

ADVENTURES OF FUTURE SCIENCE

WONDER Stories

May



HUGO GERNSBACK Editor



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by John B. Harris



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Worlds To Barter

By

John Wyndham

Writing under the pseudonym John B. Harris.

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One of the fascinations of the time traveling story lies in the endless source of speculation concerning its manifold possibilities. So many elements of time traveling stories seem to be contrary to reason and lead the thinking reader into all sort of absurd situations. Some of these were pictured quite vividly in our readers' column by young Mr. Nicholson last month.

Readers may find some of these apparent contradictions in the present story. Even the scientists of the 22nd century found themselves unable to follow the mysterious program of the owners of the silver vehicles who wanted to transfer a whole race through time.

But this story is thrilling from beginning to end. It leaves one with a sense that there was much that our hero could have told us, if he were able. It leaves us with a haunting sense of mystery, of unnamable fear and of desolation.

Outside the tall laboratory windows the sun shone brightly on the gardens. It was that kind of June morning when one forgets the deficiencies of our civilization and everything seems for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Certainly in the minds of Professor Lestrangle and myself there was no suspicion of any untoward occurrence. We had already been working for some three and a half severely practical hours.

Lestrangle, in that year 1935, was not unlike the photographs, taken ten years later, which now adorn the physics textbooks. Already, at forty, his most striking characteristics were that broad white forehead where so many mysteries were solved and those piercing eyes which saw so much that was hidden from ordinary men. Already his adaptations and improvements marked him for success though he had made none of those revolutionary discoveries individual enough to be understood and acclaimed by the public.

The time was yet to come when the name of Lestrangle would be more familiar than that of Edison had ever been and when his commanding face would peer out from a million printed pages.

The critical moments of our present experiment were approaching. I was attempting to fight down my rising excitement so that no trembling might show in my hands. Lestrangle was, to all appearances, as calm as a frozen sea. During his work he preserved the mien of a poker player. Not a hurried movement betrayed any anxiety as in the silence of the long laboratory he tested the last connections and inspected the final adjustments.

"Stand by," he ordered, at length, in an unemotional voice.

As I moved aside, his hand was on the switch. My eyes were fixed upon the intricate apparatus before us. In a few seconds now, the throw of a copper bar would prove whether we faced a marvellous discovery or the symbol of wasted months of labor.

There was a mighty crash behind us.

That noise, so dreaded in our surroundings, hit my taut nerves like a hundred volts. I whirled round. Lestrangle's scientific abstraction was shattered. Slowly his hand left the switch and his mouth dropped open. At any other time the way blank amazement succeeded intelligent concentration might have amused me, but, now, I myself, was too bewildered.

Two thirds of the way up the room, in the middle of what had been a clear floor space, lay a piece of machinery. A few feet from it sprawled the figure of a man.

As we stared, the man sat up.

He was dressed in a close-fitting black suit of a texture and finish resembling leather and apparently made in one piece. His build was tall and strong and his face, though it bore an expression of confusion at the moment, showed firmness of character.

For a few seconds he gazed about wonderingly, then alarm seized him. His voice was urgent as he addressed us.

"Quick," he said. "Some string. Quick."

Something in his manner caused me to search my pockets without question.

"Here," I said, holding out a length of packing twine.

He snatched it and turned to the machine behind him. Hurriedly he raised the contraption from its side to a vertical position. More than anything else it seemed to resemble the skeleton framework of a miniature building using, instead of steel, bright silvery bars which crisscrossed in all directions. Enmeshed in them was a bucket seat before which were arrayed two rows of dials. There was no time for a further examination.

The stranger leaned over the instrument board, adjusted several dials, tied a loop in the end of my bit of string and slipped it over a small lever. He took as many steps away as the length of the string permitted and gave a jerky pull. . . .

There was no machine; before our startled eyes stood only the stranger, the string dangling from his hand. A sigh of relief broke from his lips as he turned towards us.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I owe you an apology."

"You do, sir," replied Lestrangle. "I should be pleased to know by what right you intrude."

"I admit, I have no right. I can plead only what they used to call in the old days, sanctuary. You are Mr. Lestrangle—the inventor of the battery? My own name is Lestrangle—Jon Lestrangle."

"My name is Lestrangle," the Professor admitted, "but I have invented no battery."

"Not yet?" said the stranger. "I am earlier than I thought. You must excuse me, my dates were never good."

There was puzzlement on Lestrangle's face as he replied.

"I do not understand you. No doubt you will explain later. Meanwhile, am I to infer from your name that you claim relationship?"

"Certainly we are related, but—er—distantly."

"The matter must be examined. I cannot pretend ever to have heard of you before. Let me present my assistant, Henry Wright."

The stranger held out his hand.

"I've heard of you, Mr. Wright," he said with a smile. "Your rescue of Mr. Lestrangle was an act of real bravery."

It was my turn to be puzzled. In all the six years I had known Lestrangle he had never been in more danger than anyone who crosses a busy street.

"I see I have made another blunder. Please forgive me," the man apologized.

A change came over his expression. The smile of greeting gave way to a look of anguish. His eyes seemed to plead as he asked:

“Tell me, have you ever, either of you seen or heard of another machine like the one I came on?”

We shook our heads. I could recall no invention bearing any resemblance to it.

“There was really no chance, not one in a hundred million,” he said slowly. “I knew it wasn’t possible, but I had to ask.”

His gaze wandered round the room pausing here and there upon apparatus until it came to rest upon the material of our thwarted experiment. His eyes brightened and he took a few steps towards it.

Lestrangle and I were recovering now from our sense of unreality. Our eyes met and we knew that the same thought was in both our minds. All mystery was ripped from the affair with a jerk—the man was a spy, with the minutest care he was examining the product of our secret months of labor. Lestrangle pulled a revolver from a drawer.

“Put your hands up,” he snapped. The other obeyed, a slight smile on his lips.

“I’ve heard that these were troublous times,” he remarked.

“Come over here,” Lestrangle ordered, “and tell us just why you are so interested in that experiment.”

The other, who called himself Lestrangle, opened his eyes wide in evident surprise.

“Surely,” he expostulated, “it is reasonable to show interest in the discovery which changed the face of the world? Besides, I may be mistaken, but it seems slightly different from what I remember. It’s a couple of years since I saw a picture of it, but I have a distinct impression that several of the connections ran differently . . . that terminal on the left should be coupled direct to . . .”

“What on earth are you talking about?” roared Lestrangle. “You must be mad. The thing’s only been assembled four days.”

