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A HORSE ON ME

an Orig Prem story by

BEN J. MILLER

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Naturally a lot of strange things had happened around the Heptagon, but certainly never before the year 2232 had a giant copper-skinned Indian in feathers and full war regalia ever chased one of Solar News' star reporters through the halls of the Time-Travel Wing. And right at the time when Smullen was in an extra bad humor and had threatened to fire the reporter anyway.

Every time old Pain-in-the-Face made a swipe at him with a flint hatchet, Stieve Andro, panting for breath, would jump

sidewise and the dozens of Solar News employees standing in the halls would laugh at him.

But it wasn't funny. The sweat pouring down Stieve's backbone was real and the anxiety on his face was honest. Stieve was running for his life—and the Indian from 1492 was in a lot better condition than was Stieve in 2232.

"Help! *Help!*" Stieve's voice sounded pitiful, for it was all he could do to gasp the words out. But the technicians, gathered at the door of the Calendar Department, laughed uproariously. Stieve raced down the hall and leaped onto the fast walk and kept running.

The big Indian saw him getting away. He looked at the walk and then he stepped onto it. Immediately the walk yanked his feet from under him and he fell with a thud that shook the entire sixty-second floor of the Heptagon.

Stieve was just rounding the corner when he looked back. He groaned. The helpful technicians from Calendar were assisting the big Indian to his feet. The Indian came after Stieve with giant strides and in just about a minute he was breathing on Stieve's neck again. The hatchet grazed Stieve's right parietal lobe and very nearly clipped off his ear.

Stieve was tired. His feet were hard to lift. He stumbled. The big Indian fell over him. Stieve tried to get back up but couldn't. His muscles were so tired they were half paralyzed.

The big Indian got to his feet. The hatchet poised. He grabbed Stieve's hair in one hand. Stieve closed his eyes and prepared to face death with dignity. The Indian bellowed, "Now you behavum or I scalpum you—but good!"

Stieve gasped. His eyes opened in hopeful incredulity.

"Chief," he said, "that's a horse on me. What do you want?"

"Ugh! I from Guanahani. I from fourteen ninety-two. I was cop at arrival of Columbus. You remember me?"

"Yes," said Stieve with a sinking feeling. Smullen, the head of Time-Travel, would be furious when he heard of this. Smullen had enough to worry about already. It was bad enough to have an Indian that should have been a Minnesota fullback chasing up and down the halls with a hatchet—but what would Smullen say if Stieve got into a legal tangle with the cops of 1492?

"I here on behalf of my daughter."

"Oh," Stieve wilted. "I didn't promise to marry your daughter, mister," he said earnestly.

"Oh, no. We not trying to find her a husband. But Orig Prem promisum her a screen test. Where is screen test? On second thought, where is Orig Prem?"

"On third thought, let me up," said Stieve, beginning to see light, "and we'll figure this out." He sat up and looked around. He was surprised there wasn't a crowd there.

Then he saw why. He almost fainted when he saw they were just outside of Smullen's office.

"If we don't get away from here before Smullen catches us there'll be plenty of trouble." He began to push himself up. The Indian gave ground slowly. But Stieve was a lot more

afraid of Smullen than he was of the Indian. He pushed the Indian back and got to his feet.

"Come on," he ordered. "We'll have a cup of coffee and talk this thing over."

"Now, then," he said while he stirred his coffee, "when did this promise take place? You didn't say anything about it before. And say!" He was struck by a sudden thought. "How did you get into twenty-two thirty-two anyway?"

"Oh, that easy." The big Indian took four lumps of sugar. "This much easier than chewing sugar-cane," he said. "I jumpum in time-travel tube while your assistant, Orig Prem, lecturing to ladies' aid on Hollywood."

"Hey! When was this? Today, you mean?"

"As of fourteen ninety-two," the big Indian said gravely. "Or, rather, it fourteen ninety-three in Guanahani now."

"So that's the deal." Stieve nodded knowingly. "Prem, the robot, is back there making some extra change. How much is he charging the ladies to tell them about the movies?"

"Six bits a head. Me think that very high for fourteen ninety-two, but ladies' aid willing to pay anything to hear more about Hollywood."

"How many in the aid?" asked Stieve.

"Twenty-two."

"So," Stieve said between gritted teeth, "Prem, the little organizer, is at work giving the ladies their money's worth. Will I ever raise cain with Medlock for sending Prem through without an authorization! Now look, Chief."

