipment.

"What a process!" he murmured. "What a process!"

He consulted the dials very carefully and went over to a small table. Still blinking back his tears, he began making a series of calculations.

He was half-way through them when a shadow fell across the desk at which he worked. He glanced up, only half-seeing, and scarcely caring who it was. Val Stearman looked down at the old man. La Noire stood a little way behind her enormous husband. Val glanced into the deep freeze chamber and drew in a sharp, sudden breath. For a moment his eyes narrowed angrily, then he spotted the distress on the old man's face.

"She did this *herself*?" said Stearman. It was part question, part statement.

"Yes," moaned Sir Henry. There is no other way to describe the sound that was torn from his agonized lips. "Yes, Mr. Stearman, she did it herself."

"But why?" asked Val.

"Oh, darling," said La Noire, "can't you understand?"

"Can you?" asked the big journalist.

His beautiful Cleopatrine wife nodded her head slowly. Her dark hair moved with irresistible beauty as she inclined her head. Her dark eyes rested first on Val and then on Sir Henry.

"Yes, I understand what's happened."

"But how?" demanded Val.

"Because I'm a woman."

Sir Henry looked at Stearman's wife.

"Tell me," he begged, "please tell me. I'm a fool, an old, very stubborn fool. I've neglected my child, as I neglected my wife before her, that's why she left me. I've been a fanatic; I've lived for one thing, my work. *Research!* I think it's been an escape. Work often is an escape, you

know; a man who is afraid to face life keeps himself too busy to stop to think. Work is a more suitable analgesic than a round of pleasure. Besides, it's less expensive! It's not as dangerous as drugs; it's not as degrading as too much alcohol. It's almost respectable to work too hard." He laughed. "*Respectable!*" he echoed cynically. "Too late now . . ." he looked towards the freezing chamber and the motionless body of his daughter, "too late," he gasped, "too . . . late."

"She's in love with Mezak," said La Noire.

"With that man from the future?" echoed Sir Henry.

"I think so."

"But how? Why? She'd hardly met him!"

"Time doesn't enter into the calculations of a woman in love," said La Noire. "If it did, some of us would never dare to fall in love, at all." There was a moistness in her own eyes that Val could not fail to notice. The deep, nagging doubts that assailed him from time to time hit him again like a shock of cold water. La Noire turned her attention to Sir Henry. "Your daughter was in love with a man whom it was impossible for her to marry. She wanted to be with the man she loved. She wanted to go back with him to his own time."

"Why—why—not?" gasped Sir Henry, "I'd far rather she'd gone to the future *with* him than done *this!*"

"You don't understand," said La Noire. "I think that's what she's trying to do."

"Trying to do?" said Sir Henry, interrogatively. "My mind is confused and dazed, Mrs. Stearman. You'll have to forgive me. I'm not feeling well at all. How can this help her to——" He broke off suddenly as the answer to his own question occurred to him. "You mean she couldn't go back with him via his Time Warp, or his Time Machine, or whatever other means he was using, so she put herself in suspended animation in order to wake up with him some time in the future? She has put all her trust in my machine . . ." The old man laughed ironically and bitterly. "To think I never believed she took an interest in

my work, and now, knowing little or nothing of it, she has risked everything on my being successful. She has risked everything on my work, and my reputation. I suppose no man could ask for greater trust than that." He gulped and took a pace round the laboratory. A small, black, furry object ran gracefully down the cellar steps.

"Pippin," he said, "her cat . . ." He stroked it absently. "It was very wrong of me, but I was short of animals to use in my experiments—they're very particular about that, you know. I didn't realize how fond she was of the little thing. I 'borrowed' it. It's so difficult to get specimens without disclosing the exact nature of your work, and I wasn't in a position to do that."

He was speaking absently, more to the floor than to Val or La Noire. The cat made its way eerily and uncannily past him, towards the deep freeze chamber in which Catherine Wilder lay in a strange state of suspended, frozen animation. Before Val Stearman—who was standing nearest—had realized quite what the little animal had in mind, Pippin had gathered himself for a leap which took him over the edge of the chamber and into the icy stillness within. So intense was the cold within the chamber that the little cat had not so much time as to mew. He fell, frozen solid, just behind Catherine's ankles. Val looked over the edge of the chamber. The tableau seemed so touching that with all Stearman's toughness he gulped, and held emotion in check with some difficulty. He turned away from the pathetic, motionless figures.

"At least she won't be lonely," he said to La Noire. La Noire looked at the sleeping cat and the sleeping girl. "What are you going to do?" she asked, looking at Sir Henry.

"I can't restore them. I hadn't perfected that part of the equipment. You see, it's all a question of brain damage. I'm not trying to sound superior or difficult when I say it would be difficult for me to explain to a layman. In simple terms slow thawing would be death. The thawing has to be almost instantaneous. I can put them *into* sus-

pended animation. I can't bring them *back*. I might bring them back with hopelessly damaged brains, but who wants to do that?" He held up his hands to heaven as though expecting an answer to the rhetorical question.

"Who wants to do that?" he repeated.

"Whatever decision you come to," said Val, "must be your decision, and yours alone. La Noire and I would be willing to give you any help or advice that we can."

The old man paced up and down the laboratory, muttering to himself, deep in thought.

"Alive and not alive," he murmured. "Dead but not dead, and it's all my fault! Curse the experiments! Why couldn't I spend more time being a father and less time being a scientist? I've been in love with my own ambition instead of people of flesh and blood. That's my trouble, Stearman. Instead of being a medical *man*, I've been something of a medical *machine*. I've got to alter that. I don't know how long it will be before the Black Reaper comes for me. I am by no means a young man, as you realize. On the other hand, I still have most of my mental faculties. Perhaps it sounds selfish, but I want to make amends. I want to do something with the remainder of my life. There were so many other fields of medical research more profitable than this, more directly profitable. I should have done something with them, I suppose."

"Medicine needs its research workers, it needs them desperately. If everyone were a field worker, and no one has time to do research," said Stearman, "how will progress be made?"

"That's a comforting thought," said the old man. "You see I had hoped that one day the really advanced deep freeze techniques could keep the body in a state of suspended animation almost indefinitely, while diseases, which are now beyond us, could be cured. It might be possible to carry out a surgical operation *taking six months*, on a deep freeze patient. Just think of that, the perfect anaesthetic, and the perfect antiseptic, as well."

"I see," answered Val. He saw some of the enormous

possibilities which the old man was suggesting.

"I feel that I can do no more work on it. This particular project has cost me far too dear already. I'll let someone else do the research now. I want to make a little contact with human beings, if I can. I want to do some field work in a place which desperately needs it. I also want to find some kind of spiritual consolation. Perhaps that sounds almost hypocritical, coming from me."

"I don't think so," said Stearman.

The old man heaved a weary sigh.

"There is a place that might fulfil your requirements," said La Noire softly.

The old man looked at her. The woman's voice was as soft and gentle as a ray of morning sunlight, dispelling dark shadows from a mountain gorge.

"There is a monastery that I know of . . ."

"A monastery!" exclaimed Sir Henry.

"This is only an idea, reject it if you will," said La Noire.

"Where is this place?"

"In a very poor part of Italy," said La Noire. "They tend sick children, mainly. A man of your ability would seem a God-given gift as far as they're concerned."

"Sick children," mused Sir Henry.

"Children are the future," said Val.

"The future," murmured the old man. He looked at the freezing chamber, "the future . . ." He bit his lip thoughtfully. "Would I be able to practise there?"

"It is a very poor country area," said La Noire, "people are fighting ignorance, disease and poverty. I don't think a man of your skill has ever been to them before. The government does its best, but it has many calls made upon it."

"Could you arrange for me to meet the Abbot of this community?" asked Sir Henry, "and what about the language difficulty?" he went on.

"Several of the brothers speak English," said La Noire.

"Italy, you say . . ." mused the old man.

La Noire nodded.

"Italy," she repeated.

Sir Henry looked around the laboratory.

"The better part of my fortune's been invested in this," he said. "What a waste!"

"Not necessarily," said Stearman. "You can pass on all your findings. You can sell your equipment; there must be avenues through which such things can be disposed of quite profitably."

"Oh, yes, I can get three-quarters of the money back, at least," said Sir Henry. "Some of this stuff is practically irreplaceable."

"Well, as a tentative suggestion," said Stearman, "if you really want to do something on the lines that you've suggested, let me make a proposition to you, let me put a proposition to you . . ."

"Tell me more," said old Sir Henry.

"Just suppose," murmured Val, "that you were set up a trust. Invest in it all the proceeds, or the greatest part of the proceeds from the sale of this equipment, which would amount to several thousand pounds. The income from the trust would see to it that the suspended animation chamber is kept running, power is supplied."

"But if it became known what had happened I would be arrested!" said the old man.

"No one need know what has happened," said Stearman. "In that state of suspended animation she needs no air—I agree I'm only a layman, but at least I know that much. You can build metal covers over the thing. All that the trustees need to know is that the contents of that chamber must be kept frozen."

"Would it be possible to establish such a trust?"

"I think so," said Stearman, "there's no harm in trying."

"It wouldn't cost very much just to keep it running, I think this equipment would run to double figures of thousands when it was sold."

"It should do," said Stearman, by the look of it. "As a

journalist I get around quite a bit; I have an inkling of what these things cost."

"I have a little other money as well," said Sir Henry.

"The income from such a thing would be considerable. It ought to keep the thing running for years! For centuries! I would feel that if I could do this, I would be helping Catherine in a way that I never helped her when she was alive." Again tears sprang to the old man's eyes.

"All right," said Stearman. "The thing to do first of all is to get some covers over that chamber. Insulated covers, and some seals . . ."

"I have some insulating board over here," said the old man. Val and La Noire helped him to fasten the covers over the suspended animation chamber. Once they were in place, Stearman wired them together, and Sir Henry sealed the wire.

"You may rely on us absolutely," said Val, "as far as discretion is concerned."

"You're a strange man, Stearman," said Sir Henry.

"The world is made up of strange men, Sir Henry," said Val; he looked at La Noire out of the corner of his eyes, "and strange women, too," he added.

Sir Henry drew a deep, rasping breath.

"I wonder if I shall ever know peace again?"

"I think it is possible that you will," said La Noire.

The old medical researcher drove with the Stearmans as far as Carlisle, where he had a friend who was an eminent lawyer.

"So you want to go into retirement, eh, Henry?" said his legal colleague, "well, it's up to you, of course. You've always been a bit of a hermit. I thought a lot of you, Henry, but you always seemed a bit of an odd cove, if you don't mind my saying so."

"It's all right, Sebastian," said Sir Henry. He turned to Stearman by way of explanation, "I've known Sebastian here, since we were at school together. A long time ago . . ."

"Too long, too long," said Sebastian.

"Well, about the details of a trust, then, can I leave all that to you?"

"The matter as I understand it is that the motors of the refrigeration chamber are to be kept going for ever so that the contents are kept at their present very low temperature?"

"That's right, that's right," said Sir Henry.

"Well, you certainly sound as though you are going to have ample funds to invest in such a trust. I will see that it is established for you. It may take a little time."

"I'm going to leave everything to you," said old Sir Henry. "I must act swiftly upon an idea that is in my mind."

"What do you intend doing?" asked Sebastian.

"I'm going abroad to a place where I understand there are sick children in desperate need of medical skill."

"There are sick children in many lands," agreed Sebastian, "and you are going to do some work of this kind?"

"I hope to, if I'm spared," said Sir Henry.

Sebastian nodded.

"Very well," he said, quietly. "You may leave the trust details to me."

"Thank you, I knew I could count on you. And of course, a maximum of secrecy is very desirable," said Sir Henry.

"We are nothing if not discreet," said Sebastian. The two old friends shook hands.

"In case we never meet again," said Sir Henry, "good-bye. I will contact you with the address where you may send any papers requiring my signature."

