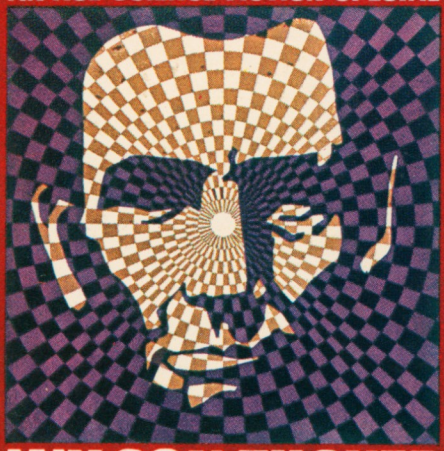
H-62 / 60¢

AN ACE SCIENCE FICTION SPECIAL

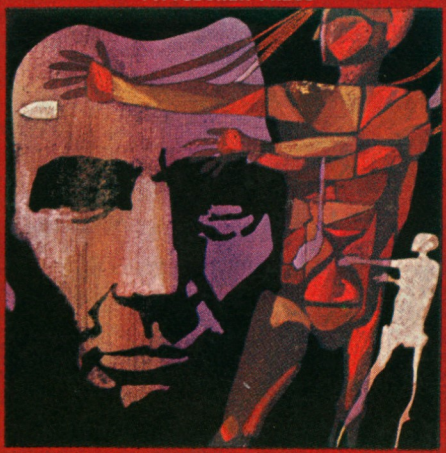


WILSON TUCKER

THE LINCOLN HUNTERS

"A time travel classic!"

PITTSBURGH PRESS



Ben Steward, man of the 26th Century, was a "Character" for Time Researchers: he was an adventurer, an actor, a student of history . . . a man trained to blend into any era of man's long past. In the overpopulated, stultifying world of 2578, his was an exciting job.

He had, for example, been standing on the shore with the Indians when the Pilgrims rowed ashore from the *Mayflower.* And now he had been sent back 700 years into his past, to the political furore just before the Civil War . . . and he was facing certain death.

For the engineers who operated the time machine had made a mistake, and Steward was stuck in a time which would overlap the time-segment he had already scouted. No person could twice exist in the same time; it was an impossibility. And so Steward, in a few moments, would simply disappear. . . .

"One of the most unusual books of the season, and also one of the most suspenseful."

—Wilmington News

ARTHUR WILSON TUCKER has been a highly successful writer of both mystery novels and science fiction. His sf novels include THE LONG LOUD SILENCE, WILD TALENT, TIME BOMB, CITY IN THE SEA and TO THE TOMBAUGH STATION (Ace Book D-479). *The New York Times* says he is "an author whose name is deservedly acclaimed in science fiction," and Damon Knight, in his critical book IN SEARCH OF WONDER, proclaimed him "one of the most brilliant writers in the business."

THE LINCOLN HUNTERS was published in hardcover by Rinehart & Co., Inc.; this Ace Science Fiction Special edition makes it available in paperback for the first time.

WILSON TUCKER
THE LINCOLN HUNTERS

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

THE LINCOLN HUNTERS

An Ace Book, by arrangement with the author.

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION:

To the diligent, salutary Staff
of the Withers Public Library,
Bloomington, Illinois.

Plausible impossibilities should be preferred to unconvincing possibilities.

ARISTOTLE

Printed in U.S.A.

1

CAUSATION . . .

A PRIM and elderly gentleman with rocks in his repository was the causative agent. His name was Amos Peabody. He entered into a contract, and he made a special request—which was easily granted.

His signature on the contract (plus the payment of a sum of money) set a monstrous business machine into motion, and one of the least confounding consequences was the snipping of thirty minutes from ancient history. The machine was never aware of the loss.

Amos Peabody collected things—historical things.

One of his most prized possessions was an old, engraved boulder found by an excavating crew on the North Atlantic seaboard; the crew had been preparing the footings for a new sea-water refinery when the boulder turned up, impeding their progress. By chance, casual word of the discovery made its way to him and he purchased the object for his museum.

Amos Peabody also owned a cracked bell, a score or more of leathery scrolls, numerous clay tablets, and the remains of two antiquated flying objects: a winged aeroplane bearing the name *Saint Louis,* and a wingless spheroid which the ancients termed a *Mouse.* (Despite historical documentation, Peabody never fully understood how they flew.)

Peabody resembled his museum: a relic of the past.

His one-man institution was small and stuffed with

the debris of other centuries, while he was equally diminutive in stature and possessed a mind filled with the glories of yesteryear. His clothing was too heavy and too warm for the benevolent climate—and more than a little out of date—but he would not change it. Peabody sternly disapproved of the ultra-modern garments worn by the younger people, believing their garb verged on vulgar nudity. He clung to the conservative, fastidious cut of an earlier day and ignored the amused glances cast his way.

He ambled now across town on a warm, brilliant and sun-splashed morning, pleased with himself and pleased to be alive in the spring—the natural beginning of a new year. Peabody had long since passed the century mark and his aging body warned him he would not reach the second centurial milestone. Other men gained their second century of life easily; it was so common a thing that it no longer rated news space. But it was not for him, and he accepted his fate without particular regret.

Amos Peabody enjoyed walking, another antiquated habit, and the hour of his appointment gave him the leisure time for it. Frequently he would prowl the older streets of Inner Cleveland, searching out the houses and historical sites of times gone by.

He liked to say the younger generation, any and all of the younger generations, were weak-kneed milksops because of their fondness (or weakness) for riding everywhere. They rode even the shortest distances. Some of the younger men of his acquaintance would not walk around the block for their tobacco or liquor rations; instead they clung to their dinky little electric cars, which were everywhere. The streets were cluttered with the cars. But Amos Peabody walked because he liked the freedom of movement and the healthful exercise, because it was a good habit the ancients practiced, and because Inner

Cleveland was basking under a wonderful spring sun.

At intersections, drivers hauled up short with elaborate, exaggerated manners to allow him to pass.

Peabody doffed his hat and bowed, knowing the gesture was only partly understood, and knowing that he was enjoying his mannerism as fully as they were enjoying theirs.

All too soon the impressive building that was his destination came into sight. He sighed a little, because the happy, ambulant journey seemed so short, so abruptly ended.

Peabody did not pause to inspect the edifice, did not glance up at the blinding, flaring, twirling illuminated sign which hung across its face. He had been there before and knew it well, had turned his head a thousand nights to shut it out of his sight. That persistent, garish sign, bright enough to be visible for several miles in full daylight (and on clear nights it was readable to the fringes of Outer Cleveland) shouted to the world that this great building housed a renowned institution, a colossal business enterprise, a daring monopoly.

This was the home of Time Researchers.

Peabody left the streets of Inner Cleveland and the warm sunshine heralding the spring of 334 N.N.

He mounted the several marble steps and passed through an activated door which had opened for him. Peabody studiously ignored the motto carved in stone over the doorway (considering it plebeian) and managed not to see its bright duplicate hanging in the foyer. Cleansed and refrigerated air smote his face. It felt actually cold after the sunshine and he was unable to repress a shiver.

"Good morning," a startled receptionist greeted him. She tried not to stare. "Do you have an appointment?"

Amos Peabody did stare, openly and with annoy-

ance. They had changed receptionists since his last visit here. He disliked women who shaved their heads, and this one compounded the annoyance by having a shiny pate. It needed powdering.

"I do indeed," he said, and wrote his name on a small slate. "I am to see Mr. Whittle."

"One moment, please."

Peabody waited patiently, well aware that few clients ever passed through those doors to face the receptionist. Most people desiring research merely called in; the members of the weak-kneed generations wouldn't dream of doing otherwise. To call in person would necessitate leaving the car at the curb and walking up the many steps, which was an idiosyncrasy reserved for simpletons, and Amos Peabody.

Peabody gloried in it. It was a part of his way of life, and it provided an excellent excuse for walking somewhere—anywhere. It was his personal touch.

The personal touch was not lost on Mr. Whittle. Visitations by clients were a rare thing, and that gentleman hurried from his office to greet the museum director. (Whittle glanced meaningfully at the receptionist, warning her to remove the emotion from her face.)

He conducted Amos Peabody into a seldom-used consultation chamber, made him comfortable in an overly fussy manner, and switched on the consultation circuit. The tiny microphones were artfully concealed. An intercom hummed with quiet life as specialists scattered about the great building awaited their conversation.

Of necessity, or so Whittle believed, the interview was opened by him with the usual inane remarks about the weather and the intercontinental game scores. ("Isn't it *warmish* for so early in the year? The climate is becoming decidedly warmer. Philadelphia is expecting a citrus crop this season, if you can be-

lieve it! That was a remarkable upset at the ball park last week, was it not?") Peabody detested these time-wasting preambles, but he supposed that Whittle enjoyed them and so let the man ramble on. He suppressed the urge to fidget.

"*Now,* Mr. Peabody," the executive said at last, "what interesting subject brings you here today?"

"I am a collector," Peabody told him. "Historical objects and so forth."

"Of *course* you are, sir, and I know the splendid reputation your museum enjoys in that field. There are not many private museums of note in the world today, and you are to be commended for your tenacity. If memory serves, I had the honor to wait on you at the time of your last visit. A little more than a year ago, was it not? Something about a rock, was it not?"

"It was fourteen months ago, lacking a week," the collector replied testily, "and my object was called 'The Plymouth Rock.' You researched it for me."

"To be sure, I remember it well. Tell me, Mr. Peabody, have you been enjoying your rock?"

Peabody tightened his lips. "How does one enjoy a rock?"

Whittle was momentarily nonplused, but quickly regained command of the interview.

"A splendid sense of humor, Mr. Peabody. But I daresay the rock gives you *great* satisfaction? I daresay our researches into the matter were *quite* thorough?"

"I was satisfied. Your people established a negative authenticity beyond a reasonable doubt."

"Splendid! A satisfied client is our only goal, Mr. Peabody. Time Researchers values your testimonial. And now, sir, how may we serve you?"

Briefly thankful they had at last reached the business at hand, Peabody reached for his notebook.

"I am now interested in a matter of a lost speech,"

he said. "Quite literally, the speech was lost to posterity. There are indications that it was not recorded in any form at the time of delivery, and that the persons who heard it were not able, afterward, to reproduce it. Someone did attempt to reconstruct it at a latter date, but the attempt was disputed, ignored and forgotten." Peabody sighed wistfully and concluded, "If it is possible, Mr. Whittle, I would like to have that speech."

The executive beamed his professional smile.

"My dear sir, nothing is impossible to the craftsmen here at T-R. Or almost nothing." (He was always uncomfortable at the memory of that Roman circus fiasco, and always fearful that news of it might leak out. That had been a major disaster.) "Who delivered the speech? When? Where?"

Peabody studied the notebook although he needn't have done so; he was more than familiar with its contents. But if Whittle could prate about the weather, he could refer to his notes. It was a mild kind of retribution.

"A man named President Lincoln gave the address, in the year 1856. A most ancient day."

At these words, the listening circuit came to life.

"The term *president*," an anonymous voice said, "is a title of office, and not a person's given name. A series of presidents reigned before the Second Revolution. The date mentioned is from the Old Nation. Correlation to current dating coming up. Please stand by."

Peabody glared stonily at the intercom speaker. He thought the proffered information was so obvious as to be unworthy of repetition.

"The date," he replied to the unseen researcher, "was seven hundred and twenty-two years ago. Correlation is redundant."

"Ah," Whittle interposed smoothly, "the Old Na-

tion. A *very* interesting period, fraught with historical charm. Imagine it, more than seven hundred years ago! A lost speech! You labor in a fascinating field, Mr. Peabody." (His agile mind was already counting money.)

"A field cluttered with ignorance and redundancy," the collector retorted. He extended empty hands in a symbol of helplessness. "I have no more information than that, I am sorry to say, for mine is also a field of enormous vacancies. The Second Revolution, Mr. Whittle, destroyed much that was noble and good in our heritage. Meaning no disrespect to the Emperor nor his ancestors, of course."

"Of course. I am sure the Emperor regrets these things."

"I find it sad, painful. Vast treasuries of bygone years were reduced to rubble. Destroyed. Forgotten. Our own history is now a patchwork affair. Political questions aside, Mr. Whittle, great crimes were committed in the wanton destruction of so many historical objects."

Whittle nodded his sympathy.

"I know well what you mean, sir. Time and again, we here at T-R have been called upon to search an era only a few hundred years distant. The excesses of the Second Revolution destroyed priceless data scarcely a stone's throw away. A few lifetimes. How, then, may we expect your Lincoln material of seven hundred years ago to have survived?" (Inwardly, Whittle was not displeased. T-R profited greatly by the destruction of information.)

"Yes," Peabody agreed gloomily. "Yes."

He fingered the notebook, and returned to the business at hand.

"I do not know the location of the delivery of this speech, although I would suppose it occurred in the Old Nation's capitol." And he glared once more at

the mechanical speaker, daring it to interrupt. "That would be the city-state of Washington."

Whittle placed the tips of his fingers together and nodded solemnly.

Amos Peabody closed and pocketed the notebook. "Frankly, Mr. Whittle, the museum desperately needs this new material. As you may have heard, the curators of some of the leading South American institutions are organizing a field trip to this country, for the express purpose of inspecting private museums such as mine. I had a call from a government official a bit ago." Peabody squirmed at the memory of the call. "The official was most insistent that our museums offer newer and better exhibits than those now on display in South America. He talked about national pride. In point of fact, he suggested that my collection suffered from staleness; that it lacked quantity as well as freshness. And he hinted rather broadly that my license would suffer close scrutiny if I failed to impress the visitors."

"Oh, Mr. Peabody, I hope *not!*"

"You hope not," the collector echoed dispiritedly. "*I dare not.* The loss of the license would close the museum. I would be unemployed. Do you know what follows unemployment, Mr. Whittle?"

Whittle knew what followed unemployment, but he preferred not to think about it. The matter was distasteful to a gentleman of breeding and position. The government had a most efficient, if brutal, answer to the unemployment problem. And poor Peabody was well along in years for that sort of thing.

The two men sat in silence for minutes, awaiting the considered word of the consultation circuit. The many specialists were already at work.

Far below them, underground, in one or more of the vast storage chambers, men and machines searched with deft assurance through the monstrous

masses of accumulated data; the men guiding and the machines moving swiftly and obediently to extract the desired information. This was one facet to the huge business enterprise. Local research was T-R's secondary function, keyed to perfection. The Time Researchers had the answer to almost every question, and were as important to daily life as the news dispensers. This search, like most others, required several minutes because of the very size of the files.

Time Researchers was a unique institution in many ways. It was the only one of its kind in the world. It enjoyed the profitable monopoly because no other person or corporation was sufficiently wealthy to conduct similar activities, and because there was available nowhere else the unlimited electrical power necessary to operate. But most important, it was the only one of its kind in the world because its engineers had painstakingly worked out the principles of operation—and those secret principles were jealously guarded. Imitators and competitors were nonexistent.

Time Researchers served the world, for a fee, never declining a reasonable (and potentially profitable) request. Now and again the great monopoly inadvertently changed the world (as witness the receptionist in the lobby). The current style of dress among the younger women was a typical example of the mighty, mechanistic Homer nodding. Shaved heads, revealing bodices, and the nearly nude torso: that had been discovered in ancient Egypt and gleefully resurrected by the present generation.

Amos Peabody did not approve.

The circuit broke the silence. Men and machines had completed their duties for the moment.

"Abraham Lincoln," the anonymous researcher spoke from his distant cubby. "Born, 1809. Death by assassination, 1865. Twice elected president of the Old Nation. Lincoln's lost speech, so called, was a

political address delivered to an assembly of five hundred people, on May twenty-ninth, 1856. (All dates are, of course, Old Nation dates.) A revolt of the populace was imminent, over the issue of slavery of human beings. Lincoln, not yet a president, is said to have delivered a fiery speech denouncing slavery. At this point two opposing schools of thought are evident. The first holds that his speech was so provoking, so impassioned, that no reporter was able to concentrate on the task of recording his words. Similarly, his listeners could not afterward agree on what was said. The opposing school contends that the speech was nothing more than a rabble-rousing harangue, unworthy of recording.

"In any event, the address was immediately lost and there exists no trace or part of it."

"Splendid work, gentleman!" Whittle exclaimed. "Oh, splendid. Where, please?"

"The political meeting convened in a structure known as Major's Hall, somewhere above the ground floor. The Hall was located in a small, rather primitive village-state on the middle prairies; their name for it was Bloomington-illinois."

"Splendid," Whittle repeated. He beamed at the collector. "Progress, my dear sir, progress! Do you wish a written or spoken version of the address?"

"I would like to hear him speak, please."

"Here, sir." A new voice entered the circuit. "The preliminary report is encouraging; a village located on the open prairie makes the task less difficult." There was a pause. "The results of the first run are coming in, Mr. Whittle. Please stand by." Another short wait and then a rattle of paper. "We believe we can have the geographical and topographical maps ready in four hours. Given that, we can put an advance man through in another six. And given *that*, we believe we can place a minimum crew in the

village in another ten. The over-all estimate is twenty hours, plus or minus two hours."

Whittle seemed satisfied. "And Finance?"

Still another voice was heard on the intercom speaker. "Sorry, sir. We will not be able to furnish an accurate estimate until the advance man tenders his report. However, if no more than the minimum crew is needed, present indications are that the total sum will not exceed two hundred and ten thousand, barring unforeseen circumstances."

"Well, Mr. Peabody, how does that sound?"

"I consider it a bargain, Mr. Whittle. I shall be more than satisfied."

"Splendid, sir, splendid! Shall we draw up the contract?"

"Do," Peabody agreed. "I ask only the usual restrictive clauses. No other collector, museum or business enterprise of any nature shall be permitted to duplicate or use this material for a period of one year. Specifically, I refer to the entertainment centers, the game houses."

"Easily granted, Mr. Peabody."

"Thank you. I do not entirely approve of some of the forms of entertainment offered in such houses, and the idea of Lincoln's speech being used there for amusement and profit is appalling."

"I understand your concern."

"And Mr. Whittle, if it is at all possible, I would like to employ the services of Benjamin Steward. I have the utmost faith in him; as a researcher, his performance leaves nothing to be desired."

"You shall have him, sir, if he is available. We value your trust, Mr. Peabody, and are ready to cooperate in every way. And now, please, the contract."

Whittle raised his eyes to one of the concealed

microphones and said pleasantly, "Proceed, gentlemen."

The gentlemen obeyed.

In the several sections of the great marble beehive, T-R divisions started work on the new assignment. Using the preliminary Engineering report, Traffic began plotting a time-curve for the initial shoot. Cartography uncovered a sheaf of previously used maps and wondered if they couldn't serve once again. Library pulled from its own hefty files a set of idiomatic tables, and sketches of appropriate costumes. A subdivision of Library commenced working up the costumes. Data checked cross references, seeking background information. Personnel set upon the job of rounding up a suitable crew, beginning with Benjamin Steward, as per the client's request.

But Finance, above all, plunged into its accustomed role with a quiet eagerness. Finance was already busy padding expenses.

