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PART ONE: SPOIL OF YESTERDAY

I

DON MIGUEL NAVARRO, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society of Time and loyal subject of His Most Catholic Majesty Philip IX, *Rey y Imperador*, dodged into a quiet alcove leading off the great hall and breathed a sigh of relief. He was enjoying this party less than any other he could remember, and it was more than disappointing—it was maddening.

He had stood, a few days ago, with one invitation in each hand, wondering which of them to accept. This whole year of 1988 was one long celebration, of course; since January, balls, parties and gala ceremonies had been held to mark the four hundredth anniversary of the conquest of England by the mighty Spanish Armada—that key event of history which had saved the Empire from vanishing off the face of the Earth when its homeland had once more been overrun by Islam. Don Miguel was getting rather tired of these affairs, but it was socially wrong to turn down *all* the invitations.

One of the invitations he had to choose between was from the Municipality of Jorque, who promised clowns, jugglers and pyrotechnics. Commonplace. He had never been to an official reception in this particular city—in fact, he had only been to Jorque two or three times before—but he doubted whether it would be much different here from Londres, or New Madrid.

The other had a great sprawling signature across the bottom, which read "Catalina di Jorque". And that was what had persuaded him. The Marquesa's fame was not confined to the north of England. She had been a famous beauty in her twenties and thirties; having lost her looks at about the same time as she lost her husband, but having inherited his considerable wealth, she had set up as a successful society hostess and a well-known campaigner for female emancipation.

Don Miguel regarded himself as a man of modern and enlightened views. He saw no reason why women should be barred by prejudice from fields traditionally reserved to men, such as philosophy. Consequently, feeling rather honored to have been singled out, he tossed the Municipality's invitation in the wastebasket and accepted the Marquesa's.

And in a few short hours, he felt tempted to turn into a hidebound reactionary. *Damn* the Marquesa!

It wasn't only the embarrassing experience of being shown off around the hall by the Marquesa—as it were, a real live time-traveler, exclamation point, in the same tone of voice as one would say, "A real live tiger!" This happened too often for members of the Society of Time not to have got used to it.

No, it was subtler than that. Don Miguel felt as if he had been tricked. The invitation had said "a small gathering of intelligent people", and that was what he had expected—he preferred good conversation to all the clowns and fireworks in the world. The gathering *wasn't* small—there were upwards of four hundred people, including clerics, philosophers both pure and natural, musicians, poets, artists and many more. And they all somehow seemed to be second-rate.

They were a wide enough cross-section, granted. As well as leading lights of Northern England, he had been presented to visitors from New Castile, on the other side of the Atlantic, all of whom reminded him in silky voices that the Prince of New Castile was the Commander of the Society of Time, except for those who wore black braids showing Mohawk extraction—those reminded him that the Director of Field-

work for the Society was a Mohawk. He had met a couple of fuddled Moors, obviously present as a concrete demonstration of the Marquesa's enlightened tolerance, who had been persuaded to take wine against the injunction of the Prophet, and who were getting very drunk. Don Miguel found that unpleasant.

Second-rate, the lot of them. Clearly the Marquesa's reputation was a house founded upon sand. He wondered whether there was any chance of getting out of the house and finding his way to the place where the Municipality was holding its reception. Rather their clowns than *these* clowns!

His glass was empty, and he looked around for a slave bearing a tray of full ones. He caught the attention of a slender Guinea-girl with knowing eyes and active hips, and as he watched her move away after changing his glass, he sighed again. There were so many better ways of wasting time!

The sigh must have been too loud; there was a chuckle from near where he was standing, and a deep voice with a humorous edge to it said, "Your honor is perhaps not accustomed to the Marquesa's entertainments."

Don Miguel half-turned. He saw a man of middle height, in a maroon cloak and white velvet breeches, whose ginger hair was fastidiously dressed high on his head. There was something rather engaging in his freckled face. Don Miguel gave the semi-bow that etiquette demanded, and said, "Miguel Navarro. No, it is the first time I've been to one of these affairs. I'm seldom in the Jorque."

"Arcimboldo Ruíz," said the freckled man. "You're the time-traveler, aren't you?"

A little taken aback, Don Miguel nodded. Don Arcimboldo gave another chuckle. "Don't be so surprised that you've been identified. Once your acceptance of the invitation came through, Catalina couldn't keep from publicizing the fact. She might at least have had the grace to inform you of the technique for getting through her receptions, though—or maybe she couldn't, because she probably doesn't know it herself."

"You *seem* to be enjoying yourself—" said Don Miguel doubtfully.

"Oh, I am! Perhaps you were misled by Catalina's reputation as a focus of intelligent activity. As you've probably worked out for yourself by now, Catalina is actually—shall we put it kindly?—overconfident of her own talents. No, the trick is a simple one. She serves excellent food and truly miraculous wine; therefore, come to her receptions for the refreshments, and take your chance on finding good company or not."

Don Miguel's face twisted into his crooked smile—always crooked, thanks to a certain Greek hoplite on the plains of Macedonia. "I had indeed arrived at the conclusion," he admitted. "Yet it seemed to me improbable, for how could so many people be deceived for so long?"

Don Arcimboldo shrugged, picking a luscious-looking cake off a tray borne by a passing slave. "Are we deceived? How much and how many of us are deceived? I think rather few. I think rather that we prefer to give Catalina her little meed of glory, and enjoy her food and her drink."

Another slave—the Marquesa di Jorque was wealthy, and had perhaps a hundred in her household—came searching through the crowd; this time a tall Guinea-man who towered above the heads of those he passed by. Catching sight of Don Miguel, he broke off his wandering and came hurrying up.

"Her ladyship requests the honor of your honor's company," he said, bowing low. He straightened, and stood like an ebony statue awaiting an answer.

Don Miguel pulled a wry face at Don Arcimboldo. "There's no way of getting out of it, I suppose?" he said.

"None at all, unless you wish to incur Catalina's wrath—which can be spectacular and public."

Don Miguel heaved a sigh and tossed off the last of his wine. "Lead me to her," he told the slave, and as he turned to go, added formally to Don Arcimboldo, "The meeting has much honored me. May we meet again."

"The honor is mine. May we meet again."

The Marquesa was standing under a bower of hot-house creepers, trained on silver branches, deep in conversation with two men. One of them Don Miguel recognized—Father Peabody, whose official post was clerk to the Archbishop of Jorque but who was commonly known as "her ladyship's chaplain"; men whispered unkind things about his function in her household. The other, Don Miguel did not know.

"Ah, Don Miguel!" said the Marquesa when he bowed before her, and flashed him a look that had probably laid suitors low in swathes when she was twenty years younger. "I trust that I have not dragged you away from an interesting discussion! But we are speaking of a difficult problem, and would welcome your expert advice. Let Don Marco propose it to you."

She gestured at the man Don Miguel did not know, a foppish person in a moss-green cloak and yellow breeches, whose sword-handle was so heavily encrusted with jewels it was obvious he never intended to use the weapon. He uttered his name in a high goat-like bleat.

"Marco Villanova, your honor!"

"Miguel Navarro," said Don Miguel briefly. "What is your problem?"

"We were disputing regarding the private lives of the great, Don Miguel. It is my contention—indeed, reason demands it!—that the greatness of individuals must be manifest as much in their private as in their public lives."

"We spoke, in particular, of Julius Caesar," said Father Peabody, rubbing his hands on the front of his long black cassock. "There is a man whose greatness is not in dispute, I venture to say."

He spoke with a broad flat native accent, and bobbed his head humbly after every other word as though conscious of his inferior family status.

"Well, as you speak of Caesar," said Don Miguel, a little more snappishly than he had intended, "I can give you accurate information. As it happens, I've spoken to him. And he was a perfumed fop. In his youth, he was guilty of abominations with men, and in his maturity his promiscuous

behavior was such that the gossip of all Rome centered on it. If this is greatness in his private life, you may maintain so; I would not."

Don Marco flushed and drew back half a pace, with a sidelong glance at the Marquesa. "It does not seem to me to be fitting to speak of such matters in the hearing of a lady!" he said.

Don Miguel answered him frigidly. "Her ladyship asked my expert advice; I gave it. I do not think dabblers, who turn aside from what displeases them—and history is full of unpleasant things—are qualified to pass opinions."

The jab went home; Don Marco's flush deepened still further. And the Marquesa added more coals when she gave a vigorous nod of confirmation.

"Indeed, Marco, that is what I want. For far too long, we women have been sheltered and pampered and secluded. This is not due to any weakness in ourselves, only to masculine prejudice."

She raised her sharp eyes to Don Miguel's face, and heaved a sigh. "But that we have in our midst a man who has spoken with Caesar himself! Is it not a *miracle?*"

"We of the Society of Time do not regard it as such," Don Miguel answered off-handedly. "It's an application of natural laws. A miracle, perhaps, would be to discover a means of flying to the moon. No one has suggested natural means whereby that might be accomplished."

"With—with respect," said Father Peabody, bobbing his round head in which his eyes were still rounder, "how was *this* feat accomplished? I understood, if you will pardon me, that the rules of your Society forbade interference, and limited the actions of time-travelers to simple observation."

Already Don Miguel had regretted his ill-considered boast; the cleric's sharp question made him regret it still further. He said stiffly, "True, Father. I assure you that that rule is most strictly kept. All I can say is that the means employed are a secret of the Society, and used only with maximum safeguards."

"I may be only a poor stupid woman," said the Marquesa,

and paused, as though waiting for automatic contradiction. Not getting it, she was forced to continue. "But to me it seems that interference with the past is out of the question. What was, was, and how can it be changed, or interfered with?"

Don Miguel sighed. For all her boasting about her intellectual accomplishments, the Marquesa had just put a question that no fifteen-year-old schoolboy of average intelligence would have uttered; he would have been taught the answer in school, or pieced it together from the items in the news. Indeed, even Don Marco was a little surprised, and showed that surprise in his expression.

"The basic arguments, my lady, are rather a matter for the speculative philosophers than for the pragmatic person like myself. But I have some conception of them, and if you wish, I'll try and elucidate."

A shadow of discomfort, as though caused by the realization that she had let herself in for some heavy brainwork, crossed the Marquesa's face. But she composed herself and adopted an expression of polite interest.

"Do go on!" she murmured.

II

"FIRST," SAID Don Miguel slowly, trying to cast his thought into words suitable for the Marquesa's intelligence, "there are in history certain crucial turning-points, are there not? Of these, some are due to yet earlier causes, and some are comparatively random. It's rare that we can fine down any event in history to a single essential causative element. The fall of Rome, for instance, was not only due to the invasion of a barbarian horde; it was also due to decadence among the Romans, and as such is the sum of vast numbers of individual acts and attitudes. Do you see?"

The Marquesa nodded, beginning to frown. Don Miguel assumed that she was not yet out of her depth.

"If we—I say *if*, for we have never dared!—if we were to tamper with the life of even a single Roman in the year 300, we might affect the entire course of events. We might rule ourselves out of existence! Rome and the Roman Empire might yet be standing!"

"I'm *fascinated* by the great empires of the past!" said the Marquesa with enthusiasm. "Especially by—"

She noted the pained look on Don Miguel's face, and broke off. "I was carried away!" she said self-excusingly. "Do continue!"

"You've followed me so far?"

"Ye—es—except that if we were so to change history, then how would history have been changed? I mean, without us having gone back to change it?"

Don Miguel sighed. "We wouldn't exist, you see," he said. "This would be *history*—all the history there was. And if the outside interference was marked, then we presume that some other agency would have caused it."

Father Peabody shook his head, a look of resigned wonder on his face. "Truly the ways of the Lord are inscrutable!" he said.

The Marquesa gave a sudden nod and smile. "I see!" she said, and then added doubtfully, "I *think*—"

Don Marco spoke up. "You mentioned turning-points of a different nature, where interference is less dangerous, I think. What are those, then?"

Don Miguel shrugged. "The classic example, of course, is one which we all know—the storm that broke the English defences four hundred years ago, doused their fireships, and in effect made certain the conquest of Britain. We could hardly interfere with the brewing of a storm!"

"But—was that storm really so important?" the Marquesa put in. "I mean, the Armada was so huge and so well-armed—"

"We have studied this matter exhaustively, I can assure you," said Don Miguel. "The most eminent strategists and naval authorities agree that encumbered as they were with occupation troops and supplies, the galleons might well

have been worsted—expecially if the fireships had got among them with a steady following wind."

"Wonderful!" said the Marquesa, shaking her head in admiration. "Tell me, Don Miguel, is it true that in this year—this quatrocentennial year—some specially honored outsiders have been invited to witness the actual victory?"

"No, my lady!" Don Miguel looked at her sharply. "From whom did you hear such nonsense? The rule of the Society—that only Licentiates are permitted to travel back in time—is absolutely inflexible. The purpose of time-travel is serious historical research; it is not a—a carnival, a spectacle for sensation-seekers!"

"Curious!" mused the Marquesa. "I had heard—but no matter. Yet I find it in my heart to wish that the rule was not so rigid. I have such a tremendous desire to see these great past happenings!"

"We have brought back pictures of almost all the great events of the past—" began Don Miguel.

"Ah, pictures! Pictures are dull, flat, lifeless! What are pictures beside a view of reality? But your heart is hard, Don Miguel. I see that."

"I assure you, time-travel is no pleasure trip. The dirt, the squalor, the cruelty, the—the disgusting facts of life in earlier ages, in short, see to that."

"Ah, but dirt and squalor are still with us. Why, yonder in the market outside the city wall of Jorque itself, there are people with *lice* on them, who do not know the meaning of the word soap! I have no desire to view their ancestors—they were probably the same fifty generations ago. But I would greatly love to see the rich and beautiful things of the past. As I began to say"—she punctuated the sentence with an arch look of reproach, that belonged in the armory of a far younger woman—"I am most fascinated by the empires of the past. The empire of Mexico, for instance, with its wonderful goldwork and featherwork!"

"And its pleasant custom of sacrificing human beings by tearing out the living heart and displaying it to the victim," said Don Miguel sourly.

"Have you no romance in you, Don Miguel?" cried the Marquesa.

"It is not I that lack romance; it is the empires of the past."

"And yet—ah, but I called you to me to ask your expert advice, and I must accept what you say in that spirit." The Marquesa gave a delicate, lady-like shrug. "And I would ask you one further favor of the same. I have a mask—a golden mask, of Aztec manufacture—which I wish to show off to you."

Her choice of words betrayed satisfactory honesty. Don Miguel bowed by way of answer. "But I know little of gold and ornament," he said doubtfully.

"Oh, no matter! I am just proud of it, Don Miguel, and should like you to admire it also. You will excuse us," she added to Don Marco and Father Peabody, who stepped back obediently. A slave answered an imperious gesture and cleared a way through the press of guests.

"You will not think it disgraceful of me, I am sure," said the Marquesa briskly, "when I say that the mask hangs in my bedchamber. I feel that it is an insult to the dignity of women to assume that they cannot protect their own virtue if they happen to be alone in masculine company."

The Marquesa had practically succeeded in making the enlightened and progressive Don Miguel into a bigoted reactionary by her behavior so far this evening; accordingly, he answered irritably, "And to men also, you must admit, my lady—by assuming that they are inevitably inclined to make improper advances whenever they have the opportunity."

The Marquesa looked blank; then she smiled. "True, true! I plead for the equality of the sexes, so I must confess you are right."

Through the head-turning, bowing throng they passed, down a corridor where their footsteps echoed on magnificent Moorish tiles, and into a room which their accompanying slave opened with a key from a chain at his waist. The room was large and luxurious, it's great bed disguised as a bank of

moss, its walls and ceilings festooned with the Marquesa's habitual creepers; and adjacent bathroom was revealed through a half-open curtain in one wall.

But after the first glance, Don Miguel saw nothing of this. His attention was riveted by the magnificent golden mask that hung on the wall facing the foot of the bed. Hardly daring to breathe, he walked up to it and stood gazing at it.

It was more than just a mask. It was a representation in beaten gold of the headdress, mask and shoulder-plates of an aztec warrior. The square, snarling face of the mask was nine inches deep; the headdress was twice as high, and the shoulder-plates were fifteen inches square. It dominated the room with its rich yellow luster.

"Is it not magnificent?" said the Marquesa happily. "I am so proud of it!" And then, when Don Miguel did not reply, she added anxiously, "Or do you not think so?"

Don Miguel reached up and touched it, half-hoping that it would prove to be a mere illusion. But the heavy metal was hard and cool to his fingers. He stepped back, his mind beginning to whirl as he noted the signs of genuine Aztec workmanship that identified it.

"Why do you not answer?" said the Marquesa interrogatively.

Don Miguel found his voice at last. "I can only say, my lady, that I hope it's a forgery."

"A forgery? What do you mean?" she cried in alarm.

"A forgery! For if it is not . . ." His mind quailed at the implications.

"But why?"

"Because this is perfect, my lady. As perfect as though the goldsmith had finished it today. Therefore it is not a buried relic dug up from the ground and restored. No restorer of the present time could so precisely adopt the Aztec style. A forger might—just—achieve a uniform pseudo-Aztec style over the whole of a work such as this, if he had long steeped himself in the period."

"But it isn't a forgery! It can't be!" The Marquesa was almost in tears. Don Miguel pressed on ruthlessly.

"In that case, My lady, I must take possession of it in the name of the Society of Time, as contraband mass illegally imported to the present!"

How much does that thing weigh? Twelve pounds? Fifteen?

What might that theft from the past not have meant in terms of changes in history?

"Where did you get it?" he pressed. The Marquesa looked at him with a stunned expression and ignored the question.

"You're joking!" she accused. "It's a cruel joke!"

"This is no joking matter," said Don Miguel harshly. "It's as well for you, my lady, that the first Licentiate of the Society to hear about this is under your roof as a guest, accepting your hospitality. Otherwise I couldn't answer for the consequences. Why, anyone with the intelligence of a two-year-old ought to have jumped to the conclusion that something as perfect as that mask must be imported from the past! How did you get it—as a gift?"

"Y-yes!" The Marquesa was beginning to recover herself, and to understand what was being said. Don Miguel saw that he had been right in making crude threats to her in the name of the Society; the Society of Time had an almost magical reputation to most people.

"Then did you report the gift to the office of the Society in Jorque? Did you check that it had been licensed for import?"

"No, of course I didn't!"

"You probably thought it beneath your dignity to obey the laws, I suppose. I won't insult you by saying that you didn't see the obvious—that you didn't know it was imported from the past. I'll try and make things easy for you—"

"Offer me no favors, traitor!" she said with a sudden blaze of spirit. Don Miguel let that pass.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Don—Don Arcimboldo Ruíz." She choked out the name. Don Miguel whirled, his cloak flying, and snapped at the slave who waited by the door.

"Get him! Get Don Arcimboldo! And quickly!"

He passed the time while he was waiting for the freckled man to arrive by inspecting the mask. Everything pointed to the same conclusion; the gold was as fresh as though hammered yesterday. Oh, there was no doubt!

"You desired my presence?" said Don Arcimboldo, hurrying into the room. He bowed in passing to the Marquesa, who had sunk on the bed with her face in her hands, a pitiful figure.

"Yes!" Don Miguel wasted no time on formality. "You gave this to her? Yes? Where did you get it?"

"Why, I bought it openly enough, in the market beyond the city walll" said Don Arcimboldo, blinking. "Is something wrong?"

"Did you report it to the local office of my Society?"

"To check if it was licensed for import? Why, no! Why should I think of such a thing? It was offered openly for sale by a merchant who vends his wares regularly in the market—why should I assume it was unlicensed?" A look of awe spread across Don Arcimboldo's face. "Am I to take it that—it *is* contraband?"

"You are," said Don Miguel curtly. "You probably acted in good faith—but God! That thing weighs more than twelve pounds; it's so magnificent it must have been famous in its own period, to begin with, and it would certainly have come to my notice if the Society had licensed it. Besides, we don't license things like that for sale in a public market! We'd have given it to the Mexicological Institute in New Castile." He sighed. "Well, at least you had sense enough to recognize it as an import. Who was this merchant? I must find out where he got it—and I'm afraid we're going to have to take possession of that mask and get it back where it came from just as fast as is humanly possible."

"But—who could have smuggled it in?"

"Just possibly, a corrupt Licentiate; we've had cases, but the Society doesn't publicize them. If not, my friend—then you can guess at the implications yourself. They frighten me out of my wits!"

III

WITH THE PASSAGE of time, the fear had not diminished, but grown. It still held him in its clammy grip as he sat in the Chamber of Full Council of the Society a week later.

The atmosphere of the Chamber was rich with a sense of authority and ritual, like the interior of a great cathedral—which in many ways it resembled. It was panelled with fine dark woods inlaid with gold; most of its floor was occupied by four tables arranged in the shape of two capital L's, with gaps at diagonally opposite corners. These tables were covered with red velvet; the chairs were upholstered in the same material, except for one, which was still vacant. That was purple, the prince's color, and it stood at the eastern end of the room, transfixed—like a butterfly on a pin—by a shaft of pure white light stabbing down from the ceiling. Another shaft of light, horizontally focused, completed the cross.

Along the northern table, the General Officers of the Society sat waiting. Don Miguel could not tell one from another, for they sat in shadow, as did he. Behind them, their private secretaries stood dutifully at their masters' orders.

He himself was in the middle of the western side of the oblong formed by the tables; while on the southern side, facing the General Officers, were the prisoners—the Marquesa, attended by two of her personal maids, Don Arcimboldo, who was alone, and the merchant from whom Don Arcimboldo had purchased the mask. The Marquesa had been weeping. But Don Arcimboldo had an air of puzzled boredom, as though he was certain that this stupid misunderstanding would shortly be regulated.

And on the velvet-covered table before the vacant chair, the mask itself rested like a great golden toad.

Suddenly there was a ring of trumpets, and the room seemed to tense. There was movement behind the vacant chair, at the eastern door of the Chamber. A herald in

cloth-of-gold strode forward and spoke in a voice much resembling the trumpets that had just sounded.

"His Highness the Prince of New Castile!"

The Commander of the Society: Don Miguel rose to his feet and bowed.

Then he was told in a grunting voice that he could sit down again, the Prince had already taken his place. He was a round man with stubby limbs and a short black beard; a ring of baldness was spreading on his scalp. He wore the full dress uniform of a Knight of the Holy Roman Empire, and his chest glittered with the stars of all the orders which he as a Prince of the Blood had accumulated. The total effect was impressive; it was meant to be.

His face was partly in shadow because the light was from above him, but it could be seen that he was studying Don Miguel intently. Don Miguel felt uncomfortable, as he might have done under the scrutiny of the inquisitor.

At last the grunting voice came again, like a saw rasping into fresh oak-planks. "You're Navarro?"

"I am, sir," said Don Miguel, finding that his mouth was dry. He was certain that he had acted correctly in the matter —and yet there was still the nagging doubt . . .

"And this bauble in front of me is the thing that all the fuss is about?"

"It is, sir."

"Hah!" The Prince leaned forward in his chair; behind him, an obsequious personal attendant moved slightly, ready for any emergency. The Prince caressed the gold thing with his thick fingers, that sprouted coarse black hair along their backs. Obviously, he liked it—or he liked the presence of so much fine gold.

At last he sat back and shot a keen glance down the line of the three prisoners before turning to the other side and saying, "Father Ramón, this is for you, I think."

Don Miguel watched to see which of the formless officers replied; whichever moved and spoke, that one was Father Ramón, the Jesuit, the master-theoretician of the Society and

the world's greatest expert on the nature of time and the philosophical implications of time travel.

"I have inspected the object," said a dry, precise voice from the officer who sat at the end of the table nearest to the Prince. "It is Aztec, of Mexican gold and workmanship—of that there is no doubt at all. And it has not been licensed by the Society for importation."

Don Miguel felt a surge of relief. At least he had been correct up to that point, then.

"The consequences of this temporal contraband cannot be assessed as yet," the Jesuit continued. "We are attempting to establish its provenance to within a few years; then we shall investigate the effects of its removal. If we find none, we are faced with a serious dilemma."

"How so?" said the Prince, leaning back and twisting a little sideways in his chair.

"*Imprimis,*" said Father Ramón, and thrust forward a thin bony finger from the darkness to lay it on the table, "we shall have to determine whether we have in fact replaced it—and if we have replaced it, then we shall have to establish the time at which it was replaced, and the circumstances. And *secundo,* we shall have to determine whether—if it has *not* been replaced—whether we have in fact a case of history being changed."

Shorn of its emotional overtones by this cleanly logic, the problem seemed to Don Miguel nonetheless terrifying.

"You mean"—it startled him to find that he was speaking, but since heads were turning towards him, he ploughed on—"you mean, Father, that we may find its disappearance incorporated in our *new* history as an accomplished fact?"

The shapeless head turned towards him. "Your presumption," said the Jesuit coldly, and hesitated, so that Don Miguel had a while in which to wonder what "presumption" meant, "is—accurate."

Don Miguel breathed a sigh of relief.

The Prince shrugged. "It sounds as though the matter is safe in your hands, then, Father Ramón."

"I think so," said the Jesuit in a voice that implied a smile.

"I leave it to you, then. My business is with the associated troubles. For example—Navarro!"

The last word was uttered in so sharp a bark that Don Miguel jumped. He said, "Sir!"

"Navarro, what possessed you to arrest the Marquesa di Jorque, who was plainly an innocent party in this case?"

Don Miguel's heart sank so rapidly he could almost feel it arriving in his boots. He said stiffly, "I acted, sir, in strict accordance with the law." He was glad that his voice remained firm.

"Have you no sense, man?" said the Prince sharply. He gave the Marquesa a sidelong glance. "I have studied the informations you have laid, and there is no evidence at all that she acted otherwise than as an innocent party. I'm discharging her from custody here and now, and I require you to apologize to her before she returns to her domains at Jorque."

What?

For a moment, Don Miguel had the impression that he had actually uttered the word—in the presence of the Commander of the Society, an unforgivable breach of manners. But he had not. He licked his lips. To have to apologize for acting in accordance with the law? But this was ridiculous!

He grew aware that the heads of the General Officers were all turned in his direction; he saw that the Marquesa had suddenly recovered all her poise, and was giving him a triumphant glare, tapping her manicured fingers on the arm of her chair. What was he to do?

