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BANDITS OF TIME

By RAY CUMMINGS

He called himself Tork, and he wanted Bob and Doris to come with him into time to found a new empire.

Amazing Stories

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"I look like a tramp, Doris," I said. "Like a bum from the bowery."

We sat on a bench gazing out at the moonlit Hudson River with the glittering George Washington Bridge before us. I was dressed in a greasy tattered blue serge suit, a peaked cap pulled low over my eyes; no collar, and I hadn't shaved for four days. My name is Bob Manse. I'm a Shadow Newsman; my job is to ferret out undercover stuff. I was going to do some of that ferreting later on tonight.

Out of the future came grim kidnapers. But why were only unfortunates the victims? Blind; down-and-out; fugitive ...

Doris Blake didn't mind how I looked because she was blind. Only yesterday the bandages had been removed from her eyes after an operation. She had been blind from birth. The surgeons had thought now that they could give her sight—and they had failed.

Her hand went out to touch my face, now as I joked about my looks. "Just the same, Bob—I—I do wish I could see you." She was smiling a twisted, pathetic little smile. And then she tried bravely to turn it into a whimsical grin. "That surgeon said I was born too soon. In a hundred years or so, science would be able to fix my eyes."

"Fine," I said. "We'll wait, Doris—gives us an excuse to live a long time ... There comes the Albany Night Line, just coming under the bridge."

Eyes of the blind. I had sworn I would be her eyes, for all the rest of our lives. We were engaged, planning to marry next year. She had wanted to break it, now that the operation had failed.

A man slouched past us, hesitating as though listening to our talk. Then he passed again, sat on a nearby bench, then on one still closer. Staring at us; at Doris' slim little figure, her pale-blonde gentle beauty. And then he came and sat down beside me.

"You look as though I could interest you," he said softly. "I am looking for young men and young—women."

He was a queer looking fellow, something about him so indefinably weird that involuntarily I hitched away from him on the bench, staring at him blankly. He was big, as big as myself and I am a good six feet tall. Wide, high thin shoulders—his figure lean, but with a suggestion of immense power. His clothes were queer—a suit, jacket and trousers of a black material that seemed to pick up and reflect the sheen of starlight. His hair was straight, black glistening like polished leather. He wore a white ruffled shirt, ruffled neck-piece edged with black.

But more than any of that, it was his face and his voice that startled me. Smooth-shaven face, lean, perhaps handsome with high-bridged nose, thin wide mouth, high cheek bones and deep-sunk dark eyes under thin pencilled brows. I try to recall it now. A face without age. Twenty—or fifty? The skin was smooth—the smooth, unlined skin of youth. But the greyness of age was in it so that here in the moonlight it had a waxen quality—like a man bloodless. A man who had died.

The thought stabbed into me as I heard myself murmuring:

"Interest me? How is that?"

His luminous gaze roved my shabby clothes. His lips drew apart with a faint ironic smile.

"You would like to improve things?" he suggested softly. "Life is not so good, for you and the young—woman?"

Queer voice. Measured words, with a strange rhythmic intonation. A voice so unusual, so unnatural that surely I had heard nothing like it before. He was smiling more broadly now.

"I can offer you a chance at a life—quite wonderful," he added. "You and your—woman."

Doris murmured,

"Bob, who is that? What does he say?"

"My name is Tork," the man said quickly. "Just—Tork. I am glad to meet you, my dear. You are blind?" His voice gave a little hiss of commiseration. "Terrible misfortune. But that can be fixed, that and all your other troubles. Do you want to hear more?"

He was a foreigner, an Oriental perhaps. A charlatan who now would see if, despite my down and out appearance, I might have ten dollars he could get away from me. I grinned at him, but I hitched myself forward on the bench so that I was squarely between him and Doris—so that his weird gaze might not rove over her.

"Go ahead," I said.

"I am building a New Era," he responded slowly. "A little New Empire. We need—converts, you see? Men and young women. A new life, no troubles, no worries. The Empire of Tork. You two will like it, I am sure. Just to live—for love—with no troubles—no struggle. Everything you need or want is provided for you—"

Recruiting us into some Love Cult? Many fanatics have been lured into that sort of thing. Giving themselves into the hands of tricksters; and giving all their worldly possessions. There might be a news story in this. The Empire of Tork—that was a new one.

"What's it cost?" I said. "And where is it?"

"Cost? Why, nothing. Nothing at all. We need only you—to help us populate our realm. Where is it? Ah, that I will tell you when you come to our meeting place of those who would perhaps join us. It is not far from here—"

He described a place hardly more than two miles away, where the upper reaches of Washington Heights look down upon Spuyten Duyvil creek and there is still a little open country with patches of woods crowded by the growing city. The time he named was 3 A. M. tonight.

"You will come?" he said. "But let me warn you to say nothing of this." His eyes seemed to gleam with a new intensity. "We have ways of knowing whether or not you play fair—and ways of punishing. And we want only eligibles like you. We choose very carefully."

"All right," I agreed.

"And the young woman—she will get her eyesight. That I promise you. You think I talk wild? You are mistaken." He stood up suddenly, smiled and with a queer, jerky little gesture, saluted us and turned away. My gaze followed him; and again I had that feeling of an indefinable weirdness about him. His walk was measured, as though he were carefully calculating each step.

Doris was gripping me.

"Oh Bob, what did all that mean? He said I could get my sight—"

Poor Doris, clutching at any straw.

"I'll tell Jim about it," I said. Jim Blake is her brother; his desk was in the same newsroom with mine. "We'll go take a look at that meeting, maybe."

I took her home presently. She and her brother had an apartment here in the neighborhood. He was down at the office now, I knew. I left Doris there alone; went upon my routine job downtown.

It was nearly two A. M. when I reached my desk. Blake was there. A fellow about my age; red-headed, freckle-faced; blue-eyed, pugnacious. Usually with a grinning, breezy manner. But he wasn't grinning now. Soberly he tossed a sheaf of the latest news-flimsies at me.

"Take a look, Bob. Something damn queer going on tonight. Green thinks it's some kind of a joke—the humorous angle for him—"

Young Pete Green, at the desk next to us, let out a guffaw. "*Costume Ball Disgorges Peeping Toms*—there's my catch-line. Pretty neat? I'll be on the air with that at 8 A.M."