The big Indian drew himself up straight. "Me listen," he said gutturally.

"You go back to fourteen ninety-three and send Orig Prem home. Tell him I said so. And I'll promise you a nineteen thirty screen test for your daughter if I have to wring it out of Prem's steel hide."

"Hokay, chief. I mean, hokay, paleface. Pardon me, I chief—you paleface."

"That's a deal. Now to get you home. You can't go today. That's against the no-doubling rule." Stieve groaned. "I might as well hide you in my suite until tomorrow. Medlock will never let us through twice in one day. You can sleep on the divan in my private office tonight. I suppose Prem will sleep on the beach at Guanahani. I hope," he added viciously, "he gets sand in his joints."

For the first time in his seven years at Solar News, Stieve was up the next morning before a lot of people got to work. Such was one of the irksome developments of an entertainment policy of near-galactic dimensions which, via time machines and abetted by such robots as Orig Prem, brought happy audio-video listeners of the twenty-third century not merely re-enactments of famous moments in history but the famous moments themselves.

The results, thought Stieve, could at times be annoying, especially when they cut in on his sleep. However, a promise was a promise and he had the big Indian made up in his feathers and took him around to Transition and was standing there when they opened the door at seven.

Medlock, in charge of time-traffic, didn't like it particularly, but Stieve said, "I'm sure you don't want Smullen to know how you've been sneaking back to five hundred A.D. to watch the Mayas build their pyramids."

Medlock glared at him.

"Nor would Smullen, in his present mood, be pleased to know that you are in the habit of leaving your dope-headed android in charge of traffic."

Medlock swallowed. "That's just because you're a robot man," he argued.

"Yes, I'm old fashioned. But I want to say that I have no intention of telling Smullen anything." He made a gesture with his hands flat and parallel with the floor.

"Okay. Tell old Pain-in-the-Face to crawl in the capsule," grumbled Medlock. "But it's blackmail."

"Me not Pain-in-the-Face, me Chief Cook-and-Bottle-Washer," the big Indian said proudly. He looked at their wide eyes and added, "That Orig Prem's title for me. He say that a very fine old tradition of white man."

Stieve bit his tongue to keep a straight face. The chief still had his hatchet. "Look, now, Chief, just get in the capsule, will you, and send Orig Prem back here as soon as possible. If you don't, he'll have the whole island of Guanahani disorganized."

"Prem," said Medlock, "is the world's best organizer."

Stieve ignored the jab. "Pull the switch, Medlock, before things get out of control."

Medlock pulled it. There was a blur and the time-capsule disappeared. Stieve sighed with relief. "Now, then —"

The omnical bells sounded. Stieve turned. "Mr. Andro," said the voice, "see Mr. Smullen in his office right away, please."

Stieve looked back. The capsule was still gone. "Thank goodness," he said fervently. "Smullen can't prove anything now."

"No," said Medlock dryly, "there weren't over eight hundred witnesses to your foot-race yesterday."

Stieve glowered at him, but the omnical kept saying, "Mr. Andro, see Mr. Smullen in his office right away, please. Mr. Andro —"

Stieve unplugged the playback. "Coming," he said glumly.

Stieve could just see Smullen's bald head with the gray fringe around the top. He stood for a moment, quaking, and then he coughed. Smullen dropped his paper.

"Oh, you," he said. Stieve couldn't decide whether it was disgust or relief. But now he could get a clear view of Smullen's face, and what he saw was encouraging. Smullen was worried. The lines around his mouth were deep, and his eyes had brown splotches under them. In spite of himself, Stieve felt sorry for Smullen. After all, Smullen had put up with a lot from him and Orig Prem.

"What's the trouble?" Stieve asked.

"I had a report yesterday from the board. They claim the gross income from the nine planets for the last thirty days

dropped almost a billion—twelve per cent, to be exact. Jupiter pulled out half of their contribution and that hurt."

"What's eating on Jupiter?" asked Stieve.

"They claim we're taking it too easy. We're not giving them anything worth while."

Stieve exploded.

Smullen held up his hand. "It's political pressure, I think. The Outer Planet League is putting on the heat. But that doesn't help us. We've got to do something sensational or significant or we'll all be losing our jobs."

"They can't fire *you*," Stieve said indignantly. "You're the one who applied time-travel to news."