“Oh, Lord,” said the stranger, “I’ve put my foot in it again. I’ll have to try to explain it all to you, but it’s a long story. May I have some food first—I haven’t eaten for twenty-four hours.”

CHAPTER II

The Man From the Future

By the end of the meal the visitor's status had changed. He was no longer an interloper, but a guest whom we were calling, at his own request, Jon. Somehow in that desultory form of conversation appropriate to the lunch table, we had lost our suspicions though we were no nearer to understanding him. He was curiously ignorant at the same time that he was well informed. His broad outlines of current politics were good, but of the details he seemed to know nothing.

In speaking of well known characters he appeared to hesitate as though he might commit himself. His knowledge of literature was excellent though occasionally he referred to works of which I had never heard, by authors whose fame was world wide. My condensed impression was that while he appreciated the high lights of most matters, he was sure of himself only in a few subjects.

"You'll smoke?" inquired Lestrangle as we retired to his comfortable study.

"Tobacco?" asked Jon.

"Of course," replied the Professor with a touch of surprise. "What else?"

"There are many things to smoke where I come from—one has to be careful."

He settled himself comfortably in a big chair and lit a cigar.

"Now," he said, "if you can put up with a long tale, I would like to explain this intrusion."

"Our experiment" I began.

"Would not be a success in its present form. Believe me, I can tell you where there is a miscalculation."

I accepted his statement. He seemed to know something of our work. Lestrangle, too, nodded agreement.

Jon began:

"I think the first thing to be explained is why I chose to thrust my company upon you rather than upon any one else. Perhaps the first reason is our relationship and the second that my studies have informed me that you, Professor, have probably a more open mind and a greater grasp of possibilities than any man now living"

"This relationship?"

"Our family has been proud of its direct descent from you and your wife, Joy."

Lestrangle and I looked at one another. Now there was no doubt that the man was off the rails somewhere.

"But I'm not married, I"

"Please let me go my own way. It is a difficult situation, but I hope I shall convince you. Very few men can have had the chance of convincing their great-great-great grandfathers of anything. I am now an anachronism. You see, I was born in the year A.D. 2108,—or should it be, I shall be born in 2108?—and I am—or will be—a refugee from the twenty-second century. I assure you that you will be married shortly, but I can't remember when—I think I told you I was bad at dates.

"It will probably be easier for you if I tell the story in the past tense. Certainly it is a past life for me. You saw me burn my bridges when I tied the string to that machine.

“Of the nature of time, we of the twenty-second century knew little more than you of the twentieth. Habit of thought still caused us still to think of it in terms of progression along a straight line. Though we were aware, of course, that this was inaccurate, yet for all practical purposes it served us as well as it had served the world for thousands of years before.

“Because I am here now, I know that time is somehow folded or circular so that it is all co-existent, or non-existent. But of the working principle of that machine which brought me here, I am as ignorant as you. I set the dials, pulled the lever—and there was your laboratory.

“I daren’t keep the thing to examine it. It’s even betting that the owners had some way of tracing it and that was not a risk worth taking.

“The world I was living in was not all you twentieth century men expected. It would have disappointed Wells and his fellow prophets to have had a true vision of A. D. 2135. We were on another swing of the pendulum.

“Scientific progress in the sense of physics, chemistry and engineering had slowed its advance to a minimum while the world caught up and readjusted. By the end of the twentieth century science was so far advanced that civilization was becoming seriously lopsided so that nature tended to restore the balance. Even today I expect you can begin to see how large scale production has begun to upset politics and social conditions which were designed to cope with a simpler way of life. It is making war no longer the solution of difficulties, it is uprooting the old order of things, but not reorganizing.

“So you will see that I come from a world in which Mr. Wells’ ‘Sleeper’ might awake, but from an age which had spent the previous century in improving its institutions rather than its machines.

“Since the year 2000 the Lestrangle battery, of which you heard me speak, had been almost the only driving agent for machinery. In 2000, Mr. Lestrangle, the internal combustion engine will have passed away. The whole world’s trains, ships, planes, radios, cranes, everything save the most ponderous machines will be depending upon your discovery.

“It is strange to tell a man of his results before the experiment has been made. Nevertheless, I assure you that your little storage battery is going to have a greater effect upon the whole world than any other single invention in the history of mankind. Even the machine which brought me here depended upon a modified form of your battery to carry it across half a million years.”

“But you said—”

“Oh, yes, I have taken only a little local trip on it. A mere jaunt of a couple of centuries.”

The Coming of the Menace

“Looking back, I can see that the first sign of the crisis we were to face occurred about a year ago—to me—in the summer of 2134. An account was published by newspapers and radio of the derailing of a train. (It was still more economical for heavy, imperishable goods to be carried by rail.) An investigation of the accident, so far from clearing up the reason, had obscured it.

“Among the debris was found the crooked frame of what we later learned to call a ‘time traveller’. Attention was first attracted to the silvery bars by their strength. Though the joints of the structure had been strained by the impact, rods, a quarter of an inch thick, were found to be supporting tons of wreckage without a bend. This unknown, silvery metal itself set a problem, but a greater puzzle was the body found lying near the track.

“There could be no doubt that the corpse was human, though to us whose standards were still those of ancient Greece, the thing appeared a travesty.

“In height it must have stood about five feet. The head had twice the volume of ours though the enlargement was mainly frontal. The neck was thickened in order to support the weight until the shoulders barely projected. Puny arms ended in small hands of which no finger carried a nail and none was longer than two inches.

“Each foot was just a pad showing no articulation of the toes. When the dissectors got to work on the body, they noticed many other curious malformations such as abbreviated intestines, atrophied aural system and absence of teeth.

“Speculation ran rife. Everyone made the creature’s origin a sort of guessing game. It was suggested that the thing was a natural freak, a product of vivisectional experiment, a sensational hoax, an attempt at artificial creation and a dozen other things all equally wide of the mark.

“The only explanation which attempted to account for the machine was offered by an ingenious gentleman who claimed that the body was that of an interplanetary explorer who had selected a singularly unfortunate spot for his landing. It was curtly pointed out that a metal framework is not the best protection against a vacuum. It nevertheless transpired later that the only thing seriously wrong about this explanation was the inclusion of the word ‘interplanetary’.

“As the controversy began to cool, it suddenly received fresh fuel from the finding of a similar body in a coastal rock-pool. The boy who reported it said that there had been a shiny machine near, but when he touched a lever, it had disappeared. Again the crop of surmise sprouted. Every suggestion which could be made, was made; save the right one—that the people of 2134 had gazed on the bodies of their own remote descendants. Could we have read in the mystery the warning it carried, it would have been useless to us.