"Very well," said Sebastian. His voice was quiet and sombre. It had been a strange interview, he reflected, but he had always known there was something strange about Henry Wilder.

Time passed, the trust was established as Sir Henry had directed, and the old medical researcher retired to the impoverished region of Italy where under the name of Brother Luke, he tended the sick of the brotherhood and

all who came to the doors of the monastery in need of care and attention of one sort or another.

Sometimes in a moment of deep and quiet devotion Brother Luke would find the peace he so desperately sought. But there were other times when he would wake in the night and see strange visions of a girl and a cat entombed, motionless in a chamber of unbelievable coldness, and then he would wake in a sweat that seemed as cold on his brow as the chamber in which his daughter slept. He would rise from bed and pray before the altar of the monastery until the vision left him and peace came again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GUARDIANS

VAL and La Noire had returned to London after the Trust had been established. It seemed, as far as they were concerned, for a little while at least, as though the great adventure was over. Then, Stearman was seized with a sudden impulse to see how Donald Smith—old Smithy the postman—was progressing in hospital. Accordingly Val and La Noire drove up to Cumberland again and called at the ward where they found the old man sitting up and looking a great deal better. The wounds in his head had healed up pretty well, but the old fellow was still a little weak after his ordeal, and it would be a few days yet before he was able to go convalescent. Val and La Noire sat talking to the old postman, and it was with very considerable interest, bearing in mind Mezak's words, that Stearman noticed the extra attention which the cheerful old postman was receiv-

ing from one of the attractive young nurses. He remembered what Mezak had said, and thought to himself, despite the bludgeoning he had received, Smithy was quite a lucky man after all. As he sat chatting to the veteran mail deliverer, Val was trying to work out the teleological mathematics of the cause-and-effect sequences of the time movements. If the agents of the neo-Fascist party, trying to assassinate the remote descendant of the old postman who was to be an important democratic leader in the Twenty-fourth Century, had not come back and attacked the old man, then he might not have been hospitalized and thereby met the attentive young nurse, who to Stearman's observant eye, had all the makings of the future Mrs. Smith, destined to be the ancestress of the Smith who was the democratic leader, whom the neo-Fascists were attempting to assassinate by 'remote control,' so to speak. But the machinations of the thought, and its absolute complexity, set Val's head spinning.

Stearman was a shrewd thinker, but the wheels of 'If' are complicated pieces of mechanism, and even Stearman's keen brain could not untangle all the probabilities and possibilities which had been involved, as a result of the interference of the would-be assassins for the future.

He could understand now, as he thought hard about the complexities involved in this one life, just how important it was that Time Patrol agents, like Mezak, should prevent Futurians from interfering with the past. Stearman was also thinking that if it made things as complicated as this in his own generation, how incredibly *more* complicated things must become in the *future* . . .

It did occur to him as a possible solution that if the old man had not been bludgeoned and hospitalized that way, he might have had an accident in the course of his round and met the nurse like that.

Or, wondered Stearman, without the interference of the Time assassin, would the old fellow have met some completely *different* girl? If so, would the genetic pattern of his offspring have been different, and would the Smith of the

Twenty-fourth Century have become a banker instead of a politician, perhaps?

Val's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden arrival of a white uniformed doctor. The man had a rather unusual cast of feature. There was nothing definite that Stearman could put his finger on, but there was something about the man's face that he didn't like. The doctor came over to Smithy's bed, smiled at him, like a crocodile smiling at a young monkey on the water's edge, and reached in his pocket as though to take out some instrument or other with which to examine the old postman. Val hesitated for a split second. He rose to his feet.

"Just a minute," he said.

The doctor turned and faced him, not with a look of indignation, but with a look of apprehension.

"Mr. Smith," said Stearman suddenly, "have you seen this doctor before?"

The old man screwed up his eyes shrewdly and studied the white-coated figure intently.

"I don't think I have, Mr. Stearman."

"Then don't let him touch you," warned Val. "Here, just back up, will you."

The white-coated figure gritted his teeth in anger, and Stearman suddenly realized where he had seen that face before. At the same time the 'doctor,' the bogus doctor, recognized him. Val knew in that instant that he was looking at one of the men whom he had fought in the corridor of 'Grey Gables.' The bogus doctor still hesitated beside the old man. Val wondered why he had had the sudden impulse to come and visit Smithy after all these weeks. He wondered if, in some way, Mezak's organization had contacted him telepathically, and what he had taken for an impulse had, in fact, been a thought implanted in his mind by the benevolent agency of the Time Patrol men.

La Noire grabbed at Smithy and pulled him suddenly towards her. The bogus doctor slashed down at the pillow where the old man had been lying a second before. Stearman saw the glint of steel. He somersaulted over the bed

like a cart horse leaping a low fence, then the big journalist-adventurer's solidly muscular and sturdily shod feet caught the futurian in the geometric centre of his chest. He gave a gasping cry and coughed desperately as he fell back. The gleaming instrument fell from his grasp and clattered to the floor beside Smithy's bed. Patients were looking round in all directions, shouting for assistance. The bogus doctor streaked out of the ward with Stearman in hot pursuit. Hospital officials appeared as if by magic, and La Noire and Smithy began to try to explain what had happened . . . Among those who turned up was a very indignant young doctor, whose coat had been stolen from the rest room.

Val thundered after the futurian assassin, and as they raced through the hospital corridors, trolley loads of instruments, and a stack of bath chairs went flying from the impact of the futurian, who was quite a big man; he ran desperately. He was a little younger than Val, as far as the big journalist-adventurer could guess, and Stearman knew that, given enough distance, the man would probably be able to outrun him. Stearman had no intention of being out-run. He was determined that he was going to catch the futurian and make him talk if it was humanly possible.

They clattered out of the hospital and the futurian assassin gazed up and down the street as though trying to get his bearing.

Good, thought Stearman, he's obviously forgotten where the end of his vortex is—or whatever means he used to get here. The bewildered hesitation gave Stearman a chance to shorten the lead which the futurian had built up. It was obvious, too, to the watching Stearman, that the futurian was baffled, in fact, terrified, by the bustle of the Twentieth Century traffic. As buses, cars and lorries thundered along the main road a few blocks from the hospital, Val realized that whatever transport wonders were available in the Twenty-fourth Century they were more economically organized than the great traffic hold-ups of our own time. The futurian was also coughing and choking in the strong fumes

which the traffic was belching out in all directions. Deisel effluent, rich in benz-pyrene, and other foul, poisonous and noxious gases, seemed to be unknown in the Twenty-fourth Century, by the way the futurian was reacting to the smell which drifted to him now. Stearman hated traffic fumes as much as any other strong and athletic man who values his lungs and tries to preserve them—as far as he can—in a polluted atmosphere. Stearman hated cigarette and tobacco smoke for very similar reasons. Now, however, he was as near as he had ever come to thanking the fumes for hitting the unacclimatised futurian harder than they were hitting him. The futurian paused at the edge of a zebra-crossing and tried to analyse its function, and how it ought to be used. He stepped off the pavement suddenly, as Stearman reached the end of the crossing. There were squeals and screeches, as brakes were furiously applied. Burly lorry drivers shook horny fists through their cab windows at the fleeing, white-coated figure. He turned and glanced back bewilderedly at Stearman, and a cyclist, whose brakes were less efficient than they ought to have been, cannoned into him. Cyclist and futurian sprawled together in a tangled, stunned heap. Stearman dashed across the zebra between the lines of reluctantly-halted vehicles, feeling rather like the Israelites crossing the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus. He paused only long enough to ascertain that the cyclist was not seriously hurt, and then, he scooped up the dishevelled futurian and took him gently but firmly by the arm.

"Now, listen," said Stearman, "you're coming with me. If you make the slightest scene, or attempt to escape I'll kill you, is that clear?"

No one but the futurian heard the big journalist's voice, and the words were spoken with such a pleasant smile, that the nearest of the bystanders thought he was merely helping his friend up.

Stearman led the futurian around the block, and back to the place where he had parked his big sports saloon. La Noire was already in the car when he arrived.

"Did you get them calmed down all right at the hospital?" asked Val.

"Yes, darling, they're all right now," she answered. "I see you caught our fish."

"Yes, indeed," said Val, grimly, "and I think he will have an interesting tale to tell."

"What are you going to do with me?" gasped the futurian.

"You're coming back home with us," retorted Stearman, "and then you're going to start talking! By your standards this is a cruel and barbaric age, and just how cruel and barbaric it is you'll find out if you don't answer my questions!"

The futurian cowered helplessly in the back of the big sports saloon as Val and La Noire drove back to London.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

REVELATION

STEARMAN bundled his victim out of the car and man-handled him unceremoniously up the steps of the tall, handsome apartment building in which he and La Noire had a flat. Val glanced swiftly around the foyer to be certain that there was no one in sight, and then, with unnecessary abruptness, the big journalist-adventurer dragged the futurian assassin into the elevator.

In a matter of moments they had reached the floor on which the Stearman flat was situated. Val jerked his victim out with the same formidable toughness, while La Noire opened the door of their flat with a Yale key. Stearman pushed his victim inside, flung him down into a chair and proceeded to tie him, tightly and efficiently, with a

length of nylon yarn which La Noire had flicked deftly across to her husband from a nearby cupboard.

"And now," said Stearman grimly, as he fingered the battle-scarred knuckles of his massive right hand, "you and I are going to converse."

The futurian's face was as white as the doctor's coat which he had stolen. Val drew back his fist, the futurian opened his mouth as if to speak, and then, instead, flinched into a stubborn immobility.

"It will be a lot easier for you to talk," said Val. The futurian assassin still remained obdurately silent. Val raised one eyebrow quizzically.

"Your last chance," he said.

Still the futurian said nothing.

"It's obvious that he fears *them* more than you," said La Noire, softly.

"Them?" queried Val.

"The other members of his organization," replied La Noire.

"Or he may be a sufficiently deep-dyed villain," said Val out of the corner of his mouth, "to know that, instinctively, no matter what I say, I'm not the kind of man who can beat up a tied and helpless prisoner."

"Yes, I'm afraid he has twigged that," said La Noire.

"I almost wish I could," said Val.

"I'm glad you can't," she answered. "I wouldn't like you to be that sort of man."

He put his arms around her for a moment, and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"The fact remains that we need the information," he went on. "The second piece of data is that in all probability our nameless friend here in the stolen white coat, possesses the said information."

"The third factor," went on La Noire, "is that he's not going to talk unless he gets hurt, and you haven't got the heart to hit him in cold blood."

"We could always untie him and let him make a break for the door," said Val, still savouring the prospect.

"I don't think that would appeal to you, either."

"No, it wouldn't. It has about as much sportsmanship in it as the pursuit of the inedible by the unspeakable."

"I think you're quoting from Oscar Wilde," said La Noire.

"I think so, too. I believe that is what the worthy Mr. Wilde said about the hunting fraternity, who have otherwise been referred to as the army of unemployed in red coats," he finished grimly. Val turned and looked at La Noire, "No, you're right, darling, there would be as much sport, or for that matter, as much decency in my untying this character and then chasing him round the flat as there would be in catching, or breeding, stags simply to hunt them, and then having caught them, putting them back in the cage and shipping them back to their reserves again."

La Noire shuddered.

"If I once get started on my anti-blood sports platform," said Stearman, grimly, "I shall have the greatest difficulty in stopping again. Right now there are more urgent matters in hand."

"True," said La Noire. Her face lit up as a sudden idea occurred to her. "I think I could make him talk," she said, softly.

"What do you mean?" asked Val. La Noire moved across to the other side of the room, beckoned her husband to come closer and whispered the word, "*Hypnosis*," so softly in his ear that it was inaudible a few feet away. Val nodded his approval and smiled. The futurian looked apprehensively from one to the other.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Val, "nothing at all. We've decided to let you sit there and rot."