"I'm afraid that doesn't cut any ice. *You're* the man who made the Three Hundred Years Ago Today feature the most popular in the Morning Telepaper too—but don't ever," he said ominously, "get the idea that you are absolutely indispensable to Solar News."

"No, sir," Stieve said hastily.

Smullen sat back, and his face was twisted with a big frown. "The worst of it is, three days ago I persuaded Murphy to take a leave from his Middle Ages Run in Europe to do a special on the sack of Samarkand by Jenghiz Khan in twelve nineteen."

"How did you ever get Murph to leave his soft berth in One Thousand Years Ago Today?"

"It wasn't easy," Smullen admitted glumly. "He had just finished the Crusades and he hollered for a rest, but I

promised him double time and a month's bonus if he would do this feature for us. The trouble is, he has been in Samarkand two months by their time, and we haven't had word from him—and no timecast."

"Was his android with him?"

"Yes."

"That explains it," Stieve said positively. "You put an android back in time like that and they always get things balled up."

Smullen shook his head wearily. "I know you're a robot man, but I have no desire to referee a feud. All I want is a few good features on the ether. Correction—also I want to hear from Murph before his widow—pardon me, his wife—gets in the hands of a shyster lawyer who will sue Solar News for more than Murph could ever possibly be worth as a husband."

Stieve really felt sorry for Smullen. "Well," he said, "I'll tackle anything you have picked out."

Smullen looked at him as if to be sure. Then he pulled out the assignment book. "My idea is to take on a series of events that are important as well as spectacular. If they aren't spectacular, we can liven them up a little—fictionize them, you might say."

"Such as what?" asked Stieve, holding his breath.

"Well—" Smullen opened the book—"such as the invention of the wheel, one of the most important events in the history

of man." He looked questioningly at Stieve.

Stieve's mouth popped open. "That means—"

"I'll tell you what the Probabilities Department gave me. They say about eighteen thousand B.C., just about the time Neolithic man went into Europe and began to cultivate the soil. The boys in Pre-History claim that the wheel should have come into use when man started raising crops."

Stieve felt a little pale. "You mean—you want me to go back before history? We've never done that, Mr. Smullen."

"All the more reason," Smullen said, "why it will go over with a bang now. We could have a whole series, like the invention of the first animal trap, the invention of the screw, the discovery of mathematics. It could be an excellent series—and I really think, Stieve, that you're the man to do them."

Stieve was resigned. "Knowing you, I'm very much inclined to agree that you would think that."

Smullen ignored it. "Fortunately or unfortunately," he went on dryly, "you have no wife to whom your value might suddenly multiply in case of your—er—disappearance. However," he added hastily, "I do not expect you to have any trouble."

"Thanks. When do I start?"

"Well, let's say tomorrow. Give us time for a buildup." Smullen arose. The frown wasn't quite as deep on his face. "Good luck, Stieve. You've made me feel better already. Let's hope this series will help stave off the wolves."

"Yes, sir," said Stieve. "I hope so."

But Stieve didn't feel very happy as he rode the autowalk to Timecasts. He well knew that the first man who had been sent to a prehistoric time had not come back. They hadn't sent anyone since. Safety said it was too dangerous.

Man had been too primitive in 18,000 B.C. Well—he shrugged. If it would save Smullen's neck—anyway, this would be one place where Orig Prem would not be able to stir things the wrong way.

He made an agreement with Timecasts to take the ether at eighty-two o'clock, decimal time. That would be right after dinner in New York.

He got back to his office about thirty-eight o'clock, and as he opened the door to his private office there was a clanking of steel and Orig Prem drew his chrome-plated body up to its full four feet three inches and saluted.

"Good morning, sir," he said cheerfully. "I hope you had a good night's rest, sir."

Stieve glowered at him. "I hope you didn't."

"But, sir—"

"But nothing. You see that turkey feather on the divan?"

Orig's pyrex eyes opened wide. "Yes, sir, but—"

"No turkey left it there, Prem."

Prem's eyes opened wider in what undoubtedly was the built-in expression of innocence. "But, sir—"

"That was old Chief Cook-and-Bottle-Washer, by your own christening."

A slight tinge of pink suffused Orig's steel-plated face.

"You may well blush, Prem. And I shall have more to say to you, a great deal more, about the ladies' aid and much more about Chief C-and-B-W's daughter who was promised a screen test in Hollywood."