To cover his loss of self-possession, he rose slowly to his feet. By the time he was standing, he had decided what to say.

"I will not apologize to the Marquesa," he said, "for acting in accordance with law. I *will* apologize for not realizing that she is an innocent."

An innocent. A simpleton, in other words. He hoped the distinction would penetrate.

It did. The Marquesa stiffened with growing fury; the countenance of the Prince began to purple. The air was thick with their reaction. But the tension broke suddenly—broke

against a thin, rather high-pitched laugh. With amazement, Don Miguel realized that it came from Father Ramón.

"Commander, that is an apology exactly meet for the case," he said. "It is true, as our brother Navarro submitted, that anyone but an innocent would have questioned the presence of so magnificent a primitive artifact in the present day."

The Prince gave a tentative laugh. Then another, more convincing. Finally he threw back his head and roared. Other General Officers joined in, and to the accompaniment of their mirth the Marquesa hastened from the hall, her shoulders bowed and shaking—but not, for sure, with laughter. With humiliation.

Don Miguel felt he had gained an unexpected victory. He sat down again slowly.

"Good!" said the Prince finally. "Now to the main part of the business. What action have you taken, Navarro, to discover the source of this—this thing before me?"

Don Miguel spoke rapidly. "The merchant is present from whom Don Arcimboldo bought it—a certain Higgins, native of Jorque and of family in that town and province. He maintains and short of torture will doubtless continue to maintain that he in his turn acquired it from a stranger."

"Indeed!" The Prince turned thoughtful eyes on the merchant, who tried to sink in his chair; he was a middle-aged man without great personality. "And how was this, may I ask?"

The merchant turned from side to side, as though seeking a way of escape. Finding none, he babbled in the flat broad accent that Peabody exhibited also, and most of the people in the north of England. "Your Highness, I swear! I swear it's true! I bought it from a stranger who offered it to me at the market—on the first day of November it was, as I recall."

"You often do business with strangers?" the Prince said.

"Never! Never in my life before! I cannot"—and his voice dropped to scarcely a whisper—"I cannot recall his name, or his face! I can say only that I must have been mad—must have had a brainstorm, Your Highness! For I'm a reputable

man, and I've always traded in strict accordance with the law, and—"

"Enough!" said the Prince curtly. "Navarro, have you investigated the claim?"

"I have, sir. And it seems to be true as far as it goes. Hitherto, this man Higgins has been a law-abiding merchant, and I've spoken to several people who have sold him goods; he has been careful to ascertain that they have proper title to them, and to avoid handling anything imported without license. He has had several extratemporal objects pass through his hands, and the office of the Society in Jorque has previously found him scrupulously careful."

"Yet this time he buys contraband from a total stranger, without investigation, and sells it to Don Arcimboldo who takes it in good faith, I'm sure"—this with a dip of the head in Don Arcimboldo's direction—"and gives it to the innocent Marquesa." The Prince chuckled again, reminiscently. "Surely he must indeed have had a brainstorm!"

"Sir." A flat word from one of the hitherto silent General Officers. The Prince glanced towards the speaker.

"Yes, Red Bear?"

The Director-in-Chief of Fieldwork, Don Miguel noted. They had really assembled the big guns for this case, then!

"I'm inclined to disbelieve that. I think Navarro was in a fit of pique against the Marquesa, and that this has colored his investigation."

"How say you, Navarro?" the Prince demanded. Don Miguel felt his face grow warm.

"I admit," he said slowly, "that I was annoyed with her for showing off a Licentiate of the Society—myself!—like a performing animal for the benefit of her guests. But I deny that this was sufficient to color my investigations."

There was a grunt from Red Bear. The Prince paused, as if seeking further remarks, heard none, and slapped his hand down on the table like a pistol-shot.

"Resolved, then! That the merchant Higgins be interrogated further! That Don Arcimboldo be discharged as an innocent party! That we meet now in private session to

speak of what has passed! Clear the room," he added in a lower tone, off-handedly, to his personal aide.

Don Miguel sat back, feeling slightly weak, but conscious of an overpowering relief that—the attack from Red Bear excepted—he seemed to have justified his actions to the Full Council. And this, for a lowly member of the Society, a Licentiate with only five years' experience and four field trips to his name, was no inconsiderable achievement.

IV

As soon as the Chamber had been cleared, the doors had been locked with a great slamming of heavy bolts, and the lights had gone up, the assembled officers relaxed in their chairs. Don Miguel was surprised to find that with the lights full on the Chamber was just an ordinary room, large and palatial, but simply a room. And—more surprising still—when they threw back their cowls, the General Officers were just ordinary men.

He found himself relaxing with them.

The Prince fumbled out a large pipe and stuffed it with tobacco in coarse-cut hunks. Lighting it, he mumbled around the stem.

"Well, young Navarro, I don't mind telling you that you've created an almighty kind of chaos with this rash act of yours!"

A harsh laugh, as though to say "understatement!", came from Red Bear, a long-faced Mohawk with black braided hair showing oily-slick around his face.

Father Ramón—whose face was like a bird's with the skin stretched tight around a beaky nose and little, very bright eyes—passed a thin hand over his bald cranium in a way that suggested he had acquired in youth the habit of running his fingers through his hair and still expected to find hair

on his head. He said quietly, "Sir, that is a harsh way to speak."

The Prince shrugged, puffing his pipe like a bonfire. "I dispute that—though I should know better than to dispute with one of your Order, Father! What I mean is what I say. Navarro has caused us a good deal of unnecessary botheration."

The Jesuit looked worried. "Again, no. In my view he has acted well, aside from the element of innocence in connection with the Marquesa, where he has let himself be deceived by appearances. My son"—he turned to face Don Miguel directly—"I must say that you were as guilty as she of overlooking the obvious. The Marquesa di Jorque is not a woman of any great intellect. She has at most a certain low cunning, which enables her to gather about her people of superior intelligence, and to pass herself off as their equal. It is a harmless pastime enough, provided all the players understand the rules. I think you should have seen that she would never have thought, even for a moment, to report the mask to our local office."

"I accept your judgment, Father," said Don Miguel, and was glad that the strictures had been phrased so mildly.

"On the other hand, the question of the merchant puzzles me," continued Father Ramón. "Our brother Navarro has said that he objected to being displayed like a performing animal, simply because he was a Licentiate of the Society. There is here a far graver matter—that the work of the Society itself is being burned into a simple spectacle for sensation-seekers."

Like a spark and gunpowder, two facts came together in Don Miguel's mind and shot him forward in his chair. He said explosively, "Then it is true!"

The curious gaze of the General Officers turned on him. Of them all, only Father Ramón seemed to know what he was talking about. He said, "You have heard about this disgrace to us?"

"I—I know only what was said to me by the Marquesa herself: that it is rumored that certain people have been

taken in this quatrocentennial year to witness the victory of the Armada."

"Hah!" said Father Ramón. "If it stopped there! If that was all!"

"Then it is true?" pressed Don Miguel. "How could such a thing be allowed to happen?"

The Prince coughed. "Father Ramón, as usual I'll defer to your judgment—but is this wholly wise?"

"To give our brother the facts? Why, indeed it is. His action, heedless of possible consequences to himself, in this matter of the mask, indicates that he is uncorrupted and upright." Having thus justified himself, the Jesuit turned back to Don Miguel and resumed.

"As for how it is *allowed* to happen—it is of course forbidden. As for how it does happen—why, simply enough. Certain Licentiates whom I cannot yet name, but whose licenses will not last long when they are caught, have stumbled on a trick. They act after this fashion: they take payment from those who wish to be treated to this spectacle, whatever it may be—the victory of the Armada, or the games in the Coliseum in the time of Nero, or the battle of the Guinea Coast, or the disgusting acts in the temples of Egypt—and they then plan an innocent field trip, which is approved as routine by our brother Red Bear. This field trip is always to a more recent time than their actual destination. They then establish a time and place when their customers were alone and unobserved; they go to that time and place, collect them, go to their official destination, go back further and deposit their customers, resume their fieldwork, collect their customers again, return them to the split-second of their departure, and then return to base. Put so elaborately, it seems difficult; in effect, it is not. Who can tell from which direction in time a traveler approaches?"

Don Miguel nodded. "And is this corruption widespread?" he said slowly.

"I regret that it is. We are at present investigating the finances of no less than thirty Licentiates whose income is, shall we say, remarkably high."

"Thirty!" Don Miguel's dismay and shock appeared in his voice. The Prince, finding that his pipe had gone out, felt for means of relighting it, and spoke in a gruff tone.

"It wouldn't be so bad if it was simple—uh—unofficial observation," he said. "I mean, we've all done this at one time or another. I've taken my father on the odd trip myself."

"But that's different," said Don Miguel slowly. The Prince chuckled.

"Yes, kings get away with a good deal! So do—well, no matter." He coughed again to cover his momentary embarrassment. "But the habit of accepting bribes is hard to lose. And no one really accepts the possibility of altering the past, except the experts. It seems that certain of these unofficial travelers have acquired souvenirs of their trips."

Father Ramón nodded. "Of which this great golden mask is probably one."

A chill passed down Don Miguel's spine. "Is that, then, not the only thing which has been brought in as contraband? Why, the possibilities are inconceivable!"

"It's the biggest that we know of," said Father Ramón. "I presume you're aware of the principle on which we permit the importation of extratemporal objects—of course you are, for you've already made field trips, I gather. Then you know how we limit ourselves to objects which the historical record shows to have been lost, such as treasure buried in a secret place by one who is killed without divulging his knowledge, or something which we know to have disappeared without trace, because the fact is to be found in contemporary annals. This is not an altogether reliable rule, naturally, since we cannot be certain that some of these items lost by 'natural causes' were not in fact lost through our intervention." He gave a skeletal smile, and shrugged. "But we trust in the divine plan, and rule ourselves by this precept.

"What would happen if we deliberately stole away something which history records as being in existence at a date later than our interference, we do not know, and I pray God we may never find out. In such a case as this, though, we

may justifiably fear disastrous consequences. Oh it may turn out that this mask was melted down, and the loss of simple mass—even so much of it, and even gold—might pass unnoticed. But if not; if we find that its mysterious disappearance is on record, we face a still graver problem. Should we assume that history has in fact been changed? Should we replace the mask where it disappeared from, in an attempt to change it back? Shall we find paradoxes developing afterwards, because the events which led us to replace this object no longer form part of the universal chain of causality?"

The smile with which he accompanied his words was in fact a pleasant one, but to Don Miguel it seemed more like a skeleton's grin. He said slowly, "My mind boggles at such possibilities, Father. I'm glad I do not have to involve myself in such deep philosophical problems."

"Nonetheless, we are giving you charge of a problem which is just about as deep as this one," rumbled the Prince. He swept the others with an inquiring glance, and received confirmatory nods. "We're charging you with discovering, first, the origin in our time of this mask—of identifying, if you like, the unknown man from whom it was bought. And then, second, of returning it unnoticed if such is the decision of Father Ramón."

Don Miguel's heart pounded. "I—I feel unworthy," he said after a pause. The Prince snorted.

"Worthy or unworthy, Navarro, you've opened up the problem. You close it again!"

In its way, the assignment was a signal honor; it was also a terrifying burden. The more Don Miguel thought about it, the more he felt qualms.

He was not yet thirty. He had held the license of the Society for a bare five years. His experience of field work had been confined to a few trips—one, the last, on which he had spoken with Julius Caesar and contrived to settle a long-standing argument among historians regarding Caesar's motives for refusing the crown of Rome; another, on which he

had suffered the blow from a blunt sword which had permanently twisted his smile.

And perhaps he might have accepted the task with equanimity, nonetheless, had it not been for the news Father Ramón had announced to him at this meeting. Thirty Licentiates of the Society suspected of taking bribes—this was hardly believable!

To Don Miguel, work in the Society had something of the air of a sacred trust. That was the principle on which it was founded, after all. Since Borromeo's epoch-making discovery in 1892, the right to exploit time-travel had been strictly limited to those judged fit to be placed in charge of it; in the Empire, this was the Society of Time, and in the Confederacy, it was an analogous body, established by the Treaty of Prague.

Don Miguel had accepted this fact as gospel. Now, though, thinking over what had been said, he realized that what he had taken for hard sense was founded basically on fear. Fear of what might happen if irresponsible people were allowed to make journeys into the past. It was that, and not a sense of responsibility, which had so rigidly restricted time licenses.

And given this premise, then it followed almost automatically that after nearly a century of time-travel, people would grow blasé and tolerant—that their upright posture would sag a little here and there.

Yet this too entailed paradoxes. One of the most familiar justifications for the rule confining the purpose of time-travel to observation without interference was the argument that if this rule were not made and kept, then time-travelers from the future, visiting the past, would be noticed in the here-and-now. Therefore the rule was a good one; therefore it was to be kept.

And if it were not being kept . . .

Don Miguel had visions of whole areas of unrealized history being swept into some unimaginable vacuum, into the formlessness of absolute not-being. Worlds, perhaps, in which Jorque was York and an English monarch sat the throne of the

Empire; in which possibly a Mohawk prince ruled New Castile and called his subjects braves and squaws. Worlds in which men traveled—to stretch the idea to its uttermost—into space instead of through time, by some undreamed-of miracle of propulsion.

Resolution hardened in him. The first line of attack on his problem, inevitably would be to inquire further of the merchant, Higgins, from whom the mask had been bought.

V

THE GUARDS on the door of Higgins' cell inspected his commission; it was under the Prince's own seal, so they gave way respectfully and permitted him to enter.

The cell was large and spacious. In the center, Higgins sat lolling in a chair, his head sideways on one shoulder, his mouth half open. He was fastened down with leather straps. At a table facing him, the two inquisitors charged with interrogating him were conferring in low tones; their faces were anxious and they frowned continually.

At Don Miguel's entrance, they glanced up, their faces pale in the shadow of their dark brown cowls.

"How goes it?" demanded Don Miguel, when he had explained his business and authority. The inquisitors exchanged glances.

"Badly," said one of them—the taller. "We greatly fear, Don Miguel, that he has been bewitched."

"How so?"

"We have used all the means that are lawful to unlock his tongue," the other inquisitor said. "We have employed liquors of divers kinds, and we have used mirrors and pendulums. We have established that he remembers purchasing the mask, but he cannot recall the face of the man who sold it, nor his name, nor any clue to his identity."

"But he recalls the date?" suggested Don Miguel. The inquisitor who had spoken first nodded.

"We have given orders that all travelers in or about Jorque who registered with the authorities at the time shall be followed up. But it seems hopeless; whoever brought the mask for sale would have been a wealthy man—perhaps a noble—and could too easily have avoided the demands of the law."

"The justification of the law lies in men's obedience thereof," said the other inquisitor in sententious tones. Don Miguel nodded.

"What kind of enchantment might this man have used?"

"There are many possibilities. A drug of some sort, one imagines. Or possibly he constrained Higgins to stare at some bright spot—a reflection on the mask itself, even—and then soothed him to oblivion with gentle words."

It sounded unlikely. But the inquisitors were experts in that kind of work themselves; he had to take their word for it. He sighed.

"Inform me of what passes," he said.

"We will. But we have small hope of reaching the truth."

If the interrogation of Higgins had reached a dead end, the only thing to do was to go back to Jorque and continue on-the-spot investigation. Accordingly, Don Miguel left Londres that same evening by fast coach, and next day presented himself at the local office of the Society—a great house set in spacious grounds not far from the Cathedral.

Here he was received by an old-young man with a pale face and a high, hesitant voice whose eyes fastened greedily on the Prince's seal at the foot of Don Miguel's commission. He was probably a failed Licentiate, Don Miguel diagnosed, both from that fact and from his further behavior.

"We have much discussed the problem which you are come to look into," said the old-young man fawningly, having introduced himself as Don Pedro Diaz. "We greatly admire the way you saw straight to its heart."

"Did I?" said Don Miguel dryly, thinking of the clouds of mist that still shrouded its solution. "You are too kind. I am

come to know what has been discovered concerning the origin of the mask since I left Jorque the other day."

The other looked disconcerted. "Why, we have not sought further," he admitted uncertainly. "Was it not enough to have arrested the merchant, Higgins, and his clerks?"

"It was not enough," said Don Miguel shortly. "Take me to these clerks; I would speak with them."

But the clerks were of no help either; their story was that their master Higgins had himself conducted the purchase and the sale, as he often did when the other party in a bargain was a person of noble family. Don Miguel well understood this—it was sometimes necessary for a nobleman to sell family heirlooms or other vaulables in order to replenish a shrinking coffer, and when this was the case he usually preferred to treat in private with a discreet merchant.

It seemed that Higgins had a reputation for being exceptionally discreet; he had handled many such transactions.

The clerks stuck to their story—that they had known nothing of the mask until their master was arrested.

Don Miguel sighed and left the cell in which they were incarcerated. Walking back through the fine grounds of the Society's office, he spoke musingly to Don Pedro who accompanied him.

"This market, now—the one where Don Arcimboldo said he purchased the mask. It's outside the city wall, is it not?"

"It is. The municipality banned markets within the city, save for freemen of Jorque, in the last years of the last century; thus the custom arose of going beyond the walls to trade. And now, indeed, marketing within the city is rare—all the richest merchants trade yonder."

"Good. I wish to view this market. Call a coach, and let us begone."

"At once," said Don Pedro eagerly, seeming overjoyed to be of service.

While they were waiting for the coach, Don Miguel turned to another subject that interested him currently. He said,

"And of Don Arcimboldo Ruíz, now—what manner of man is he?"

Don Pedro spread his finely manicured hands. "He is of noble and ancient family, I believe; he has estates in the north, but prefers to live in Jorque, occupying himself with the pursuits of the wealthy and with the collection of rare works of art."

"So he's a connoisseur, is he?"

"Men speak highly of his expert knowledge."

"Then he'd have known how strange and rare the mask was." Don Miguel bit his lip. He recalled that Don Arcimboldo had stated straightforwardly his assumption that Higgins would not try and sell him contraband; this was reasonable enough, if he had previously done business with Higgins and found him honest.

And yet he might have questioned—

Don Miguel firmly repressed that line of thought. Don Arcimboldo had struck him as a sensible, level-headed person; he had revealed a healthy cynicism in his assessment of the Marquesa di Jorque, and there was no doubt that he would have had the sense to make inquiries if he suspected he was receiving contraband. More to the point, perhaps, he would not have made a present of the mask to the Marquesa if he had suspected it was contraband; he would probably have kept it secretly for his own collection.

Why had he given such a remarkable object to the Marquesa, though? If he was himself a collector, then—

A crease of puzzlement deepened between Don Miguel's eye-brows, and remained there all the time he was in the coach *en route* for the great market of Jorque.

The called it a market; in fact, it was almost a town on its own now, spreading out beyond the walls in an easterly direction. Wide well-paved roads ran between the plots of ground occupied by the merchants' stalls; these consisted of booths erected before and around solid stone-built warehouses. During the day, goods were brought forth under awnings and in glass-sided huts, where brawny men guarded

them with clubs. At night, they would be taken back into the warehouses and secured firmly against robbers.

Don Miguel instructed Don Pedro to dismiss the coach for an hour, and set forth on foot through the market. He paused, apparently at random, to test the quality of nutmegs at a grocer's, to feel some splendid Eastern brocades in a draper's, to inspect a set of candlesticks in a silversmith's. As he did these thing, he asked questions casually of the merchants who attended him. Don Pedro, blinking and uncertain, listened to what was said, and at last began to catch hold of an important fact. Somehow in each conversation, Don Miguel was contriving to introduce the names of Higgins and of Don Arcimboldo.

The hour passed. Their last call was at a bookbinder's, where gold-leaf glittered on fine calf bindings and the air within the booths was rich with the scent of leather and size.

Brooding, Don Miguel emerged and indicated to Don Pedro that they should walk together back to the place where their coach waited. Their course took them through the heart of the market; many persons of great wealth and standing were now entering it, since it was past noon, to visit their favorite merchants.

"Higgins seems to have been a very upright and much respected trader," said Don Miguel at length, while they stepped to the side of the road to allow the passage of a gilded coach.

"So it has been said," Agreed Don Pedro, with a sage nod.

"Therefore he must indeed have been bewitched." Don Miguel cast a lingering glance after the gilded coach—for its passenger had been a rather beautiful young woman—and resumed walking. "And witchcraft is tricky. Don Pedro, I require a word of advice from you."

"You do me too much honor," said Don Pedro nervously.

Don Miguel did not comment. He said merely, "Don Pedro, if you were in Don Arcimboldo's place, why would you give a very rare and costly mask of solid gold to a lady who is—to be blunt—past the age of courting?"

Don Pedro's eyes widened. He said nothing for a moment. When he did reply, his voice was hesitant.

"Ah—I would not say such things of Don Arcimboldo—"

"Speak your mind!" rapped Don Miguel impatiently.

"Why, then, one would assume he stood to gain some advantage or other. If he did not do it purely from motives of friendship."

After Don Arcimboldo's scathing denunciations of the Marquesa, Don Miguel felt that the latter possibility could be ruled out. He shrugged.

"So too would I say. Don Pedro, instruct your coachman to pass by Higgins' town house on the way back to the Society's office."

At Higgins' town house, Don Miguel descended alone from the coach and went indoors. He came back after twenty minutes, his face very thoughtful. During the rest of the trip to the office, he said nothing, responding only with grunts to Don Pedro's tentative essays at conversation.

There was a message waiting at the office, which had come by semaphore telegraph from Londres few minutes before their return. It was a report from Red Bear's department, informing Don Miguel that the golden mask was almost certainly the work of a celebrated Aztec goldsmith called Nezahualcoyotl—Hungry Dog. And that placed its origin somewhere in the middle fifteenth century, most likely in the great town of Texcoco.

Another puzzling factor! If the mask was the work of so famous a smith that Red Bear's fieldworkers could trace and identify its origins in so short a time, then it was all the more unlikely that Don Arcimboldo would readily have given it away.

And especially since . . .

A great light suddenly broke in on Don Miguel. Facts came together and formed a pattern. A pattern that made sound sense. He slammed fist into palm and muttered an oath.

"What ails you?" demanded Don Pedro in alarm.

"Nothing!" snapped Don Miguel. "Nothing! But I see it,

and yet I do not see it! If—Don Pedro! Send speedily to the office of the Inquisition in Jorque; demand for me a skilled inquisitor, to visit me and answer certain questions. Then a coach, to await my orders—for tonight I purpose to call on Don Arcimboldo."

"It shall be done," said Don Pedro, a trifle nervously, and hurried away.

Don Miguel conversed lengthily with the inquisitor who came in answer to his request, in private and alone. When he had finished it was near dark, and yet he refused Don Pedro's request to stay and take a bite to eat before his departure. Instead, he buckled on his sword, threw his cloak about him, and went into the night as though fiends were hot on his heels.

VI

Don Arcimboldo's house was a fine one, of recent building, in extensive and well-cared-for grounds. Inside, everything bespoke luxury and elegance; the same stamp that marked the Marquesa's house was to be seen here, in the many creeping plants and hothouse flowers that turned the rooms and halls into gardens, in the exquisite paneling and the many cases holding rare trophies—Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Etruscan, Aztec, Inca.

The majordomo who admitted Don Miguel presented his master's apologies, saying that he was at dinner but would shortly be finished and would wait on his distinguished guest; meantime, would Don Miguel have the grace to occupy himself in the library?

Don Miguel would, with pleasure. Wine was brought for him by a slender Guinea-girl—she must have been very expensive—who poured him a glassful and then retired to

sit in the darkest corner among the bookcases, her white eyes and white teeth glimmering in the shadow.

Glass in hand, Don Miguel walked absently about the room. It was not merely a library; it was almost a museum, with many shelves of fine objects—gold, silver, jade, turquoise. Don Miguel passed his fingers caressingly along a pair of Moorish silver knives that caught the light on one shelf, before turning away abruptly and interesting himself in the books.

Don Arcimboldo displayed a truly catholic—but definitely not Catholic—taste. There was one case which would probably have sent Father Peabody into hysterics. Don Miguel caught the thought, re-considered it, and decided that it was probably incorrect. Father Peabody's association with the Marquesa had probably cured him of any such tendency. Nonetheless, there were very many books here that were on the Index, for heresy as well as for other reasons.

He selected a finely illustrated edition of the *Satyricon* of Petronius Arbiter and settled himself in a superb leather chair, its back tooled all over with gilt, to pass the time until Don Arcimboldo should enter.

When at length he did arrive, he was full of apologies for having made Don Miguel wait. But Don Miguel waved the protestations aside.

"Of course not!" he said. "I should have sent word that I was coming. But I wished to speak with you, and I have not long to spend in Jorque before I must return to Londres—so it is rather I who should apologize. And I have not been bored. I have been admiring your excellent taste."

Don Arcimboldo drooped into a chair that was the twin of Don Miguel's, snapped his fingers for the Guinea-girl to bring him wine, and gave a deprecating chuckle. "I'm flattered," he said dryly. "But it is hardly a question of taste; rather, I am selfish enough to like to surround myself with beautiful things."

"You have certainly succeeded in that," agreed Don Miguel. "Tell me, did you acquire all these in Jorque?"

"Many of them. Our great market—have you see it?—is

a fine hunting-ground for rarities. Indeed, I bought many of the items here—the gold and silver, at least—from Higgins. By the way, what news is there in that matter?"

"You hold no grudge against me, I trust, for having acted a little—rashly," suggested Don Miguel.

"No grudge at all, of course. I see perfectly that you had to act as you did. The smuggling of temporal contraband is a very serious matter, I know; I've been looking into the question of the tenuous arguments of the philosophers, I am fully aware of the risks attached to it."

Don Miguel repressed a desire to frown. That choice of words seemed inapposite. Or apposite. He was very glad he had set out this evening.

The strong wine was affecting him a little, on an empty stomach. He waved aside the Guinea-girl when she came to offer him more.

"No, so far we have made little progress," he said. "It appears that Higgins was bewitched into forgetting the name and looks of the man who sold the mask to him. The best efforts of our inquisitors have not broken down the barrier in his memory."

He watched closely to see if there was any change of expression on Don Arcimboldo's face at the news; none was visible.

