

MAY BE SOME TIME

by Brenda W. Clough

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From Scott's Last Expedition by Robert Falcon Scott:

Friday, March 16, or Saturday, 17 [1912]. Lost track of dates, but think the last correct. Tragedy all down the line. At lunch, the day before yesterday, poor Titus Oates said he couldn't go on; he proposed we should leave him in his sleeping bag. That we could not do, and we induced him to come on, on the afternoon march. In spite of its awful nature for him he struggled on and we made a few miles. At night he was worse and we knew the end had come._

Should this be found I want these facts recorded ... We can testify to his bravery. He has borne intense suffering for weeks without complaint, and to the very last was able and willing to discuss outside subjects. He did not -- would not -- give up hope till the very end ... He slept through the night before last, hoping not to wake; but he woke in the morning -- yesterday. It was blowing a blizzard. He said, "I am just going outside and may be some time." He went out into the blizzard and we have not seen him since ... We knew that poor Oates was walking to his death, but though we tried to dissuade him, we knew it was the act of a brave man and an English gentleman. We all hope to meet the end with a similar spirit, and assuredly the end is not far._

* * *

It's said that death from exposure is like slipping into warm sleep. Briefly, Titus Oates wondered what totty-headed pillock had first told that whisker. He no longer remembered what warmth was. He had endured too many futile hopes and broken dreams to look for an easy end now. Every step was like treading on razors, calling for a grim effort of will. Nevertheless without hesitating he hobbled on into the teeth of the storm. He did not look back. He knew the Polar Expedition's tent was already invisible behind him.

Finer than sand, the wind-driven snow scoured over his clenched eyelids, clogging nose and mouth. The cold drove ferocious spikes deep into his temples, and gnawed at the raw frostbite wounds on brow and nose and lip. Surely it was folly to continue to huddle into his threadbare windproof. What if he flung all resistance aside, and surrendered himself to the wailing Antarctic blizzard? Suddenly he yearned to dance, free of the weighty mitts and clothing. To embrace death and waltz away!

He had left his finnesko behind. Gangrene had swollen his frozen feet to the size of melons, the ominous black streaks stealing up past the ankles nearly to the knee. Yesterday it had taken hours to coax the fur boots on. Today he had not bothered. Now his woolen sock caught on something. Excruciating pain jolted his frozen foot, suppurating from the stinking black wounds where the toes used to be. Too weak to help himself, he stumbled forward. His crippled hands, bundled in the dogskin mitts, groped to break his fall. They touched nothing. He seemed to fall and fall, a slow endless drop into blank whiteness.

And it was true! A delicious warmth lapped him round like a blanket. Tears of relief and joy crept down his starveling cheeks and burnt in the frost fissures. He was being carried, warm and safe. Rock of Ages, cleft for me!

For a very long time he lay resting, not moving a muscle. Stillness is the very stuff of Heaven, when a man has marched nearly two thousand miles, hauling a half-tonne load miles a day for months, across

the Barrier ice, up the Beardmore Glacier, to the South Pole and back. He slept, and when he wasn't actually asleep he was inert.

But after some unknowable time Titus slowly came to awareness again. He felt obscurely indignant, cheated of a just due. Wasn't Heaven supposed to be a place of eternal rest? He'd write a letter to the Times about it...

"Maybe just a touch more?" one of the celestial host suggested, in distinctly American accents. Silly on the face of it, his unanalyzed assumption that all the denizens of Heaven were British...

"No, let's see how he does on four cc. How's the urine output?"

Shocked, Titus opened his eyes and looked down at himself. He was lying down, clothed in a pure white robe, all correct and as advertised. But were those a pair of angels lifting the hem? He used the drill-sergeant rasp he had picked up in the Army. "What the hell are you at!"

Both angels startled horribly. Something metallic slipped from a heavenly hand and landed with a clatter on the shiny-clean floor. A beautiful angel with long black hair stared down at him, sea-blue eyes wide as saucers. "Oh my God. Oh my God, Shell! Look at this -- he's conscious! Piotr will be like a dog with two tails!"

"Damn it, now the meter's gone."

As the other angel stooped nearer to pick up her tool Titus stared at her face. It was tanned but flushed with irritation. The nose had freckles. She wore huge coppery hoop earrings, and her short curly hair was dull blonde, almost mousy. "You," Titus stated with conviction, "are not an angel."

The happy angel -- no, blister it, a woman! -- exclaimed, "An angel, Shell, did you hear that? He called you an angel."

"He did not! Don't you ever listen, Sabrina? He just said I was not an angel."

"This isn't the afterlife," Titus pursued doggedly. "Am I even dead?"

"Shell, this what we have you for. Hit it, quick!"

The irritable angel elbowed her companion into silence and spoke, clear and slow. "No, Captain Oates, you are not dead. We are doctors. I am Dr. Shell Gedeon, and this is Dr. Sabrina Trask. You are safe here, under our care."

Titus could hardly take her words in. His mind hared off after irrelevancies. He wanted to retort, "Stuff and nonsense! Women can't be doctors. They don't have the intellect!" But he clung to the important questions: "What about my team? Bowers, Wilson, Scott: Are they safe too?"

Dr. Trask drew in a breath, glancing at her colleague. Dr. Gedeon's voice was calm. "Let's stop the drip now, why don't we?"

"Excellent idea. If you'll pass me that swab..."

"They are all right, aren't they?" Titus demanded. "You rescued me, and you rescued them." The doctors didn't look round, fiddling with their mysterious instruments. "Aren't they?"

He wanted to leap up and search for his friends, or shake the truth out of these fake ministering angels, these impossible doctors. But a wave of warm melting sleep poured over him, soft as feathers, inexorable as winter, and he floated away on its downy tide.

* * *

Again when he woke he was met with pleasure: smooth sheets and a cool clean pillow. No reindeer-skin sleeping bag, no stink of horsemeat hoosh and unwashed men! He lay tasting the delicious sleek linen with every nerve and pore. How very strange to be so comfortable. His gangrened feet no longer hurt even where the covers rested on them. Double amputation above the knee, probably -- the only

treatment that could have saved his life. He had become reconciled to the idea of footlessness. Lazily he reached down the length of his leg with one hand to explore the stump.

The shock of touching his foot went all through his body, a galvanic impulse that jerked him upright. He flung back the covers and stared. His feet down to the toes were all present and accounted for, pink and clean and healthy. Even the toenails were just as they used to be, horn-yellow, thick and curved like vestigial hooves, instead of rotten-black and squelching to the touch. He wiggled the toes and flexed each foot with both hands, not trusting the evidence of eyes alone. It was undeniable. Somehow he had been restored, completely healed.

He examined the rest of himself. At the end, in spite of the dogskin mitts, his fingers had been blistered with frostbite to the colour and size of rotten bananas. Then the fluid in the blisters had frozen hard, until the least motion made the tormented joints crunch and grate as if they were stuffed with pebbles. Now his fingers were right as ninepence, flexing with painless ease: long, strong and sensitive, a horseman's hands.

The constant stab from the old wound in his thigh, grown unbearable from so much sledging, was gone. He leaped to his feet, staggering as the blood rushed dizzily away from his head. He sat for a moment until the vertigo passed, and then rose again to put his full weight on his left leg. Not so much as a twinge! He was clad in ordinary pyjamas, white and brown striped, and he slid the pants down. The ugly twisted scar on his thigh had opened up under the stress of malnutrition and overwork, until one would think the Boers shot him last week instead of in 1901. Now there was not a mark to be seen or felt, however closely he peered at the skin. Most wondrous of all, both legs were now the same length. The army doctors had promised that with the left set an inch shorter than the right, he would limp for the rest of his life.

He had to nerve himself before running a hand down his face. Such a natural action, but the last time he'd tried it the conjunction of blistered fingers and frozen dead-yellow nose had been a double agony so intense the sparks had swum in his eyes. But now it didn't hurt at all. His nose felt normal, the strong straight Roman bridge no longer swollen like a beet-root. No black oozy frostbite sores, but only a rasp of bristle on his cheek. Even the earlobes -- he was certain he'd left those behind on the Polar plateau! Incredulous, he looked round the room for a glass.

It was a small plain chamber, furnished with nothing but the bed and a chair. But there was a narrow window. He leaned on the sill, angling to glimpse his ghostly reflection in the pane. He ran his tongue over his teeth, firmly fixed again and no longer bleeding at the gums. His brown eyes were melancholy under the deep straight arch of brow bone, and his dark hair was shorn in an ordinary short-back-and-sides.

Suddenly he saw not the glass but through it, beyond and down. He leaned his forehead on the cool pane, smearing it with a sudden sweat. He was high, high up. Below was a city the like of which he had never seen, spread from horizon to horizon in the golden slanted light of either dawn or sunset. Buildings spangled with lights, gleaming in sheaths of glass, reared mountain-high. His own little window was thousands of feet up, higher far than the dome of St. Paul's even. Far below, vastly foreshortened, people scurried along the pavements. Shiny metal bugs teemed the ways and flitted through the skies.

"This isn't London." His voice had a shameful quaver. He forced himself to go on, to prove he could master it. "Nor Cairo. Nor Bombay..."

"You are in New York City, Captain Oates. As you will have observed, you have traveled in both

space and time. This is the year of our Lord 2045."

Titus turned slowly. Though every word was plain English, he could hardly take in what the man was saying. With difficulty he said the first thing that came into his head: "Who the devil are you?"

Unoffended, the slim fair man smiled, revealing large perfect teeth. "I am Dr. Kevin Lash. And I'm here to help you adjust to life in the 21st century. We're connected, in a distant sort of way. My three-times great-grandmother was Mabel Beardsley, sister of the artist, Aubrey Beardsley. You may know her as a friend of Kathleen Scott."

"The Owner's wife." Titus grasped at this tenuous connection to the familiar. "Then -- you're an Englishman!"

Dr. Lash continued to smile. "I was born in America, but yes, I'm of English extraction. Insofar as several generations of the melting pot have left me with any claim to..."

Titus crossed the room in a bound. He wrung Dr. Lash's slender hand as if he were his best friend in the world. In a sense this was true. The doctor was his only friend. Titus's inner turmoil was such that he only belatedly realized the doctor was continuing to talk. "Sorry -- I'm afraid I didn't catch what you were saying. It's all quite a lot to take in."

"Absolutely, I don't doubt it." With an amiable nod Dr. Lash sat down in the chair and waved Titus towards the bed. "A very natural reaction, given the tremendous change in your circumstances. I was outlining your schedule for the next day or so..."

And Titus was off and away again, sucked into an interlocking series of irrelevancies. It was stress, the alien environment all around, that made it so hard to concentrate. But recognizing why didn't help him focus any better. This time it was Dr. Lash's pronunciation that set Titus off: "schedule." Titus himself would have said "shed-jool." But Dr. Lash used "sked-jool," the American pronunciation. Indeed every word, his every tone and posture and gesture, spoke of the United States. So it must be true. "Damn it! Sorry -- I'm trying to attend, believe me. But I keep going blah. My head's full of cotton wool."

Still unoffended, Dr. Lash smiled. "Not at all, Captain. I'd be happy to repeat or amplify anything you haven't quite grasped. I was giving you a quick outline of time as our theories suggest it applies in temporal travel. No man is an island, you know..."

Complete unto himself, Titus finished for him silently. So Lash was a man of education -- must be, if he was a doctor. A doctor of what? Those two women, the sham angels, had obviously been medical-type doctors. But curse it, he had to listen!