La Noire wound up a musical box on which a series of small coloured glass ornaments hung, scintillating with light. Val drew the curtains to shut out completely the sounds from the street below. The terrified futurian looked desperately from one to the other and then his eyes were caught by the musical box. Rays of light passed over his

face again and again, to the accompaniment of a very soft and melodious, repetitious tune. Val turned out the other lights. The futurian found himself staring fixedly, but unwillingly, at the revolving brightness of the musical box. They left him like that for several minutes, then La Noire began to speak. Softly, gently, but undeniably her voice bit down below his consciousness. It went deeper still, until her suggestions seemed to be touching every level of the futurian's mind. Val had rarely heard her so persuasive. In fact, he knew that if he had not looked away from the revolving light, he, too, would have fallen a victim to the unbelievably powerful hypnotic trance which La Noire was inducing in the futurian assassin, bound helplessly in the chair. Val was so engrossed in her voice that at times he lost track of the movement of the clock. It seemed that time stood still.

Then he realized that La Noire had stopped speaking to the futurian and was now speaking to him.

"Val, darling, I think he's under."

Stearman moved round to the front of the futurian. His eyes were wide, glassy and staring. His attention was still apparently rivetted on the revolving lights of the glass ornaments attached to the musical box.

"Now," said La Noire quietly, "can you hear me?"

"Yes." The futurian's voice sounded faint and far away, as though he were speaking down the shaft of a deep mine. It was as though his voice was being conveyed to them by the cylindrical interior of a speaking tube.

"Tell me," said La Noire, insistently, "for whom do you work?"

"I work for Arakar."

"What is Arakar?" asked La Noire.

"Arakar is a political organization."

"What are its aims and objects?" asked La Noire.

"Its principal aim is the establishment of an authoritarian regime, a regime in which the super race will rule inferiors. It will permit to live only such races as are useful and desirable."

"I see," said La Noire, "and how will Arakar achieve its objects?"

"By strength and by force. By the elimination of the weak and the useless."

Val whispered to La Noire.

"It sounds horribly close to Twentieth Century Facism."

"It's amazing that there should be traces of it lingering on so far in the future," said La Noire.

"One of the worst things about evil," said Stearman, "is its apparent tenacity."

"Agreed," rejoined his wife, sadly. There seemed to be much more significance in her words than was apparent by the actual words themselves. Val got the impression that she was speaking from an experience that was far deeper than any mortal had a right to have. He looked at her questioningly for a moment, but the question died in his eyes as she looked at the futurian whom she had hypnotized, and continued her interrogation.

"What was your purpose in coming?" she asked.

"I was sent to kill Smith, the others had failed. We had all failed. We had not realized that there were such fighters in this century. It was a common belief that modern methods of fighting were far superior to anything which had been encountered in the past. They learnt that this is not so. More care is to be exercised."

"Why did you wish to kill Smith?" asked La Noire, although she and Val already knew the answer.

"He is the ancestor of a decadent, democratic leader of the world government movement. Unfortunately the decadent democrats have a security system that it is not yet possible for our gallant heroes to break, although several attempts have been made. Security is much more difficult in the past. Only Time patrol agents are allowed to use the vortex machines, and the Warp Vibrators. One or two others have secret Time capsules and Time travel machines . . ."

"How did you yourself come back to this age?" asked La Noire.

"I came by a Warp vibrator."

"Where is this Warp vibrator situated?" demanded La Noire.

"It comes out near a cherry tree in the grounds of the hospital, where the man Smith is being healed."

Val and La Noire made a mental note of the directions which he had given them.

"How was it that you were able to use this warp without Time Patrol agents apprehending you?" asked La Noire.

"We have nothing to fear from the Time Patrol agents. Nothing can stop us now. Only two agents are used for patrols into this sector of time. They are Mezak and Cotil, they have both been captured by our party."

"I see," murmured La Noire, "tell me, where are they being held captive?"

"Mezak and Cotil are being held captive at——"

The man stopped suddenly; his face underwent an agonized transformation. His eyes twitched; the lids closed and opened again with a violent jerk. His hands clawed wildly at the air. As far as their bonds would permit his feet kicked and strained against the nylon, then his head fell back helplessly.

Val moved across to him, rapidly.

"He looks as though he has been shot with some kind of energy weapon," said Stearman. "His body seems hot as though a blast of high powered energy had been right through it. The man's lips twitched spasmodically.

"Gre-Gre-e-e-e-e-," he mouthed.

"What are you trying to say?" asked Val.

La Noire listened intently. The dying man's lips moved once more.

"Gre—" he panted, and then his lips ceased to move.

Val lifted one of the futurian's eyelids.

"Dead," he whispered. "Dead as mutton."

"What killed him?" she asked.

Stearman looked all around the flat.

"Somebody hit him with some kind of weapon, but it's

not in evidence at the moment," said Val. "It's as if he'd been shot from some point of concealment *in Time*."

Val pointed to the corner of the room nearest the chair in which the corpse of the futurian was still bound.

"Look there," he whispered. His wife looked. The shimmering outline of a man carrying a strange-looking hand-weapon became clearer and clearer.

"I think that's the gun," said Val Stearman.

"You are right," came the voice of the futurian. He wore the cloak and metal helmet of all the other futurians they had seen, with the exception of the dead man in the chair. There was a stunned silence in the room for several seconds.

"How did you kill him before you materialized?" asked Stearman when he recovered his power of speech.

"A good question," said the futurian. "A very good question."

"Well," demanded Val, "how did you do it?"

"I did it with this," said their latest visitor.

"But you discharged that weapon before you were in our time sector," said La Noire. "That just isn't possible. You can't fire a weapon through a time barrier!"

"This weapon can," said the futurian.

"That's the ultimate weapon," said La Noire, "it's a greater power than the power of invisibility."

"That's right," said the futurian. He was taller than the other futurians they had seen, more solidly built. His face had a cold, deadly expression. He was like a walking statue. He was sinister, deadly. Stearman felt an instant antipathy towards the man. Val's eyes rested on the gun.

"You really mean to say that thing fired between the frames of Time? Across the vibrations?" asked Val. "How does it work?"

"I do not know." Their unwelcome visitor smiled evilly. "Nobody knows now. The secret is well kept!"

"How so?" asked Val.

"The inventor is dead. He was killed by Arakar!"

"Is that the only one of its kind?" asked Stearman.

"This is the *only one of its kind*," agreed the futurian, "and it is in the hands of Arakar. It seems that it has demonstrated its usefulness already. It would not have been advisable for you to learn where Cotil and Mezak were being held. You might have done something foolish like attempting a rescue. And if you are the man whom I take you to be then from what my subordinates report, you have already been a considerable nuisance to us."

"That's a comforting thought," returned Stearman.

"Take comfort from it while you can. You will not be alive long to enjoy such comfort!"

Val's mind was racing like the engine of a powerful sports car. He knew that unless he dealt with this futurian and his miracle gun quickly, then, somewhere in the future a benign, democratic world government would collapse because its key figures had been assassinated. The man who had a gun which could fire *across* the Time frames, which could shoot *through* the Warp, was an opponent against whom no security could work. It would not have been so bad, thought Val, if the Time Patrol agents had had similar weapons with which to snipe at the fanatics of the Fascist organization known as Arakar, but with the miracle weapon on the side opposite to the angels, the situation for the Twenty-fourth century looked unbelievably grim and forbidding.

Val measured the distance between himself and the dangerous looking gunman, and Stearman realized that at all costs he must get possession of that weapon and destroy it. But to make a decision on a matter like that, and to implement that decision were two vastly different matters. With Val Stearman, however, to think was to act. He had once heard it said that thought was only internalized action. He wasn't altogether sure whether he agreed with the psychologist who had come to that conclusion, but as far as he was personally concerned, at this precise moment, the internalized action of thought became the externalized action of movement. With a sudden cry that distracted the futurian's attention for a fraction of a second, Stearman hurled him-

self through the air like a great human kangaroo. Even as Val leapt, the futurian recovered himself and fired the hideous weapon which had destroyed the man whom La Noire had hypnotized

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TIME BUBBLE

THE searing blast of potentially fatal energy whistled past Val Stearman's head so closely that the fringe of the deadly power burned the tips of the iron grey hairs which sprouted from Val's left temple.

There was a singing noise in his ears as he closed with the futurian. It was a strange sound. It was not exactly a hum, nor was it a vibration. It was unlike any sound that Stearman could ever remember hearing before. He looked at the clock on the wall behind the futurian. It was a big electric clock, with a sweep hand. The hand had *stopped*. As Stearman grappled with his enemy he caught a glimpse of his own watch. That was also equipped with a sweep hand, and it, too, *had stopped*. The gun in the futurian's hand clattered to the floor. Stearman kicked it away, sideways. His heel came around in the time-honoured sweep of a wrestler's trip, and he crashed down on top of his opponent.

"Time bubble!" gasped the half-winded futurian.

"What did you say?" demanded Stearman.

"That noise—do you hear a whistling, humming noise?"

"Yes, I do." Stearman did not relax his grip for a second.

"It's a time bubble, a time-lock."

"What do you mean by that?" Val was treating his opponent with the utmost caution. The man was considerably stronger than any of the futurians whom Val had previously fought, and Stearman did not believe in taking unnecessary chances. He wondered whether the Arakaran whom he now held was deliberately playing for time. Val wondered whether he was expecting the arrival of reinforcements at any second.

"It was the gun," grated the Arakaran.

"What do you mean? Explain yourself," ordered Stearman.

"The clocks have stopped!" The Arakaran moved his eyes in the direction of Stearman's watch. "That, and the noise—it is a time bubble!"

"What the devil do you mean by a *Time Bubble*?" snorted Stearman angrily.

"The gun——" stuttered the futurian again. He looked at Stearman imploringly for a second, then his expression changed and became puzzled. He looked like a man searching desperately for a word which will explain his meaning.

"Think of a pipe with an air bubble in it," he said at last. "Think of an air lock in a system of water pipes."

"Wait a minute, you're beginning to make sense," said Stearman. "Do you mean that one of the side effects of that gun that you've just fired is to create a time lock?"

"Not always. It shouldn't have done. But there was a danger that it would."

"What exactly is this Time Lock?"

"It's like a pocket of *no-time* in the middle of real Time."

"But if time has stopped how come we are still moving and we can still talk?"

"It's like slipping a gear. We're no longer in communion with the time outside. As far as we're concerned, it's stopped! As far as they're concerned, we no longer exist."

"Do you mean we could be trapped like this *for ever*?" asked Val.

"I don't know," answered the futurian.

"You don't know!" roared Val, almost incredulously.

His voice throbbed with violent anger. "*Don't know?*" he snarled again.

"Truly, I do not know." The futurian's face took on a look of pride and haughtiness, even though Val held him pinned, "and when Zados does not know, no one knows."

"You have a very high opinion of yourself, my friend," said Stearman.

"I am the greatest of the super-race!"

"You mean you're the leader of the Araker?" asked Val. "I ought to strangle you here and now!"

"As far as the rest of creation is concerned we are as good as dead," returned Zados. "What will it avail you to kill a dead man?"

Stearman shook his head.

"Nothing, I suppose." He got up, dragged Zados to his feet and flung him contemptuously into an armchair. He flipped the big Browning from his jacket pocket and passed it to La Noire.

"If he attempts to move, kill him," said Val. And he meant it. She knew he did, the tone of his voice was undeniable. She covered Zados unflinchingly with the big Browning that was as much a part of Stearman's accoutrements as his trousers. The big journalist adventurer picked up the weapon, which Zados, leader of the Arakar, neo-Fascists, had dropped.

"You said this was the only one of its kind," remarked Stearman.

"That is true," agreed Zados.

"You also gave me to understand that your organization had killed the man who invented this gun. There is no plan?" asked Val.

"There is no plan," said Zados.