"But it puzzles me," said Don Arcimboldo reflectively, his hand caressing the cut-glass goblet in which his wine was served, "how anyone could have acquired the mask in the first place. As far as I can see, it would have had to be a Licentiate, would it not?"

"Possibly not," said Don Miguel, giving a shrug. "It is known that certain outsiders, not of the Society, have been taken into the past lately—having oiled sufficient palms, of course."

Don Arcimboldo raised his eyebrows. "Indeed! I believed that your Licentiates were incorruptible."

"It would seem not. Thirty at least are known to have accepted bribes." There! That was a direct jab. But in vain Don Miguel sought a sign that it had struck home.

"Almost, I find it in my heart to envy these outsiders," said Don Arcimboldo, and gave a grin which conveyed engaging frankness. "For I must admit I have yearned to walk among the people to whom the rare and beautiful things I so much admire were almost commonplace—modern! But I fear that even if I were to overcome my natural revulsion gainst infringement of such a basic law, I would find it an expensive business to indulge that yearning."

Don Miguel found himself oddly at a loss. There was a ring of great sincerity in Don Arcimboldo's words. He said uncertainly, "I am glad that you say so. It seems to me in the last degree wrong that the marvel of time-travel should be degraded to a mere spectacle."

Don Arcimboldo shifted confortably in his chair. "On the other hand," he said reflectively, "I suppose there is some reason to say that—provided, always provided, that the rule regarding non-interference is strictly kept—others than Licentiates might be accorded the privilege of visiting the past."

Don Miguel shook his head. "But who, except Licentiates, could one trust to—?" he began. Seeing the flaw in his argument, he broke off. Don Arcimboldo chuckled.

"Yes! Yes! On your own admission, Don Miguel, it has now turned out that even your Licentiates are not to be altogether trusted. Although, I have no doubt, they charge a very stiff price, and do their best to see that their—uh—clients keep the rules."

Don Miguel felt that somehow he had been bested in a subtle dispute. He rose nervously to his feet and began to walk back and forth on the soft, expensive carpets.

"Possibly," he said after a few moments of silence, "possibly in the end we shall be compelled to extend the scope of time licences. Possibly we shall find a means of bringing objects out of the past which does not entail changing history."

"As far as I can find out," said Don Arcimboldo, "changing history is highly theoretical—up to now. How can one tell whether history was in fact changed by the contraband importation of that mask, for example? One can't. Our idea

of 'changing history' actually consists in changing the written record of history, does it not?"

"Partly. Not entirely."

Don Arcimboldo paused to see if the other was going to add anything. When he did not, he rose to his feet also. "Well, as I said, this is all too deep for non-experts like myself. Tell me, was there any special business about which you came to see me?"

Don Miguel debated for a moment with himself. His original resolution was fading; he was no longer so sure that he was right. He covered his hesitation by staring thoughtfully at a fine Saxon buckle of hammered gold, set with garnets, that occupied a shelf among the books on the wall.

Well, it was risky—but if he did not stake his hopes on this deduction, he might go on hesitating for ever. He said, "Yes, Don Arcimboldo. There was. I wished to ask you why you gave such an expensive present to the Marquesa."

Don Arcimboldo looked taken aback. He spread his hands. "Don Miguel!" he said reproachfully. "I think you have no right to pose me so personal a question."

"You leave me no alternative but to command you, then," said Don Miguel, and drew his documents from a pouch at his belt. "My commission is under the seal of the Prince of New Castile."

Don Arcimboldo scowled. "I suppose I have to answer, then. I think it is ungracious and unmannerly. Why do you wish to know this?"

Don Miguel drew a deep breath and turned to face the other. He said, "You must have had a reason for doing this. Because you were heavily in debt to Higgins, and you would not lightly have paid him for that mask, nor would he lightly have sold it to you."

Don Arcimboldo half-turned his head away, so that his face was shadowed. His voice was cold and distant. He said, "So you have been prying into my personal affairs."

"I was commanded to," said Don Miguel, and waited.

Don Arcimboldo picked up a delicately wroung silver chain

from a shelf near him, and let it swing between his fingers as though absent-mindedly. He said, "Very well, then. Yes, it is true that I owed Higgins a good deal of money. But it is not true that he would not have extended me further credit. After all, Don Miguel, I am far from being a poor man."

"Are you?" said Don Miguel glacially.

"What do you mean?" Don Arcimboldo flushed and spoke in a harsh tone. The swinging chain did not vary its pendulum-like motion. "Think you that this around you is the home of a poor man?"

"Yes."

Don Arcimboldo sighed. "I yield, I yield. That also is a sort of truth. I will tell you, then, why I gave the mask to the Marquesa. I hoped that she would loan me a sum to rescue me from my temporary—temporary!—difficulties."

The chain went on swinging. There was silence. Don Miguel allowed the silence to stretch. And after a little while, Don Arcimboldo's self-possession began to crack. He looked first puzzled, then alarmed. When his alarm was acute enough, Don Miguel spoke out.

"No use, Don Arcimboldo! Before I came here, I spent an hour in talk with an inquisitor, who is expert in this work. I have taken an antidote which countered the drug you gave me in that very good wine. So you cannot lull my mind with your swinging chain and bewitch me into forgetfulness—as you served Higgins!"

The last phrase came out like the lash of a whip. Don Arcimboldo let fall his hands; white-faced, he whispered, "I—I do not understand!"

"Don't you? I do. This is how it happened. You decided to join those fortunate outsiders who have bribed Licentiates to take them into the past. It was, as you yourself said, an expensive business. Yet you persisted. You ran into debt with Higgins—an undignified situation! He may have become eager for his money. Doubtless your original plan was to smuggle a valuable item of contraband back from one of your illicit trips and offer it to Higgins in settlement of your debt. Then you reconsidered. Higgins was an upright man—too

upright to accept contraband. So you chose a subtler way out of your corner.

"You deluded him into believing that he had bought the mask from someone else. No wonder he cannot remember who it was! One cannot remember a nonexistent person, after all. But you did not get to his clerks, Don Arcimboldo. I have spoken to those clerks. Even the clerk who keeps the stock-list for his master does not know of the mask. And you gave it, then, to the Marquesa, knowing that she would show it off to all the world, and that sooner or later someone would deduce it was contraband. Then you could play the innocent dupe, and Higgins would suffer the penalty for trading in contraband—thus preventing him from dunning you further, of course.

"I was almost deceived. A few moments ago, indeed, I was ready to believe that I had made a mistake—until you made a worse one, and started to try and bewitch me with that silver chain. The inquisitor with whom I passed time this afternoon warned me about such tricks. Then I was certain, and am now."

Don Arcimboldo cast the silver chain violently to the floor. "It's a pack of lies!" he said harshly. "What's more, you'll never convince anyone else except yourself."

"That is a risk I'm prepared to take," said Don Miguel stonily. He jerked his sword from its scabbard. "I arrest you, by the authority vested in me, and desire you to go with me to face trial. You may have met one corrupt Licentiate, Don Arcimboldo—but learn from this that some of us take our rules seriously. After all, we are meddling with the very fabric of the universe."

VII

THE VACANT space between the crystal pillars hummed faintly; those present in the hall shifted in their chairs, wiping

their faces occasionally. It was always warm in the neighborhood of the crystal pillars when a traveler was about to return.

The Prince of New Castile seemed worse affected than anyone by the heat, and grunted and muttered to himself. Abruptly he could not stand it any longer, and snapped his thick fingers at the attentive aide standing nearby.

"Wine!" he said thickly. "The heat is awful."

"Yes, Your Highness," said the aide alertly. "And for the company as well?"

"Father Ramón? Red Bear? You want wine?" the Prince barked.

Red Bear moved his long Indian face once in a gesture of acceptance, but Father Ramón did not move. After a pause, the Prince waved to the aide to hurry.

"Think you it is well done, Father Ramón?" he snapped.

Father Ramón seemed to come back to the present from a very long time away. He sketched a brief smile, turning to look at the Prince.

"Well done?" he parried. "As well done as we may do, I suppose. At least we know that the golden mask has been restored; whether the restoration itself was wise and necessary or not, we can but guess."

Red Bear snorted. "If you had doubts of the wisdom of the act, why give me so much trouble over it?"

"We must always doubt our own wisdom," said Father Ramón peaceably. He raised a hand toward the crystal pillars. "I think the moment is upon us."

The technicians on duty around the hall had tensed to their positions. Now, suddenly, there was a clap like thunder and a smell of raw heat, and in the space between the pillars a shape appeared. A curious shape of iron and silver bars, that seemed to glow for a moment as energy washed out of their substance in the process of their turning back to right angles with normal dimensionality.

In the middle of the frame, a figure was seen to collapse.

Father Ramón jerked to his feet. "Be swift!" he ordered the technicians. "He has been long about his task!"

The technicians moved—some to dismantle the frame of metal bars, others to help Don Miguel to his feet and stumble with him to a couch that stood waiting. Slaves hastened to fetch restoratives and basins of clean water to rinse his face and hands.

Only a few minutes had passed in the hall since the moment when Don Miguel had shifted into the past. But it was plain that for him much time had gone by; his skin was burnt with sun to the color of leather, and his eyes were red and flamed with dust. The General Officers gathered anxiously about his couch, wondering how gravely he had suffered.

Not very, it transpired. For having accepted a sip of stimulating liquor, he waved aside further attentions and struggled to sit up. He passed his tongue over sun-chapped lips and spoke thickly.

"It is done," he said, and looked about him in wonder. His mind was still whirling with the memory of the great city of Texcoco burning in tropic daylight, as his body was still clad only in the breech-clout of an Indian of that time. The slaves had started to wash away the painted symbols from his face, but had not completed their task.

The General Officers breathed a sigh of relief. Red Bear said harshly, "You are certain?"

"Indeed I am. I found the workshop of Hungry Dog without trouble, at a time when he was working on the very mask I had brought back. When it was complete, it waited in his shop for the festival at which it was to be dedicated with sacrifices to the great god Tezcatlipoca. I waited until the time of that festival. And the day before it, a man came to the shop and went away with the mask."

"Was it Don Arcimboldo?" demanded the Prince.

"Perhaps."

"Aren't you sure?" The Prince leaned forward angrily, with reproaches boiling on his tongue-tip; Father Ramón laid a hand restrainingly on his arm.

"Don Miguel has done well," he said.

"How do you mean?" the Prince said, blinking.

"Why, if he had given himself away to Don Arcimboldo,

then Don Arcimboldo would have recognized him on meeting him again. This did not happen. Therefore it was correct to hide from him."

"So I reasoned," said Don Miguel, laying his head tiredly in his hands. "Therefore, when I saw that the mask was gone, I replaced it. I stayed long enough to make sure that it was dedicated at the festival as planned. And—here I am."

The Prince breathed a sigh of gusty relief. "Is it now in order, Father Ramón?" he demanded.

"As far as we can tell."

"Good! Then I must go back to New Castile; had it not been for this affair, I had planned to leave Londres days gone. All else will be attended to, I take it."

He gave Don Miguel a curt nod, spun on his heel, and was gone from the hall with cloak flying and aides trotting at his heels. After a thoughtful pause, Red Bear also took his leave, and Father Ramón was alone in the hall with Don Miguel and the silent, scurrying technicians.

"How do you feel now?" said the Jesuit eventually.

"I begin to recover," said Don Miguel, and reached for another sip of the restorative. "My hurt is rather in my mind than my body. I was witness to the sacrifice to Tezcatlipoca less than a day ago, and I am still nauseated."

The Jesuit nodded.

"It sometimes makes me wonder," said Don Miguel in a hesitant tone, "what blindness we also may be guilty of."

Father Ramón gave him an odd sideways glance. "Go on, my son," he invited.

"Well—what I mean is this. For all their fine work in gold, their masonry, their social discipline, those Aztecs I have been among were savages, habituated to sacrificing men by the score in the most cruel manner. For all that they understood the motion of the stars and planets, they never used the wheel save to move children's toy animals. We are superior in some ways—in many ways, perhaps. And yet we may have our blindnesses. Although Borromeo showed us how we might rotate the dimensions of substances so that the world became flat and we could voyage back into time,

although we live in a peaceful world free of much of the horror of war—nonetheless, what things may we not be using for children's toys, that later ages may marvel at and put to use?"

"Yes," said Father Ramón, looking unseeing at the frame of iron and silver which the technicians were now dismantling. And then he repeated more slowly, "Ye-es . . ."

"What is perhaps worse still," Don Miguel continued, "is that we—unworthy as we are—have the power to re-shape the history of Earth! So far, we have managed to confine that power to a few fairly reliable individuals. But thirty corrupt Licentiates—if this figure was accurate—could in their overweening confidence wreck history back to the moment of Creation!"

He spread his hands. "How see you this, Father? It's a question for you, not for a layman."

Father Ramón seemed to draw himself together inside his habit. "We have free will, my son. Therefore it is up to us to do as we will with what we have been given. Only—"

Don Miguel broke in, suddenly incredulous. "But Father! Here is—oh, how have I never seen this before? With time-travel, would it not be possible for agents of evil to go back in time and undo the good consequences of the acts of others? Would it not even be possible for such persons to corrupt the great men of the past, deliberately?"

"You are astute," said Father Ramón soberly. "It has been debated whether indeed the influence of evil that we see in history may not be the working out of just such interference as you suggest—whether in fact the fall of the angels hurled out of heaven may have been a fall into the past, rather than a fall through space. But this is the deepest of all theological questions today."

"I'm glad you say so," said Don Miguel with a trace of irony, and wondered at his own audacity in being ironical with a General Officer of the Society. Yet for all his reputation as a philosopher living in the rarefied regions of metaphysics, Father Ramón seemed singularly approachable. He

added, "I myself do not see how such a question could be answered at all."

"You mean—whether or not the good results of men's acts could be wiped out by temporal interference? Good, of course, cannot be destroyed, and it is heretical to think it can."

The edge of sharp reproof on the Jesuit's voice cut Don Miguel's self-confidence to ribbons. He said humbly, "But then, Father, that makes nonsense of the idea of deliberate interference for evil ends."

"Not altogether." The Jesuit rose to his feet, seeming to come to a decision. "When you are rested, visit me in my private office. I think you deserve some information you have not been given."

Father Ramón's bare office had two chairs in it—one hard, one soft. He was himself sitting in the hard one when Don Miguel entered, and indicated that the other was for visitors. Don Miguel sat down uncertainly, wondering what the knowledge might be that was to be imparted to him.

Father Ramón offered him tobacco and a pipe, which he refused with a shake of the head, and then leaned back, putting his finger-tips together.

"Consider what makes an act of free will free," he said.

The suddenness of the question took Don Miguel aback. He stammered a confused answer which Father Ramón ignored.

"No, it lies in this. That all the possible alternatives be fulfilled."

"*What?*"

"Precisely that. If there is free will—and we hold that there is—all our acts of decision must in fact be fulfilled in just so many ways as there are alternatives. Thus to kill and not to kill and merely to wound more or less seriously—*all* these must follow upon a choice between them."

"But I do not see that! There—there is no *room* for that to be true!"

"No?" The other sketched his habitual faint smile. "Then

think on this. You go into the past. You abstract a crucial object—shall we say, a bullet from a gun aimed by an assassin at a king? You return to the present with that object. A king may change history by living or dying. Would you return to the same present as that which you left?"

"I begin to understand," said Don Miguel slowly, his voice shaking.

"Then suppose you return and restore that bullet to its place. The king dies—*again*, so to speak. And the present to which you come after doing thus, is the original present."

"But this must have been done!"

"It has," said the Jesuit calmly. "We have been doing it for more than forty years."

"How about the rule of non-interference, then?" cried Don Miguel, feeling his universe reel about him. "Are the corrupt Licentiates not the only ones who are corrupt?"

"There is no corruption in this matter. Those Licentiates who have taken bribes and carried outsiders into the past were confident that they could undo any stupid act by their clients. Indeed, most of them have scrupulously undone them. He who was Don Arcimboldo's accomplice did not know about the golden mask, or doubtless he would have forbidden Don Arcimboldo to take it away. From fear, of course. We all fear the consequences of interfering with history."

"But if all this is true," said Don Miguel in a choking voice, "then—what does it matter if we interfere or not? We ourselves may be only a fluid cohesion of possibilities, subject to change at the whim of someone who chooses not to keep the non-interference rule."

"True," said Father Ramón stonily. "That is a logical consequence of there being free will."

There was silence. Eventually Don Miguel said, "I suppose this might be foreseen by anyone who worked out carefully what kind of a universe Borromeo's discovery opened to us."

"We may give thanks that up to now, few people have thought the matter through." Father Ramón smiled again.

"Well, Don Miguel Navarro! How do you like the universe we live in?"

"I do not," said Don Miguel, and was at a loss for words to describe the sense of impermanence, volatility and changeableness that the other's words had instilled in him.

"Nonetheless," said Father Ramón dryly, "this is how things stand. Go you now to Red Bear and report on your trip for him. And do not speak lightly of what I have told you. For if this truth were to become known to those who are not ready for it—why, the sky would fall!"

When Don Miguel turned and walked to the door, he was surprised to find the floor still firm beneath his feet.

PART TWO: THE WORD NOT WRITTEN

I

THE QUATROCENTENNIAL YEAR was dying in a blaze of glory. The weather had been kind, and New Year's Eve proved to be fine and mild, spiced with a wind whose nip was just enough to sharpen the step to briskness and put color in the faces of the people. Bonfires had been lit at sunset in most of the main streets of Londres, and around them nut vendors, potato bakers and kebab men with their rapier-like skewers laden with alternate lumps of meat, kidney and onion cried their hot wares.

There had been a great mock battle on the Thames as dusk fell; people had flocked in their thousands to witness the finest reconstruction ever presented of the battle between the all-conquering Armada and the gallant but pitiful English ships, four hundred years ago.

Even yet there were a few diehards in the crowd who cried insults at the display, shouting that it was shameful to them and their ancestors. But most of the spectators answered with jeers, for they regarded themselves as subjects of the Empire regardless of what blood happened to flow in their veins. Soon enough the civil guards quieted the complaints, and the loyal shout that greeted the appearance of His Most Catholic Majesty Philip IX, *Rey y Imperador,* when his golden barge hove in sight, echoed across all Londres.

Smiling, bowing graciously from side to side, King Philip was rowed over the same water that shortly before had been full of the mock battle. Another barge followed, bearing the Prince Imperial, his Princess, and their children, and behind

that again came the barge of the Prince of New Castile. The King's barge had sixteen oars aside; those of his sons had twelve, and at one of the oars sweated and cursed Don Miguel Navarro, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society of Time.

Whoever the blazes had thought up this delicate tribute to the royal family, he muttered to himself, ought by simple justice to have been pulling on the oars too. But it was fairly certain that he wasn't. He was probably simpering and dancing attendance on the King or the Prince Imperial.

Even if they were going with the stream, it nonetheless called for real rowing to keep up with the King's barge, as it had eight more oars and was anyway less heavily laden. As a gesture of loyalty the idea was splendid; as a job of work it was abominable.

The notion had started innocently enough. As Commander of the Society of Time, the Prince of New Castile was going to play host this New Year's Eve to his father, elder brother, and a raft of foreign dignitaries, chief among them the Ambassador of the Confederacy of Europe. It was certainly a great and signal honor for the Society to be chosen as the focus for the climax of the quatrocentennial year, but like a good many royal favors it had its drawbacks. Don Miguel was in no mood for merrymaking anyway, what with the aftermath of the recent revelations he had had from Father Ramón about the actual nature of his work in the Society, but at least among personal friends and at his own discretion he might have passed a pleasant enough New Year's Eve. As things stood, he was going to have to follow up this chore on the river with an evening of making like a host to all kinds of noble idiots at the Commander's palace in Greenwich. He could tell that he was not alone among the younger Licentiates on the rowers' benches in thinking that this might prove unendurable.

Probably the crowds that watched the splendid water-procession from the embankments guessed nothing of all this. Probably, when the spectacle was over, they dispersed sighing, thinking of the magnificence of the royal occasion and envying those fortunate enough to be present. Con-

versely, Don Miguel and his companions sat scowling by their oars, envying the simple folk going off to spend New Year's Eve with their families or to join the revels which would make the streets noisy and bright until dawn.

"You'd think," he growled, selecting one of the many discomforts that plagued him, "that in a Prince's barge they'd at least pad the seats decently."

His opposite number on the other side of the boat, another Licentiate of about his own age whose name was Don Felipe Basso, curled his lip. "It's clear where you'd rather be tonight, Miguel!" he answered in a low tone.

"Macedonia was better than this," Don Miguel muttered. A surge of memory drew up the side of his face where his smile was permanently twisted by a Greek hoplite's sword-stroke; it had been on that field-trip to the Macedonia of Alexander the Great that he had first made the acquaintance of Felipe.

"Don Miguel! Keep the time!"

From his post in the stern Don Arturo Cortés rapped the order in his shrill, acid voice. Seated in his most magnificent plum-colored cloak and snow-white velvet breeches on a velvet and gilt chair, he was making the most of his task as overseer of the amatur rowers. He was one of the senior Licentiates of the Society below General Officer rank, and widely tipped to succed the Mohawk, Red Bear, as Director-in-Chief of Fieldwork. Somewhere he had acquired a Genral Officer's wand which he was using at the moment as a baton to beat time for the oars. It was typical of his overweening self-esteem to make such a presumptuous gesture.

Don Miguel bit back his answer—he was altogether too close alongside the tapestry pavilion in which the Prince was sitting to speak louder than a whisper without being overheard and perhaps ticked off—and leaned harder on his oar. But when Don Arturo's attention had wandered again, Felipe spoke softly.

"He doesn't seem to like you, Miguel."

"Who Don Arturo? That makes us even. I don't like him either."

"A little faster still!" Don Arturo rasped now, rising to

his feet with his wand conspicuous in his hand. "We're falling further behind!"

By the time the barge was gentled in to the wharf near the Commander's palace, Don Miguel's buttocks were bruised, his hands were rubbed sore by the oars, and his temper was close to flashpoint. Face like thunder, he sat on his bench and watched Don Arturo with his usual officiousness directing the disembarkation of the Prince. With part of his mind, however, he was wondering whether out of sheer self-interest he ought to try and counter the dislike to which Felipe had referred. It was obvious where it had its source—in the affair of the stolen Aztec mask in which he had recently got himself involved. Everyone seemed to think he had handled it rather well. Indeed, he was wearing tonight for the first time at any Society function the outward sign of the Commander's approval, the gem-encrusted collar and star of the Order of the Scythe and Hourglass which cynical old Borromeo had chosen as the Society's emblem.

It crossed his mind that if he had played his cards right he might have used this new honor as a way of escaping duty on the rower's bench. But it was not in his nature to think of things like that at times when they might be useful.

Don Arturo's reputation for being suspicious of any younger member of the Society who made himself too noticeable was being amply borne out by the way he had been treating Don Miguel lately. Simply for his own comfort, Don Miguel reasoned, he would be well advised to deal courteously with Don Arturo.

But he wasn't going to do it this evening. Not after the performance Don Arturo had given aboard the barge.

"Are you going to sit here all night, Miguel?" Don Felipe said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Have you suddenly found a liking for that badly padded seat?"

Don Miguel sighed and roused himself. "I suppose not," he said. He gave a rueful glance at his hands. "Why did I not bring leather-palmed gloves with me instead of my best white silk pair which the oar would have rubbed to shreds?

Ah well—how long shall we have to wait before we find a drink here?"

The Prince was ashore now. The wharf had been carpeted with purple, and a pathway of the same material led up over the rolling green lawn towards the main portico of the palace. Either side of the carpet, huge immobile Guinea-men stood with flaring torches to light the way; candles in colored glass balls had been hung like fairy fruit on the branches of the trees and glowed red, yellow, green, white, among artificial leaves. Every window of the palace was ablaze with light except for the upper two floors where the servants and slaves had their quarters under the eaves, and the higher windows of the great central tower where the Commander's own time apparatus was lodged. Don Miguel had a sinking feeling that before the night was out someone at least would have been persuaded to take a royal or noble visitor up that tower and show off the gadgetry, involving the technicians in a day's frantic work tomorrow to re-adjust all the delicate settings.

The strains of a band playing the currently fashionable dance-music drifted down from the palace. There was a fad for the chanted melodic lines and intense drumming of the Mohawks, and as Prince of New Castile, of course, the Commander could have the finest of American muscians at call.

Distantly visible through the huge windows flanking the entrance door of the main hall Don Miguel made out the General Officers of the Society, waiting to greet the King, who by now was almost at the door. Red Bear, with his black braided hair, was instantly identifiable.

Surrounded by a gaggle of courtiers, the two royal brothers and the Princess Imperial went up towards the house. Their faces eloquent of their suspicion that these high-ranking amateurs might have done the valuable barges some harm, the Society's watermen were taking over the potbellied craft again, to paddle them back to the boathouses. Most of the temporary rowers had already started in the princes' wake.

"Move, you two!" Sharper than ever, Don Arturo came

bustling across the wharf waving his wand. "Don't you see that mooring must be cleared? There on the river is the barge of the Ambassador of the Confederacy—we dare not keep him waiting!"

Don Miguel shrugged and might have answered back, but Don Felipe sensibly warned him against it by closing his fingers hard on his upper arm. Together they stepped ashore, and the watermen hastily shoved off to make room for the new arrivals.

"Come on up to the palace now, Miguel," Don Felipe urged. "We don't want to get fouled up in the Ambassador's train as it lands."

"I suppose not." Don Miguel tore his dull gaze away from the looming, lantern-outlined shape moving with splashing oars down the river toward them, and started to walk up the lawn. "Are you expecting to enjoy this evening, Felipe?"

"Me? I can enjoy myself anywhere. But you look as though the hand of doom had been laid on you."

"I know where it's been laid, too," Don Miguel said ruefully, rubbing the seat of his breeches. "Ah, to Hades with it all! Let's make the most of it, what say?"

Don Felipe laughed and linked arms with his old friend, and hurried him up the slope towards the lighted palace.