Lash was saying, "...the tiniest change can have an incalculable impact. The death or life of an insect, a microbe even, may not be inconsiderable. Nothing can be plucked casually from the past, for fear of accidentally revising the world..."

The past? But of course. If this was the year 2045, then 1912 was long ago. "Is it possible to go back?" he interrupted.

"What, you, you mean? Return to the place and time you left? I believe it is impossible, Captain. But you would not wish it -- to return and freeze to death in Antarctica? That was another subject of debate: the moral dimension of what we were attempting. It would be surely wrong to wrench away some poor fellow with a life ahead of him, family and friends..."

My family, Titus thought. Mother, Lilian, Violet, Bryan. My friends. I will never see them again. They might as well be dead. No -- they are dead. Died years ago.

"...an ideal subject," Dr. Lash was saying. "Not only are you a person rescued from a tragic death, but

your removal is supremely unlikely to trigger any change in the time-stream, since your body was lost: presumed frozen solid, entombed in a glacier for eons..."

Titus stared down in silence at his pale bare feet. They were a little chilly now from resting so long on the uncarpeted floor, but that was all. Impossible to think of them frozen rock-hard, embalmed in eternal ice. Yet only a short time ago (or was it 133 years?) they were nearly so. "My team."

Interrupted in mid-discourse, Dr. Lash said, "I beg your pardon?"

"The others. Scott, Wilson, Bowers. Did you rescue them too?"

"Ah ... no."

"Then they made it. They got back to the depot, back home!"

Dr. Lash's copious flow of words seemed to be suffering a momentary blockage. "No."

Titus sat silent, his shoulders bowed. So his companions too had died. Had it all been for nothing then, all their work and sacrifice and heroism? "Why did you save only me, then?"

"Remember, Captain," Dr. Lash said patiently. "You are unique. Your body was never found."

"Just as well, since it was here. I'm here." He grappled with slippery verb tenses. "This is the future. You must have histories, newspapers. Records of Scott's Polar Expedition."

"And you shall see them. But, if I may make a suggestion, not today. You should recover your strength a little. The doctors have further tests -- "

Titus growled in disgust. "No more doctors! Now!"

"Tomorrow," Dr. Lash promised. "Tomorrow I'll get the books. As you can see, it's already evening. Not the time to start a new project."

Titus stood to look out the window. Only the closest observation revealed that night had fallen. The city outside glowed and throbbed like a gala ballroom, its lights smearing the dark sky, blotting out stars and moon. So beautiful and strange!

"...a good night's sleep." Dr. Lash was getting to his feet. "And breakfast. I've tried to have food that isn't too strange for you..."

Titus hardly noticed the doctor's departure. The moving lights outside held him. The soaring or darting small sparks must be the metal bugs of before, lit for night work. Presumably behind every glowing window were people working and living. There must be thousands, millions of them. By night or by day the city was alive. He leaned his ear to the cold glass and heard its murmur, a dull continuous roar.

He realized he wanted nothing to do with it. This strange monstrous city was far more foreign than the Antarctic ice. The thought came to him that this was all delirium, the final flicker of phantasy in the brain of a dying man already half-buried in blizzard-drift. It wasn't even a delusion he enjoyed! A tremendous hollow longing for home filled him, for England, his family and friends, anything familiar. And there was nothing left to him now, except perhaps his own renewed body. At least this was as it had always been. He climbed back into bed and hugged himself, curled under the covers, diving into sleep's reprieve.

* * *

With the morning Titus's courage rose again. No point in going into a funk, he told himself. I coaxed those damned ponies halfway to the Pole. I have the sand to cope with the future.

The breakfast Dr. Lash had promised did a great deal to restore his strength of mind -- streaky bacon, odd toasted bread rounds, and buttered eggs. The tea in the flask was cat-lap, brewed with water that had come off the boil, and he could not identify the fruit from which the juice had been squeezed. But

there was plenty of everything, a heaped plate on the little serving trolley and additional servings on the shelf below under covers to keep them hot. After months of short commons, the sight of so much food made him weak at the knees.

When Drs. Lash, Gedeon and Trask came in, Titus was mopping the plates clean with the last crust of bread. "Where are you putting it all?" Dr. Gedeon said, watching. "It's been a long time since your last decent meal."

Dr. Lash blinked in alarm. "Gently there, Shell. I'm trying not to confront him with too much just yet."

Dr. Trask fished a stethoscope out of her pocket, hung it round her neck by the ear pieces, and beamed upon him as if she were offering him a splendid gift. "I'm going to check you over, Captain."

Grudgingly he allowed her to listen to his heart, and look into his eyes and ears with a shiny metal instrument. She did other mysterious tasks too, with rubber tubes and bits, or holding little tools that blinked or flashed colors against his arms and legs. "Physically okay," she pronounced at last. "He was strong as an elephant in the first place, to survive what he went through. So he had a good foundation to build on."

"And you always do good work, Sabrina," Dr. Gedeon said. "What about his mental and cognitive recovery, Kev?"

"Well, yesterday we weren't quite ourselves, were we, Captain?" Dr. Lash said. "But at his suggestion -- his insistence, in fact -- I have a simple test all prepared."

"All that historical stuff? Don't tell me you want to teach him to surf the net."

"Of course not -- the books will be plenty." Dr. Lash pushed the serving trolley out into the hall, and returned immediately with a different cart, loaded with several dozen books of all sizes. "Captain, you asked about the fate of your friends. As you can see, there's quite a lot of literature on the subject. Also, in preparation for your reception I had much of the archival material, the articles and so on, transferred to hard copy last year -- forgive me, I should say printed out onto paper and fastened together into these makeshift volumes."

"These?" Tentatively, Titus touched a stack of weird shiny books. "Are they glass?"

Dr. Trask smiled, but Dr. Gedeon said, "Titus -- is it all right to call you Titus? I'm going to teach you one of the most important terms of this modern age. No, hush up, Kev -- you have to give the poor man a few tools to handle his environment. These floppy covers are plastic. So is this binding on the spine. Plastic, remember that word."

"But the pages inside are plain old paper, just like in your day," Dr. Lash added.

Titus picked up the top book. The slick but stiff substance -- plastic! -- of the cover slipped in his unaccustomed fingers. The book flopped open in its fall to the coverlet, and he looked down at it into the photograph of a familiar face: Dr. Edward Wilson, his hands in their mitts akimbo on the ski poles, grinning into the camera from under the rolled brim of his sledging cap as if death could never touch him. "Uncle Bill," he said, stunned.

"We know he was your friend," Dr. Gedeon said softly.

Dr. Lash sat down on the bed beside him. "Keep in mind though, Titus, that you've traveled. Even if all had gone well with your Expedition, he would be long deceased. Your loss is no less. But it's inevitable, a natural progression."

Titus seized a less strange volume, a fat grey book titled Scott's Antarctic Expedition. More ferocious than the need for food, the thirst for his past was suddenly overwhelming, parching his mouth. "For God's sake, leave me alone and let me read!"

"You wouldn't prefer to have me present, to answer any questions?"

"No -- please! Go away!"

"Come on, Kev." Dr. Gedeon jerked her blonde head at the door. "Leave him in peace."

"We can come back in a while," Dr. Trask said.

Reluctantly Dr. Lash allowed himself to be drawn away in a trail of discourse. "During this initial adjustment period I think that slow progress is the ideal..." And mercifully they were gone.

The books, the proper ones, were antiques. Everything about them proclaimed it, their smell of yellowy paper and dust, the alarming crack of their spines when Titus opened them, the flakes of brittle glue that sprinkled his pyjama lap. A film of fine greyish grime coated the top edges of the pages and came off on his fingers. How terrifying then, to see the photographs he remembered posing for only months ago! These men, that pony, those dogs: they weren't old. How could they be, when the memory was so new? But the books belied him.

And it was a jolt to glance at the text and realize that he was reading excerpts from Scott's personal diary. The Owner was -- had been -- a meticulous diarist, but the volumes were of course private. Titus flushed with embarrassment, to thus pry into a comrade's innermost thoughts. But here they were, all the juicy tidbits printed in a book, an old one at that. Everything in them was common knowledge, public property for more than a century. Titus had kept journals himself, sent letters home, written to family and friends. He gulped, wondering now if they were printed here too. Figures of history have no privacy.

But enough shilly-shallying! He paged rapidly through the book, skimming along the months and days. The journey to lay One-Ton Depot; daily life in the camp; the Polar trek; a photograph of Roald Amundsen and his team standing bareheaded before the Norwegian flag at the Pole. Titus glowered at it and turned the page. Towards the last he had lost track of the days, but Wilson or Scott would have kept good count.

And here it was. Titus bent over the book, scarcely aware of the chilly floor or the crick in his neck. The end of the story at last: eleven miles short of the depot, Scott and Wilson and Bowers had frozen and starved to death. Titus exhaled a long silent breath. The unfairness of it, the waste! The print blurred as his eyes filled.

This is history, he reminded himself. It's over, long over, poor devils! But his heart refused to go along with it. Suddenly the coolness of the room seemed malevolent. He piled the pillows up at the head of the bed and sat against them, armoured in covers pulled up round his chest, to read -- to dive into the books that held all that remained of his world.

He devoured them, the different journals -- the egotists, had every member of the expedition published his journal? -- the scholarly analyses, the biography of Amundsen, the biographies of Scott. When he had read them all, he looked at them again and then yet again, chewing them over, extracting new meanings and significances.

He noticed for instance that different meanings could be wrung out of the same set of events. Scott was praised as a hero and damned as an incompetent, his expedition the last flower of the golden Edwardian afternoon or the first tremor of a collapsing empire. And the theories of why the expedition failed! There were more candidates than he would have ever imagined: deteriorating washers in the fuel tins, crooked Manchurian ponies, Wilson's poor medical supervision, Scott's bad decisions, even -- this made him wince -- his own excessive endurance and bravery.

But surely the eeriest experience of all was reading the account of his own death. Scott's journal entry was quoted time and again. 'Able and willing to discuss outside subjects'? Titus could recall nothing of it

-- perhaps he had muttered something about his yacht, in semi-delirium. Odd, but entirely characteristic of the Owner to find that admirable. And the paintings and memorial statuettes of himself! He turned past them, averting his eyes.

Vaguely he was aware of Dr. Lash popping in and out, talking and asking questions, of the rattle of the food trolley as it came in and went out. Titus paid none of it any mind, focused with a ferocious concentration on the past. He only looked up when a slim pale hand laid itself flat on his page. "I beg your pardon?"

"Titus, you've been slaving away for the entire day. Do you think you would care to quit for the night? Maybe have a meal? You have to take care of yourself -- "

"Hell's bells, man, must you hover? I'm perfectly fine!" Titus jumped to his feet and to his dismay fell head-foremost onto the food trolley. He didn't quite faint, but the black buzzing in his eyes was curiously reminiscent of it. There was the hot oily splash of soup or gravy on his chest, a tremendous clatter of falling crockery, and over it Dr. Lash shouting for help.

He came to himself in bed once more, clean and dry in fresh pyjamas, blue and white striped this time. The female doctors were there again, the plumper blonde holding his wrist while the tall dazzling brunette directed her mysterious tools at it. "Dr. -- Gedeon, is it," he murmured. "And Dr., Dr. Trask."