The estimated maximum of two hundred and ten thousand was a princely sum—although they would not be able to keep the ten thousand. *That* was the Emperor's impost.

2

. . . AND EFFECT

THE SWINGING door was kicked open.

"Saddle up, Evelyn. I'm raring to ride!"

The young woman glanced up without surprise.

A lanky, slow-speaking and slow-moving individual pushed through the nonactivated door into the first of a suite of rooms making up the Engineering Section. He grinned cheerfully at the woman seated behind the floating desk and looked to see if her ankles were exposed. They were not. However much modern woman might imitate her Egyptian forbears, she drew a taut line at the waist.

Evelyn's colorful skirt draped the lower length of her body and primly overlapped the tops of her feet, hiding all.

She said, "Good afternoon, Benjamin. It is pleasant to see you again."

She did not ask the meaning of the cryptic reference to a saddle; the Characters were forever dropping obsolete words and phrases garnered in their travels. Nor did she self-consciously tug at the skirt in his presence. She knew her ankles were properly covered.

Benjamin Steward pulled in a chair and sat down.

She studied him seriously and searchingly, looking for any minute change in the man since their last meeting. His value rested on his appearance. If he seemed colorless, almost useless, well and good.

Steward's amiable face, like his clothing and his manners (and, she often suspected, his mental attitude), was nondescript. He and his habits belonged to no particular age, reflected no particular pattern of life. His dossier revealed he was forty-four years of age, but she frequently had reason to disbelieve that.

Benjamin Steward gave the appearance of being perpetually at peace with the world, seemingly unmoved by it and caring little or nothing for it. She knew that current events seldom affected him, and crises were things happening to other people. He was tall, appallingly thin, with unkempt hair and an unhurried metabolism. He was somewhat out of step with her world, and admirably suited to his job.

Steward belonged to a group of men and women employed by Time Researchers, and referred to by T-R personnel as "the Characters." They were the anonymous people who did research in the field, more or less anonymously serving such clients as Amos Peabody. They were a tight, clannish group, and they belonged to a guild.

It was to be remarked that this man had temporarily lost his anonymity. Amos Peabody had requested him.

The Characters were the runners, the legmen, the adventurers who performed the field work. They were jealously proud of their jobs. Among their number were actors and would-be actors, writers and artists, linguists and librarians, political hacks, students of the physical sciences, salesmen, sleight-of-hand artists, athletes, hunters and trackers, anachronistic soldiers of fortune, and bums. The Characters had but three things in common: a ready willingness to risk their lives for monetary reward, a certain sly talent for survival, and the ability in the field to pass as genuine characters—whatever the time

and place. That last was of paramount importance.

Observing her prolonged scrutiny, Steward said, "Maidens, like moths, are caught by my glare."

"I am not a maiden, Benjamin."

"Most surprising. Then beware of me."

Evelyn unbent to smile at him. "Benjamin, you have been threatening me with terrible fates since the day we first met, some five or six years ago. Your threats are as hollow as the wind."

"Ever the weaker sex, to piety more prone. I'm lulling you into a sense of false security—and then I'll pounce. Snap!"

"After six years?"

"The seventh may be the fateful one."

Steward relaxed his body on the chair and searched his pockets for a cigar.

She knew the remark that would follow. It always did.

He unwrapped the tobacco with slow and loving care. "A woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke."

"Kipling," Evelyn said.

He affected surprise. "How did you know?"

"You told me. At least a dozen times. I hope your memory in the field is more reliable."

"Oh, I squeak by."

His glance lingered briefly on her nearly bare bosom, knowing that it was expected of him. She would feel complimented if he did stare for a moment and slighted if he did not. Vanity had never changed its gender. The view, while pleasant, was not particularly enticing to him. Not that Evelyn was at fault—she most decidedly was not—for her body revealed that ripe maturity expected of a woman in her later twenties. But to Steward, feminine charms such as hers were more attractive when they were

artfully concealed—and in that frame of mind, he couldn't say much for modern fads.

A colleague had been responsible for this revelatory vogue, a man with a roving eye and an impressionable mind.

It began as a prosaic assignment, a study of an early Egyptian dynasty—but the Character surveying ancient Egypt had lost his head to ancient Egyptian beauty, and finished the assignment with a greater concentration on anatomy than on architecture. The spectacular pictorial report was received by T-R executives with something less than enthusiasm, whereas the public reception was decidedly the reverse.

Young bosoms went Egyptian-bare almost overnight.

Steward swung his glance away and puffed lazily on the cigar.

"Boot, saddle, to horse and away," he reminded the young woman.

"Kipling again?"

"I don't remember. I have several hundred of them filed away for ready reference, but I'm darned if I can remember the originators. The ancients were a windy lot."

"The world has not changed in that respect."

"'Sdeath! The woman is wise beyond her years. And the future will be the same, I expect, if we could get into it. Perhaps it's just as well that we're limited to searching the past." He waved the cigar. "Where away?"

Evelyn gathered up a sheaf of papers.

"The Old Nation. A prairie village, some few hundred miles west of here and a trifle over seven hundred years ago. An element of uncertainty will necessitate the minimum crew." She flicked a glance at him but he did not react. "Sound recording only, which should not be too difficult, should it?"

"Whiskers?" he asked with a mild interest. "I like whiskers—they give me that handsome and distinguished appearance."

"If you wish, although they are unnecessary. The men of that age followed their inclinations in the matter. You will need warm clothing, a vocabulary, and the usual history briefing. Plus a strong reminder to keep your thoughts and your tongue to yourself."

"An element of uncertainty," he repeated her words dryly. "Hot times?"

"Perilous times to certain persons. The Old Nation is on the brink of rebellion over the issue of slavery. You will be antagonistic to slavery, if you must commit yourself."

"Not Patrick Henry again?"

"Patrick Henry? One of the Characters?"

"No—a chap in history, that great dust heap called history. Old Nation, old cause. He said, 'Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty, or give me death!' " Steward was grinning with a secret amusement. "That was his public side."

"It sounds very correct. And his other side?"

"He bought slaves."

At Evelyn's surprised stare, Steward flicked a finger downward to indicate the data repositories below them.

"It's in the files. A bill of sale for the purchase of somebody called Negro Boy Joe."

"I confess I do not understand the ancients," Evelyn said.

He shrugged. "A mad world, my masters. What about the job?"

Evelyn returned her attention to the papers in her hand.

"You are to conduct a pilot survey of the village, and later, of course, accompany the minimum crew into the field. Engineering believes no more than the minimum will be necessary, because of the existing conditions. Your initial departure is estimated at six to seven hours."

"'Sdeath! Why the delay?"

"There is some difficulty with the topographical maps, but it will be solved."

"Sound recording only?" he asked curiously.

"That is correct. An historical personage named Abraham Lincoln delivered a political speech, attacking slavery. The year was 1856. Our client wishes only the verbal record."

"Slavery," Steward mused. "The date sounds sort of familiar—as if I'd been there before."

"Really?" The young woman frowned with surprise. "I don't recall that. But it may have happened before I entered the department." She half turned from the desk to open a cabinet and consult his dossier. "You certainly cannot return there if—— Oh. Here it is." And she paused to read the notations on his employment record.

"It's just a vague feeling," he explained.

After a moment she continued. "You are partially correct. You visually-recorded a duel between two Old Nation dignitaries; perhaps fifty years earlier and several hundred miles distant. That may explain the confusion about the date. But you have a clear field in this new assignment. Your nearest approach was 1804."

Steward snapped his fingers at the returning memory.

"Hamilton—the loser's name was Hamilton. Some duel! He fired into the air and the other fellow killed him." The Character reached down to massage his

leg. "I almost lost it. A dog chased me off the grounds."

She nodded. "I saw that in the theater."

"Bad guess—you saw the re-enactment. My film was clouded. What about my crew?"

"The minimum crew, as usual, will consist of three men and yourself. You will not carry weapons. The village is quite civilized and secure from attack by the aborigines. Do you have any preferences?"

Steward rubbed his palm across his chin, thinking of the Characters.

"Warner," he suggested.

"I'm sorry. Mr. Warner is already in the field. He left a short time ago, to record a New Year's Eve celebration in the year 2000, O.N. A place called Times Square. The client wishes to determine whether the century began with 2000, or 2001."

Steward chuckled. "Lucky stiff. He'll come in drunk. All right, then, how about Karl Dobbs?"

"Isn't Mr. Dobbs somewhat elderly?"

"Elderly? 'Sdeath, no! Not a day over ninety. I wouldn't pick him for a rough and tumble, but you said this was a civilized job. He'll do."

"Very well. Two more, please."

"Doc Bonner. And don't let him hear you mention elderly. He's sixty-something, I think. Young enough to jump you over the woodpile."

"Dobbs and Bonner," she agreed.

"Oh, Charlie Morris, I guess."

Evelyn frowned, thumbed a file and shook her head. "Mr. Morris is not acceptable. Too risky for him. The slavery issue concerns Negroes."

"Ah—I should have remembered that!" He closed his eyes to think, and when he opened them again he found himself looking at her bosom. Hell's bells—yes!

"Bobby Bloch."

"Mr. Bloch?" she questioned.

"Mr. Bloch. The one and the same." Bobby Bloch was the Character so immersed in Egyptian pretties that he ignored architecture and almost lost his job. Bloch needed another solid assignment to put himself back in good standing. Benjamin Steward said, "He'll be safe this time. Sound recording only."

"Bloch," she repeated again. "Dobbs, Bonner and Bloch. It will be your responsibility to make certain Mr. Bloch remains sober. Recent information is not very encouraging. You may be in the field several hours."

"The curse of demon rum," Steward told her. "I'll take care. You may fire when ready, Gridley."

The young woman dismissed that as she had dismissed earlier references to a saddle. His meaning was clear.

"Lincoln's speech was given in a structure known as Major's Hall, situated near the center of a village called Bloomington-illinois. We know virtually nothing concerning the village; it is believed to be a typical city-state having its own ruler, but bound up by political and emotional ties to a geographical area known as the Old Nation, North. North was opposed to South, which condoned slavery.

"The speech was made between the hours of five and seven o'clock in the evening, their local time, on May twenty-ninth, 1856. Major's Hall is supposed to have two or more stories; the address occurred in an auditorium somewhere above the ground level. About five hundred men and women were present, in highly emotional states of mind. You must be careful to record the correct address; several similar political speeches were made in the Hall on the same date, and at about the same time.

"Your subject, Abraham Lincoln, was forty-seven years of age, rather gaunt and homely, and about six

feet four inches in height. He had a small growth resembling a mole on his right cheek, and an unruly shock of dark hair." She paused briefly to glance at Steward's head. "Library will furnish you with a photograph of Mr. Lincoln, believed to have been taken no more than four years after this event."

"A period photograph?"

"Quite authentic, yes. I had forgotten cameras existed in that early day." Evelyn sifted through her notes. "We have very little else on the village or the hall. But the data assures us the villagers were peaceful and reasonably civilized. Some bore arms, although they appear to be unnecessary in the area. The native tribes, called 'Indians,' were subdued. You must remember that all persons other than the Indians were violently opposed to slavery, and conduct yourself accordingly."

Steward had been listening intently, being one of those persons who retained more of what he heard than what he read. Now he said, "My ears will hear no evil. My heart will beat with my brothers."

Evelyn hesitated. "That is *almost* familiar."

Steward pulled on the cigar before he answered. "The treason trials of the Glenrock family. One parent, one daughter, three sons. In the year Five of our glorious New Nation."

"Oh, yes. Of course."

"Of course," he repeated. "The hearts of the valiant brothers stopped beating in unison. The old man and his daughter lived a day or two longer. Long enough, at any rate, for the girl to spout that brave and foolish line. A pity it isn't hacked onto a monument somewhere." He deliberately dropped cigar ashes on the polished floor and watched them whirl away, sucked up by unseen vacuums. Idly, he wondered what would happen if he dropped a shoe.

"I went out to see him hanged, drawn and quar-

tered, which was done; he looking as cheerful as any man in such position."

"Benjamin, don't be gruesome. The Glenrocks were executed by a firing squad."

"Ah, so. A shortage of rope, I expect."

The woman's troubled glance rested on his enigmatic face and she wondered if he was speaking disrespectfully. His voice hinted at sly mockery. It was so difficult to judge the Characters correctly; they frequently behaved as if they belonged to another species—or to no species at all—rather than to the present day and age. Without consciously trying, they sometimes gave the impression they were fugitives or exiles from another race, another sphere. She was quite positive *some* of them mocked her world, and yet it was their world as well.

Mr. Whittle constantly entertained doubts about *some* of them, as did she. It was disconcerting to realize suddenly, by reason of a peculiar glance or an oddly turned phrase, that the Characters were in a sense timeless. That they sometimes regarded her with the same timeless detachment they bestowed on long-dead persons in history. The Characters appeared to mark little or no difference between their contemporaries and their ancestors. Indeed, if T-R were able to research the future, the Characters would undoubtedly look upon tomorrow's man as artlessly as they viewed yesterday's bones. They held themselves a breed apart, pretending to be untouched by time and not rooted in it.

Evelyn found Benjamin Steward peering at her through a curtain of Kipling smoke.

The data sheet reclaimed her hasty attention.

"The village at that time," she went on, "knew no mechanical devices beyond the simple transportation and food-preparation machinery. There is no source of electrical energy. Your crew will be

equipped with self-operated pocket recorders which, of course, must be concealed at all times. The Library will furnish you your vocabulary and the photograph; I understand the costume is completed and ready for a fitting. There will be a very small amount of personal jewelry, and something of value to barter for a supply of local currency."

Evelyn folded her hands on the desk. "And that is all I have, really. I wish you luck, Benjamin. Remember our motto."

"Our motto," he responded, "is for the birds. But thanks, Evelyn. You're a peacheroo."

"I feel certain that is a compliment."

Steward dropped his voice to a barely audible level. "Meet me tonight—at the same place—and I'll explain what it is. In five juicy flavors."

Evelyn smiled at the reference—which he *had* previously explained—and at a very pleasant memory the phrase and the explanation recalled to mind; but she shook her head. "I don't believe you will be free this evening. The engineers are plotting a twenty-four hour completion." She moved her head to read the chronometer. "You are scheduled for six forty-five and there are still many things to do."

"Fiddlesticks. You know how engineers are—they'll tack on a plus-or-minus three weeks just to play safe. The plus-or-minus covers a multitude of ignorant sins."

"No, Benjamin, not this evening. The librarian and the doctor are waiting for you now."

"The doctor!" He jerked upright with indignation. "Not *more* shots?"

"Of course," Evelyn said.

"Now, look here, I've already been inoculated for everything from Aaron's scorbute to zymosis—any zymosis in the medical dictionary!" And he shot up a sleeve to reveal a many punctured arm. "My battle

scars; count them. The ancients had ten thousand diseases, give or take a dozen, and I've got the antidote for each and every one of them. In both arms, both legs, and both cheeks. I don't need any more. Lincoln *can't* have a new virus—he just isn't that clever."

"The doctor will be waiting," Evelyn said firmly. "You're a hard woman; you'll make a hard wife."

Evelyn studied the man thoughtfully. "Benjamin, it would not be wise to permit *that* to grow out of hand. I have thoroughly enjoyed our dates, as you call them, but I anticipate nothing beyond that. I know you quite well, so well that I know you would not look with sympathy upon a six-months' trial marriage contract."

"Quite right," he heartily agreed. "When I marry thee, fair maid, it will be for keeps."

"I am certain of that. And I will accept your rain mark."

"Rain check," he corrected.

"Thank you. And now, Benjamin, I believe the Library is waiting. Miss Breen has your material. Your shoot has been assigned to chamber *B;* please be on time; precisely six forty-five. I will locate your crew and meet you there before departure."

"That," he said, "is as plain as a pikestaff." He crushed out the cigar, lifted his foot, and watched the debris scuttle across the floor. The routing gave rise to an afterthought. "Evelyn—are the vacuums strong enough to carry off a shoe?"

"You might try an experiment."

He considered that and then shook his head. "I'd probably lose the shoe, and the engineers wouldn't approve of that. They're high-strung chaps you know; a barefooted visitor might unnerve them."

"Good luck, Benjamin. And be careful."

Steward vacated the chair and drifted lazily across

the room to a door opening upon the corridor. He paused there and glanced over his shoulder for a final inspection.

Evelyn remained seated, hands folded atop the desk. Her anatomical structure was at its Egyptian best, for she was sufficiently female to know when to sit erect and still. Her skirt dipped down primly to cover the tops of her feet. She was smiling pleasantly.

Steward winked and pushed through the door.

Evelyn watched him go. He was one of the nicest Characters, and one of the few romantics in the profession. He was the only one she cared to date—quaint term that *that* was. Benjamin had found it in some forgotten age and carried it home to her. Dating was fun.

But he was also the Character most frequently discussed in the higher echelons of the company, and that troubled her. She knew, if he did not, that his continued usefulness and future employment hung in a precarious balance; any day or any field trip could be his last. The company carried his name on a secret gray-list.

A tragic accident and Benjamin's efforts on behalf of his clannish guild were responsible for the talk and the endangerment of his job. Either one was a serious offense to company thinking, while the two combined pushed him almost beyond the pale. Because of the accident, *and* because of Benjamin's subsequent agitation, minimum crews had been increased from two to four men on any project entailing an element of doubt.

Evelyn returned to her work, fervently hoping he was not one of those men of doubtful loyalty who caused Mr. Whittle so many anxious moments. Mr. Whittle could easily break that hairline separating the gray-list from the black, and Benjamin would be done.

3

SHOOT

IN THE LIBRARY, the Character was given a large envelope which contained the idiomatic tables and a concise summary of the historical period he was scheduled to visit. The summary embraced a span of a hundred years, narrowing down to concentrate upon the particular date and the particular event germane to the assignment.

As usual, the abstract ceased abruptly as near as possible to the target date itself. That was standard operating procedure designed to protect the Character and the assignment. It would not do for a man in the field to know the events of coming weeks or even years—his tongue might slip. To retain his value as a Character, he must be as wise, and as ignorant, as the local people around him.

The briefing could be read later. Steward tucked the envelope under his arm and passed on to another room where tailors were waiting to fit him. The costume was not particularly interesting and not unlike period clothing he had worn on previous assignments. The coat and trousers were of plain-cut heavy cloth, and did not match each other. The hat was low, flat across the crown, and had a wide brim. The shoes were more like boots. He recognized the ensemble as being designed for adverse weather conditions rather than style and attention. It was the kind of clothing

a practical prairie man would wear for protection against hard rains and bad winters.

He was given an ornate gold ring in which were set two precious stones—something of value to barter for a supply of local currency. For his personal use, and to help complete the costume, he received a large and heavy pocket watch. The tailors had cut an authentic pocket into the trousers to contain the timepiece. They supplied a watch chain and showed him how to fasten it to his belt.

And, ready for the ultimate eventuality, he had to strip down and then dress himself in period underwear. He found the garment itchy and confining, but was partially mollified to discover he need not wear a restrictive necktie over the soft shirt. The shirt collar concealed a miniature microphone in the folds of the cloth.