II

THERE WAS a peculiar and unexpected air of confusion in the main hall of the palace, gorgeously decorated and remarkably warm—which had the minor advantage, from the point of view of most of the younger Licentiates, that the beautiful women present could show themselves off in their lightest and filmiest gowns. The confusion stemmed from the fact that guests were arriving from both sides: the river approach, and the roadway as well. Consequently every few moments a tall Guinea-man would lead a surge of

notables one way or the other across the already crowded hall so that they could greet a newcomer as protocol demanded.

The sight of this swirl and bustle raised Don Miguel's low spirits a little. With such a shifting of people it was conceivable that he might be overlooked, and could slip away to some quiet anteroom and savor his mood of gloom in private with a jug of wine. He made a meaningless response to some comment of Don Felipe's on the quality of the women here, his eyes roving around for his best line of escape.

And then his name was called.

His spirits sank again as he turned and saw Red Bear making an imperious gesture to him on his way from the river entrance—where the Amabassador from the Confederacy had just come in—towards the opposite door. He could hardly ignore that. He moved in Red Bear's wake and Don Felipe came with him.

"I think we're going to be honored," Don Felipe said softly as they hurried forward. "Do you see who that is who has just turned up?"

The majordomo at the land entrance had a fine voice, but the babble of conversation and the noise of the band made it hard to hear what names he called out. A group of three—a man and two girls—were pausing in the center of the wide double doorway.

"I don't know them," Don Miguel was going to say, when Red Bear, greeting the trio, turned and made another imperious gesture at them. He and Don Felipe strode forward and bowed.

"Your Grace, I have the pleasure of presenting Don Felipe Basso, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society"—you had the feeling that this formality and routine appealed to Red Bear, with his Mohawk background—"and Don Miguel Navarro, Licentiate in Ordinary, Companion of the Order of the Scythe and Hourglass. Don Miguel, Don Felipe: His Grace the Duke of Scania, Ambassador of the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norroway. The Lady Ingeborg; the Lady Kristina."

His daughters, presumably. Bowing again, Don Miguel took a second look at them. They were very much alike in most respects, and also very much like the Duke—tall, slender, with the shining fair hair which on their father's fine head was turning to snow-white. Their eyes were large and blue, and their complexions were like milk. Their gowns were clearly designed by a master; without ornament or embroidery they managed to look dazzling and put the finery of most of the other women to shame.

"Honored," Don Miguel said, and heard how much more enthusiasm Don Felipe was putting into the same word.

"Don Miguel, Don Felipe," Red Bear was saying, "I charge you with the duty which I'm sure you'll find a pleasant one of escorting these beautiful ladies for the evening."

There could be no doubt of Don Felipe's agreement. With a tremendous flourish he bowed again, grinning like a cat, and the Lady Ingeborg's eyes danced. Don Miguel, on the other hand, felt like a boor as he muttered some empty answer. It was not that the Lady Kristina, opposite whom he had happened to find himself, was not extremely lovely. It was simply that in his present mood the last kind of company he had been looking for was that of an emancipated girl. His near-disastrous brush with the Marquesa di Jorque had set him against female emancipation for the time being, and all his friends who had trifled with girls from Norroway had informed him that they liked—no, demanded!—to be treated as at home. He had never been in Sweden or Norroway, which formed a curious private northern enclave where the people determinedly minded their own affairs and ignored the rivalries of the Empire and the Confederacy. But he did know that under their system women were even entitled to vote for the members of the Thing, and this was almost alarmingly different from the usual way of running public life.

And that this was not all talk was shown by the fact that no other girls of such rank would conceivably have arrived at an affair like this without at least a duenna apiece and probably half-a-dozen ladies in attendance.

"I'm sure you'll be well looked after, my dears," the Duke said in excellent Spanish, smiling at his daughters. "Go ahead and enjoy yourselves. I've already seen several people I promised to have a word with tonight, so there's no need for anyone to look after me." He nodded at Red Bear.

Well . . .

The first steps were automatic; provision of refreshment, a few comments about how mild the weather had turned out, and something about the mock battle of the afternoon. And there it ran dry. For some reason Don Miguel's mind wandered off the subject of his sore hands and the hard rower's bench, and he found himself at the tail-end of a long and impolite silence. Don Felipe and Lady Ingeborg were chatting with immense animation on the other side of a large pillar where they all four seemed to have wound up. He was standing like a booby.

It was something of a relief when with true northern emancipation Lady Kristina decided to make good his deficiencies for him, and pointed at the star hanging on his ruffled shirt.

"Navarro," she said thoughtfully. "Of course. Aren't you the Don Miguel Navarro who was responsible for setting to rights that matter of the Aztec gold mask which could have been so disastrous?" She spoke Spanish as well as her father.

Somewhat uncomfortably, Don Miguel nodded. He said, "As a matter of fact—but how on earth did you know? It's not—uh—a matter of public record, exactly."

Lady Kristina gave a quicksilvery laugh. "Oh, your Empire-bred modesty, Don Miguel! Even if it wasn't explained in detail in all the newspapers, something which leads to the award of what you're wearing is bound to become a matter for gossip. And you must know that of all places, an embassy is where gossip, particularly scandalous gossip, comes most quickly home to roost."

She gave a mischievous grin, and Don Miguel felt a corresponding smile come lopsided to his own face. He said,

"In that case, my lady, I'm sure you have an absurdly exaggerated idea of what actually happened."

She shrugged the creamy bare shoulders that rose from her plain but exquisite gown. "Very probably. But I'm sure that if I were to ask you to tell me what actually did happen, you'd underplay your part in it grossly and persuade yourself that you were being honest."

The automatic, stiff, ridiculous words were already forming on Don Miguel's lips, triggered by the possibility that she was going to ask him to tell her about it, with the gushing flattery he would have expected from someone like—oh, Catalina di Jorque, for instance. He was going to say, "I'm afraid I can't talk about it. It's confidential to the Society of Time."

Barely in time he realized that she wasn't going to ask him to do anything of the sort, but was turning to find a place for the empty glass she held, and saying, "Well, if you're unwilling to converse with me, you might ask me to dance."

Somewhat disconcerted, he led her out on the floor. She was a very good dancer indeed. As they completed their first circle of the hall, they passed Don Felipe dancing with Lady Ingeborg, and over her beautiful shoulder Don Miguel saw his friend give a conspiratorial wink. Obviously Don Felipe had heard stories about northern girls—the so-called reformed religion of course had a lot to do with it, but it was probably mostly slanderous . . .

His mind made an abrupt jump. He stopped dead in mid-beat.

"What on earth—?" Lady Kristina began. She turned and followed Don Miguel's gaze. "Oh-oh!" she said under her breath. "Would you like to dodge out of sight?"

He did in fact want to dodge out of sight much too much to wonder why she should suggest it; automatically giving her his arm to lead her off the floor, he headed for one of the nearer side-passages leading away from the hall. It was not until they were safely around a corner that he completed his double-take and looked startled at her.

"Uh—I'm dreadfully sorry," he began.

"Why?"

"Well—to snatch you away like that. It was unforgivably rude. I must look an absolute boor."

She gave her quicksilver laugh again, this time throwing back her head and making the most of it. "My dear Don Miguel!" she exclaimed. "Let's work this out. Wasn't that just the Marquesa di Jorque that you saw arriving?"

He nodded.

"And exaggerated accounts or not," she pursued, "weren't you recently involved in something which showed to her detriment?"

He nodded again.

"And weren't you shaken to the core to find her suddenly appearing where you least anticipated her having been invited?"

He found his voice at last. "Yes, my lady," he said ruefully. "I can only imagine that someone—some friend of hers—has wangled her an invitation to make up for the way the Society recently snubbed her."

"So you very naturally want to keep out of her way. Well, here we are. Shall we find somewhere to sit down? I presume these rooms are open for us. And by the way, stop calling me 'my lady'—nobody ever calls me that at home except peasants and artisans. My name's Kristina." She was opening the nearest door and peeping through it. "Yes, how about this? And let's have some drinks, too."

Don Miguel, slightly dazed, caught up with her at that point. He glanced around, spotted a Guinea-girl carrying a tray of wine past the end of the passage, and called after her. She came obediently and served them with a curtsy.

Kristina took six glasses off the tray and ranged them on a handy table, somewhat to the Guinea-girl's surprise. When the slave moved to go, she looked after her. As the door closed, she said, "I think they're lovely. I wish I looked like her—so graceful. Don Miguel, I like you. You shock beautifully. It lights your face from inside like the candles in those glass globes they've put all over the trees."

She sat down on the end of a heavy-built padded sofa with gilt-tooled leather upholstery, and took the nearest glass of wine from the table. Don Miguel swallowed and tried to speak.

"Tell me," she went on, "you're plainly not enjoying yourself, and I hope that isn't my fault. If it is you only have to say so. But if it isn't, suppose you give me an idea—be honest, now—of what the rest of the evening will be like."

Don Miguel's defences suddenly crumbled. He sat down next to her. He couldn't help smiling, and the smile warmed his whole mind.

"To be completely honest," he said, "what will most likely happen is this. Red Bear, who has the Mohawk weakness for firewater, will probably decide at about nine or ten that he is a better drummer than the professional musicians. He will embarrass *everybody*. The Ambassador of the Confederacy will make slighting remarks about our celebrations, comparing them unfavorably with the winter carnival on the Neva. Everyone will drink furiously because the conversation keeps getting frozen in mid-run. Around midnight Father Ramón will arrive to celebrate Mass for the Society; those who are sober—and members of the Society; had better at least *look* sober!—will heave a sigh of relief and go to chapel. And after midnight, when the King and the Prince Imperial take their leave, there might be some fun with the younger Licentiates and the Probationers who are here. Most of them aren't. They're out in the city enjoying themselves, except for whichever poor fellows on duty at the Headquarters Office."

"I think I'd like to see some people who are enjoying themselves," Kristina said thoughtfully. "I suppose you have to be at this Mass at midnight, do you?"

Don Miguel nodded. "This is a great traditional occasion for the Society. All the members come. Even—" He bit the last word off short. That should never be mentioned to anyone, of course.

She took no notice. Rising with sudden determination to her feet, she said, "Miguel, let's go and be with people

having fun, shall we? There's plenty of time to go into Londres and get back for your–service at midnight, isn't there? How about seeing if you can find a carriage for us?"

Astonished almost beyond description, Don Miguel felt his jaw drop. Painfully raising it again, he said, "You know—that's an absolutely wonderful idea!"

III

THERE WAS NO doubt about it, Don Miguel thought contentedly—this was a far, far better way to spend New Year's Eve than in the Commander's palace—wandering among the crowds of merrymakers with a beautiful girl on his arm, doing idiotic things for no particular purpose behind the customary anonymity of half-masks bought from a peddler, and laughing more and more often than he could ever remember laughing in his life before. He was naturally a serious person. It occurred to him that perhaps he was habitually too serious.

They had left their carriage shortly after reaching the north side of the river. The had sampled hot chestnuts and hot spiced wine from stalls on wheels, paused to watch a tumbler and juggler for a while, looked in at a display of animals from Africa on Queen Isabella Avenue, joined in the rowdy singing of a troupe of street comedians. Now at last they had come to Empire Circle, where five ways met. Here a bonfire was spitting and snarling as people threw fireworks into it; a band was playing raucous traditional tunes, and people danced in the roadway with an abandon that gladdened the eye.

It had turned much colder in the past hour or so, and Kristina, with only a light carriage-cloak covering her flimsy gown, ran forward to the fire to warm her hands at it. She tossed her hair back and looked laughing up at him, her eyes sparkling behind her black mask.

"Ah, Miguel! I hadn't thought that the people of these

damp and misty islands knew so well how to amuse themselves!"

"Oh, it's their native good sense," Don Miguel said, smiling. "No matter how much our priests and prelates inveigh against these festivities, they go on nonetheless. Is it like this in your country?"

"It's colder in winter than it is here, but we do much the same things." She rubbed her hands together as they absorbed the radiant heat of the flames. "Why, Miguel, you look sad all of a sudden. What's wrong?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I was only thinking—" He hesitated. Normally he would not have spoken of what was in his mind to a young girl, but Kristina was considerably different from other girls of twenty he had met.

"I was thinking," he continued slowly, "of other festivals I've seen, at other places and times. The Aztec feast, for instance, in honor of Xipe the Flayed God, where the officiating priests were dressed in human skins, and there was ritual cannibalism after the victims had had their hearts torn out."

"You've seen that?"

"Yes, I've seen that. And the *Ludi* in the Circus Maximus in Rome, where men died by the hundreds to glut the blood-lust of the crowd. So I was thinking: although the prudish and prurient so roundly condemn this New Year merriment, it is at least more innocent than much of what has gone before. Surely in this respect at least the world is changing for the better."

"And it made you look sad to think that this is so?" Kristina probed mockingly.

"No. I was thinking of death coming to so many people for the entertainment of so many others." Don Miguel shrugged and looked around for something to distract him. It was out of keeping to voice such gloomy thoughts here and now.

"Ah, but I'm warm again!" Kristina said cheerfully after a moment, turning away from the blaze. "It's the dampness with the cold now which eats to the bones. How do you

suppose she endures it, for example?" She shook one arm free of her cloak and raised it to point across the circle.

For a moment he did not see what she meant, but a couple of youths standing nearby also caught the movement and looked up, and one of them whistled. "Look!" he nudged his companion. "Look there, I say. What do you make of that?"

His friend's eyes bulged. "Drunk, or mad, to behave like that!" he exclaimed. "Probably mad!"

"An interesting kind of madness," the first youth said.

Indeed, the subject of their remarks did appear to be out of her mind. For one thing, her costume—even for a night given over to fancy dress—was ridiculous. It appeared to consist of blue feathers pasted directly onto her smooth skin, on her hips and buttocks and on her belly as high as her navel. There were low red shoes on her feet; around her wrists there were bangles of various colours, and aside from that she wore only designs in yellow paint on her face, shoulders and breasts. She seemed to have emerged from the southward-leading avenue connecting Empire Circle with the river embankment, and was standing now in the middle of the roadway staring about her. She seemed both dazzled by the sudden brightness of the illumination here and dazed by her surroundings, for she looked wildly from side to side like an animal trapped and seeking a way of escape.

Ribald yells went up from the crowd and the noise of singing died as people turned to stare. Not far from Kristina and Don Miguel were a pair of civil guards; an indignant man of middle age, pointing furiously at the feathered girl, said something to one of them. Don Miguel did not catch the words, but the import was clear, for a grinning youth next to him bellowed, "Speak for yourself—some of us like to see 'em that way!"

It occurred to Don Miguel that the sight of someone so nearly unclothed was hardly fit for a duke's daughter, but the realization was somewhat belated, for Kristina, her pretty face set in a frown of curiosity, was staring intently at the

girl in the blue feathers. She said, "Do you know, Miguel, I have never seen such a costume before?"

Something clicked in Don Miguel's mind. The word *premonition* flickered through his thoughts.

A group of drunken workmen at the edge of the crowd nearest to where the feathered girl was standing had made up their minds now that if she came out in public half-naked she could expect what they had in view. Leering, they moved up to her, about five or six of them together. Tiger-wise, she paused in her frightened staring about and half-crouched to confront them.

"Kristina," Don Miguel said in a low voice, "I think I ought to get you away from here."

"You'd do much better," came the reply as tart as lemon juice, "to make these civil guards go and help that poor girl before those men rape her!"

She glared at him through her mask. Taken completely aback, he missed the next step in what was happening, but a sudden cry drew his attention back to the edge of the circle. He saw to his amazement that one of the workmen was lying on his back on the hard ground, and the girl was in the process of hurling another of her assailants over her shoulder in a perfect wrestling throw.

"Oh, lovely!" Kristina clapped her hands, then caught Don Miguel by the arm. "Come on, let's go and cheer her!"

But the ferment of Kristina's earlier remark was working in Don Miguel's mind now. Never seen such a costume before . . .

What was he doing standing here like a petrified dummy? He started to shoulder his way toward the feathered girl as violently and quickly as he dared.

Ignoring the many complaints from those he pushed aside, he made his way to within a few paces of the girl, Kristina keeping up with him somehow. By now two more men had joined the first, bruised and cursing on the ground, and the girl was spitting insults at them. Her voice was almost as deep and strong as a man's. Listening, Don Miguel felt the hairs on his nape prickle.

The girl was small and thin, but wiry. She had—he could see now that he was close enough—black hair dressed in stiff wings on either side of her square head. Her complexion was olive-sallow. And the words she had uttered had sounded like—*like,* not the same as—the language of Cathay.

Don Miguel was as well acquainted with the costumes, behavior and languages of the major civilizations of history as any Licentiate of similar experience, and better than most. He could make himself understood in Attic Greek and Quechua, Phoenician and Latin, Persian and Aramaic. He could also recognize the characteristic vowel-consonant clusters of many other tongues which he did not speak fluently. And what the girl had hissed at her assailants did not fit any language he could call to mind.

There was a slim chance that she was a legitimate visitor to Londres, perhaps a member of the Cathayan ambassador's suite. But he doubted that. He was suddenly so doubtful of everything about this girl that he did not believe she had a right to exist.

The horrible possibilities implied by his suspicion—it could not be called more than a suspicion—made him for a moment completely forgetful of everything else. Leaving Kristina to take care of herself, he strode forward.

The feathered girl spun to face him, taking him in her panic for a new attacker, and before he could even utter a tentative phrase in the Cathayan language, she had sprung at him.

Barely in time he reacted. She was not merely a wrestler—she was a killing fighter, fantastic though that was in view of her sex. Her first move had been to launch a crippling kick at Don Miguel's crotch; her toe landed on his thigh instead and caused him to lose his footing so that he had to go down on one knee, fending her off upwards, and she seized his right arm at wrist and elbow and attempted to bend the elbow-joint back so it would dislocate.

Pivoting on his prisoned arm and his knee, he swept his other leg through half a circle and kicked her feet from under her. Astonished, she lost her grip on his arm and fell sideways.

He brought his leg back and laid its weight on her neck so as to hold her down for long enough to gather himself and throw himself on top of her. She made to sink her teeth into his calf.

Snatching his leg back from the pain, he managed to fall forward nonetheless, and pinned her wrists and one leg to the ground in an improvised but serviceable hold, half-sitting, half-kneeling. Then by main force he started to bring her wrists together.

She said nothing, but set her teeth and stared up at him, fighting to break his grip. During that long moment Don Miguel found time to hope grimly that there were no Probationers of the Society of Time in the crowd around, yelling crude approval at his success. If there was anything more undignified that a Licentiate could do than wrestle with a woman in the middle of Empire Circle, he couldn't imagine it.

All right, he was going to have to hurt her. There was no alternative, however much it went against his principles. He shifted his fingers on her wrists and stabbed down at the ganglia.

The shock went all the way through her. She forgot about resistance for long enough to allow him to seize both wrists in one hand and hold them, still applying the painful pressure. With the hand thus released, he sought the carotid arteries in her thin throat and scientifically began to strangle her.

In fifteen seconds she was limp; he gave her ten seconds more to ensure that she would not recover too quickly, and then sat back wearily on his heels. He wiped sweat from his forehead. Mingled now with the egging-on cries of the crowd he detected voices of complaint, perhaps at his ruthless treatment of the feathered girl; those people should have had to tackle her. But a nasty situation might develop unless it were checked at once. Where were those civil guards he had seen standing near the fire? As the saying went, when you needed a guard you never could find one—

Ah, here they were, the crowd jeering at them as they made their way over. He got to his feet.

"Make these people stand back!" he ordered crisply. "Fetch a hackney-carriage and help me to get this girl into it!"

The civil guards, taken aback, exchanged glances. One of them with bristling mustachios said, "Who do you think *you* are?" His hand fell to his sabre-hilt.

Don Miguel drew a deep breath. "Will you do as I say? I'm Don Miguel Navarro of the Society of Time, and this is Society business! Jump to it!"

The scar across his face made him look savage and very much to be obeyed. But it was the talisman-like name of the Society which made the guards blanch, and many of those in the crowd as well. There was a startled hush followed by a ripple of comment. Then the guards moved.

Don Miguel took off his cloak and laid it over the girl on the ground; she was stirring a little but had not recovered consciousness. Maybe he ought to tie her hands and ankles; he found a handkerchief and knelt to attend to the task. As he was feeling for a second means of tying her, something was dangled before his eyes. He glanced up. Kristina had somehow eluded the civil guards and was offering him the girdle of her gown. He took it with a word of thanks.

"Who is she?" Kristina demanded. "Why did you knock her out?"

"I don't know who she is," Don Miguel said grimly. "But if she's what I suspect, there's going to be the devil to pay tonight."

IV

IN THE DARK padded interior of the carriage they sat mostly in silence, staring at the cloak-shrouded form of the girl on the opposite seat as successive scythe-sweeps of light from roadside lanterns moved over her.

Suddenly Kristina shivered and pressed up against Don Milguel. She said, "Miguel, what did you mean when you

said you thought there would be the devil to pay tonight? You spoke so fiercely it was frightening."

Already Don Miguel regretted that he had spoken. After all he had nothing to go on but guesswork. He said, "If you don't mind, Kristina, I'd rather say no more until I've found out the real facts."

She looked round at him, lips a little parted as though about to ask another question, but deciding not to. Don Miguel sweated and wished that the driver would hurry. Guesswork or not, this feathered girl scared him. That costume was none he recognized; the words she had uttered were subtly wrong. Which could mean—which might mean . . . He choked off the thought.

The carriage wheeled with a grating of iron tires on cobbles and came into the forecourt of the Society's Headquarters Office. Like the Commander's palace, it was set in its own grounds fronting the river, but unlike the palace it was all in darkness tonight, except for a single yellow square of a window on the ground floor near the main door. Dropping from the step of the carriage as it halted, Don Miguel swore. Tonight, naturally, only the duty Probationer would be here—and just, just barely, possibly the man he needed to see more desperately than anyone in the world.

"Get the girl out!" he rapped to the driver. "I'll have the door opened."

The man nodded and climbed down from his high seat, while the horses shifted uneasily in the traces. Don Miguel started up the dark steps.

But the door opened before he reached it, and there stood a young man blinking diffidently in the light of a lantern in his hand. He was twenty or less, snub-nosed, blue-eyed, below Don Miguel in height but well enough built.

"Are you alone?" Don Miguel flung at him.

"Ah—yes, Licentiate!" the young man said. "I'm Probationer Jones, sir, on duty tonight. I believe your honor is Don Miguel Navarro. What service can I do you?"

"You are alone?" Don Miguel pressed. "No one else here?"

"Absolutely no one, sir," Jones asserted, wide-eyed. Don

Miguel's heart turned over. He had expected—but no matter. It might or might not be true. He would have to see.

"There's a girl in my carriage," he said. "She ought not to be here—or anywhere, for that matter. I'm having her taken inside."

Jones gave a sigh. "Very well, sir. I presume you will require a suite in the quarters, and privacy—"

The look on Don Miguel's face made him break off, stuttering.

"Have you been required to do such services by members of the Society?" Don Miguel demanded.

"Uh—" Jones's embarrassment was acute. "Not I myself, sir. But I believe other students have."

"If anyone ever tries it on you, report him to your Chief Instructor. It's no part of your duties to act as a pander. Understood?" Without waiting for an answer Don Miguel swung round, and saw how the confusion might have arisen, for Kristina was standing by the door of the carriage while the driver was still half-hidden in shadow as he wrestled to lift out the cloak-enveloped form of the unconscious girl.

"Show the driver inside!" he rapped at Jones. "Find a couch or something where he can lay his burden!"

"At once, sir," Jones said, and hurried down the steps, his face fire-red, to lend a hand.

"Kristina," Don Miguel said in a low voice, moving close to her, "I must apologize for this. I think perhaps I should arrange for you to return to the company of your father now."

"In any case," Kristina said, "it's gone eleven, and you'd have to make haste to return yourself. But what—?"

"It is indeed!" Don Miguel remembered with dismay. "So in fact I've wasted time, idiot that I am, to come here at all. See you, I wished to speak with Father Ramón, and not realizing how late it had become thought to find him still in his study here— Oh, what a kettle of soup we have to stir!"

He passed a tired hand over his face. "Get you back in the carriage, then. We'll return to the palace as soon as I've done one necessary thing."

He spun on his heel and dashed into the building.

When he came back, instead of climbing into the carriage, he scrambled on the driver's box and seized the reins. The horses whinnied and leaned on the traces, and Kristina gave a cry of alarm.

"I'm sorry!" Don Miguel shouted down to her above the grind and clatter of the wheels. "But as you saw, that feathered girl is dangerous. I dared not leave Jones by himself to cope with her, so I've paid the driver for his service in remaining there."

"Was that all you went for?" she cried back.

Don Miguel did not answer, but lashed the horses into a gallop. It was not all. He had needed to find out for himself that the great doors guarding the time chambers in the building had not been tampered with tonight. And they had not; Jones had told the truth, and he was alone.

He had imagined that perhaps some drunken Probationers, or some corrupt Licentiate, had secured access to the time apparatus unlawfully. Yet it seemed his guess was wrong. And, the simple explanation having failed, he was left for the moment with no explanation at all.

A cold wind blew along the river now; their road followed the embankment. He shivered, and damned his impatience in abandoning his cloak.

Driving like a fury, he brought the carriage swiftly to the broad straight Holy Cross Avenue—the last portion of their route on the north side of the river. At the next bridge they would have to swing right and cross over. And there, at the approach to the bridge, something was going on. At first he took it for the expected crowd of people coming across from the south to attend Mass at midnight in the cathedrals of the city; it was not until the carriage was already among the pale-faced, terrified men, women and children that he heard the near-screams of the civil guards trying to keep order and realized that this was nothing so commonplace.

The whole roadway was flooded with people here; the windows of nearby houses were illuminated and the air was full of a confused moaning.

From behind him, Kristina looked out as the carriage perforce slowed to a crawl. "What's happening?" she called.

"I don't know," Don Miguel answered curtly. "Guard! Guard!"

A civil guard on horseback breasting the flood of people as though it were a flood of water forged his way slowly in their direction, waving a gauntleted hand. When he came close enough, he called out, "You'll have to go around another way, your honor! It's impossible to get past here!"

Don Miguel stared, cursing the murky darkness which the lanterns barely penetrated. Some commotion under the bridge there: water splashing—

"What's happened?" he bawled.