"So if I was to destroy this gun it would be impossible to create another?"

"You can't destroy it," said Zados.

"Why not?" demanded Val.

"That gun is power! That gun is my key to the leadership of the world!"

"Somehow I don't feel that you are going to use that key. Politically, the lock is jammed as far as you're concerned."

"No, no! You must give me the gun! Please do not troy it! I *have* to be the ruler! Don't you understand? I Zados! Zados! You are nothing, you are nobody! You are merely a barbarian from the past!"

"Well then, I shall behave in a barbaric manner," returned Stearman. Taking the weird weapon which had the power to fire through the time phase vibration cycles, he swung it savagely against a thick part of the wall of his apartment. Plaster and brick dust scattered in a cloud. Zados gave a groan and then, the Arakaran leader's eyes brightened, as he saw the gun was still intact.

"Indestructible," he gloated. "The wonder gun is indestructible. So I shall use it again! It will be the key to power; it will be the magic sword with which I shall destroy all my enemies! It will be my Excalibur!"

"Some king!" retorted Stearman, contemptuously.

"Give me my gun," ordered Zados.

"Go to hell," said Val, politely. He took the poker from the fireplace and placing the gun on the ground he belaboured it with the thick, heavy, antique fireiron, until the poker was bent almost beyond recognition. *The gun had suffered no damage at all.*

"What the devil is it made of?" muttered Stearman.

"Obviously some metal alloy that is stronger than anything you are able to use against it," said Zados, triumphantly.

"We have a saying," said Val. "It may have survived to your day, or it may not, but it is to the effect that there is more than one way of killing the cat."

"I suppose by that you mean," sneered Zados, "that there is more than one way of breaking the gun. But it is indestructible."

"Suppose I tied a good, solid lead weight around it and lowered it into the deepest and muddiest part of the

Thames," said Stearman. "Suppose I took it out to sea and dropped it."

"You forget," said Zados, "I could go back through time, and observe you, then, at some other time, when you are not expecting me, I could dive for it and retrieve it. If it took ten life-times I would get my gun! When I had it I would assassinate you. I would come in the night when you knew not that anyone was there; I would come by the light of day; I would come in the light of the moon; I would come when the sun was in the sky; you would not know when you were safe! I would come when you could not guard yourself against me! It might not be at you that I struck. I might go back into the past and kill one of your ancestors, *so that you would never even exist.*"

"Charming," replied Stearman. He raised one eyebrow laconically. "So then, to hide the gun is not enough. I *must* destroy it."

"You *cannot* destroy it!" crowed Zados. "You might as well give it back to me now. Release me, and then rely upon my mercy!"

"I would rather rely upon the compassion and humane qualities of a rattle snake!" retorted Stearman. "I would rather appeal to the better nature of a vulture! I would rather make a plea for clemency to a Tasmanian devil!"

Zados sat sneering contemptuously at Stearman.

"Then I will destroy you."

"What if I was to destroy you," said Val, with a smile.

"I doubt if you could do it," said Zados. "That is the weakness of our enemies. We have found this over and over again. They lack the ruthlessness of the Arakar."

Stearman remembered his own inability to beat the prisoner whom they had taken.

"You're probably right," he said, "but what you take to be weakness, is really strength."

"Ruthlessness is strength! Scruples and compunction—these things are weaknesses."

"Your mind is so twisted," said Stearman, "I don't think anything could be done to help you."

"My mind is not twisted. It is the minds of other men that are twisted. They have grown soft; they have grown *effete*, weak—weak with mercy, weak with love for those who are helpless. I don't want to help the helpless. The helpless must be destroyed before they breed other helpless things. The feeble-minded must be annihilated, the sick must be put beyond their suffering. The world is for the healthy. Life is for the strong. Leadership is for the strongest of all!"

"I am convinced," said Stearman, speaking more to La Noire than to their prisoner, "that Fascism is a kind of insanity, and this Arakar organization seems to be the ultimate insanity."

Zados ground his teeth together in rage.

"How dare you! Oh, how you will suffer when I come to power!"

"If you come to power in the Twenty-fourth century," said Stearman, "I shall have been dead for two or three hundred years. That won't worry me very much."

Zados gave him a look which seemed to indicate that he would have Stearman's corpse exhumed and fed to the vultures.

Stearman grinned back.

"There has to be a way of destroying this gun," he said to La Noire.

"What about the furnace?" asked his wife.

"Of course," said Val, "that generates a fair old heat."

"No, no!" shouted Zados.

"Ah," said Stearman, "so you're afraid it will burn? Your super-hard alloy isn't able to bear heat, eh? *Right!*"

"Nooo," quavered Zados. "Please! That gun is everything! It is my answer to the cursed democrats and their security. With that gun I can assassinate whom I will."

"Shut up," said Stearman, "you make me sick."

"Give me my gun . . ." Zados held out his hands imploringly.

"You need help," said Stearman, "you need help badly! I hope there are some good psychiatrists in the lunatic asy-

lums of your own century, that's all."

"My gun," quavered Zados, he had reverted to a childish trembling of the lower lip.

Stearman looked at La Noire.

"Can you manage him all right, darling?"

"Yes. If he moves I'll shoot," he said.

Stearman looked at the beautiful black eyes. Besides the beauty there was now a firmness of purpose. He knew that if anything her resolution was stronger than his own. If it became necessary to kill Zados, he felt sure that La Noire would not hesitate. There was a kind of implacable quality about her Cleopatrine beauty.

The elevator was frozen between floors. Val walked downstairs and found that he was passing life-like 'statues,' some were frozen in impossible positions of imbalance, their feet halfway between stairs. One young man, who had an apartment above the Stearmans, was actually poised in mid-air. He had been in the act of skipping a stair on the way down, and neither of his feet were actually touching. Such, thought Val, was the power of a time bubble, that it could actually negate the law of gravity.

Stearman passed the weird, ghostly statues and found them more disconcerting than many of the supernatural adventures, or time and space adventures, which he and La Noire had experienced in the past. It was strange to be the only man 'alive' because of the time bubble which extended around the apartment building.

Val reached the furnace room. Although the *flames* were not moving the *heat* still existed. Val opened the door of the furnace and flung in the miracle gun with which Zados had hoped to capture the world of 2320.

Val had scarcely shut the furnace door when there was a roar that sounded as though the firmament was being torn from one horizon to the next. The whole apartment building shook as though in the grip of some terrifying earthquake.

Val flung himself backwards and grabbed at the statue-like figure of the janitor as he did so. In the same

second the time bubble burst, and reality flooded back into the isolated apartment building. Val and the janitor dodged the worst of the sheeted flame that flooded the cellar; it crackled and roared behind the base of the splitting furnace.

Whatever the miracle gun had been made of it had certainly responded to heat, but it had responded with a fallibility that had been far more than Stearman had calculated on. Flames licked hungrily on the cellar roof.

"What—what—what happened?" gasped the janitor.

"I heard a bang," said Val. "I came to see if I could help you."

"We'd better get everybody out, sir," said the janitor, quickly.

"We will," said Val, "and get 'em out fast!"

The old man stopped to ask no more questions. Stearman grabbed an extinguisher and discharged its contents in the direction of the overflowing furnace. But he might as well have tried to cap Vesuvius with a paper hat.

"That furnace isn't going to stop for anybody, sir," said the janitor, "we shall have to evacuate the whole apartment!" Val raced up the stairs. The statues had come to life. The janitor rang the fire alarm, and the building echoed and vibrated to the loud clashing of the bell.

Val raced to the two apartments above his, shouted a warning to the occupants, then sprinted back to his own apartment to make sure La Noire was all right.

The shock of the explosion had thrown her off-balance, and even as Val crashed open the door, the sinister futurian Zados was racing down the fire escape. Smoke and flame filled the apartment building.

Swearing volubly, Stearman grabbed La Noire by the hand and piloted her safely down to the ground floor, then, with a man from a neighbouring flat, Stearman searched the building systematically despite the smoke and flame, to make sure that no one was trapped. The brigade was there before he had finished, and it looked to Val, as they pumped in water and foam, that most of the damage would

soon be neutralized. Val and La Noire stood well back from the fire, breathing in the comparatively clean night air. It was balm to the lungs after the smoke and flame of the incinerating building.

"Our futurian friend appears to have got away," said La Noire regretfully.

"I wonder how we can explain that other chap's body," said Stearman.

"Yes, that'll be awkward," said La Noire, as though explaining mysterious bodies was an everyday occurrence.

The wind changed with surprising suddenness and new flames poured through the building with unexpected heat. The control which the brigade appeared to have successfully established was now lost, and the fire was burning up again, seeming to burn with particular intensity around the angle of the house in which the Stearman's apartment was located.

"It doesn't look as though we shall have to bother about explaining that body after all," said Val. "It must be the devil's own temperature going through that place now."

La Noire nodded.

"Perhaps it's for the best," she said.

"Maybe you're right," agreed Val.

"It was a horrible experience," said La Noire. "I hate fires, Val."

"I don't blame you," said her husband.

"And that Time Bubble experience," went on La Noire. "It was very weird."

La Noire continued to look up at the burning wreckage of the apartment building for some time, as though she had read some inspired omen, or rune amid the smoke. She turned to Val, and said, "I think I know what the man was trying to tell us before Zados killed him."

"What do you think it was, darling?" he asked.

"I think that 'Gre' was the beginning of 'grey'," answered La Noire.

Val looked at her excitedly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RESCUE

"GREY," said Val, taking her meaning. " 'Grey Gables,' of course, the old house in Cumberland! That's what he was trying to say. There is already an established time vortex there. There's a warp from their era into ours. That must be the answer! That's where they're holding Mezak and Cotil as prisoners."

"We must go quickly," said La Noire.

Val nodded.

"Come on," he said.

The garage in which the Stearman's kept their powerful sports saloon was at the base of the blazing apartment house, but the flames had gone up, not down, and no falling debris had yet penetrated the steel and concrete roof of the garage. The efficient and courageous efforts of the London brigade had succeeded in extracting all the cars before the flames could reach them. Val showed his licence and certificate of insurance to the constable who was guarding the cars which the brigade had rescued. The policeman was one of the local men who knew Val personally, and the big sports saloon was to him a familiar sight. He saluted smartly and nodded as Val got into the car, having opened the door for La Noire.

They stopped at the first filling station and loaded the tank of their four-wheeled missile. Val checked the oil, topped up the vast engine with a pint of best quality thirty grade, checked the big 12-volt battery, added a few drops

of distilled water, to the third cell, and topped up the radiator as well. It was some time since he had had a minute to go around the big sports saloon, and while the attendant finished putting petrol in the tank, Val ran the compressor round the tyres and checked for any slight cuts or signs of wear. When a man drove as fast as Stearman drove it did not pay to neglect anything as vital as the tyres.

The attendant finished filling the tank, and came across to the opened bonnet to see if he could be of any assistance. "Have you checked the hydraulic brake fluid, sir?" he asked helpfully.

"No, I hadn't as a matter of fact," admitted Val. He opened the top of the hydraulic fluid reservoir, it needed a few drops to bring it right up to full. The attendant brought a canister of the liquid, and topped the reservoir. Val gave him a five pound note, told him to keep the change, and climbed back behind the wheel of the powerful sports saloon. He threaded his way out of the evening traffic; then the big car roared northwards like a bullet on wheels. They reached the motorway, and Val put his toe down harder still. The needle flickered between a hundred and forty and a hundred and fifty miles an hour, as the sports saloon sang its song of power to the night sky. Val enjoyed the sensation of speed as the long-nose of the multi-horsepowered mechanical monster thrust its way aggressively through the night. The tyres trimmed on the beautiful surface of the new motorway, and the stream lining of the car shed the air in all directions as it clove the breeze like a bullet. Stearman kept pushing the car as fast as the road conditions would allow.