"Oh, so you're talking again," Dr. Trask said. "And you remember our names, that's a good sign."

Dr. Gedeon scowled at the little machine in her hand. "He read all day yesterday? Wonderful. Very clever of you, Kev."

"That's unfair, Shell," Dr. Lash said, tightlipped. "And the vid record will bear me out."

"He said he felt perfectly fine," Dr. Trask said.

"And Kev believed him, yeah, right." Dr. Gedeon folded up one tool and took out another. "A man whose chief claim to fame is that he committed suicide to save his team. You wouldn't keep a Pomeranian kenneled up this way, never mind a man used to an active lifestyle -- "

"I'm giving him the dignity of a rational being. You, night and day training with the Fortie team, wouldn't realize -- "

Titus lay back and let the quarrel roll over him. He didn't grasp what the difficulty was, and didn't much care. In the Army he had learned to hole up when the brass had a row. Instead he assessed his surroundings again. Vaguely he remembered that while he was reading the sunshine had crept across the window and faded, an entire day's passage. And then a period of oblivion, and now the light streamed in through the glass again, a new day. Perhaps midmorning, judging from the angle of the light. The trolley stood near the bed, laden anew with covered dishes. It would be a great pity to let the meal get cold. He slid the nearest plate off the shelf onto his knees and seized a fork, suddenly famished. Would he ever get enough food again?

Dr. Lash thumped the hospital bed rail with both hands. "All right, a walk then! But let's try to keep the chronal displacement shock at a minimum, all right? Through the park, not the streets."

"Shell will go along, won't you, Shell." Dr. Trask's brilliant blue gaze shifted to her associate. "You can fit him into your exercise routine."

Dr. Gedeon turned to Titus, who hastily gulped down his mouthful. "Be dressed and ready at 12:30," she said. "And make them give you a pair of decent shoes. You can't walk in slippers in New York -- there are always jerks who don't scoop after their dogs."

On that gnomonic statement she swept out of the room. "I'd hoped to postpone this, Titus old man," Dr. Lash said, shaking his head. "But the ladies, God bless 'em ... At any rate, while we fit you up with some

walking shoes, we can go over a couple of routines that may ease the choral displacement for you."

"Don't concern yourself," Titus said. "How difficult could a walk be?" Dr. Trask sighed at this, folding up her shining tools.

Titus's cocky self-confidence only began to shake when he and Dr. Lash met Dr. Gedeon in the hall. She wore the most outre clothing he had ever seen on a female. Even the street beggars in Calcutta didn't go about bare to above the knees. It was indecent, shocking -- wrong! The only possible conclusion to draw was that the woman was a whore. If they allowed women to become doctors, surely it was not a very much further descent to let in whores? One respected doctors, but light-skirts were owed only contempt. Nothing in Shell's demeanor seemed to allow disrespect, however. The contradictions inherent in the situation made him giddy. Suddenly Dr. Lash's words, repeated over and over, sank in: "Don't let it get to you. All that stuff, it's unimportant, nothing to do with you. Let it roll off your back, like water off a duck. Accept, nod, and move on..."

Titus nodded at Dr. Gedeon and moved on. Dash it, there were more important things to do now. He would worry about bare knees later. Dr. Lash held the door to the stair for them. Titus followed Dr. Gedeon down and down, dozens of flights of echoing steel stairs quite empty except for themselves. "Does nobody else use this building?" he asked.

Dr. Gedeon glanced back, surprised. "Most Paticalars use the elevator -- oops, sorry, Kev!"

Water off a duck, Titus said to himself. Nothing to do with me really. But he was unable to resist adding the new words to the list. Paticalar, elevator, plastic -- he ought to start a notebook like the Polar scientists, and illustrate them with water-colour. "And ought I have a hat?"

"A _hat_?" Both moderns looked so blank, Titus immediately saw that hats were dead out of fashion. In his day a gentleman rarely stepped out of doors without some sort of head covering, summer or winter. In fact he noticed now that the entire party was free of the impedimenta an Edwardian outing would entail -- no gloves or walking sticks, muffs or card-cases, hats or topees, purses or parasols. For a moment it was almost discomposing, to have nothing to fill one's hands. But then he thought of his walks as a child, when the grown-ups had to do all the carrying, and it was deliciously freeing instead.

The stair ended at another door. Through, past a lobby beyond, and ...

Titus felt his mouth go dry. He had stepped into a street as strange as the far side of the moon. And so damn busy! Machines he couldn't name whizzed past, big and small, making noises he had no word for. People surged round him, hatless indeed, dressed in colourful grotesque garb and doing or eating or saying things that he could not name. Were those little machines on their heads, or merely elaborate hairdos? Were those scars on the bare legs and arms, or paint, or some attenuated garment? Strange smells assailed his nose, tempting appetite, revolting, attracting in turn. Colour and light poured over him too quickly for comprehension. And the noise! Worse than the beggars in Cairo, worse than Covent Garden market. The wail and clatter and roar of the 21st century slapped him in the face and drove all rational thought from his head.

He found he was clutching his companions, Dr. Lash on his left and Dr. Gedeon on his right, flank to flank as if they were breasting a mighty river in full flood. Somehow they passed together through the howling chaos to a haven, a refuge of calmness and green, and Titus became aware of Dr. Lash's steady lecturing again. Apparently he had been talking all this while: "Don't think about it. Ignore her. It's all rolling off you. Has no effect, eh? Someday when you're up to it you can easily figure it out. But now, today, you don't have to..."

"You know," Titus mumbled.

"Yes?"

"You know, Lash, you can be bloody damn tiresome," Titus said, all in a breath. His vision cleared. The object in front of him was blessedly familiar. "A tree! First one I've seen in -- " He halted, confused. Was it a year and a half, or a hundred and thirty?

"You're feeling better," Dr. Lash noted.

Titus nodded. The vertiginous sense of unreality seeped away fast as it had come. The vista before him now would have been familiar to a man of any era: rolling grassland studded with handsome clumps of trees. If one didn't look beyond, at the cliff-like buildings towering above the treeline, it was an environment Titus knew down in his bones. Carefully, he didn't look. He drew a deep happy breath, eased from a constraint he had not recognized until now.

Dr. Gedeon lifted what he realized was a small rucksack from her back -- he had assumed her jacket was merely cut strangely. She took out two dumbbells, saying, "You want to set the pace, Kev?"

"I'm not going far," Dr. Lash said. "My asthma will start up if I push it."

"Let's take the reservoir path then." Dr. Gedeon clenched a weight in each small fist and began to walk briskly down the path. Titus and Dr. Lash followed.

An almost frightening sense of well-being possessed Titus. He had not felt so fit, so confident, so brimful of vigour, in ages. The dear old sun shone behind leaves as cleanly cut as paper, and birds sang with enthusiasm. A breeze blew cool and damp from the reservoir below, freighted with a slight scummy smell. Titus inhaled it like incense. He stretched his legs, striding out with long steps. Surely it would be possible to live in just the familiar bits of this new era, comforting and safe areas like this park?

Dr. Gedeon grinned at him when he caught her up, her teeth very white in her tanned face. "Great, isn't it?"

"Yes." Carefully he did not look down past her face. She had accurately pinpointed the medicine he needed. Perhaps she wasn't a bogus sawbones after all.

"Hold up, you two," Dr. Lash called. He had fallen far behind, wheezing.

Dr. Gedeon reversed course immediately. "Did you bring your inhaler?"

"Of course." Dr. Lash appeared to be sniffing medicine from a large white tube. Concerned, Titus watched him closely. The dose did seem to help.

Dr. Gedeon said, "You'd better go straight back to the office and take an antihistamine. Shall we come back with you?"

"No, don't bother," Dr. Lash said. "I'll be fine. This happens all the time," he added to Titus.

"It shouldn't," Dr. Gedeon said. "You should have your condition assessed by a qualified allergist. Asthma can be a killer."

Asthma, Titus mused -- another new word. Dr. Lash brushed her concerns aside. "Keep a close eye on Titus," he said. "Once only around the park, and then come straight back. This is his first experience, remember."

"A walk round the park?" Titus snorted. "Don't make me laugh, Lash."

"I'll take good care of him," Dr. Gedeon said. "Now off you go."

Only when Lash was out of sight did Titus realize how confining his fuss and mother-hen admonitions had been. Dr. Gedeon, a real medico and female to boot, had a more robust outlook, more to Titus's taste. "I think we should run," he said. "Fast."

"All right. Race you to that bench!"

And she was off, surprisingly speedy in spite of a womanish rocking-horse gait that would have made

a pony blush. How delightful it was to use the limbs like this! Titus made his best effort, trying to use his greater length of leg to advantage, but she beat him handily. Carrying a weight handicap, too! He felt only a moment of obscure outrage before laughter overtook him. "Bravo!"

She laughed too. "Not a real contest, against a disabled vet."

"Ludicrous. The leg wound hasn't bothered me in years."

"Not till recently." He stared in astonishment -- how could anyone know that? He had hidden the disintegrating scar even from Scott and Wilson until the very end. And he knew from the books that Scott, the last expedition member to keep records, had not mentioned it. She went on, "I watched Sabrina glue you back together again, remember? One of the symptoms of scurvy is old wounds breaking out again."

"Whatever she did patched it up fine. I couldn't even find the scar."

"She's a whiz. It was worth all the cloning work, to see you trying out your leg, and feeling your toes for the first time."

"You saw me? But, but I was alone in my room."

She grimaced. "Titus, you're unique and valuable -- the first and possibly last man to travel through time. And not only that -- you are a patient. We've been monitoring you all during your recovery. You have never been alone or unobserved since you arrived."

He remembered the shiny metal tools, the gleaming examination table cleaner than anything he had ever seen. "How long have I been here?"

"You traveled to the modern era a year and a half ago."

He stared at the trees, trying to take her words in. For eighteen months he had been clay on the wheel, dough under the rolling pin -- a chunk of inert material upon which skilled hands worked. It was a sodding liberty! And surely he could not have spent all that time flat on his back in a hospital bed. He had done that in 1901, and knew well how one's legs became weak as string and the muscles wasted away from want of use. Now his legs were a little shaky and his skin unusually pale, but otherwise he was himself, in good working order. They must have been exercising his limbs, working and testing and using his body in ways he couldn't conceive of, with all the conscious consent one would get from the clockwork goatherd in a Swiss cuckoo clock. Returning him to consciousness day before yesterday was only the capstone of a major project -- it was obvious in retrospect that his first short encounter with the 21st century, swearing on the shiny-clean table, had been unplanned. He wondered how many people were employed on the task. The thought of unseen eyes spying on him day and night made his spine crawl. "Are they watching us now?"

"Here in the park? Well, I'm in charge, watching you, but that's all. C'mon, Titus, don't let it worry you. There's a lot for you to get used to. Here." She took water bottles from her rucksack and, opening one, passed it over.

He drank, hefting the weird featherweight container. "Plastic?"

She smiled. "You're a sharp one." He felt absurdly chuffed at this praise from a modern.

They walked on at a slower pace. The path was narrow here, crowded closer to the tall wrought-iron palings of the park fence by trees and brush. Beyond the palings was a city street. It was a quieter one, without the surging crowds and thundering vehicular traffic near the first building, but still Titus felt like a lion safe behind the zoo bars. "Are those commercial buildings?"

