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The LAND where TIME STOOD STILL

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Prehistoric Hordes Prove a Lesser Danger, Compared with the Brain-Man of Future Eons!

Thrilling Wonder Stories

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CHAPTER I

Into Nothingness

It was, perhaps, the almost unbelievable antiquity of Silbury Hill that oppressed Ronald Stratton with a queasy premonition of disaster. He thought again of the old legend: that anyone entering the stone rings on top of Silbury Hill between dusk and dawn vanished, leaving no trace. The thought lingered.

Ronnie Statton, with 20th century courage, Battles the Science-Monsters of an Age Unborn!

The twilight silence, the low-lying layer of ground mist veiling his footing, the chill of evening damp striking into his very bones, combined to trouble the young American with sinister unreality. Something of that feeling had been with him all during his journey through England's South Country; had troubled him as he stood on Salisbury Plain where, twenty years before, had drilled the father he had never known, proud in the uniform of his ancestral land.

Tall and clean-limbed and lithe the American volunteer must have been then, bronze-skinned and frank-eyed as his son now was who retraced in a nostalgic memorial tour the route of his hero father's last voyage. Silbury was part of that sentimental pilgrimage—

Ron Stratton suddenly stumbled, sprawling into a grass-hidden ditch. He rolled, caught at whipping tendrils of a bush, pulled himself to his feet. He took a step forward—into the wrenching, frantic instant of sheer nothingness!

It was as if he had walked over the brink of a sheer precipice, save that, though a bottomless abyss yawned fearfully beneath him, he oddly knew no sensation of falling. The world, the universe had simply vanished from beneath him.

His foot came down on solid ground. Stratton pulled in a gasping, choked breath between his teeth. He'd never before experienced anything like that moment of terrific giddiness, of deathlike vertigo. Queer. The light seemed to have grown stronger. It filtered through the trees with a reddish glow somehow eerie....

The trees! How had he come into this forest? There hadn't been any trees at all, a moment ago! Was he dreaming?

Something scampered through the brush behind Stratton, and he whirled to the sound. A brown beastlet popped into sight between two rugged boles, a perfectly formed horse not knee-high to the man. Great, limpid eyes were startled in the miniature head—and then the creature had spun around and vanished.

Ronald Stratton stared at the spot where it had been. He managed to get himself moving, managed to get to where he could look down upon the hoof-prints. The tracks were unmistakable. Three-toed, those were the traces of an Eohippus, of that forgotten ancestor of the horse extinct before man's first anthropoid progenitor learned to swing along arboreal highways by four clutching paws and a prehensile tail.

Stratton's scalp made a tight cap for his skull. His hands were out in a peculiar, thrusting gesture, as though he were trying to push away some dreadful thing that was closing in upon him. What had happened to him? Where was he?

A scream sliced the forest stillness, a woman's scream, high and shrill and compact with terror. Stratton's head jerked up to it, to the swift threshing of someone running through the thicket. Something white flicked among the trees, took shape in the form of a running girl. Long blond braids streamed behind her, and her face was as white as the white robe fluttering about her slim form.

Her fear-dilated eyes saw him as she went past. "Help me, I prithee," she screamed; and her archaic appeal was blotted out by a horrid, bestial roar blasting from leaf-veiled aisles whence she came, by the thunder of a far heavier body pursuing her.

The underbrush tossed in the grip of a whirling tornado, parted to the plunge of a huge, hairy creature who ran half-crouched and bellowing.

The American leaped for the monster, flailed frantic fists at a brutal, leathery visage. His blows pounded against rock-hard bone, pitifully ineffectual. Something struck him, catapulted him backward. For the first time he saw clearly the thing he had attacked, and amazement seared through him.

It—it wasn't a gorilla, despite the stiff black hair covering its big-thewed haunches, despite its chinless, flat-nosed, beetling-browed countenance. A ragged pelt was slung about its waist. It clutched a wooden-handled, flint-headed axe in one spatulate-fingered hand; and in its lurid, beady eyes there was a groping, grotesque sort of intelligence not quite bestial. It was a man, a man from out the dawn of time. A Neanderthal man, whose like had vanished from the earth countless eons ago.

The ape-man's black, thick lips snarled back from yellow fangs. His neckless throat pulsated, vented a nerve-shattering, insensate roar. Threat was fierce in that horrid ululation, but underlying the menace a singular note of inquiry seemed to signal a bewilderment in the creature's small brain as great as Stratton's own. That was what had checked its charge, what held it now, momentarily hesitant.

In that instant of reprieve Stratton heard the bush rustle behind him, felt a twitch at his right hand. His fingers closed on something hard that fitted into his palm.

"Mayhap this dagger will aid thee against the ogre," a whisper came to him. "This blade, and my prayers."

The aborigine's bellow blasted again. He sprang, catapulted down upon Stratton, his flint axe arcing before him. The youth's frantic side-spring saved his skull, but the Stone Age weapon hit his left shoulder, numbing it. Stratton struck out blindly with the dagger, felt its point strike flesh and sink sickeningly into it. Then the hairy body of his antagonist bore him down. He thudded appallingly to the ground.

Harsh hands clamped his throat, cut off breath. His lungs labored, tortured by lack of air. Blood roared in his ears, and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

And suddenly air pulled in between Stratton's teeth as the strangling hold on his throat relaxed. The insupportable mass crushing him was abruptly flaccid, lifeless. Fiery stabs cut Stratton's chest as he gasped in saving breaths. Instinctively he heaved off from himself the anthropoid's limp mass.

"Marry! Thou hast slain him with a single thrust of the poniard!" The girl's voice was thrilled, applauding. "See how his black blood doth flow!"

His vision cleared. The girl stood above him, briar-tears gashing her robe to reveal tantalizing glimpses of lissome curves. Her blue eyes danced with excitement in a face small-featured, red-lipped, somehow pagan in the upthrust of high cheekbones, in the blunt modeling of its tiny chin. Even in that moment Stratton's heart skipped a beat at the elfin beauty of that countenance.