Carrying the coat and the envelope, Steward left the Library suite and made his way to the lounge. The big room held only one other occupant, a costumed woman studying *her* material. Steward nodded, and stared at her costume.

"Queer-looking thing," he commented.

"It's called a polonaise," she told him.

"How many petticoats?"

"Four."

He grunted. "And they'll shoot you smack-dab into the middle of summer." He twisted, scratched and then twisted again. "You ought to see the monstrosity I'm wearing."

The coat had not been pressed, so Steward folded it into a pillow and lay down on the floor—he found it easier to study that way. Lighting a cigar, he examined the opening page of the historical summary and then put it aside to scan the vocabulary. Picturesque words and phrases delighted him; collecting and using them amounted to a hobby. In every age,

he made it a practice to gather as many colloquialisms as the ear could catch; and now and again he would be enchanted to find that some smartly turned phrase had attained true immortality—or at least, the immortality of many centuries.

Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast was one such example. He had encountered that phrase four centuries after its birth, with but one word changed. And *The world is mine oyster* was another, an astonishing line which was now almost one thousand years old. Here, now, in Mr. Lincoln's day, was *This nigger's ribs.* That was a new one to him and he wondered at the exact meaning. And what might a *Free-soiler* be? Or a *Know-nothing*? They possessed a certain surface value which suggested their true meanings, but he knew better than to accept such values prior to meeting them head on in the field. What might *this nigger's ribs* possibly mean? A *Free-soiler* could be a citizen with the peculiar liberty to dirty anything he wished, or a farmer unshackled from slavery, or the term might be a vicious epithet.

Steward read the entire list, easily committing it to memory because of his fondness for phrases. Then he returned to the history texts. They were dull.

A few parts of the summary were familiar—those phases encountered in previous assignments, or studied in preparation for an assignment. Hamilton's fateful duel was briefly mentioned, as it had some effect on later developments; and Mr. Lincoln's men still spoke of it. There was a reference to a Mexican War, which was familiar only because he had overheard another Character discussing it. Shoptalk was common in the lounge and certain places of entertainment frequented by the Characters.

Steward blinked and grinned broadly. Here was a reference-in-flashback to old Peabody's Plymouth Rock. He vividly recalled *that* assignment. It had

been his first encounter with the Old Nation Indians and he had come off second best. Pesky redskins!

As a matter of fact, *he* had been an ersatz Indian on that occasion and very nearly lost his reputation and his skill as a passable Character. The Pilgrim people who rowed ashore from their *Mayflower* (they did not land on Peabody's rock) accepted him as an authentic Indian, but the bewildered tribesmen who surrounded him didn't know what to make of the imitator. Only the greater excitement of the arrival of the boat saved the day.

Steward caught himself dozing before he reached the end. He looked around the lounge and found himself alone. The woman had quietly left without his knowing it. Steward lazily closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Evelyn awoke him at a little after six o'clock.

"Benjamin! I expected this."

He smiled sleepily. "Labor to keep alive in your breast that little spark of celestial fire—conscience. You be my conscience, you are well endowed for it." He sat up to rub his eyes.

"Try not to be tardy, Benjamin. You know the shoots are timed on close tolerances."

"We go now, fair maid." He got to his feet and shook out the wrinkles in the coat. Evelyn had gathered up the scattered sheets of material and tucked them into the envelope.

"Have you finished the studies?"

"Yep." He dropped his voice although they were still alone in the lounge. "Did Mr. Lincoln's rebellion break out?"

"You know I must not tell you that, Benjamin."

"I know," he agreed. "Did it?"

"Yes."

"I thought as much. It happens every time. The old ones didn't learn much from history—their his-

tory." They quit the lounge. He held the girl's hand as they walked along the corridor to chamber *B*.

Without knocking, he edged the chamber door open with his foot. Evelyn hurriedly slipped her hand free.

"Howdy, pardners."

Two bright young men turned to stare at him. They were neat, clean, and wore the immaculate white coveralls which were the uniforms of their profession.

"Mr. Steward?" one of them asked.

"That's my handle, pardner."

"Mr. Steward, please make yourself ready. The shoot is scheduled in twenty-two minutes."

"I'm ready now. Any special instructions?"

"Yes. Will you step over here, please?"

One of the two bright young men conducted him across the great chamber to where a long and thin bullet, manufactured of glass and steel, rested on a cushioned dais. This was the stepson of H. G. Wells's bicycle.

The bullet was seven feet in length and had a circumference barely large enough to admit a fat man lying down. The fat man—or any other—would recline full length on a webbed metallic floor and grasp small handrails near his shoulders. The fat man's waist would touch the topside of the hull. Areas of clear glass surrounded the head of the bullet, permitting the passenger a full view of his outer vicinage. And that was the only comfort permitted or provided. The tremendous cost in energy limited the vehicle's mass and volume.

The activating machinery was tightly packed beneath the webbed flooring—or most of it was. The leftovers were stuffed in at either end, just beyond reach of the head and toes. The conveyance resembled a peculiar vacuum table, bullet-shaped, filled to

overflowing with its components. All in all, it was a deliberately designed, minimum-sized package built for just one purpose. Economic reasons and little else dictated the design.

"A few modifications have been made," the engineer was saying. He bent down and pointed to the missile's stern. "Do you see that kick-bar? That is the recall switch. A slight pressure of either foot will return you to the chamber instantly."

And reversing the pointed finger, he indicated the bullet's head. "There are twin push buttons imbedded in the handrails; they will release you when target has been reached. Please remember, Mr. Steward, *both* buttons must be pushed simultaneously. Pushing only one will indicate you are in difficulty, and we will pull back."

"That's mighty nice," Steward observed.

"One other modification has been made," the engineer continued. "The chronograph key will now rest on your stomach. It does not matter whether you are right- or left-handed. When you are on the bed, pull it down from the hull to a comfortable position on your stomach. It will remain so until you again move it."

The Character nodded his understanding.

"There is no need to conceal the missile after you have vacated it; this model will automatically maintain itself a millisecond out of phase for so long as the door is not locked from the inside. And, of course, our instruments will record every detail of the shoot. You need not notify us of a variance." The engineer's smile was artificial and professional. "But then, I am sure you know all about that, don't you? Any questions?"

"Where are you putting me?"

"On the morning of May twenty-eighth, the day before the target. One hour after dawn, plus or minus

ten minutes. You will emerge on the open prairie near the village." The engineer paused and stumbled over his tongue. "Ah, yes. Mr. Steward, I might mention a small difficulty with the topographical map. Research apologized, of course, but they fear it might not be entirely accurate." And again the empty professional laugh. "But then you need not worry about it—we will know instantly if you are underground, and bring you to the surface. Just keep calm, Mr. Steward."

"It wouldn't be the first time you've buried me," Mr. Steward informed the engineer.

The other bright young man broke in.

"And please, *please*, Mr. Steward, do not stay for more than a few hours. Remember your tolerances. We plan to shoot the crew at about sunset that same day. You are aware of the self-cancellation effect, are you not?"

"Why, no, Mister Engineer. What's that?" Steward gazed at the young man with childlike innocence.

The young man was horror-stricken. "Mr. Steward, if you aren't——" And then he broke off, belatedly aware that he was the butt of a joke. A hasty glance at Evelyn's constrained face confirmed the suspicion.

The devil take the Characters! He briefly wished, throttling the surge of guilt, that someday some Character *would* overstay his tolerance limits and meet himself later returning with the regular crew on assignment. It would serve the clown right to cancel himself out.

The chamber door swung open behind them and Whittle entered on bouncy step.

"Ah, here we are," he greeted them, "here we are. All ready, Mr. Steward? All ready, gentlemen?"

In answer he received two "Yes, sirs," and a "Yep."

"The briefing complete, I trust?"

Evelyn said, "Yes, sir."

"Splendid! Now then, Mr. Steward, I trust you are fully prepared. Remember our motto: *We Sift the Sands of Time.* We always strive to give our client value for value received."

Steward glanced at Evelyn and silently mouthed the words, "Our motto is for the birds." To Whittle, he complained, "The underwear itches."

"Splendid. Authenticity, sir. You know your task. Scout the village and get acquainted; meet the people; verify the hour of the speech; inspect Major's Hall and make plans for your recordings. We will be awaiting your speedy return, Mr. Steward. This little machine runs on money, you know." He finished with an appreciative giggle at his own joke.

"Will you bake me a cake?" Steward asked.

"My dear sir, you are a jocular fellow. Come, come now, it is nearly time for the shoot. What, gentlemen?"

"Yes, sir," and "Yes, sir."

Benjamin Steward turned his back on them and blew Evelyn a secret kiss. He slid his rangy length into the bullet and lay down on the floor. An engineer stood over him, checking each preparation on a tally sheet. Steward pulled the chronograph key down onto his stomach, rested the soles of his feet lightly on the kick-bar, closed and locked the door, and firmly grasped the two handrails. His thumbs were resting at the bases of the push buttons.

"Fire one, you jackasses," he said aloud within the soundproof confines of the missile.

Whittle smilingly stepped away as the engineers ran up a safety barrier enclosing the dais. Before completely sealing it off, they moved to either end of the projectile and attached cables to the protruding terminals. That done, the engineers retreated to their stations at the instrument panels to run the final checks. Satisfied at last, one of them turned

and signaled the Character. The other watched a chronometer.

Whittle lifted his fingers to wave good-bye. Evelyn studied him with a calm face, her emotions hidden. Steward blinked, and closed his eyes against the alternate, dazzling flashes of lightning that would follow.

The engineer closed a switch and the bullet vanished.

The electrical cables, only minutes ago carefully connected to the terminals, now emptied onto nothing which was discernible. The dais was vacant.

4

LINCOLN'S LAND

BENJAMIN STEWARD'S eyes were jolted open when the machine dropped. His backbone protested the cruel blow.

"Damn all engineers!"

He stared upward and around him with astonishment, to repeat the malediction with some choice phrases added.

The vehicle was under water.

Reaching for the chronograph key, he laboriously tapped out: *Snafu.*

The one-word message instantaneously shot forward seven centuries to the terminus in chamber *B*, using the machine's own secure timeline as a carrier beam. It was the only means of communication possible between the base and the field.

The engineers wouldn't know the meaning of that obsolete term, of course, but they would have sufficient curiosity to request a translation from the files. And in due time the files would deliver it up. Steward's only regret was that the sting would be deleted from the message; the translator would substitute one word for another.

He waited impatiently, knowing that the distant instruments had revealed his predicament.

After a long moment the missile began rising. It broke surface and he found the thing had dropped

into the muddy waters of a creek. He hoped the splash hadn't attracted attention.

The key on his stomach came alive: *Guidance?*

Steward glanced around quickly and found he was alone. He tapped out an answer.

Starboard 10 ft.

The missile drifted away from the creek. Steward picked out the exposed roots of a great tree growing on the creekbank.

Down 3 in. he messaged. *Astern 2 ft.*

The remote engineers moved the machine according to his directions. Steward continued sending in his slow fashion, guiding the vehicle well into the interlaced roots. Invisible or not, he remembered without amusement a racing horseman once stumbling over the carrier. The unlucky fool broke his neck, the horse ran away, and Steward had known several anxious moments before he relocated the machine. It would not be lost to him again.

When the bullet was securely tucked among the roots, he gently rocked it to and fro to form a muddy bed. A final message went forward.

Fix.

Steward swung the key away from his belly and depressed the twin buttons. The door slid smoothly open.

"Land ho! Mister Christian."

He felt a wild, joyful exhilaration, as he always did. Although he was the veteran of some forty or fifty shoots, each new one always thrilled him. Each one was a new experience, a new exploration into living history.

Two distinct impressions rolled through the open door to greet him, as he had expected they would.

The sound of gently running water was his introduction to the world of 1856, and it was a pleasant sound. The crisp, almost cold spring air which fol-

lowed was equally pleasant. It was markedly cooler than the spring air of his homeland, but welcome nevertheless. The air was new; air he had not breathed before.

Steward wormed his way out of the cramped machine and crawled among the roots to the top of the creekbank. Behind him, the missile was no more than a shimmering nothing, glimpsed from the corner of the eye. Of such things are mirages made.

It was just sunrise.

Steward looked at his pocket watch. It had stopped.

Sunrise—plus or minus nothing. The engineers had fouled twice on the same shoot. They could be proud of themselves and congratulate each other for running at par.

The fresh prairie air was invigorating and he gulped it in like a hungry man, reveling in the sweetness of it. It was always like this when he escaped the cities and found himself in the open country. The cities were missing the real breath of life.

Obeying an impulse, he sat down on the dew-wet grass and spread his hands, letting his fingers curl about the tufts of grass. The sod was cool and refreshing. He wished that he could fully recall a phrase which lingered on the rim of his mind—something about being homesick for dirt. He was that. The feel of moist grass readily brought another ancient line to the fore: The wizard silence of the hours of dew. That was apt, here. Or nearly apt—he could hear a dog barking somewhere. But inwardly and wholly, he was and always had been homesick for dirt.

A sigh of contentment escaped his lips. This was living.

This was the bright kind of living which Evelyn, Whittle, Peabody and the engineers would never know. They didn't want to know it; they were

chained to their age, their world and their occupations. They were as firmly rooted in their native lifetimes as was the great building rooted in the soil of Inner Cleveland. *This* kind of zestful, adventurous living was reserved to the Characters.

The dog barked again and he sought out the source.

In the near distance stood a thick grove of trees and after a moment he spotted a column of smoke rising above their tops. The dog was there, and other sounds of human habitation. The grove was too small to conceal a village. It probably contained an Indian camp.

He debated whether or not to investigate the grove and then decided against it. The Indians just might notice he was unarmed. Twisting around, he searched the prairie. The settlement was a mile or more behind him.

Research was wrong again—but he had long since become used to that. For all their massive files and endless data, for all their professional pains, they frequently went astray on the finer details. This was not a primitive village but a thriving town.

It covered a surprisingly large area for an isolated prairie town and he knew that indicated growth. A number of tents were pitched on the outskirts while several farmhouses closely ringed the town's borders. His prying eyes picked out a telegraph line and then a railroad beneath it. A cluster of low buildings about the rails would be the depot and the repair shops. There was another and smaller settlement a few miles to the north but he could not guess if it was a part of the town or a separate entity of its own. The briefing mentioned only one village.

Steward chose the larger and nearer town as his probable target.

But nothing impelled him to start moving.

Contentedly, he sat where he was and watched Mr. Lincoln's sun come up. That was exciting, too.

Once again—as it had always happened on past shoots—he experienced the keen regret that this (or that, or the other,) was not his native age. The other man's air was infinitely more pleasant to breathe, the other man's grass was greener, the other man's world wilder and more agreeable. The other man invariably lived in a more envied, provocative year.

Envied? Steward examined his choice of adjectives, and then agreed with it. He was envious of the other man.

He knew most of his own weaknesses. He had been born out of step with time and never permitted himself to forget it. He had recognized that temporal misframe even before embarking on his very first journey to another era, before discovering firsthand what another world was like.

The sight, sound and smell of that first new world confirmed his belief. He envied the people in it. Home just wasn't worth a tinker's dam afterward.

Any prehistoric date—or at least, any of those prehistoric dates he had thus far witnessed—were vastly preferable to his own regimented day and age. Even that ill-starred shoot to the Mediterranean to record the double suicides of Antony and Cleopatra; *that* world was not all pain and death, not all bread and circuses. The good life was available to those who had the wit to search it out.

Each new world, he was forever reminding himself, was where he *should* be. The here and the now. He could have been born on this rolling prairie or yonder in the grove. He could have been a part of Mr. Lincoln's world and taken an active interest in it. A man could really *live* in this lush, green world.

The Character said, "Damn!" and reluctantly got to his feet.

A profound melancholy had slipped up unawares to seize him. The mood was more pointed than any he had known before. This world was lovelier than any he had ever seen, but it could not be his.

Steward studied the landmarks; the towering tree, the creek and the shimmering wraith nestled within the exposed roots, the nearby Indian grove. The excited dog would not hush. He fixed the exact locations in his mind and struck off for the town.

It was not difficult to pawn the gold ring.

He took breakfast in a hotel dining room, not wishing to rely on any of the numerous boarding-houses which advertised meals to convention visitors, and not trusting the sanitary standards of the many tents which dotted the open lots. The dining room was crowded with men for all its spaciousness. The town had come alive with the sun.

Breakfast conversation was heady and excited.

Steward listened closely, alert for some overly curious reference to himself or his clothing. There was none. He was accepted as just another native character, as he felt sure he would be. But still he listened.

The food was good—rather heavy, and in too large a quantity, but good. That was another point in favor of these alien worlds. Most of them ate well, in a manner which would surprise—and probably shock—conservative Inner Cleveland. Rationing seemed to be unknown here.

In the midst of the meal a phrase caught his attention. He thought at first it was only another colorful phrase to which his ears were perpetually attuned, but the following few sentences shocked him. He stopped eating to listen. The shock multi-

plied. A man at the next table said a startling thing, and said it rather matter-of-factly. His companion answered in kind. The tenor of many fragmentary conversations fell into place and made them crystal clear.

Steward searched wildly about the room and found a calendar at the cashier's desk. The corroboration jolted his self-imposed silence.

Involuntarily, he said, "Oh, hell."

"Please, sir?" The waitress stood at his elbow.

Steward covered the outburst by pushing a cup toward her. "Another coffee, if you please, my good woman."

He stole a second glance at the calendar.

When the woman had filled his cup and left the table, Steward dropped his gaze and studied the hot, black liquid. His mood was comparable to the cup's contents. The earlier sense of melancholy was giving way to profound disgust. Those stupid engineers! Snafu compounded by fubar.

Those ignorant, imbecilic engineers! They had really fouled up *this* shoot! First the cartographers and the maps which deposited him underwater, and then the jewelers and their timepiece which would not work, and now the engineers. The bright young men proudly parading in their white uniforms.

They had overshot the target.

The date was May 30.

Mr. Lincoln's political address had been given yesterday. Both Lincoln and his speech, as well as the successfully concluded convention, were being hotly discussed in the dining room.

It was all over but the Monday morning quartering.

Benjamin Steward finished his meal with glum introspection, wondering what was to be expected next. So many things had gone wrong with the shoot

—if he was at all superstitious, he knew he would be worrying and watching for black cats. Where was the thirteenth step?

The Character swallowed the hot coffee, morosely rearranging his program. He could not recall this kind of stupid mistake ever happening before, but if it *had* occurred, the people at T-R were entirely successful in hiding it. There had not been so much as a rumor, or a bit of gossip among his colleagues. An ancient phrase came to mind: what cannot be cured, must be endured. 'Sdeath—he would have to endure this unwelcome turn. There was nought to do but carry on; the target must still be covered and the client kept happy. His survey would be accomplished a day after the event, instead of a day before; he would have to determine what had happened, instead of what was expected to happen. The reverse of an ordinary operation.

Steward shoved back from the table. Once again he was making company history, unwillingly and unavoidably, but making it nevertheless. The knowledge was depressing.

He purchased cigars at the cashier's desk and paid his bill with a silver dollar.

"Have you ever heard anything like it?" the buxom and friendly cashier demanded.

Steward shook his head. "I'm flabbergasted."