“Three months ago, the curtain rose on the last act of our drama—only three months.”

Jon paused and looked at us with bitterness in his eyes.

“Then,” he said, “it was a happy world. A civilization progressing serenely, as it thought, to its appointed goal. Now it is swept away. All time and space are warped, distorted and incomprehensible.

“It was my happiest night. A dream had started its flow towards reality—now Fate has ordained that the dream remains a dream. Somewhere in the intricate tissue of time, Mary may still live, but the dream can never be fulfilled now.

“Across that evening, which surely was made for lovers to discuss their future, clashed the voice of our doom. Over the whole broadcast belt in all the world those unemotional tones were heard.

“‘People of the Twenty-Second Century,’ the voice began. ‘We of the five thousand and twenty-second century offer peace. We come from a period in the world’s history which holds no hope for us. We have conquered time that we may gain the Earth. We offer two kinds of peace, one is elimination, the other, submission to our will.’

“‘We are not cruel. We do not wish to kill you, our ancestors. Instead, we give transportation—you will exchange your world for ours. We will carry you across the gulf of half a million years to a world in which you, a short-lived race, will be well suited as will your sons and your sons’ sons. For us who count our years by thousands as you count by tens, the end is too near. We have broken through time that we may continue our work. Prepare

yourselves and your possessions that you may be ready for the time and places we shall appoint.'

'Neither Mary nor I knew what to make of it—indeed, we heard it only subconsciously. Tomorrow would explain. Tonight we had more important matters to discuss.

'The next day did not explain; it complicated. Where did the voice originate? How had it compassed all wave lengths? How was it of equal strength at antipodes? Why did no picture of the speaker come through on the television screens? It caused a vague uneasiness. Though no one understood nor took much interest in the message itself, the curious form of transmission was disturbing to a world unused to new inventions.

'The general attitude to science had resulted in the feeling that things were very well as they stood and that tamperers should be put down with a firm hand. Even the type who immediately attributes the incomprehensible to a form of practical joke felt that easy solution to be inadequate. The mass of the people wondered unintelligently, suggesting hazily that 'something ought to be done about it'. Governments officially disregarded it and privately did not know what to make of it.

'A few days later, came the second world wide call. Mary and I were sitting at the open window when the voice made us jump round.

'But I shut the radio off,' said Mary in surprise.

'I crossed the room and inspected the switches. Undoubtedly they were out—there might be a short somewhere. I pulled the leads from the speaker and then stared at the thing in amazement, for the voice still continued:

'—seems in view of the fact that no preparations have been made, that you have not understood our intentions.'

'It was uncanny. I picked up the speaker and carried it across the room. I know a few tricks to make an unattached speaker work, but none of them was being used here. The voice went on:

'—not our wish to hurt anyone, but such as do not accede to our demands must be eliminated. It is suggested that for the purpose of convincing yourselves that this is no empty threat, a committee shall be appointed to visit us and report its findings to the world. Thus you shall be convinced that obedience to our will is the only course not leading to elimination. This committee will gather at the Paris Air Station whence we will provide a means of travel one week from today at exactly this hour.'

'I looked at Mary and she at me. There was trouble in our eyes. There was something behind that unemotional voice which told us that this affair was far from a practical joke. Feeling, not reason, told us it was serious.

'I am going on that committee,' I said at last. 'Somehow or other I'll join it and find out what's at the bottom of all this.'

'Mary nodded.

'Good, Jon, that's like you,' she approved. Then a little frown appeared.

'You don't think it's dangerous?'

'Not a bit,' I assured her. 'There'd be no point in assembling a committee just to kill its members—or 'eliminate' them, as the voice puts it. They might just as well start 'eliminating' right away. No, I think whoever they are, they're on the square and though the whole show sounds insane, there's something pretty big behind it.'

CHAPTER III

A Mysterious Adventure

“Far below we had seen the coast of France slip away from beneath our queer craft. Now, through the thick glass windows, the blue waves of the Mediterranean twinkled at us. Around me, as I gazed down, buzzed the tentative suggestion of a puzzled committee.

“Such influence as I possessed had been exerted with successful results. A large air liner had carried me rapidly from home to drop our gliding tender at Le Bourget, the Paris airport. There I had found a group awaiting the craft promised by the radio voice. It was a cosmopolitan collection of Americans, Germans, English, French, Japanese, Chinese, Indian and most other nationalities.

“Not one of them officially represented his government. The rulers assumed an ignorance of the ultimatum, nevertheless they had assisted brilliant men to attend. The unknown had managed to infuse into his short speeches some quality which attracted many intellectuals.

“I had left myself a narrow margin, for, within an hour of my arrival our craft was sighted. At a great height the watchers saw a silver cylinder hurling itself towards us. At that moment, I believe, some began to realize the possibility of a menace. All eyes gazed up.

“Only random guesses as to its size could be made at such a distance, but as it drew nearer we judged it to be about equal to one of our larger airships. Built of silvery metal, it tapered at each end. Along the sides there ran rows of windows. Nothing more was to be seen, it gave no clue to the manner of its propulsion.

“Suddenly from all the loudspeakers both in the control tower and around the ground snapped the one word:

“‘Landing.’

“The ground crew used for the lighter-than-air machines hurriedly assembled and then found that there was nothing for them to do. Down and down the great cylinder dropped to land as lightly as a leaf.

“‘The committee will come aboard,’ said the voice we were beginning to know so well.

“Simultaneously sections of the hull opened outwards, the hinges at the bottom so that the doors themselves formed ramps.

“For a moment we looked at one another in hesitation, then we stepped forward as though by common consent. There was no one to welcome us on board. Into a great saloon—seemingly the full length of the ship—we flocked. With a click the doors closed and we were off to heaven knew where. Thousands of feet above the ordinary traffic levels we turned and sped to the south.

“After the first surprise of departure had worn off, we found our tongues again. It seemed as though most of us found them at the same moment.

“‘I do not like this affair, not at all, no,’ said a little Frenchman whom I recognized as M. Duvain of the French Air Roads.

“‘It is all too mysterious. Are we children that they make to us the effect of the stage thrill? It is a bad begin, such nonsense, for the serious investigation, no?’

“‘Damn ridiculous, the whole thing,’ replied Sir Henry Deen, standing near. ‘Silly scare by some jokers in my opinion. However, they’re in for it now, we’ll soon show ’em what’s what.’

“The Frenchman nodded his agreement.

“‘And you, m’sieur,’ he said turning to me. ‘Do you not think it is as an insult to treat a so distinguished party as a flock of the sheep? No reception, no speeches.’