"I wouldn't have had it to thrust if it wasn't for you," he grunted, struggling erect. "You've got a lot of sand, young lady." She looked puzzled. "Sand? Prithee, what meanest thou?"

"That's American slang for courage." Why was she talking in that confoundedly queer lingo? Even if she was dressed up for a masquerade, what had happened here should have shaken her out of it.

The girl shrugged. "Nay, but thy speech groweth ever more strange. And thy garb, too, is passing queer." She gazed about her. Her pupils widened with sudden fright. "What—what land is this, what forest?" she cried out.

His own bemusement swept back on Stratton. "I—I don't know," he faltered. "I was hoping you'd tell me that."

She stepped backward in awe. "By the Holy Rood, 'tis an enchantment some sorcerer hath cast upon us! Look you. But a moment hence I hurried with milady's message to her lover that Sir Aglavaine hath returned betimes from Arthur's court. Seeking to hasten back so that I might bend knee at vesper crisons, I dared cross the ancient mound that riseth betwixt the castle and Avebury Town. As I attained its crest some strange malaise o'ercame me; and then, and then—"

"Yes," Ron Stratton prompted. "What happened?"

"And then there were these trees about me and the fearsome face of yon ogre peered at me from among them. I fled. He pursued. I came upon thee and—and the rest thou knowest."

Stratton shook his head violently, as though to jar his brain into functioning. "Wait a minute. What's all this you're saying about Sir Aglavaine, Arthur's court, a castle? Are you kidding me?"

She looked at him dumbly, as though she did not understand. "Kidding?"

"All right. Skip it. I'm having trouble understanding you, too. What year do you think this is?"

"What year?" She backed farther, warily, as though she were about to dash away. "Forsooth, hath bemusement clouded thy accmpt of time? 'Tis five hundred and a score years since Our Lord was born in Bethlehem."

Little chill prickles scampered along Stratton's spine. She believed it! She believed that she was telling the truth. But— His eyes slitted as his gaze left her, to shift from the corpse of the Neanderthal man to the tracks of the Eohippus, and back to this girl, who seemed to have stepped out of the pages of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.

If his memory of paleontology did not fail him, at least a million years ranged between the tiny horse and himself. It was possible that the animal and the beast-man were survivals, by some inconceivable quirk of fate, from the misty ages in which they belonged. They couldn't tell him. But *she* could. She had. She told him that the present was to her A. D. 520. To him it was 1936. That meant—What did it mean?

"Everything's mixed up here," he groaned. "Time's all mixed up. It's as if the universe were the rim of a great wheel, whirling through Time. As if, somehow, we have left that rim, shot inward along different spokes whose outer ends are different years, far apart, and reached the wheel's axis where all the year-spokes join. The center point of the hub, that doesn't move at all through Time, because it *is* the center. Where there is no Time. Where the past and the present and the future are all one. A land, in some weird other dimension, where Time stands still."

CHAPTER II

Trapped by Flame

The girl's lambent eyes flicked about, returned to him. "Marry," she sighed. "An' it doth appear to have been of no avail."

Ronald Stratton started. "What was of no avail?"

"The spell thou hast essayed. See, the woods still cluster around us, and Silbury Hill hath not reappeared."

In spite of his perturbation the youth grinned. "I don't blame you for thinking it some incantation. It sounds pretty goofy to me. Looks like we're going to be together for quite a while, so maybe we'd better get acquainted. What's your name?"

"I am called Elaise." She dipped in a graceful courtesy. "Tirewoman I am to Milady Melisante, spouse to Sir Aglavaine of Silbury Keep."

"I'm Ronald Stratton—Ronny to my friends."

"Ronny. It falleth trippingly from the tongue. Ronny."

"Sounds swell when *you* say it. Strikes me we'd better try to find some way out of here. I'm not hankering to spend the night in these woods. Might be damned unhealthy, judging from what we've seen here already."

"Whither thou goest I follow, Squire Ronny." She said it demurely, but he could have sworn there was a glint of amusement in the blue eyes over which her luxuriant lashes drooped. "Having saved my life from the ogre it is forfeit to thee. All I have and am is thine to command."

"The hell you say!" Stratton muttered. "Come on then." Was the minx laughing at him?

"Perchance thou mayst have need of this, Ronny," he heard her say behind him. He threw a glance backward over his shoulder, saw her tugging the dagger from the ape-man's breast. She got it out, started after him, wiping the blood from its blade with a handful of leaves. He shuddered at her callousness. Then he recalled the brawling, ribald, tempestuous age from which she came. Handling a gory dagger then was no more than cleaning a muddy tennis ball to the girl of now....

Then—Now. Those terms no longer had any meaning. The concepts of a dead past, a living present, a future yet unborn—all were false, utterly false. All Time exists simultaneously, in the same manner that all space exists simultaneously. Minutes, hours, years, centuries are merely measurements of location in terms of time; just as yards, miles, light-years are measurements of location in terms of space.

Space-time, time-space—the terms of the mathematical physicists, their theories that had seemed to Ronny Stratton's realistic mind so much fairy-tale nonsense, had suddenly become breathing truths. If he had only paid more attention to them, tried to understand them! Didn't Einstein talk about ether-warps, about eddies in the flux of space and time? Was there such an eddy on Silbury Hill, through which he had slipped into some alien dimension?

Did the ancient Druids know it; was that why they had selected the spot for their savage rituals? Had they erected those monstrous circles to warn their charges from the very fate that had overtaken Elaise and himself?

"Ronny! Ronny!" The girl's cry recalled Stratton to awareness of his surroundings. "What enchanted domain is this?"

They were at the edge of the forest, at the edge of the plateau it covered. Ten feet from where they stood, the terrain dropped away in a precipitous, headlong descent.