"*He* sure woke up this town! That's what my husband said. He sure woke up this town! When my husband went to bed last night he was a Free-soiler, but when he got up this morning he was a Republican." She gave Steward his change. "*That* Mr. Lincoln! He's going to wake up this whole state, you mark my words."

Steward seized his cue. "I sort of think these new Republicans will amount to something."

"My husband's very words. These new Republi-

cans will amount to something, he said. There had better not be a blinking Whig left in town by next week, he said. Begging your pardon, sir, if you be a Whig. All the menfolk are going Republican. Whigs, Democrats, Free-soilers, Know-nothings, anti-Nebraskans, everybody! We thank you, sir."

"Thank you, and good morning."

Steward moved out into the street to look for a Whig.

He counted the change in his hand and reflected that Inner Cleveland would again be shocked. The price of a meal and a handful of cigars was ridiculously cheap. The other man's envied world once again.

For the better part of an hour he did nothing more strenuous than stroll the town, absorbing the picturesque atmosphere. The town was bathed in it. None of the buildings was more than three stories high, although some of them sought to create the impression of height by erecting tall, false fronts above their first or second levels. A building boom was in progress, with lumber and carpenters much in demand. There were many stables, blacksmith and livery shops, and the streets were clogged with horse-drawn vehicles. The traffic raised a pall of dust and, of course, the town was incredibly dirty. All the towns and cities of the ancient worlds were dirty beyond belief, when compared to the fastidious cleanliness of his own modern city-state, and he never failed to marvel that the children could grow into adulthood in such unsanitary surroundings. Some of them did not, he knew, but the numerous adults about him now proved that many did. In spite of the dirt.

A courthouse dominated the center of the town, set to itself in the middle of a square block and entirely surrounded by green lawn. He recalled the

phrase in the idiomatic table: the courthouse square. The lawn was a favored lounging place and a scene of free and open public debate. Any subject under the sun was admitted; plainly, the courthouse square was now coming into its own in the Old Nation way of life.

A traveling medicine show caught his eye.

The show was closed at this early hour of the day, but he paused to inspect it with pleased anticipation. It was no more than a gaily painted wagon with canvas sides and end flaps. A piebald horse was tethered at one end of the wagon, eating from a shallow feedbox. There was no other sign of life about the show. Steward experienced a small difficulty in translating and reading the extravagant announcements painted on the side panels of the wagon.

Doctor Mudgett was the traveling attraction's impresario, and also the master pharmacist who offered to the world that priceless boon, *Doctor Mudgett's Bitterroot & Snake-Oil Elixir.* The secret formula for the elixir had been whispered to the doctor by a dying Pawnee Chieftain, at midnight under a full moon, and the wonder medicine was now said to cure most of the ills of mankind, as well as some of the more common diseases of cattle and swine. Too, hunters and trappers reported beneficial results when the elixir was rubbed on their boots—it destroyed the scent of man.

Two large bottles for only one dollar!

For a moment—for no more than a fraction of a moment—Steward wished he could tip the good doctor to a remarkably cheap and remarkably efficient true wonder-drug to pour into those bottles. But if he did that he would upset Mr. Lincoln's world, and his own as well.

He drifted on.

He rounded a corner and walked into a noisy

scene of bustling activity. Men and teams were clustered in the street before a half-finished brick building; while other men carried building materials from the wagons into the structure. A foreman moved among them, shouting orders in a loud and vulgar voice. Steward leaped aside to avoid being run down by a burdened hod carrier.

"Ah," he mused aloud, "that sweet city with her dreaming spires."

"The new library," a bystander answered casually, believing that Steward had addressed him. "The town's pride and joy. A dash of culture is always welcome."

Steward nodded his agreement. The bystander glanced at his face, and then turned with a mild surprise.

"Well, Mr. Steward, you are *still* among us."

Aware of an inner clangor of alarm, of a sudden alertness to possible danger, Steward slid into character. The bystander was a stranger to him.

"Beg your pardon?" he asked cautiously.

"Oh, come now, did I make no impression last evening?"

"Well, sir, I wouldn't go so far as to say that. But last evening was pretty full, you know."

"Humph! Pretty full! Mr. Steward, your quick tongue excites my curiosity. Just what are you up to? What are you hoping to discover here? Are you *with* us?"

"I'm proud to be with you, mister." Steward eyed the man, seeking some swift clue to guide his conversation. Evelyn had warned him to be antislavery if he must commit himself, and now he guessed that last question concerned the slavery issue. "The blot must be erased!"

"Humph. We agree on that, I say. But your prying concerns me. No—no, I apologize. Not prying. Shall

we say your observations? Your studies? I confess to being a trifle suspicious of you, Mr. Steward."

"Well, I'm sorry about that. I was just looking."

"Ah—yes, looking, and thinking. You've admitted that. A little thinking can be a dangerous business, Mr. Steward. And may I say, sir, entirely without rancor, that the flattery was quite transparent to some of us. We are a provincial people, and likely to be suspicious of you men from the *outside.*"

A coiled spring nestled in the pit of Steward's stomach, awaiting the moment when he would be unmasked. His nervous system tingled with an awareness of unknown danger, feeding adrenalin into the bloodstream. Despite the pressure, Steward maintained an outward calm and held to character.

"I hope it ain't that bad!"

"Perhaps, and perhaps not. Time will tell, Mr. Steward, time will tell. I shall be interested in you. Good day, sir." And the man stalked away.

Steward looked after him, scratching his head. Now what in the hell had *he* done? What deed had he performed on the previous evening to call forth that outburst?

The bull voice of the foreman roaring in his ear brought him around. The volume of raw sound nearly deafened him but the words were sweetly welcome.

"That there Lovejoy sure is a tartar, ain't he?"

Steward grinned with relief and thankfulness. "He *is* that. Man, how he talks!"

And with that rejoinder he beat a hasty retreat before the foreman could trap him into a new situation. The name of his mysterious adversary was Lovejoy, and that was enough for the moment. Steward left the vicinity of the library and began an anxious search for Major's Hall, newly conscious of the fact that he wasn't altogether welcome in this wilderness town.

The hall was found much sooner, and more easily, than could be found a man who would admit to being something other than a Republican. It was found with a clatter and a bang.

Steward was passing the mouth of an alley when someone threw open an upstairs window and began shoveling debris into space, heedless of who might be standing in the alley below. Several shovelsful of trash sailed down from the heights to be scattered on the ground. Steward's eye caught a flickering, silvery sheen among the debris.

Major's Hall was a three-tiered structure standing at the southwest corner of a street intersection; only the third and top floor used the name attributed to it. Broad wooden sidewalks lined the two street sides of the building. Two stores, selling hardware, and clothing, occupied the ground floor; between the stores a wide flight of stairs led upward. Steward climbed the steps.

A custodian was cleaning out the auditorium.

As Steward entered the great room and looked around, the man finished shoveling the last of the trash out the open window.

"Morning," the fellow said amiably, and promptly stopped working to lean on the shovel. "You with the show?"

"What?"

"Are the girls here yet?" And the custodian stared hopefully over the Character's shoulder, seeking chorus girls.

"Sorry, old-timer," Steward told him. "Wrong man; I'm not with the show. But maybe the girls will be along shortly." He advanced into the auditorium and inspected it. Flags and bunting hung from the open rafters. "I wanted to look around and refresh my memory. Setting out on a trip pretty soon and I

wanted a last look. I want to remember this place a long time—I want to tell the folks at home."

"Aw, I know just what you mean, mister! A real stem-winder, that's what it was. I was standing right *there.*" The custodian indicated the door of a broom closet. "And Mr. Lincoln was right up yonder." He moved nearer Steward, dragging the shovel and pointing. His face was illuminated with remembered excitement. "You know, mister, I kinda worried about the braces when they took to stamping and shouting so. This old floor warn't made for that. It was a real rouser of a crowd, you bet, and they raised an awful ruckus. Remember?"

"I expected a lot of excitement," Steward said.

"It was that Mr. Lovejoy what started it," the custodian declared.

"Lovejoy always starts it," Steward agreed heartily.

"Yup, Not that I blame him, atall. Talking about his dead brother and all, and it ain't been more'n a week since that bloody business out Kansas way. That Mr. Lovejoy gets *real* excited." The old fellow shook his head once more and pondered the boarding beneath his feet. "I was sure worried about this old floor."

"Full of fire and damnation," Steward prodded.

"By jingo, yes! Now, those other fellas, Mr. Davis and Mr. Herndon, they had a lot of good talk but they couldn't cut a hide when it come to Mr. Lovejoy and Mr. Lincoln. Mr. Lovejoy, he roused them up good and proper like, and Mr. Lincoln just *had* to up and talk after that."

"He was the man I wanted to hear."

"Well, sir, I reckon you heard him, all right." The old fellow scratched his chin whiskers reflectively. "Don't recollect seeing you, but that ain't nothing. There must have been four-five hundred people packed in here."

"To tell the truth," Steward said carefully, "I don't remember where I was. Too much crowd. Right here now, I can't tell you where Lincoln was standing."

"Haw—I can tell you right enough. I ain't forgot. It was right there—right there on that spot."

Steward inspected the spot.

"Yes," he agreed after a moment, "you're right."

"Durn tootin. A real stem-winder."

After another several minutes of chatter, the friendly custodian returned to his work and Steward strolled about the auditorium, noting the position of the furniture, the platforms, the doors and windows. He contemplated the spot on which Lincoln had stood (according to the old man) and fixed it in his mind. The briefing had placed about five hundred people in the room, bearing out the custodian's guess, and now it was readily apparent that he and his crew would have to be near the speaker or risk losing him. The wire recorders were sensitive instruments but they could not separate spoken word from mob noise.

While he studied the room, he was acutely conscious of an alarming gap in the history briefing. He had easily recognized the old man's reference to the bloody business in Kansas, and he knew the various other hostile events pertinent to it: he knew, too, that in the week prior to the Lincoln speech, two angry lawmakers representing the two sides of the conflict had met and battled in something called the Senate Chamber. The melee was sensational news and one of the men had suffered serious injury.

These incidents, and others, contributed to the inflammatory speechmaking in this Hall. But *who* was Mr. Lovejoy? What was the significance of the deceased brother? The files had furnished him nothing on that, and yet the mysterious Lovejoy was al-

ready breathing down his neck for some fool thing he had said or done.

Still glum, still troubled and wondering how he had so far fallen from character as to arouse suspicion, he thanked the custodian and prepared to leave.

"I sure thought you was the advance man, mister."

Steward could only stare and keep silent.

"I was expecting the girls. I thought you was the front agent for the show coming in. The house is sold out for all three nights. Golly—girls!"

"Hate to disappoint you, old-timer. I'd stay and see the girls myself, if I could."

He lost no time descending the stairs. Coming out into the brilliant sunlight, he berated himself for permitting anxiety to stifle his mind. Perhaps he was going soft—an old man's innocent statement had thrown him into a momentary tizzy. A neophyte might freeze up at an unexpected comment of that nature, but an old hand was supposed to stay in character. Steward struck off for the main street, taking a small pleasure in the thud of his boots on the board walk.

He had progressed only as far as the alley mouth when he stopped again, suddenly cold and apprehensive. A fleeting memory returned to mind.

He glanced into the alley and then upward at the open window of the third floor. Something silvery and shiny had come from that window a little while ago, shoveled out with the debris of last night's meeting. Something shockingly familiar.

Steward ran into the alley and rummaged through the scattered trash. He found the wire at once.

The single strand was as thin and as fine as silk thread. Many dozens of feet of it lay on the ground, hopelessly entangled with debris. It glittered in the sun.

He knew what it was, and now he wondered wildly *whose* it was.

The wire was from a pocket recorder, the kind of recorder he and his crew would carry into the hall to capture Lincoln's speech. The trash pile did not give up a recorder, nor was there a spool which had contained the wire.

Something had gone (and still would go) ominously wrong.

Steward purchased a newspaper and sat down on the courthouse steps to read it, seeking to ease his mind by deliberate concentration on another subject. The reading was not an easy task. Old Nation English was a tortuous thing to follow, and frequently seemed impossible whenever he encountered a sentence or paragraph which demanded a lucid translation in order to understand the whole.

The paper, called *The Weekly Pantagraph*, dedicated most of a page to the all-important convention and the birth of local Republicanism, with only secondary consideration given to Mr. Lincoln's speech. None of the columns actually reproduced the speech.

Instead, the journalist devoted his space to paraphrasing what he had heard and remembered, and what he imagined the speaker had said. Lacking precise detail, the accounts relied on glowing praise, colorful adjectives and rhetorical assertions of strength, power and threats. If words were weapons, slavery was at an end that night; but nonetheless it was slipshod reportage. Mr. Herndon, described as Lincoln's law partner, was most eloquent in his commendation, and either he or the newspaper editor—inserting words into the mouth—boasted that the deathless oratory would ring down the corridors of time. It was full of fire, Mr. Herndon declared.

The remainder of the paper was given over to

news of visiting dignitaries; local happenings including illnesses, persons in the town lockup, and new merchandise received by merchants; and information of national scope. There were daring raids in Kansas, open warfare in Missouri, an account of fur trading in Oregon Territory, a brief recapitulation of the Senate Chamber battle, an unintelligible article concerning something called an underground railway, and a flare-up of a minor boundary dispute involving Nevada, California and Mexico. There was an obituary.

Steward read everything, including the obit.

It gave him a glimpse of a surprisingly harsh world.

The respected citizen who had passed away, said the newspaper, was a doughty survivor of the great freeze of 1836. The deceased, then only a schoolboy, had been helping his father tend the stock when ". . . there occurred a very great change in the weather, as many will remember. From a mild, thawy condition of the atmosphere, with the thermometer standing about forty degrees above, the change was almost instantaneous to twenty degrees below zero. The wind came from the northwest with a howl and a roar, a perfect moving wall of cold, with its edges apparently square and perpendicular. It traveled at the rate of about thirty miles an hour. Cattle, hogs and even wild animals were frozen to death where they waited. People were caught on the open prairie but a short distance from home, and a number of them perished before reaching shelter. School children were lost from sight.

"The numbed boy was carried into the house by his father and revived."

The numbed boy lived through that frozen winter, to die a few days ago of acute indigestion—the doctor said. The deceased was thirty years old.

Steward folded the newspaper musingly. The columns were quaintly written and poorly edited; he had done better in both departments during his own brief news career in his earlier years. These small-town sheets always needed improvement. "The deceased was thirty years old." Steward knew, if these people did not, that "acute indigestion" was heart failure—but he couldn't tell them that for the term would be meaningless. He left the paper on the courthouse steps. It couldn't be taken back with him, any more than the strand of wire abandoned in the alley could be carried back.

An unpleasant voice said, "Well, Mr. Steward?"

He recognized the voice. "Yes, Mr. Lovejoy?"

Lovejoy stood on the courthouse veranda, eying him. "There is no point in waiting, sir. Not today."

"Waiting for what, Mr. Lovejoy?"

"For whatever secret purpose you have in mind, sir. For *him*."

Steward got to his feet and wondered what would happen to history if he pasted the man on the nose.

"I'm just leaving, Mr. Lovejoy."

"A pleasant journey, sir."

Steward strode away, beginning to resent the man. He was painfully aware that Lovejoy resented him.

The Character returned to the machine concealed in the roots of the sentinel tree. A strong, heady wind was blowing off the prairie and it smelled invigorating. He saw a herd of cattle browsing in the distance, while a column of billowing smoke on the horizon betrayed a chugging locomotive. Absently, Steward consulted the pocket watch that wasn't working.

The irritating noise of the barking dog plucked at his attention, and the wondered why the owner

didn't muzzle it; that, or remove the cause of the dog's excitement.

Steward slid down the bank and entered the projectile. Mr. Lincoln's hurly-burly world vanished.

5

RECALL

THE CHARACTER rolled out of the projectile and sat up on the cushioned dais. People were awaiting him across the safety barrier.

Whittle was there, of course; he would stay with the shoot until it was completed. Evelyn was standing beside him with notebook in hand. Whittle's smile of greeting was meant to be ignored, but Evelyn's homecoming expression was genuine.

His crew, Dobbs, Bonner and Bloch, were spread around the chamber in poses of indolent waiting. Karl Dobbs and Doc Bonner were eying him with a professional interest; and Dobbs had caught the look he flashed Evelyn. Bobby Bloch sat in a characteristic fashion with his head in his hands, either sleeping or studying the floor.

Steward scowled at Bloch, wondering if he were drunk or suffering from a hangover. Covertly, he shot an inquisitive glance at Karl Dobbs. Dobbs correctly guessed the question and made a negative sign.

The barrier encircling the dais had dropped.

One of the two engineers was across the chamber entering notations in a log; the time-traveling bullet—and Benjamin Steward—had remained in the past precisely four hours and nineteen minutes. An identical number of hours and minutes had elapsed in the chamber. Thus far, the project was running ahead of schedule.

The second engineer was hovering over the machine and inspecting it for damage. He seemed dismayed to find mud clinging to the undersides. That violated not only the esthetic senses but economic fundamentals. The added weight of the mud made the machine that much more expensive to pull back. Steward's newspaper, as lightweight as it was, would have earned him a stern lecture. And his heavy meal, since it had been eaten but not excreted, would have caused a verbal explosion if it were known.

The young man deemed it prudent just then to say nothing of the mud. Steward had read his face and knew the man had received the translation from the files.

But the best was still to come. The running feud between engineers and Characters was a tradition.

Steward pointed a dramatic and accusatory finger.

"You goofed."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said you goofed. You overshot. I came out on May thirtieth."

"*You did what?*"

"You did what?" Whittle echoed.

"I hit target a day too late," Steward repeated. He had the attention of everyone except the downcast Bloch. "Bloomington, in Illinois, in the United States of America, is a fair-sized town with real running water—the mayor would fight if you called it a village. The files, Mr. Whittle, are slightly askew."

"Oh, dear!"

"Abraham Lincoln made his celebrated speech in the third-floor auditorium of Major's Hall, right on schedule. The day before I arrived."

"Mr. Steward, this is incredible."

"Mr. Whittle, it's a veritable stem-winder."

"Are you very sure?"

"I arrived at sunrise on May thirtieth. There wasn't a Whig to be found."

"But are you *certain?*" the bewildered man asked. He peered suspiciously at the engineers.

"Certain, Mr. Whittle? Well, now, let me offer you two genuine quotes from authentic eyewitnesses. The first was uttered by the auditorium custodian: 'There must have been four-five hundred people packed in here. I was sure worried about the old floor.' And the second quotation is from the admiring lips of Lincoln's business partner, a chap named Herndon:

'. . . full of fire and energy and force; it was logic; it was pathos; it was enthusiasm; it was justice, equity, truth and right, the good set ablaze by the divine fires of a soul maddened by the wrong: it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarled, edged and heated, backed with wrath.'

"He was talking about the speech, Mr. Whittle. The fiery, knotty, gnarled speech. Oh, yes, I'm certain—I got there too late. Engineers have a predilection for hairy ears."

Whittle was lost in the enormity of it. This was an unprecedented error. The cost could be staggering.