"The eternal comedian," Blake said. "I'll be damned if I see anything funny in it."

I riffled through the flimsies, noting the items he had marked. Occurrences all within the last few hours; all in New York City and its suburbs ... "*Red-skin climbs to porch roof. A marauder garbed as an American Indian ...*" And another: "*Girl frightens burglar, fantastically dressed as Colonial Soldier. Janet Scudder (19) was seized by a man in the costume of a Colonial Soldier ...*" And another: "*Man in weird costume tries to abduct farm girl. Mary Hoskins, eighteen, is in Centerville hospital, recovering from attack by unknown assailant in fancy dress futuristic costume.*"

Items of humor? There was nothing funny in them to me. I sat staring, with a vague shudder. An office boy came with another sheaf of flimsies. Blake gasped as he glanced at them. This time, several girls were missing; a girl had been heard screaming... A running Indian, two-thirds naked, painted-smearing, had flung a tomahawk at a policeman. With unerring precision, at a distance of a hundred feet, the policeman's skull had been split as though it was an apple.

Nothing funny in that. Nor another: "*Patrolman John Cafferty, 28th Precinct, found dead in alley. No wound except queer burned spot on forehead as though from electrical high voltage contact....*"

I drew young Blake aside; told him of the man who had accosted me up on Riverside. He stared numbly; and suddenly we were both shuddering.

"Dead people—" he murmured. "Or—or—"

Or what? Wild thoughts were in my mind. Was this some band of normal criminals, fantastically garbed? What about that Indian's skill with a tomahawk? That weird burned spot on the policeman's forehead? The man on Riverside had said: "We need young men and young—women." More than once, that queer emphasis, young—women....

"Well—" Blake murmured again. "Good Lord, Bob—something supernatural—"

It was two-thirty A.M.

"He said three o'clock," I told Blake. "Shall we go? Or tell the police?"

It was possible of course, that the man who had met me on Riverside had nothing to do with these attacks upon girls. And his talk to me might have been a hoax. Or, to the contrary, there might be a big news story here, which we certainly wanted to get unaided if we could.

We told no one of our purpose. It was just before three A.M. when on foot we were approaching the region which the man who had called himself Tork had designated. Ragged trees, rocky terrain lay ahead of us, a long and then precipitous slope which ended down at winding Spuyten Duyvil Creek. Clouds were overhead now; the night was

darkening. The little creek, far below us, spanned by its several railroad bridges, was a silver thread, darkening as a cloud patch effaced the moon. The yellow-lighted city behind us faded as we entered the woods.

"This ought to be about the place," I whispered.

We melted down, crouching in a thicket. The silence was queerly heavy here, surrounded by the great throbbing city. Its faint blended hum was audible; and the distant grind of trains rounding the curves, crossing the bridges, sometimes with a spluttering glare from the third-rail contacts....

"Bob—look—" Blake's whisper was in my ear, his hand on my arm. We tensed, crouched staring. Ahead of us in the gloom a figure had appeared. Short, thick-set man in an ancient Dutch costume. He had an old fowling piece in his hand. He stood with his back to a tree, peering down the slope. Then suddenly he moved into a deeper shadow and vanished.

"Shall we follow him?" Blake whispered. "Or shall we—"

He got no further. The words died on his lips as he sucked in his breath with a little gasp. Ahead of us in an open space where for two or three hundred feet there was an oblong patch of level ground devoid of trees, something was appearing. The ghost of a ship. For a second or two it looked like that—a shimmering wraith of cylindrical hull a hundred feet long and twenty feet or so high. Fantastic—the skeleton of a ship and white shining ribs. Bars crossing its long line of little windows; a bulging front bow-end, with a round protruding turret.

All in a second or two it materialized, with a faint humming coming from it. Then the humming ceased. Blankly we stared, transfixed. The thing was real, lying there a hundred feet from us. Long, low dark shape now.

Lightless. Soundless. No! There was the faint sound of a frightened girl's voice; then another, checked by a low guttural command. And the sound suddenly, of a metal door grinding open. An oval doorway yawned in the ship's side; the figures of men came out.

Three A.M. A distant church spire in the city behind us boomed the hour, floating here on the heavy night-air. Abruptly figures were around us in the woods; arriving men. A man carrying the limp form of a girl. From the ship a tiny beam of white light struck on them. Tork! I recognized him. But more than that Blake and I both recognized the unconscious, inert girl. So great a horror swept me that for a second the weird scene blurred before me.

The girl was Doris!

Blake and I leaped to our feet together. Neither of us were armed. We did not think of that. There was nothing save the horror of Doris being carried into the doorway of the weird ghost-ship. I recall that I shouted wildly, and that Blake seized a rock which he flung in futile frenzy as we ran forward.

But suddenly we stopped. Blake stumbled, fell and lay twitching, jerking as though he were bound by invisible ropes to the ground. A second later the thing hit me. A force; it seemed to jump from the ground into my feet—or from me, flowing down into the ground. My feet struck. I swayed forward, then back. With all my strength I lifted one foot, but it snapped back to the ground. Rooted there. A chuckling laugh came through the darkness. A voice said in queer, clipped English:

"Not to kill them. The master says bring them. The time-ship leaves in one minute. There is no other stop until the end of the voyage."

Weird figures engulfed Blake and me. For a moment we fought wildly. I saw Blake being carried bodily as he struggled. Then something was crushing on my head. My senses faded, with just enough consciousness left so that I was aware of being hoisted into the dark doorway. It slid closed with a soft grind of metal. Then there was a faint throbbing hum—and a shock hurled into all my body so that what little consciousness I had left was flung from me.

My senses must have come back within a few seconds. I was aware throbbing hum—and a shock hurled window near me.^[1] Then it faded into night again. The daylight and night of Tomorrow!

I was being carried through Time!



CHAPTER II

The Voyage of Two Million Years

I had been carried forward, into the round turret room at the bow of the ship. The humming had faded now to a faint throb. With full returning consciousness I found myself lying on the floor grid.