Sheer down for a thousand feet the high cliff fell, and far below a great plain spread mile after mile to a vague and murky horizon, a limitless expanse of tumbled, grotesque rock. Queerly angular, strangely distorted, the tortured stone soared in needle-like spires toward the lurid sky, or lay strewn in the fractured fragments of some gigantic cataclysm; piled here in gigantic mounds, there flattened to jagged fields.

Nowhere in that far-flung tumulus was there any sign of verdure, nowhere the glint of water; the hint of human habitation.

But it was not alone the infinite desolation of that vast vista that gave it the eerie, ominous cast of a nightmare landscape. Color ran riot there. Violent greens warred with oranges virulent as the venom of the cobra. Fiery scarlet streamed shrieking between the yellow of a finch's breast and blue cold as Polar ice.

"Ronny!" Elaise had shrunk against him. Stratton was abruptly conscious of the quivering warmth of her body against his, of the fragrance of her hair in his nostrils. "See there. What manner of beings are those that dwell in this outland of hell?"

His arm went around her, drawing her closer still, but his gaze followed the gesture of her shaking hand. There was movement, just below. He saw them...

Apparently they had come out of some cavern in the face of the very cliff on whose brink he stood, and they were half walking, half crawling, as though seeking to take advantage of every bit of shelter the broken ground offered. Dwarfed though they were by the great height, Stratton could yet sense in their poses an odd combination of fear and aggressiveness. They were both hunter and hunted. They were stalking some as yet unseen enemy, dreading him and yet determined to attack him.

The American was by this time beyond astonishment, yet a chill prickle crawled his spine as he gazed down on the curious file. Their leader was a Roman centurion, the short skirt of his peplum swishing against swart thighs, breast and back protected by burnished armor, small round shield on one arm, stubby sword in the other.

He was followed by a squat, half-naked individual whose long blond hair and yellow, walrus mustachios set him off as one of the Britons whom Cæsar's legions conquered. Behind came a gigantic, steel-capped Viking with strung draw-bow, then a hairy aborigine.... Had the eddy on Silbury Hill plucked from out of the dead years one of each race of England's long history to make up that small company? Jute, Pict, Saxon, they were all there, bound together with their common trait of cruel savagery!

The shadow of a cloud drifted across the great plain. The Roman saw it, crouched suddenly low behind an emerald rock. The others dropped prone. Stratton was aware of a whirring sound. A flash of light darted across the field of his vision. The Briton—*vanished!*

Where he had lain was a small pit in the rock, its edges glowing red-hot!

The faint sound of a barked order came up to Stratton. The men he watched sprang up, dashed helter-skelter for the shelter of the cliff whence they came. Before they passed from sight two others had whiffed into nothingness with the appalling spontaneity of the first. The whirring was louder, seemed to beat all about the watchers on the cliff with some indescribable threat.

Something was in the air, level with Stratton, an egg-shaped metallic object suspended there without visible support. It flashed on him that this was the source of the spark that he had seen smash three humans into nothingness. Elaise whimpered, watching the wingless flyer hover—and then it was darting straight toward them!

Terror fanged the youth. His muscles exploded to throw him backward into the obscurity of the forest, carrying Elaise with him. His heel caught on a gnarled root and he sprawled, the girl on top of him. The whirring filled the forest with its menace. Stratton scrambled to his feet, jerked the girl erect. Side by side the two ran through the thicket, blindly, fear lending them wings, the fear of a terrible unknown from which they must escape. They plunged into a clearing.

A tree flared into flame, ahead of them. "This way," Stratton grunted, twisting to the right. Another forest giant was a column of fire, barring their passage. Behind, a third flamed.

"Oh-h-h," Elaise gasped. "The fiend ringeth us around with the flame of his breath. We are doomed."

They were surrounded by a roaring, torrid blaze. Heat beat in upon them, unendurable heat of an oven. Tongues of flame lapped toward them through the brush. They could not escape.

Stratton clutched the girl to him. "We're licked," he murmured. "We're licked, honey, before we start."

Her heart beat against his chest, her arms were around his neck. "We die, my Ronny," she cried. "But we die together."

"Together." What was there in the blue eyes, looking up into his that quenched the despair surfing in his blood, that sent a thrill of ecstasy through him? What did these red and luscious lips demand? "Together!" Stratton's own lips found her

avid mouth, clung. It was almost pleasant—to die—like this.

"Curious," a dry, shrill voice squeaked. "Curious indeed."

Charred, leafless trunks surrounded them, but the fire was gone. The ovoid flying-machine rested in the clearing, and a man stood before a black opening in its sleek side. "I must note the reaction," he continued, "really, I must note it at once."

This must be a native, Stratton thought. Surely there was never anyone on earth like him. His bulbous head, with fish-belly-white scalp utterly hairless, accounted for a full half of his height. The rest—his shrunken body, clothed in some tight, iridescent fabric of spun metal; his spidery legs—seemed too fragile to support that great mass. Eyes large as small saucers stared unblinkingly out from under a bulging, immense forehead. His nostrils were gaping tunnels, his ears huge, flapping appendages, but his mouth was a tiny, toothless orifice. He was like some surrealist's caricature, like the spawn of some evil dream....

"No," the monstrosity squealed. "You are wrong. I am Flaton, an Earthman like yourself. Some forty centuries of evolution make the differences between us."

What the hell! The fellow had answered him. But he hadn't spoken! Stratton was sure he hadn't spoken!

"You need not have," the response came. "I know what you are thinking as well as you do yourself. Nor am I talking to you, in your sense of the word. What you think you hear is the projection of my thoughts into your brain. Evidently in your period, telepathy had not yet replaced oral communication,—What was that period?"

"Nineteen thirty—" Stratton started to say. He did not need to finish.