Orig's steel head was bowed and his eyes were downcast. "Yes, sir," he said and his metallic tones were filled with guilt.

Stieve stalked across the room to the book-shelves. "Sometimes," he said absently, "I think you forget that we represent the twenty-third century, Prem."

Orig still kept his eyes averted. "Yes, sir," he said humbly.

Stieve pulled out a book. Orig opened one eye and fixed his telescopic vision on the title.

"Are we going back to prehistoric man, sir?" he asked diffidently.

Stieve nodded. "Invention of the wheel. About eighteen thousand B.C."

"Oh fine," said Orig. His head came up straight. "That would be in the late Paleolithic or early Neolithic era."

Stieve stared. "Is that the Stone Age?"

"Yes, sir," Orig said. "In the latter part of the Paleolithic era the Cro-Magnards in what is now southern France were pushed out by the Azilians, who began farming rather than hunting."

"Okay, but don't be so happy about it," Stieve growled. "I'm plenty sore at you, Prem."

Orig's enthusiasm disintegrated abruptly. "Yes, sir."

"Now, while I am figuring out what to do with Chief C-and-B-W's daughter—by the way, what's her name? No doubt you have given her a good one."

Orig licked his vanadium lips. He squirmed. "I call her Madame Du Barry," he said finally.

Stieve studied him and under the scrutiny Orig seemed to shrink. "Some day," Stieve told him, "you'll get yourself chased back into the twenty-third century with your rear side all dented up with buckshot."

"Yes, sir," said Orig penitently and, after a moment of thought, he added, "Sir, I am a most unhappy robot. I fear my conduct has not been exemplary. I have not lived up to my built-in principle—'A helpful robot is a happy robot.' Sir, I am eager to make amends."

"Okay. See Probabilities and get the exact time, then go back about a month before and check up on things. But remember—no organizing."

"But, sir, it may be necessary to organize just slightly," Orig argued. "After all, the wheel is possibly man's most important invention and it probably wasn't done in a day, sir. I shall most likely have to dramatize it slightly to make it good entertainment for your public."

"Okay." Stieve sighed. "But take it easy this time. We certainly won't need a popcorn stand."

"Of course," said Orig, "I may have to teach them a few words of English."

Stieve nodded unwillingly. "Please get started," he said.

"Yes, sir," Orig stood erect. His plates were bright and shining, his head high. "Wish me luck, sir."

"With you going first," Stieve said sourly, "I'm the one who needs luck."

Orig looked crestfallen but he turned and went out bravely, his steel heels striking the composition floor with unusual solidity. But Stieve did not relent—not immediately anyway. He would run up to Traffic later to watch Prem leave.

Right now Stieve had Smullen to worry about. Nobody knew better than Stieve how tight the situation must be for Smullen to send him back to 18,000 B.C. Ordinarily Smullen was most careful with his men.

Stieve's concern was not relieved the next day when he learned that the Legal Department had been served with a demand for one hundred thousand dollars for "uncalled-for negligence in requiring a reporter to take undue risks."

Smullen was really downcast. "A thing like this could well mean the closing of Time-Travel. It's not the amount of money asked for—which of course would be cut about ninety per cent even if Mrs. Murphy should get a judgment, because no reporter is worth a hundred thousand—it's not just that but the fact that the board gets high blood pressure every time it thinks of setting a precedent for damages in time-travel. After all, there's no telling what some screwy jury *might* do."

"All this, of course, would take on a different aspect if Time-Travel should in the meantime do something outstanding," said Stieve.

Smullen nodded. "That's the general idea."

So, at eighty o'clock, Stieve picked up a sheaf of communications from Orig Prem, took them to Medlock and got into the capsule. He gave Medlock a last warning.

"I don't care what else you do but don't turn us over to that android of yours. He's likely to get us shunted out on some time-stream that nobody could ever find again."

"I resent the slur," Medlock said with dignity, "but I will honor your request."

"Thanks." Stieve pulled the lid down. There was a coruscating whirl of lights, the sickish feeling for a moment, and then Stieve braced himself for the free fall. He floated to a stop, then the lid was thrown back and Stieve sat up, blinking his eyes.

He got out cautiously, remembering that this was 18,000 B.C. He was standing on the edge of a long grassy slope. Behind him was a forest. Before him, across the meadow, was a mountainside dotted with cave mouths.