“‘If it is a practical joke,’ I suggested, ‘you don’t want to be made more of a fool, do you?’

“‘Then you, too, think that it may be a practical joke?’ asked Sir Henry.

“I informed him that I had come to observe and to draw conclusions from those observations. I had no intention of muddling myself by prejudice nor of building theories without foundation. Not a polite answer, but the pair irritated me.

“‘The desert,’ shouted someone. I turned back to the window and saw that we were heading over miles of rolling sands towards the heart of the Sahara.

“Three quarters of an hour later, the familiar voice gave its laconic ‘Landing’.

“Below us lay a building. It was shorter than the craft we were in, some three hundred feet by one hundred and fifty and rising about sixty. The whole place was entirely constructed of the silvery metal.

“The ship settled without a jar. The doors fell open and we walked out to find ourselves face to face with a seamless, shining wall in which one patch of darkness framed a waiting figure.

“Exclamations of surprise rose from the party. There can hardly have been one of us who did not realize in that moment that we now faced a living replica of those two bodies which had puzzled the medical world. The same massive neck supported the same front-heavy head from which two intelligent eyes examined us. For clothing he wore nothing but a brown, shapeless tunic and a pair of soft boots. As we stared, a voice commanded us to follow, but the dwarf’s lips showed no movement.

“We passed into a large hall lit by some sourceless diffused radiance. In rows of chairs we seated ourselves as if for a lecture. The five-foot figure took a chair in front of us. It was curious that in facing the man I felt none of the distaste one has for an abnormality. It became forgotten that by our standards he was stunted, malformed, hairless, toothless and deaf. He was of another race—no more abnormal than a pigmy or a Tibetan. He addressed us, but still no movement broke his lips.

“‘People of the Twenty-Second Century,’ he formally began, ‘you are evidently less advanced than we had anticipated. So far, it would appear that you do not accept our offer of transportation, but neither do you reject it—you completely fail to understand it. You must therefore be treated like children to some simple demonstrations of our power. First, you shall see the world we offer.’

“Upon the wall behind him a scene ‘faded in’. Not like a picture, but rather as if we gazed at a real if fantastic countryside. A level plain stretched away to the distant mountains. In the foreground stood buildings; a city of gleaming metal, each structure beautiful in line and proportion, but none rising higher than two or three floors.

“‘The town of Cyp,’ said the voice. ‘It stands on the bottom of the old Mediterranean Sea close by Mount Cyprus. You will notice that it is low built. This is necessary as the air at such high altitudes is rarefied. On the Atlantic or Pacific beds’—here the scene changed—‘the towns are loftier since the atmosphere remains dense at such depths. Though the oceans have dried, it is no barren world. The great deeps still contain enough water and will do so for some hundreds of years. After that is gone, there are the machines.’

“A gloomy looking tarn flashed before us. Deep in its darkness was a reflected glimmer of the red ball of fire above.

“‘The sun is getting old,’ said the voice. ‘Slowly he is dying as he must, but there is a long time yet before his end.’

A Confusion of Time

“View began to chase view rapidly across the screen. The voice went on:

“‘All this is what we offer in exchange for your world. Buildings which will still be standing proudly when the Earth has become cosmic rubbish as the moon. Machines to make food, supplement air, create warmth and produce water, all are waiting for you. Machines which are proof against wear; proof against breakdown; wheels which will go on turning when the untenanted world snuffs out the last smouldering fragment of her fiery life.

“‘Though much of it will defy your minds, you will have all the accumulation of wisdom and invention that the wit of man has produced since he began—all save one thing—the secret of time, that is our safeguard which even we must use with care lest order become chaos.’

“‘Still the scenes flashed and faded before us. Mighty machines, beautiful cities, intricate flowers, limitless plains, vast halls, huge flying cylinders, a panorama of a world shown to us half a million years before it should exist.

“‘Most of us were dazed, but we did not doubt. Conviction that this was the truth came not entirely from the voice, nor yet entirely from the pictures, but from some power which seemed to accompany both. In the presence of the dwarf the fantastic ceased to be fantastic and any thought of bluff had long been banished. The case was stated with plain force. He had made us feel that the plan was as feasible as for two nations to change territories—as feasible and as inconceivable.

“‘That our population could, if it chose, move half a million years, we had no doubt; But that it would not so choose, we were certain. If the invaders thought that they had but to say the word and we would relinquish our healthy middle-aged world for one tottering on the brink of senility, they could not know much of our stubbornness.

“‘The tall Professor Toone of Harvard rose from his seat.

“‘On behalf of all of us, I should like to know the reason for this plan,’ he said. ‘You appear to offer us much—what do you gain that we lose?’

“‘You lose,’ came the reply, ‘nothing but familiar surroundings—we offer better surroundings.’

“‘But,’ objected someone, ‘what about our children? Several generations are safe, you say, but you condemn the rest to extinction?’

“‘Some, but not all. You ensure for the others an infinite future (if you understand such a term)—that is the object of the plan.’

“‘But—’

“‘Do you not yet realize that we are your descendants—the descendants of your children? We are the race your stock has bred and though we have climbed far, the end is too near for us. Were we to stay in our age we should die when the earth died. Instead we shall take the more youthful earth, for our need is the greater. From it we shall climb to infinity as life climbed from the sea to the land. Thus will we, your children, approach the closer to our destiny. It was not meant that life should cease with the earth—evolution was delayed. Do you understand?’

“‘Hanged if I do,’ murmured the man next to me. ‘What’s he getting at? Is it religion?’

“I did not answer him. I was trying to understand. The speech had been far longer than the repetition I have given you. Much of it I still cannot grasp. The vista was too big, the muddle of time too involved, but I thought I had the main drift. The next speaker almost voiced one of the questions which troubled me though his manner was facetious. He was an Englishman whose voice sounded tired as he asked:

“‘Am I to understand that though we are at present your ancestors, you are shortly likely to become your own ancestors?’

“‘Yes,’ said the voice, ‘and no.’

“The Englishman looked helpless round.

“‘I give it up,’ he announced in tones even more tired than before.

“‘You cannot understand that until you know the nature of time,’ was the reply. ‘While you continue to imagine time in terms of progression, you put more stumbling blocks before you than did ever the flat-earth theorists.’

“Professor Toone arose again to put a question. I cannot remember what it was for at that point the discussion started to leave me behind. Voices went on wriggling into an abstruseness beyond my mental grasp. It was a kind of knock out contest—the survival of the mentally fittest. When Sir Henry Deen rose to his feet a long time later there can only have been two or three of the company who retained any pretensions to following the slender thread of explanation. He broke the spell.