"We don't know, you honor! Some say an invasion, some say rioting—but across the river there, it's total chaos!" He sounded frightened. "Men's bodies have been seen floating downstream, stuck full of arrows, they say! And there are fires!"

Shriller and more piercing than the general tumult, there was suddenly a scream from near the bridge, and people began incontinently trying to run. Ignoring the guard and Don Miguel, they surged past the carriage, making it rock.

The guard wheeled his horse and went off shouting, trying to restore some calm to the crowd. There was no hope of getting the carriage further forward, short of running down the people in the way of it, and Don Miguel jerked on the reins to bring the horses to the side of the road. Even to cover those few paces took a heartbreakingly long time. He set the brake and leapt down from the box.

Kristina was still peering pale-faced from the window. As he came close, she threw open the door and made to step down. He gestured her to stay where she was.

"I'll see if I can get one of the civil guards to escort you away," he said harshly. "This is inexplicable, but—"

"No, I'd rather not," she cut in. "I'm coming with you. The civil guards have all the work they can cope with, and I refuse to be abandoned in the carriage on my own."

Don Miguel bit his lip. What a time to be encumbered

with a woman! But he shrugged and held the carriage door for her. With her leaning on his arm, he forced a way forward to the wide space at the approach to the bridge.

Here the confusion was fantastic. A small detachment of soldiers with horse-borne artillery had formed up at the side of the road; some of the men were assisting with crowd-control while the others looked after the horses. Men with spyglasses were staring across the river from the parapets of the bridge. On the other side blurs of red could be seen against the sky—the fires the guard had mentioned, presumably. Many of the fleeing thousands were half-clad, sick or aged and children among them.

In charge of the artillery troop was a young officer on a fine roan gelding. Kristina beside him, Don Miguel managed to get close to this officer.

"Miguel Navarro, Society of Time!" he introduced himself, cupping his hands to his mouth. "What's the chance of getting over the river to the Prince's palace?"

The officer stared down at him as though he were mad. He said explosively, "To the palace? You're lucky to be here, aren't you, rather than there?"

Don Miguel felt a cold hand touch his nape. He said, "I don't know anything about what's going on!"

"Nor do I, practically!" The officer's horse started at some alarm, and danced sideways three paces before he quieted. "But whatever's going on seems to have started at the palace. Haven't you looked across the river?"

He threw up his arm and pointed. Don Miguel turned, seeing for a moment only the same red smudge on the night as he had noticed already. Then landmarks fitted together in his mind. He said, "The palace is on fire!"

"That's right!" The officer laughed humorlessly. "One of my men reported a minute ago that the roof had fallen in."

"But the King's there, and the Prince Imperial, and the Commander of the Society, and the Ambassador of the Confederacy—!"

The hand on his arm tightened. He glanced down at

Kristina and saw that all the color had gone from her face. Yes: her father and her sister, too . . .

"God knows what's going on!" the officer said savagely. "But it's the biggest disaster in a hundred years, no question of that. And the night on the other side of the river is alive with murderous shadows, killing and looting and burning."

From near the water's edge came a loud exclamation. "Someone out there! Swimming! Get him ashore!"

The officer saluted Kristina and dug his heels into his horse's flanks to go down and investigate. If this was someone from across the river, he might have more coherent news. Don Miguel hurried after the officer.

They arrived as the man was being dragged on to the bank. He had spent his last strength swimming; he collapsed immediately. Don Miguel saw with horror that each of his shoulders was stuck with a short, vicious arrow, the barbs buried in the flesh. It was a miracle he had got across.

"Miguel!" Kristina whispered. "Isn't it your friend?"

Don Miguel strode forward. "God's name," he said. "God's name, but it is. Felipe!"

He dropped on his knees beside the stricken man, but the officer, dismounting, waved him back. "Leave him till we've drained the water from his lungs, you fool!" he snapped.

Yes, that was sensible. Don Miguel moved aside and a medical orderly from the artillery troop came hurrying up with a case of medicines. Like a huge waddling white owl a Sister of Mercy came after him.

Aching, Don Miguel stared as they examined the arrows and made to extract them and dress the wounds. His sick preoccupation was suddenly broken by a rattle of carriage wheels from behind him, at the end of the bridge. A harsh voice called out to the driver telling him to go around another way.

Then a dry, precise voice was heard, speaking from the carriage. "But I must cross here and now to go to the Prince's palace. I must be there before midnight."

Don Miguel's relief was so great that he almost swooned.

He started forward, waving and shouting at the top of his voice.

"Father Ramón! Father Ramón! Praise heaven you're here!"

V

THE JESUIT master-theoretician of the Society of Time got down from his carriage, bird-like head cocked as he surveyed the fantastic scene. He said, "I fail to see, my son, why my arrival in the middle of this to-do should so excite you, but something tells me that I shall not enjoy learning the facts. enlighten me."

Rapidly Don Miguel summed up the catastrophe as far as he knew of it—the mysterious attackers beyond the river, the burning of the palace, the unknown fate of the royal family, the refugees streaming north, his being in the company of the Lady Kristina of Scania, her concern about her father, then last of all the astonishing apparition of the girl in blue feathers.

Father Ramón started. "Describe this woman!" he said sharply. As well as he could, Don Miguel obeyed, and was appalled to see the expression that came to the older man's face. It was as though the words were blows from an enchanter's wand, each one aging him by another year.

"Do you think you know what her origin is?" he demanded.

"Yes, my son. I fear I do," the Jesuit said heavily. "And to judge from your reaction, it seems that you do also."

Don Miguel did not know whether to be relieved that his guesswork had been so accurate, or horrified for the same reason. He said, "But then—"

"Let us not speculate too far," Father Ramón interrupted. "How can we find with some degree of accuracy what has transpired at the palace?"

"Ah—just as you arrived!" Don Miguel said. "My friend Don Felipe Basso has swum the river, pierced with strange

arrows but living when he came ashore. They are ministering to him—see, there on the bank!" He pointed.

Father Ramón headed towards the white outline of the Sister of Mercy like a shot from a gun. Don Miguel glanced at Kristina; it was clear from her paleness and her trembling lips that she was using her self-control to its uttermost. He put his arm comfortingly around her and led her to Don Felipe's side.

Father Ramón was already kneeling there, head turned to the medical orderly. "Will he live?" was the crisp question. If the answer was negative, Extreme Unction must precede any questioning, of course. But the medical orderly, tossing bloody dressings into the river, nodded.

"He's tough as oak, Father," he said. "He'll live."

Don Miguel heaved a sigh of relief and bent close to Father Ramón's thin lips as they formed the crucial words. Don Felipe opened his eyes and tried to smile.

"You were lucky not to be there, Father," he whispered. "And Miguel—I thought you were . . . No matter. God's name, what madness can have taken possession of them all?"

"Speak on!" Father Ramón commanded sternly. "Without fear or favor I charge you to speak unvarnished truth in the name of God and the Society!"

Don Felipe closed his eyes again, but his lips writhed and in halting whispers he outlined the dreadful truth.

Partly, it seemed, it was the fault of the Ambassador from the Confederacy, who—as Don Miguel had sardonically prophesied—had compared the entertainment offered unfavorably with what he could see at home. Partly it was the fault of the Prince Imperial, who according to rumor was known to be tired of waiting to succeed his long-lived father, and who had learned to pass away the time in unprincely ways. And partly it was the fault of Red Bear, whose notorious Mohawk weakness for liquor had sometimes caused trouble before.

At some time in the evening, a word had passed which broke a royal temper. A quarrel flared; the Ambassador from the Confederacy threatened to leave the country. In between

the rowing parties came two dangerous conciliatory figures: Catalina, Marquesa di Jorque, and Don Arturo Cortés.

"The Marquesa spoke of the glories of the past," Don Felipe whispered. "Perhaps she meant well; perhaps she was trying to distract the obstinate minds. But she started the arguments anew, as to who were the bloodiest and fiercest fighters of all time. The Ambassador claimed the Scythian Amazons—his army as you know has a regiment of women infantry—while the King declared that Amazons had never existed. Then I saw Don Arturo speaking with Red Bear and the Commander, who as host of the evening was greatly put out by the turn of affairs. Then—but I don't know what happened then. All I saw was the terrible women with their bows and spears, swarming down the stairway leading from the centre tower. I stood and fought with those who could fight, but they came on like devils, and at last I was compelled to . . ."

His voice trailed away.

"My father!" Kristina said in a high thin voice. "My sister! What happened to them?"

But there was no answer. The medical orderly dropped to feel Don Felipe's pulse; after a moment he looked at Father Ramón. "We must get him away and let him rest," he said. "He is weaker than he was."

Unseeing, Father Ramón rose to his feet. Don Miguel took a pace towards him. "Do you know who these terrible women are? Can you fill in the gaps of the story?"

"I think so," the Jesuit said in a dead voice. "Amazons—yes, it pieces together. It must have happened like this. They wished—the fools, the fools! God forgive me for calling them fools, but what else can I say? They wished to decide this difference about the most valiant and dreadful fighters, and they trespassed where they should not have trespassed, beyond the bounds of our reality. Women such as you described to me, my son, are female gladiators from the court of King Mahendra the White Elephant, in an age where a decadent Indian usurper sits the throne of a Mongolian empire governing all Asia and all Europe—a world

further distant from ours than any which our researchers have ever explored."

It made sense to Don Miguel, thanks to his having been made privy to the best-kept secret of the Society of Time—the fact that its members had in fact deliberately altered key incidents of history to observe the consequences, then changed them back. But he wished that what Father Ramón said could have been as meaningless to him as it was to Kristina, who merely repeated as she looked from one to other of her companions, "My father and sister! What happened to them?"

He could only give her a comforting squeeze with the arm he put around her. To Father Ramón he said, "But—who can be responsible? Who can have broached this secret to the company? Not the Commander, surely!"

Father Ramón shook his head. "Not the Commander, my son. For all that he is of royal birth, he understands the danger of ignoring the rule of natural law." Don Miguel thought he was going to add something more, but he shook his head again instead.

"Then—who?" Don Miguel persisted.

"Don Arturo Cortés led the expedition to investigate this distant stream of history," Father Ramón said, and on the last word his mouth shut like a steel trap. There was silence between them, but the noise of the fleeing people continued, and now was mingled with the pealing of bells as midnight approached, and with gunfire.

The orderly and two soldiers were raising Don Felipe now, to set him on a wheeled invalid trolley. The movement seemed to awaken him, for he gave a sudden cry.

"Father Ramón! Where are you?"

"Here, my son," the Jesuit said, striding towards him.

"Father, I did not tell you the worst!" Don Felipe babbled. "I saw them kill the King! I saw them shoot the Prince Imperial full of arrows, and they speared men and women as they tried to flee! I saw a woman hurled from the top of the stairway to break her head open on the floor beneath! I saw—oh God, Father! I saw such monstrous things!"

"What?" said one of the soldiers helping to lift him. And before Father Ramón could stop him, he had spun round to shout to his officer. "Sir! The King is dead!"

A hush fell for an instant over all those within earshot of the cry, and was followed by a sound like a rising storm. "The King is dead! The King! The King!" Dying away across the sea of people like an echo, the words ran swiftly.

"Father Ramón, what can we possibly do?" Don Miguel said.

For a long moment, his bird-like head bowed, Father Ramón did not answer. At last, however, he stirred and seemed to brisken. He said, "Whatever we can, my son. Find a civil guard—have criers sent out to call in any members of the Society who may not have been at the palace to the Headquarters Office now; this should be easy, for they'll all be passing this way to attend our Society Mass. Then—have you a carriage?"

"By now I suspect it will have been commandeered by refugees," Don Miguel said. "In any case, it will be hard to make passage for a vehicle through this fear-crazed crowd."

"Then we'll take the horses from my carriage," Father Ramón said briskly. "It's many years since my aged bones spanned a horse's back, but needs must. To it, and quickly!"

Don Miguel had never before tried to ride at speed bareback and controlling the horse with carriage-reins, at the same time trying to comfort a weeping girl seated ahead of him with her head buried in his shoulder. It was half nightmare, half farce, and about the only thing which could have made it worse would have been if Kristina had followed the Empire custom of riding sidesaddle instead of astride like a man. She would certainly have fallen off if she had.

One more window of the Headquarters building was lighted now, and the door stood ajar. As their horses stopped outside Jones came hurrying to meet them. One of his eyes was newly blacked.

"She got loose!" Don Miguel said in alarm, sliding to the ground and reaching up to help Kristina down.

"Yes, sir," Jones said unhappily. "And we had a terrible job tying her up again."

"But you managed it?"

"With the help of the man you left here, yes, sir. I'd never have done it on my own."

"Help Father Ramón dismount," Don Miguel ordered. It was some relief at least to know that the girl was still here. He helped Kristina up the steps and settled her in an armchair in the hallway, and saw as he was doing so that instead of turning through the door beyond which the driver could be seen keeping guard over the furious girl in blue feathers—tied not with good strong rope, he noticed—Father Ramón was heading into the interior of the building.

"Father! Don't you want to see the girl?" he called.

"Come with me, and be quick!" Father Ramón answered.

"Look after this lady," Don Miguel instructed Jones, and hurried after Father Ramón.

He caught up with him as he paused before the door of the vast library, hunting under his habit for the key. He found and inserted it, and marched forward among the high stacks of heavy, finely-bound volumes.

"What you are going to see, my son, you must not divulge to anyone, is that clear?" Father Ramón said. "But for the rule that no single member of the Society—not even the Commander—shall consult these files without a witness beside him, I'd not burden you with the dangerous knowledge of them. You've been burdener enough for so young a man already. But here"—and he halted before a securely padlocked stack with blank metal doors, fumbling out another, smaller key—"is where I must confirm my guess."

He opened the padlock and reached into the case, bringing out a fat, bright red volume of manuscript notes. Interleaved with them were accurate watercolor drawings. As directly as though he were merely looking for something he had already seen—and presumably he was—Father Ramón turned to one such picture and held it out to Don Miguel.

"Does she look like that?" he demanded.

Don Miguel nodded slowly. These feathers were green,

and the painted designs were white instead of yellow, but the hair was the same, the complexion, the shoes and bangles.

"Then my worst fears are fulfilled," Father Ramón said. He slammed the book shut and thrust it back. "There is no doubt any longer. I must confess to you frankly, my son, that I am totally at a loss. This is without precedent!"

To hear Father Ramón the expert of experts on his subject, say such a thing shook Don Miguel to the core. He said before he thought, "They must indeed have gone mad, all of them together! Why, but for the madness we would now be at the Society's Mass, and—"

"The Mass!" Father Ramón said suddenly. "Of course! My blessings on you, Don Miguel! That I could have been so blind and not have seen it before!"

Blankly, Don Miguel stared at him. And then, little by little, light and hope began to dawn.

VI

Don Miguel gave a start so violent that he almost fell. He looked about him at his surroundings with astonishment. It was not that he failed to recognize where he was—he could never mistake the robing cells in the antesection to the chapel of the Society, or the sound of the high clear bell which was now tolling somewhere outside.

Only—here? Now? And everything apparently normal?

He had not asked Father Ramón what was going to be done. He could read in the Jesuit's eyes the certainty that that was knowledge a man was better off without. But he had thought he knew. Fresh in his mind was the memory of the panic displayed by those junior members of the Society whom the criers had haled off the streets, setting to work in the time chamber of the Headquarters Office under Father Ramón's direction. While they worked feverishly on the apparatus, he himself had been directed to take pencil and

paper and work a computation in factors which Father Ramón had scribbled down for him. He tried as he worked to assign real-world values to the symbols, and thought that most likely he was dealing with labels for human lives, for one by one he saw them cancel out, cancel out . . .

The problem reduced to an unassigned variable and a factor *k*, and he showed this result to Father Ramón, who stared at it for a long time before he sighed, closed his eyes for a moment with a fierce expression, and then gestured for him to take his place between the iron and silver bars of the time apparatus. The air grew very hot—

—and he was here in a robing cell, and the bell of the Society's chapel was tolling for midnight as it had done each New Year's Eve since the Society acquired this palace as the official residence of its Commander.

What had that unassigned variable equated to, for pity's sake? Don Miguel's mind raced. He was virtually certain that the factor *k* represented a *key* individual: himself, who by sheer chance had been spared from the holocaust, or perhaps Don Felipe, who by managing to swim the river despite the arrows in his shoulder muscles had carried the terrible news to those who could act upon it.

It was patent, of course, that the thing which had been done must be undone. He had never questioned this; nor had Father Ramón, it seemed. For one thing, the consequences of this night's madness would be a blot forever on the Society if left unrectified; for another, the death of the King and all his nearest heirs, and with them the Commander of the Society, was an effect out of all proportion to the act.

And yet the results of setting up a closed causal loop in local time had never, never been investigated. This event was—as Father Ramón had said himself—without precedent.

Don Miguel's mind swirled like water in a rotated cup. He put his hands to his head and struggled to think clearly. He had been trained to some extent in casuistry, and he could see the dim outlines of a logical sequence here. Postulate: the terrible women gladiators who wrought the harm originated in a non-actual world—a world brought about through

the experimental interference of Society members with their own past history. Therefore the consequences of their acts were also non-actual, or potential. Therefore the rectification of these consequences must be *not* non-actual, if this was a safe case to exclude the middle—

It came to him with blinding, horrifying suddenness that in fact, in the fact where he must now have found himself, all the nightmare so vivid in his memory had already not happened.

For a moment he had a glimpse of what it must be like to be a man such as Father Ramón, all his mind lighted by a logic as piercing as sunlight, driven by a terrible, inexorable honesty to conceal nothing from himself. And he felt sweat prickle all over his body as he knew why he was here, now, in the rectified situation, with the knowledge of his personal unique past.

The tolling of the bell had stopped, and from beyond the door of his cell came the slow shuffling of many feet, irregular in rhythm. The Society going in to Mass, he thought. For the most awful of all its formal occasions.

He calmed himself deliberately with deep breathing. When finally he thought he could walk without swaying, he took his own concealing robe from the wall, slipped it on, and pulled the hood far forward over his face. Then he opened the door and joined his brothers.

These, tonight, now, were all faceless men. Only differences of height and girth could give the slightest clue to their identity; the hoods hid their features, the sleeves hid their hands, the robes fell to the ground and swished around their feet. For a reason. For the reason which only members of the Society knew, and which made this the Mass it was.

Grey into the grey shadows of the chapel, lit only by the candles at the east end, whose thin beams played fitfully on the gilded coats of arms mounted over the stalls but were too faint to reveal faces at the distance of the nearest member. To the solemn music of the organ, the Society assembled.

Now, this year, there were three hundred and forty-six Licentiates and Officers of the Society. Accordingly there

were, here in the stalls, three hundred and forty-six grey-robed men.

And one or more of these was not a present member of the Society, but a man who had died in its service.

Only the officiating priest, bringing the Host to the row of kneeling brothers, would be able to see by the light of the altar candles which of the worshippers was a stranger, and tell too which of the present members was tonight—here words were lacking—celebrating the Mass with his brothers of an age yet to come.

And the priest was masked.

In his stall, Don Miguel thought of everything that was implied by that. He—after all, he himself—he here, now, as far as he could possibly tell, might not be at the Mass of the New Year's Eve he had so far been living through. For every year the organ played the same music; every year the dispensation was given that the service should be conducted in whispers, so that the stranger in their midst might not recognize an unfamiliar voice, and thus be spared foreknowledge of approaching death. He might count the total of grey robes present to see if it differed from the number he expected—Don Miguel glanced round into the shadows, and shook his head.

No. No man would do that. No man would dare.

There was a shuffling. The grey robes rose, and the masked priest came forth before the altar.

When the service was over, it had come to him what he must now do. He filed out of the chapel with the rest of the Society and returned to the robing cells. It was of course here in the isolation of the cells that transference to the future would most conveniently take place in the event that he was selected to partake of another Mass on New Year's Eve. But he knew now that he had not in fact been selected—it was a definite relief to recognize this—and he thought he knew who had been chosen.

After all, it was not absolutely necessary for the time-

transference to be operated from a robing cell. Why should it be?

A kind of grim excitement took possession of him now, and he stripped off his robe. He barely spared time to place it tidily on its peg before leaving the cell—ahead of most of the other members, who were probably spending a few minutes in contemplation alone before emerging.

There was a cold stone-flagged side passage running past the chapel to the priest's offices at the other end. He hurried down this, his heels clicking on the hard floor, until he came to the vestry door.

There he halted. Cold shivers traced down his spine. Suppose—just suppose—he was wrong. Suppose when he knocked it was another voice than Father Ramón's that call him in!

There was only one way to find out. He knocked. And an answering pounding of his heart began as he recognized the dry voice which spoke to him.

It *was* Father Ramón, no mistake. He turned the handle and slipped inside.

The Jesuit was alone in the starkly furnished little room, standing close to a table with one thin hand laid on its bare wooden top, his eyes bright and sharp in his bird-like face. He smiled on recognizing his visitor.

"A good new year to you, my son," he said. "Is it to wish me one that you come calling when the year is still so young? I'd have thought you would be eager to return to the company of your colleagues in age." He broke off, searching Don Miguel's face, and then resumed in a more serious tone.

"Forgive me that I jest!" he said. "For I see by your look that you're on no light errand."

Don Miguel nodded warily. He said, "What I have to say may seem strange, Father. Indeed, I'm not sure beyond a doubt that it should be said at all. But will you permit me to establish that point?"

"However you wish," Father Ramón consented, sounding puzzled.

Don Miguel drew a deep breath. He said, "Father—if you

can in conscience tell me—which one of us was absent from the Mass tonight?"

Stiffly, Father Ramón drew himself up. "I cannot possibly answer that!" he snapped.

"It was, I think," Don Miguel said, "Don Arturo Cortés."

There was a long pause. Finally Father Ramon nodded to a chair. "Speak your mind, my son," he said. "I am sure you have a reason for your visit, and I'll hear you out."

Don Miguel sat down, weak with relief, and wiped his face. He said, "Father, I swear to you that I've not—in this word as it is—seen the records concerned. But I know, and you know, that at the court of King Mahendra the White Elephant they have female gladiators who fight like madwomen. Don Arturo Cortés was in charge of exploring this bywater of history. I have not spoken with him about it. As you know, there is little love lost between him and me."

Father Ramón blanched. He said incredulously, "How—?"

"You showed me, Father. You told me. You told me so that I could tell you now and convince you that the rest of what I have to relate is more than delusion." Don Miguel had to wipe his face again.

"I—" Father Ramón said thickly, and hesitated. Then he turned and took from a shelf a thick black-bound volume on the front cover of which a cross was inlaid in gold leaf. He laid it on the table between them and sat down.

Don Miguel nodded and placed his right hand on the book, and Father Ramón continued wonderingly, "You speak of secret things, my son. For good and sufficient reasons the existence of this potential world has never been advertised—you can imagine why?"

"Possibly because in that world the true faith is suppressed," Don Miguel guessed.

"Precisely." Father Ramón's face gleamed like oiled parchment over the underlying bones. Tell me what you have to say to me now."

Already his fantastic mind must have reached the kernel of the matter, Don Miguel realized. Already he must know that he was compelled to the worst of all human predica-

ments: to judge his own actions with no knowledge of them whatever. He had to swallow hard.

"First, Father, you must write a message to the future. To close a causal chain you must instruct that when the day comes that Don Arturo Cortés is called to celebrate Mass on New Year's Eve at another time than his own, they must fetch him from a moment earlier than usual. There is certain to be the opportunity, because this is what has happened—I think," he felt compelled to add. "He must not be permitted to speak with Red Bear or anyone else about the importation of female gladiators to entertain the Ambassador of the Confederacy."

Father Ramón looked stricken. He said, "I will do this. But tell me why."

So, by pieces and scraps, Don Miguel did so.

VII

WHEN HE HAD finished, Father Ramón sat for a long time in silence. At last he stirred, his face very white.

He said, "Yes. Yes, it could have happened. A venal and corrupt mind could operate so. And the result—the death of kings. You have performed a great service to the Society, my son. But you have been dreadfully burdened with a nightmare of knowledge."

Don Miguel nodded. His voice thick, he said, "I feel like a leaf tossed on the wind. Do I know what I have done—now, as things stand—this evening?"

"With caution and grace you'll discover that," Father Ramón said. "You need have no fear." He shot a keen glance at Don Miguel. "Do you wish to be free of your burden of knowledge? I could free you if you wish—what you remember is now clearly nonexistent, and I might lawfully absolve your mind of it."

Don Miguel hesitated. It would be quick and easy, he

knew, using the humane drugs developed by the inquisitors for cases where a sincerely repentant heretic was prevented by memory of former errors and the attendant guilt-feelings from becoming a useful member of society. He was very tempted.

But suddenly a point occurred to him, and he said, amazed at himself, "No, Father. For you know it now. And I feel it would somehow be wrong for me to leave you in sole possession of the knowledge, sharing it with no one else."

"It is shared with God," the Jesuit reminded him gently. "But—I thank you, my son. It seems to me a brave thing to say." He drew back the black-bound book across the table and held it in both hands.

"I counsel you now, for your peace of mind, to return to the great hall. The longer you are still dominated by the memory of what did not happen, the longer you will be ill at ease. Go back, and see for yourself that the palace stands and does not burn, that the King lives, that your friend Don Felipe was not shot full of arrows. In the end, it will be like a dream."

"But—was it nothing more?" Don Miguel persisted. Father Ramón gave a skeletal smile.

"Tomorrow—later today, rather, if you wish, come to me and I will recommend you some texts in the library which treat of the powers of the Adversary and his limitations. If is possible for him to create convincing delusions, but not to create reality. And it is always possible for determined and upright men to penetrate those delusions." He rose to his feet. Don Miguel rose also, and then dropped to his knees and bowed his head. When the priest had blessed him, he looked up.

"And you, Father? What are you going to do?"

"Write the message to the future. Think again—you may know this but not speak of it—think again about Don Arturo Cortés, whose overweening vanity has come to our notice more than once, and possibly investigate a certain rumor about his conduct. And also, of course, I shall pray."

He walked past Don Miguel and opened the door for him to go out.

"Go with God, my son," he said.