The figures of men were here in a flat, dead-gray luminescence—a roughly clad, bearded fellow who squatted near me, smoking a weird-looking pipe, with a small cylinder weapon on his lap; and a group across the circular room, playing some sort of game with a board between them. Incongruous figures, their dress suggesting the past of New York City, and its future.

Their murmured voices sounded with fragments of English, yet so different of wording and intonation that some could barely understand the others. Comrades they were, but they seemed from worlds far apart. Yet there was one thing all of them had in common—men of villainous look, criminals banded together here by a common outlawry.

Their rough laughter rose at intervals. Drink was in a great flagon beside them. Some of them were flushed with it. Then in the humming silence of the time-ship, from down the dim, opalescent corridor came the murmured frightened voices of girls. One of the men laughed raucously.

"Our big day, when we arrive, eh Greggson? Hope I get a good one—it will be nice to start married life again."

At the ship's controls I saw Tork sitting, with a great bank of whirring mechanisms before him—levers and little switches, electronic pressure gauges and whirring time-dials. Weird, almost gruesome figure now with the glowing opalescent light tinting his sleek black clothes. His grim, hawk-nosed face was gray, bloodless in the light-sheen. He turned to survey the man who had spoken.

"The drawing will be fair, you may be sure of that, Thomass."

The group assented jovially. The one called Greggson—a burly, bullet-headed giant in red silk shirt, blue tight trousers and big flaring gaudy boots—retorted ironically:

"Quite so, Master. And you, crowned Emperor and for Empress we have Rhadana? She is worthy of any man—I would like her myself." He raised his cup with an applauding gesture. "To Rhadana—Mistress of the New Era. If I had lived in 5140, where she came from, I might have had her myself, long before this, eh fellows?"

Then I saw Doris sitting in a little chair across the room; Doris with terror on her white face, but seemingly unharmed. And beside me here on the floor, Jim Blake was lying. He was hitched up on one elbow, aware that I had stirred, that my eyes were open; and his hand touched me.

"Doris, she's all right," he murmured.

"Yes, I see—"

Our guard heard us and called Tork. He left his dials and came with a pounce, standing over us.

"So? You have recovered?"

"Yes," I said. "What's the idea of this—you—"

His waxen hand, with long lean fingers heavily jeweled, rose to silence me.

"So you would trick me? Telling your friend—"

The red-shirted giant across the control turret suddenly laughed,

"What will we do with them, Master? Why not kill them? Or should we toss them out?"

Tork's thin smile widened. "They shall be the first criminals of the New Era. That will be interesting—punishing them with death after our festival." He stood with his eyes flashing as he drew himself erect. "And it will show the rest of you

that Tork will tolerate nothing."

He turned, went back to his controls; and as he passed Doris, his hand lightly touched her hair with a caress. It made her cry out; and Blake exclaimed:

"You let her alone, damn you—"

"Oh she shall not be harmed," Tork smiled. "She is too gentle.... You two—sit with her, if you like. You want them by you, little Doris?"

"Oh, yes—yes, please," she murmured.

"Whatever you wish," he said grandiloquently. "You see, little Doris, how kind Tork can be to you? It will be that way, always in our New Era. Look out the window—certainly there is much to see. You can tell her about it," he added to me.

We sat on a little metal bench beside Doris; whispered to her, comforting her. How terrible all this must have been to her, in her eternal darkness! Tork quite evidently had followed her and me when I took her home; and then he had gotten in, seized her, with a drug that had rendered her unconscious....

"Two thousand ten," Tork said suddenly to his men. He chuckled. "We are making speed—and no more stops, this trip."

Blake and I stared out the window between its luminous, faintly humming grey bars. During all this time I had been aware that at first there was alternate light and darkness outside—brief periods which marked the passing days and nights as we sped into Time. There was a steady acceleration; light and darkness which soon were brief puffs. And then their speed blended them; a greyness outside. I had seen a green tinge to it, alternating with white—the summers, the winters, and then they too were blended into drab monochrome of grey as the years, merged with one another, sped by.

I stared, breathless, awed and then with murmured words tried futilely to describe it to Doris. The ghostly grey outlines of the landscape and the city outside our window were changing with a slow flow of movement. Great shadowy buildings rose. It was a strange form of movement; things melting down, leprous and in a second gone, and others, always larger, rising to take their place.

The time-dials in front of Tork were whirring. The dial for the years was a blur with its whirling pointer. Great New York!—It had flowed up and around us, engulfing us. Monstrous metal terraces, gigantic arches, buildings that towered into the sky. All grey with the blended daylight and darkness, winter and summer.

But now I could see spots of color. Buildings of glistening yellow metal which endured for a hundred years or more, and then were gone with something else replacing them. Great archways on which permanent lights were mounted, so that at least for what to us was a second or two, we could see the spots and glare of the lights.

Had the great city here reached its height? It seemed so. Down the slope, where the little Spuyten Duyvil Creek wound into the broad Hudson, all had been engulfed by the bridges, terraces and arcades.

Now we plunged into blankness. Great structures were built on this space we were occupying. A blankness here, with our ship perhaps within the metal itself of the vast structure. Then that was gone and we came again into the open.

The great city at its height. I could envisage all the myriad little events transpiring here—the daily movements of millions of people here in these buildings, on the towering terraced streets. The giant vehicles in the air. A billion-billion little events, so brief that they were merged into a grey nothingness before us.

Beyond where the Spuyten Duyvil and the Hudson now doubtlessly flowed submerged beneath solid arcades under them, a monstrous spired tower swiftly rose into the air. Fifty years perhaps to build it. For what to us was a moment or two, it held on its top a great multi-colored beacon—a ring of red and green eyes. They endured—a hundred, two hundred

years.

Then all in the blinking of an eye, the tower was gone. A leprous hole there; a grey leprous patch to the left and to the right; a blur down where a segment of the Hudson was exposed, as though a litter of wreckage were lying there—wreckage which for a hundred years did not seem to be cleared away.

A monstrous cataclysm? I was murmuring it to Doris; and then I was aware that a man had come and was quietly sitting beside us.

"War," he said. "The war of 5550. So much destroyed, and there was no one left here with the heart to rebuild."