“‘Can we be shown something of your works, something concrete upon which we can report? So far we have done nothing which will profit either you or those who sent us. The public we represent will scarcely be impressed by hearing merely of a philosophical discussion which most of us have failed to follow. Any intimation we could give them of the forms of armament upon which you rely to carry out this plan would be vastly more impressive than an unlimited amount of discussion.’

“‘You shall look around our building, though there is little to see. In the matter of armament, we must disappoint you.’

“Sir Henry grunted.

“‘Intending to keep that secret, eh? Very sensible too, from your point of view, but if you could give a demonstration of your weapons’ power. . . .’

“‘You mistake us,’ the voice reproved. ‘We cannot show armament because we have none.’

“‘Ha. Then the whole thing is a piece of humbug—a bluff. I had suspected so from the beginning. You think that by tricks. . . .’

“‘Again you do not understand. Why should we have any need of those guns and shells which are, after all, merely the extension of the stone-age man’s sling and throwing flint? Intellect has no use for such uncertain toys—shells which may kill one man or one hundred men. We wish to kill no one.’

“Sir Henry snorted again to show his contempt for such an attitude (or perhaps to be on the safe side in the event of this proving itself an extension of the bluff).

“There was a pause during which several more dwarfs entered and approached our instructor in a manner which revealed them as inferiors. It was explained that we should be shown round the building in parties.

“‘It’s a queer thing,’ said my neighbour as we rose, ‘but did you notice that the old boy never opened his mouth all the while he talked to us—nor has this one.’ He nodded towards the back of our guide.

“‘Also, we know they can’t hear, yet they understand everything we say. Rum, I call it, just you watch this fellow now.’

“The dwarf strode straight at the metal wall and a space appeared before him.

“‘Nothing queer about that,’ I said. ‘I know plenty of doors at home which open when you tread on the mat.’

“‘No, it’s not that. You watch next time. That bit of wall neither swung back nor slid—it just disappeared. Same thing happened when we first came in.’

CHAPTER IV

A Battle of Wills

“The guide was frankly contemptuous. His was the manner of a major-domo taking the lap-dog for a walk. He threw out occasional curt references to the objects we passed. These machines were water producers, those, food makers. One and all were equally mysterious to most of us. We trailed blankly along gaping as vacantly as any savage at his first radio. Perhaps the dwarf was justified in his contempt, for these machines, unlike the ‘travellers’, did not use Lestrangle batteries and the source of power was to us as obscure as the methods of operation were unintelligible.

“At length we reached a large hall which at first glance seemed to be a jumble of birdcages.

“‘Travelling machines,’ came abruptly from the guide.

“We approached them and he became so informative over what we guessed to be a recent invention that contempt was momentarily forgotten. One of the two rows of dials, he explained, determined the amount of time to be traveled. It contained seven indicators ranging from an hour to ten thousand years. The lower row regulated the position.

“A certain amount of interaction between the two rows was necessary. For one thing, it prevented the machine from maintaining its position in space without reference to the motion of the earth. Within the limits set by this interaction, position could be calculated almost to a foot.

“‘What’s that for?’ asked one of the party reaching towards a lever. As he lifted his hand, the dwarf saw him and he reeled back, crashing to the floor. Afterwards, he told us that it had felt like a tremendous blow between the eyes.

“‘What did I tell you?’ said my neighbour excitedly. ‘Force of mind, that’s what these people use; that’s why their hands are vestigial. Pure will power.’

“The dwarf seemed to hear him for he looked towards us.

“‘I am surprised,’ he sneered, ‘that you even know of such a thing as will power. I judged by your reflexes that you had only instincts.’

“‘You are insulting,’ said a voice behind me.

“‘There are thirty of you,’ he continued to sneer. ‘Let us see if your combined wills assist you against mine.’

“We stared around us in amazement. The walls had gone, the machines, too, everything. There was nothing to be seen in any direction save unbroken desert.

“‘Playin’ Aladdin’s lamp tricks,’ growled my neighbour, bending down to grasp a handful of sand.

“The dwarf almost smiled at our confusion.

“‘You know perfectly well where you are,’ he said. ‘But all you can see or feel is the open desert. That’s how much all your wills are worth against mine. Try now to see whether you can bring the walls round you again.’

“I suspect that it was the mind of that remarkable man, Professor Toone, which tipped the scales in our favour.

“For a moment we felt the heat still beating up from the sand, then the shadowy outlines of the hall began to reform. Slowly from mistiness they grew more substantial, for a few seconds

they began to fade again, then, in a flash, we were back indoors. The dwarf lay on the floor before us, panting.

“‘Lord,’ said someone, ‘played out like he’s run ten miles—anyway, we’ve got some wills between us.’

“When I had been home three days I began to understand Professor Toone’s decision that the committee should meet and discuss in Paris before scattering to report.

“He made the suggestion during the flight back to Le Bourget. The alacrity of acceptance was such as to make one suspect that the delegates were so uncertain of what their reports should contain that they were eager for a few pointers. Toone by common consent opened the proceedings.

“‘Gentlemen,’ he began, ‘each of us will be called upon in a few days to give his comments upon the results of our investigation.

“‘The questions we shall be asked will appear ridiculous in the light of our experience, but, they will not seem so ridiculous to us as will our answers to our governments. They will say: ‘What form of power supported and propelled the flyer you traveled in?’ We shall reply that we have no idea. They will be irritated.

“‘They will ask: ‘How many of these dwarfs are there?’ We shall have to reply that we saw at most about fifty. They will smile. This will be followed up with: ‘What kind of armament?’—We saw none and have reason to believe that they possess none. ‘How many flyers?’—We saw only one. ‘What is their silvery metal?’—We do not know.

“‘So it will go on until with their amusement and their contempt we shall be in danger of becoming a laughing stock. If that is allowed to occur, we have no hope of any warning we may give being regarded as anything but further embroidery to a great joke.

“‘Seldom, gentlemen, can any committee of investigation have produced less concrete results. Had we found great guns, strange rays, new gases, they would have listened to us—instead, we have found a menace of pure force beside which such weapons would be childish.

“‘We have found this, I say, but because we cannot comprehend it, we cannot describe it. The grand total of our observation is one strange ship, one equally strange building, a few dwarfs, a number of machines reputed to be time travellers, other unknown machinery and what our critics will call a cinematograph show—that is all we saw: we cannot tell them what we *felt*.