His mind churning, Don Miguel walked slowly along the cold passage which led back towards the adjacent palace. He could hear the sound of the band performing again, and voices singing with it, and much laughter.

This was real.

Yet—how *much* of what had happened had not happened? Had he spent this evening in Londres with Kristina, mingling with the crowds? Clearly they had not encountered the blue-feathered girl at Empire Circle, but what had they done? Why could he not remember what had actually happened to him? It must be—his imagination boggled at this but it must be accepted—that he had not existed for a period of time. In the world as it actually was, presumably he had to have lapsed out of existence so that he could remember the potential world on his return; otherwise he would have dual memories for some hours of tonight . . . Wait a moment: he was going to have dual memories in any case, because after midnight in the potential world he had been with Father Ramón and Kristina at the Headquarters Office, and in the real world he had been with Father Ramón here at the same time . . .

Wrestling with the paradox was giving him a blinding headache. He snatched his attention away and found that he was now in a warm, brightly-lit, gaily-decorated corridor; he had regained the interior of the palace. Any moment now he might emerge into a room full of guests, and find Kristina there, and be unable to account for his disappearance. Or—and the notion shook him again—he might find that she and he had not slipped away together into the city, but had spent a dull and miserable evening facing each other formally and making polite small-talk.

Or conceivably, in view of what had happened, he might find himself already here.

No, surely not. Father Ramón would never have committed

a gross and dangerous error like that in any world, potential or actual!

Cautiously, he headed towards the great hall. Slaves were coming and going with the traditional New Year breakfast on trays and trolleys, and with bowls of steaming mulled wine giving off a spicy aroma.

The great hall was only half full now. There was no sign of the King, but things seemed peaceful enough; the Ambassador of the Confederacy wasn't in sight, nor was Red Bear, who had probably had to be sobered up forcibly to take part in the Mass; imagine a Licentiate trying to get away with that, but as a General Officer he managed it—

"Miguel!"

He glanced round. Coming toward him, smiling broadly, was Don Felipe.

"Miguel, where've *you* been all evening?" Don Felipe gave him a poke in the ribs and a knowing wink. "Don't tell me, let me guess. I'm sure you enjoyed yourself anyway. I've had the finest New Year's Eve I can remember!" He chortled.

"Quick!" Don Miguel seized his chance. "Put me in the picture about what's been going on since I—uh—"

Don Felipe's eyes grew round as O's. He said in a whisper, "Miguel, you don't mean you . . . *Really?* You lucky so-and-so! Ingeborg's fun, but she's a bit too young and bubbly, like sparkling wine—"

"Felipe!" Don Miguel interrupted sharply.

"All right, all right!" Don Felipe parodied repentance. "Speaking ill of a lady and so on— What do you want to know? I'm in a hurry to get rid of the drink I've had and go back to Ingeborg. Where did you lose touch?"

"Uh—" Don Miguel frowned."There was some sort of disagreement between the Ambassador of the Confederacy and Red Bear, wasn't there?"

"Oh, that! Yes, it was pretty stormy for a while. And your old chum the Marquesa di Jorque didn't make things any easier. But the real fly in the ointment was Don Arturo. Luckily for the peace of everyone, he got mislaid at some point. Drank too much, I shouldn't wonder. Yes, look—he's

over there, see? Looking as though the hand of doom had been laid on him."

Don Miguel followed the indicated direction. There indeed was Don Arturo, looking like death, pale as a ghost and trying as it were to restore his color by drinking glass after glass of red wine.

"So what happened?" Don Miguel said slowly.

"Oh, the subject got changed to something more congenial and when the royals left at about half past eleven and the Ambassador too, there was laughing all round and hand-shaking and all kinds of friendliness. Perfectly calm and in order. Miguel, I *must* disappear!"

He vanished down the corridor, leaving Don Miguel to sigh with relief. It really was all right, then. For a moment he was puzzled by one point: if the other ambassadors and people had gone, why was Ingeborg still here—and presumably Kristina too? Then it struck him that they were of a heterodox faith, and of course had different observances. He didn't know whether to be glad or sorry as yet that he was going to see Kristina any moment, probably.

But before that, there was one thing he must attend to. He looked at the miserable face of Don Arturo.

That wasn't the result of too much drinking. That was the result of a very terrible experience. Don Arturo had lost—how long? Hours, perhaps out of his New Year's Eve. He had gone to celebrate Mass at some other period of time, and he knew that he had not gone to the robing cell on his own two feet.

Oh, but that was an awful thing to have to endure! For what other conclusion could be drawn than that his death was on the way? He must be unique among the members of the Society, past, present or future, in knowing what he had seen.

What justice was this punishment now that the effect of his disastrous actions had been swept into limbo?

"Well, the casuists must be left to struggle with that problem, if they ever learned of it, as Father Ramón doubtless was struggling to find out whether his own actions in a

world that never was had been justifiable or not. But there was one thing he, Don Miguel, could do.

He strode across the floor towards the unfortunate man and halted in front of him, his face set in a mask of pity. "Don Arturo!" he said. "Your hand, brother!"

For a moment Don Arturo's haunted eyes met his, not understanding. Then, in a convulsive movement, he let fall his wineglass with a crash and seized Don Miguel's hand in both his own. He said nothing, but his eyes were bright.

A prompt slave came to snatch up the fragments of glass and mop away the spilled wine. Don Miguel let go Don Arturo's grip, hearing his name called in a familiar voice.

"There you are, Miguel! Where've you been?"

Across the floor Kristina was standing between her sister and her father. She was waving to him. He could not ignore the command, but his heart turned over wildly. He walked up to them and bowed to the Duke.

"I'm sorry, Lady Kristina," he said. "I've been—uh—having a few words with Father Ramón in his vestry."

She looked slightly puzzled at his use of her title, and then seemed to find an explanation. "Oh! Oh, Papa doesn't mind people calling me Kristina, Miguel. He's just had to get used to it."

The Duke chuckled. "Indeed I have," he said. "I've even had to get used to her so-called progressive friends addressing me as Duke, pure and simple. Well, I'm not in favor of starchy behavior anyway." He looked quizzically at Don Miguel. "You and my daughter seem to have been getting on very well," he added. "At any rate, I've hardly seen either of you all evening."

Kristina bubbled mischievously. "Miguel's been wonderful, Papa. We got dreadfully bored, so he found a way for us to slip out, and we've been in the city mixing with the people and having a marvelous time. You'd never think it to look at him, but he's got quite a sense of humor under that grim scarred face. Of course, Miguel, I suppose because you're really very stern the reason you wanted to see Father Ramón

was to confess how wicked you'd been to enjoy yourself this evening."

"Kristina!" the Duke said sharply. "You mustn't make jokes about other people's religious faith!"

A strange light-headedness was taking possession of Don Miguel. Already the writing of the gruesome events on his memory, which he had thought to be indelibly etched, was fading as chalk-marks fade under a wet sponge until the words are as though they have never been written. He said, "Regret having enjoyed an evening with you, Kristina? Don't be silly. Let's have another dance—our first one was rudely interrupted."

He bowed his leave of the Duke and led her out on the floor. Taking her hand, he murmured to himself, "Everything for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

"What was that, Miguel?"

"Nothing. Just a rather bitter anti-clerical joke. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, explain it!" she urged him.

A look of sadness passing over his face, he shook his head. "Believe me, Kristina, I couldn't. Nobody could. Forget it, and let's just dance."

PART THREE: THE FULLNESS OF TIME

I

"YOUR PEOPLE," said the long-faced Mohawk who managed the mines, "came to what you called the New World hungry for gold. You came looking for fabulous kingdoms—Cibola, Quivira, Norumbega, Texas. And so keenly were you disappointed when you found they didn't exist, you set about creating them."

He waved at the hillside opposite, where the mine galleries ran like holes into ripe cheese. Don Miguel Navarro followed the gesture with his eyes. Here where he sat with the manager —whose name was Two Dogs—it was cool under the shade of woven reed awnings, on the verandah of the plain mud-plastered house which served as both home and administrative office. But there the fury of the sun lay full, and the Indian laborers emerging from the mouths of the galleries with their baskets full of crushed rock, to be tipped into the sluices for sedimentation, wiped their dusty faces, swigged water from leathern bottles, and seemed glad to escape underground again.

The heat of the air was such that the world felt silent, although there were always noises: the monotonous creaking of the pumps bringing up water for the sluices, the droning of flies, the cries of the overseers in a local dialect that Don Miguel did not understand. He was almost content.

"More wine?" Two Dogs suggested, raising the jug from the table between them.

"Willingly," Don Miguel agreed. "It's very good. You grow it locally, I understand."

Two Dogs nodded, pouring for his visitor and himself.

"Our climate here in California is very good for vines. Take a piece of cheese also; the tastes mingle well." He set down the jug and offered the large baked-clay platter on which the cheese stood, stuck with a silver knife.

"Ye-es," he continued musingly after a moment. "You are indeed a strange people. We shall probably never understand one another."

Don Miguel laughed shortly. He said, "For people who lack mutual understanding, we get on well enough."

"Conceded. But because we serve one another's purposes, no more. And it could have been otherwise—we need only look south past the Isthmus to see what might have been."

Don Miguel stirred uncomfortably in his chair. It was always upsetting for an Imperial citizen to discuss the fate of the great civilizations of Central and South America, sacrificed on the altar of European greed. He said, "There has never been change without suffering—it's the way of the world."

"And as you people saw it, it might as well be the provincials who suffered," Two Dogs suggested.

It was impossible to be sure whether there was hostility in that even voice. Don Miguel stiffened imperceptibly.

"Isn't it so?" the Mohawk persisted. "As you conceive it, you look from the center outwards; Europe is the heart of the world, and the other continents are its—outskirts. Of course, there's truth in this attitude. A great many local squabbles in Europe over the past five hundred years have created changes out of all proportion here, in Africa, and in Asia. And for my own people's sake, I should be grateful for small mercies."

The words seemed to dig into Don Miguel's mind like the touch of a claw. He felt little premonitory tinglings on the nape of his neck.

"Suppose your Empire hadn't won its greatest victory," Two Dogs went on thoughtfully. "Suppose Western Europe, like Eastern Europe, had split into petty principalities. Suppose you'd lost the Netherlands and never gained England.

We might have had four or more different gangs of Europeans fighting over our hunting-grounds like dogs over a bone."

Don Miguel gave him a look of unconcealed respect. He said, "I see you've made a study of history."

"I have—as part of an attempt to understand the European way of thinking. But as I was saying: we'd likely have had you, and the French, and the Swedes, and the Dutch, and the English, all bringing their local differences to this continent and fighting over them. And we poor Indians might have been ground between them like corn between millstones." He raised his eyes to meet Don Miguel's and finished on a challenging tone, "Am I right? You can tell me, I'm sure."

"I?" Don Miguel forced an unconvincing chuckle. "Why?"

For a moment a flicker of uncertainty showed on the other's face, but he returned sternly to his attack. He said, "It should be better known that—having escaped being ground between your millstones once, by the skin of our teeth—we don't wish to see it happen after all."

What manner of man have I stumbled on—some revanchist fanatic? Don Miguel shook his head and said, "It's never likely to happen, so I fail to see—"

Two Dogs cut in. "Perhaps you thought, Don Miguel, that you were at the world's end here—well, it's true we're a long way from Europe. But we hear news eventually. On your way to California you passed through New Madrid; the Prince of New Castile happened to be in residence, making one of his occasional visits to the territory he nominally governs—and you remained a few days to pay your compliments."

"By the infernal fires!" Don Miguel said. "Isn't there anywhere on Earth I can get away from it all?"

"What in truth—in truth!—brought you to this hillside mining-town half a world from your home?" Two Dogs demanded.

"A need to be unknown," Don Miguel sighed. "Nothing more."

Two Dogs leaned forward on his chair, eyes bright. He said, "Then you don't deny it!"

"Deny my professional status? No, of course not. I'd simply hoped to have it overlooked for a while. Wherever a Licentiate of the Society of Time shows his face, people cluster like flies on honey, cackling and gibbering over the presence of this 'real live time-traveler'. I'm sick of it. I'd hoped that by coming all the way to California to spend my sabbatical leave, I'd be able to remain comfortably anonymous for at least a little while."

There was silence between them for a moment. Don Miguel's face, twisted savagely to one side by the ill-healed scar of a hoplite's sword-cut, looked in the harsh light as though it might have been copied from an idol carved by one of the Mohawk's Central American cousins. He hoped that Two Dogs would not press him for further details, because he would have to refuse them, and in the few days he had known the Mohawk he had come to like him well; moreover, even the act of refusal would reawaken memories that ached like deep bruises. He would have been happiest had he been able to forget altogether the things that preyed on him—that being out of the question, not having anyone around to remind him of them had seemed the next best cure.

But here, now, Two Dogs had gone to the core of his trouble as directly as a skilled engineer sinking a mineshaft to a lode of ore.

"I will not ask you to swear that," Two Dogs said after a pause. "Perhaps a European might, but I'll gamble on my estimate of you."

Don Miguel said stiffly, "I'm what I seem, and I'm not used to being taken for anything else."

"No, hear me out. We Mohawks realize that we owe to you our present standing, for without the alliance with the Empire which made us militarily capable of dominating so much of the continent, we'd be as we once were—one small tribe among many. Yet to be allied with the Empire is like being brother to a hotheaded adventurer. Any day a feud in which the brother has become involved may explode in the face of his family without their knowledge or desire."

Don Miguel studied the other wonderingly, but said nothing.

"Picture, then, my state of mind," Two Dogs went on, "when I learned that you, the pleasant visitor gratifying a wish for solitude and a curiosity about the Far West, were in fact a Licentiate of the Society of Time." He shrugged. "I was—disturbed!"

"Why?" Don Miguel made the word crackle like a fire-arrow.

For a long moment Two Dogs seemed to be struggling towards a decision. Suddenly he drained his wineglass and slammed it down hard on the table.

"I hadn't meant to come to this," he said, standing up. "And least of all had I meant to come to it here, now, with such a man as yourself. But I'll show you the reason, because before God!—I can't endure the knowledge by myself—any more!"

He stared down from the verandah without further explanation, shouting at the top of his lungs for Tomás, his dour chief overseer. Some of the laborers on the other side of the valley heard, paused in their work and looked to see what madness had come upon their master. Don Miguel followed more slowly, not being accustomed to the strong sunlight. He caught up with Two Dogs when he had located Tomás and was giving him orders in the incomprehensible local Indian language, and asked for details, but the only answer he got was, "Wait, and you shall see."

Much puzzled, but eager to find some bottom in this, Don Miguel contained himself in patience while Tomás went in search of two burros with saddles fit for gentlefolk; then, his old but bright *serape* around him, took to the trail ahead of them, walking steadily with the aid of a staff.

The jogging was so unlike the motion of a horse as to make Don Miguel very uncomfortable; besides, it was nearing the middle of the day and the flies were troublesome. But a glance at Two Dogs persuaded him not to mention these facts; the Mohawk wore an expression like a man driven by demons.

The trail wound over the shoulder of the hill, becoming in places a mere footpath, but the burros found their way and Tomás went uncomplainingly ahead. On the other side, where the attention of the miners had not yet been directed, a smaller valley lay baking in the sun. Only the trail winding across it suggested human visitation; that apart, this land might have lain as it was since Creation Day.

"There!" Two Dogs said, causing his burro to fall back alongside Don Miguel's, raising his arm and pointing to a rocky slope ahead. Don Miguel saw nothing, and said so.

"Well, then, come closer!" Two Dogs snapped. As he urged his mount forward, Don Miguel wondered what could conceivably have disrupted the Mohawk's habitual placid calm like this.

Tomás reached the spot first, paused, turned, looked back with an inscrutable face, and tapped a nearby boulder with the end of his staff. Two Dogs leapt to the ground, leaving his burro to wander, and he and Tomás together leaned against the heavy boulder. Shading his eyes, Don Miguel saw it begin to rock back and forth, further—further—and suddenly it gave, rolling through half a circle and coming to rest in a cup of ground. Its displacement revealed an opening in the slope behind it. A dark, roughly square opening. The mouth of a tunnel—of the gallery of a mine.

Don Miguel felt horrified understanding dawn. He dropped from his saddle and came forward. He said, "What's this?"

Two Dogs shrugged. "We'd very much like to know," he said grimly. "Aside from being a mine-gallery, it's a mystery to us. Oh—and aside from *this*."

He stepped for a moment into the low opening, having to stoop to avoid the roof, fumbled on the ground, and turned to Don Miguel, holding out something in his hand. Don Miguel took it, stared at it, and felt the world tremble around him.

II

His Highness the Prince of New Castile, Commander of the Society of Time, ran his fingers through his short black beard. He looked at the object on the table in front of him, and at last spoke.

"Well, since you seem to have a gift for turning up uncomfortable odds and ends, Navarro, I suppose I'll have to inquire what you make of this—this bit of scrap metal. I must say it seems to me an innocuous enough object for such a song and dance."

Don Miguel drew a deep breath and held it for the space of three heartbeats. He didn't need anyone to tell him that he was going out on a limb; he would have been far happier had he been able to consult with Father Ramón or another of the Society's theoreticians before approaching the Commander. But Father Ramón was on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, and the Commander, fortunately, was here in New Castile. And the quicker some action was taken, the better.

He licked his lips, very conscious of the piercing eyes of everyone else in the Prince's audience chamber, especially of the eyes of the other Licentiates. He had previously experienced the double edge of his reputation in the Society, but here it was keener-cutting.

He said boldly, "I make of it, sir—though I'm open to correction—a breach of the Treaty of Prague."

Well—there was his bombshell. And it certainly went off to great effect: the Commander himself blanched and jerked back in his chair, while everyone else without exception paled and voiced wordless exclamations.

"By whom?" the Prince said sternly.

"By the other party to the Treaty," Don Miguel said. "I can draw no other conclusion."

"You realize that this is the most serious allegation you could possibly make?"

"I do," Don Miguel agreed fervently. "But having conducted such investigations as were possible to me without time apparatus, I found so much pointing that way that I was compelled to lay the facts before you."

The Prince put out one hairy-backed hand towards the harmless-looking chip of metal on the table, hesitated before completing the gesture, then drew his hand back as though from a sleeping snake. He said, "Sit down! Let's hear the whole story!"

The Treaty of Prague, Don Miguel had often thought, was the most fragile bulwark ever interposed between man and the forces of primal chaos. It was like a plug of wet paper in the mouth of a volcano—yet it was all they had.

At the time when Borromeo discovered how time might be rendered a direction like other directions so that men might make voyages along it, he—whom some called very wise, others very cynical—had clearly foreseen the uses to which fools might put his miracle. There were, for one thing, those in the Empire who wished to re-conquer Spain, the old heartland from which Christian civilization had once more been driven by its virile Islamic rival, and who would not have been above sending back an army to ensure that change of history. This Borromeo feared so greatly that he came close, more than once, to destroying the results of his research.

But on reflection he decided that sooner or later someone else, without so many scruples, might stumble on the same discovery, so it was up to him to make the best of it. That was why he founded the Society of Time, as an organization of responsible persons bound by oath to use their techniques wisely and honestly, to increase the sum of human knowledge but not to interfere with the past.

Nonetheless, what he was afraid of happened, and some lunatics began to agitate for the reconquest of Spain. For a while it looked as though madness would overcome sense. Then, however, the balance was swung. The Confederacy of Europe let it be known—discreetly, delicately—that they

too had gained the secret of traveling in time. If an Imperial army went back to oppose the conquest of Spain, it would be met by corresponding forces determined to keep the *status quo*—for the Confederacy regarded the Empire as quite strong enough already without the retrospective addition of Spain to its lands.

It was whispered, but never proved, that Borromeo himself had leaked his secret to the Confederacy. At any rate, it was all for the best; the Empire came to its senses, proposed Papal arbitration and an agreement that neither of the two power blocs would ever interfere with history to the disadvantage of the other, and signed the Treaty of Prague. The Treaty was Borromeo's last legacy; three weeks after it was signed, he died of a chill caught in the mists of Poland, for it was a bitter winter that year.

But now . . .

"It's good steel," Don Miguel said, pointing to the object on the table. "It's the bit of a rock-drill—cracked in half. *We've* never mined that valley, I've established the fact beyond doubt. And history shows us no one who knew how to make good steel and who passed through California prior to our discovery of the New World. In company with Two Dogs, the manager of the mine, I searched the locality for several miles around. We discovered the traces of other mine-galleries, all of them caved in; Two Dogs was able to estimate that they had been collapsed approximately a thousand years ago. Moreover, once or twice at least the miners have been puzzled to find that a vein of ore ended unexpectedly—a very thick, rich vein, which should have continued far further. Such evidence points to the ore having been worked some considerable time ago."

The Prince exchanged a glance with one of his aides, and then indicated that Don Miguel should continue.

"I read it like this." Don Miguel licked his lips. "It's been known for a long time that those hills are rich ones. I think that the intruders decided to mine them at a time when we had not yet started exploiting the area. They went back

in time to do so. Later, our undertakings crept close to the area they had chosen; they broke off their work, collapsed the galleries, and abandoned the project. Or maybe they didn't even go to that much trouble—after all, California is earthquake country, and in a thousand years you'd expect the galleries to cave in of their own accord. It may have been pure chance that preserved the one where Two Dogs discovered this steel drill-bit."

"You say it's been lying there for a good thousand years," the Prince mused. "Yet it's barely marked with rust."

"The mouth of the gallery was closed by this balanced boulder that I spoke of. Earth and grass-roots had made an almost perfect seal around it, and the interior of the cave was dry. In any case, the climate is equable."

For some moments the Prince was silent. His dark eyes searched Don Miguel's face. Then he said heavily, "You've made a case, Navarro. We'll get time apparatus out there as quickly as we can, and see if we can secure objective evidence." He rose to his feet. "Meantime, we'll also notify Londres, and bring out our most highly trained investigators. I'm not questioning your judgment, but—to charge a breach of the Treaty of Prague would be disastrous if it were unfounded."

"Sir," Don Miguel said with feeling, "I pray that I'm wrong. For how much more disastrous it will be if the charge is true!"

Before the discovery of humane drugs to unlock the gates of truth in the mind, there had been a torture—used even by the Holy Office—consisting in the placing upon the subject of a large wooden board, and in turn upon the board a succession of stones of increasing weight, so that in the end a stubborn man would be crushed like an insect beneath a boot.

For Don Miguel the next several weeks were like a period of that torture. And he was not the only one to suffer.

The first stone was the lightest. It was rumored and had been for some time that there was more gold and silver

circulating in the Confederacy than their known resources would account for. But it was not unreasonable to assume that new and so far secret lodes had been located—until suspicion began to gnaw as a result of the affair in California.

The second stone was heavier. A metallurgical expert compared the mysterious drill-bit with samples of other steels, and reported unequivocally: made in Augsburg! It was a type commonly used in the mines of the Confederacy, but hardly ever encountered elsewhere—certainly not in California.

The third and heaviest was a report from the men whom Two Dogs—at Don Miguel's urgent request—had set to searching the route between the site of the poachers' mine and the coast. It was unthinkable that a time apparatus belonging to the Confederacy could have been smuggled into California recently, but of course in operating the apparatus a spatial component could be included in the temporal displacement; any place on Earth where the gravitational potential was nearly the same was accessible from a given starting-point. Nonetheless Don Miguel doubted if this technique had been used—at least, not on the first trip. Jumping into the dark was far too dangerous. He suspected that the poachers would have shifted back while on familiar ground, and then would have voyaged by more conventional means till they located their target.

And the men sent by Two Dogs, following the most obvious route to the sea, came across a ship's timber buried in the sand, of a form not known to the aboriginal inhabitants of this land, and of an appearance that suggested it had been lying where they found it for some such period as a thousand years.

Weighed down by these facts, the members of the team hastened their preparations. The time apparatus was installed under the habitual conditions of secrecy—few people outside the Society ever saw an actual time apparatus, because it was so dangerously simple, composed only of bars of silver and magnetized iron in precisely determined relationships, and it might have entered somebody's head to make a

model of what he had seen . . . with the disturbing consequence that the model might *work*.

Accordingly, a small town of canvas marquees bloomed in the California sun, and the laborers and their families went by incuriously for the most part, occasionally pausing and watching for a few minutes, but not often.

It was on the shoulder of the hill separating the valley where Two Dogs managed his mine from the valley where the time-travelers had established themselves that Don Miguel met his friend again for the first time after suspicion turned to certainty.

Don Miguel was plodding up the slope, head bowed, feeling as though the limping world were using him for a crutch, when he heard his name called and raised his eyes to find Two Dogs waiting ahead of him. The Mohawk's face was inscrutable, prepared for any news.

"Well?" he said as Don Miguel came up.

"They found them," Don Miguel said. "At 984. They worked through a summer here. They killed a Mohawk Licentiate who showed himself to them. With a gun."

Two Dogs showed no reaction. He said merely, "So your millstones are going to grind again, and we shall be between them."

"What do you mean?" Don Miguel said wearily.

"Is it what you suspected—poaching by the Confederacy?"

"Yes. No doubt of that. They've been seen, and heard talking."

The Mohawk nodded. "Then this is a breach of the Treaty of Prague—and what are you going to do about it? Fight a war? With each side taking the other in the rear of time?"

"I don't know," Don Miguel said. The heat of the sun and the terrible news were conspiring to make his head spin.

"You can't do the sensible thing, apparently," Two Dogs said. "That would have been simply to wipe out the poachers at the end of their stay here, when they had made changes exactly corresponding to the traces we found, which led to their discovery."

Don Miguel said sharply, "Why not?"

"Because—well, I was assuming that if you could, you would." Two Dogs hesitated. "It isn't that it hadn't occurred to you, is it?" he ventured.

"So far nobody's had time to decide on a course of action. But I don't see why we shouldn't do as you suggest—we'd risk creating a closed causal loop, but . . ." His voice trailed away, and he straightened his bowed shoulders. Clapping Two Dogs on the arm, he said, "My friend, do you have any of your fine Californian wine? I'm nearly dead of thirst, and I want to drink to your probably very practical suggestion. Don't ask me to pass final judgment on it, though—we'll leave that to Father Ramón, who's due here in a couple of days' time."

Two Dogs gave a slow smile. "Of course I have wine," he said. "But somehow I've lightened your depression already, I can see."