I turned to face him. His soft voice, with queer clipped accent was not like the rough voices of these other men. He was a smallish pallid young fellow, in a grey-white, embroidered tunic with tight cloth trousers beneath. His head, small and round, was surmounted by close-clipped blond hair. His face, smooth-shaven, was clean-cut, patrician highly intelligent.

"I am Georg Allaire," he said through thin lips. "Queer to stare out now at my time-world. I was born in 6000—just after the war. It was terrible—the end of civilization here."^[2]

Tork momentarily had moved away. Blake and I talked in half whispers to young Allaire. He had been a surgeon here in the unbuilt ruins of Great New York—a vassal state then of the Great Dictator. A surgeon—

His gaze went to Doris as he told us. And she heard him.

"Oh," she murmured. "And you will give me my sight? Could you?"

He smiled his gentle smile; and left us. He had freedom of movement here. He went down the grey, luminous ship's corridor. In a moment he was back.

With goggles on his eyes and an instrument in his hand, he examined Doris carefully. More than four thousand years of medical progress!—My mind, with expanded viewpoint, flung back to my own unenlightened time—our physicians and surgeons, back there in 1950—what puny knowledge they had possessed!

Then Allaire nodded, spoke strange medical words which we had no way of understanding.

"A simple growth-spore," he said. "Non-malignant, but it desensitizes the sheathing of the optic nerves. I could remove it in half an hour. How terrible and stupid that it should have been left there so long."

I held Doris as she trembled with her happiness. Blake leaned closer to Allaire.

"You're not like the rest of this outfit," Blake whispered. "How did you happen to—"

"I had trouble." Allaire's smile was a little wistful. "I was glad to escape."

"Where is he taking us?" I demanded. "His New Era—"

"Yes. You'll see." He suddenly felt perhaps that he should not tell us too much. He had made several trips on the time-ship—from the New Era, back almost to the first coming of the Indians on Manhattan Island. Gathering supplies. Stealing things of science. Recruiting men.... Stealing women.... A new civilization to be built by Tork—its Emperor.

"Only some five hundred of us men are there now," Allaire was saying. "And we're taking thirty women this trip. Several hundred have already been taken. That will be enough, they say, for the drawing, when we get there. The men are very impatient."

His slow smile was whimsical.

"They have made me the physician and surgeon. We had casualties this trip. One of our men was wounded when we stopped at 3000. And back in 1950 where you came aboard—one was shot with what I hear you call a bullet—a leaden, base-metal chunk. I am afraid he will die."

Tork suddenly joined us. He saw the optical instruments in Allaire's hand.

"So? What is this?" he demanded.

"Her eyes," Allaire said. "I am going to give her sight."

"Oh you are?" Tork's grin was ironic, but his eyes gleamed with a suppressed fury. "I do not wish it."

"Why," I gasped, "you told me—"

"I have changed my mind." He bent with his jeweled hand touching Doris' head. "I think I would rather have her without sight," he said. "Do not be too unhappy, my dear. There is little to see of any glories where we are going. You will stay by me, and I will be your eyes. And you will know what a wonderful man is Tork—your Master, and yet—your servant."

His hand toyed with his belt where a tiny weapon of gold, jewel-like, hung dangling.

"I should kill you, Allaire," he added calmly. "But I won't. I need you. Go attend our men who are wounded."

He turned away. Allaire leaned over me.

"I'll find my chance—I'll fix her eyes."

Three days of our trip passed. They were awesome days indeed. Since we could not possibly escape, Tork ironically gave us a fair freedom of movement. Much of the time we spent with him in the ship's glowing, humming control turret.

There was something queer about him—something that I could never quite seem to fathom. He radiated power, yet with it there was a simple childishness. Pleasant enough with us—and then he would gloat that we were his first condemned men, to be put to death at the great festival the night of our arrival. Our deaths—with ghastly torture which he delighted in picturing—would show all his men what a wonderful Emperor they had in him. And that he meant it, and would do it with the same smiling irony, I could not doubt.

There was a woman here who ministered to Doris. The woman Rhadana—she whom the red-shirted giant Greggson had toasted as their future Empress. She had joined Tork's band during one of the stops—at 5140. I recall my emotions when first I saw her. Tork had given me a little cubby alone, and Blake the one next to it. It was near the first time of sleep; and Rhadana came with food for me.

"You are called Bob Manse?" she said softly. "Here is your meal."

She had very much the same clipped accent as young Allaire. But her voice was throaty, purring. I had been staring out of the barred window of my dim little room—staring at the vast panorama which the changing centuries were bringing to this little vista of Space. The great city had risen to its height, been devastated by war most horrible—war that all the perverted genius of science could make terrible beyond anything my mind was capable of understanding. For centuries the city had lain in ruins, its despondent people the vassals of tyrants.

And then the city began to rise again. Perhaps a different civilization. I saw rising what seemed great pyramids, with their apex sliced off, with streets running along their steplike terraces. Another monstrous city, with buildings as far as my vision extended—great structures a thousand feet or more in height, with parks on the tops. And all the original grounds and the rivers again covered with the tangle of traffic arteries.

The time-ship's acceleration seemed to have reached its height now. Structures which endured only a hundred years were melted together in the scene before me. Everywhere now there was a vast stir of things changing. And then there seemed a pause. Mankind on the height. Perhaps it was so all over the world. Peaks of civilization—the genius of man's accomplishment taking him to the height. And there he was resting, content. A thousand years? Two thousand? And then the inevitable decadence began.

And I saw the triumphant city come down. Faster, faster through the centuries.

Through the window of my cubby I was watching it. The city here—perhaps the pride of all the Earth—at last sank back into a blur of ruins, decay and desolation.

"You are called Bob Manse?" the voice at my doorway repeated impatiently. "Come, take your meal."

I turned to face the woman Rhadana. Amazingly voluptuous creature, this harlot from the city of 5140 A.D. A blue-colored cloth was wound wide around her swelling hips, with a tasseled sash hanging knee-length down one side. Sandals were on her bare feet. Her torso was bare save for breast-plates of gleaming metal and a low-cut collar of cloth, covered with shining little golden coins, flat on her upper chest and cut wide to cover her shoulders. Her black hair, glistening with oil, was braided and coiled on her head, with a gauze headdress of crimson which fell like a bridal veil down her back.