“‘This, then, is the problem confronting us: How can we convey to a skeptical world the sensation we received of potential force?

“‘The peoples must know of that seething mental battery, that surging power of will beside which we are scarcely reasoning creatures—they must know, and they must believe. The burden of their conviction lies upon us.’

Fruitless Efforts

“The conference had continued for two days. Two wasted days they seemed to me. Speeches drifted more and more from the main issue and steadily tended to confine themselves to suggestions for combating the menace. Again and again Professor Toone dragged the members back from their talk of tactics by his insistence that the governments must first be convinced of the need for tactics. No solution could be suggested short of the governments themselves experiencing our sensations.

“Back home, I was sitting in a palatial office trying to convince a bored official who felt that his time was being wasted.

“I was growing irritated.

“‘Can’t you think,’ I demanded, ‘in any terms but guns and gases?’

“‘They might have ignition rays,’ he assented.

“I groaned.

“‘Of course they might have, but can’t you see what I’m getting at? They simply haven’t been developing along those physical lines.’

“‘They seem to have developed physically a great deal if your description is accurate.’

“‘Their present form was probably reached tens of thousands of years ago—to them, that is. It’s their minds which have progressed since then—if only you could meet them, you’d begin to feel that terrifying force. Man alive, it was as much as thirty of us, most of them brilliant men, could do to overthrow the mental suggestion of one of their inferior servants.’

“The official smiled.

“‘And their flyer. Do you realize that there was no one save the committee on board—no pilot, no crew? The whole blasted thing was worked by a telepathic control of some kind.’

“‘We also have radio control,’ he reminded me gently.

“I began to admit to myself what I had known from the first—that it was hopeless. But still I hammered on.

“‘You don’t realize what they are working for. We speculate mildly about the future of mind—they *know* its future. They are out for discarnate intelligence. They know that, given time, they can achieve it.’

“‘Nonsense, there can’t be a mind without a brain.’

“‘Why not? The brain is only the organ of the mind, a sort of central control for the other organs. Already they can project their minds, but they still have to use the body for a base for operations.’

“‘You seriously expect me to believe that?’

“‘There’s proof of it. Did you hear the voice which issued their ultimatum?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘And it came from the loudspeaker?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Then perhaps it will surprise you to know that in London they took a record of one of the messages. When they put it on the machine, not a sound was to be heard—the thing was blank. Those messages never came out of the loudspeaker, but the dwarfs, for some reason of their own, made you think—made us all think that they did.’

“In the evening when I met Mary, I was tired and discouraged. Nothing I had been able to say had even dented that wall of mechanical materialism. My most trenchant arguments had either bounced off or missed fire. The final blow had been when, in the middle of my efforts to convey my impressions of mental strength, he had asked with the air of one who draws the conversation back to realities, whether I thought that they might have tanks hidden in the neighbourhood.

“‘It isn’t,’ I said to Mary, ‘for or against acceptance of the dwarfs’ terms,—as for that, I only know that I, personally, am going to no dying world,—my job was to try to make the fools realize that they really were terms. For two and a half hours I tried to tell that smug

know-all that an over-whelming danger threatens him, the nation, and the whole world—I made just as much impression as I would throwing snowballs at a pyramid.’

“Mary gazed at me intently.

“‘It’s very difficult to grasp,’ she said. ‘Even yet I don’t really understand what this great danger is if they haven’t got any weapons.’

“‘That’s the devil of it. They may even have some weapons in the way you mean—though I don’t think so,—but that is nothing to do with their strength. Oh, if I could only convey that sensation which scared us all, something might be possible, but I’m utterly incompetent. If you asked a horse to explain the activities of men, he’d be no more at sea than I am over this business.’

“‘But, dear, if there are so few of them, why should they want the whole world? Surely they could make a sort of colony somewhere?’

“‘I don’t know, but I think this is a sort of advance guard—supervisors of emigration and immigration; we don’t even know how many of them there are. Probably the world couldn’t support both populations at once so that the only way is a complete change over. Half the worry about this affair is that we know nothing of the details—we’re just expected to do as we’re told.’

“Mary bent towards me and tried to smooth out the furrows of anxiety.

“‘Darling,’ she said firmly, ‘you must stop worrying about it. Put it all away for the present.’

“She took my arm and we strolled out to the terrace. A soft breeze pressed the trees so that they swayed gently. Slips of torn cloud were gliding across the moon. Far, far away we could see the misty outline of the hills.

“‘It’s all so beautiful,’ she whispered, her eyes on the dim distance. ‘I think it makes me afraid.’

“My arm went round her.

“‘Our lovely world,’ said my voice.

“‘But how long ours?’ asked my mind.

CHAPTER V

A World at Bay

“A month later, hell was loose. Our civilization was broken up. The herd instinct which built it had given way. All the climbing from individuals to groups, from groups to clans, from clans to nations meant nothing to men who roamed the dead cities as their ancestors had prowled the jungles. The veneer was off. All our vaunted progress had taken us no higher than the first rung of the ladder; that rung broke and we were back where we started.

“The dwarfs had stolen our power, they had hit us literally where we lived. All the Lestrage batteries went dead and with them our world stopped. Save in the great tide-stations which still made power for the useless batteries, not a wheel could turn. It was chaos.

“Planes fluttered from the skies, ships wallowed in the seas, airships floated away on the winds, factories were silent, elevators dropped, trains were checked, ovens cooled, radios died, cars were pulled up and every light failed.

“It was nine o’clock at night when the great stoppage came and it was the darkness which caused the panic. Across the world in the sunlight they cannot have had that catastrophic madness in which crowds rushed, milled and swirled without reason, without object.

“How it was done nobody knew. Perhaps it was a ray against which they shielded their travellers. Perhaps—but what is the use of speculating on the possibilities of such minds?

“I was in the city, the roar of the city’s life rose through my open windows. One moment, busy hubbub and bright lights, the next, silence and darkness. I stumbled across the room and looked out into a pitchy gulf which might have led to the bowels of the earth, so quiet—a quiet which seemed to wait—a quiet during which men died. During which cages dropped down mines, divers got no more air, loads fell from cranes, acrobats missed trapezes, surgeons cut too deep.

“From below there came a scream and as if at that signal a murmur rose. The voice of the crowd growing louder and louder, wilder and wilder. My eyes could see nothing, but my mind saw devilish things happening in that street. Bodies crushing at the walls, ribs cracking under pressure, eyes bursting from their sockets, lungs laboring for air, corpses trampled under foot and corpses unable to fall, while above it all rose now the senseless roar of that wild beast, the mob, destroying itself.