"The twentieth century, in your reckoning!" The American felt a reaction of pleased triumph from his interrogator! "What luck! Wait till Gershon sees you. The fool insists the Fifth Glacier was down as far as the Fiftieth parallel, and life there extinct, by the beginning of the eighteenth. When I produce you he will have to admit that I was right in setting the beginning of the last Ice-Age much later.... And this other is a female." His unfathomable gaze shifted to Elaise, and he fell silent.

No! Evidently his eerie method of communication was focused by the direction in which he looked, for the girl was curtsying. "Five hundred and a score years since Our Lord's birth, master," she quavered. "An it please thee."

Another moment of silence, then she was speaking again. "I am night Elaise, and this squire Ronny." It was like listening in on one side of a telephone: conversation. She could not of course, understand that she was not really hearing Flaton's questions. Stratton himself could not actually comprehend how it was accomplished, though, child of the Radio Age as he was, there was no magic in it for him. Were his thoughts exposed to the man of the future, he wondered, while the fellow's eyes were not on him? It might be important to know....

Looking carefully at the odd craft that had brought Flaton here, he thought: "Maybe he's more developed than I, but he's weaker. Physical development has been sacrificed to mental. I can break him in half with my fist. I'm going to try it. *Now!*"

Nothing happened. In the youth's wrists a pulse throbbed. There was limit, then, to Flaton's powers.

Elaise screamed. "No," she shrilled. "No! Thou canst not do that to me! The Virgin Mary forfend—"

Stratton whirled to her. She was rigid, statuesque with terror. Her dilated eyes were fastened on Flaton's imperturbable countenance, but the fellow hadn't touched her, hadn't approached her.

"What is it, Elaise? What's scared you?"

She was shuddering within the protecting circle of his arms. "Didst not hear? Art thou once more bewitched?"

A cold chuckle within Stratton's skull was the echo of Flaton's cynical amusement. "Mankind no longer is divided into

male and female, so I informed her that we should have to dissect her to confirm our records. Her reaction is curious...."

"You devil!" Stratton shouted, and leaped for him. *Started* to leap. Abruptly he was without power to move, as his every nerve, his every cell, was shredded by unutterable anguish. Through a dancing haze of pain he saw a small, black cylinder in one of Flaton's tentacular hands, saw a peculiar green nimbus haloing the end that was pointed at him.

"Fool," the future-man's thought battered at his understanding. "If you were not the sole specimen of your era we have found here I should have disintegrated you before you could pass over a tenth of the space between us. You saw what happened to those on the plains below who were stalking one of our geological parties. A slightly increased pressure of my thumb and every molecule of your frame would be blasted into its component atoms."

Agony twisted through Stratton, knotting his muscles, wrenching at his sinews. "Stop it!" he moaned. "Stop it! I can't stand it!"

The green nimbus flicked out. The excruciating torture relaxed, though his sinews still quivered with remembrance. "All this is a waste of time," Flaton said. "Come, both of you. Get aboard my stratocar. Quick, now."

Resistance was useless. Stratton turned his back to Flaton.

"We'll have to do what he says, Elaise. We can't fight him." He was between the girl and their captor, shielding her from that omniscient gaze of his. "Not now, anyway; but don't give up hope. I'll find a way out. Don't think about that when he's watching you. Don't think about anything except how helpless we are. We'll fool him yet."



CHAPTER III

Lair of the Future-men

Elaise was like a small, frightened kitten huddling in Ronny Stratton's arms on the strange curved floor of Flaton's curious conveyance. That floor was of no metal Stratton had ever seen. Darting with tremendous speed through the air it had been silvery, but now he could see that it shimmered with ever-changing striations embracing the whole spectrum in their deep, variegated colors.

It was blood-warm to touch, too, and almost it seemed alive, vital with some force yet undreamed of in the twentieth century. Had the people of the future solved the obscure identity of energy with matter just dawning on the scientists of his present? Was this fabric fashioned of some element man and not God had created?

Flaton sprawled at ease in the bow of the sky-craft, his grotesque frame cushioned on a billowing, smoky substance, cloudlike in appearance. Although no machinery was anywhere visible, his pencil-like fingers played along a serrated bank of tiny levers; and in a screen, placed just where he could watch it with a minimum of effort, the weird landscape of this weird space was blurred by projectile-like flight. He was taking them to others like himself. Was their advent here also accidental, or—

"No. We are an expedition sent to examine the specimens trapped here." Stratton was once more startled by the pat answer to his thought. "We are checking the fossil records of the rocks the Great Glacier left behind." Flaton's back was toward him. But a mirror to his right, the American saw now, brought to him a reflection of the prisoners. "History will be an exact science when we return."

"*When we return!*" Return was possible, then! The thought sank deep into Stratton's consciousness. If they could escape—Good Lord! He had forgotten! He fought frantically to make his mind a blank, to bar from it even the flicker of a plan that Flaton, with his uncanny powers, might read and forestall.

"I'm a damn fool to think escape is possible," he forced to the surface of his brain. "I'm as much in his power as the Neanderthal Man would be in mine if I had him handcuffed and chained, with a machine-gun trained on him. After all, Science must be served. Why should I object even to death if it will advance the knowledge of his wonderful civilization?"

Had he struck the right chord? A wordless communication from Flaton seemed to tell him so, although the future-man's gargoyle-like visage betrayed not the slightest expression. It was sexless, soulless—neither cruel nor evil, but more sinister than both in its utter lack of emotion. There was no pity in the man, no mercy.

"I am afraid," Elaise whimpered. "Oh, Ronny, I am dreadfully afraid. Whither doth he take us?"

"Hush, honey," Stratton whispered, pressing her quivering body to him. "There isn't any use in being afraid. We've got to take what comes, and take it smilingly. We can't do anything to avoid it."

In the television screen the rushing terrain below was slowing, was becoming more distinct. Evidently they were reaching their destination and the landing was absorbing all of the future-man's attention.