Thin smoke was coming out of one cave. Stieve started toward it. But he stopped short. In front of him stood a giant. The giant wore no shoes. His only clothing was a brown

reindeer hide. His massive chest and shoulders were matted with hair.

Stieve bent far backward to look all the way up to the giant's face. He was a Cro-Magnard all right, tall, thick like an oak tree—and glowering. He had a broad face and a big nose, and he was carrying a heavy war-club that Stieve could not have lifted off the ground.

The giant spoke in a ponderous bass voice: "What party you belong?"

Stieve controlled the impulse to run. "Party? What party?" he asked.

The giant shifted the club and watched Stieve with suspicious black eyes. "You talk too much. You repeat yourself." He picked the words slowly and carefully. "You Democrat or Republican?"

Stieve gasped. He lost his fear of the giant and began to think harsh things about Orig Prem. He'd like to lay hands on his assistant right now while he was in the mood to punish him.

Prem knew better. The Legal Department was constantly issuing warnings against involvement in politics. Now it wasn't enough for Prem that the Cro-Magnards were being succeeded by the Azilians but the little robot had to get busy and organize a whole political system.

But Stieve swallowed his anger and said, "I'm a Fence-Sitter."

The giant's eyes lighted. "Ho," he roared, "a third-party man!" He shifted the club on his shoulder and Stieve gulped.

"I suppose," Stieve said, hastily changing the subject, "that you know Mr. Orig Prem."

The giant dropped his club to the ground and the earth trembled. "I very good friend of Mr. Prem."

"Can you tell me where he is?"

The giant grinned. "Mr. Prem in forest, getting float ready for big timecast."

Stieve had a sinking feeling. "Getting the float ready?"

The giant frowned. "I repeat, you repeat yourself. You make me unhappy."

"Believe me," said Stieve earnestly, "there is nothing I would more dislike than making you unhappy. But about the timecast—when is it to take place?"

"Tonight," said the giant. "Come along. I tell you. I your guide."

Stieve felt like a pygmy following the caveman through the forest. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Davie Horsemeat. That name Mr. Prem gave me. I eat much horsemeat," he said proudly. "That make me a big boy."

"Yes," Stieve said placatingly, "you're a very big boy. Where are we going now?"

"I take you to Mammoth City and introduce you." Davie squinted through the trees at the sun. "You have time to get something to eat, then we go over to Forestville for the timecast. Mr. Prem have a large program arranged."

"No doubt," Stieve said dryly.

They walked out into a clearing filled with stone huts. Steve listened intently to a regular *thump—plink-a-thump—thump—plink-a-thump*.

"This is Thursday afternoon," said Davie. "Our editor, Jackie Mammothtusks, getting off first run of *Cro-Magnon Chronicle*. Mr. Mammothtusks says the press a relic but the damn thing prints."

Stieve sucked in his breath. One thing had always been understood between Prem and him. Prem would not teach any natives to use English swear words.

"Anyhow," went on Davie Horsemeat, "equipment very hard to get these days."

"Equipment always has been hard to get—out of the Smithsonian Museum," Stieve said dryly.

"Mr. Mammothtusks is going to play a leading part in the enactment tonight."

Stieve drew a deep breath. "What time is the timecast?"

"Eight o'clock, soon as Queen of the Wheel returns from good will trip to next mountain."

Stieve groaned. "Queen of the Wheel, eh?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Prem say everything very modern and sophisticated. He say Miss Wheel Queen most beautiful girl in Mammoth City. She my daughter," Davie said proudly.

Stieve looked shrewd. "Did Mr. Prem possibly mention a screen test?"

"I believe he did," Davie said thoughtfully. "He said winner of queen contest always eligible for Hollywood."

Stieve groaned. "If somebody doesn't dull that robot's organizing principle we'll have all the time streams jammed up for ten thousand years." He looked at his watch. "Well, it's a couple of hours yet and no doubt by this time Prem is handling the good will tour. Let's dispose of the eating now."

"Sure. I take you."

A big neon sign said, "Neolithic Cafe. Aged Mammoth Steaks a Specialty." And underneath, in small italic letters, it said, "Endorsed by Orig Prem."

Stieve snorted. "That endorsement doesn't mean a thing. Orig Prem doesn't know anything about food. He can't eat."

"He said it would attract tourists," said Davie doubtfully.

They went inside. "I'll buy your dinner," said Stieve. "It goes on the expense account anyway."