And there was in her eyes as she stared at me, all the lure which her aspect promised; and a little mocking half-smile upon her heavily carmined lips.

For that instant, startled, I blankly stared; and then I took the terraced little tray of food and drink she proffered.

"Thank you. You are Rhadana?" I said.

"Yes. You have heard of me?" She lingered in my doorway, a jeweled hand on her hip.

"The blind girl, Doris—you have been kind to her, she says. I thank you."

"Oh, she?" Her gesture was of faint contempt. "A sweet little child. She wants her eyesight. Tork should let her have it."

"Yes, so I think. You are to be the Empress of the New Era world?"

She nodded carelessly. "And Tork the Emperor." She was looking at me strangely; and suddenly she glided forward. Jewels hanging on a bracelet at one of her knees tinkled. Suddenly her hand went out and touched my shoulder. And she added furtively, in her queer throaty, purring voice:

"I have been watching you—Bob. I can see you are not like these other bellystabbers—more like that Georg Allaire. Except—"

Her hand lightly caressed my arm.

"Except—that you are more of a man," she finished. "I am to be Empress, you see? That is why I joined this—adventure. Power to rule. How I have always wanted it—and now I am going to have it, you see?"

"I see," I said.

She was suddenly breathless.

"To rule with Tork!" She spat it out. "And he is less than—"

She checked herself. What was this? I couldn't imagine.

"I have some ideas," she suddenly added, still more softly. Her furtive gaze back to my door made my heart began to pound.

"What?" I murmured. "Ideas of what? Surely you realize you can trust me, Rhadana?"

She nodded. Stood staring at me an instant, with her bosom rising and falling with the emotion of her pondered plans. Whatever they were, it seemed to me suddenly that I could use this woman, perhaps to escape with Doris and Blake. Did she hate Tork, and yet want to be Empress of this new world?

"We will talk again," she murmured. At my door she regarded me again with that mocking little half smile, and then she glided away into the luminous humming corridor.

Two days; two nights more of that weird fantastic trip. The first time of sleep was over. And all through those next hours of existence as we were living it here on the ship, I stared out at the tumbled, blurred ruins of the great city. The hills and rivers here were obvious now. Changed, eroded contours from those I had known in my own time-world. Ruins of a city. Storms were burying them in silt.

Then there was a cataclysm. For a time it seemed that water was here; but then it receded, so that off to the right the huge Atlantic ocean was rolling up, grey and blurred, fairly close to us; and to the left, the buried city sank under silt and tangled vegetation.

Our forward acceleration was slowing now; a retardation of time-flow for a while more rapid than our acceleration. And the scene which I had thought was empty, now suddenly began to show movement again—transitory little structures that man was struggling to erect, which could endure perhaps hardly a century. I could see them rising, then breaking and melting away. And others coming. Always smaller. Enduring now only a year or two, but our slow velocity at last made them apparent; crude little dwellings.

That day passed for us; and still another time of sleep. The time-dials were nearing two million A.D. when the sound of tramping feet and the frightened voices of girls aroused me, made me realize that we were almost ready to disembark. In the control turret, Blake gripped me.

"If only we could get Doris away from them," he whispered. "Get this damned ship and run it back. I've been studying how it operates, Bob."

"Yes, so have I. If only—"

Futile plans. The big red-shirted fellow named Greggson was watching us now, a leer on his face, his hand at a weapon which dangled by his side.

"Almost there," Tork said. "Two million and ten A.D. The New Era. The world of Tork—Emperor of the Earth.... Oh, there you are, little Doris. Come here by me. You see how fortunate you are that Tork likes you."

Rhadana brought Doris to us, evidently at Tork's command. The woman flung me a furtive, seemingly significant glance, then glided away. Tork did not see it, but Blake did.

"What the devil," he whispered.

"Quiet, I'll tell you later. Just a chance for us, maybe."

Tork called out a warning and flung the last time-switch. My senses reeled. Down the corridor, I could hear the voices of the captive girls crying out, and Rhadana quieting them.

Then the humming was gone. The luminous, opalescent ribs of the ship were solid and dark-grey. Through the barred window, a dull-red sunlight was streaming. And sounds were floating in. The shouts of men—Tork's comrades here—calling out in greeting. And other voices; the voices of the natives here ... our descendents—yours and mine.

As Tork and Greggson shoved us out through the oval doorway and down the incline, Blake and I stood numbed, gasping at the weird sight.

CHAPTER III

The New Era

The sun was low in the west—a huge dull-red round ball. It looked startlingly close, and sullen; lifeless. The cloudless sky was a sodden bronze. The landscape had almost nothing in it of any familiar configuration, save that the sea was at the east—a glassy, oily-looking surface, with the red-bronze sunlight on it.

Undulations of almost naked, rocky hills, with stunted trees; and to the west a great eroded canyon with a babbling ribbon of dark water, far down.

Instant impressions. Then my gaze swept to the babbling throng that pressed close toward us on the rocky slope. Humans? Our ancestors. Men and women.... Women carrying children in their arms.... Adults hardly taller than my waist. Ghastly little things. Naked lumps of flesh—grey-brown skin, covered with scraggling, mangy-looking black hair-growth. The heads were round, over-large. Bulging forehead; big brain-pan, with large brain, most of it long since atrophied.

These weird humans stood milling on the slope—a thousand of them perhaps. Mankind reverting to savagery? Already they were beyond that; merging into animals. Yet not quite that either. For somehow on them was stamped the traditions of their heritage of transient glory, lost now so that they were helpless.

Blake stood gripping me.

"Those—the people here? Is that all that's left of mankind?"

It was, undoubtedly. Perhaps in the struggle, the animals, birds, insects all had died. Certainly we saw none of them. The little babble of human voices rolled at us—brief fragments of sounds, animalistic. Like a chattering, milling throng of apes they stood with frightened curiosity, staring. Lumps of women, wide-hipped with flowing tangled hair half enveloping them, held up their little lumps of children to see us better—children with round, wondering faces of staring dark eyes. All staring with apathetic gazes, dulled by the blight of the centuries.