“I moved back and sought the telephone only to find it as dead as the lights. It was not until then that the full meaning of the crisis came to me. It had seemed an unusual failure of current only, now I realized in a flash what it meant and knew it for the dwarfs’ masterstroke.

“They had been roused from their patience at last. Of the several messages sent out on their world-wide system since our useless investigation, I had heard only one. It was almost pleading in tone.

“‘Our destinies must be worked out, nothing shall stop that. We wish you no harm—we are not butchers—but you are leaving us no alternative.’

“The voice went on to appoint ‘stations’ for transportation. In the northern plains of Italy; North and South France! near Johannesburg, South Africa; Salisbury Plain in England; in Florida, California and Illinois for the United States and so on to the number of sixty or more.

“‘I wonder,’ said one of my companions, ‘why they always make these announcements in English?’

“Another listener, a blond young man looked at us.

“‘You will excuse?’ he said. ‘But I haf chust heard them perfect German use, nod English.’

“I attempted to explain that the messages were conveyed directly to their minds without the use of sound. That they merely *thought* they heard. After this, each obviously considered me more of a fool than he thought the other.

“On the set days crowds flocked to the starting places. Except for a few cranks such as daily expect the end of the world, nobody save the cameramen went from any motive than idle curiosity. A holiday spirit was abroad. There was the prospect of a free show of some sort and the likelihood of a good laugh at the dwarfs’ expense. The cameramen were the only survivors.

“All the world saw the films of what occurred. It was announced that the cinematographers had been allowed to return in order that we might see the simplicity with which transportation was effected and thereby lose any nervousness restraining us. The particular version I witnessed was taken at one of the American stations and was, I was told, typical of all.

“Around a structure resembling an enormously enlarged ‘time traveller’ stood a cordon of police and guards. The space enclosed was about two hundred yards square. Reliable witnesses stated that a couple of hours earlier there had been no sign of the glittering framework with the result that among the majority—still incredulous of the idea of time traveling—there was a tendency to regard it as a magical piece of construction work rather than accept the fact that it had just made the journey across five hundred thousand years.

“Beyond the cordon the sightseers parked their cars and got out to examine the machine with awe. Whatever they had expected in their inmost minds, it was not this huge silver cage; they were impressed in spite of themselves.

“The murmur of the crowd as we heard it through the speakers seemed to betray a nervous tension, but curiosity backed by a sensation of safety in their numbers kept them waiting for the show to begin.

“Without warning, parts of the enclosure on all four sides fell apart making entrances.

“A gasp of surprise went up from the house as we saw that the guards whose duty it was to keep the public clear, had stood aside from the gaps. Some of them even motioned the crowd forward.

“Not a sound now came from the speakers. As though in a dream the sightseers trailed slowly into the enclosure. Suggestion? Hypnotism? Heaven knows, but in they flocked solemn faced, vacant-eyed, old men, young men, women and girls alike, even the dogs joined the procession. It was as though some pied piper led the way. Then, when the last had entered, the police and the guards followed.

“In the darkness of the theatre, Mary gripped my arm.

“‘Now I begin to understand what you mean by their ‘power’,’ she whispered.

“As the last guard entered, the entrances snapped shut. Simultaneously a few yards from the great ‘transporter’ a dwarf appeared on a one man ‘traveller’.

“Mary grew tense and another gasp rustled through the audience—it was the first time any of them had looked upon one of those men of the far future. He jumped from his machine and ran towards the enclosed crowd whose apathetic eyes appeared not to notice him.

“In a corner of the transporter we saw for the first time that a small cabin was divided off from the main bulk. We saw him enter it, we saw him turn the dials, we saw his hand upon the lever and—nothing. Nothing before us but the empty plain and a little one man traveller.

“The picture continued; there was more to come. For five minutes the audience sat in silence or whispered speculation. Then, as suddenly as it had gone, the machine was back again, but save for the dwarf in his cabin, it was empty. . . .

A World Aroused

“The world was roused at last. No type was heavy enough for the newspapers, no terms weighty enough for the radio announcers. The casualties (as they were determined to call them) at the sixty-odd stations came well on towards the 200,000 mark. The old cry went up—something ought to be done. The prestige of governments was at stake. The vermin must be wiped out.

“The members of the investigation committee were hastily summoned and this time received a better though no more profitable hearing. A stern-faced official faced me across a broad desk. His manner suspected me of complicity, his method savoured of third degree.

“‘What we want to know first is, where’s this base of theirs?’

“‘I’ve told you as near as I can. All I know is that we seemed to go south-south-east from the Algerian coast, as far as I could tell by the sun. We went that way for about three hours so if you know the speed of the ship, it ought to give you a rough idea of the district.’

“‘You must’ve seen some landmarks, at the height you were.’

“‘Precious lot of landmarks in that desert—and as we didn’t know beforehand where we were likely to be going, nobody happened to have a pocket map of the Sahara on him.’

“‘No need to get fresh. We’ve got to get a line on this business somehow, and it’ll be better for you if you help us all you know how.’

“‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’ll tell you this. If you ever find that base, you’ll have to thank luck—not cross-questioning.’

“‘What’re you gettin’ at?’

“‘Just this. Not one of us has any idea where this place is, or what makes it different from any other place that has a lot of sand, but even if you get there it’s pretty good odds against you seeing the building. Do you seriously think that a gang who hypnotize a crowd of three or four thousand men and women into an overgrown birdcage can’t stop a few pilots from seeing them?’

“The man snorted.

“‘When one of our pilots knows where they are—,’ he began.

“‘—then there’ll be one less pilot in the force,’ I finished for him.

“Of course they got none of the information they wanted from us—we hadn’t it. Even then I had begun to realize that if we knew a whole lot we’d still be as helpless as sheep against men.

“Italian, French, English and German scoured the desert, failed to find a trace and brought home their bombs. A report of the position of the base reached Tripoli. Through hurry, the Italian officers in charge omitted to verify the information. Their rocket shells destroyed a French desert fort. Feeling already ran high against France who was thought in some circles to be in league with the dwarfs. Undoubtedly they were on French territory. A French pilot made

matters no better by announcing his destruction of the dwarfs' cylindrical flyer at approximately the same moment that the Germans reported that one of their airships had been bombed by a French plane. Notes began to pass between countries and the threat of war added fuel to the excitement.

"It was then that someone at the Suez English base made an inventory with the startling result that five days of profitless searching showed twelve English airships and nearly a hundred planes unaccounted for.