Davie Horsemeat looked genuinely regretful. "Sorry, Mr. Stievandro, I have to get the stage ready for the timecast. I see you later, hey? Just follow the path to Forestville. Only two miles."

"Sure." Stieve sat on a stone bench.

The waitress was almost as big as Davie. She handed Stieve a menu that read, "Barbecued reindeer, bison roast, auroch cutlets, wild horse tenderloin, fried caterpillars."

Those items did not excite Stieve's salivary glands. "How about a nice bowl of potato salad?" he asked. "And toast and coffee."

"Sorry, Mister," the giantess said. "No potato salad today. We don't have potatoes yet. Potatoes still in America. But I fix you nice acorn relish."

"I'll try it," Stieve said, hoping.

The acorn relish wasn't bad but a little difficult to eat without silverware. There was about a peck of it and when Stieve got halfway through he sat back with a big sigh. He wiped his fingers on his handkerchief and looked up to see the waitress at his side.

"How much is it?"

"Forty dollars," she said cheerfully.

Stieve blinked. "I'll sign the check," he said.

"No," she said. "That cash price."

Stieve frowned. "Let's be reasonable. I haven't that much money and you know it. By the way, who set those prices, anyway?"

"Those tourist prices suggested by Mr. Prem. He says tourists feel gyped if they not gyped."

Stieve eyed her speculatively. "What if I can't pay?"

"You pay, all right. My father Davie Horsemeat."

"Ugh." For the first time Stieve was really uncomfortable.

"Look, don't I get a dessert?"

"I bring you nice dish of wild cherries and yewberries." She left.

So did Stieve. He left rather hurriedly. Something told him not to cross Miss Horsemeat—at least not within her reach. He scooted across the small clearing, past the thumping cylinder press in the office of the *Chronicle* and down the trail to Forestville.

This second town was larger and it was now filled with people in a holiday mood. On every corner was a small caveboy selling helium balloons—"The latest scientific toy"—and each one was imprinted with the words "Orig Prem, Licensee."

Stieve grumbled. He worked his way through the crowd toward the center of town, and had just come within sight of a log structure which he recognized as the timecast booth, like a small bandstand in the middle of a street, when he heard yells.

A wagon drawn by four reindeer covered with leaves and flowers came into sight at the other end of the street. On a skin-covered dais in the center of the wagon, under a great papier maché wheel which turned slowly, with each spoke throwing a different color of light, stood Miss Cro-Magnard—or, rather, Miss Horsemeat.

She wasn't as rugged as her sister in the restaurant. She was young and curvy and her complexion was a soft suntan. She should have been Miss Whistlestop.

As Stieve thought of that, he whistled. She turned a dizzying smile upon him.

Then Stieve's eyes narrowed. There was Prem, sitting at Miss Wheel Queen's feet, as smug and cocky as a four-foot three-inch robot could be.

Stieve watched the float go by and then he stared. This float had wheels. But a small sign on the back reassured him — "Pardon us. Wheels not invented yet but used on this wagon by special dispensation of Orig Prem."

Stieve's jaws hardened. Who was Prem anyway to be issuing dispensations like that? He'd have a talk with Prem.

He followed the float. There was much cheering, with hairy giants tossing their clubs into the air indiscriminately, and Stieve watched pretty carefully to avoid being beneath one of those clubs on the way down.

He realized there were some boos mixed with the cheering. Then unexpectedly Orig Prem was at his elbow. "Welcome, sir. I saw you in the crowd." Orig was most cheerful.

"Okay," Stieve said gruffly. "But why did you have to organize political parties for this affair? Don't you know this is an election year in twenty-two thirty-two? Isn't that enough for you?"

Prem looked contrite. "But, sir, I could not arouse any enthusiasm for this timecast until I announced an election for a queen. Then and only then, sir, I gave the two parties names. Innocently, sir. Cross my heart—pardon me, I mean my electrostatic amplifier."

"Listen to those boos. It sounds to me as if you've let your realism go further than mere names."

"Oh," said Prem easily, "everything is under control, sir. Pardon me, here we are at the timecasting stand, sir. I'll help you up."

Stieve began to feel nervous. He wondered if the Democrats, or Azilians, had had a candidate. And if so, how had the Cro-Magnards won the election? Weren't they supposed to be decreasing in numbers now?