III

Don Arturo Cortes came, who still had the look of a man haunted by the ghost of himself, and who had not been a friend of Don Miguel's until he saw that ghost; Don Felipe Basso came and said that a certain Lady Kristina was sad at not having seen Don Miguel again before she left Londres on her father being appointed Ambassador to the Confederacy; Father Ramón came, and unlike the other two showed no trace of the effects of the appalling journey, night and day from New Madrid in the huge cushion-wheeled transcontinental express-wagon which stopped only to change horses and pick up provisions. Don Miguel saw the last relay of horses as they were led away from the wagon on its arrival; they looked fit for the knacker.

There three, the very night of their arrival, gathered with Don Miguel, and the two experts who had had charge of the

investigations here, of whom one was an inquisitor. They met in one of the huge marquees set up by the Society over the hill from Two Dogs' mine. There was a breeze, and their shadows cast by flaring lamps on the white canvas behind them moved in eerie fashion as they sat around their table.

Don Rodrigo Juarez had conducted the expedition to the past personally. Since what had happened to Don Arturo Cortés, men had begun to speak of Don Rodrigo rather than of Don Arturo as Red Bear's probable successor in the General Officer's post of Director of Fieldwork. Don Rodrigo knew this, and saw that Don Arturo knew it also; the fact made his voice seem unpleasant as he reviewed what had been done.

"We found them," he said. "We saw them at work, and we heard them talking among themselves. To avoid anachronism we were clothed—unclothed, rather as Indians such as we know to have frequented California in those days. A Licentiate from New Castile, a Mohawk known as Roan Horse, volunteered to show himeslf at their encampment. They shot him dead on his mere appearance. I agree with Don Miguel Navarro; we have a clear violation of the Treaty of Prague."

He sat back, jutting out his jaw. He was a large man whose mother had been Scots, and his gingery hair and lantern jaw were from her family.

All eyes turned to Father Ramón, who had been listening with total concentration to Don Rodrigo's story. Keenest of all to hear the Jesuit's opinion was Don Miguel, whose mind ached for it.

"No," said Father Ramón at length. "We have not."

"What?" All of them said it, except Don Felipe, who was keeping himself to himself.

"I said no." Father Ramón turned his bird's head slowly to regard them one after the other. "For various reasons. Not the least compelling is that a breach of the Treaty would be a total disaster, and we must avoid that at all costs. Luckily one has not yet been committed."

"But—!" Don Rodrigo began. Father Ramón's thin hand went up to interrupt him.

"Don Rodrigo, before leaving Londres I checked your qualifications. They're excellent. But they omit one important item. You've never attended the School of Casuistry at Rome; if you had, you'd have gone through a gruelling course of disputation on this very subject of a breach of the Treaty of Prague. Believe me, when the Vatican's experts framed that Treaty, they did not do it in a hurry, or in such a way as to leave loopholes."

"If there are no loopholes," Don Rodrigo snapped, "then why has no breach been committed by this flagrant act of poaching?"

"You should know why," the Jesuit said calmly. "In your position you should. Don Miguel's misunderstanding is forgivable; in the ordinary course of his career he would not be due to attend the School of Casuistry for another five years or so. Your colleague, however, I'm also surprised at." He shot a frown at the inquisitor. "How say you, Brother Vasco?"

The inquisitor shifted on his hard bench. He said, "I've reserved my judgment till I can consult a text I needn't name. I confess my memory of it had worn thin."

The Jesuit pursed his lips. After a moment he shrugged. "On the other hand," he said, "Don Arturo *has* attended the School in Rome. And should by now be bursting with the right solution."

They looked at Don Arturo, their heads moving as if pulled by strings, and saw him pass his hand shakily across his face. "Solutions to the present problem I have none, Father," he said. "But I know one thing almost beyond a doubt."

"Which is?" Father Ramón prompted.

"There hasn't been a breach of the Treaty of Prague because such a thing is virtually inconceivable."

Don Miguel glanced at his friend Don Felipe, and received in return a look which said, "I'm out of my depth here." He turned back to Father Ramón.

"I—I must plead for myself, Father," he began, and got

no further. The Jesuit smiled, as usual like a parchment-covered skull, and shook his head.

"Save your apologies, my son. They're not justified. An intent to break the Treaty is perfectly conceivable, and it appears that that's what you've chanced upon. Let me clarify the situation in terms which I think the judge of a Papal court would use." He raised one bony finger.

"*Imprimis*—the death of Roan Horse. He was an extemporate, was he not? His death had no consequence in the past; its effects began at a point in present time which is demonstrably later than the point from which he departed. It may also be later than the point from which the—the poachers, as you so conveniently name them, departed. This is not certain, but it's probable."

A second finger went up. "*Secundo*, there is a particular clause in the Treaty under which I am sure Don Rodrigo has been champing to frame an indictment. It states that neither party to the Treaty will act in such a way in past time as to cause a disadvantage to the other party affecting present time. It cannot be said that the abstraction in past time of a limited quantity of ore from this valley has been disadvantageous to us in present time—indeed, we haven't even extended our mining operations to that point yet."

Don Miguel was too full of an overwhelming relief to comment. Not so Don Rodrigo. He said aggressively, "but if they'd stolen the ore from the next valley, where we're already mining, this would indisputably have set us at a disadvantage! In fact, the mine manager tells me that they've found veins of ore which ended unexpectedly—and we've correlated this with the activities of the poachers! Much as it disturbs me to contradict an expert of your caliber," he added with bad grace, "I feel you're overlooking something."

"Nothing," the Jesuit replied. "Or rather, not I but all the experts in disputation who have threshed out possible interpretations of the Treaty." He lifted another finger. "I say further that *tertio* at the time when the poachers took the ore there was no property right subsisting therein."

Even Don Felipe gaped at the appalling casuistry of that

remark. As for Don Miguel, he could not restrain himself from an explosive—but fortunately wordless—reaction. Father Ramón turned to him.

"I know what you're thinking, my son," he said. "You're thinking that if this is so, what's to stop us systematically rifling the prehistoric ages of the territory now occupied by the Confederacy, so that their lands will be poor and empty? I can answer that immediately. It wasn't done. And why should it be done? If we do it to them, they do it to us—and each of us winds up with the other's resources in any case, at the cost of infinitely greater effort."

He switched his penetrating gaze back to Don Rodrigo. "What you've forgotten, my son," he said with some gentleness, "is that the signatories of the Treaty of Prague wanted very much to prevent it ever being broken. The power to alter past time is so pregnant with terrible possibilities that no sane man could overlook them."

There was silence between them for a while. During it, Don Rodrigo began to blush like a woman, and seeing him Don Arturo smiled for the first time that Don Miguel could remember since that terrible New Year's Eve. It was embarrassing to Don Miguel. For the sake of breaking the silence, he said, "Something must surely be done, nonetheless!"

"Yes, that's clear," the Jesuit agreed. "May we have your proposal to begin with?"

Don Miguel stumbletongued. He said, "Why—why, I have no plan. Only a suggestion by Two Dogs which seemed to me to make fair sense, which was that we should pick the moment during their expedition at which the poachers complete their work so as to leave the correct traces which Two Dogs later discovered, and then step in. The death of Roan Horse suggests that we might teach a lesson which would not be soon forgotten."

"Agreed," Don Rodrigo said. Don Felipe looked cheerful and rubbed his hands together; this was his kind of game.

"No," Father Ramón said. "At least, not insofar as we are to copy what they did to Roan Horse. But we should

certainly step in, and we should certainly learn who they are, and why they're there, and speak with them."

"Speak with them?" Don Rodrigo was scornful. "They shot down Roan Horse in cold blood!"

"I doubt if they will fire on an obvious extemporate," Father Ramón said. "Especially if he wears the cloth."

That took a moment to sink in. Brother Vasco was the first to speak. "Father, you're not thinking of going alone!" he exclaimed.

"No. By way of imprinting a small lesson on a certain party who has—not for the first time—overreached himself, I shall go in the company of—Don Miguel Navarro."

He did not switch his gaze until he had finished speaking. Don Miguel shrugged and smiled. He said, "As you say, Father. I confess, I'd not have started this wildcat rumor if I'd been better schooled in the legalities of the matter."

"Good," Father Ramón said, and glanced at his watch before standing up. "It's late. Tomorrow morning, then, I'll require the use of your time apparatus for us, and we'll settle the problem—God willing—once for all."

"What's been decided?" came the soft question from Two Dogs. He was smoking a late pipe on his verandah, awaiting Don Miguel's return from the meeting. On the floor at his feet Conchita, his serving-maid and mistress, sat picking ethereal chords from her *cuatro*, a small four-stringed guitar. He had offered her to Don Miguel a couple of times when first he came to stay at the house, but this was so far from the customs of home that Don Miguel had refused automatically, and the offer had never been repeated. Subsequently he had looked again at Conchita, who was slim, berry-brown and graceful as a dancer, and regretted the fact. He could have welcomed the mere physical relief of her company as a key to the sleep which worry had so often denied him these past few weeks.

He sat down in the guest-chair wearily, and waited while Two Dogs dismissed Conchita with a gesture; she went like

a shadow, silently. Then he said, "There's been no breach of the Treaty."

For a long moment Two Dogs didn't comment. Then he said, in a tight, controlled voice, "How's that possible?"

"You're too practical a man to follow the casuistry." Don Miguel shut his eyes. "I barely accept it. I'll just say that instead of what you proposed, we're going to pay them a sort of social call—Father Ramón and myself. What will come of it, Lord knows."

Two Dogs laughed harshly. He said, "Indeed, indeed, as I said to you before—you're a strange people, and we'll never understand you. It seemed to me that you regarded your mines, your gold, as we regarded our hunting-grounds in the old days. If outsiders came, and stole our game, we made war on them, and they didn't come back. Now here's this case where your beloved ore is filched, and you'll do nothing to restore it."

"We can't." Don Miguel felt suddenly extremely tired. "We found the traces of the poachers' work; we can't cancel it out, for then we'd never have found the traces. I didn't see it before, but Father Ramon made it clear; both parties to the Treaty of Prague wanted to make it impossible for a violation of that Treaty to lead to a war fought in time. So we shall settle it by calm discussion."

Again there was silence. Finally Two Dogs stood up, knocking out his pipe. He said, "Well, I suppose it's a small consolation that your millstones won't be grinding us. I'll bid you good night, Don Miguel. And I'll wish you sharp wits in your discussion with the poachers—if I'm any judge, you'll need them."

He left the verandah, and it was not until he had gone to his sleeping-room that Don Miguel realized how peculiarly phrased his final comment had been. He got out of his chair, intending to pursue the matter, but Conchita had gone in with her master, which made the idea impossible, and anyway he was far too tired.

IV

As Don Miguel had expected, the valley had changed so little in a thousand years that it was not incongruous to see a mining encampment when they walked over the brow of the hill behind which they had arrived, choosing a moment when they were unlikely to be observed at once. There had been earthquakes, certainly; there were subtle differences in the outline of some of the nearby slopes. But you could recognize the identity of the valley at the two time-points.

He felt a stir of admiration for the magnificently simple stage-management of Father Ramón's plan. When they paused on the crest of the hill and let the poachers see them, the effect was instantaneous. Indians such as were to be expected at this moment of time would have called forth violent reactions, but to see Father Ramón in his somber habit, and Don Miguel wearing—at the Jesuit's insistence—the jeweled collar and star of the Order of the Scythe and Hourglass conspicuously glittering on his plain shirt: this was something to inform the poachers without words that their presence and their plans were known.

They waited, a light breeze touching their faces, while the impact of their arrival sank in. Don Miguel had his first chance to study the tented settlement, the mouths of the galleries, the sluices, and the rest of the equipment, all so like the mine which Two Dogs managed that he had to keep forcibly reminding himself that this was a thousand years away.

Work stopped. Harsh barking orders brought men out of the galleries to blink in the sunlight. Overseers, wearing the uniform of the organization which was the counterpart in the Confederacy of the Society of Time in the Empire, snapped at each other and their men.

Still the newcomers waited, for fully five long minutes in the baking sun of late summer, until at last a man detached himself from the ant-milling crowd and came up the slope

to meet them, accompanied by two of the uniformed overseers.

"Good day, sirs," he said in heavily accented Spanish. "I do not have to ask the reason for your presence. Permit me to present myself: the Margrave Friedrich von Feuerstein, Deputy Master of the Wenceslas Brigade, High Brother of the Temporal College. I recognize your honor as Father Ramón of the Society of Time."

The Jesuit inclined his head. "We've met before," he acknowledged. "Though possibly you may not recall our meeting. In Rome, twenty-seven years ago, as students in the School of Casuistry. My class was departing as yours arrived."

"Why—that's so!" the Margrave said, and extended his hand. "Strange that our acquaintance should be renewed here and now!"

Father Ramón ignored the offered hand. He said, "No, it's far from strange. Are you in charge of this—venture?"

The Margrave hesitated a moment. Then he withdrew his hand folded his arms across his chest, and said challengingly, "I am!"

Father Ramón reached inside his habit and produced a rolled parchment. With his bird-claw fingers he undid the fastening and shook it out; a heavy red seal swung on a ribbon from the bottom of it. He seemed suddenly to speak in a voice other than his own, holding the parchment up as though to read from it, but looking all the time at the Margrave.

"This," he said, "is a copy of a Papal bull. Do I have to tell you that it is the bull *De tenebris temporalibus*?"

The Margrave smiled. He was a large-jowled man with grey hair; the smile made plump hummocks of his cheeks, on the crest of each of which showed a red network of broken veins. He said, "I defy you to show cause for invoking that bull."

"We are not required to show cause." Father Ramón stared unblinkingly. "But in a Vatican court we're prepared to. You have twelve hours, present time, in which to remove your men, your equipment, and all traces of your presence up to that point which we decree, on pain of summary excommuni-

cation by the powers vested in us under the aforesaid bull. Hear!" He snapped the nail of a forefinger against the stiff parchment so that it sounded like a beaten drum, and still without looking away from the Margrave began to recite.

De tenebris temporalibus et de itineribus per tempus leges instituendae sunt. In nomine Deo Patri Filio et Spiritu Sancto dicimus et affirmamus . . .

The whole world seemed to hesitate to hear the rolling Latin syllables ring out through the hot still air. *Regarding the shades of time past and regarding journeys through time laws are to be instituted. In the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost we say and affirm . . .* Don Miguel felt his lips move on the familiar words which he had never before heard invoked.

"We say and affirm that the means of travelling in time is a gift bestowed by divine ordinance and therefore to be used only in accordance with divine law, subject to regulation, to conditions now or in the future to be laid down by Papal decree, and to the expedient judgment of those agents now or in the future appointed by us for the enforcement of those conditions. Let there be agreements between nations and before God for the employment of the means of traveling in time for the benefit of humanity and the increase of human knowledge, and let there be penalties imposed upon those who are tempted for evil ends to pervert and misuse the means of traveling in time."

The Margrave waited patiently until Father Ramón re-rolled the parchment with a crisp rustle, and then he said merely, "On what grounds do you base your orders? Can you show proof of evil?"

"Yes," Father Ramón said delicately. "But not evil of your doing."

The Margrave blinked. He said, "What then?"

Don Miguel could hardly believe his ears. He stared at his companion, who took notice and gave a faint smile. "Be easy in your mind, my son," the Jesuit said. "You'll see it all in a little while." And to the Margrave he added, "Is there somewhere we can speak together in confidence?"

"Yes! Yes, in my tent below. I'll see we're not disturbed there." The Margrave made to turn, but lingered for a long moment trying to read the expression on Father Ramón's face.

He failed, and led the way down the slope towards the mining settlement. Several of his overseers came up to him, demanding instructions. He told them to halt their work, and to wait for further orders. It was clear that they were puzzled by this, but glad enough of a rest, for the sun was scorching.

"Now explain yourself!" the Margrave said, when they had taken their places in his tent and were alone.

"I'd rather you began by explaining yourself," Father Ramón countered.

The Margrave shook his head sharply.

"Well, then, I'll explain you." Father Ramón put his sharp elbows on the table separating them. "I don't care, by the way, about the ore you've taken on territory which is to be Imperial ground by treaty with the Mohawk Nation a thousand years from now—doubtless, you've made some profit, or you expected to make some profit. That's totally beside the point. I want to show you the probable course of going ahead as you had in mind.

"It's no secret to anyone that the Mohawks are the Empire's uneasiest allies. But this doesn't make them friends of yours—a point you overlooked. Legalistically, there may be a claim to be made for freebooters' rights in the ore you've taken. I doubt if there's one for Mohawk rights—they were nowhere near this part of the world. I correct myself: they *are* nowhere near, and indeed I'm not certain that they could be found to exist as a precedent tribal unit.

"Forget all that. Think of the predictable consequences of what you intended to do. You're perilously close to a breach of the Treaty of Prague—and if it weren't deliberately framed to be unbreakable in all reasonable circumstances, you'd have broken it already. Without prejudice we're prepared to overlook the fact. We want to keep the treaty intact."

"Doubletalk," the Margrave said curtly, and Don Miguel

found himself inclined to agree. What had the Empire-Mohawk alliance to do with this act of poaching?

"Are you prepared to act in breach of the Treaty of Prague? snapped Father Ramón.

"Of course not!" The Margrave looked astonished. "As you yourself said, it's framed so as to be virtually unbreakable."

"But you think that the Empire-Mohawk alliance is not," Father Ramón said.

There was a long, cold silence. Finally the Margrave got to his feet. His voice had changed completely when he spoke again. It was heavier and somehow rang false, like a counterfeit coin.

"Very well. I'll clear the site and call the operation off."

Whatever had happened, it was effective. Don Miguel had still not figured it out when he found himself charged by Father Ramón to supervise the removal from this day and age of all the equipment used by the poachers, an order grudgingly acceded to by the Margrave, who told his clerks to provide fair copies of the equipment manifests so that Don Miguel could check that everything which had been brought was going back. His head swimming with the itemized lists of picks, drills, sieves, flotation and separation equipment, chisels, crowbars, saws, hatchets, axes, guns powder, shot, he spent the rest of the day on the task.

It was not until he and Father Ramón had watched the entire process through to its conclusion, with the vanishing of the poachers back to the twentieth century, that he had a chance to utter his burning questions. In the gathering dusk, he turned to the Jesuit.

"Father, I simply do not understand anything about this—neither what the Margrave was up to, nor what was meant by your references to the alliance with the Mohawks, nor why the Margrave so tamely packed up and went home!"

"I'm hardly surprised," Father Ramón said wryly. "I confess I hadn't expected to be shown so right. I didn't know, I only speculated, as to the reason for this ridiculous expedition by the Confederacy."

The last of the poachers vanished into the gloom; there was the inevitable wash of heat, like the opening of a furnace door, which accompanied temporal displacements. Father Ramón waited like a statue for long seconds. Then he said, "Have you the means of making a light?"

"Yes."

"Come with me, then."

He started across the now empty valley towards the mouth of the gallery which Two Dogs was to discover a thousand years from now and bring to Don Miguel's attention. It was closed by the counterpoised boulder, of course, but now it was freshly placed, and the shifting of the earth which later was to make it require the strength of two men to roll it aside had not yet occurred. Father Ramón set his shoulder to it, and gave a gentle heave; before Don Miguel could come to his aid, it had rolled and settled in the open position.

"Now—your light," the Jesuit said briskly.

Don Miguel struck it and offered it, but Father Ramón waved the offer aside. "No, take it into the gallery," he said. "Search carefully, along the walls and floor, right to the end."

Much puzzled, Don Miguel did so. He found nothing, except some traces left by the workmen—and as he was coming back, he saw what Father Ramón was implying.

"Well?" the dry voice said as he emerged. Don Miguel had a struggle to make his own voice equally calm and level.

"It's not there," he said.

"You mean this?" Father Ramón felt in a pouch at his waist and produced the cracked drill-bit which Two Dogs had originally given as the key to the whole affair. "I thought it wouldn't be there. Before my departure from Londres I made some inquiries of—well, of certain trusted agents. I'm prepared to state that this drill-bit was purchased in Augsburg the winter before last; I mean naturally in our present. And it was purchased by a Mohawk."

He tossed it up and caught it again; the light gleamed on the shiny broken edge of it. "Put the stone back, my son. I think we should return—and when we do, we'll make some inquiries of your affable acquaintance the mine manager.

Two Dogs isn't that his name? I think we'll discover that he's by no means a mere miner, but someone of a very much higher caliber, and infinitely more dangerous."

Bending to replace the boulder, Don Miguel turned the words over in his mind. He was about to speak, when another thought came to him. He said explosively. "But I knew it already! I had the equipment manifests in my hands, and I checked that the total of drill-bits returned to their time of origin was the same as the total brought here!"

"I know," Father Ramón said. "I watched that phase of the operation with some attention. Come, let's get away from here. We've had a long day, and we're going back to the middle of another one."

V

It was always the strangest quirk of time-travel that a man might go back a thousand years to a later time of day, and feel below the conscious level of his mind that he had traveled forward, while by returning from a late hour to an earlier one he would feel he had traveled back. It was dizzying, as usual, to emerge from the dusk of the year 948 to the high noon glare of the day they had set out from.

Several Society officers were present to see them come back, headed by Don Rodrigo, who—possibly to atone for his ill-mannered speech to Father Ramón the night before—did not put his important questions immediately, but saw that they moved tiredly, and called for shade, wine and food for them.

That was very welcome. Don Miguel wiped his lips with the back of his hand and thanked Don Rodrigo with a nod, before turning, with everyone else, to listen to Father Ramón's report. Among those who had assembled for the news he saw several—indeed, as far as he could see, all—of the Mohawk

Licentiates present at the site. Doubtless they wanted to know the fate of the poachers who had killed their colleague Roan Horse.

Don Miguel started as he realized that that episode had not even been mentioned to the Margrave.

"We got rid of them," Father Ramón said. "Almost more easily than I'd expected. The affair is closed."

So short a report was not what anyone was waiting for. Don Miguel saw an exchange of startled glances. One of the Mohawk Licentiates on the fringe of the group whispered to a friend nearby, and then turned away. For a moment Don Miguel let his gaze follow; then a surprised comment from the inquisitor, Brother Vasco, called his attention back.

"Father Ramón! It's good to hear that they took their departure, but surely it can't simply be left at that."

"No, of course not." The Jesuit was irritable. "As far as people here are concerned, though, it's over."

"What about Roan Horse?" snapped one of the Mohawks, the same one that a friend had whispered to a moment back.

"We shall require recompense—but that must be obtained properly, from the government of the Confederacy."

A buzz of comment was going around now, like the droning of flies in the hot sunlight. The Mohawk spoke up again.

"That's scarcely good enough! What compensation can we accept for the life of a good Licentiate and a brave man?"

There was a chorus of agreement, and someone else said, "And what about the ore they poached, too? It can't be as simple as you say!"

It was then that the facts clicked together in Don Miguel's mind. The only reason he could think of for having overlooked the obvious twice in one day was that he was confused and tired.

"Felipe!" he snapped, bounding to his feet, and Don Felipe Basso whirled to face him. "Sword—quickly! And over the hill with me!"

He shoved his way unceremoniously between the watchers, and Felipe, not knowing why but impressed by his friend's urgency, came after him.

"Wait, you!" the Mohawk snapped, and came towards them. "Where are you going?"

Almost Don Miguel unsheathed his sword, but as yet he had only suspicion to go on. Instead, he placed one palm flat on the Mohawk's chest and hooked a toe behind his ankle, sending him sprawling. The sudden commotion had drawn everyone's attention. Don Miguel saw Don Arturo starting forward, and barked at him.

"Hold this man! Hold his companions! Keep 'em here till we've gone over the hill—but one of them has left already, and we may be too late."

He gestured to Don Felipe and began to run up the hillside track. Behind him the noise of confused argument grew louder, but he dared not turn back.

He breasted the rise, and saw that indeed he was already too late.

Alongside the mud-plastered house where Don Miguel had spent so many nights as the guest of Two Dogs, Tomás stood inscrutable in his gay *serape*. He was shading his eyes to look towards a cloud of dust on the road towards the sea—and in that cloud of dust could be seen two horses, not the stumbling burros of the locality, but horses of the finest racing stock, being ridden as though to outpace the devil himself.

"Miguel!" panted Don Felipe, coming up beside his friend. "What's this all about?"

"The birds have flown—and there's the whole continent and ocean for them to hide themselves." Don Miguel pointed. "Felipe, find Don Rodrigo—get men with good horses after those two! One of them is Two Dogs, who's been posing as the mine manager here, and he's probably the most dangerous man in the world!"

Don Felipe threw up his hands in a hopeless gesture, and turned back. His exclamation made Don Miguel turn also, and with sinking heart he saw that down in the valley there was flashing of steel, and some of it was colored red in the sun. Red, too, was spreading across the dark habit of the bird-

like figure seated in the chair in shade of the awning at the focus of the group.

"Father Ramón!" Don Miguel cried, drawing his sword. Together with Don Felipe, he launched himself down the slope.

"What we forgot," Don Miguel said uncertainly as he set astride the leathern water-bottle, "was that when we say Mohawk that's like saying Imperial. In the Empire there are people of Spanish extraction—English—Netherlanders—French . . ."

The others—all those who were in a condition to stand up and pay attention—nodded as though his words were pearls of perfect wisdom. If they knew how little he had actually learned, how much he was simply guessing, they would be less willing to lean on him as they had leaned on Father Ramón.

But Father Ramón was dead. And he was not the only one.

"So too," Don Miguel continued, trying to make everything crystal-clear, "Mohawk is a general term, convenient because it was our alliance with the Mohawk Nation that enabled that people to become the dominant power of this continent and subjugate the Crees and the Cherokees and the Choctaws and all the rest. Scores of them—scores of tribes! Some of them very resentful of the ascendancy which the Mohawks had achieved—others less so, and willing in the event to be regarded as members of a single super-tribe as we were willing to become Imperial citizens."

Don Rodrigo, his left arm in a sling, grunted. He said, "Are we to take it that it's the resentment you describe which accounts for this fantastic day's happenings?"