"Those tall ones over there, you mean? Oh no -- co-ops, I think. Damn! What I mean is, they're residences. People live there." He knew his face was blank with ignorance, because she waved her hands

in rhythm with her stride, trying to explain. "I mean separately, not all together. Condos. Cells. Divisions." She groped for more synonyms.

The penny dropped. "You mean, it's a block of flats."

"Is that what you call it? Okay then!" She blew out a relieved breath. "I should've listened better, when Kev was going through his British-versus-American word lists with us."

Titus smiled. "Two countries, divided by a common tongue."

"Exactly. It's surprising how hard it can be to communicate clearly."

"And that." The architecture was so powerfully familiar he could hardly believe it. "A church."

"Yep." She peered through the railings at the signboard on the pavement across the street. "Saint Somebody's Noontime Service. And will you look at that sermon! 'Is God a Fortie?'"

Titus's religion was nominal, no more than a tradition of his class. But the organ music pouring forth from the open doors of the church drew him in like a hooked fish. "I know that tune!" He hummed along, and then sang the words that rose unbidden from the depths of memory. "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne ..."

Dr. Gedeon sighed. "You must be a Christian. Everybody was, back then. You want to go in, don't you? And I'm dying to hear that sermon."

He nodded. She found a gate, and they crossed the street, she holding him back until a gap opened in the traffic. But Titus took the lead up the steps into the dark Romanesque arch of the portico, and dragged Dr. Gedeon into the haven of the rear pew.

A number of wrongnesses immediately struck him. Electric lights dangled from the arched ceiling and spotlighted the stained glass windows -- Titus could not remember ever seeing a church fitted with electricity. The windows themselves were gratingly ugly in their modernity. Uplifted in the homily, the voice of the celebrant rang jangly and loud, amplified in some uncouth modern way. The dozen members of the congregation were almost blasphemously dressed. Titus gulped down a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

"-- not only are they ineffable. As Jehovah in the Old Testament had his chosen prophets, the Forties communicate through those who can understand them -- in their case the scientists and astronomers who have translated their message..."

Titus scowled, uncomprehending. What were the Forties -- the time period, the 2040s? Dear God, what had happened to the faith of our fathers! But then the music rolled from the pipe organ, a hymn from his boyhood. The last time he had heard this tune was at Sunday morning prayers in the little stone church in Gestingthorpe village, where as the young squire of the manor he had presided in the family pew. Homesickness rose up in his throat. His soul balked like an over-tried horse at the new and ugly and strange. He ached to go home, to the place and time where such songs were part of daily life. Though he knew the words he could not join in.

It was the closing hymn. The priest pronounced a benediction, and the congregation straggled down the aisle and out into the sunshine. Dr. Gedeon fidgeted but did not rise, while Titus struggled with his misery. The priest, saying goodbye to the tardiest old lady, noticed the new faces in his flock and came down the aisle. Dr. Gedeon smiled up at him. "Just visiting."

"You're very welcome all the same," the priest said. He was a tall balding man in a dog collar, the image of a regimental padre.

Dr. Gedeon stood up and shepherded Titus out into the aisle. "I'm so thrilled to hear a homily about the Fortie project!"

"It's on everybody's mind, so every denomination has to throw in their two cents' worth. There's even a rumor the Pope is writing an encyclical."

"I think Titus here is an Anglican," she said in a helpful spirit. "And I'm Shulamith Gedeon."

"So you're the dancing doctor! I'm Rev. Pollard. We call it Episcopal in this country, but that's just terminology."

"Shulamith?" Titus's jaw slacked with astonishment. 'Shell' must be a nickname, just like 'Titus' was. "What on earth kind of a name is that?"

"Jewish, isn't it?" Rev. Pollard said.

"My grandmother," Dr. Gedeon said. "And my father was a Santeria wizard from Bermuda. So I really don't fit in with your churchy stuff -- though the building's absolutely gorgeous." She looked up at the stained glass windows.

The priest smiled with gentle pride. "All the original Art Moderne glass too -- "

Titus wanted to laugh. "How did you ever become a doctor? A nigger, a Jew, and a woman!"

To his complete astonishment Dr. Gedeon turned on her heel and slapped him across the face. He would have tumbled over if the priest had not caught him by the elbow. She continued turning, marching away out the door, her thick strange shoes plopping angrily against the stone floor. "Did I say something wrong?"

Rev. Pollard stared at him from under his grey eyebrows. "You were very rude."

"Was I?" The padre's cold disapproval whipped the blood to Titus's cheeks as a blow could not. I can't go back, Titus realized. The world he had known was gone forever, never to be found again. It had been a natural impulse but an utterly false step, to pursue familiar old things like this church service -- to wind himself into a cocoon that resembled, more or less, the past. To retreat rather than advance was shameful, a coward's ploy. He had assumed the job was to retain what he had always been, the well-bred Edwardian soldier and explorer. Now he saw he had been pitchforked into a war, the scope of which made his heart sink: the war to make a life for himself in the year 2045, a fight he had no choice but to wage and win. "You're quite right," he almost gabbled in his haste. "I must beg her pardon."

He sprinted down the dim aisle, through the narthex and out into the summer sunshine, acutely aware that she was fleeter than he. If she had run beyond view, he would never be able to follow. He cursed his own helplessness, and grimly promised himself it should be short-lived. But there she was in the street, standing next to a big shiny-yellow beetle. "In you go," she said as he ran down the steps. "Let's go back to the TTD."

"In?" He realized it was a vehicle, a fantastically futuristic motor of some sort, and she was holding the door open. Awkwardly he climbed in. She would have banged the door on him, but he kept it from latching and ducked his head through the window to grab her sleeve. "Doctor -- Shell -- I apologise. I'm not sure what I said wrong, but I'll do my best to learn. Please -- give me a chance."

"The PTICA-TTD, at 93rd," she was saying to the driver. "Look Titus, it's not your fault, I know. But even though you don't look it, you're a sexist, racist, anti-Semitic old fart! So let go my arm, okay?"

The grinning driver made a tasteless remark in what Titus recognized as Hindi. Automatically he flung the fellow a viperish oath picked up during his Indian service, and went on: "You can't send me back alone in this thing. I'll suffer from chronal displacement, just like Dr. Lash is afraid of. I'll have the blithering vapours. I'll get lost. I'll -- I'll be robbed by the driver."

The cabdriver, cowed by amazement for the moment, seemed unlikely to do anything of the sort. But Dr. Gedeon sighed. "I suppose Kev would never let me forget it." She pulled the door open again.

Titus made room for her on the slick seat -- plastic again, they must love the substance. And, God! "I'm sorry, I didn't ask if I could call you Shell," he said quickly.

"What?" Her grey eyes were blank with astonishment.

"It's an unwarranted liberty -- isn't it?"

"Goodness, that's not important. I only assist Sabrina with your treatment, so we don't have a formal doctor-patient relationship. Keep on calling me Shell. Although I know it gives Kev a charge when you call him Dr. Lash, so maybe you should keep that up."

"I will. Shell, I'll find my feet as soon as I can -- "

The vehicle lurched into sudden vehement motion and then screeched to a halt, flinging him against the sliding window that separated the driver from the passenger compartment. The driver turned, shrilling, "Careful! Son of a fool, hold onto the handle!"

Horns blared. Titus obeyed, cursing the driver comprehensively to the third generation. The seemingly solid handhold under his fingers suddenly gave way with an ominous click as some mechanism in the body of the door activated. The door swung perilously open out into unsupported space, taking him with it.

"No, Titus! Not that one!" Shell reached across him and pulled the door to. Titus got a terrifying glimpse of the roadway speeding past not a foot below, before she slammed the door shut.

The vehicle swerved wildly as the driver leaned on the horn while turning to abuse them. "You destroy my beautiful taxi!"

"Sorry!"

"Will you keep your eye on the road and drive!" Shell yelled at the driver. "And you, Titus, don't touch anything! Just sit!" She pushed him back into his place and with her other hand touched a button or control. A restraining strap slid out of a recess and clasped itself round his torso and waist, pinning him courteously but firmly to the seat. "My God, Kev will wet himself..."

The vehicle barreled along at an impossible pace, fast as a railway engine but darting in and out like a fish. Every moment new collisions and fresh disaster seemed imminent. Lights blinked in a blare of colour, metal hulls glittered like talons, and the traffic roared its hunger. Titus felt that dizzying disorientation creeping over him again. He licked his dry lips and clutched his hands together in his lap where Shell had placed them for safety. He stared at the turbaned back of the seething driver's head, reasoning away his discomfort. This driver is not a man of unusual gifts, he told himself. I've driven motors myself, just not as fast -- and the road was empty! I could manage this vehicle. It can't be difficult, if a native can do it. I could learn. "You see why I need to learn," he said hardily. "As long as I don't know what's what, I'm a danger, to myself and others."

"You're preaching to the choir, Titus." Shell slumped against the seat in not-entirely-exaggerated exhaustion, her short blonde curls escaping from their headband. "You're going to need a minimum of information before you can even begin to learn. But give yourself some slack, okay? Take your time. The 21st century isn't going anywhere. We don't have to do it all today."

"You teach him," the driver snarled. "The fool, the idiot! He cause an accident to my taxi, I sue!"

"What is 'sue'?" Titus demanded of Shell. "It sounds like some hell-and-tommy impertinence!"

"I'll tell you later," Shell said. "Look, here we are, thank God! One more word out of you, driver, and I'll report you to the taxi commission. No, Titus, don't pull like that! Let me unbuckle it -- oh, all right, unbuckle it yourself. You push this bit right here, and voila. Yes, yes, here's your fare, and the hell with you, pal. That's right! and if you don't like the tip you can stuff it up your ass and set it afire."

Titus's mouth dropped open again. In all his wide travels, he had never heard such red-blooded invective from the lips of a female. A hard-bitten cavalry trooper could say no better. Torn between admiration and horror, Titus followed Shell inside.

* * *

Titus began the new regime the very next morning by stacking all the antique books back onto their cart, and rolling it out into the hallway. He wanted to add a label, the sort they put on steamer trunks: "Not wanted on voyage." He had learned everything he needed to know about the past. Onwards, to the present! He capped the gesture by demanding the morning paper. "You do still have newspapers?"

"Not _paper_ papers," Dr. Lash said. "I mean, not usually printed on paper."

"What do they print them on then?"

"Screens, old man. Like this." He tipped the sleek little black machine he held, so that Titus could see the square glowing window on the front, small as a postcard. It looked nothing at all like what Titus would call a screen -- screens were for fireplaces, to shield the glare. "And trust me, Titus -- you would not understand a newspaper. It's too soon for you to dive into current affairs. Wouldn't it be easier to start with a precis of world history for the past century and a half? Work yourself up to the present day?"

Titus knew this was only common sense. Nevertheless he felt it was time to be bloody-minded. He had pretty well proven that he could do anything he set his will to. "I can do both. I know it."

"At least let me find you a paper newspaper," Dr. Lash pleaded. "We don't have to learn to surf the net today. Let me print out a paper edition of the _Times_."

"The _Times_? Truly?"

"The _New York Times_. But there's no reason why other papers shouldn't be available too."

"The only _Times_ is the London _Times_," Titus growled. When Lash went out, he pulled a piece of paper from under his pillow. He had found it in the wastepaper basket of his bathroom -- from the printing on the outside it must have once formed the wrapping for a roll of toilet tissue. Now Titus started his list on it. To 'plastic' and 'elevator' he now added 'screen' and 'net.' He was going to have to get a proper notebook, and a pen rather than a pencil. And no more of this keeling over like a stunned ox from swotting at the books. He would pace himself, sensibly.