The varicolored rocks were taking on definite form. The stratocar was hovering over a circular pit in the plain which held a building of some sort.

They dipped lower still. Stratton could make out another grotesque creature like Flaton, staring up at them. Then they were within the rock-walled crater. It was that, he saw, rather than a pit.

So smoothly had the landing been accomplished it was not until Flaton rose that Stratton realized the stratocar was no longer moving. A wave of the future-man's tentacular arm and a hatchway opened in the vessel's side, apparently of its own motion.

"Get out," the voiceless command came. "We have arrived."

The surface upon which they stepped out was level and glass-smooth, as though the rock had been melted and poured

into the cup of its stony walls.... Ronald Stratton brought his eyes back to Flaton in time to catch his thought, addressed to the man who had awaited him.

"Wait till Gershon sees this one, Talus. A man from the twentieth century. How he will howl to discover his chronology errs by at least two hundred years."

"I am troubled," Talus replied. "Gershon and Frotal have sent no messages for three quarter-hours. Have you seen anything of them?"

Flaton was undisturbed. "They were being hunted by some barbarians near the cliff they went to explore. I turned those back with a few blasts of the disintegrator ray. Our colleagues are probably making discoveries so interesting that they forgot your request for periodic signals."

"They should not. I don't understand..."

"Naturally. Being merely a representative of the World League's Administration, you could not expect to understand how we scientists react to the acquisition of new knowledge." Stratton sensed discord here, a schism between the practical men of the Earth of the future and the students. Forty thousand years, he mused, had not served to reconcile that ancient conflict. "By the same token I am anxious to begin the examination of my own finds. Beside the twentieth century individual I have a female. Just think of that!"

Flaton flung around to Stratton and Elaise. "To the laboratory," he repeated the thought, making of it a command. "At once!"

His leveled ray-gun drove them before him, across the frozen lava of the stockade's floor, in through a high portal in the shimmering metal side of the structure at its center.

A pale blue luminance lit the interior, and the space seemed filled with a pounding, mechanical throbbing. Some sort of machine bulked before Stratton. No part of the complicated device moved, yet somehow it seemed instinct with the same sort of life as had animated the fabric of the stratocar.

The door of the laboratory was narrow. Stratton went through first. In a larger chamber he glimpsed curious racks on which gleaming instruments were ominously ranged, high panels studded by glowing lights, a maze of tangled cables.

There was something terrifying about all this, some aura of the same dispassionate cruelty he had felt, once, in the experiment room of a naturalist friend whose skinned frogs and guinea-pigs had twitched to the galvanic false-face of searching electrodes. They had been bundles of gory flesh, like the scarlet horror on a table near a second door in the farther wall. *But that was—that had been a man!*

"No," Elaise groaned, behind him. "No. I will not—" Her voice choked off.

Stratton whirled. The girl was writhing in the grip of Flaton's macaber weapon, her dear face twisted out of all semblance to humanity by the torture Stratton himself had found unendurable.

The cylinder's green nimbus blinked out and he caught Flaton's grim order. "Disrobe, or you shall feel the agony again. Strip off your garb, female."

Flaton's great eyes flicked to Stratton, and the youth read his appalling intention. Wrath lightnined through him, obliterating fear. He left his feet in a long low dive, his arms flailing ahead of him in a desperate stab at the future-man's spindly legs.

Because instinct, and not thought, inspired that mad attack, Flaton was not warned of it in time to bring his weapon to bear on the berserk youth. Stratton's shoulder crashed against the fellow's frail limbs. They snapped at the impact, and Flaton went down under the mad charge. Paper-thin bones crunched under his blow. Abruptly he realized he was pummeling a squashed thing that did not move, a thing out of which all life had expired.

"Ronny," Elaise was crying. "Here, Ronny. His wand of magic!"

Stratton pushed himself erect, shuddering now with revulsion from the touch of that which had been the fruit of all mankind's long travail, shaking still with the fury that had fired him to his unexpected triumph. Elaise was thrusting at

him the black cylinder of the disintegrator ray. He snatched it from her, found the thumb-button that would release its fearful energy.

Somewhere outside someone called: "Flaton! Come quickly. I need your help. The barbarians attack us!"

CHAPTER IV

The Siege of the Primitives

"What now?" Stratton groaned, twisting to the door. The portal, sliding open, revealed Talus, waving filamentary arms in a paroxysm of apprehension.

"Hold it," the American said grimly. "As you are! If you move, I'll ray you!"

"Flaton—dead—incredible! He has the ray-gun!" Talus' thoughts were a jumble of astonishment at the pulped remnant of his companion, of terror of the weapon Stratton held. "He will disintegrate me before I can draw my own. Defeated—from within and without. I should not have come—."

"Damn right you shouldn't," Stratton interjected. This telepathy business had its points, he thought. He knew he was master of the situation now. "What's going on out there?"

"Our screen scans the plain for a half-mile around. I have seen them approaching—the barbarians. They are converging on all sides. They will destroy us."

"That's lovely! How about our getting away in the stratocar?"

"I do not know how to navigate it."

"That means we've got to fight them off. Can we?"

"One man on each side of the wall, with our weapons we should have been impregnable. But you have killed Flaton—"

"Never mind that. I'll make a dicker with you. You take one side, I'll take the other. You ought to be smart enough to see that we've got to play fair with each other or we both lose out. How about it?"

"Done!"

Stratton couldn't distinguish any reservation in the man's mind. Not just now. Afterwards he might change. "Are there any more of these ray-guns around?"

"Another in the cabinet to the left. That one—"

"Elaise," Stratton threw over his shoulder. "There's a magic wand, as you call it, in that closet on this side of me. Get it. You work it by pushing that little thing on its side. You come out with us, stay in the center of the blockade and don't take your eyes off this beauty. If you hear him think anything even a little bit hostile to me or you, let him have it. All the way down!" Then, to Talus, "You get that, don't you?"