The dazed engineers were a safe distance across the chamber, making a pretense of re-examining their computations. Something had gone wrong, but there was no quick way of discovering the miscalculation.

And the Finance department, when the news reached them, would be equally hard, heavy, knotty and gnarled, spewing wrath. The error would necessitate an expensive new plotting and possibly a delayed final shoot. The carefully padded profit margins would dwindle alarmingly.

The Character turned his attention to the girl.

"Evelyn, will you make a check on a man named

Lovejoy, and his brother who died for some unknown reason?"

"First names?" she responded crisply.

"Not known. Lovejoy was the speaker who preceded Lincoln. He stirred the multitudes with a dead man and some loud flag-waving. He wasn't in the briefing. I'm curious."

"Very well."

"An overshoot!" Whittle continued to moan. "The *wrong* day. An overshoot. Goodness, gracious!" He turned reproachful eyes on the engineers.

Steward could not miss the opportunity to contribute to his state of mind.

"Yessir, I saw the very spot where Mr. Lincoln emoted—about fourteen hours afterward. Mr. Lincoln had stepped out somewhere."

"But do you realize what this means to the schedule?"

"I realize what it will mean to my schedule. I'll have to high-tail it out of town before sunrise that next day. Time will be running tight."

"Yes, yes, of course, but——"

"Mr. Whittle," Steward interrupted him.

"——this is most unusual. Dreadful. Eh . . . what?"

"Mr. Whittle, there's no need to upset the apple-cart. Change the plans when you reschedule the shoot. Put us through on the morning of the twenty-ninth—that's all we need. That town is wide open and hundreds of people are coming and going at all hours of the day and night. They have special trains hauling in people from a distance. The morning of the twenty-ninth will wrap it up."

The bewildered executive clutched at the straw.

"Not the evening before? We had planned that, you know."

"Waste of time *and* money, Mr. Whittle. Shoot for the morning hours of the twenty-ninth. I'll take

the crew into the hall that afternoon. We can wire that speech and be on our way before midnight—long before midnight."

"Well . . ." Whittle agreed slowly. (It *would* save money. The pilot survey was complete and the target adequately mapped. A new schedule would lop twelve hours off the operating time; holding the projectile in the field overnight was a costly business.) "Well . . ."

Steward whirled on the engineers to sew it up. "The morning of the twenty-ninth, gentlemen. That follows the twenty-eighth, but precedes the thirtieth. It's really simple, now give it the old college try. And if you foul me up once more—just once more—I'll send an Indian back for your scalps. He will also slit your throats."

"Threats are unnecessary, Mr. Steward."

"So is a twenty-four-hour overshoot. How are you going to explain that to your union?" Steward turned to the girl and fished the timepiece from his tailored pocket. "This thing didn't work, Evelyn. Can you get me another?"

"Certainly, Mr. Steward." She hastily tucked the watch away before Whittle could start fretting about *that*. "When will you brief the crew?"

"Oh, I dunno. When's the next shoot?"

"Traffic will have to plot a new curve, of course, and that will require at least five hours." She glanced at the engineers for confirmation. They silently agreed with the estimate.

"Another five hours? 'Sdeath—we'll be up all night. Okay, let's get on with it. In the lounge. The high and the mighty can send word by pony express."

"Very well."

Steward motioned his crew to follow him, and quit the engineering chamber. Somebody nudged Bloch,

who got to his feet and shambled after them. He seemed reluctant.

"What's this about Lovejoy?" Karl Dobbs asked.

"We're in trouble, a peck of trouble," Steward told him softly. He kept his voice down.

"I'm listening."

"Not now. Wait until we shake Evelyn."

Evelyn left the chamber and hurried after the four men. She wished to make certain that Benjamin Steward thoroughly briefed his crew, and she wanted his impersonal report for the data files.

They found the lounge empty.

Disdaining the plush chairs placed there for his comfort, the Character lay down on the floor and stretched luxuriously. That breakfast served by Mr. Lincoln's primitives was equal to a full day's rations in Inner Cleveland.

The crew settled themselves around him.

Evelyn hesitated in momentary confusion and then sat down carefully, tucking her legs beneath the long skirt. She managed the operation without revealing so much as an inch of ankle. A part of her mind fretted lest Mr. Whittle or some one of the other employees should walk in and find her on the floor; she was thankful that the lounge was seldom used by anyone other than the Characters.

"Evelyn," Steward said after a silence, "tell me about this chap Lincoln."

"I know very little of him, Benjamin. My information was contained in your brief."

"Did he make president? Some of the townspeople figured he would, some day."

"You know I must not tell you that, Benjamin."

"Sure—against the rules. Did he?"

"Yes," she answered with a worried glance at the other Characters. "He was elected for two successive terms."

"Bully for him."

"You *must* be careful not to mention that, Benjamin. Nor any of you. It simply would not do!"

"I'm a Know-nothing," Steward assured the girl.

Karl Dobbs broke in worriedly. He had been reading the warning posters hanging on the walls of the lounge.

"Stew, what about the next morning? The wrong morning? They've put you on a dirty spot."

"Did you ever know an engineer who was worth the powder to blow him to hell?"

"Not me. But what about it? They're playing with your life—you've got to watch out for that cancel."

"No truer words were ever spoke." Steward stretched again and gave every impression of a man falling asleep. The minutes of silence lengthened.

"*Benjamin.*"

"Impatient maiden," he retorted lazily, and then chuckled. "Man, what a meal! Wait until the engineers tote up their recall figures and try to account for *that* much mud."

"Mr. Dobbs asked a serious question, Benjamin."

"Mr. Dobbs will get a serious answer, Evelyn." He turned his head to the impatiently waiting Character. "They screwed me up, Karl, so we'll play it safe and turn things around. *You* shoot first. Do you mind? The bullet will be bedded down on a creekbank, nesting in the exposed roots of a tree. Take a very careful look around. If you see my duplicate there, ride hell for leather and we'll string those damned engineers up by their toes. But if the roots are empty and I'm not wandering about on the prairie, everything is copesetic."

"Will do. But damn it, Stew——"

"Evelyn doesn't approve of swearing. And stop worrying, Karl. Do I look like a man seeking suicide? We'll hit the field on the morning of the twenty-

ninth; we'll have all day to get acquainted and play the tourist. We'll get that speech in the evening and haul tail out of there. I don't intend to stay around until sunrise on the thirtieth to see what kind of a dead man I'll be. All I ask is that you be the sharp-eyed scout."

"Will do."

"Climb the bank with the big oak tree on your left hand. There's a stand of timber nearby—to the southwest. Barking dogs, smoke from a campfire, old home week and a picnic in the woods. I think it's an Indian camp. Probably a morning ritual. I didn't go near the timber."

"Fixed." Dobbs nodded his understanding.

"The town is a mile, maybe a mile and a quarter behind you—northeast. The creek twists and turns but we don't have to cross it. Not deep—clear water. Open prairie, no fencing, no animals except grazing cattle. Say, Doc, what's that French line about homesick for dirt?"

Bonner grinned at him, knowing his mind. "*La nostalgie de la boue.*"

"*Merci.* Tried to remember the line and couldn't. The prairie is like that: green and wide and rolling. It's queer, but the primitives don't see it that way. To them it's a never-ending desert. The farmers use it for plowing and grazing, but otherwise neglect it. A couple of times a year—in the spring and fall—there's danger of prairie fires. An old codger told me the last one wiped out a dozen fields before they got it stopped. They haven't much use for the prairie; some of them hate it and some of them fear it. But me—well."

"What was your schedule?" Dobbs asked.

"Shot full of holes by everything that could possibly happen to it. My watch had stopped running before I landed. I left the bullet and climbed the

bank at sunrise. The sun was one quarter above the horizon. It was supposed to be an hour later, plus or minus ten. Well, sir, if a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he will end in certainties."

"Your field time was four hours and nineteen minutes," Evelyn volunteered.

"A half hour of which was spent in skygazing," Steward added. "Coming and going. Watch out for that sky—it'll send you."

Dobbs said, "Do you want me for the second lead?"

"Yes. You shoot first going out. If you don't see me mooning at the sky, send an okay and I'll be right behind you. In times of peril, you haul tail with the recordings. Bloch in the middle, then Bonner. I'll bring up the rear."

"What about the town?"

"Pretty well spread out for a prairie town. The last nose-count racked up five thousand people, not counting Indians. There will be an extra one or two thousand in town for the speeches—they're holding a big convention, and every train and stagecoach brings in more. Tents on every vacant lot, selling food and whiskey. Don't touch the food—their disease rate is pretty high. We'll eat at one of the hotels.

"From the creekbank, steer for the water tower. They call it a standpipe. It's easy to see; a tall brick structure overshadowing the houses and barns around it. The water-tower street runs right into the heart of town. Opposite the tower—oh, maybe a hundred feet out from it—is a small saloon. On the way into town it's called The First Chance; coming out, it's The Last Chance. That will be the rendezvous if we get separated." He glanced at Bloch and added an afterthought. "Outside the saloon. At the hitching rail."

Bloch made no reply.

Steward continued. "The courthouse square dom-

inates the town, although it isn't in the geographical center. That's our second steering point, after the water tower. From the courthouse, we walk one block south and one block east to the intersection of Front and East Streets. Major's Hall is a three-story building on the southwest corner. The main entrance has a wide flight of stairs running up to the auditorium; there's another, narrow flight at the back of the building, opening onto an alley. And by the way, stay out of the alleys. There are only four policemen in the town. Crime is rampant."

"Murder most foul," Doc Bonner commented.

Steward eyed him. "First or Second Shakespeare?"

Bonner was injured. "There is but one true Shakespeare. The second is an impostor."

"Amen!" Bobby Bloch said hollowly.

Steward turned in surprise. "I thought you were asleep."

"In sleep I am a king, but waking no such matter."

"I don't know," Steward said ruminatively. "Maybe we'd better revise the roster. Two actors in the same crew spells trouble."

Silence, without alarm, was the only rejoinder. Benjamin Steward rolled his head to examine Bloch. The man was folded nearly double in his misery.

"What's the matter, Bobby?"

"Nothing, sire."

"You're not going if you've got a bellyache."

Hollow, hungry eyes lifted from the floor to fasten on his. There was a suspicious trace of tears.

"I know a powerful and undying thirst," the actor announced.

"Absolutely not! If you come in with liquor on your breath, you don't shoot. I mean that. It will keep until we get back. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, wicked master." And the head dropped.

Bonner spoke up. "Shakespearean actors—bah!"

From the depths, Bloch retorted with a false humility. "Go and commend me to my brother Cassius; bid him set on his powers betimes before, and I will follow."

"And *we* will follow," Bonner corrected.

"It shall be done, my lord, my fellow tragedian."

Doc Bonner opened his mouth for a tart reply, but Dobbs stopped him short with a meaningful thump on the arm.

"Knock it off," he ordered sharply.

The company stared at him with surprise. Dobbs put his finger to his lips in signal and then motioned toward the door.

After a moment, Steward said, "Evelyn, will you check up on the Lovejoy brothers?"

"Certainly, Benjamin." She rose to her feet and left.

Steward stretched again, rolled over and stood up. "What say we go out and look at the stars? Or contemplate our navels? Not you, Bloch. Sit tight. I want to find you right here, sober, at shooting time."

Bloch made no answer.

Dobbs and Bonner followed Steward from the lounge.

In the seclusion of the corridor, Dobbs stopped them and turned on Steward. "All right, mister, unload yourself. What's with this Lovejoy? What's the trouble?"

Steward told them. He described his two meetings with the colorful figure, repeated the conversations that had passed between them, and ended with the wry observation that Lovejoy had practically ordered him out of town.

Dobbs mulled it over. "No hint of what went wrong?"

"None—unless you can find one in his statements."

"That isn't good."

"What *is*, about this shoot?" he demanded. "Now, what's with Bloch? What were you trying to tell us in there?"

"The labor squads seized his brother this morning," Dobbs answered quietly.

"Oh, *hell!*" Steward was thunderstruck.

Bonner was disgusted with himself. "My big mouth!"

"What happened?"

"The usual thing," Dobbs said. "They were both raised in the theater, and on the bottle. The brother has been going downhill for some time, I understand. Drinking heavily and forfeiting one job after another. He lost his last one only a few weeks ago and the theater people turned him down with finality. Tore up his card. Bobby tried to get him in here, and some of us put in a qualified recommendation—against our better judgment—but his references were against him, and we were ignored. The squads grabbed the poor fellow this morning."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"He would not make a Character, despite his profession. Frail, in poor health and something of a weakling. Intelligent enough to know what was ahead of him, but not enough to ward it off."

"Maybe if we went down there——"

"We did," Dobbs interrupted. "Bobby and I went down early this afternoon. Argued with one bureaucrat after another. Zero. It's been tried before, Stew." Dobbs stared at his open hands, seeing a bureaucratic neck between them. "I got in touch with a man I know there. We were too late. The brother was already processed and gone; apparently they've shipped him to some road-building project in Central America. It's a dreadful way for a man to end his life."

Steward silently agreed to that. The government

labor squads supplied the most efficient answer to the unemployment problem. There were no unemployables burdening the national economy. A man or woman without a job—and without the prospects of obtaining one—was promptly conscripted into government service. The period of liberty was brief because employers were required to notify the government each two weeks, when they filed the income tax returns for every employee. For the females, conscription meant one thing or another, some pleasant and some otherwise. For the males, it meant the remainder of a lifetime at forced manual labor, doing those things the government wanted done at the least possible expense.

It wasn't called slavery because the New Constitution prohibited slavery, and because each man was paid a daily pittance to keep to the technical letter of the law. The conscripted man served the rest of his life. There were no paroles or pardons, no visitors, no mail.

"Bobby's brother can't expect a long life, not in his present condition," Dobbs added reflectively.

"I suppose that's a blessing—for him."

"Perhaps. But cataclysmic to Bobby. He sees his own image in his brother, and believes he is destined for the same end. He was pathetically grateful for being called on this job."

Steward studied the pattern of the floor. "Can we rely on him tonight?"

"I believe so. He's trying desperately to get back in good graces. Liquor and that Egyptian thing are marks on his record which he is determined to erase, if that's possible. This shoot will help him considerably. Yes—I think we can rely on him to carry his end. And I'm willing to help cover, if he stumbles."

"Same here," Bonner added. "We can always fake a recording for him."

"Okay." Benjamin Steward knew he would have said that even in the face of an unfavorable opinion. On another shoot and another day—perhaps not. But right now Bloch's troubles seemed larger than his own. "We'll go ahead, as scheduled. Keep the lad in the sack. That town has a saloon for every five inhabitants. I'll snag an extra wire to pass off as his, if it's necessary."

He looked up as Evelyn entered the room.

"What's the good word, fair maid?"

"The information on Mr. Lovejoy will be ready soon, Benjamin. And in the meantime the engineers have decided a shooting time. Five hours and forty minutes from now. They are plotting a ten o'clock arrival in the field."

"Plus or minus a fortnight," Steward replied. "Poo, and a yobber to boot. Five hours and forty minutes; what do you want to do, gents? Knock over a couple of games?"

"Sounds reasonable."

"You must change your clothes if you go outside, Benjamin."

"By the gods, yes! This stuff itches." He undid the shirt to reach inside and scratch vigorously. "Let's all go outside for a few hours, Evelyn. I can't remember a thing you said this afternoon."

"No, Benjamin!"

"Do you have to alibi to Whittle? Then put it this way for the record: Dobbs and Bonner are taking me out for an extended briefing; they want a minute description of that First and Last Chance Saloon. They fear to stray, you know—weak-willed and all that. You should be present."

"Benjamin, that isn't fair."

"Of course not. I'm a villain. You may hiss me."

"Benjamin, I . . ." She hesitated with indecision,

and was suddenly lost when he shrugged out of the shirt. "I'll have to make arrangements, Benjamin."

"Make 'em fast. I'm peeling the underwear next."

Evelyn whirled and ran from the room.

"Touching sort of romance," Dobbs commented dryly after she had gone. "Old-fashioned-valentine sort of thing."

"She's the old-fashioned kind of girl," Steward said. "But not the *old* old-fashioned kind daddy used to make. What say we lose a few hours at the Madam's house? And when we get there, you chaps take a powder. A man can't manage a briefing with a crowd hanging over his shoulder."

6

FUN AND GAMES

Doc Bonner whistled up a car in deference to Evelyn. The Characters would have preferred to walk the short distance to the nearest house.

The early but already forgotten proprietors of the very first house of games had availed themselves of the services of Time Researchers. Games new and old, skillful and silly, sweet and sour, innocent and dangerous were culled from numerous historical ages for the amusement of the New Nation city-states. Each succeeding—and competing—games house had improved upon the diversions available to the citizenry. The popularity of the sporting houses was enormous; they remained open around the clock. It was whispered that even the Emperor sometimes patronized them—carefully disguised of course.

A staggering amount of research and planning had gone into the operation of the house of games. Sometimes the results were ludicrous, where the origin of a particular sport or amusement was obscured by time and legend—this despite the valiant efforts of Time Researchers. And sometimes an historical contest was deliberately twisted to satisfy the players. They would not have it any other way.

Item: in the cardroom, some tables were reserved for Dead Man's Hand.

It was an ordinary draw poker game with two variants. Hovering over each table—and reading the

cards of all players—was a referee officially known as Wild Bill Hickok. This man was dressed in authentic Old Western garb: a ten-gallon hat, loud shirt and vest, trousers and silver-spangled chaps, boots and spurs. He also wore a pair of reasonably authentic forty-fours strapped to his legs. If and when, in the course of a game, some player drew a hand containing two pair or a full house of aces and eights, the referee pulled his guns and shot the unlucky fellow in the back. As might be anticipated, it broke up the game.

The survivors divided the pot and whatever money the loser had on the table and on his person. Not dead, but stunned and unconscious for hours to come, the unlucky participant was carried out and sent home by car. Sporting-house tradition decreed that a dollar be left in his pockets. Wild Bill Hickok usually received a generous tip for his role in the proceedings. And a new game would begin.

Item: in the basement galleries were numerous games of pure chase, having a variety of names.

Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians, Hare and Hounds—and for the ladies—King's Women and Robin Hoods. Each gallery was appropriately named. City Jungle, The Reservation, The Dismal Swamps, and The Green Forest. The younger people liked to play Drop the Gat. Each game had its peculiar set of rules, rewards and penalties. Mixed sexes were not permitted to participate in any but the most innocuous of contests, inasmuch as the losing teams were frequently in need of medical attention. These games, so the whispers ran, were the royal favorites. The Emperor was especially fond of archery.

And much of the games house bore a reliable similarity to carnivals and amusement piers. There were shooting galleries, hurling tournaments, small-change

gambling and ultragaudy roulette wheels which paid off in worthless bric-a-brac.

Always popular and always crowded was the Twenty Questions game. Standing in a soundproofed booth with a distractingly pretty girl, the contestant pitched twenty legitimate questions on any subject at a panel of experts. The monetary rewards mounted in direct proportion to the number of questions the panel failed to answer before a bell rang signaling the commercial interlude.

Madame Jennifer's House of Games had a free gate.