"The French, German, Italian and Egyptian authorities investigated and revealed a similar state of affairs in their own air forces. The fate of all those craft remained a mystery. Solo searching over, the desert became less popular with the result that, instead of single machines disappearing, whole flights vanished together.

"It fell to an Italian pilot to do the world the worst possible service with the best possible intentions.

"He had become separated from his unit and was heading for home in accordance with the regulations that single planes must not be risked, when he saw almost below him the shining building for which all the world was searching. Whether his mind was not susceptible to their control (as was found to be the case with a few) or whether they were off their guard, never was known and did not really matter. What did matter was that his five great bombs flashed down together.

"It must have been a rude shock to that pilot when, during his congratulations and celebrations, the voice spoke again.

" 'People of the Twenty-Second Century,' it began with usual formality, 'we appealed to you first as reasoning creatures. You failed to reason. You even failed to understand that if we are not successful, man will count for nothing—he will have lived in vain. Then we treated you as children who must be led—you spoke of it as a tragedy. You described as 'casualties' men and women who are now living in the future, not one cell's life the worse for the journey.

" 'Now you have taught us to know you for savages. Your ridiculous bombs did no harm to our building, but you killed thirty of our men who were outside. Those thirty were worth a thousand of you and you killed them by an action no more reasoned than that of a frightened brute. We shall not kill you in revenge—the art of living is not killing, but we warn you that those who remain here three weeks from now will start to kill one another. For the rest the transporters will be at their stations. Make good use of them.'

"Hundreds of thousands laughed.

" 'We've killed some of 'em—we'll beat the lot,' was their attitude.

"But other thousands heeded the warning, surging in crowds to the machines.

"Mary and I were of neither party. I suppose it was sentiment which held us. The road to safety was plain, for the dwarfs never lied, yet the call of familiar things was too strong. We were standing by the world we loved till the last. Going down with our civilization.

CHAPTER VI

Nearing the End

“All governments published futile edicts forbidding approach to the transporters. Planes were headed off, trains stopped, roads blocked, but still the crowds swept forward on foot. Infantry and tanks sent to turn the stream, joined it. The authorities reached their wits’ end.

“The English sent rocket shells against the Salisbury Plain station. Hundreds of their own people died. The transporter was scarcely scratched.

“In California two men finding themselves immune from the dwarfs’ influence, attempted to steal a small time traveller—they were never seen again. Thereafter the dwarfs arrived in pairs, one to work the transporter while the other guarded their travellers.

“For the full three weeks the huge machines made their two or three journeys a day, but the hundreds of thousands they carried were like a few spoonfuls from a full bucket.

“And now, standing in my dark room, I knew that the end had come. Men and women had started to fight insanely in frenzy of fear. Soon they would become hungry. They would prowl like famished beasts, ready to eat even each other. The dwarfs had thrust our ultimatum upon us. It would not be long now before the multitudes were besieging the only means of escape from a maddened world—the transporters.

“In my mind a plan was growing, a slender chance. First I must get out of this crazy city and find Mary.

“Together we lay in a clump of low bushes. Not far from our hiding place, a line of haggard men and women was struggling towards a transporter.

“‘The evacuation of a world,’ I heard Mary murmur.

“Some dragged barrows of possessions, some could barely drag themselves. There was no need now for suggestion to impel the crowds. They were striving their utmost towards those feared or despised machines which had become glittering symbols of rescue. Many staggered from fatigue to fall in their tracks.

“‘If the dwarfs use suggestion, to help on the fallen ones—count,’ I said. ‘They won’t need much power and if you keep your mind full it can’t touch you. Fill it up with figures. Multiply and multiply so that there’s room for nothing else. It’s our only safeguard.’

“‘Luckily there was no test of our concentration. Friends pulled the stragglers up and urged them along the last lap of the journey. At last the transporter was filled. The entrances clicked together. Those who were shut out retired to throw themselves on the ground. They would have to wait for the next load.

“‘Get ready,’ I whispered to Mary as I drew a rocket pistol from my pocket.

“The two small time travellers appeared. One dwarf ran to the transporter; the other sat on guard in his saddle. I reckoned that the big machine would be away in about twenty minutes since it would take that long for the weary crowd to file out. As the first dwarf vanished with the transporter, I drew my aim on the second.

“It is a horrible thing to kill a man who is off his guard, but it was necessary. Merely wounded, he might bring his friends about us in a few seconds.

“‘Now,’ I cried. Together we sprang for the travellers as the dead dwarf rolled from his seat.

“‘Get on,’ I ordered, setting the dials. I put Mary’s hand on the lever.

“‘Pull,’ I said. But, instead, she leaned out and pressed her lips to mine.

“‘I love you,’ she said. She said it as though she knew the end had come. Then her hand flew back to the lever. I shouted to stop her, but it was too late—she had gone.”

Jon paused in his tale. We did not interrupt; the grief in his face held us silent.

“Where is she now, I wonder?” he said slowly.

“When she drew back her hands it brushed one of the dials. I had been so careful—worked out the position of each to a hair so that there might be no delay in our coming here. So that we might travel together far away from our world of chaos, far away, too, from the threat of a dying world. One hasty move she made which may have carried her further than the earth’s death or beyond its birth. She is a castaway somewhere in the jumble of time and space.”

“But you?” asked Lestrangle. “How—?”

“Oh, I jumped on the other machine. The crowd had seen us. A hundred or more of them were pelting across the field. It was as though I had the one lifebelt on a sinking ship. They jumped at me. The traveller rocked as they hit it. It was falling as I pulled the lever—it fell in your laboratory.

“But what’s the good of it all? I’m alone. Better to have gone on to the end with the people of my time. Why did I come here when I knew she couldn’t be here? If I’d kept the machine, I might have searched—I’d have searched all time to find her.”

A bell on the wall shrilled suddenly.

“Quick, Wright,” said Lestrangle, jumping from his chair. “The laboratory alarm. Somebody’s spying—take this.”

He handed me a pistol and held one himself. Silently we raced to the laboratory wing and flung back the door.

A familiar silver framework glittered at us. Beside it stood a figure clad like our visitor.

“Mary, by heaven,” said Jon’s voice behind us.

“Jon, Jon,” the figure cried and ran towards us.

A few moments later Jon Lestrangle walked over to the traveller and examined its controls curiously. He looked up with a smile.

“Obviously, Mary,” he said, “some patron saint guides your hand. You might have altered the setting by six hundred years or six thousand, but you *did* only alter it by six hours.”

He turned towards Professor Lestrangle.

“If you please, great-great-great-grandfather,” he said, “I should like another piece of string.”

THE END

[The end of *Worlds to Barter* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon Harris)]