"I understand." He was thoroughly cowed. "I shall give her no cause to disintegrate me. But we must hurry, or they will be over the wall."

"Let's go!"

There were steps in the sides of the stockade wall. Atop it was a runway protected by a rampart. If there were only four of the future-men, Stratton thought, they must have been here a long time to have built this fortress. Then he saw that it was of the same glass-like consistency as the floor within. He tested the ray on it.

Its button pushed halfway down, the green halo formed around its end, but there was no visible effect on the fused rock. A little further. The green deepened to a brilliant dazzle that extended in a tight beam to the spot at which he aimed. The stone glowed red, then white. It melted, ran in little streamlets down the slick sides of the little wall. That was what they had done! They had *melted* the solid stone to make their lair.

"Gosh!" Stratton exclaimed. "Just think what full power would do to a man!" Then he recalled that he had seen just that.... But he was forgetting what he was here for.

He could just see over the rampart. The piebald space outside was vacant. As far as his vision reached, nothing moved. Had Talus tricked him?

A swift glance over his shoulder showed him the future-man across the small space, peering intently over the barricade on his side. Elaise was tense beside the stratocar, her gaze unwaveringly on their strange ally, the ray-gun clutched in her small hand and focused on him. Admiration surged up in Stratton. She might be untaught, superstitious, but there was nothing lacking in her courage!

A tiny clink of metal against stone spun Stratton around. Had something dodged behind that boulder, out there?

Twanng! A harp-note sounded somewhere. Something zipped through the air, thudded against the rock wall below him. Again—*twanng!*—*zzzip!*—*thud!* This time it struck sparks from the rampart-top a foot to Stratton's left, fell over onto the foot-way. It was an arrow, flint-tipped. The American ducked below the shielding stone, looked from the dart to the cylinder he held. Ages between these two weapons—but that arrow also could kill, and without a target his ray was useless.

His careless exposure of himself had given some marksman his range. Stratton ran, crouching low, along the wall. Popped up for another look. A shambling Dawn-man, pelt-girdled, dodged out from behind a rock, his ferocious countenance more bestial than human. The fellow poised a flint-tipped javelin for the throw. Stratton took snap aim, thumbed his ray-gun's trigger. The dart-hurler whiffed into nothingness.

Revulsion twisted at the pit of the American's stomach, horror at the thing he had done. This death he dealt was worse than death itself. The most savage of warriors buried their dead and their enemy's dead, but he was leaving nothing to bury.

A wail rose into the dimness, hollow and somehow eerie with its keening of the dreadfully dead. A flaxen-haired youth, in leather jerkin and forest-green breeches, was suddenly visible. His longbow was stretched to the tip-point of a feathered arrow and his keen, eager eyes scanned the wall for a mark. Stratton's arm jerked up—but he could not bring himself to press the lethal button.

"Wait!" he yelled. "Wait!" There was in him some inchoate realization that the bowman was far nearer kin to him than the callous man of the future, that they two should be fighting shoulder to shoulder in a common cause. "Wait! I—"

The twang of the loosed bowstring cut him short. His ray caught the arrow in midair, sparked it into non-existence. The beam melted a lurid, angry pit just in front of the archer, and the yellow-headed Saxon sprang back to safe concealment.

If he could only get them to listen, Ronald Stratton thought desperately; if he could only get them to understand that he was not of the people who had come there to capture them and torture them.

Metal clanged, out there, and abruptly another figure was striding through the fantastic landscape of the Timeless Zone. A mailed knight, helmeted and visored, he came on jauntily, secure in the gleaming armor he could not deem other than invulnerable. His great, two-handed sword flashed bloodily in the fading light.

"Hey, you," Stratton called. "Hold up. Listen a minute. I don't want to kill you. Listen to me!"

The knight did not pause as he bellowed, "Ho, caitiff! Though thou art craven, Sir Sanguinor yields thee no quarter. Defend thyself!"

"You damn fool!" Stratton snarled, exasperatedly. "I want to—" The dazzle of Talus's weapon hissed past him. Out there, where the knight had been, a pockmark in the plain glowed redly, a molten pockmark where a gallant man-at-arms was dispersed into myriad scattered atoms.

"Ronny," Elaise screamed. "Ronny."

Stratton twisted to her. An ape-visaged aborigine, gigantic, was bringing down a great, stone-headed mace to demolish the shrieking girl. Stratton's flashing beam caught him, blasted him into extinction. The American left the rampart in a great leap, thudded down beside the cringing girl. A chorused jabbering of rage pulled his gaze to the farther wall. Forms were surging over it. Ravening, beastlike forms.

The American knew now that the die was cast. No chance for a truce now, for talk.

The future-man's ray swept clear the crowded wall. Swept it clear of swarthy, runted Picts; of long-haired, long-bearded dwarfs of the ancient moors; of all the surging, fierce apparitions of a dreamlike past. But others, and still others, took

their place: Roman legionnaires, shaggy-bearded Druids, archers who might have fought with Henry of Navarre at Poitiers, a longbowman in the forest green of Robin Hood's gay band. Indomitably they came on, and the silent death of Talus's fearful beam scythed them into oblivion.

A hurled spear ripped Stratton's thigh, sent agony searing through him. An arrow sliced his scalp. Talus gave vent to a high, piercing scream. A swift glance showed that his left arm was carried away. Grotesque, incredible in the gathering darkness, he carried on.

"Nerve!" the American exclaimed. "By jingo, he's got nerve!" A thrill ran through him, a tingling thrill of pride in the Race. All of these weirdly assorted participants in the uncanny, nightmare struggle staged in the dying luminance of an outer world were somehow ennobled by that high quality of courage. Ape-man from the fens of the immemorial past, Jute and Druid and knight, Roman and hook-nosed Norman seaman, girl of the sixth century, man of the twentieth, man of the four hundredth—not one of them craven. Above them all fluttered the pennant of bravery that in all the ages must distinguish man from beast.