Dobbs and Bonner moved away by themselves. They had decided to try their luck at ghoodminton, although Bonner loudly proclaimed it to be a sissy's game. He would rather bowl, or join one of the baseball teams being organized. (A complete nine innings every hour on the hour.)

Evelyn glanced up at the silent Character who was drifting along beside her. His face was blank.

"I think that was prearranged, Benjamin."

He laughed. "I do like a little bit of butter to my bread."

"It was too obvious."

"Ah, well, four's a crowd."

"And what do you have in mind?"

"Nothing that I haven't done before. I thought I'd whisk you away to some cozy place—like a park bench—and whisper sweet nothings in your ear."

"And, I suppose, explain *peacheroo*?"

"By all means."

As they walked along they passed the entrance to a darkened side room which housed a kind of entertainment called The Marriage Game. It was designed for persons who wished neither a six-months' trial contract nor a permanent marriage. Mixed sexes were

the rule, and the period of occupancy of the heart-shaped "honeymoon cottages" was unrestricted so long as the participants paid the proper fees. (Each cottage contained a small printed notice informing the couples that a notary public was in residence, in the event they changed their minds and decided to marry.)

Evelyn glanced away, disgustedly, and covertly studied the Character. After a moment's reflection she decided he had not deliberately brought her this way. She slipped her hand in his.

"There is something on your mind, Benjamin. I find you uncommonly solemn."

"There certainly is." He did not smile. "I want to ask you a personal question."

"Very personal?"

"Oh, *very.*"

"I warned you not to grow serious, Benjamin."

"Cross my heart and spit, Evelyn. Beneath this rugged chest beats a heart of gold. And if I must confess the truth, I simply like to talk to you."

"That is a compliment. Thank you."

They strolled into a Lilliputian park. It was equipped with a tiny artificial lake, facsimile swans, soft music emanating from concealed speakers in the shrubbery, and a romanticist's idea of park benches. The benches were just wide enough to accommodate two people, were comfortably upholstered, and each was set off the curving walk in a location affording semiprivacy. A coin meter was fastened to the side of each bench, and later, when the time limit expired, a bell tinkled insistently until another coin was inserted or the bench vacated. Songbirds, or the recorded equivalent, could be heard in the trees.

Steward seated himself beside Evelyn and draped a casual arm around her shoulder. He glanced into the trees.

"Ersatz."

"What?"

"You ought to see the real thing. Real birds. Nesting in real trees in real parks. This ersatz stuff reminds me of our motto."

"Benjamin, you must be more careful. Mr. Whittle is quick to notice disrespect."

"Hah!" he said. "Comes the revolution—*Sic transit gloria* Whittle."

"I don't believe I understand."

"Neither do I." And he lapsed into a moody silence.

"Benjamin," she prompted after a while.

"Yes, my love?"

"The *very* personal question."

"Tush. I'm working up to it. After all, I've only known you for six years."

"Stop teasing!"

"Okay, Evelyn. It's probably anticlimactic, but that's my question. Evelyn what?"

"What?" she repeated, nonplused.

"Yes, what. I've known you for six years and you have always been Evelyn—just Evelyn. Don't you have a family name?"

She stared at him with surprise and then, slowly, growing amusement. Finally she burst out laughing.

"*That* is the question?"

"It's legit," he said defensively.

"You . . . you *silly!*"

"Are you nameless?"

"Certainly not."

"Well, then?"

"Benjamin, are you serious? My full name is Evelyn Kung Fu-tza. I do not use the last."

He considered that. "Why not?"

"It is a descriptive label meaning 'the teacher.' I am simply Evelyn Kung."

"Not so simply," he contradicted. "But there's noth-

ing wrong with the name. Why didn't you tell me before?"

"You did not ask, Benjamin."

He pursed his lips and decided against choking her. Instead, his questing mind turned in another direction.

"There's a game in here called The Chinese Water Torture. Have you seen it?"

"Yes."

"Is it as goofed-up as the other games?"

"Definitely. The original was not a game but a method of torture used on recalcitrant prisoners. It bore not the remotest relation to gambling stakes and the number of drops of water falling in a given time in a given container."

Steward looked around the park but his comment embraced the whole.

"Rum place."

"And yet the peoples of the Old Nation had their places of amusement."

"Everybody did—as far back as we've gone. But none of them seem as goofy as this place." He stretched his long legs and tightened the arm around her shoulder. "Is there anything else I should know? Anything else I haven't asked?"

"There could be many things. It depends."

"On my seriousness?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm this much serious—but not too much." He scratched his chin and grinned at her. "I'm a mite too young to settle down."

"I think I can judge the extent of your intentions, Benjamin. I have used the past six years in study, if you have not. And I shall not go shopping for a wedding ring, nor shall I reveal the amount of my dowry."

"Well, no," he agreed judiciously. "I wasn't up to *that* point—not this week, anyway."

"Nor this month, nor this year."

"But it's nice to think about," Steward said.

"I can agree to that. Benjamin, there is *so* much more to marriage than you seem to realize. It is not all an entertainment, like that place back there. You would find it necessary to entirely revise your viewpoint of life—perhaps your way of life—if you desire a successful marriage."

"'Sdeath, you don't have to make a man over."

"Benjamin, have you ever known a successfully married Character? Or a married, successful Character?"

He thought a moment and said, "Solly Blaisdell?"

"Mr. Blaisdell is restricted to nonrisk shoots. At his own request. Which means at his wife's request."

"Well—now, yes, I had missed him around lately."

"Any others come to mind, Benjamin?"

He shook his unkempt head. "Can't think of any."

"Very well," she pressed, "how many Characters resigned and sought other jobs after they married?"

"A flock of them, I reckon. The wives, huh?"

Evelyn nodded. "Their wives, and the arrival of children."

"Poor buggers," he said with a burst of sympathy. "They must be missing it, now."

"As you would miss it."

"*Me?* Hold up, Evelyn. You aren't the kind of a woman to make me quit."

"How do you know what kind of a woman I am?" she asked sharply.

He turned to stare at her.

After a lengthy silence he said, "I don't know."

"I am afraid that is correct, Benjamin. So it is best that you do *not* become serious. I think you would be very unhappy at the consequences."

He did not reply at once, but listened to the electronic birds singing in the mock-up trees. In the near

distance a hidden waterfall tumbled musically over the rocks and there was a subtle, undefined humming sound in the air. In long gone ages that humming had been bees. Time Researchers' vast libraries of wire-recorded sound had supplied the original chorus of birds and bees.

This was a wholly new and unprecedented Evelyn. He must have rubbed salt in an unexpected wound.

Ruefully, he admitted that he didn't really know the woman very well, despite the six years they had worked together. *Plus* the last couple of years they had played and dated together. He hadn't even known her name; had known nothing of her background. He hadn't known the swift turning of her mind, the rebuke on her tongue, or the velvet threat only half concealed in the tart reply. He hadn't known *this* Evelyn at all. Aye, woman at best is a contradiction still.

"Evelyn Kung," he said pensively. "Maiden name?"

Her voice turned strangely soft. "Yes, Benjamin." It should have warned him.

"I guessed at it." Steward avoided her eyes. "I owe you an apology, Evelyn. I've put my foot in my mouth once too often. You didn't *look* married—you know what I mean?—but that's no excuse."

"I am a widow."

"Double blunder, and I'm doubly sorry." Belatedly, a lightninglike suspicion smote him. He whirled on her.

"Evelyn—*one of the Characters?*"

"Yes."

"Hell and high water!" Stung with embarrassment, Steward got to his feet awkwardly. No wonder she had so forcefully rejected his tentative proposal. "I'd better take you home."

"To the chamber, Benjamin. I am with your crew for the duration of the shoot."

"That's what I meant," he mumbled. His senses were still reeling from the shock.

Evelyn stood beside him to put a hand on his arm. It was a small and reassuring touch.

"There is one more question to be asked, Benjamin."

"I don't want to ask it."

"You have little choice. It is necessary."

"No."

"Then I will tell you. And you *must* believe that I bear no malice toward you, or anyone. For heaven's sake, Benjamin, not once have I been vindictive toward you; nor do I expect to be. Admit that." She spoke earnestly and quietly, gazing up into his face. Her saffron skin was very pale.

He could only nod.

"My husband's name was Sam Wendy. I think you have already guessed that. We kept our marriage a secret; not even the people at T-R knew. And I will be grateful, Benjamin, if you do not mention it now. It is over."

When Steward did not reply or move, but only stood woodenly before her, Evelyn slipped her arm through his and turned him about.

"Come along, Benjamin. The time is short."

She guided him out.

He stood in the deserted tailor's fitting room, off the Library, absently contemplating a pile of clothing.

By the gods, he had played it dumb!

For six years he had worked with Evelyn Kung, and for the last two of those adventurous years he had haphazardly courted her—never dreaming she was first Sam Wendy's wife and then his widow. Benjamin Steward dating Sam Wendy's widow. What an absurdity!

He could only marvel at Evelyn's unbounded pa-

tience, at her rigid self-repression. She had *not* shown the slightest trace of resentment, had *not* spoken a vindictive word. Nor, during or following his guild negotiations to double the size of the minimum crew, had she said anything about closing a barn door after it was too late.

He wondered if he could ever ask her out again? Could he knowingly date the widow of the man whose death was on his hands?

Benjamin Steward and Sam Wendy's widow!

Moving in a trance, he donned the prairie costume.

7

SECOND SHOOT

THE CHARACTER was walking through the Library when he saw the familiar large envelope, addressed to Evelyn. It also bore a serial number he recognized as that one designating his shoot.

He picked it up and carried it down to her office. She was not there.

Dropping into the chair behind Evelyn's desk, he opened the flap and peeked into the envelope. A notation at the top of the first page caught his eye.

Lovejoy.

Steward removed the sheaf of papers and commenced reading them.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy (1802-37 ?? O.N.) Male, white. Old Nation abolitionist leader (?) and political figure. Lovejoy was ordained a Presbyterian minister, and later became editor of the Saint Louis *Observer,* an influential Presbyterian propaganda organ. He incurred the enmity of proslavery forces in Saint Louis by writing inflamatory antislavery editorials. Threatened with violence, Lovejoy moved his printing press to Alton-illinois (nearby city-state) and continued as before. New name for newspaper: the Alton *Observer.* Dangerous mobs followed him and destroyed his printing apparatus three times (intervals of time not known) seeking to stop the antislavery editorials. On the fourth attempt, Lovejoy was killed (gunshot) defending the premises. There-

after hailed as a martyr by antislavery peoples. (Definite death, 1837).

Owen Lovejoy (1811-64 O.N.) Male, white. An Old Nation abolitionist, brother of Elijah P. Lovejoy. He was born at Albion-maine; was educated at Bowdoin College, and removed to Alton-illinois, where he witnessed the death of his brother. A man of intense feeling and great magnetism, he preached and lectured against slavery with a passionate energy that carried the people with him. In 1838 he became pastor of a Congregational church in Princeton-illinois, where he distinguished himself by the boldness of his attacks upon slavery from the pulpit and his open defiance of the laws prohibiting antislavery meetings. In 1854 he resigned his pastorate to accept a seat in the Legislature. From 1856 until his death a member of Congress, where he took an active part in the parliamentary conflicts that preceded the Civil War. Known to be present at Lincoln "lost speech." Advise extreme caution.

"Okay," Steward said aloud, "I'll be extremely cautious." He continued reading.

Political History, Bloomington-illinois. Excerpts from authentic historical volume:

"Our city has always claimed that the great Republican party of the nation had its birth at Major's Hall in 1856. At the risk of being attacked for our audacity, we will undertake to declare this a spurious claim. In the fall of 1854, the opposition to the Nebraska Bill (?) all over the country fought its battles under different names, generally as Free-soilers, anti-Nebraska Democrats, the Whig or American Party; though in Massachusetts the Free-soilers and anti-Nebraska Democrats had declared themselves to be Republicans. The election of Speaker in Congress (?) in the winter of 1855 and 1856 resulted in the choice

of Mr. P. Banks, who had been elected as a Republican and American in 1854. . . .

"It is, however, a fact that a convention called as the anti-Nebraska State Convention assembled in Major's Hall, in Bloomington, on May 29, 1856. Mr. John M. Palmer presided. This convention was largely attended by delegates from all the principal counties and was a most remarkable gathering. The anti-Nebraska Whigs and Democrats, with the Abolitionists, and those who, in 1854, were willing to be called Republicans, who in this state were not numerous, together with a large number of Americans, coalesced willingly into one party and took upon themselves boldly the name of Republican, which had now since the election of Speaker Banks become a name of national importance. The enthusiasm of the convention was most tremendous, and here was started the movement which resulted in the perfect organization of the Republican party of Illinois. . . .

"The nominees of this convention were elected. Hon. William H. Bissell was elected Governor; and James Miller, the State Treasurer; while the speech of Mr. Lincoln resulted in his later election to the Presidency. . . .

"At Bloomington, Lincoln was the great figure; beside him all the rest, even the oldest in the faith and the strongest in the work, were small. Yet, he was universally regarded as a recent convert, although the most important one that could be made in the State."

(Direct quotation follows:)

"We met at Bloomington, and it was there," said Mr. Herndon in his lectures and his writings, "that Mr. Lincoln was baptized and joined our church. He made a speech to us. I have heard or read all Mr. Lincoln's great speeches, and give it as my opinion on my best judgment, that the Bloomington speech was the grand effort of his life.

"Heretofore, and up to this moment, he simply argued the slavery question on grounds of policy, on what are called the statesman's grounds, never reaching the question of the radical and the eternal right. Now he was newly baptized and freshly born; he had the fervor of a new convert; the smothered flame broke out; enthusiasm unusual to him blazed up; his eyes were aglow with an inspiration; he felt justice; his heart was alive to the right; his sympathies, remarkably deep for him, burst forth, and he stood before the throne of the Eternal Right, in the presence of his God, and then and there unburdened his penitential and fired soul.

"This speech was fresh, new, genuine, odd, original, filled with fervor not unmixed with a divine enthusiasm; his head breathing out through his tender heart its truths, its sense of right, and its feelings of the good and for the good.

"This speech was full of fire, and energy, and force; it was logic, it was pathos, it was enthusiasm; it was justice, equity, truth, right and the good set ablaze by the divine fires of a soul maddened by the wrong; it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarled, edged and heated, backed with wrath. I attempted for about fifteen minutes, as was usual with me then, to take notes, but at the end of that time I threw pen and paper to the dogs, and lived only in the inspiration of the hour. If Mr. Lincoln was six feet four inches high usually, at Bloomington he was seven feet, and inspired at that.

"From that day to the day of his death, he stood firm on the right. He felt his great cross, had his great idea, nursed it, kept it, taught it to others, and in his fidelity bore witness of it to his death, and finally sealed it with his precious blood."

(End, direct quotation.)

Benjamin Steward sat back to scratch his head. Just what was meant by that last flight of rhetoric?

There was a phrase worth remembering, a few paragraphs back: *I threw pen and paper to the dogs.* That sounded good—it had a certain lilt to it. But what was that cryptic, mystical reference to death intended to convey?

He inspected the large envelope, but there was nothing more. The men and machines presiding over the data banks had chosen to deliver only those few skimpy pages, believing them sufficient; and they were sufficient for their purpose—they had been intended only for Evelyn's information.

It was frustrating, now that he was developing an interest in this chap Lincoln. Damned frustrating. He wanted to know more about a man who could weave a verbal spell of such intensity. A part of him was looking forward to the coming recording session with an eagerness which transcended professional detachment and professional pride in a job well done. His curiosity was whetted by the praise he had heard and read.

Meditatively, he tucked away everything as he had found it and placed the envelope on Evelyn's desk.

He would record the entire evening's speechmaking. Palmer, who presided; Bissell and Miller, who would be nominated; Lovejoy, who would harangue; and Lincoln, who would wrap it up into a complete package. Plus anyone else who popped up to say a few words. The entire evening. Exact operations in the field were left to the crew leader's judgment and discretion, always providing he blanketed the target; to turn in five or six hours of recorded wire would not be unusual. The remainder of the crew would concentrate only on Lincoln's words.

Later, after his return, he could borrow his own re-

cording from the files and study the evening's work. That would be fun.

He knew enough, now, to keep out of trouble; and he knew the answers to several mild questions which had bothered him. The data on Owen Lovejoy was brief, but if he kept out of that gentleman's path there should be no difficulty.

He would take the crew in early—perhaps in the waning hours of the afternoon, to inspect the Hall once more. The custodian had given no indication of meeting him previously, so the fellow should not be there. If the crowd was already gathering for the evening session it would be wisest to join them, securing advantageous positions for recording the speech. But if the room was still empty, they could return later. At least two of their microphones should be as near Lincoln as possible. His, as a matter of course, and—oh, Dobbs was the next best man.

One Character should station himself near the door to expedite his escape in case of emergency, and all of them should keep that alley exit in mind. The cardinal rule was to *always* keep open an avenue of escape. Things sometimes happened to the best-planned shoots.

Evelyn Kung was a widow because something unpleasant happened to Sam Wendy.

Steward shook his head to clear away that memory.

The subject was much too painful to contemplate; the more so since that recent, unhappy episode on the park bench. He had unknowingly hurt Evelyn, and now he bitterly regretted that. She was the one person in the world he did not want to hurt or harm in any way.

He forced his thoughts back to Lincoln's town.

The crew could be thankful for the warm weather pervading the town. The day had been balmy and springlike, making him overly conscious of the heavy

underwear. There came to mind the obituary found in the local newspaper, telling of a sixty-degree drop in temperature in a matter of minutes. Astonishing thing! It sounded impossible but it must have happened, for rather than questioning it the writer had referred to the memories of the older townsfolk. Come to think of it, they needn't be so old to remember it. Every man and woman over twenty years of age had lived through it, while those thirty or more probably remembered it. But it remained an astonishing occurrence. He tried, and failed, to picture a rural scene in which the temperature had dropped that far, that fast—freezing so suddenly that humans and animals were trapped in the open.

The contrast to his own world was remarkable. Inner Cleveland bathed in almost perpetual summer. Philadelphia was growing citrus crops. Toronto, during the past year, had discovered subtropical parasites within its borders.

The world was a much colder place in ancient days.

It was a more troublesome place as well, as witness the turmoil found nearly everywhere in the field. The world of the ancients was a cold, noisy, brawling, warring world with governments rising and falling within the span of a man's lifetime.

And he was drawn to it.

'Sdeath, yes! With all the furore and upsets, he was drawn to it.

"Well, it's like this," Steward mused aloud, and kicked at the desk floating before him. "Had I been present at the Creation, I would have given some useful hints for the better ordering of the universe."

The desk shivered under the blow and then regained its balance.

He turned his head at a minute sound.

Doc Bonner had his head in the door, peering curiously.

"Who are you talking to?"

"Me," Steward answered.

"Delightful conversation, I'm sure, but stow it. Bobby's gone."

Steward shot out of the chair. "Where?" His body struck the desk lightly and nearly upset it.

"Funny question. I'll mail you the answer. Now move a leg—we start shooting in less than an hour."

Steward was already running for the door. "Damn that jackass! Who saw him last? When?"