"Seems to me," said La Noire, above the roar of the great engine, "that every time we do this run we take about two minutes off the previous time. Yet, when we are doing the previous run, we seem to be doing that as fast as possible."

Val grinned.

"If we keep on like this," he said, "we shall be arriving before we set out."

"And that," laughed La Noire, "would be a problem for the Time Patrol to sort out!"

They reached Cumberland and slowed down very considerably between the mountains and lakes, on the narrow roads, like coils of uneven grey ribbon strewn on the hill-sides by some careless pedlar of cosmic proportions. Just before they reached the house Val found a piece of flat grassland by the side of the lake. He nosed the big sports saloon off the road on to the little promontory, switched off the lights and the engine, and climbed out.

He and La Noire made their way as furtively as two dark ghosts along the road to the strange old grey stone house above them. The complete isolation of the place was frightening, eerie, somehow. There was an air of foreboding that hung like a grey pall over the Cumberland night sky. It was as though a blanket of impending evil hung over the normal light of the stars and the welcome, silvery glow of the moon.

Val and La Noire reached the low, dry stone wall that separated the gardens of Grey Gables from the sheep-nibbled fields around.

For some reason the feel of that shepherd-built wall reminded Stearman of the old classic rendition of "Sheep may safely graze." He supposed that it was no more than an association of ideas. He lifted La Noire silently over the wall, then vaulted over it himself. They made their way towards the back door of the house and listened in silence. They could hear nothing.

"Do you suppose the trustees leave a man on the place all the time," whispered La Noire, "or will he just come in once or twice a day to make sure the engines are running satisfactorily?"

"I'd have thought they'd have left someone here all the time in case of a breakdown," said Val. "But if they had the engines connected to an automatic warning system, there would be no need to have a man in the cellar watching constantly." La Noire nodded in the near darkness.

"The place seems too quiet," murmured Val. "If the

opposition have got there, where do you think they would be?"

"Almost certainly in the cellars," said La Noire.

"I think you're right," agreed Val.

Stearman and his wife made their way down a little path that ran close to the side of "Grey Gables" until they reached a window. Val's prying fingers found it was open. He raised the frame and climbed confidently inside. La Noire followed him, and he assisted her over the sill, although the assistance was more a matter of politeness than any real response to a need. La Noire was as lithe and athletic as she was beautiful.

Val and his wife made their way from the small room into which they had climbed, to the passage beyond, and from the passage to the cellar door. Val opened the cellar door very softly. He heard a strange, repetitive sound, accompanied by heavy breathing. It sounded to Stearman like an exhausted mariner toiling at the pumps of a storm tossed ship that was flooding in heavy seas. He frowned as he descended the cellar steps with amazing silence for so big and powerful a man. Val and La Noire paused on the edge of the illuminated area which represented the lower part of the cellar. All the elaborate equipment had gone. Only bar benches remained. At the far end of what had once been one of the most elaborately equipped laboratories that Val Stearman had ever seen, the deep freeze apparatus stood, grim and enigmatical, against the far wall. There was a metal-helmeted futurian leaning against the wall a little way away from the freezer. He was laughing quietly and horribly as he watched a man, in the last stages of exhaustion, blowing his heart out over a hand pump. The man was Mezak. His face was as haggard as the face of a zombie. His eyes were glazed with a terrible exhaustion, yet he still pumped. There were two or three other metal helmeted Arakar members in the room, and another futurian who was gagged and bound, was just visible to Stearman beyond the angle of the benches. The scene before him, combined with the information which La Noire had ex-

tracted from the hypnotized Arakaran whom they had captured, gave Val all the knowledge he needed of the situation so far. It was obvious that the neo-Fascist Arakarans had over-powered Mezak and Cotil, his companion. It was also obvious that they had switched off—or otherwise disabled the motors which kept the freezing mixture circulating to cool the suspended animation chamber. The hand pump was obviously intended as an emergency measure to prevent the temperature from rising and the resulting decomposition of Catherine Wilder. The mental agony which Mezak must be enduring, thought Val, was just the kind of “joke” which would appeal to the Arakar. Val stood where he was for a full half minute, evaluating the scene and planning his next move. Then, motioning to La Noire to go around the other side of the right hand bench and make a noise as soon as he was in position, Val crept, like a huge ominous shadow, behind the other bench, so that he and La Noire were doing what a military tactician would have described as a pincer movement.

La Noire got into position and a movement of Val's hand, a lighter patch in the darkness, told her that he was ready to go into action. She took off one of her high-heeled shoes and thumped hard against the bench. It was a loud, startling “*rat-a-tat-tat*,” a kind of devil's tattoo in the darkness beyond he light. The members of Arakar leapt suddenly into action, and scrambled in the direction of the sound. Every eye was on La Noire's side of the room. She remained perfectly still behind the bench, while Val erupted like an angry volcano, like a hurricane releasing its fury on a forest of poorly rooted trees. He was a whirlwind, a tornado, as he ploughed into the backs of the Arakar supporters with a series of devastating chopping blows that mowed them down like ninepins. For a few seconds only, Mezak stopped pumping, and then, realizing that no matter what was going on, he must keep the pump working until he was relieved—or until he dropped dead where he stood—the Time Patrol agent went on with the task that was sapping his strength and his vitality. Three of the

Arakar futurians lay senseless on the floor before the fourth one turned. As he turned he met a Stearman uppercut that was travelling at little less than ninety miles an hour before it made contact with his jaw. The Arakaran went down like a stump that has got in the way of a very fast ball from the mighty Truman. The last futurian Fascist was fumbling for a gun when La Noire's stiletto heel caught him at the base of the skull between the base of his gleaming metallic helmet and his lowest cervical vertebrae. With a grunt he staggered forward, losing interest in the gun and everything else for some considerable time. Stearman slapped him backhand, as he came forward, just to make sure he didn't wake up before they were ready.

Mezak clung to the pump like an animated corpse.

“Get him off there before he kills himself,” said Val. She pushed him gently away and took over the pump. Mezak was too far gone to do more than groan his thanks as he sank in an exhausted heap on the floor.

La Noire moved the pump smoothly, rhythmically and regularly while Val unfastened the cords that held the man whom he guessed was Cotil, Mezak's fellow Time Patrol agent.

Cotil smiled his thanks and began rubbing vigorously at his limbs where the Arakar bonds had held him powerless. As soon as his circulation was reasonably restored he began tying up the Arakar futurians. He tied them swiftly, tightly and efficiently, and looking at the Time Patrol agent's face Val could see that Cotil was enjoying his work at that moment.

Stearman was no mean electrician among his other functions and it required very little of his skill to see that all the Arakar had done was to disconnect one of the leads on the electric motor that kept the freezer supplied with cooling liquid. Val reconnected the lead, and the motor hummed back into life.

“All right, darling,” he called, “you can stop ‘manning the pumps’ now.” La Noire let go of the pump handle and bent over the unconscious form of Mezak.

She lifted one of his eyelids.

"They must have had him at it for over twenty-four hours," she said. "He's in a dreadful state."

"I don't think there's anything wrong with him that a little sleep won't put right," said Cotil, "but these characters have a very unpleasant sense of humour." He nodded to indicate the futurians whom Val and sent to 'dreamland.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE LEADER

A SUDDEN soft, creaking footstep on the cellar stairs made Stearman spin round as though he had received a violent jolting, electric shock. A large figure, tall and sinister, stood at the foot of the cellar stairs. Val began moving instinctively and aggressively towards the newcomer. As yet it was difficult to distinguish features, but there was something unpleasantly familiar about that figure.

"It is Zados, leader of the Arakar," gasped Cotil.

"Oh, the potential Feuhrer," mocked Val thickly, as he advanced nearer.

"Keep still," ordered the figure at the foot of the stairs. The dangerous outlines of two sinister energy weapons were trained on them.

"I think we'd better," said Val, as he froze in his tracks.

"How did you get here?" demanded Stearman.

"After the conflagration at your flat," said Zados, "a conflagration, I would remind you, which was inaugurated by the destruction of my super weapon . . ."

"You can cut that out," said Val, "I'm not interested in your recital of recent history."

"You will listen!" stormed Zados. His voice rose to a bull-throated roar, "When Zados speaks the world listens!"

"You're mad!" retorted Stearman. "You're a paranoid megalomaniac! If you know what that means!"

"The offensive terminology of the primitive psychology of the Twentieth Century does not really concern the master race," returned Zados.

"If you knew a little bit more about Twentieth Century psychology," retorted Val, bitterly, "you would realize that the concept of a master race is symptomatic of severe mental disorder."

"Your tongue will soon be silent for ever, fool," said Zados.

"I just love surprise presents," said Stearman, laconically. Zados snarled in the back of his throat. He sounded more like a beast than a man.

Moving warily, the leader of the Arakar, circled round the benches till he reached the first of his minions. He put one of his energy weapons down on the bench and keeping another trained on the group in general, and Stearman in particular, Zados took a knife from his pocket and cut through the bonds which Cotil had so recently fastened on the Arakaran assassins. The man whom Zados had released stood up and saluted with fanatical enthusiasm.

"Hail, great leader," Zados inclined his head in the man's direction by the veriest fraction of an inch. Val was waiting for the slightest wavering of Zados' attention, but Zados' attention did not waver. Obviously, thought Val, this was a case of once bitten, twice shy.

I jumped him once, he isn't going to be jumped again, decided Stearman. Zados spoke swiftly to his disciple.

"Unfasten our men quickly!" The man whom Zados had freed slashed through the bonds of the other Arakar members. Within less than a minute they were all free. Their eyes were venomous. Hatred blazed out of them like a tangible, living flame. Stearman did not like the situation at all. Cotil and La Noire stood perfectly still. Val was as tense as a coiled steel spring. He was like an atomic pile that was nearing critical mass, but even he realized that it would be no more than suicide to jump the gun at that point. A better opportunity would have to present itself. He would achieve nothing by jumping Zados now.

The triumphant sneer on the face of the Arakran 'feuh-rer' was almost more than Val Stearman could stand. He wanted more than anything to take that throat in his strong hands and shake till the head came loose at the top of the cervical vertebrae. He wanted to pound his fists into that grin until there was nothing of the grin left. He wanted to grab the hand that held the gun and twist the gun from it with unnecessary violence. Stearman was not by nature a vicious man, but that superior sneer on the face of Zados was goading him into a white hot fury that was akin to the Celtic violence of the legendary Irish heroes of the Middle Ages, like Ossian, Finn and Cú Chulainn. The latter's battle fury, according to the mythologists, had been a thing of such intensity, that the hero actually turned round inside his skin!

Zados was still sneering.

"Now," said the self-styled 'feuh-rer' of the Arakar, "the time has come, I think, for us to plan some suitable termination to your career."

A lesser man than Stearman would have felt afraid. Even Val was aware of a tingling sensation at the base of his spine, as though drops of cold water were trickling slowly down his back.

"Tie them up," said Zados. With the utmost care and caution, taking pains to keep Stearman between the gun and themselves, Zados' Arakaran minions tied the big journalist adventurer by wrists and ankles.

"Put him down here," said Zados.

A quick push and Stearman toppled like some undermined Colossus.

Zados looked down and his sneer broadened.

"Pleasant change to see you doing obeisance to me." He kicked derisively and scornfully at the big journalist-adventurer. Stearman looked up with eyes that held a vengeance and a fury that made Zados turn away, and took some of the sneer from his lips.

"Tie up the others," ordered Zados.

He covered them with guns in both hands, and La Noire,

Cotil and the unconscious Mezak could do nothing. Within minutes they had joined Stearman in helplessly trussed heaps on the floor.

"I have been paying some small attention to the design of this house," said Zados. "It may interest you to know that it has certain features which will be of great assistance to me in my first plan."

"And what's that in plain English?" demanded Stearman.

"I'll leave you to worry about it for just a little while. You won't be left in doubt for very long. And here's another thought for you to be going on with . . . as you lie here waiting for the end, a number of my companions and I will be going back though the warp, the warp that ends in a corridor in this house."