"Get back there!" Tork was roaring. "Out of the way—you—get back!"

As though scattering a group of domestic animals, he lunged at them, waving his arms; and before him, with frightened squeals, they ran. I could see, off by the Hudson-canyon, little mounds of stones piled into the shape of dwellings. The scurrying figures ran into them; and into holes in a nearby broken cliff. A patch of stunted woods was nearby; trees on which food might be growing. And there was a distant field. A little agriculture left. Blighted; pathetic....

The red-shirted swaggering Greggson shoved at Blake and me.

"Come on, you two. Your house—" He laughed raucously. "Your last day—you might as well get what comfort you can."

I suddenly resisted him.

"I'm going with Tork—Tork and Doris—"

Men were bringing the girls out from the time-ship now. Amazingly heterogeneous group of swaggering villains—and amazing captives....

Two or three girls of my own time-world. And my future, and my past. There was one with long flaxen braids—a little Dutch-American costume of tight bodice and flaring skirt. Another—half naked Indian girl of Dutch Nieuw Amsterdam. A man was dragging her as she screamed with her terror; and then he cuffed her into silence.

They passed around an angle of nearby hill. Close to us, Tork was leading Doris with an arm around her. I saw the slim dark figure of young Georg Allaire, enveloped now in a dark cloak, press close after them.

"You let us alone," Blake was protesting to Greggson. "You—"

Then Tork heard us.

"Bring them," he called. "This way, Greggson."

In the light of the dying red sunset, we advanced around the corner of the hill; and then upon us there burst a new amazing sight. Tork's village. His new civilization, here in this aged, dying world. His New Era.

Like the captive girls, and the motley bandits themselves, in this little group of fantastic dwellings there was the blending of the past ages when man was glorious. Perhaps a hundred small structures had been erected here. Weird metal houses, like fantastic shanties thrown together of the small parts of other structures which had been brought here. Some, with lean-to walls of shining metal, had roofs of crude thatch. Or a wall of alumite, glistening like burnished copper in the red-bronze sunset, with oval window set with prism-panes to catch and fling the light inside—and incongruously the adjoining wall was of piled stones.

Motley, half finished little dwellings, waiting for more materials to come that they might be completed. They were set in rows, with a curving street or two between them. A broken statue stood ludicrously askew at an intersection—a pilfered work of art brought here from some past age. Platforms, hastily built of handsome colored marble blocks, had been erected at the end of a street.

Lights were winking on now—the glow of lights in windows—soft radiance from braziers in the street, with crudely connected wires leading to strewn batteries lying in a nearby heap. From a cliff close by, a light projector suddenly flashed on, like a rainbow bathing the village in prismatic splendour. And a great brazier of incense—the toy of some past voluptuary—cast off its exotic odor, wafted by the heavy, sluggish night-breeze.

Some five hundred of Tork's men were here; and now perhaps as many maidens. I saw a long, rambling shed of thatch patrolled by armed guards, in which they were confined. The thirty new arrivals were flung in there; waiting for tonight, the choosing of mates for the population of this New World.

I saw Tork now with his arm around Doris as he led her toward one of the strange half-metal houses, with Greggson shoving us after them. Did Tork want Rhadana—or Doris? Why was he so ironically gentle with Doris? So ironically anxious to please her? "I am your Emperor—and your servant." I had heard him say it to her several times. And why that burst of rage from him at the idea of having her regain her sight? Why should he like her better—blind?

Guards were pacing in the red-bronze twilight outside our little house when Tork left us with Doris—and with Rhadana here to give us our supper.

"Your last meal," he told Blake and me with his twisted, ironic smile. "Have Rhadana make it a good one. You shall see the choosing of mates. And then comes your great honor—the first criminals to be put to death here. You will go down in history for that." He thumped his chest, on which now a miscellaneous collection of little pilfered ornaments were fastened, to denote his rank. "The history of Tork's New Empire—and I am writing it now. And tonight your names go in it."

A madman? Was he that? I stared, at him. "Stop that!" he said sharply. "You—you—" As though a stab of terror had gone into him, under my stare. Then he turned. "I am busy with arrangements. I will come for you later."

The woman Rhadana—queerly incongruous in her voluptuous garb as she quietly moved about her tasks—was preparing us the evening meal. In a corner of the ramshackle room—its metal walls sloping, its thatched ceiling askew, with metal furniture and luxurious colorful drapes representing a dozen past ages—Blake sat with Doris. We knew we could not escape from here. The watchful guards outside were armed with weapons of what diabolic lethal power we could only imagine.

And suddenly the dark-cloaked Georg Allaire came in. His little instrument-case was under his cloak.

"I will give her her sight now," he murmured. "Only a few minutes with the facilities I have here." He was pale, intense,

his eyes burning. "Have no fear—his vengeance will come on me—not her."

He led Doris, and young Blake with them, into an adjoining room. Just the simple removal of blighting, clinging spores.

I started with them, but abruptly Rhadana checked me.

"You—Bob—I am ready to talk now." Again she was breathless with her emotion. She swayed against me; her heavy, exotic perfume enveloped us. "You like me a little?" she murmured.

"Why—why of course, Rhadana."

"Because you are a man—of course. I will be Empress here. It was my idea—" She breathlessly paused. Her eyes darted like daggers—like the little jeweled dagger that suddenly her jeweled fingers were gripping. "My idea—I would like to have—you for my mate. The men would not mind—not with the promises I could give them." The mocking half smile played on her lips. "I have always been able to control men. I could—promise them much—"

"And Tork?" I murmured.

"Tork. To him will I attend—you need do nothing of that. He—can be killed. A stab—and the acid I have, to melt him apart. I know him—you see? He is—"

A faint cry from Doris made me whirl.

"Just hold still—just a minute," Blake's voice was saying with harrassed anxiety. "He won't hurt you, Dorrie—just a minute now—"

I rushed in to them; stood silent, breathless. Miracle of science of the year 5,000. Spores that could be killed with a gentle light-beam.... It was no more than the effort of a druggist, in my day, removing a cinder from a woman's eye.

"All right," Allaire said at last. "Now—I'll wash them out—and then the vapors—"

Doris, now with closed lids, stood trembling.