Dr. Lash returned triumphant. "You're in luck, Titus! Jackie had last Sunday's _New York Times_ printed for her son's history project. A couple days old should make no difference to you, eh?"

"I'll overlook the deficiency this time," Titus said with mock severity. He spread the weird undersized paper out on the counterpane. But within the hour he had to admit Dr. Lash was right. The _New York Times_ was almost completely incomprehensible: not because any given word was beyond him, but because he had no context in which to place each sentence. What was the pork-barrel? If they were building a freeway, then it should be free -- so why was funding it cause for vituperation? Who was the Internet AG, and how did his indictments combat Fortie frauds? It had been the same when he listened to Rev. Pollard's sermon yesterday. And the paper was too small and felt odd. Frustrated, he tossed it aside.

"Had enough, huh?" Shell came in with an armload of brightly-coloured books and magazines. "Maybe these will go down better. Kev's been buying up antique children's texts and reprints of old comics." She balanced the stack on the chair.

"Children's books? You must have a poor opinion of my intellect."

"Not at all. But you're not interested in scholarly analysis or minutiae. You want the broad overview -- just enough to go on with till you find your feet. Did you know that to understand a written text you

have to already know seventy percent of the words? Some TTD expert worked it all out that this level of difficulty should be about right for you now."

Not quite right, Titus noted. Not seventy percent of the words, but seventy percent of the knowledge. Grasping seventy percent of the meaning was the fence he was finding rather high. In any case the size of the stack was disheartening. "What I really want," he said boldly, "is another walk. Longer this time."

"Sorry, Titus. I'm booked today, and so are you, with that reception this evening. Let me just give your vitals a check-over, okay? Sabrina is in consult all day today, so I promised her I'd do it."

"I don't want to over-work myself again with the books," he said, pressing his advantage. "Walking is good for me. You said so yourself."

"Oh, for God's sake." But she was smiling as she consulted the glowing screen of the little machine in her hand. "They didn't tell me you were persuasive. Tomorrow, how about."

"I shall look forward to it. Oh, and what is -- " He consulted his list. "Paticalar'?"

"Oh! The initials PTICA stand for Pan-Terran Interstellar Contact Agency. Everyone calls it the Fortie Project, though. This building you're in, everyone here, is the Time Travel Division, the TTD. And people who work for PTICA wind up being Paticalars. A silly name, but a newsie coined it in '39 and it stuck."

This was not very helpful, but Shell was obviously in a hurry to some other appointment, so he let her go. Instead he made a note of the names, PTICA and TTD. With the prospect of another outing comfortably in hand, Titus turned to the stack of books. He had never been of a scholarly turn. Now he found the large letterface and the shiny coloured pictures in A BOY'S BRITISH HISTORY soothing. King Arthur, William the Conqueror, Henry the Eighth, oh yes. There will always be an England. It was disappointing that Scott and his Expedition didn't rate a chapter, but merely a paragraph. And good God, Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts project had flourished! Then wars and more wars -- Titus groaned aloud. He had missed all the fun, curse it.

"Ask me any questions you like," Dr. Lash said, coming in.

Titus preferred to quiz Shell because she was less of a fuss, but it would be foolish to carry prejudice too far. "Lash, what is this Fortie business you're all on about?"

"You could say that the Forties are the reason you're here, old man. They're certainly the *raison d'etre* for the entire PTICA-TTD."

"Then they're very important. Come then, tell!"

"I'm trying to choose the best way, Titus. Have you ever seen a film? A movie, a motion picture?"

"Of course," Titus snapped. "They took cinematographs of the Polar Expedition, you know."

"So then you think you'd be comfortable viewing an educational film?"

"About this Fortie business? Certainly!"

"Hmm, there's enough time." Titus noticed that Lash consulted not a pocket watch or a wristwatch, but his little machine. In 1912 a watch was the badge of competence and responsibility, yearned for in boyhood and carefully kept in later life, but obviously customs had altered. Instinctively he felt in his trouser pocket for the watch he always carried, the most accurate timekeeper in the Polar party, but it wasn't there. Lash was saying, "And it would be good if you had something to converse with the Ambassador about. But you're sure it won't be upsetting, Titus? There will be pictures of your rescue -- "

The mere suggestion made his blood rise. "Don't coddle me, Lash. I insist on seeing this film."

"Well, let's risk it. While you get ready, Titus, let me give you a brief summary of the phenomenon.

The first contact with extraterrestrial intelligence in 2015 set the world ablaze with excitement..."

Attending with only half an ear, Titus put on his shoes. He was rather ashamed that he'd fallen into this habit of tuning poor old Lash's blather right out, but at least Lash's self-importance blinded him to it. He led the way to the stairwell and briskly down the metal stairs while Lash trailed behind. Titus felt like a terrier straining at the leash, urging the slow-footed human along.

But instead of pushing through the big double glass doors, Dr. Lash turned the other way in the lobby. The single steel door he chose gave onto a plaza on the other side of the building. It was a fine hot day, blazing with sunshine, and beneath the shade of leafy trees were booths and stands and placards and bright-clad people. "A market," Titus hazarded. "Like in Egypt."

"Not a bad guess," Dr. Lash said. "But this is a marketplace of protesters and cranks, in the main. Better to let them have their say here, where PTICA has some control over the process. Ignore them all, old man. After the film you'll know what's what."

The doctor linked an arm through his. Titus suppressed the impulse to pull free. The booths and placards did look beastly dull. Nothing edible or alive or interesting was on offer, but only leaflets. Titus remembered with brief nostalgia the teeming markets of Bombay. He had bought heavy silver bracelets for Lilian and Violet, and --

Dr. Lash suddenly stopped dead. "The brass-balled nerve of the fellow! No, this is too much! Titus, stand right here. Don't move an inch, all right? I'm just going to fetch the police."

"The police? I -- " But Lash was gone, darting away through the press. Titus stood as instructed, and stared at the cause of Lash's ire. It looked like just another set of placards, presided over by a lean old man absurdly dressed in pale pink. The fellow was shouting some service or product and passing out leaflets.

" -- safety for you and yours, when the aliens come," he said rapidly. "Condos burrowed into the rock on Easter Island, the most isolated place on earth." The people filtering through the plaza didn't pause to listen, even when the old coster thrust leaflets into their hands.

Titus's motionless stance made him very obvious. "How d'you do, sir?" the old fellow greeted him. "Here you are."

Titus took the offered leaflet. "What's it all in aid of then?"

"Don't ever trust what those PTICA people tell you, sir." His watery old eyes shone with sincerity. "What are they getting out of this? You think about that, sir, because you'll find it's the key to everything. They're all grinding their own axe. A secret agenda, do you understand me, sir? They don't have our interests at heart at all."

Titus wondered if he meant Shell or Dr. Lash. It came to him that this fellow was the first modern he had spoken to, who wasn't involved in his rescue. But the old fellow was rattling on: "They tell us the Forties are too far away to be dangerous. But, come! Nobody knows what they're really after. Everybody agrees on that. Do you want to risk your family, sir, your children, on the unfounded assumption that they're nice folks? Safety first, that's my policy."

"And a damned craven one," Titus interjected.

The salesman evidently didn't know what 'craven' meant, because he didn't pause. "Easter Island, the most remote place on earth, that's where we're erecting the first series of shelters, sir. And construction is already beginning under the Antarctic ice cap -- "

That one word was enough to galvanize Titus. "In Antarctica? Where's your base camp? Has the British government approved this incursion?"

"Britain?" The old man was momentarily derailed. "What do the Brits have to do with it?"

Conceding Amundsen's prior claim still stuck in Titus's craw, but in justice he had to add, "Or the Norwegians."

But suddenly the old man clapped his placard together, scooping up the stack of leaflets and shoving them into his pocket. Without a word more he began to scuttle away through the crowd. Titus heard a distant shout, "He's running for it!"

That was Lash's voice! Without thinking about it, Titus lunged and clapped a strong hand onto the old man's shoulder. The placard went flying. The fellow squealed and writhed like a pig, no more that one would expect from a professed coward. "Let go!"

"Oh, buck up," Titus said in disgust. But, how odd -- was that a fountain pen he was pulling out of his breast pocket?

Too fast for Titus's unaccustomed eye to take in, a pellet or stream or projectile shot from the pen's end, hitting a passing woman squarely in the stern. She whirled, teeth bared in outrage. "Tep!" she yelled.

A host of divergent irrelevancies instantly took charge of his thought processes, so that Titus stood there clutching the pink shoulder of his captive like a dummy. Perhaps 'tep' was a curse, his first modern swear word? The pen could not be a deadly weapon -- the enraged female victim had taken no injury. What was she saying? It was too fast and impassioned for him to grasp, but she sounded damned stropy. Perhaps the pen was like pistols, fairly harmless at a distance but dangerous up close. Not for the first time, it struck him that his ignorance was downright dangerous. The old blighter was pressing the thing up to his ribs. At point-blank range even a popgun might be annoying --

A huff of surprised breath escaped him. That hurt! Some sort of electrical shock, was it? A fiery pain had run from the pen right through his body. Without knowing how it had come about he found he had let go and fallen reeling to one knee. A weapon, by Heaven, and surprisingly effective.

But the enraged woman was keeping the fellow at bay, yammering like all the Furies unleashed. Titus felt a new and profound sympathy for her attitude. Astonishing, how respect for grey hairs could evaporate under the stimulus of a low trick like that. He took the fellow's wrist in both hands and hauled himself upright, digging his thumbs hard into the tendons along the way and twisting the hand open. The little cylinder dropped clattering to the pavement, and the angry woman immediately snatched it up, snarling.

Sputtering, the old man took a swing at him with his other hand, but his arm was too short to connect. "An old cove like you shouldn't be so feisty," Titus observed sardonically. "Might you consider yourself overpowered? I'm a foot taller and two stone heavier than you, after all. And twenty years younger -- " He bit the words off short. Not true, if one calculated by the birth date!

A pair of women in blue uniforms swept up on either side of him and collared the captive before Titus could say more. "Thank you, sir," one of them said to him in passing.

Dr. Lash trotted up panting, and dragged him aside. "I didn't mean you, Titus! Dear God, you shouldn't have waded in like that. It was very dangerous!"

"Stuff and nonsense -- nobody was much hurt." He rubbed the place on his ribs where the tingling pain was passing off, and nodded at the agitated little group.

The old man drooped in the grasp of one female constable, while the other waved a black machine. The enraged woman had finally slowed to comprehensible speed, saying, "Damn right I'll press charges!"

Everything seemed to be under control. Reluctantly Titus allowed Lash to shepherd him away from the fuss. "What's it all about, then?"

"This is the fourth time we've caught this old fraud here, selling shelters against alien invasions."

"Under the Antarctic ice cap," Titus recalled.

"Is that the latest? Naturally there's nothing being built there. The scheme's fake as a wooden nickel. To have that sort of thing here give the impression that we endorse it. Thank God nobody seems to have fallen for it today."

None of this made sense to Titus. The familiar sense of overload was creeping over him again, triggered perhaps by the crowded plaza and its excitements. He trailed after Dr. Lash, masking his discomfort behind a cavalryman's reserve. Surely they were nearly there, wherever their destination was? They were approaching the building that formed the other side of the plaza now. Titus had to make a deliberate effort not to hurry up to its big glass doors.