Orig was making an announcement into the microphone. Stieve looked around the booth. He recognized the big-boned Cro-Magnards on one side and he assumed the smaller, darker men on the other side were the Azilians.

A great reindeer-skinned caveman stepped to the microphone and, at a nod from Prem, the Cro-Magnard began to speak.

"Ladies, gentlemen. Pardon me, ladies do not have suffrage yet. Gentlemen. We here for great celebration, invention of the wheel. Man's most significant event. Without wheel future generations would not have can-openers, baby-buggies, or steam-rollers. Cro-Magnards very proud to have invented wheel."

He bowed. The Cro-Magnards cheered while the Azilians maintained a stony silence. Stieve began to feel strangely uncomfortable.

Then an Azilian addressed the microphone. "We happy to be here on this glorious occasion. We remind our Cro-Magnon brothers that invention of the wheel was decided by ballot, not by facts. We remind listeners that history shows we shall

succeed Cro-Magnards. We suggest listeners think very solemnly before trying to change course of history."

He sat down. There were cheers from the Azilians. The Cro-Magnards were not silent. They booed.

"Sounds like a baseball game in Brooklyn," Stieve observed to Prem.

"Oh, don't mind, sir." Prem's metallic voice was reassuring but Stieve thought there was a gleam of uncertainty in Prem's pyrex eyes.

A Cro-Magnard got up and went to the microphone.

"Hey, what is this?" asked Stieve, "a marathon?"

"Sir," Orig Prem said earnestly, "I had to promise them a chance to talk to get them here to furnish color for the timecast."

A spot was clearing in front of the stand. In the center was the giant Davie Horsemeat, leaning on his club. Orig turned the klieg-lights on Davie, signaled Distribution up in 2232 and spoke into the microphone.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen of the twenty-third century, you are about to witness the most historic incident in the history of mankind—the invention of the wheel, in the year eighteen thousand fifteen B.C. The wheel is man's only true invention. All others of man's so-called inventions are actually adaptations but the one thing Nature did not invent is the wheel."

The crowd cheered.

"I may say that the decision as to who actually invented the wheel was the subject of a friendly rivalry between the Azilians and the Cro-Magnards, the former claiming it was invented to move their crops, the latter holding it was first used to transport meat to camp after the kill.

"The argument was settled by an election in which the Cro-Magnards were victorious by two cracked heads—pardon me, by a slight margin." Prem coughed discreetly. "You will now see a reconstructed on-the-spot dramatization of man's greatest invention."

Davie Horsemeat disappeared in the trees. A moment later a bison came out, grazing. Davie felled it with a club, and stood for a moment licking his lips, his eyes big and white in their sockets.

Orig nudged Stieve. "Good actor, isn't he?"

Stieve frowned. "I hope he doesn't take a bite out of that bison's withers."

But Davie remembered his lines. He tried to put the bison on his great shoulders but it was too heavy. He dropped it after a struggle and stood there wiping the sweat from his massive brow. Then he leaned against the carcass. It moved!

He studied it, wrinkling his brow. He pushed it. It moved again. He looked underneath and discovered a big rock under the bison, a round rock that rolled.

"And that," said Orig Prem at the microphone, "is the first step in the invention of the wheel. Act Two follows."

The clearing was dark for a moment, then the lights came on and Davie Horsemeat, assisted by another giant who, Stieve assumed, was Jackie Mammothtusks, pushed a big canoe out into the clearing on short pieces of log.

Then the two loaded the fallen bison into the canoe and pushed it on out of the clearing, Davie pushing, Jackie Mammothtusks snatching up the logs as they dropped out behind and running around in front to lay them under the canoe again.

A great cheer went up from one side of the crowd but Stieve noticed that the other side was silent. Prem was saying, "That, in brief, ladies and gentlemen of twenty-two thirty-two, shows the first two steps. Mr. Horsemeat and Mr. Mammothtusks will now appear in the final climactic scene."

The spotlight shifted to one edge of the clearing. Davie Horsemeat came pushing a large-sized log with a small hollow through the center.

Stieve heard an Azilian say into the microphone, "—the two biggest hams before Shakespeare."

A great cloud of helium-filled balloons with rocks tied to their strings traversed short arcs into the clearing and settled down around Davie, to the accompaniment of a chorus of boos from the Azilians.