"You take her," Blake murmured to me. "Take her to the window."

I stood with her, holding her trembling body against me as she opened her eyes—opened them, closed them again—and then was blinking, staring with wordless wonderment. Strange trick of fate that after a lifetime of darkness her first vision should bring so weird, fantastic a sight as this beyond our window—the motley little street in the red-bronze twilight with the prismatic rainbow of the distant projector bathing it.

"And what is this?" Tork stood behind us. He saw Doris; he understood. For that second, so great a wrath was upon him that his contorted face seemed suddenly inhuman. There was a little hiss from his belt—a tiny darting point of light.

Quite visibly it floated across the room, struck young Allaire in the face; point of light which suddenly expanded to be a puff of blackness. Allaire stood wavering. His face was a ghastly, puckered black mask, with empty eye-sockets and goggling mouth.

Then he fell. Tork, with a burst of laughter, strode from the room. We bent over the dying Allaire. His groping hands found Doris, clung to her.

"I am very glad," he murmured. "You see—in my own world I was condemned to death—disgraced. I—tried an operation on the daughter of our ruler—hopeless but I tried it—and failed. I am glad I could—help you—"

His breath suddenly stopped; he was gone.

We sat presently—Blake, Doris and I—at our little meal. The woman Rhadana did not join us. At the doorway, she stood somberly staring. The last meal for Blake and me. And for Doris—what? We had no chance to plan, even if planning anything could be more than futile, fatuous hope.

The swaggering giant Greggson came in and sat close to us, watching us with his grinning, leering gaze. He said little; but I noticed that his gaze often strayed to the watching, voluptuous Rhadana. Was Greggson too, planning something for tonight?

Tork's New Era! This new civilization where he thought that he could rule supreme! The irony of it struck at me. There is nowhere in the Universe—no time-world from the Beginning to the End—where man could go and avoid the passions of greed, love, hate, jealousy, because he brings them with him. Tork's Empire was hardly yet set up, and in this single room of this one little house all of us sat pondering, brooding with different motives—smouldering passions waiting the spark of opportunity to flare them into violence and bloodshed.

"All right, we start now," Greggson said suddenly. "You two men—I will take you."

For an hour past there had been the commotion of preparations outside. The red-bronze twilight was long—Earth had slowed its rotation as it sank nearer and nearer the dying Sun. There was still faint daylight in the west, engulfed by the glare of the village lights as Greggson, despite our protests, pushed Blake and me from the house. Other men leaped on us; shoved us along the weird, busy little street until beyond its end, we were flung to the top of a little dais, where we crouched with a red light bathing us.

At first, in the crimson glare, I could see nothing. There was just the vast murmur of blended sounds—voices, the tramp of feet, the faint hissing throb of the lectronic lights. Then my eyes grew accustomed to the radiance.

To one side, on a long platform, the lines of the several hundred girls were ranged. Indescribable collection of young females from a score of time-worlds. They were all still dressed in the garments in which they had been seized, save that most of them were now partially denuded. Prismatic light, glorious rainbow sheen as though from a painter's palette, bathed them as they stood terrified, clutching at each other.

On each of them was a big ticket, with a number. The men were jostling each other, crowding around the raised platform, noting the numbers, calling out to each other the number which they hoped they would get. Roistering men examining the prizes now to be awarded them.

Facing the girls' platform at a distance of some fifty feet, a raised dais stood with its back against a dark little rock-cliff. Dais with a great golden, canopied throne. I sucked in my breath as I stared, and felt young Blake tense beside me. Tork was on the throne—Tork resplendent with pilfered stolen robe of red and ermine. And it was Doris beside him. Doris, gentle, dove-like with a great headdress and a long shimmering blue robe.

She sat white-faced. Her lips had been carmined; her brows heavily pencilled. Her eyes were wide; terrified, wondering—gazing at the fantastic motley world, incomprehensible to her.

The lights here were like a five hundred foot spot of rainbow. Beyond it, the dusk was gathering. Blurred stars were in the sky. The distant sea was a sullen surface of dark glass; the hills close at hand held purple shadows. And on the nearby slopes a great throng of the little lumps of humans were gathering. Like animals attracted by the lights—gathering, milling among themselves at a safe distance. Their jabbering voices blended with the other sounds.

Behind us, the strange village now was deserted, just a few spots of radiance in the house windows. And beyond the hill corner, the long dark outlines of the time-ship were apparent, merged with the purple rocky hillside behind it.

"The ticket-drawing," Blake muttered to me. "They're starting. Oh Bob—what the devil can we do—Doris there—if only ___"

Nothing that we could do. Here beside us our guards were alert. Then I saw, on the throne-dais to one side of Tork, the woman Rhadana was standing. Soft music from some distant point flooded the scene. Rhadana stood swaying to it, instinctive sway perhaps.

She was dressed differently now. Scarf around her hips; breast-plates; and over her nearly nude body a flow of gauze crimson draperies. A shaft of light struck her sensuous face. Venom was on it as she gazed at Tork, with her hand sliding under her draperies to her hip.

And then I saw the burly, red-shirted Greggson. He was near Rhadana; watching her. And then slowly I saw him edging toward Tork.

The lottery. A huge brazier of cloisonné stood before Doris. One by one now, Tork was calling the men's names. One by one they came and Doris, reaching into the brazier, handed them a ticket. Their shouts presently were rising: then they were at the girls' platform, dragging down the girls which had been given them, embracing them—and standing aside in couples, waiting impatiently for Tork, their Emperor, to address them.

Some of the girls were passive, numbed; others struggled, fought with little whimpering screams against the crude caresses forced upon them.

Breathless drama, pregnant with silent expectancy that seemed about to burst into a scream. Tork was on his feet now, with Doris standing beside him. His arms raised with an imperious gesture as he made ready to address his people. There was a breathless instant when I saw Rhadana silently drop her draperies. The prismatic sheen painted her milk-white body, clothing her with color. And now she was gliding forward; the light glinted on the knife-blade in her hand. But suddenly she stopped. Greggson had seen her. He gestured, and she slunk aside.