Resolutely sauntering at Dr. Lash's heels, Titus had a perfect view of the portals swinging open at Lash's approach, without a hand laid to them. The wonder of it nearly cracked his mask, but he refused to demand how the mechanism worked right now. Later, perhaps.

Inside the crowd was thicker yet, clustering at one end of the lobby. Titus was weakly grateful when Dr. Lash bypassed the crush, opening an inconspicuous door behind a pillar. Beyond was a vast dim space. "Mind your step!"

"It's a bleeding cliff." Titus peered over the railing.

"Not at all, there's a stairway to your left. Let's find a seat before the crowd comes in."

As his eyes adjusted, Titus realized it was not really so dark. Not until they were descending the stair did he grasp that these were seats forming the steep slope. This was a theatre, a very oddly-shaped one. He sat down in the seat Lash indicated. "But where's the stage? The curtain?"

"This is a film theater, Titus." Lash dropped into the seat beside him.

"Film theatres need curtains too," Titus grumbled. But the crowd was filtering in now, entering from the lower doors. And a bunch of trippers they were, too -- children with jujubes, women carrying big bags or sniveling tots, men sipping from cups. It was like an outing to Bournemouth. A long time seemed to drag by, before everyone took their place.

There seemed to be no screen, but only a smooth blank wall, six storeys high. The seating sloped steeply enough so that every member of the audience had an unobstructed view. The lights faded slowly to a pitch dark, filled only with the anticipatory rustle of the crowd, the crackle of candy wrappers, and the whimper of a baby.

Violins, a swooping bit of romantic fluff by one of those German composers. A small spot of light appeared in the darkness, so small that Titus almost mistook it for a trick of his eyes. With a sudden swoosh the spot grew into a familiar blue globe. "What's all the cotton-wool round it, though?"

Titus felt rather than saw Lash's glance. "Clouds. That isn't a model, Titus. It's a motion picture of the Earth itself, taken from a satellite."

Questions surged up in Titus's chest: How did they loft anything so high? Who was running the camera? Since when did they take pictures in colour? But the entire wall suddenly exploded into light and life, and it was as if he were hurtling in a taxi driven by that Hindu again. The Earth whizzed by, six storeys high and tipping alarmingly until his stomach heaved. He gripped the arms of the seat and swallowed down the bile. It's only a blistering film, he reminded himself. This speed and size -- it's a deliberate effect, damn them.

A voice spoke and made him jump. So they had learned to add sound to the moving pictures, the clever little buggers! Why had no one done it in 1912? But he wasn't going to give way to distraction.

He forced himself to put amazement aside for the moment, and pay attention strictly to what was being said.

"...LN-GRO, the most powerful gamma-ray space telescope in existence," the voice was saying. "The pulsar is a natural stellar phenomenon modified by alien intelligences to carry a message, transmitted in a series of gamma rays bursts. The message was enormously long, taking three years to capture in its entirety. It took another ten years to translate it."

Incomprehensible patterns of light and dark squares, moving back to reveal that they were merely depictions upon screens, the glowing rectangular screens of machines like those Shell and Lash used. Then the image moved back yet again, to show people sitting and standing at those machines, puzzling over the patterns. An instant soundless dissolution, and the huge image split into nine images -- some of them continuing to depict scientists staring at screens, and others showing things Titus could not name, machines working or people doing things. For a moment he was totally at sea.

The music buzzed, busy and driving and joyous, giving Titus the clue he needed. He blinked with tardy understanding. The film was depicting a process: thought, research, the work of many people all driving towards a solution to the translation problem. He had never thought of telling a history in this way, but he dimly perceived the power of it. If only he knew more of what was being shown! To his astonishment the film's voice intoned, "A minimum of information is necessary for comprehension to even begin." Shell had told him the same thing. It must be a proverb of the era.

But the film was going on about the mysterious star message, the possible interpretations of the signals and the final conclusion as to what they meant: "An invitation?" Titus muttered. "Someone in the stars wants us to come to tea, perhaps."

"Shh," Dr. Lash whispered. "Watch, they'll explain."

"-- an invitation, and perhaps the means to get there," the voice said. "Albert Einstein told us that it was impossible to travel at the speed of light. But the Forties' novel theories of space and time have showed us how to warp space -- and time. Their clues have helped us make theory into reality, and build a faster-than-light interstellar drive. The final proof was pulling a historical figure from the past to the present. This personage was carefully chosen from a spot where nothing was alive: on the Antarctic icepack, to ensure that not even an insect or a plant seed was inadvertently removed from the biosphere loop. Precisely placed in space and time on the 80th parallel on March 16th, 1912, his body has never been found. The bodies of his companions are still entombed in the glacier which will carry them out to their final ocean resting place in another hundred years, so that no question arises of some plant or algae being deprived of the nourishment of his component atoms..."

It was a single image now, of this door into the past shining with weird white light. Titus stared in jaw-dropping horror at the colossal screen. It was himself up there six storeys tall, falling through that door, the Rock of Ages cleft from the other side: the slow endless drop into blank whiteness. And not his clean whole current self, but the emaciated and gangrened cripple, stiffly clad in frozen mitts and tattered windproof, collapsed forward out of the glowing portal onto the gleaming white floor in a flurry of blizzard-driven snow. Chunks of ice, or perhaps bits of his frozen flesh, shattered off to melt into brownish disgusting puddles. The researchers in the film cheered loud and long, clapping each other on the back at this living proof of their theories. Dr. Trask and a horde of other medicos armoured in gloves and masks dashed forward to the rescue, turning the icy dying thing over, their shining tools poised.

Titus gazed up at his own face sideways on the screen. Several tots in the audience wailed at the horrific sight. The frozen white lips had writhed back, revealing a red-black slice of rotting gums and

bloody teeth. Scarred with frostbite, the skin blackened by the wind and pocked with scurvy pustules, the countenance was inert and deformed as an Egyptian mummy's. The back of Titus's nose and throat constricted at a powerful memory of the nauseating aroma, the overwhelming rotten-sweet stench of his own body shivering into decay around him as he dragged himself along. "God, I shall be sick," he gulped.

"I beg your pardon?"

Titus lurched to his feet. He had to get out of here, before the bubble of vomit rose to the top. He almost fell down the stair, his leaden feet catching on the carpet, trapped in a nightmarish slowness. Above him the music blared triumph and joy, and the film's voice boomed, "...Captain Lawrence Oates, heroic explorer lost in Antarctica..." And where was the blasted door?

He pushed through and fell flat gasping onto the carpet. Dr. Lash, close behind, nearly tripped over him. "Hang on, Titus, I'm paging the doctors. Don't try to move!"

Of course this was intolerable. Titus immediately sat up, breathing hard. He wiped his clammy forehead on his sleeve. "Oh God. Oh bloody fucking hell. Lash -- that was I!"

"But you knew that, Titus. I told you, it would explain all about your journey here."

"I don't understand. I do not understand." With self-contempt Titus listened to the weakness, almost the whimper, in his own words. Was he actually unable to grasp the knowledge offered to him, the way a dog is unable to manipulate a pencil? Were these people so far beyond him? Seventy percent, they said. Get 70 percent by the throat, and the rest will come. He reeled to his feet and walked, staggering a little, ignoring Lash's protests. He was a soldier, and a soldier could not give in. This was the true war, the one he was going to have to fight for the rest of his life: the battle to adapt and understand and survive here. No surrender, damn it. Never!

The lobby was thronged. Faces swam and spun past him, busy and self-absorbed. Thank Heaven people were unlikely to recognize him, thawed out, cleaned, and healed as he was now. Moving, using his arms and legs even in blind purposelessness, was the solution he instinctively clung to. The creed in the Antarctic was, if a man could walk, he could live. And it did not fail him. His stomach steadied and his courage returned a little. When a familiar quacking blatted out as he passed, he turned to look.

It was a duck call, just as he'd thought. A very young black man was blowing on the short wooden tube for the benefit of a gaggle of children, and making a damned poor job of it. The raspberry noise he made was embarrassing. "Now, what does this call say?" the young man asked them.

The only reply was giggling. Titus couldn't stand it. "Give me that." Without waiting for a reply he held his hand out over the heads of the seated children. Such was the power of his expectation that the young Negro meekly handed the duck call over. Was it done, to call them Negroes? In his day Titus had flouted class and race divisions not from any burning sense of the brotherhood of man, but in pure anarchic bloody-mindedness. The egalitarian quality of modern society caught him on the hop, as discomposing as kicking a huge weight that suddenly was no longer there. He held the little tube to his lips and blew. The call was not quite the same shape as the long thin ones he was used to, and there was something entirely novel about its innards. But it was not too odd, and he had been well-taught by the old gamekeeper at Gestingthorpe when he was a boy. A magnificent and utterly authentic-sounding quack echoed through the lobby, the cry of the mallard patriarch in his pond. Titus could almost see the ducks gliding in towards the water. His palms itched for his old fowling gun.

"Oh, nice!" the young man said. "And what does it say, can anybody guess?"

"Hello!"

"Or g'bye!"

"When a duck says quack, that's what it means, probably," the young man said. "But when he blows the call, what does he mean?" He pointed at Titus. "Sir, why do you say 'quack'? What do you want?"

Titus handed the duck call back. "Roast duck for dinner."

The black man beamed at his audience. "So we might know what the Forties are saying, but we might not know what they actually intend, you get what I mean? If the ducks knew that this gentleman was a hungry hunter they wouldn't come when he calls..."

A boxful of noisemakers, animal calls, and other toys had been passed round the group, and the nippers seized this moment to try them all out at once. Wincing at the cacophony, Titus moved off. He saw now that the lobby of the building was fitted out with a series of displays and exhibits. How slack of him, to have come in earlier without noticing!

Titus halted to stare without comprehension at a spidery metal erection taller than he was. It was asymmetric and gawky, a derrick adorned with shiny rectangular boxes and flaps and the odd white plastic plate here and there. "A model of the trans-solar gamma ray satellite," Dr. Lash said at his elbow.

Putting the pieces together was like assembling a jig-saw puzzle cut out of granite. No wonder they'd chosen children's books for him. "The satellite received the message," Titus said slowly. "The message from somebody out in space, in what's-the-place."

"Tau Ceti, that's the name of the star system. Yes, it was the newsies that dubbed the aliens the Forties -- because the gamma-ray source was numbered 4T 0091, you know."

Titus didn't know, but wasn't going to say so. He strolled on towards the next exhibit, which was made up of black boxes stacked in tiers around rows of chairs. All the chairs were occupied by rapt people, but someone stood up to leave and Lash nudged him forward. As Titus took his place in the semicircle of boxes, the sound enveloped him -- a thump or pulse or syncopation. He looked up, and on a large screen directly above their heads was colour, washes of colour throbbing from red to yellow and back again to blue. Neither sound nor picture made the least bit of sense, and Titus sat in mystification for several minutes before he noticed the words crawling past on the ceiling at the edge of the coloured lights. Admiring the ingenuity of the system prevented him from actually reading for another couple of minutes. How did they make the words creep right round in a circle? A cine-projector could only project in a straight line, could it not? Look as he would, he couldn't even spot the projector. But finally he was able to absorb what the words were saying. "So this is it? This is what the Forties sent, this light and sound? Coy little creatures, aren't they!"