"The one you mean happens to belong to the Time Patrol," said Cotil.

"Such a pity the Time Patrol is so seriously undermanned," said Zados. "Or perhaps I ought to say such a pity that the Time Patrol is so inferior to the Arakaran supermen."

"Rubbish," said Cotil, angrily.

"If my arguments are false," said Zados, with sniggering superiority, "why do the Time Patrol officers lie helpless on the floor, while the heroes of Arakar stand triumphantly over them?"

"I would suggest," said Stearman, "that it is principally because the heroes of Arakar outnumber them by about fifteen to one in this present engagement!"

"Your crowing will soon cease for ever, my fine cockerel," said Zados. He raised an eyebrow and looked derisively at Stearman but once more the fury in Val's eyes wiped some of the sneer from Zados' face and he backed away a little, even though Stearman was bound and Zados held the guns.

"In a few moments," said Zados, "you will know that your fate is to be, and as I have already said, think well on where we are going, and what we are going to do. I believe

It was the immortal Shakespeare who wrote:

"To be thus is nothing,
But to be *safely* thus . . ."

Soon we shall be *safely* thus. We shall have accomplished what we came out to accomplish and once it is achieved the world is ours."

"I assume that you are going back to the hospital, to the other time warp, near the cherry tree," said Stearman coldly.

Zados looked a little surprised.

"Oh, we know plenty about you. You're not as clever as you think," went on Val, sensing his advantage and pushing it hard, playing for time.

"I shall go back through this warp to 2320. We are temporarily in charge of the depot at that end of the vortex." Zados sneered at Cotil. "The Time Patrol have been very inefficient over this particular job."

"Once you've got back to that transmitter what do you do?" asked Stearman.

"We shall go through the other warp, the cherry tree warp, then we shall make our way into the hospital and kill the man Smith. As soon as he is dead, we return to our own time, and we shall find that our democratic leaders have vanished—at least, the man we fear most, the man who stands most stubbornly in our way, the descendant of your Twentieth Century postman."

"And then you take over the world?" asked Stearman.

"And then we take over the world."

"Of course, one little world won't be big enough for a great man like you," said Val, trying to keep him talking at all costs, "soon you will want to go out and conquer the whole universe."

"This is a vision, a vision which we shall achieve in time. Perhaps not in the reign of the first feuhrer, but in the second and third, we shall achieve this."

"Oh, I remember the first Feuhrer," said Stearman, "a

funny little man, called Hitler; he looked like a weasel with a black moustache."

"You must not speak so of the great historic leaders of our movement," said Zados. "Hitler and Mussolini are like gods!"

"Some gods," said Stearman. "I'm afraid their 'worshippers' didn't like them very much. They came to rather ignominious ends. You may remember Hitler did a fair old impersonation of a petrol bomb, in his bunker. Musso finished up like a fruit bat on a lamp post."

"Blasphemy!" croaked Zados. "They were martyrs to a sacred cause!"

Stearman laughed.

"You're a fool, Zados. You and your Arakar! There have been imbeciles like you throughout the course of history, some have achieved a temporary measure of power and then faded again into nothingness. You may even achieve a limited success, and spend a few hours of fading glory, but it will avail you nothing. *Nothing!*"

Stearman's voice was strong, iron hard, resolute.

"You wouldn't understand about the eternal values and the imponderables. But they are the things that count. You and your Arakar will be dust and ashes, merely a comical page from the great book of history. Men you've never heard of will be remembered by posterity with gratitude and thankfulness."

"You preach sermons like a priest," accused Zados.

"When I come to power, priestly prating shall cease. The only religion shall be the religion of ados. Men shall worship *me*."

"That'll be nice for them," said Stearman, "what are you going to do with heretics? Burn 'em at the stake?"

"You are playing for time," said Zados, suddenly. "You are hoping that if you delay me here long enough something will go wrong, something will turn up."

"Yes, there is a strong streak of Micawber in me," retorted Val.

"I shall not fall into your trap," said Zados. "You are

a clever man, as well as strong man. Almost I can respect you; almost I could wish that you were one of us; you would be a credit to the super race."

"That is nice to know," said Stearman sarcastically.

"But you have chosen the path of foolishness. You have chosen to defy the mighty Zados. You have chosen the enmity of the Arakar, instead of its service."

"Did I have a choice?" asked Val.

"Perhaps—and then, perhaps not."

Zados turned on his heel.

"Come!" He and his Arakaran followers strode, half-marching up the cellar steps.

Mezak was groaning in his bonds. He opened his eyes. They looked exhausted, but there was a certain wildness in them.

"The pump," he gritted, "the pump. Somebody's got to work the pump!"

"It's all right," said Val, "it's all right, Mezak, the motor's running."

"Motor, motor . . ." said Mezak, as though scarcely understanding.

"It's all right," said Val, "I repaired the motor. There's no need to pump."

"No need to pump . . ." Mezak relapsed into a kind of peaceful unconsciousness, as though Stearman's words had given him some consolation and comfort.

"I wonder just what Zados has in mind for us," pondered Val.

"What do you think he meant by the lay out of the house being helpful," said La Noire.

There was a sound, a familiar sound, yet for a moment Stearman couldn't exactly place it.

"Water," said La Noire.

"Oh, so he's playing that old game, is he," said Val.

"What do you mean, 'old game'?" said Cotil.

"It's hardly an original trick," said Stearman, "but I would suggest he's going to flood the cellar."

"Where's he going to get the water?"

"There's no shortage of water in a place like this. There's a tarn further up the hill; it supplies some of the out-buildings. There's a stream quite close. I don't know exactly what he's done, but it may have been nothing more desperate than turning on half a dozen taps. Gravity will do the rest for him. Water will pour down and flood the cellar."

"But surely we can get out."

"We are tied up; the cellar door is fastened, no doubt. Tell me how we are going to get out."

"At least we can get to the top of the steps!" said Cotil.

"We can try," said Val. "Let's get together." They moved around till they could get at each other's wrists.

"I don't know where that water's coming from," said Stearman, "but it's coming in pretty fast, I'll give Zados his due there."

"He could have got a good length of pipe, torn it off one of the outside walls, perhaps," said La Noire, "and connected one end to the cellar ventilator, the other to the stream."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ESCAPE

THE water was ankle deep in the cellar and Stearman had still made progress with Cotil's bonds. La Noire was struggling furiously with her bonds and even the exhausted Mezak had staggered to his knees and was trying desperately to hook the stout cords that secured him against some real or imagined sharp projection on the end of the bench.

Val moved away from Cotil and said resignedly, "It's no good, I'm not getting anywhere." Stearman moved closer to his wife. "Let me have a go at yours; we've done this before." The water was pouring in with relentless speed and had risen another inch while they made the move.

"The motors, the motors," moaned Mezak, "when the water gets up a little higher it will stop the motors."

"Yes, it will," said Stearman, "which means that we have got to get these cords off and get them off fast."

"What sort of effect will the water have on the deep freeze unit?" asked Mezak.

"I don't know yet," said Stearman, "that is a thing we shall have to find out in the course of time."

"But . . . buuuut . . . but we've got to stop the water," moaned Mezak.

"We've got to get these cords off," said Stearman.

Already the water was approaching the edges of the deep freeze cabinet where Catherine Wilder lay in her strange state of suspended animation; it was turning to ice at the impact of the great coldness. The tremendous absence of

temperature was making its presence felt even through the insulating boards; it was still sealed around the chamber where Catherine lay.

"I think I've got one of these knots," said Val with sudden triumph. La Noire moved her hands lithely and dexterously.

"Yes. Yes, you have; it's beginning to loosen." Her voice was excited.

"Keep going, darling," said Val. La Noire wriggled her wrist expertly and like an escapologist delighting a crowd on the side of the Thames Embankment she pulled a hand free suddenly from the cords that held her.

"Done it," she said with a gasp of triumph. Once her hand was free it was the work of only a few moments to get the cords away from her ankles and then she untied Val. A moment more and he had unfastened Mezak and Cotil.

"I wonder how he diverted that water in here?" said Stearman.

"We shall find out pretty soon," said La Noire hopefully.

There was a buzzing, spluttering sound, the lights dipped for a second and then came up again. The motors submerged and stopped. Mezak waded through water that was now above his knees. He took hold of the pump handle and began working at it with a kind of dogged mechanical stroke.

"I'll do that," said Cotil, his voice almost sharp as he spoke to his friend and fellow officer of the Time Patrol. Mezak looked at him gratefully and slumped down into a sitting position in the swirling water.

"This cellar is too efficiently water-proofed," said Stearman, "there doesn't seem any very quick way of getting this water away."

"We'd better get on to the stairs," said La Noire.

Val climbed several stairs and tried the door experimentally; he had not thought for a second that it would be open and he was right.

"It is difficult to get any kind of leverage against it;"

he said grimly. "Is there anything we can use as a weapon?"

"There is nothing in here but the benches and the deep freeze equipment," said La Noire.

"We can't use any of that," said Stearman, "and the benches are too big to get up the stairs." He looked around, "there must be something," he said.

La Noire descended the stairs again and waded through the thigh-deep water.

"Even if there was anything," she said, "it would be submerged by now pretty well." A chair floated past like an answer to her prayers. Val grabbed at it. Mezak had regained his feet and was leaning against the wall near the deep freeze watching Cotil working the pump. Ice was forming all around the chamber in which Catherine Wilder lay in her frozen sleep. The pump was becoming increasingly difficult to manipulate.

"She's got to be all right," said Mezak, he was too tired to be coherent, he was merely voicing his thoughts, his thoughts came to him disjointedly, "got to be all right," he muttered again. "Catherine, Catherine, keep the pump going for Catherine."

"All right," said Cotil, "take it easy, Mezak."

The exhausted Time Patrol agent staggered towards the stairs. He tripped on some unseen obstruction on the floor below the swirling waters. La Noire caught him deftly and pulled him to the surface again. He was spluttering and gasping; the water was almost waist deep.

La Noire and Mezak made their way across to one of the benches. She helped him from the water and stood with him on the bench which reared itself like a small flat mud-bank above the Mississippi.

Val, chair in hand, had re-ascended the steps and now, scientifically, he was belabouring the great door that barred their path to freedom. The blows of the chair fell thick and fast but they were not the blows of a wild, excitable, or desperate man.

Stearman could develop a white hot fury when the occa-

sion demanded. But, he was not the man to lose his head in a crisis, especially when other lives depended upon his keeping it.

He struck again and again, but each blow, despite the unwieldiness of his weapon, was aimed with considerable accuracy at a spot immediately above the lock. There was a splintering noise and the hasp gave way. Val crashed the door open with his shoulder and then turned and raced back down the cellar steps. He gathered Mezak up in his great left arm and taking La Noire's arm in his right, he piloted her safely through the shoulder deep water to the steps.

"Look after Mezak," he said. La Noire took Mezak up the steps, although he was pawing weakly at the air and trying to get back to his pump.

Val half-waded, half-swam to the far end of the cellar where Cotil was working the now submerged pump.

"It is almost impossible," he said, "and the water around here is so bitterly cold it will be freezing up inside the pump soon if we don't do something about it."

"Get out; see if you can see how Zados has turned it on and turn it off," said Val.

"What are you going to do?" asked Cotil.

"I'm going to stay here and keep this pump going," said Stearman, "what do you expect me to do?"

"But you can't, you'll be under water soon."

"Just go and get that water stopped," ordered Stearman.

Cotil nodded his obedience and swam back to the cellar steps. The Time Agent scrambled up to the corridor above. La Noire had propped Mezak up against the wall where he lay moaning like a sick cat. La Noire ran out through the kitchen door and found that Zados had connected two or three lengths of drainpipe, torn from the side of "Grey Gables," to the stream—the fast flowing stream—from the tarn high up the mountain. The tarn emptied itself, via the stream, into the placid waters of the steep sided lake beneath.