Clubs had been flying in the air from the Cro-Magnards but suddenly the clubs began to change direction. Instead of going straight up they hurtled at the Azilians. The Azilians sent back some flint-tipped arrows. A Cro-Magnard fell. Then the Cro-Magnards rushed in a body toward the Azilians.

Stieve began to see how the Cro-Magnards had won the election. In a moment the two halves of the crowd were battling furiously. The timecast stand was emptied as speakers of both sides leaped joyfully into the fight. The battlers swayed against the stand and it shivered. It was only boughs tied together with vines, anyway. The nail had not been invented.

Stieve began to look for a way out. Then a head appeared above the floor of the stand and a Cro-Magnard vaulted up. Stieve retreated.

"You no pay for your dinner," the Cro-Magnard said ominously, "and you no leave tip. You come now and wash dishes for me."

Stieve stared at the ponderous arm reaching for him, then at the Cro-Magnard's face, and recognized Miss Horsemeat. He side-stepped and looked wildly for Orig Prem. The little robot was not in sight. Stieve ducked Miss Horsemeat's clutching fingers and dived for an opening in the crowd.

He slid halfway across the floor on his stomach just as Davie Horsemeat vaulted up over the edge of the platform. Stieve catapulted into Davie's big legs. Davie grunted and sat down on Stieve. Stieve gasped.

When he could get his breath he said, "This, my friend, is definitely a horse on me."

Davie was grinning broadly from ear to ear. "How I do? You think I get a contract on Broadway? Huh?"

Stieve looked at him from under lowered eyelids. "Sure," he said without batting an eyelash, "I'm looking for an agent now."

Davie jumped up. He took Stieve under his arm like a haunch of venison and waded through the mob. He let Stieve down when they were safe.

Stieve started to thank him but he heard yells. They were pursued. Davie turned to battle. Stieve turned to run. He sprinted back through Mammoth City, down the trail again, and vaulted into the time-capsule and thankfully pulled down the lid. He was sorry for Davie but he thought the big Cro-Magnard could take care of himself.

He was still breathing hard when Medlock pulled back the lid and brought the step.

"How was it?" asked Medlock.

"Unbelievable!" Stieve gritted. "Where's Prem?"

Medlock suppressed a sly smile. "He's around somewhere."

Stieve took the fast walk to his suite. A message was there from Smullen. "Timecast from eighteen thousand B.C. best feature in years. The fight scene wonderful. Very realistic. Still coming in. Congratulations. You have saved our necks. Smullen."

Stieve tossed it aside. He was too angry even to gloat. He started to stamp out, but came face to face with Orig Prem. Behind Prem was Murphy, who had disappeared two months ago. "Hi, Stieve," said Murph.

Stieve swallowed. "Hi, Murph."

"So?" Stieve said to Orig in a cold voice.

The robot nodded hastily. "I just happened to think—Murphy got lost at the same time Medlock was watching the construction of the Mayan pyramids. I looked up the records. Murphy's trip was handled by Medlock's android and I, knowing that anything might happen with an android— begging your pardon, sir," he said to Murphy, "I forgot you're an android man." He addressed Stieve again.

"Anyway, the android sent Murph to the Mayan pyramids instead of to Samarkand. I went back to look and found him. 'A helpful robot is a happy robot,' you know," he said brightly.

"You're wiggling out fast," said Stieve, "but how about Madame du Barry's screen test? How are you going to swing that?"

Orig thoughtfully hesitated. "Well—"

"Message for you, sir," said a half-size robot copy-boy.

"Thanks." Stieve opened the envelope and read the message. Then he looked up. "Listen to this: 'Jupiter renewed full Telepaper coverage. Probabilities advises they misplaced a decimal point. It should have been eighteen thousand B.C.'" Stieve groaned.

"But never mind. Authorities don't agree. It was a good show anyway. Hollywood in nineteen forty-eight has just made an offer for exclusive rights to the riot scene in eighteen thousand B.C. What do you suggest? Smullen.' Well," Stieve drew a deep breath, "that takes care of Madame du Barry." But he was sarcastic when he added, "We'll make them take her along with the fight."

Orig Prem was squirming now with happiness.

"I'll do it this time," Stieve said reluctantly to the robot. "I'll help you out on Madame du Barry but never again. And one more thing" —he fixed an eagle eye on Orig Prem— "where's my cut on your lecture fees from the ladies' aid?"

[The end of *A Horse on Me* by Ben J. Miller]