"More precisely, this is one of the interpretations we've made of their binary signals," Dr. Lash said.

Titus could not imagine how an invitation could be extracted from this. Or advice on how to travel to Tau Ceti. But he remembered the film, how many thinkers laboured for years at it. What damned smart people these were! He felt both pride and an uneasy inadequacy.

In his world, courage had been the paramount virtue. Now the rules had changed, and he had a distinct sense that courage was well down on the list. Look at that leaflet chap out in the plaza, for instance. What did they value nowadays? Communication, perhaps -- being able to talk to unknown star-beings, and children, and yes, even the occasional time-travelling Polar explorer. Suddenly he felt a feverish desire to get back to those books Shell had brought. He had a lot of catching up to do, no leisure to idle about with tourists. "Shall we go back now?"

"Had enough, eh? I don't blame you." Lash sighed with relief. It was only when they got outdoors

that Titus saw the white vehicles waiting at the kerb flashing their red and yellow lights, and Dr. Trask hovering with a stretcher crew at her back. "I told you I was paging them," Lash defended himself when Titus glared at him. "It's our job to keep a close eye on you, old man."

In the tone of a nanny dangling a toy before a baby Dr. Trask cooed, "A ride in the ambulance will do you good."

"I'm going to walk back," Titus told her, and strode off across the plaza. Lash, and all of them, meant him only good, Titus was sure. But the closeness of their care, the modern obsession with safety and security, weighed on him like chains. He remembered now that Shell had mentioned he was closely observed. Even now Lash was trotting behind, blathering.

"Are you still watching me somehow, Lash?" Titus interrupted him. "I won't have it!"

Dr. Lash frowned. "Shell is such a chatterbox, I'm ashamed for her. My boy, you've only returned to the land of the living for a couple days. It's our job to keep a close eye on you. This is, count them, your fourth day of waking life in the 21st century. Be reasonable!"

Titus could not deny it. But he could refuse to concede defeat. He stalked tight-lipped into their own building, Lash panting behind like an overweight lap dog. "The elevator for me," he wheezed. "How about it, Titus?"

"Instead of the stairs? A pleasure." Titus thawed instantly at the prospect of being initiated into yet another modern mystery. Tall panels slid aside, revealing themselves to be doors. The room beyond was very small. "Nowhere to sit," he remarked as he followed Lash in.

"We'll only be in here for moments," Dr. Lash said. "Thirty-nine," he added, mysteriously. Titus noticed that the discreet digits 39 lit up in blue on a wall panel a moment after Lash's spoken words. The metal doors slid shut, and only the discreet murmur of an engine betrayed any motion. When the doors opened, a disembodied voice made him start by sweetly announcing, "Thirty-nine." So machines these days could talk and be talked to! And there was the familiar corridor with the door of his own chamber standing ajar at the far end.

"Delightful," Titus admitted. "Better by far than hauling up all those stairs. But what's this?"

"Hi, Titus!" Dr. Trask popped out from a room just behind. The anticipatory gleam in her sea-blue eyes would make a cavalry brigade falter. "Did I mention that an ambulance ride would be faster, too? Just step in here for a moment -- I left an entire surgical board meeting just for you." She held her stethoscope up.

"I'm fine! Lash, call these harpies off!"

At his other elbow Shell said, "Harpies? I'm hurt, Titus. Is that nice? I thought you were going to learn modern manners." He babbled apologies until he saw the twinkle in her eye and realized she was jesting. By then they had him jockeyed onto the examination table, tapping and probing with their shiny tools.

He made an effort to be gracious. "I quite appreciate the work you've put into my restoration. I very much enjoy having use of my limbs. But the job is finished! I'm in good nick. There's nothing wrong with me now."

"I don't like these spells of dizziness," Dr. Trask said. "But on the whole we've made a fine job of you, Titus." She beamed at him with pride, the way one might admire a prize steer.

Titus held his commentary until they let him go. Then he snarled to Lash, "Don't I get any credit for my own sodding health? She makes me sound like a house pet."

"She made a spectacular job of you, old man," Lash said. "I could show you the film -- they cloned

bits of you and reattached them, extracted samples of diseases of your time and inoculated you against modern ones -- "

"Film? There's another damned cinematograph?" Titus was aghast.

"Of course there are complete records. Titus, not only are you an important historical figure. You're the first time traveler, probably the last to -- "

Titus could imagine the pictures six storeys high of himself in the altogether, being patched together and reassembled by Dr. Trask and her team. Had he a scrap of privacy left? Seething, he flung himself into his chair, picking a book up at random and pretending to be absorbed in it until Lash went away.

As his anger faded however Titus was drawn into the book. It was something he had never seen before, a story told in pictures and labels, something like Hogarth engravings but more colourful. He turned back to the title page: BUCK ROGERS: THE FIRST 60 YEARS IN THE 25th CENTURY. He gathered from the foreword that these things were called comic strips. At first he could not imagine why Dr. Lash had selected this for him. But when he began at the beginning he understood. This Buck Rogers fellow was a soldier who had travelled into the future too. The discovery made him chuckle. And how clever of Lash's cohorts, to take an idea from a children's book and make it reality!

And the comics themselves were ripping in a juvenile sort of way -- evil Asiatics kidnapping shapely blonde girls, battles across land and sea. They were the sort of fare his boyhood chums at Eton would have thoroughly enjoyed. He whiled the afternoon away very pleasantly.

"Titus, old man," Dr. Lash came in to say. "Time for dinner -- the banquet, you remember. Would you care to dress?"

"A bean-feast? Nonsense. I don't know a soul in this world, except you and the other doctors."

"Titus, we haven't discussed this much," Dr. Lash said. "But think about it. You are famous, the first time traveler. Furthermore, you're the quintessential British hero, an historical figure. Naturally people are interested in you. Now you're on your feet again, let us show you off a little."

"Claptrap!" But Titus noticed Lash's nervy air as he laid out new garments on the foot of the bed. Perhaps it would be letting down the side, not to indulge him. "So what's this then? Can't I wear the trousers I have on now? They fit well enough."

"These will too. They're the same size, just a more dressy cut."

"What has the world come to," Titus grumbled, dressing, "when khaki can be spoken in the same sentence as dressy?" None of the garments were what he would have chosen for himself, these ill-tailored trousers and the nasty coarse shirt and unnaturally-sheer socks. Everything fitted well enough but felt tatty and fake, like stage costume. He would have spurned a necktie, but none was offered. Only the wool jacket was tolerable, though its blue was a hair too assertive. "But I know -- knew, I should say -- a tailor in Mhow who could make a far better job of it."

"I'm afraid that, after technological advances, the changes in dress will be the most trying for you," Dr. Lash said placatingly. "Yes, just step into those shoes. Now, this way..."

Titus was glad he had bathed and shaved this morning. In Antarctica while sledging nobody had had the strength to spare for personal hygiene. They had niffed like foxes after four months of brute physical work in the same clothes without bathing. He wondered who'd been handed the nauseating job of cutting him out of his polar clothes after the rescue, and hoped to blazes it had not been some female. That was probably where his watch had gone, too. But he could probably find out, damn them -- it was all on film somewhere.

He followed Dr. Lash down the elevator, congratulating himself on how commonplace the ride

already had become. They got out on an unfamiliar level. Beyond the elevator hallway was a large meeting room with nobody in it. "Good, the Secret Service finished their sweep," Lash said. "The President and the British Ambassador were anxious that the occasion be kept as casual as possible for you -- "

"You mean the President of this country? Of the United States?"

"Yes, Titus, I was telling you. But there'll be photographs and so on, you're used to that, and also more video -- film, moving pictures."

"Yes, yes." Titus recognized the experience now: codswallop, the sort of silly attention-grabbing that the nibs, nobs and snobs arranged to amuse themselves. Some things never changed. He regretted now not smuggling the BUCK ROGERS volume in.

But then the doors opened, and a horde of people came surging in. "Let me make some introductions," Dr. Lash said genially. "Titus, this is the TTD's Medical/Cultural Management Section, essentially everyone who works here in New York, mostly -- Marjie's on vacation, and a couple people are out sick..."

The faces and names blurred in Titus's mind as Lash presented them. Only Dr. Piotr, pinkly plump and overly well-groomed, seemed to be important. Titus gathered that he ran the entire show on the time travel side. Everyone seemed hugely delighted to meet him, smiling and squeezing his hand with enthusiasm.

Sabrina Trask startled him speechless with her bright yellow trousers. Women wore trousers in this era! And though he had been too flustered to notice at the time, he dimly recalled now that females out in the street and in the museum had been similarly clad. Titus had not realized until now how clothing signaled status and sex. It was the sort of thing everyone instinctively knew in his time, though from pure hellishness he had occasionally amused himself by cocking a snook at the standard. Now he murmured inanities as the line passed, all the while trying to deduce the underlying principles of modern dress.

Trousers were obviously no longer confined to men, nor skirts to women -- surely that fellow over there was not wearing a gown? Perhaps it was a robe of the kind worn by Hindus. Some men had beards, some were clean-shaven like Lash, and there were plenty of thick mustaches like his father had favoured when Victoria was Queen. Was hair the key? This one with hair nearly as long as Sabrina's must be male from his beard, yet right behind him was another chap shorn to quarter-inch stubble. In his day all women had long hair, but there was Shell with her boyish curly crop, and Lord! Here was a woman absolutely bald! Titus opened his mouth as he shook her hand, but no words came out. Lash had warned him that the sartorial fence was going to be a high one -- perhaps it was not necessary to clear it today!

Even the women in skirts didn't walk like ladies any more, with the delicate slow saunter enforced by tight corsetry. They walked like men, brash and bold. And the thrill of glimpsing a well-turned ankle was gone, when a man could see all the way up to well above the knees. In his day even the shilling dockside Gerties were not so bold! Yet it passed belief that so many bits of muslin would be presented to the swells, and there was no lasciviousness in their manner or faces. He was forced to conclude that all the women he'd met in the 21st century must be respectable after all. The lewd signals sent by their clothing were to be ignored. He thrust the confusion aside to think about later.

Last in line, Shell was gowned in electric blue -- were there no sober colours in this time? -- and vibrating with nerves until her earrings jingled. "I hate this, don't you?"

He nodded in fervent agreement. "Like a cursed dog show." No hats and no watches, Titus

concluded, but without exception everyone carried or wore a little machine. Perhaps they were the modern equivalent? He shoved his hands into his pockets to hide his lack.

Everyone stood in loose rows, like troops being reviewed only much more casual, Lash and Dr. Piotr flanking Titus. Titus suddenly noticed the buffet tables laid out at the far end of the room. Dinner! Though the body had been restored, yet the mind still lived in the posture of starvation. His stomach gurgled audibly, and he crossed his arms over it in embarrassment.

But there, thank God, was a stir at the door, and a number of new people came in. Only a few of them came forward to be greeted by Dr. Piotr. "Madam President, may I present Captain Lawrence Edward Grace Oates. Titus, this is President Livia Hamilton."

In a slight daze Titus shook the President's hand. He would have placed her as the headmistress of a dame's school, with that firm mouth and pinned-up grey hair. Had American presidents ever been women in his time? He could not recall, but rather doubted it. "This is an honor," the President said in a deep horsy voice. "Captain, welcome to the 21st century."

"Thank you."

His concise reply seemed to disconcert them. Dr. Lash said, "And this is the British Ambassador, Sir Harold Burney."