"We all did, when we left the lounge. Maybe that was a mistake."

"Did you notify Evelyn?"

"She found him—I mean, she didn't find him. She went into the lounge after him, and he was gone. Kind of worked up about it, too."

"*She's* worked up?" He sped along the corridor beside Bonner. "I'll wring his skinny neck! He's not going to spoil my shoot."

They burst into the lounge but it was untenanted. As they turned to leave, Karl Dobbs caught up with them.

"Evelyn's checking the guards on the outer doors," he said hurriedly. "He couldn't go outside without leaving his mark."

"Did he follow us to the games house?"

"Don't think so—I didn't see him."

Steward cupped his face in his two hands, thinking. He and Evelyn had been outside for a little more than three hours; he didn't know how long Dobbs and Bonner had stayed away, not having seen them again after they separated. Three hours had given Bloch a good long time in which to lose himself. If he *was* outside, he was gone. And the remaining time before the shoot was critically short. *Too* short, to bring in a substitute crewman and adequately pre-

pare him for the field. If Bloch was not found they would have to jump undermanned.

"Organize it," Dobbs suggested. "One to each side of the corridor; one go upstairs."

"Right. You go up. Take a guard with you, so you won't get nailed for opening the wrong doors. Bonner can take the inner ring along this corridor and I'll search the outer. If we don't find him, we'll go below."

"Fifty-five minutes," Bonner said in warning.

"Damn, yes! Drop everything and meet me in the chamber in fifty minutes—the engineers will have our hides if we don't give them a five-minute margin. Bloch can go to pot."

"Check," Dobbs said. He trotted away.

Steward motioned to the first room along the inner corridor and Bonner followed the finger. The Character then turned quickly to his own task of searching the opposing rooms. It proved fruitless. Periodically, he encountered Bonner as one or the other of them were going through doors. There was no need to ask questions.

The remaining minutes were leaking away.

Emerging from a thorough search of the Library and the adjoining fitting room, where he found only Bloch's street clothes, Steward ran into Evelyn.

"Any luck?"

"He has not left the building," she reported tersely. "The doormen have not checked him out."

"That's encouraging. Is there any liquor in the house?"

"There may be, in the executive offices."

"Let's get up there—that joker can sniff a bottle in King Tut's tomb."

"I have already taken care of it, Benjamin. Mr. Dobbs and the guards are making a search."

"Then I'll keep on doing what I'm doing. Not that I expect to find him. He'll be up with the liquor."

"I am sorry, Benjamin."

"Be sorry for him—not me. We can shoot without him. But I guess he's kissed his job good-bye."

"I am afraid so."

Together they hunted through the remaining rooms, without success. Bonner reported in, equally empty-handed. Still going through the motions, they descended to the floor below and covered that. It was useless to pry deeper into the bowels of the building. The missing man could not have gained entrance to the data vaults if he had tried.

"Fifteen minutes, Benjamin," Evelyn said urgently.

"Let's hope Dobbs found him."

They retraced their steps.

Dobbs and the guards had not found him. That Character was awaiting them outside the door of chamber *B*. He spread his hands with an empty gesture.

"All the corks were in all the bottles."

"This is stupid," Steward growled in disgust. "He's *in here* somewhere."

"Sure he is. But name a place we haven't looked."

"The pigeoncote," Bonner said dourly. "We are a nest of singing birds. Jot that down in your memory book and come on—we're on the brink. Evelyn, did you get another pocket watch for Stew?"

The girl said, "Oh, my goodness!" and whirled away.

Bonner stared after her. "That's the first time I've known that girl to slip. What did you do to her, Stew?"

"I held her hand in the park. My animal magnetism. We may as well shove off. This damned shoot has been wrong from the beginning." He opened the door to the engineering chamber and the others fol-

lowed him in. "If we foul up in the field I'm going to turn in my card."

"Don't be radical," Dobbs said.

Mr. Whittle and the two engineers were waiting. A mountainous mass of charts and papers were stacked on a nearby desk.

"Ah, gentlemen, here we are," Whittle said by way of greeting, "here we are. Everything is in readiness. And rest assured, Mr. Steward, there will be no mistake this time. The time-curve has been triply checked."

"Amazing," Steward retorted in ill-humor.

Whittle counted heads. "Someone is missing?"

"Evelyn's right behind us."

"No, no, I mean one of you gentlemen."

"Oh, really?" Steward turned about and examined Dobbs and Bonner. "Who's missing?"

"I'm here," Dobbs replied.

"Me, too," Bonner said.

A silence fell, a growing, painful silence that stretched into eternity. Whittle crossed to the desk to examine some papers.

"To be sure," he said disparagingly. "Mr. Bloch. The gentleman who visited Egypt." He glanced up at Steward. "You chose Mr. Bloch for this project, I believe."

"I did," Steward acknowledged.

The reply seemed to sadden Whittle. His manner took on a degree of coolness. He glanced meaningfully at the engineers, who, a moment later when it was safe to do so, looked smugly at each other. Everyone knew Characters were morons. And the heat had been taken off them for their earlier error.

"*Well,*" Whittle intoned censoriously. He placed his hands behind his back and waited for an explanation.

None was forthcoming.

Steward hooked his thumbs in his trouser pockets and returned the stare. He waited for the voice of doom.

Evelyn entered on this tableau.

She held a substitute watch in one hand and the sleeve of Bobby Bloch's coat in the other. Bloch was uncomfortably occupying the coat. The man appeared distraught and very red of face.

"Ready, Mr. Whittle," Evelyn said smartly.

Whittle smiled tremulously.

Benjamin Steward glowered at the furiously blushing Bloch and turned on Evelyn.

"Where did you find it?" he demanded.

"In the men's room of the lounge. Mr. Bloch had fallen asleep."

Her forthright answer sent new waves of blood washing through Bloch's thin cheeks. He did not utter a word.

The shoot began a few minutes later.

Karl Dobbs climbed into the missile and lay down, his hands and feet in readiness. The engineers attached the terminal cables and raised the protective barrier about the dais. Whittle made with his silly little hand wave. Dobbs ignored that by closing his eyes. A switch was thrown and the projectile vanished from the chamber.

They waited.

Benjamin Steward paced the floor, marking the time necessary for Dobbs to untangle himself from the roots, climb the bank and scan the surrounding prairie. He knew Dobbs would be in no hurry; that cautious Character would take all the time he wanted to be absolutely certain, for Steward's life in the next few minutes would depend upon his observation and judgment. Dobbs would not send the signal until he was satisfied the projectile had reached the

target date, the correct date. He would make sure the prairie was empty of that earlier Steward who had overshot the day.

They continued to wait.

The chronograph key sparked into sudden life.

Bird on the wing, fish in the creek, it snapped, *come on in, dad.*

And a moment later the missile reappeared on the dais, awaiting the next passenger. The barrier dropped. Steward stepped forward and as he moved, trepidation picked at the network of nerves about his stomach.

"Follow me, Bloch—and then Bonner." Over his shoulder he called to the engineers, "My congratulations, gentlemen. Nothing succeeds like success."

He wriggled into the bullet and pulled down the key. The door was closed and locked. Steward curled his fingers about the handrails and then turned his head to look through the glass ports.

Sam Wendy's widow waited across the chamber, calmly watching him, as she had done on scores of previous shoots. Her keen, Oriental eyes gave him no message.

Steward's gaze lingered on her face for long, somber seconds and then he closed his lids and found himself locked in with his own thoughts.

Sam Wendy's ghost settled down in the machine with him, but this time there was an added weight.

Benjamin Steward rode backward seven hundred years into history, dreading the misfortune he knew was coming.

8

DESTINATION

A LIGHT RAIN had ended less than an hour ago, and now the clouds were breaking to reveal patches of sky. It was the same pleasant Illinois sky, the same brilliant sun of 1856, and the same undulating prairie of his earlier visit, now wet and freshly green under a new day. Steward hopped out of the projectile and breathed deeply. The old familiar taste of sweet clean air welcomed his arrival. This day seemed warmer, despite the recent rain.

He was back again, crowding a menacing deadline he had never before encountered.

Karl Dobbs was standing erect on the creekbank, surveying the new world. "You like this place?"

"I thought I did."

"There's no smoke in the trees yonder."

"We're much too late for breakfast," Steward said. He consulted his new watch. "When did you make it?"

"Nine fifty-seven. And I'm not going to let you forget they gave us a nineteen-hour maximum tolerance."

"It is now ten-aught-one."

"The same," Dobbs nodded. "Close the door and send that bottle back."

"It can wait. I want to talk to you."

Dobbs turned about and stared down at the man beside the waiting machine. He said solemnly, "I

expected as much. When you said we were in for trouble, you meant *trouble.* All right, son, I'm listening. What else did you do, besides insulting Lovejoy?"

"That's the rub, Karl. I don't know who did it—or will do it."

"Do what?"

"Lose his recording wire in the Hall."

"*Jehoshaphat!*" Dobbs was shocked. "Tell me."

"I checked the hall for particulars—you know the routine. A janitor was sweeping out the trash, shoveling it out of the window into the alley below. He also shoveled out a length of our wire—fifty feet or more. No spool, no recorder, just unwound wire."

"He didn't notice it?"

"He must have noticed it, but it didn't mean anything to him because he threw it away."

"You left it in the alley?"

"I didn't dare bring it back with me!"

"Hell and high water, Stew. A run-in with Lovejoy, and now a lost recording."

"Yes. Well, now you know."

"Now I know. Send that contraption back. Let me work on this."

Steward closed the door and watched the little time-traveling projectile missile vanish. The engineers would be waiting impatiently for it. He climbed the bank to stand beside his second in command.

"You can get yourself into the dangdest messes!"

Steward waved his hand over the prairie. "It's just like tomorrow, only wetter," he observed. "There'll be some cattle grazing over there; a dog barking in the timber, and, of course, smoke from the cooking fire. All quiet, all peaceful."

"Pleasantly rustic," Dobbs agreed, "but I prefer the cities. The old cities, of about this same period. London and Paris, specifically. Each was squalid and handsome in equal measure; squalid living conditions

for the poor, handsome women and handsome music for all. And there was a very witty man named Disraeli. A genius."

A faint whispering was audible behind them as the time-tracking projectile made its third appearance on the scene. The whispering was followed by a grunt and then a violent thrashing as Bloch became entangled in the roots.

"Doomsday is near," he cried hollowly; "die all, die merrily."

"Haul your tail up here, sleeping beauty."

"Protest, I protest!" Bloch retorted. He got to his feet and eyed the now-slippery mudbank. "The fair, the chaste and unexpressive *she* has invaded man's last domain. A most ignoble awakening."

"Lucky for you—Whittle was ready to bounce you. The unexpressive she saved your skin. Hey . . . !" Steward called down, "go back and close the door."

Grimacing, Bloch re-entered the jungle of roots to obey. He snapped the door shut and the missile melted beneath his fingers.

"Company, villainous company, has been the spoil of me," he complained, and negotiated the climb to stand beside them on the grassy prairie.

Presently, Bonner joined them. This time the bullet remained in its bed, shimmering in concealment.

"Hey!" he cried with quick delight, "look at that empty sky. No aircraft, no towering monstrosities. And the greensward—just like grandmother used to romp on." He wiped his muddy feet on the greensward. "You picked a prize, Stew."

"Yes, didn't he?" Dobbs muttered.

"Where is Mr. Lincoln?" Bloch demanded. "I espy the lonely standpipe."

"Where," asked Bonner, "is the standpipe? I will espy the lonely Lincoln later."

Bloch fixed him with a disapproving eye. "How

oft when men are at the point of death, have they been merry!"

Bonner grinned at the skinny actor. "Dad, you're a sad-looking Romeo. Why, I'll bet you played in Second Shakespearean stock!"

"Oh, knock it off," Steward interrupted them. "And watch what you say from now on. These people know nothing about a Second Shakespeare—he's five hundred years in the future."

The Character scanned the surrounding prairie with a professional interest. There were a few head of grazing horses between them and the town, but the animals' restricted movements suggested they were hobbled. He did not see the herd of cattle which would be present at tomorrow's sunrise. West of the town, columns of smoke drifted lazily above a cluster of buildings; and another moving column was approaching from the north to join the others.

"Railway trains," he pointed out to the crew. "The main building is the depot and those others are the workshops. The trains are bringing in hundreds of convention delegates and sightseers from all over the state. If anyone should ask, we're from Chicago. That's the largest city to the north. We arrived on one of those trains."

He glanced down to make a final inspection of the bullet's resting place. The only signs of their coming were the muddy, elongated footprints on the creekbank.

"Fix this location in your minds—you may have to come back here separately, and if you forget it, you're done for."

"Yes, wicked master."

"You're repeating yourself, Bobby." Steward again read his pocket watch. "Check this: ten-aught-nine. Don't compensate if the local time varies by a few minutes; keep the difference in your head. You know

the routine." And he thought to add a final warning: "Dobbs arrived at nine fifty-seven. Our nineteen-hour tolerance limit began at that moment."

"Hadn't we better check the recorders?"

"Yes. Do it now."

Steward watched their hands dip into coat pockets to release the switches on the tiny mechanisms, and he wondered which of them would be coming back with an empty pocket—or at the very least, which one would bring back a recorder lacking a spool of wire? The crew members did not adjust their positions for the test, relying on the sensitive microphones concealed in their shirt collars to pick up any sound.

Dobbs nodded their readiness.

"I will borrow a page from Mr. Bloch's beloved Shakespeare—the Original," Steward enunciated clearly. "To wit, and as follows: Time travels in divers places with divers persons. I'll tell you who time ambles withal, who time trots withal, who time gallops withal, and who it stands still withal."

Doc Bonner was sorrowfully shaking his head.

"A slight correction, my dear sir. That last should read, and who *he* stands still withal. If you will take my solemn advice, don't consider the stage as a career. You are something less than terrific."

"I bow to the superior judgment of Character Bonner, and to the horrified expression of Character Bloch. I will not compete with them in the theater. Okay, play it back."

One by one they replayed the minute lengths of wire and listened carefully to Steward's self-conscious words. The machines had performed their tasks faithfully, repeatedly underscoring his inability as an actor or a public speaker.

"I guess that's why I failed in life," Steward confessed when they were done.

"Don't forget to erase," Dobbs warned them.

"I'm going to record the entire evening, start to finish," Steward continued. "Save your wire for Lincoln. Owen Lovejoy will be your cue. Lovejoy comes on and whips everybody into a froth—Lincoln follows him to the platform. I don't know how long the man will talk. When Lincoln finishes, the crowd goes wild. Get out then, if you can manage. If not, there's another speech. A fat man called Judge Somebody follows Lincoln and calms the crowd. It breaks up after that."

"Fixed," Dobbs said.

"Dobbs, wangle a seat in the front row if you can. I'll try to be there, too. Bonner will stay near the door." He pointed an admonishing finger. "And Bonner, if anything goes wrong, fly to save the bacon. Forget about us and get that speech back here to the machine. Jump for the chamber—you know the emergency routine."

"Aye," Bonner nodded.

"Bloch will circulate through the hall; lean on the wall if you wish, that place will be jammed and you'll have to fight for space. Now, this is important: the escape hatch is a small doorway behind the speaker's platform. If trouble starts, use it. Make sure you have your recorder *and* the wire, and use it. Rendezvous at the Last Chance saloon."

"But don't wait too long," Dobbs added cautiously.

"Correct. Use you own judgment if anyone fails to show. Leave your mark on the hitching rail so we'll know you've been there. But *do not*, for any reason, stay later than midnight. Jump for home, with or without us."

"Ah, we'll be home in bed by midnight."

"We should be. The speechmaking is supposed to be over by seven, this evening."

Bloch cleared his throat. "In the posteriors of this day, which the rude multitude call the afternoon."

"That one missed fire," Bonner commented. "Learn to be more selective."

"I am not in the role of common men."

"That is precisely the trouble."

Steward said, "Stuff it, pardners. Let's hit the trail." And he struck off at a fast walk, with Dobbs at his side. The remaining pair tagged along behind, halfheartedly protesting the pace.

The town was seething.

They reached the water tower and turned into the road which shortly formed itself into a street. Steward flicked a casual finger at the saloon which was to be their rendezvous. A few horses were tied at the rail and the place was obviously busy. The street became more crowded as they moved toward the center of town; even the side streets contributed to the throng.

The downtown thoroughfares were congested with excited, loud-talking men and not a few women. Numerous running children and a sprinkling of glum, impassive Indians were in evidence. The dirt streets were hard and compact; it had not rained long enough to whip them into mud. Teams and their vehicles contributed to the assembly, unable to move at more than a turtle's tread. Sweating drivers frequently climbed down from the wagons to lead the horses through dense masses of people.

The noisy mobs surged to and fro along each downtown street, seemingly going nowhere—but determinedly going, nevertheless. Collectively, they were possessed of the notion that to remain still was to stagnate; they would miss the elusive excitement. Movement and disorder, motion and sound were the decrees of the day. People milled about the hotel lobbies, jostled their ways into and out of saloons, haunted the newspaper bulletin boards, swarmed

about the railway depot and continuously circled the courthouse square, all searching for something or nothing.

A deafening din hung over the town like weighted dust. Anticipatory elation was rife.

"These Republicans-to-be take their conventions seriously," Dobbs commented. He moved nimbly aside to avoid a passel of roistering delegates.

"Watch them tonight—thousands of them will be jammed around the courthouse square. The Governor is making the wind-up speech. He talks for three hours."

Dobbs glanced at him. "My briefing was obviously more brief than yours."

Steward grinned. "I read newspapers."

"We should avoid that mob."

"We will. Take a route around the courthouse." And then he motioned at the corner of an intersecting street. "Down this way. The Hall is on the next corner."

Bloch had stopped and was staring in the opposite direction.

"Ah," he cried happily, "I espy the theater. A genuine, primitive theater."

"Be careful, you fool!" Dobbs said warningly.

"I espy a genuine, pretentious theater."

"That makes two of them, at least," Steward said. "The Hall doubles in brass—there's a girl-show coming in tomorrow night."

"A pity we cannot stay."

"Waste of time," Bonner retorted dryly. "Girl-shows are all the same, year in, year out."

"But the faces are new and different."

And only the faces," Bonner conceded. "Everything else is a carbon copy. The same routines, the same dances, the same skirts and the same jokes.

Compare this one to the show you saw last week, or last year."

"Jaded sachem!"

"Maybe—but I know what I'm talking about."

"This way," Steward interposed politely, "if you gentlemen have finished discussing culture."

He led them the length of the block and paused at a wide doorway.

"Upstairs," he cautioned, "and watch your tongues. We're highboys from Chicago—we're willing to go Republican but we want to be convinced. We want to see the wheels go around, and listen to them rumble."

They climbed the stairway to the third floor.

Two workmen were decorating the auditorium with flags and bunting. Steward shot a quick glance around and was relieved to find the custodian absent. The workmen only gave them curious glances.

They studied the hall in silence, and after a while Dobbs muttered a low, soft, "Fixed."

"Alley door?" Steward asked quietly.

"Yes."

"Lectern?"

"Yes."

"Find a spot about four feet this side of the lectern and fifteen inches downstage. Near that hammer."