La Noire tore the pipes away angrily from the small

grated window of the cellar. The water spewed out over the concrete yard at the back of the farmhouse. Cotil joined her and between them they disconnected the evil pipeline which Zados had constructed so crudely yet so rapidly and efficiently. The waters of the tarn flowed down the stream bed as before in their allotted course.

The water in the flooded cellar ceased to rise. Stearman was working the pump with his feet. He had punched a hole in the lath and plaster ceiling of the cellar and with his brawny left hand clutching the side of the jagged aperture which he had made, he was pedalling the pump rather on the lines of an athletic cyclist determined to win a hill climb trial.

It became obvious to Val that the level of the water had stopped rising. There was an air space of about twenty inches between the surface of the water and the roof of the cellar. Stearman watched the surface of the water very carefully, there was a small stain on the wall a little to his left. When he had first looked the water had been up to the lower level of that stain. Now, however, it was an inch below it and seeping away slowly. The icy numbness of which Cotil had complained, began to have an effect even on the steel-hard muscles of the invincible Stearman, but the iron-grey colossus continued his pumping with the resolve of a robot. His ankles and knees were practically numb from the coldness of the water, but there was just enough sensation left in his legs to tell him that the pump was still functioning. He wondered what kind of effect the water had had on the freezing chamber itself. He was not by any means a refrigeration engineer, but he wondered whether the water which had sped unavoidably into the chamber, would negate the super-freezing which Sir Henry had considered necessary if cell tissue was to be preserved perfectly and indefinitely.

Val had an idea, but it was no more than an idea, that provided the temperature could be maintained, even though ice was present, the ice would become a kind of "super-ice" at a temperature far below zero and would actually

be an additional safety factor rather than an obstacle to the safe preservation of Catherine Wilder.

He would have liked to ask some authoritative expert, but it was the kind of secret which could not be shared. He imagined the sort of pious noises that authority would make if it knew that a human being was preserved in the cellar.

Stearman, although by no means a natural rebel, although by no means the kind of man who was automatically 'agin' everything, had, nevertheless, only a limited belief in the validity of established authority. It was not that he was an anarchist, by any means, it was just that in a number of respects he felt that the Establishment was not the best of all possible governmental organizations in the best of all possible worlds. It was funny, he thought, as he pumped with legs which were now so cold that he could not feel the pump handle, how one thought of odd, incongruous things at a time like this. Why was his mind swimming away in odd directions? His thoughts went darting out in a score of other exploratory, whimsical fancies.

The surface of the water, which had now receded another four or five inches, made him think of a great, flat, grassy plain. It was a mirror in which all life's evil was reflected. His movements were disturbing the surface of the mirror. His actions were turning the smooth clear glass into a series of undulating waves in which the only images were surrealist and symbolic, Picasso-like representations. Only the reflections in the surface of the water told Val that his numbed legs were still working.

He continued to pump as Cotil and La Noire came back into the cellar and swam through the water towards him. They didn't swim all of the way, it wasn't necessary.

"Let me take the pump a little while," said Cotil. The water was around his shoulders. "I've got it," said the Time Patrol agent. Stearman moved his body in the hope that his numbed legs would follow it. He looked at La Noire.

"The cold," he said, "I can scarcely feel my legs at all."

"We must get you out of here quickly," she said.

Val kept close to the wall; he half-swam and half-dragged himself to the cellar steps. He crawled up, dragging his numbed legs behind him like a hermit crab crawling across the shore of an ocean looking for a new shell in which to hide its soft pink body. Stearman felt somehow naked and unprotected while the numbing cold paralysis of the water denied feeling to his legs. La Noire rubbed at them vigorously and Val felt a little feeling coming back. He forced himself to stagger around in the corridor for a few seconds. The seconds turned into minutes and then the restored circulation was an agony of "pins-and-needles." He almost wished that the paralysis had continued instead, but "*almost*" was a long way from its goal. He was able to do more than walk now, he was running up and down the corridors, stamping his feet, curling his toes and then uncurling them again inside his shoes.

"That's better," he said, "I wonder how Cotil is getting on with that pump."

Courageously Stearman went back into the icy waters of the cellar. Cotil was working the pump, but his hands and arms were nearly as numb as Val's legs had been, although he had spent much less time at the task. The water was still falling rapidly.

"It won't be much longer now," said La Noire.

Val relieved Cotil who went out of the cold dampness of the cellar into the corridor above, beating his numbed arms against his chest to restore the circulation.

"The pump," said Mezak, "I want to pump; I want to do my share; she is my woman; I want to pump, to puuuuump." His voice tailed away and he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Cotil relieved Val again and by the time they changed positions once more the water had subsided to a series of damp puddles on the cellar floor. The terror had gone.

"It amazed me that that place should fill up so fast and empty so fast," said Stearman, "it just didn't seem that it

was ever going to drain away again. I thought the cellar was completely impervious to water."

"I think it had temporary imperviousness," said La Noire," but once the stone had got wet its porosity increased and accelerated the draining away of the water."

"Oh, whatever the reason," said Stearman, "I'm glad it's gone; I wouldn't exactly say it's dry now, but in comparison with what it was!"

"Do you think you can get the motors going again?" asked La Noire.

"I've looked at them; not a chance until they are allowed to dry out," said Val.

"Then it will have to be the pump," she said. She looked at Cotil. "Can we manage it in shifts?"

"I'm afraid we shall have to," said the Time Patrol Agent, "we haven't done all this to give up now."

"No, we certainly haven't," said Stearman.

Mezak came staggering down the stairs.

"I'm all right," he said, "I can take my turn." There was quite a bit of the glazed, dazed expression left in his eyes but he looked a great deal fitter than he had done.

"If you think that you and Mezak can manage," said Stearman, "La Noire and I must hurry."

"Hurry?" asked Cotil. "Where? Why?"

Stearman looked at him.

"That water has numbed your brain boy, don't you remember where Zados said he was going?"

"Of course, I'm a fool. It should have been my first consideration, I, of all people, a Time Agent!"

"Don't worry about it," said Stearman, "I hadn't forgotten. Can you give me any information about the time it takes to get through one of those warps and back again through another one."

"It would depend. You see, if our people delayed him at the other end; if somebody penetrated his disguise . . . I don't know *how* they get into the warp transmitter; that is a thing we must work on as soon as we get back."

"You certainly must," said Stearman, "we don't really

want a repetition of this business if we can avoid it. I'm not very enamoured of brother Zados and I'll say this, that as and when an opportunity presents itself I would like to make the world a little cleaner by sending him on." It was a euphemism but it was a term which Cotil understood.

"Perhaps you are right," said the Time Patrol agent enigmatically.

"There is no perhaps about it," said Stearman, he sounded almost angry. "There are things about Zados which make a decent man sick."

"So! Where do you plan to go now?" asked Cotil again.

"I must see if I can get to the hospital before Zados is able to get up one time warp and down another," said Stearman.

"You may just do it and I wish you good fortune," said Cotil.

"You're sure that you and Mezak can manage to keep the pump going until we get this place dried out and the motors organized?" asked Val.

"We will. Be as quick as you can," said the Time Patrol agent.

Val and La Noire piled into the car which they were thankful to see had not been touched by the opposition.

"It looks as though Zados was so anxious to get into the time warp that he didn't have time to do anything about our car," said Stearman.

"Maybe it looked so primitive by his 24th Century standards," said La Noire, "that he didn't see any point in doing anything to it. I mean, if you and I had gone back into the 17th Century we wouldn't have bothered to have sabotaged the opposition's horse and cart, would we?"

"No, I suppose not," said Val, "that's a good thought there, you have paralleled that well."

He flexed his legs again and then turned on the engine.

"I'm still a bit stiff," he said, "I think you ought to drive."

"Right," said La Noire. She and Val exchanged places. Her strong but dainty feminine muscles moved controls

with skill, grace and finesse, the big car began to move.

"Push it hard," advised Val and La Noire needed no second bidding.

The massive sports saloon roared into vibrant life and blasted its way in the direction of the hospital where Donald Smith still lay . . .

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ARAKARAN QUIETUS

THEY reached the hospital and swung in through the gates. Stearman lost no time in going to the Senior Registrar.

"You remember an attempt was made on the life of one of your patients, a Mr. Donald Smith?" said Stearman.

"Oh yes, why yes, yes I do," said the Senior Registrar; he sounded taken aback.

"I believe that another attempt is about to be made," said Stearman, "if it hasn't already been made."

"Oh good gracious me, how very distressing!" said the Senior Registrar. "We must go at once." He led Val to the ward in which Donald Smith was lying. The old postman smiled cheerily as Val and La Noire appeared. Stear-

man heaved a sigh of relief when he saw that he was still all right.

"We are in time," he said. "Is it possible to get Mr. Smith transferred to a private room?"

"Why yes, yes, if you feel it would be advisable, I would have thought the open ward would have offered more protection, people round him, that sort of thing."

"Well, it wasn't exactly Mr. Smith whom I had intended putting into that room," said Stearman.

"No!" the Registrar's voice was interrogative. "What had you got in mind then, Mr. Stearman?"

Val whispered something in the Registrar's ear. The man's eyes twinkled a little. "Indeed," he said, "yes, yes; we'll come along then."

Smithy, who was now well enough to get out of bed, dressed in gown and slippers, followed Val, La Noire and the Registrar out into the corridor.

"Listen," whispered Val in an almost inaudible undertone, "those people who were after you before are after you again, Smithy. The only way you are going to be safe is to have something done to them, *permanently*."

"I see!" said the postman.

"Now, the Registrar has very kindly agreed to put you in a private room, only it won't be you, it will be me. We will have your name up on the door and your charts hanging at the foot of the bed. There'll be some screens round it. I shall be in the bed."

"Capital! Capital!" said the Registrar rubbing his hands. He had been extremely annoyed, hurt and incensed to think that someone had dared to try and assassinate one of his patients. He felt the same kind of protective responsibility for his patients as a good house-master at a boys' public boarding school feels for the lads who are committed to his care. It was a personal affront, so far as the Registrar was concerned, and he was delighted that Stearman was taking the matter in such a spirit.

It was obvious to Val that the Registrar was going to

do everything he possibly could to assist in the operation of the Stearmanesque plan.

The private room was made ready in a matter of minutes.

"Now, at all costs," said Val to the Registrar, "I want regular staff kept away from here. Naturally, as you will appreciate, I don't know who the regular staff are. If anybody comes in I want to know that it is safe for me to grab them, and grab hard."

"Of course," said the Registrar.

Val drew a deep breath and settled down with a blanket over his head. He curled his great torso up into the smallest possible space; even then he took up a lot more of the bed than Smithy would have done! The Registrar looked at him.

"Well, I suppose if it says Smith on the bottom of the bed and on the door it may fool them." He said, "Are you sure you will be all right?" There was a trace of anxiety in his voice.

"I'll be all right," said Stearman. He set his jaw grimly.

Time passed. Val sneaked a glance at his watch. The real Donald Smith was hiding in the Registrar's office with La Noire sitting beside him cradling the silver bullet Browning which Val invariably carried.

There was the faintest of faint creaks as the handle of the private room door began to open. Val grinned a little to himself in the darkness below the blankets. He heard footsteps approaching the bed, one . . . two . . . three . . . another.

Judging by the footsteps the would-be assailant must be just inches off him. Val tensed himself for the leap and then judging his moment with split second precision, he gave vent to a roar which possessed many similarities to an old Gaelic war-cry.

As he let loose that terrible shout he leapt up and flung blankets and bedding over the Futurian who had just entered the room. It amazed Stearman they had found the room so quickly; they were not fools, he knew; one of them

must have seen Smith's chart and name on the door.