More handshaking. "Sir," Titus acknowledged. Dr. Lash bobbed his head in an encouraging manner, but Titus was damned if he was going to bark on command like a trained seal.

"On behalf of His Majesty the King, I welcome you back to the land of the living," the Ambassador said.

How fine it was to hear a British accent! But, "His Majesty?" Titus demanded, startled. Surely King George V was not still alive?

"Oh! His Majesty King William V. You poor fellow, haven't they caught you up to date yet?"

"In due course, sir," Dr. Lash broke in. "We've tried to bring the Captain up to speed gently. It's a big adjustment to make."

The Ambassador beamed with pride. "But if I know anything about it, you've been damned plucky, eh?"

"Not at all." Titus remembered now that this was why he loathed Society -- one had to converse. Every anarchic instinct in him rebelled at the expectation. He was tired of being a tame poodle. "What I want to know," he began, in his plummiest drawl.

"Yes, yes?"

Titus pinned the Ambassador firmly with his gaze. "I wondered why a pack of Yanks are making these great discoveries. I get the distinct sense that Britain's no longer in the forefront of human endeavour."

The Ambassador turned pink and opened his mouth, but only a few disjoint syllables came out. "Shameful backsliding, I call it," Titus pursued, twisting the knife a little. "The work we put into keeping the Empire on top of things, fighting the Boers, trekking into the hinterlands of the globe, and now look at it!"

Dr. Lash's grip on his elbow was almost painful as he swiveled Titus back to face the President.

"So, Captain," the President said. "Now that your life has been restored to you by Dr. Piotr and these good folks, what do you intend to do?"

"There's a facer," Titus said, at a loss. The question had not occurred to him till now. Which just showed how pulled down he was, since it was obviously of the first importance. "Something useful."

"A fine idea."

"I don't suppose Britain's at war or anything," Titus said with dissatisfaction. "Perhaps we could try and claim the Colonies again, eh?"

The President's smile did not waver, but her gaze flickered, searching for rescue. The British Ambassador hastily said, "No wars on at the moment -- but your old regiment, the Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards, is anxious to welcome you back into the ranks."

Titus had kicked his heels in an idle peacetime regiment before -- codswallop, pointless parades, catering to the whims of the brass -- and was not about to take the shilling for more. "Perhaps I could work at the TTD here," he said. "Lend a hand with the time traveling business. I have the experience, after all."

The Ambassador gave a small polite laugh. "Oh, very good."

The President glanced at Dr. Piotr. "You planning another jaunt into the past, Doctor?"

"Not soon," Dr. Piotr said. "And not another person. Captain Oates here is probably the one and only man who will ever travel through time, because that's a dangerous trick to try. But by plucking him out of the past we have more than just the proof of the fundamental theories. It was a test of the Fortie technology. They taught us how to build a drive that can twist space -- or time. This was the easy part. The Captain is living proof that the time travel works. Next, we test the technology on the main job: travelling to the stars."

Titus listened closely, sifting nuggets of meaning out of the incomprehensible. "Do I understand you correctly?" he cut in, interrupting Dr. Piotr in mid-peroration. "You didn't set out to travel through time? You didn't intend to rescue me?"

The scientist cast a pained glance at Dr. Lash, who said, "But, Titus! I explained this to you. And the film this morning discussed it in detail!"

"This is the Fortie project, Captain," Dr. Piotr said patiently. "Your rescue was part of it."

"Ah, you took him over to the museum, very good," the Ambassador said. "I love IMAX films myself, ever since I saw 'To Fly' down at the Air and Space Museum when I was a wee lad."

For a moment Titus was speechless. No one had said that he was the sole beneficiary of a titanic temporal rescue effort. He had only assumed his was the central role. Apparently he wasn't the pivot of the project: had never been. He was an unimportant cog in a big engine that was driving across the heavens towards Tau Ceti. The readjustment in his picture of the situation was painful but nearly instantaneous. He had never been one of those status-conscious blokes, always trying to get an edge on his fellows. He had enough self-confidence to speak up right away: "Right-oh. Count me in then. I've never been to another planet! When do we leave?"

Embarrassment, shuffling feet, a nervous laugh. Had he said something wrong?

"Now isn't that just the spirit of exploration," the President said, with the air of a schoolteacher determined to find something positive to say about a rowdy pupil. "You're a firecracker, Captain. Larger than life!"

"A credit to the nation," the Ambassador said. "Ah, sherry!"

An overall relaxation, as trays of drinks circulated and people began to move towards the buffet. Titus seized a glass of sherry and hung back as the nobs went forward. "Monster," Dr. Trask whispered, grinning. "So this is how Victor von Frankenstein felt!"

"You're a troublemaker, Titus," Shell agreed. "You've got your nerve, jerking the poor Ambassador's chain like that. I thought I'd bust a gut."

Titus refused to be distracted, even by the spread of food. "I like the idea of going to Tau Ceti. Who else is going? You, Lash?"

Dr. Trask snickered at the idea. "Not with his asthma! And you're never getting me up in one of those things. Clonal surgeons have plenty of work Earthside, grafting new limbs and boobs and organs onto people. Shell's the one who'll sweep those Forties off their feet."

Titus blinked. He had not meant to suggest that women could be explorers. "If they have feet," someone else in the line remarked.

Shell sipped her sherry and laughed. "Did you see that awful cartoon on the Today page?"

"Well, prophylactics wouldn't take up all that much cargo space!"

The talk veered off into jokes and chatter that went right over Titus's head. "It sounds like a perfect job for me," he grumbled, accepting the plate someone handed him. What an odd and casual way to eat -- and they called this a banquet? To Titus, banquets meant waiters and service, not shuffling through a line for bangers and mash.

Dr. Trask plopped a scoop of potatoes onto her plate and said, very kindly, "Titus, the teams have been in training for ten years. It'd be an awful lot of work for you to get up to speed."

"Frankly, old man, you were the highest example of the explorer as amateur," Dr. Lash said. "But this is the age of the professional. It's no reflection on your own worth."

In fact Titus did not believe this. His entire experience, leavened with the example of Buck Rogers in the 25th century, assured him that all he had to do was try. Surely a concerted effort would bring success. He helped himself to an enormous plateful of food, only belatedly noticing that he had cleared off half the sausages. How odd, that meat should make up such a small fraction of the offerings! But he had always been a carnivore, and it would surely be incorrect to shovel part of his portion back onto the platter. Instead he allowed them to seat him at the head table.

The President had asked Dr. Piotr a question about the economic impact of speedy space travel, and the talkative scientist was off and away. "At FTL," he said with enthusiasm, "the planets are just suburbs. We can colonize the solar system! No more of this three-years-to-Mars stuff. We've already gained so much from this one Fortie contact, I can't wait to see what else is coming."

Every word was English, but Titus found he had no idea what was being said. He leaned nearer to Shell. "Do you understand him?"

"Sure."

"I don't."

She laughed. "And Piotr prides himself on being a populizer, too! Don't disappoint him by telling him."

"Hamilton's such a show-off," Sabrina Trask muttered from beyond Shell. "Just because she taught economics and math at Stanford."

Titus wasn't even sure what economics was. Something to do with money, he hazarded. Born to wealth, all he knew of money was how to spend it. He wondered what precisely Buck Rogers had lived on, and how he had got into the 25th century's military. "Shell, how much education have you had?"

"Me? Gosh, let me think -- twelve years of school, four years college, medical school, another two for my communications doctorate ... If you count the Fortie training, I've been in school just about all my life."

Dr. Piotr had finished his remarks, and the President applauded, saying, "Doctor, I swear if you ever want to quit the Paticalar business, I have a job for you in politics. You could sell shoes to snakes."

The doctor grinned, pinker than ever. "Once, Madam President, you might have tempted me. Now, I know the better part. This is where the fun is going to be."

"Gad, I envy you young people," the Ambassador said. "Tell us more about the time business -- what's this new time window trick the newsies are chattering about?"

Obligingly Dr. Piotr said, "Well, it's disruptive and difficult to pull a real object or person through time. A perfect candidate like the Captain here is rare. It would be as much fun, and cheaper, to just pull light -- images. I wouldn't mind a photograph of a velociraptor, would you? We could make a fortune on the posters and screensavers alone."

This is beyond me, Titus admitted silently. He bowed his head to the inevitable. Buck Rogers was a cheat, the invention of some fantasizing duffer who'd never actually had to work with less than seventy percent of the knowledge necessary. Titus would live the reality, and he could acknowledge now that much of it would be forever beyond his comprehension. To swallow down the entire 21st century was too big a mouthful. His only hope was to select an area to worry at and, please God, to master.

But which area? If he wasn't going to explore, then what? "Lash, what am I going to live on? They must have proved my will and settled the estate. I don't suppose my heirs' descendants, my great-grandnephews and so on, will want to part with the money even if there's a bean left after all this time. Will you people support me until I die?"

"A stipend's in the works," Dr. Lash said. "PTICA is responsible for your existence, Titus -- you won't starve."

"But I bet anything you like, you're not going to want to live out your life as a couch potato," Shell added. "I can't wait to see what the newsies will say, about your re-conquering the American Colonies!"

Dr. Lash shuddered. "I could wish, Titus, that you'd be more careful about what you say!"

Titus ate steadily, thinking hard. His life had been handed back to him on a platter. But the President, of all people, had put her finger on the key question: what could he do with it? He knew how to fight, and he knew how to die. He had a sense there was very little call for such skills in the 21st century. As useful as knowing how to blow a duck call, he thought sardonically. Perhaps he could assist that young black at the museum.

He had it now: enough information so that he could distinguish what was truly vital. Clear as day, Titus saw that if he didn't carve a niche for himself, he would indeed become a couch potato -- he was repelled without even knowing what that was. There was a higher fence to clear than just learning to exist here. The crucial battle lay not in the past, nor the present, but the future. From infancy, playing with popguns and wooden horses, he had always known what he would be: a soldier. Now in this strange new world this destiny was gone, and he was adrift. He could do anything he set his will to. But first he had to find a new destiny to replace the one he'd left behind in 1912. Else he'd become a pet, a parasite, leeching off the moderns for the rest of his useless life, trotted out for display every now and then to bark for the visiting brass.

It reminded him of his first sight of the Himalayas, in India. Some dashed impressive mountains, but then the morning haze lifted for a moment, and the eye took in the colossal heights beyond, snow-capped peaks rearing up to pierce the sky. What he had thought was the real battle had again been nothing but the first skirmish. How much easier a sharp crisis would be! Walking to one's end in a blizzard, perhaps. "May be some time," indeed! This slow stubborn uphill slog would last till his dying day -- in the spirit of locking the barn door too late, he swore that when he drew that final breath it should not be expended on feeble ironies that would come back to haunt him.

Wars came to an end in a year or two. Even manhauling to the Pole and back had to be accomplished in six or seven months during the austral summer. But this was never going to end. It would call for more pluck and resolution and bottom than anything else he'd ever set hand to, because it would never be over. For a moment the prospect was unspeakably daunting, and he slumped over his empty plate. But with an effort he straightened. Stiff upper lip and all that. He had conclusively demonstrated, after all, that he could do anything he set his mind to. "I've survived far worse," he said aloud.

Dr. Lash glanced up. "What's that you say, Titus?"

No time like the present to begin. Titus gazed thoughtfully at the other man's little machine, lying beside his plate. "Lash ... what time is it?"

End