And then Greggson was raising his weapon. By some miracle Tork suddenly was aware of the danger. He whirled. Greggson's flash of weapon was met in mid-air by one from Tork—a little shower of red, green and yellow sparks with a tiny thunderclap. And then from Tork's belt some other ray spat. It cut through the spark-shower. Greggson's body fell.

There was a sudden shock of silence. Then into it came the muttering of the startled, angry men. Greggson; one of them, perhaps their favorite. A mutter as they surged forward. It was a little fire in prairie grass—it spread. A shout; a thrown missile; girls screaming.

I was aware in that pregnant second that the guards here by Blake and me had jumped forward. One of them called with a burst of profanity at Tork.

Blake seized me. "Come on! Around the back of that throne—"

We jumped together. A hiss of radiance stabbed at us, but missed. It added to the turmoil—confusion—and in another second, chaos. Some of the girls had escaped from the men holding them. They ran, screaming. Down on the dark slopes the little watching creatures also were shouting, milling, surging forward to see better. A hundred or so of them, like stampeded, bewildered animals, came plunging into the light area. A little wave of them got between me and the throne. I plunged into them, scattering them as with squeals of terror they tried to avoid me.

Myriad things happening at once, in those crowded seconds. Up on the throne-platform, close before me now, Tork stood motionless, gazing down at the body of Greggson and then at the surging chaos before him. Tork, with an expression so weird on his face that it made me gasp. A stricken tableau up there....

Doris, to one side, was crouching, huddled in her Empress robe—staring numbed, with a hand at her breast in her terror.

Tableau—and in it, only the voluptuous figure of Rhadana was moving; again with sinuous glide advancing upon Tork. And as he had been aware of Greggson, so now he was aware of her. With a little muttered scream of anger he whirled. Her white, painted body wilted under his flash—wilted and fell in a quivering heap at his feet.

In the distance I saw some of the men running now for the time-ship, dragging the girls with them. Between me and the throne there was a solid mass of struggling natives. Blake was gone; separated from me in the rush.

All in only a few crowded, chaotic seconds. The collapse of Tork's world. Up on the platform he was still standing stricken, on his face amazement, disillusionment, despair. Emperor here. Of what? Just chaos. And suddenly his face was contorted by ghastly rage—the maniacal rage of his disillusionment, his despair.

From his belt he whipped a jeweled weapon. It spat with a spreading, electronic blast. Amazing pyrotechnics of hurtling free electricity! It went out in a wave of crackling, sparkling color.

Other blasts from some of the running men came stabbing, but Tork's current beat them back. The air crackled and hissed with showers of sparks, gleaming in the lights. And then the lights were extinguished. There was only the light of the sparks—crackling showers; pin-points of bursting stars high in the air, and on the ground.

Screams sounded. A spark-shower in an instant was over all the scene. Just a second when the running men and girls were stumbling, dropping, electrocuted by the free-electron, high voltage of the sparks that leaped at them. Sparks like living things in a torrent surging down the slope, blighting the running, naked little creatures. Blighting everything.

Tork, destroying his world.

With an eerie scream he turned his almost exhausted weapon upon his village. The houses shook, crackled with sparks, glowed with interference heat. The thatch roofs burst into puffs of flame. Then the fused, glowing walls collapsed. Rumbles, grinding little crashes of tumbling metal, mingling with the crackling, hissing of the sparks, every spark a million-volt exploding charge.

I had leaped to one side, crawled on the ground and then was up again with the first pyrotechnic shower going over me. And then I came to the side of the platform. Tork's weapon, suddenly dark, exhausted in his hand, went silent. With a wild, maniacal laugh he threw it away. From behind the platform a figure leaped up upon it—a man, seizing Doris ... Blake! My heart pounded with a rush of thankfulness as I jumped up and Tork saw me; rushed for me.

Our bodies collided, with my arms around him. Weird, ghastly combat. What was this? My gouging fingers clutched his face. Weird smooth feeling—his skin, so queer. Then I struck him. Gripped his shoulder. It seemed to break. In that second his shirt tore. I saw where the flesh of his shoulder had split apart. Bloodless. His flesh? The substance there showed a reinforcement of wire mesh!

Man of the year 6,000. A man? The weird truth rushed at me, with memory of my own vague gropings, and what Rhadana had almost told me. Not a human man. Synthetic; built, moulded in a laboratory. Supreme product of man's inventive, scientific genius at the peak of man's skill—this Thing, cast with such ghastly irony in the fashion of a human. A Thing, made only to be a slave. And Tork had seen his chance to ape his human masters.

I had cast him off with a gasp of numbed astonishment. And as I stared at him, saw him partly smashed by my clutching grip, he gazed back at me. That same weird look he had given me in the house a while ago—his look of fear at me, a human master!

He felt it now, his helplessness. And with a wild scream he jumped from the platform, scrambled to a nearby rock. For a second he poised, with the gas-clouds rolling at him and the lurid glare painting him. Stood poised, gazing at the wreck of his little Empire. Balanced on the rock, fifty feet above us—and then head down, he dove. His body splattered on the rocks, ghastly, twitching, broken thing. The turgid green gas of the electronic fire rolled over it.

We ran through the choking clouds, Blake and I half carrying Doris; leaping over the dead and dying, passing the crumpled, wrecked little village—running for the time-ship. At its door I paused to look back; stood for an instant with my arm around Doris as we gazed.

The spots of light were dulling into little red glows. The heavy gas-clouds were settling—a great green-yellow, sodden shroud of death, so that under it Tork's Empire was gone.

Transcriber's Note: sentence left as printed, possible misprint.

Scientists—especially the new order of metaphysical-scientists—are agreed on the principles of Space-Time. The future is not a thing which *will exist*. Rather it is a thing which *does exist*—all events from the Beginning to the End, spread in a record upon the scroll of Time. All with a different, inherent vibration-rate—all, so to speak, in a different state of Matter.

The Bleroid time-ship changed its inherent state of Matter, thus sliding by natural law into the time-world with which it then was compatible. The vessel was the first of its kind known to his time-world. Invented by the Bleroid Family—Bleroid 274-Y—in the year 6042.—Ed.

[The end of *Bandits of Time* by Ray Cummings]