Val grappled with the struggling figure beneath the blankets. Another of the Futurians came through the door and Val threw the blanketed form to one side while he dealt with the new intruder. Seizing the Futurian by the collar he hurled him across the room with a great pivoting movement that fetched him up in a breathless, insensible heap just below the window.

The first man had staggered free of the blankets and Stearman realized who it was. *It was Zados himself.* Stearman faced the leader of the Arakaran Neo-Fascist organization and his mind was full of thoughts of the cellar in which he, La Noire and the two Time Travel agents could so easily have died. He thought of the way in which the followers of Zados had forced the exhausted Mezak to go on pumping long after flesh and blood could stand no more. The degree of refinement of the mental agony which they had imposed on Mezak made Stearman furiously angry. He attacked Zados with a flying head-butt that took the wind from the Arakaran and carried him back across the room to fetch up with spine-jarring force against the wall.

Val had no desire to damage the room any more than was necessary. He was a man who had the utmost respect for the sacrosanct profession of healing and he knew that hard pressed hospital finances could be better used than re-decorating apartments which had been unnecessarily damaged. All the same, this was the most minor of considerations when Val considered the damage which Zados would render the world of the 24th Century, if he lived and triumphed. It was hard to realise, reflected Stearman, that the life of an important democratic leader three centuries and more in the future, depended upon the life of a simple country postman in the 1960's.

Zados dived for a hand weapon as he clattered off the wall. Val got in close before Zados could get the weapon into firing position. Taking Zados's gun wrist in both his massive hands Stearman flung him across the room again

after the manner of the wrestler who flings an opponent into the corner-post. Zados lost interest in retaining his grip on the gun. He hit his head on the door knob as he slithered across the room and his senses swam in a sea of incandescent sparks.

Stearman dived across the room after him and locked his steely fingers around the would-be dictator's throat. The leader of the Arakar struggled desperately; he was a big man and strong and he was a ruthless man. He fought with every dirty, underhanded trick that he knew but nothing could loosen the grip of Stearman's massive hands. Tighter and tighter the big journalist-adventurer squeezed. He did not relax his grip, even after the leader of the Arakar had ceased to struggle.

The face of Zados underwent a revolting colour change; his countenance was a nauseating puce and magenta by the time Stearman finally rose to his feet and looked down dispassionately at the body of the man he had killed.

The Arakaran who had accompanied Zados into the room was stirring, recovering consciousness. Stearman jerked the man to his feet and pointed dramatically to the body of Zados.

"You see that," he demanded. The Arakaran looked in blank disbelief.

"It is Zados our leader!" he gasped.

"Yes, it is your leader. Zados, the superman, and I killed him with my bare hands and I will tell you something more; I enjoyed doing it, do you understand?" Stearman's voice had taken on a note of unusual viciousness and ruthlessness. "That is what I think of your organization and that is what I think of you." He pointed to the corpse of Zados. "Now pick it up."

"I can't. I'm not strong enough."

"Well, we're going to give you a lesson in muscle development," said Stearman. He lifted the body of the dead Arakaran leader and dropped it like a feather boat about the shoulders of the buckle-kneed Arakaran. "Now take him out to the cherry tree and disappear," said Stearman.

"We don't ever want to see you, or any others of your Arakaran party, in this century again. We have got enough troubles of our own without importing some of yours!"

The Arakaran, shocked into a kind of numb disbelief, staggered out into the corridor, through the open doors of the Hospital and out towards the cherry tree. A number of patients, taking a little fresh air and exercise in the grounds, stared in amazement and disbelief as the Arakaran staggered towards the cherry tree.

"I say," called an orderly, "I say there; what are you doing? Who are you?" He began running towards the Arakaran. The sagging bearer of the dead Zados reached the aperture of the time warp and just before the orderly's hands could close on the Futurian's tunic the body of Zados and the man who carried it, vanished apparently into thin air!

Stearman, looking on from the corridor window, smiled a thin, rather enigmatic smile as he looked at the amazed orderly going round the cherry tree trying wildly to locate the vanished Futurians.

Val went into the Registrar's office.

"It is over," he said, "it is finished, completed."

"Where are they?" asked the Registrar.

"Gone back to their own time," said Stearman, "one alive and one dead."

"So the Arakaran party are finished," said La Noire. She put her arms around Val. "Darling, I'm so proud of you." Val returned her embrace. He looked at Smithy and the Registrar.

"I think we have done all we can do here, gentlemen." He shook hands with them both. "But there is some unfinished business in another part of the County, if you will excuse us."

Val and La Noire made their way out of the hospital to the point where they had parked their powerful sports saloon. He stopped on the way and bought an electric motor.

"Probably it isn't the same size, but it is the right volt-

age and it is strong enough to do the job as far as I can guess. It will replace the one that got flooded."

Val's legs were now completely restored. All traces of the stiffness and numbness had gone.

"Nothing like a good brisk fight for restoring the circulation," said Stearman grimly. La Noire smiled.

"Are you feeling all right, darling?"

"I'm fine," said Stearman, "I'm fine. I never felt better."

They reached "Grey Gables" and hurried down to the cellar carrying the new motor. Cotil was working the pump.

"I'm glad to see you," he called. He looked admiringly at Val. "What happened?"

"The Arakaran menace is over," said Stearman, "my solution was probably barbaric by the standards of the 24th Century, but by my own standards it was good enough."

Cotil looked at him questioningly, gravely.

"I've just killed the leader of the Arakar," said Stearman.

"Zados!" asked Cotil.

"I killed him in a fair fight," said Val, "then I draped him around the neck of one of his disciples and sent them both packing to their own time, your own time," he added.

"That's terrific," said Cotil.

"Magnificent," said Mezak.

Val fired the motor and, as it purred into life, Cotil heaved a sigh of relief and stopped pumping.

A few moments later there was a tap on the cellar door. A voice asked rather anxiously.

"Is anyone there?"

"Yes," called Stearman, "who are you?"

A dapper little man wearing a black homberg appeared at the top of the cellar steps.

"I'm the Trustee Inspector," he said, "I was just making my round. I come three or four times a week just to make sure that the motors are working all right. Is everything all right?" He was obviously longing to ask who they were.

"Yes, everything is fine," said Stearman. He decided to put the little man out of his misery, "By the way, we are friends of Sir Henry; we have just dropped in to see that everything was satisfactory. I'm afraid there has been a little flooding," added Val, "perhaps you can arrange to get someone in and get the cellar mopped?"

"Oh dear, I hope the motors haven't stopped."

"No, no, no," said Val, "the motors are all right."

"It appears to have iced up," said the Trustee, "will that affect anything?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Val.

"Oh, that's all right then."

"May even be an extra protection," said Stearman.

"Good, good, I'm afraid I don't understand this experiment at all, but . . ." the little man seemed lost for words.

"Oh, it is a very valuable and interesting experiment," said Stearman, "isn't it?" He turned to Mezak.

"Yes," said Mezak, his voice rich with emotion, "very valuable experiment indeed. You will take the utmost care of the motors, won't you?"

"I and my fellow trustees will see that absolutely nothing happens," assured the little man in the homberg.

Val, La Noire and the two Time Patrol Agents made their way out of the cellar.

"You'd also better get a new lock on there," said Val, "that one seems to have been damaged."

"Oh dear me, pressure of the flood water or something," said the little man vaguely.

"That is probably the reason," said Stearman non-committally.

They stood in the corridor, near the bend, close to which lay the mouth of the time warp, by means of which Cotil and Mezak could travel.

Val and La Noire shook hands with them both.

"Goodbye, and the best of luck," said Stearman.

"And to you," answered Cotil and Mezak.

And then, before the eyes of Val and La Noire the two

Time Patrol Agents walked around a corner in time and vanished.

"They are gone," said Stearman.

La Noire looked sad and wistful.

"Gone," she echoed in a rather resigned voice. "Now I suppose there is nothing else for us to do but go back to London."

"Yes, I must go back and see how much work has been piling up on my desk at the *Globe*," said Val.

"I bet you can rely on Mac for a few caustic comments," smiled La Noire. She and her husband made their way out to the car and drove back to the great city of the South-East . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY

... HAPPILY EVER AFTER

MEZAK, back in his own time, raced from one Government Department to another with the speed and industry of a nectar-carrying worker bee trying to get back to its hive before the weather broke.

The old Cumberland house still stood. The trust, all but forgotten, as is the way of ancient Trusts and Charities, still carried on its work without really knowing why. Mezak made a number of important legal applications and accompanied by a team of the most brilliant 24th Century medical scientists and heating engineers, he made his way to the ancient house.

It was very much as he remembered it. It seemed to him as though it were but yesterday that he and Cotil had been

trapped in that flooded cellar in which only the strength and the courage of the mighty Val Stearman had rescued them alive. But, Mezak's thoughts were centred incontrovertibly on the deep freeze chamber and its precious contents. It was not that he was ungrateful to Val; it was just that the contents of that chamber mattered more than anything else in the whole world as far as Mezak was concerned.

Under the direction of the heating engineers, the refrigeration experts, the bio-physicists and the medical experts, the ice was chipped away until the contents of the chamber were revealed. There was a gasp of surprise as they saw the flawless beauty of the girl in suspended animation.

Looking at her through the super-cooled ice, Mezak could only gasp her name. Tears of joy and wonder trickled down his cheeks.

"Catherine, my Catherine." He looked at the little cat sleeping at her feet. He gulped and swallowed hard, the emotion overcame him. He looked at the experts who had come with him to help; they were already assembling the complicated pieces of equipment. Coils and tubes, metal rods and all sorts of induction apparatus were being fastened carefully and scientifically and with great methodical precision around the super-freezing chamber.

"Shall we be able to save her, to awaken her?" asked Mezak.

"I don't know," said one of the doctors, "but we will certainly do everything we can."

At last the scientists and the engineers were ready. The coils were all in place and they were only waiting for the Senior Doctor's signal to apply the power and the current. The timing was absolutely imperative. If they delayed at all in the unfreezing she would die of the cold that had preserved her. If they applied too much heat, they would kill her with the heat that was intended to resurrect her.

It required micro-second timing and micro-degree cali-

bration. The temperature in the suspended animation chamber had to be known exactly.

"Now," said the senior surgeon. The machines went into action. The ice vaporized. The awful coldness in the cellar melted like an early snow, in the twinkling of an eye. The doctors lifted Catherine swiftly from the suspended animation chamber and began applying the kiss of life method of artificial respiration. To Mezak's incredible delight she sat up, blinked, smiled; her eyes rested on him and she took a few unsteady paces towards him.

"Mezak?" Her voice was a mixture of delight and wonder. Then they were in each other's arms and he was kissing her fervently, knowing that they would never part again.

Something black and furry rubbed itself warmly and contentedly against her legs. She stooped and picked it up. While she and Mezak had been embracing, one of the doctors had revived Pippin as well. The little black cat purred contentedly and snuggled up between the lovers . . .

* * *

It was the wedding of the year for 2321. It had to be. The publicity experts gave it global coverage. Pictures of Mezak and Catherine Wilder appeared on every video-screen in the world. As Mezak and his bride sat contentedly by the glo-panel in their pent-house apartment, looking through the enormous numbers of 3D colour shots that had been taken of their incredible wedding, Mezak paused suddenly and frowned.

"Who's that?" he asked. "I've seen that woman before." Catherine and the time patrol agent looked at a face.

It was a face in a crowd and it was obvious that the owner of the face was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. But there was a mysterious, enigmatis, cleopatrine beauty about that face, which would not be hidden. The

SUSPENSION

hair was black, almost blue-black. The eyes were deep, dark and mysterious.

"If it's not her, it's her double!" exclaimed Mezak. Catherine looked wonderingly at the picture.

"Perhaps it's one of her descendants?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes, I expect so," agreed Mezak," but the likeness is uncanny."

"It is," whispered Catherine.

They were looking at a photograph of La Noire Stearman.

THE END