Suddenly the battle was over. Suddenly there were no longer any more attackers for the fearful ray to smite with its green oblivion. Ron Stratton slumped wearily, exhausted, feeling the agony of his wounds.

"They're licked, Elaise," he gasped. "They're licked."

Not the least uncanny feature of the uncanny fight was that, now that it was ended, so little remained to show that there had been a fight.

"All gone," Stratton groaned. "All—"

"You're wrong," Talus's message squealed in his brain. "There are still others of them out there. I can sense their presence, though they are too far off for me to make out their thoughts." The fellow swore softly.

"The devil!" Stratton pulled himself to the rampart again, peered out once more into the tumulus whence the savage raid had come. Silence brooded, gravelike, among the fantastic rocks. It was a dead world he looked at, shrouded in a mournful dusk. A dead, unpeopled world. "I don't see anyone."

"They are there, nevertheless," he heard. "Hidden to plot a new attack—" That thought broke off; another took its place. "At last! Gershon and Frotal—"

The thought blanked out. Talus had veiled it, but a whirring sound, faint, out of the almost lightless sky, came to Stratton. The two missing future-men were coming back!

CHAPTER V

The Primitives Take the Crater

Stratton saw suddenly a tremendous, reaching beam arc against the vault of the maroon-shaded sky; saw a rock flick from its end to hurtle and crash devastatingly against the stockade's façade.

This was a catapult, he realized, a Roman catapult, heavy artillery of Cæsar's legions. Some military genius was directing the siege. But the future-man was equal to the new threat. The catapult's huge throwing beam flared suddenly into flame as the disintegrator ray struck it.

Above that pillar of fire, high above and miles distant, a glowing speck showed against the deep maroon of the sky. The same electric shimmer flowed in the skin of Flaton's stratocar. If only Stratton knew how to fly that—

What good, while Frotal and Gershon were aloft to ride him down? Better death at the hands of the barbarians than what *they* would do to Elaise and himself. Stratton's arm jerked up, brought to bear pointblank on Talus's spidery form. He pressed the button halfway.

The future-man was rigid, quivering in the clutch of that dreadful force.

"Take his wand, Elaise," Stratton yelled. "Quick."

No words sounded in his brain, telepathed from the future-man, but pain and terror impacted there in a chaos of transferred anguish. The girl sprang unhesitatingly up the steps to the runway. Stratton flicked off his beam for the instant she needed to snatch away Talus's ray-gun, flicked it on again as Elaise turned questioningly toward him.

"Get into the thing in which we came here," was his next order, "and watch the hole in the wall. If anyone starts to come through, ray him down."

"Aye, Ronny, my love," she answered him. "I haste to do thy will."

"Now, you," Stratton addressed Talus, aloud. "Which way shall I move my thumb, up or down? Will you do just as I say, or do I blot you out?"

There was acquiescence in the message that came to him, cringing, tortured appeal. Stratton relaxed. "Come down and turn off the machine in there that holds up the stratocar."

"But you'll kill them," the agonized protest reached him. "They will fall."

"That's just what I've got in mind. Going to do what I say, or do I start with you?"

Talus's actions replied for him. He was scrambling down the wall. Stratton leaped down, kept right behind him. The future-man shambled into the powerhouse. The American threw a quick glance up into the sky. That ominous flier was nearer, much nearer. Shadowy forms were moving out there on the plain. All the sinister forces of this sinister land were closing in.

"Watch it, Elaise," he called and followed Talus into the building. "Hurry up," he flung at the cowed creature. "Turn it off."

The whir of the approaching flier came to him, high and angry now, like the irate whir of a worker bee whose hive is being attacked. Talus did something—and the whir was gone.

Stratton faced about. Through the open door he could see the sky. A star fell, leaving a long wake of electric flame behind it. The plain spurted a fountain of sparks, green and red and golden. Then there was only darkness out there....

Only darkness and the long darting flares from Elaise's ray-guns as she fought off the oncoming hordes. Killing, killing. God, how weary he was of killing! Those poor fellows didn't know what it was all about. They knew only that strange creatures had come here to capture and torture and slay—and that they must fight to save themselves. Stratton jerked around.

"Turn on the power again."

Talus obeyed, thinking, "It won't do any good. The scientists are gone. No one, now, is left who knows how to fly the stratocar. The charges of the ray-guns will soon be exhausted and then—the end."

"Oh, yeah?" Stratton gritted. "I've got an idea. Come on, let's get into the flier and try it out."

"Ronny," Elaise screamed. "The wands hath lost their magic. We are lost."

"Coming, honey. Coming." He grabbed Talus by his one remaining arm, fairly hauled him to the flying machine, threw him into it, leaped in after him. He remembered the motions of Flaton's arms that had closed and opened the hatchway. Clumsily he imitated them. Elation leaped up in him as the hatch cover slid closed.

He twisted. Talus lay almost unconscious on the floor. Elaise stood above the future-man, staring fearfully at the view-screen above the control levers. Mirrored in it was the breached wall of the stockade; through the gap, Stratton could see the dusk-shrouded figures crawling in, always in. Till the last man was gone they would persist in their attack, not intelligent enough to realize how hopeless it was.

"Talus," Stratton shouted. "You think you don't know how this thing works, but you must have been in them often. You must have watched the pilots manipulate them, and what you saw is deep down in your subconscious. Don't think. Don't try to remember. Just try to picture Flaton, for instance, at some moment he was taking off."

"I cannot," the fellow's despairing whimper came to him. "I cannot remember."

"You've got to, man! *Try*. Try hard!"

Silence fell in the round-walled cubicle, a thick silence that seemed to quiver with tension. Stratton stared at the future-man, concentrating on his thoughts, on that storehouse of forgotten but never eradicated brain-impressions the psychologists call subconscious memory.