"Partly," Don Miguel said, and was going to explain further when he saw the bowed, weary figure of Brother Vasco approaching through the wavery heat of the afternoon. "In a moment, though, we may be able to hear truth rather than my guesses, if Brother Vasco has been successful in his labors."

The inquisitor came closer. In answer to an unspoken question from Don Miguel, he nodded.

"He's alive—the one who challenged you," he said. "They told me he was called Red Cloud, but—I gave him some of my relaxing draught and asked how he was named, as is customary."

"And he said what?" Don Miguel started to his feet.

Brother Vasco gave him a strange look. "He said his name was Bloody Axe," he replied.

"Let's go to him and get at the truth behind this," Don Miguel said, and strode towards the place where the injured man was laid.

The techniques of the Holy Office were more refined than they had been, as Don Miguel well knew; they were also more effective. It was eerie to see this man who consciously would prefer to die rather than utter the secrets he kept, yielding answers to every interrogation under the influence of Brother Vasco's draught.

Two Dogs? His real name, the injured man said without being able to stop himself, was Hundred Scalps, but he was commonly known as Broken Tree. At that, one of the non-Mohawk Licentiates drew breath sharply and said that he knew the name as that of a brilliant student at the Mexicological Institute some years before.

That fitted.

The information Bloody Axe gave them pieced together in Don Miguel's mind with the clues dropped by Father Ramón before he was killed to make a terrifying unity. Its roots were in envy, as usual in human affairs.

The Confederacy's expansion was barred—partly by the contrary expansion of Cathay, partly by the hostile winters which locked up so much of its potential northern territory. By contrast, the Empire's alliance with the Mohawk Nation gave access to a continent over much of which the climate was equable, and whose resources were mostly still uncharted, let alone tapped.

Some Indians, jealous of Mohawk supremacy, planned to make a breach between the uneasy allies, using the Con-

federacy as a wedge. They made an approach in simple terms to the government of the Confederacy. They stated their feelings about the Mohawk-Empire alliance frankly, letting it be assumed that they would ultimately transfer their allegiance to the Confederacy. They asked for help. The Confederacy might have given it anyway; a promise of payment was made which clinched the deal. The Indians offered to pay by giving the Confederacy access to resources which they knew about, but had not yet begun to mine for the Empire. Clearly the Confederacy would have to take their profit at a time when nobody was there to argue with them, and the Indians promised to conceal the traces for them.

After much pondering, the Confederacy agreed. In law, it could be argued that at the time when they proposed to take the ore, it belonged to nobody, or if it did, it belonged to the ancestors of the present-day Indians. It might not be possible, as they were promised, to conceal the traces—but what did that matter? If the facts came to light, they would drag with them for all the world to see the truth about the Mohawk-Empire alliance. It would splinter, and it was to be hoped that at least some of the splinters could be picked up by the Confederacy.

But it would be easier for all parties, of course, if the secret could be kept.

The proposers of the plan, once it was accepted, took steps not only to ensure that the loss of the ore was discovered, but to pin the deed squarely on the perpetrators. Part of it was luck—the fact that Don Miguel stopped off in New Madrid to present his compliments to the Prince, and let it be mentioned that he was bound for a vacation in California, suggested an opportunity too good to miss.

And but for the fact that Father Ramón's agents knew of a Mohawk—or rather, a Mohawk subject—who had lately purchased some drill-bits in Augsburg, the result would have been as Two Dogs expected, especially when Roan Horse was killed. For this was only the first step. All over the continent there were other sites, waiting to be discovered.

This one was genuine; the others were manufactured. The plan was that the Imperials should complain officially; the Confederacy would issue denials and promises that the same would not be done again—and then, time after time, evidence would be produced that it *had* been done. The same procedure would be adopted to fake these sites as had been used by corrupt Licentiates in Europe to take wealthy patrons on illegal sight-seeing trips—one and the same journey would be used for a legal and a covert purpose. Since there was a sharp limit—four thousand four hundred and sixty years and a few weeks—on the operating range of time apparatus, by establishing the faked sites at maximum distance in the past it could be rendered impossible for anyone from a later point of departure to visit them and see that they were being prepared by Indians, not by miners from the Confederacy. And more than one drill-bit had been bought in Augsburg, and could be left if evidence had to be supplied.

In face of the Confederacy's denials, more and more indications of wholesale plundering would be found. Suspicion would mount—how much of our resources have been taken? Accusation would pile on accusation—there would be Papal adjudication, probably going against the Confederacy, so that the injured innocence of the Confederacy would turn to a cynical determination not to be hanged for a sheep. So—violence.

Oh yes. The millstones across the sea were to be set grinding again, and from between them—so it went in the grandiose vision to which Two Dogs had dedicated himself—the unwilling subjects of the Mohawk Nation and the Empire its ally would escape into the freedom they desired.

Stunned by the subtlety of the plan and the narrowness of their escape, Don Miguel brought himself to put one last question to Bloody Axe. Suppose the plan was discovered and thwarted—as indeed it had been?

The answer struck cold and hurtful as that same axe-blade for which he had been named. "In that event—rather than endure the Empire's vengeance—we have sworn to bring it down around your ears, and all of history with it!"

VI

"WE HAVE to deal with a madman!" the Prince said.

Don Miguel nodded. "There's little doubt of it. I've not wasted a moment of the time since we discovered the truth—thanks to Brother Vasco's inquisitorial skill." He nodded at the Dominican beside him. "We have set on foot inquiries into the background of this man—Two Dogs was an alias he adopted on the old Indian custom whereby a child is named for the first ominous thing the father sees on leaving the birth-tent. He had been known variously as Broken Tree, Hundred Scalps, Storm of Rain, and several other aliases. As for Bloody Axe, who passed as Red Cloud when he became a Licentiate of the Society, his career is nearly as checkered. Almost sixty of the Licentiates granted their time licenses in New Castile have proved to be associated with one or other of these two."

"We have to deal not only with *one* madman," Red Bear said. His long face was shiny with sweat, and his braided hair hung dull beside his head, as though tarnished with strain and worry. No one could question Red Bear's allegiance to the Empire and the Mohawk Nation—he was Mohawk for ten generations back. "We have to deal with madmen in the Confederacy! As you know, we've risked creating local causal loops a hundred times in the past few days, by operating time apparatus at maximum spatial angular displacement and minimal temporal displacement, so as to negate the time required to traverse distances. Already we have exceeded the safety margins laid down by Borromeo—but that's beside the point. What matters is that we got the news of the danger to diplomatic contacts in the Confederacy as soon as it was humanly possible—and some *fools* over there are hindering the co-operation of their Temporal College with us, thinking that for the Empire to fall about our ears as

was threatened will be no bad thing for the Confederacy!" He spat with vicious accuracy between his feet. "Are they all out of their minds?"

"It seems like it," the Prince said. His face was grey—the first time Don Miguel had ever seen a man's face go that color, through sheer unmitigated terror. One day, Don Miguel knew, he would probably look in the glass on rising from one of his sleepless nights and see that same greyness in his own tanned skin.

He half-turned to look down the long table at which the officers were congregated. This was no mere private meeting in the Prince's chamber of audience—this was the first meeting of the Full Council of the Society to be held in New Madrid since the one called to establish the New Castile Chapter of the Society, better than sixty years ago. As Red Bear had mentioned, the limits of safety had been strained to bring the officers here—some of these people, indeed, might even now be where they had been, having returned from tomorrow. It was *that* much of an emergency. There had never been one like it. There might never be another such—never, until the Last Judgment.

"Father Terence!" the Prince said. "I'm not slighting you if I say that I turn to you as I'd have turned to Father Ramón your late colleague—may he rest in peace."

The man next to Red Bear shifted on his chair. He was most of the things that Father Ramón had not been—tall, heavily built, with a thatch of fair hair. He spoke with a strong Irish accent.

"Since Father Ramón went from us," he said, "of course no one has been able to match precisely the plans he doubtless had laid. I feel inadequate to take his place though I've worked with him for some years more or less closely. What's agreed is this: any attempt to create a closed loop by eliminating this Indian—Two Dogs, I'll say for convenience—by temporal intervention from this point will have incalculable consequences. I can only recommend it as a last resort. Moreover, his apprehension and execution at a point in past time will be unprecendented and a violation of all the

canons of the Society. We must accordingly select—so long as we have the chance—a less dangerous alternative."

"Is there one?"

For a long moment Don Miguel thought he had gone too far in voicing his cynical thought. Father Terence flushed and bridled, where Father Ramón would have inclined his head and spoken with gentle reproof. He said, "My son, you've had greatness imposed on you by chance. Don't exceed the freedom it bestows on you!"

The story of that New Year's Eve when Father Ramón had condemned himself knowingly to an intellectual torture whose refinement passed imagining, as well as—incidentally—Don Arturo Cortés to being haunted by his own ghost and Don Miguel to being burdened by unique and impossible knowledge, came to the tip of Don Miguel's tongue. But now was not the time to speak of such matters. He held his peace and swallowed his pride.

After a pause and a glare at his interrupter, Father Terence resumed. "We analyzed the studies which Two Dogs under the name of Broken Tree, pursued while at the Mexicological Institute and previously at the University of New Castile. We took into consideration also the facts which Don Miguel Navarro laid before us regarding the secret society which he and Bloody Axe belonged to, and we've been able to make educated guesses concerning the point at which he would wish to attack the Empire's history."

"Guesses only?" stabbed the Prince.

"Bloody Axe was lucky to know even that this reserve plan existed. Its actual nature was privy to the members of an in-group of the secret society—Two Dogs was one of them, but we can't identify any of the others." Father Terence broke off and coughed behind his hand.

"We are fairly sure that they would attack at the most crucial known point of our history—the conquest of England. It isn't known what the course of events would have been if the Armada had failed to secure the seas for the transit of the forces from the Netherlands, but it can be argued logically that the Empire would have been swallowed up when Spain

was conquered, having no prosperous alternative homeland to retreat to. As every schoolboy is aware, we barely survived the seventeenth century as it was."

"So what are your proposals?" the Prince prompted.

"Have all the obvious precautions been taken?" Father Terence countered.

Red Bear gave a snort. He said, "Oh, we've placed loyal men in charge of every time apparatus we have, but what's the use? Doubtless there are men associated with Two Dogs who can build him time apparatuses good enough to serve his needs—or if not, then he can wheedle those idiots of the Confederacy into granting him passage!"

Father Terence hesitated. He said, "Well, then—our recommendations. We propose that every available Licentiate and Probationer whose loyalty is unquestioned shall forthwith be set to patrolling the causal paths leading to the sailing of the Armada and the conquest of England. If we fail to locate Two Dogs there, we'll have to resort to direct interference. But the consequences are unpredictable."

There was a dull, unpleasant silence. Finally the Prince said, "And that's all?"

Father Terence shrugged. He said, "Yes. That's all."

The Prince turned to Don Miguel. "You had something to say, Navarro?"

Don Miguel put the same question to himself. Yes, he did—but it was compounded of his personal acquaintance with Two Dogs, of all the indefinable impressions acquired while he was staying under the same roof. It didn't fall into words.

At last he shook his head, and the Prince slapped the table with his open palm. "Red Bear!" he said. "See to it—and in the name of God, man, find this lunatic before he ends us all!"

And it could happen. They knew it in theory. Don Miguel had spoken with Two Dogs, thought of him as an acquaintance ripening to the status of a friend, and *knew* that this was the sort of man who could bring history tumbling—the fanatic, the dedicated maniac of great intelli-

gence and perverted idealism capable of committing the untimate blasphemy of believing that he was uniquely right.

His own moment of notoriety was fading. The spotlight had turned on him because he chanced to have been on the scene when the crisis took fire. Now was the time for the organizers, the General Officers, the Don Arturos and Don Rodrigos, while he could once more resume his position as a mere Licentiate of the Society, with some experience and more credit than most of his age, but that only.

It would take a little while to arrange for this concentrated onslaught of the Society on this single perilous period of history, and, since even the simple presence of so mnay extemporates was itself dangerous, many calculations had to be worked out, many special techniques tested, before they could depart. He himself, along with Don Felipe, would be among the first to be sent, to the very closest arrival point: the time of the Armada's sailing. Possibly they would find all well. Possibly not. The second alternative didn't bear thinking about.

Which was why, that evening, he met with Don Felipe in the drinking-shop which was currently popular with the younger members of the Society in New Madrid, and showed him a letter he had written.

"To Kristina?" Don Felipe said, his dark eyes darting back and forth between the folded paper and Don Miguel's face. His friend nodded.

"I've written also." Don Felipe felt in the pouch at his waist. He showed a letter that might have been the twin of Don Miguel's, except that the superscription was to the Lady Ingeborg. "But what's the point?"

"The point?" Don Miguel shrugged. "In the writing itself, I suppose. How do you imagine it will happen if it does? A fading, or an instant obliteration?"

"We'll never know." Don Felipe's face darkened for an instant. "There's one thing, though," he added after a moment in a more cheerful tone.

"What?"

"According to the experts, a potential soul is not subject

to retribution, but is classed as Limbo-fodder. Which means that if Two Dogs succeeds, we can kick ourselves for not having taken advantage of our potential state."

"Do you find that funny?" Don Miguel said.

"No. No, honestly I don't. But I think after a few drinks I might—and what better medicine for the ending of a world is there than laughter?"

So they called for liquor, and spent this final evening reminiscing.

Don Miguel had never before been to the Iberian peninsula, either in present or in past time. But this was by far the best-researched area of Earth, and for various reasons the time prior to the departure of the Armada was thoroughly explored. So his briefing had been excellent—condensed, precise, comprehensive.

And when he walked out into the month of June, the year of 1588, he could say to himself, "Now the Armada is assembling; despite the efforts of the English who have raided its ports and tried to burn its ships, work proceeds apace. The Duke of Parma will have a force of more than a hundred ships; he'll muster six thousand sailors and twenty thousand soldiers, and waiting in the Netherlands are as many more to conquer England."

Put into such concrete terms, and knowing that down in the harbor here such vast preparations were going ahead, made it all unreal. How—after all—could one man change the course of this single historical event? Short of commanding the weather, so that the English and not the Spanish fleet was favored, surely nothing could be done!

And yet—pestilence aboard the ships? Poison in the water-barrels? Something like that might have the right effect.

He tested his command of the archaic language by inquiring the way to the waterfront, which he knew; he passed without question, and shortly found himself among all the last-minute bustle of preparation. The last detachments of soldiers were going aboard; the last hogsheads of pickled meat and barrels of water and biscuit, the last wagonloads

of shot. Unnoticed, he wandered along the quays until he saw a wineshop, and there turned in. Gossip would take root here if anywhere.

There were a few clients. Five minutes' conversation with the landlord told him why—now that the fleet was due to sail, of course, his custom was aboard.

"Here's to their good fortune!" Don Miguel said, raising his mug. "What say you?"

"I'll drink to it," the landlord answered. "But—though the true faith will triumph—I'm not sanguine of this venture."

Don Miguel halted the mug en route to his lips. He said, "Why so, then?" And heard his voice shake.

"Why so?" The landlord gave a coarse laugh. "With a commander who's sick at the least lurching of his ship?"

Don Miguel said faintly, "His Grace the Duke of Parma . . ."

"Parma?" The landlord eyed him strangely. "Parma's in the Netherlands, man! Medina Sidonia's commanding this fleet, and a worse sea-commander could hardly be picked in all of Spain!"

VII

IT WAS AT that moment that Don Miguel Navarro became the first man to know that a universe was crumbling about him, except always for Two Dogs, and Two Dogs desired that it should be so.

The Duke of Parma—in the Netherlands. This was not history. The Duke of Parma, Spain's finest commander of the century, took the Armada to sea! Medina Sidonia—who was he? A nonentity, an entry in the footnotes of history books! And the Netherlands were secured permanently for Spain and its inheritor the Empire by that brilliant, unorthodox master of strategy, the Scottish Catholic Earl of Barton, who when the Armada broke the English resistance at sea was prepared with his hundreds of flat-bottomed barges to break the resistance on land as well.

Don Miguel said after such a pause that he thought he had heard the grinding of Earth on its axis, "And the Earl of Barton? Does he serve with Parma in the Netherlands?"

"The Earl of Barton?" The landlord shrugged. "Perhaps—I've never heard the name." He gave Don Miguel a curious glance. "Where've you come from, that you ask such questions?"

"Ah—I've been traveling." Don Miguel emptied his mug and got to his feet carefully. "My score—how much is it?"

The landlord rubbed his chin and mused for a long moment. All at once Don Miguel could not bear it any more. He snatched a piece of gold from his purse and flung it to the floor, then spun on his heel and took his departure at a headlong run, although reason told him that running could do nothing to speed his purpose.

He headed back away from the shore, making for the house which was the location for his return, his mind pounding faster than his feet. Yes, this was what he had wanted to say to the General Officers—that Two Dogs was subtle, that he would do nothing so open as poison the Armada's provisions! The Earl of Barton: what was known about him? He claimed to be related on the wrong side of the blanket to the Scottish royal family—but so did scores of others. He appeared from nowhere in the Netherlands when Elizabeth ascended the English throne; from then on he made his name by sheer military brilliance, and when Parma was recalled to command the Armada he finished the Duke's work in sixteen weeks of whirlwind campaigning, making sure forever of the Netherlands.

That was the point at which Two Dogs had struck. Not here.

Now what was the Society to do? Lord Barton had come from nowhere, and to track him back to his origins would be impossible! *Already* it was impossible, for the man they were tracing could not exist—

For a second that fact stopped Don Miguel in his tracks, like a physical blow. He grew briefly aware that the townsfolk were staring at him, wondering what made a finely

dressed gentleman race through their streets as though chased by devils, and at once ignored them again.

Was the Society to watch over the birth and childhood of a thousand royal byblows in Scotland, to find out which life Two Dogs had cut off? He could think of no alternative, and groaned because it all seemed so hopeless.

Then it occurred to him that he was still here and aware, and that therefore at this moment (he tried to bring back in laboriously-learned technique of five-dimensional thinking in which he had been schooled) the actual future existed and the potential future was unrealized. Accordingly there was hope even yet. The killing of the Earl of Barton—he didn't doubt that Two Dogs would have made his work definitive—had created a period of suspension, and it was in this period that he now existed. If he could get back to the twentieth century armed with his knowledge—if he could make the Society find the Earl of Barton—they could still thwart Two Dogs and restore history to its true form.

He began to run again, like a madman, and within ten minutes found himself before the house where the Society kept its temporal watch. The watchman on the gate leading up to it had passed him out shortly before, and was a Probationer he knew; he read Don Miguel's anguished expression and let him by at once.

The empty house was eerie, and the great dusty room where he waited for the pickup was looming and dark after the bright summer day outside. He fumed with impatience while the sense of blazing heat grew around him, indicating the onset of temporal displacement, seeing the melting of his surroundings as time was rotated to become a direction through which he could travel, seeing the distorted shape of the cage of iron and silver take on relative actuality as it contained his body and drew it forward into time.

A terrible relief weakened him. So at least he hadn't been forestalled in the carrying of his knowledge! The trip was going to take some "time", because of the considerable angular displacement involved in the return to his starting point in

New Madrid which inside the cage affected him as though it were ordinary time. He had a chance to calm himself and order his thoughts.

It must work this way. Two Dogs had gone back and killed the Earl of Barton. Owing to the tangential relationship between elapsed-past time and elapsed-present time, the results of this deed had not echoed down to Don Miguel's own present before his departure for the year 1588. But in 1588 the effects were already established, and it was conceivable that they might have durated through to the twentieth century "while" Don Miguel was absent from it. If they had, though, it was to be assumed that this temporal pickup would not have taken place. With luck, Two Dogs had not departed until after Don Miguel; in this case, there was quite a considerable margin of actual time in the twentieth century in the course of which the work of tracing the Earl of Barton and ensuring his survival might be carried out.

If, on the other hand, Two Dogs had departed very soon after he was last seen, there was so little time for such a gigantic task that success was unlikely.

Don Miguel sat down on his haunches on the floor of the cage, and realized to his astonishment that he had become quite calm now he had had a chance to think things over. It seemed so unnatural for a single man to be able to wipe out the real course of history! Besides, hadn't Two Dogs spoken of his people being ground between the millstones of the rival European invaders if the Empire hadn't won its greatest victory? Would he desire that fate for his people?

Don Miguel shuddered. Yes, he thought. A man like Two Dogs might think it better that the Indians should go down provided only that the Empire went with them, and that the Europeans who came to his homeland should be torn indefinitely by their quarrels and never achieve the greatness of the united Empire.

Had he not, though, been too pessimistic in thinking that the task of tracking down Two Dogs would be impossible? A major figure of European history like Lord Barton must have been the subject of some research by the Society

—they would not be hunting in the dark, but would have clues to guide them, and in a little while the natural order would be restored. The fools in the Confederacy who felt that the collapse in past time of the Empire would bring them advantages in the present would see reason; the members of the Temporal College would work together with the Society of Time to ensure . . .

Abruptly the growing cheerfulness in his mind was cut off. He stared at the frame of iron and silver which surrounded him, misty and deformed as always while in transit, and thought: *it should be growing clearer as I come closer to the present. Instead, it's growing fainter. Or is it a trick of the eyes?*

He dared not touch the semi-solid bars to confirm what his eyes reported—that way, he would die quickly. There were vast energies trapped in the configuration surrounding him.

He stared, wondering what lay beyond the bars: reality, or some unimagined nightmare, and while he stared, he found out.

There was a wrenching. It acted on his bare consciousness, so that he perceived it as pain, and as blinding light, and as a sound which shook his brain in his head; as a burning fire, and as a headlong falling into illimitable abysses, one beyond the other without number or end.

That was the most terrible thing of all: that they were endless, and yet after an eternity, they ended.

He had sight and hearing, touch and the awareness of his body. He looked, listened, felt air and warm sunlight, knew he was physically present, knew he had weight and substance. And while his mind still echoed with the dying reverberations of the crash of a universe, he was not ashamed to scream.

But that, said a small voice far distant in his mind, is a foolish thing to do. It can be understood what has happened. Think! Think that in less than one short century after Borromeo, the world you thought of as being real spawned not only Two Dogs, but others beside. Think of the New Year's

Eve when a king was killed because men played with the power to master time. Think of the greed that made men steal from the riches of the past, and what had to be done to set right the consequences. Think why in your world that you imagined to be real no one had come back from the future to intervene in the future's past . . .

True. Oh, God's name! True as daylight, and never understood! If a span of a century less some years had brought about so many abortive interferences with the past, why had not the future, with its incalculable toll of years in which time travel would be possible?

Because there *was* no future. Not rooted in that past. Don Miguel Navarro drew a deep breath into a throat made sore by his foolish screaming and said the words to himself.

A picture was coming to him now. He could visualize the path of history in each of those innumerable potential worlds where men had gained the power of time travel as a series of loops. Every loop was like a knife; it severed the chain of causation and created a new reality. (Was there indeed any reality more real than any other?) At last the temptation to put the past to rights would lure one man at least to make the entire path of history unstable. The very events that led to the discovery of time travel would be wiped out, and a new universe would form.

Perhaps this was what had happened to him. He could almost grasp the concept, but not quite. If he had crossed the margin of the spreading ripples from the Earl of Barton's death on his way to the past—as he clearly had, for when he came to 1588 the effects were established—then they would probably have durated to his starting-point as he was returning to it. In fact, he had been trapped between actual and potential "during" his journey . . . and here he was.

Where, then, were all the people he had known? Felipe, who had drunk with him last night, as it seemed; Kristina, who had made him the unwitting instrument of just such a loop in time as he was considering now—and who might have been more than a charming companion; the King, the Princes, the General Officers, the Margrave, even Two Dogs

himself? Were they abolished from the total scheme of things, while he by a freak was left in possession of his knowledge and his life?

Only such a man as Father Ramón could answer that question—and even in the universe which Two Dogs had brought crashing down about their ears, Father Ramón was dead.

Passive, he began to study his surroundings. He was in a sort of park; people were coming towards him, drawn by the screaming, no doubt, for they hesitated while they were yet some distance away. They were dressed in extraordinary clothes; he saw young women as well as men among them, their legs bare to the knee, hatless, clinging shamelessly to the bare arms of their male companions. But behind them he saw a city: towers of tallness he had never dreamed of, and there were sounds he could not identify, but which seemed to have their source in the sky overhead.

He looked up. Something far vaster than a bird was passing, stiff-winged. A mystery.

Now the people were getting bolder. A young man of about his own age came striding forward, and addressed what was presumably a question, in words completely beyond Don Miguel's comprehension. He countered with a question of his own.

"*Donde estoy?*"

The man frowned. He said, "*Español!* Ah—you are in New York!" He spoke slowly and clearly, as to an idiot, and Don Miguel suddenly understood. Nueva Jorque: New York. A derivative of English, the language which only peasants spoke in his universe—here, the tongue of this fantastic city. He hunted through his limited recollection of the parent dialect and formed his second question.

"When? Please—which year?"

The man blinked in astonishment. Either he didn't see the point of the question, or he hadn't understood Don Miguel's accent. But on reflection, of course, he could see that it didn't matter. It must be this universe's year 1988 or 1989, assuming that he'd come to a New York which corre-

sponded to the New Madrid he had known before, because if he had fallen short of his year of destination he would have fallen short in space too, and drowned in the Atlantic.

Only time would tell whether that fate would be preferable to the one which had actually overtaken him.

Now, seeing he was not dangerous, the other curious onlookers were approaching to study him and pass startled comments. Their surprise suggested that in this world time travel was unknown; if it were known, it would supply a ready-made explanation for the arrivel of a stranger out of thin air. The thought brought with it a sense of peace—a security which he could never remember having felt since he first learned how dangerous Borromeo's legacy had become.

Let them explain his presence how they would, then. He would never explain it. He could describe the operation of time apparatus; he could build one in a week, given the iron and the silver. He would not. He swore that silently to himself. Whatever this world was like, it was not for men to usurp the divine prerogative and alter the established order of what had gone before.

The young man facing him was beckoning to him, inviting him to accompany him somewhere. Don Miguel gave a slow smile. For better or worse, without chance of change, this was his reality now.

Don Miguel Navarro, formerly Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society of Time, now the most isolated of all the outcasts the human race had ever known, walked forward, into the real world.