No words came to him, but pictures seemed to form on his retina, pictures like the hazy visions of a dream. They grew more definite in outline. He saw Flaton resting on his grey cloud cushion. He saw the view-screen in front of him. It was a porthole looking out on a platform thronged with hundreds of creatures in the nightmarish shapes of the world of the future. Silhouetted against a blue sky were towering pinnacles of gleaming crystal, fairylike highways leaping from façade to façade in a gossamer arabesque, clouds of ovoid stratocars....

The view-screen drifted upward and he saw the lever-banks. Thin, boneless fingers reached out, pushed one down in its short slot. In the view-screen the crowded platform shot down.

"I have it!" Stratton shouted, and leaped to the bow of the stratocar. He glimpsed the real view-screen, glimpsed a steel-capped Viking rushing in through it, a crowd of others behind him. His shaking hand found a lever, pushed it down.

The uprush of the stratocar flung him down on Talus, crushing the future-man as Stratton had crushed Flaton in his irate onslaught. But the flier was rising. The crater was dwindling in the television screen, was once more a pit in the plain's boundaryless surface.

Ronald Stratton struggled back to the control levers. "I've got to stop this or we'll keep on going up forever." Talus was dead, could not help him any longer. He pushed the tiny handle back into the central point of its slot. The precipitate rise stopped; the stratocar hovered, motionless in the air.

Stratton stared at the control board. He saw now that the switch lifting the stratocar was the topmost of a vertical row of three, that to left and right of the central lever there were two more.

"It looks simple enough," he muttered, "now that I've got a starting point. Top—up. Bottom—down. Middle—forward. Left—left. Right—right. Let's try it. I'll push down the middle one. Here goes!"

The craft leaped forward. The problem was solved! He could fly the stratocar. But where? Where in this terrible place was safety for him? For Elaise?

"Look, Ronny!" the girl exclaimed. "It waxeth light again. The night here is indeed very short."

The strange red glow that passed here for day was growing in the screen. "It's just some kind of fluctuation of the light,

sweetheart," Stratton thought aloud. "You see, there could not really be any day or night here because there isn't any Time."

Below, the eerily colored plain was visible once more, stretching undisturbed to a featureless horizon. No. There, straight ahead, something bulked against the lurid sky, a familiar, grateful green margining its upper edge.

"How would you like to come home with me, Elaise?" Stratton whispered. "Home to England?"

"Ronny!" She was wordless, but her arms around his neck, her kiss on his cheek, was enough.

"All right," he said. "Here goes."

The stratocar came down in the clearing, where Flaton had captured them. Stratton stepped out of it, helped Elaise to descend. They turned shuddering away from the gruesome remnants of the last of the future-men.

"We came from that direction," Stratton said. "Maybe if we go back there we'll find the eddy once again."

"Whither thou goest I will go," Elaise murmured. "I am thine, my knight, soul and body ..."

"Not more than I'm yours, honey. Remember that when we get back to 1936. Come on."

The underbrush rustled against their knees, the trees whispered overhead. They passed the still body of the Neanderthal Man. Then—a wall confronted them, a wall of hazy, swirling nothingness.

"Here goes! Together does it, Elaise. One—two—three!" His arm around her warm waist, Ronald Stratton stepped into the haze.



CHAPTER VI

Through the Eddy

It was as if he had walked over the brink of an abyss, save that he did not fall. He was standing on the gentle slope of Silbury Hill. A great monolith loomed above him, black and gaunt against a dusk sky grey and haunting with the death of day. Not a minute, not a second had elapsed since he had taken the fateful step in the other direction.

"Look, Elaise," Ronald Stratton said. "Look down there. See the spire of Avebury Church? We can find a minister there, to wed us."

She didn't answer. "Elaise!" he said sharply, turning to her. She wasn't there beside him. She wasn't anywhere....

"Elaise!"

But she had walked into the eddy, close against him. She must have walked into it. What had happened? Where was she, the girl he had found in the Timeless Zone, who had fought so bravely by his side? The girl he had learned to love, the blue-eyed, fair-haired girl from the days of King Arthur?

From the days ... Abruptly he understood. He remembered his first explanation of their strange adventure. "We've shot along the year-spokes of that great wheel, each from our own time, and met here at the center...." The reverse, too, was true. Returning, they had each gone back along his own year-spoke, he to 1936, she to A. D. 520. Some vibration of their cosmos, some esoteric, unknown quality, had provided for that. They were fourteen centuries apart.

Ronald Stratton started slowly down the hill, descending toward the valley whose moor was already dark with the gloom of night. Little stars sprinkled it, lights in the homes of people like himself. Of people of the twentieth century. Above them, the red and green winglights of an airplane drifted across the dusk.

"I don't care how advanced your era is; if you haven't got love, I pity you." He had said that to Flaton. "It's the greatest thing in life."

Stratton halted, turned back to the monumental double-ring the Druids had built to warn their people of the terrible thing that lay within. Abruptly he was running back to the high stone that marked the boundary of the eddy. He stopped on its very edge.

"Elaise!" he cried into that dread maelstrom of haze. "Elaise!"

Mad! He would be mad to plunge back into it. She wouldn't be there, in the forest. She was hastening down Silbury Hill, fourteen hundred years ago, so as not to be late for evening prayers. She—

"Ronny!"

Her voice came out of the mists. He hadn't heard it, couldn't have heard it, *across fourteen centuries*. He was mad!

"Ronny!"

"I'm coming, Elaise. Wait for me! I'm coming!"

Above a forest of tall and ancient oaks a lurid sky bent its eerie dome. A tiny horse, three-toed and knee-high to a full-grown man, peered through the underbrush at the couple walking, hand in hand, into the lowering, threatening future of the Land Where Time Stood Still. Hand in hand, heart to heart, the man of the twentieth century and the maid of the sixth went, together, into the Unknown.

[The end of *The Land where Time Stood Still* by Arthur Leo Zagat]