"Got it."

"Our man will be standing on that spot."

"Fixed."

"Good enough. Let's take in the town."

Like casual tourists, they gaped a moment longer and filed out of the hall.

"I wish to inspect the theater," Bloch announced when they had reached the street. His eager gaze turned that way with anticipation.

"Why?" Bonner wanted to know.

"To read the playbill."

Steward waved his hand. "Lead on, Macduff."

Bloch winced.

"He means, lay on, Macduff," Bonner pacified the actor, and then turned his attention to the crew leader. "For shame, sir. I trust your collection of bright and pithy sayings is not equally as inaccurate."

"I'm a mite rusty," Steward admitted.

Bonner snorted. "A mite, he says."

Struggling against both the pedestrian and vehicular traffic, against noisy, charging children and occasional drunken revelers, the field crew worked their slow way back to the main street and crossed it to continue westward toward the theater.

"Wonder how Warner is making out in Times Square?" Steward mused.

The theater had the usual garish front common to places of entertainment in many centuries, and was liberally plastered with placards and three-sheets. It was a wide, squat building with much fancy but quite useless ornamentation on its frontside. The box office was set flush with the planked sidewalk, while just around a corner on a narrow alley, a flight of steps led upward to the gallery. The cart of a peanut vendor, now doing a brisk business, was nearby.

"I know none of them," Bloch announced disdainfully after a scrutiny of the current playbill. "We have here *Brutus, or The Fall of Tarquin.*" Reading on, his eyes flickered over the smaller type. "I am in grave error, gentlemen. Tarquin fell last night. A pity. This evening, the townspeople will be treated to the first successful social satire by an American playwright (if we accept this at face value, which is hazardous) entitled, *Fashion, or Life in New York.*"

"I saw *The Beggar's Opera* in London," Dobbs volunteered.

"I was privileged to play in a revival of that, sir," Bloch informed him. "The audience received it rather coldly, which was not surprising; the censors had butchered the heart of it to remove the message."

"What message?" Dobbs asked bluntly.

Bloch shrugged eloquently. "The censors found one."

"The gelded nincompoops."

"I hate them!" Bloch cried. "Those misbegotten knaves of Kendal green."

"You're misquoting again," Bonner called. "Look over here—just like old times!" He was pointing out the posters on the far wall beyond the box office.

The colorful three-sheets proclaimed the gala attractions coming next week.

The Booth-Willoughby Traveling Players, now engaged on their fourth triumphant tour of the western frontier, and coming direct from a stupendous season in Boston and New York, would arrive in town the following week to present to sophisticated theatergoers a splendid, diversified program of comedy and tragedy. From their vast, sparkling repertoire they would be pleased to offer four evenings of delightful entertainment, representing the best of the international stage. The first evening, *Julius Caesar;* the second evening, *Love's Labour's Lost;* the third evening, *Macbeth;* and the closing evening, for a grand and never-to-be-forgotten finale, *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

Come one, come all!

Karl Dobbs read the closing title a second time. "Did Shakespeare write that?"

Bloch lost his temper, and even Bonner glanced around to see if the older man was joking.

Later, in midafternoon, they gathered for lunch at one of the many cook tents dotting the swollen town. This tent was pitched in an open lot next to a blacksmith shop and was manned by two elderly Chinese attendants, backed by an Indian woman washing dishes. The two cooks reminded Steward of the girl he had left waiting in the chamber. She would still be waiting several hours from now when he returned, but he wondered if she would wait for *him* any more?

Despite misgivings—for these primitive places had a fearfully high disease and mortality rate—the crew had been given the choice of eating at one of the tents or going hungry. It had been impossible to get into the hotel dining room for a meal. But the food was not as bad as they had expected, and the considerate hosts insisted upon serving a shot of whiskey with each plate. Perhaps it was a local custom. The whiskey was a raw, powerful liquor, and perhaps that was the custom, too.

"Any questions?" Benjamin Steward asked.

"Yes, dad." Bonner held his shot glass up to the sunlight. "Why don't they make it like this at home?"

"The censors," Dobbs informed him sourly.

"*Firewater.* Gad!"

"Questions?" Steward asked once more.

There were none.

"All copesetic, then. Shoot for the crown." He lowered his voice. "Check your pockets; make sure the spool is in place and ready to operate."

Bonner regarded him curiously. "How come you're harping on that subject, how come?"

"What happens to the Character who loses his?" Steward countered.

Bonner drew a fast, snaky finger across his throat.

"You guessed it. Now check them—we're on the

ball." He thought a moment. "I never did find out what that meant."

"And remember our motto," Bonner said lightly. "Sift like hell and devil take the hindermost. Don't let dear old Whittle down." He studied the empty shot glass. "Onward, for the glory of T-R and the satisfaction of the client. What does our client want with an old speech, anyway?"

"One more treasure to tuck away in a dusty museum," Bloch answered. "Come, let us seek out some desolate shade, and there weep our sad bosoms empty."

9

LINCOLN SPOKE HERE

THE CHARACTER riveted his gaze on Abraham Lincoln's mouth, on the powerful and persuasive lips.

He was enthralled, and all but lost in the spell.

The evening's program had flowed along smoothly, all according to schedule and thus far without a hitch. He had it all on the spool of wire.

An elderly, frail and pompous gentleman named John Palmer had opened the convention. Palmer identified himself and welcomed all the delegates present, whatever their political affiliations; he called the gathering by its proper name, the Anti-Nebraska State Convention, and reminded the assembly that these were perilous times, therefore blah, blah, blah. After several minutes of blathering, Palmer got around to introducing the notables present and then read the brief agenda. He closed by exhorting his listeners to do their sacred duty to their country, to banish sin and wickedness.

The perfunctory applause which followed was done more in relief at his going than in approbation.

A tall, ruddy and wind-burned man who identified himself as an appointed delegate from Macon County gained the floor and asked for a statement from Mr. Lincoln. The presiding officer ruled him out of order. The delegate sat down, amid a handful of boos for the chairman's ruling.

The second speaker was a David Davis, who

suggested a coalition of the several political faiths into one; he pointed out that men of at least five individual political faiths were present in the convention and that except in the matter of slavery, those men pulled in five individual ways. He spoke at length on the future of the nation, on the many territories other than Nebraska which one day would seek admittance to the Union, and on the need for one individual political party to lead those territories and that nation to greatness.

Davis proposed an amalgamation of all those present, plus any others who felt as strongly as they did, into the new and growing movement known chiefly in the Eastern states as the Republican Party. He proposed the founding of the Republican Party of Illinois, here and now. And as the standard bearer of that great new party, he proposed the nomination of the Honorable William H. Bissell as Governor.

Reaction was mixed. The number of delegates who were willing to bolt their respective parties and become Republicans were decidedly in the minority.

From the rear of the auditorium someone sent up a cry for Lincoln. The demand was taken up by two or three other voices, but in vain. The chairman rapped for order.

He solemnly recognized and introduced for the second time that evening the Honorable William Herndon, Mayor of Springfield. The recognition was greeted with wild applause.

Mr. Herndon wished, with modesty and yet with brimming enthusiasm, to second the motion for the nomination of the good Mr. Bissell. Whereupon he launched into a long lusty, gusty speech in which praise for the nominee and laudation for the great state of Illinois became somewhat confused and hopelessly intertwined. At times his listeners found it difficult to judge who or which he was praising at

the moment. Herndon possessed one weakness. He cultivated a forceful if unusual syntax; he was a man who loved words and who loved to listen to his vocal chords pronounce them. That he was a colorful speaker there was little doubt; a speaker capable of mesmerizing his audience and himself. Herndon was eloquent, bombastic, telling, dynamic and sonorous. His vocabulary was unbounded.

William Bissell was nominated for the governorship.

Riding the enthusiastic bandwagon, the adherents of James Miller quickly boomed his nomination to the post of State Treasurer, and won. A sprinkling of nominations for other offices followed suit.

Again a plea was made for a united, unanimous party, under the Republican flag, and this time it almost carried. After the loquacious Herndon, a change of mood was becoming evident.

The Character checked the operation of his pocket recorder and waited. He stole glances at the target.

Other speakers stepped to the lectern, had their say and vanished again into the restless sea of faces. The speakers expounded on a variety of causes and subjects dear to their hearts and to the voters at home. Benjamin Steward could scarcely remember their names, but he listened to what they were saying because he was enjoying himself and because this was ancient history in the making. The history would not affect him but it would change the lives of untold millions of the world's population, and *that* interested him.

Some of his colleagues viewed the field trips with a detachment verging on boredom; they tended to regard ancient peoples as dead and buried even when standing in their presence—as if they were witnessing a carefully rehearsed reconstruction rather than the personage or the event. He was never

able to see history and historical people in so distant a manner, nor did he want to. The men around him were living, breathing entities—as fully alive as himself. That they were born and died seven hundred years before his own existence prejudiced him not at all. They were living *now* and he was among them.

He always felt stimulated in the presence of the ancients: man or woman, famous or infamous, they excited him and he was pleased to be living among them for however brief a span. He had known a small pleasure in helping to establish Marcus Antonius's exact birthdate; had, with precise and loving care, stolen into the studio of Correggio to photograph certain of his paintings; and had, without understanding a word, recorded the sonorous voice of Sophocles reading aloud from his own dramas. To some of his colleagues it was only grist for the mill; to him, it was spirited adventure.

Again the urgent cry, "We want Lincoln!" resounded in the hall, and again the presiding officer put it down, but with difficulty.

In the comparative hush, the chairman introduced Owen Lovejoy.

Steward muttered, "Hot damn!" under his breath and glanced at Dobbs. Dobbs was slipping a hand into his coat pocket, preparing to activate the recorder. He was too good a field man to miss a cue.

Steward craned his neck to examine the crowd. He could not see Bloch. Doc Bonner nodded at him from a position near the door and patted his pocket in signal.

Owen Lovejoy exploded like a skyrocket.

When he spoke he yelled, screamed, cried out in mock agony, twisted his face into nightmarish grimaces, beat on the lectern with two clenched fists, raised his hands to heaven to call on his God, and in general made an emotional spectacle of himself.

Lovejoy was a master rabble-rouser and the delegates swallowed every fiery word of it.

The undersized but loudmouthed man berated the slavery-loving devils, the Negro killers, the inhuman landowners of the greedy South, the sinful masters who toyed with the bodies of helpless female slaves, the insufferable cotton monarchs, the foul ships' masters who accumulated fortunes by running in black men found in Africa, the scabby whites who would extend this unspeakable crime into the pure Northern states, the heartless scoundrels who were ripping open the bloody seams of Kansas and Missouri, and finally, the filthy sympathizers of a wicked cause who had pillaged a newspaper plant and murdered his decent, God-fearing brother Elijah in cold blood.

Lovejoy cried and cajoled for more than thirty minutes, riding roughshod over common logic, ignoring all qualifying principles and circumstances, and confusing cause and effect with deliberate abandon.

When he was done, the adolescent and impressionable segments of the audience—apparently about ninety percent—were howling for blood, rich red Southern blood. A cotton monarch sufficiently unwise to enter the hall at that moment would be hung from a rafter before he could shout Dred Scott.

A tumult broke out even before Lovejoy had ended, a noisy, thumping disturbance which would not be hushed. The cry for Lincoln became universal as hundreds took up his name. Chairman Palmer dropped the gavel and spread his hands helplessly, looking to Lincoln for assistance.

Those men nearest the tall, gaunt figure were already pushing him forward. Lincoln's face was solemn.

The silence, when he began to speak, was com-

parable to the thick silence of a long forgotten tomb.

Steward found himself enthralled.

Abraham Lincoln's eyes and spellbinding lips were alive in an otherwise worn and homely face. The eyes were feverish reflections of an inner turmoil, an immense unrest; and the mouth was not a part of his mundane body but instead a detached, verbal reproducer of some mighty battle being fought in a corner of his mind. Lincoln did not speak with the brilliant, rangy syntax of Herndon, nor did he rely on the rabble-rousing tactics of Lovejoy. His style, manner and delivery were indisputably his own; his words and thoughts were simple ones, forcefully delivered.

Watching, listening and recording, Steward could not decide if Lincoln was caught up in the widespread Lovejoy hysteria, or was subtly using it to his own ends. Whatever the truth, the speaker was magnificent. He held his audience in the proverbial hollow.

Again and again, as he listened, Steward recalled the words Herndon would later write.

"Full of fire and energy and force; it was logic; it was pathos; it was enthusiasm; it was justice, equity, truth and right, the good set ablaze by the divine fires of a soul maddened by the wrong; it was hard, heavy, knotty, gnarled, edged and heated, backed with wrath."

It was all of that to Herndon and this assembly. (He stole a glance at Herndon, to find the man had put down his writing implements.)

But from his relatively alien viewpoint, subjected to seven centuries interjacence, Steward wasn't too sure of the logic. He was too far removed from this turbulent age to accept the proffered logic blindly. The basic reasoning was understandable but

the sometimes-wild hypothesis was open to question. These people did not think to question it because they were caught up in it, they were living with it and hence were not cognizant of the blind spots, but Steward was forced to reserve judgment. And in the light of another day he could question the justice. He was much too familiar with the peculiar justice of a number of peculiar worlds to accept any *one* as pure justice.

There was the lopsided justice of his own age, for example. Not for nothing did his government keep an eye on the political beliefs of the wandering Characters. Not without cause did Whittle secretly fret over the question of rebels on his payroll.

But to Herndon and the hushed humanity packed into the hall, this magic evening was everything it would later be described as being. This night, in truth, Mr. Lincoln was taller than his normal six and four—he was that inspired, stimulated seven feet or more.

Musingly, Steward let his gaze roam the hall. The phrase *captive audience* came to mind.

He had managed a front row seat by coming early and using his elbows. Lincoln was standing not three yards distant and swaying with the cadence of his nasal voice, standing very near the spot where the workman's hammer had been lying. Dobbs was seated in the second row and several chairs away, as thoroughly engrossed as the others around him. Bloch had not been located.

Swiftly now, Benjamin Steward swept his eyes over the assemblage, studying them, weighing their tensed expectancy, watching the reactions to what they were hearing. Bonner briefly met his eyes and shrugged. He had correctly guessed the object of the search, but did not know where Bloch was.

The speaker slapped a great fist into an open palm

to emphasize a point, and the sudden impact of flesh on flesh was like a gunshot in the rapt silence.

Startled, Steward swung his attention around.

He found Lincoln's eyes locked with his.

Steward nodded gravely and sought to appear in agreement with whatever had been said, but inwardly he was alarmed. A phrase or two, or perhaps a complete sentence slipped by unheard as he struggled to remain calm and not fall from character. Very casually, as though to scratch the skin about his collar, he lifted his hand to his neck to determine if the microphone had somehow slipped from concealment. It had not. The tiny recorder rested in his pocket, noiselessly absorbing the speech.

Steward decided that his movement, his turning to scan the audience had caught Lincoln's attention, and that it was only a momentary diversion. He held himself rigid, striving to imitate the attitudes and expressions of men on either side of him.

After an apprehensive moment of eternity, Lincoln's stare lifted to another part of the room and the smooth flow of elocution continued without break.

Steward relaxed, but did not again risk turning around. He was beginning to worry about Bobby Bloch.

Fire, energy and brimstone, the address rolled on. Hard, heavy, gnarled and knotty, it touched every man and woman in the room. Owen Lovejoy, the master spieler, sat entranced. Karl Dobbs, the professional auditor, was engrossed.

An hour and thirty minutes after he had begun speaking, Abraham Lincoln mopped his face with a handkerchief and thanked the presiding officer for his courtesy. Steward peeked at his watch and was astounded at the swift passage of time.

The crowd sprang to their feet and found voice. The din was deafening and seemingly unending.

The custodian had adequate reason to be concerned for the flooring—he should also have given some thought to the walls. They reverberated. The delegates cheered and sang, banged chairs on the floor in disorderly tattoo, and stomped their feet the better to express overwhelming enthusiasm. Dred Scott's owner, had he been present, would have been speedily strung up alongside the poor cotton monarch.

Steward knew a little shock when he glanced again at Dobbs and found that Character briskly applauding, caught up in the general spell. It was so unlike Dobbs.

Relying on a certain security in the midst of noisy confusion, Steward looked once more toward the door and discovered Bonner in the act of slipping out. Good man. Whatever else might be said in the brief remainder of the evening, Bonner had the target speech and was getting his wire to safety.

He, too, fidgeted impatiently and wished to be away, but there was no leaving yet. The audience was wildly excited and would not go. Steward knew what they did not; none of them would vacate the hall until a Judge Cook made still another speech, calming them and offering them a verbal nightcap to the activities.

After a while the chairman was able to make himself heard. He had two announcements. One, that the Honorable Governor Reeder would speak later that evening on the courthouse square, and two, Judge Burton C. Cook, of Ottawa, now wished to offer the convention a few words.

Judge Cook was not capable of confining himself to a few words, and proceeded to prove it, but he

served his purpose at whatever expense to his ego. The delegates cooled and soon tired of his windy rhetoric (which included scores of political clichés Steward had already heard for hundreds of years in either direction) and made their preparations to vacate the hall. Many of them followed Bonner's example and slipped down the stairway.

The Character waited until the final syllable was uttered and the chairman rapped the closing gavel; waited until the political group on the stage began to break up. He shut off his recording device, fingered the spool of wire reassuringly and permitted the yammering, pushing crowd to move him toward the exit. On an impulse—or because someone was staring with a burning intensity at the back of his neck—he turned to favor Lincoln with a last fleeting scrutiny.

He had not imagined the burn on his neck.

Lincoln stood in a chattering circle of admirers, looking over their heads, looking warmly and curiously at *him.* Owen Lovejoy hovered at Lincoln's elbow, also staring at him. There was an equal curiosity but no warmth in Lovejoy's glare.

Steward was instantly flooded with the earlier and urgent sense of alarm. He wondered what could be wrong. Twice in the same evening—actually twice in the same hour—he had drawn the target's attention to himself, and that was not the wisest thing to do. It just wasn't cricket. Was this the beginning of the misfortune? He had aroused curiosity about himself, and perhaps animosity as well.

Fighting panic, he diligently maintained character.

Steward broke the silent exchange of cross-observation by smiling thinly, nodding, and deliberately turning away. Thereafter he moved toward the door

as quickly as the crowd would allow and descended the stairway.

He was sweating.

Doc Bonner was awaiting him on the sidewalk. Steward revealed his surprise at finding him there.

"You should be jumping, man! Is anything wrong?"

"There's no hurry, and nothing wrong," Bonner replied. "Just wanted to get out of that crowd. It's cooler down here."

"The wire okay? Have you seen that Shakespearean ham?"

"Yes, it's okay, and no, I haven't seen him. Not for hours, come to think of it. He hasn't come down past me—but he could still be milling around up there."

"We'll wait."

"Hey, some speech, wasn't it? *That* man was powerfully mad at somebody."

"That makes two of us."

Bonner was suddenly solemn. "I think he's goofed, Stew. One time too many."

"We'll wait and see."

They lingered at the mouth of the wide stairway, searching the faces of the delegates and visitors as they erupted from the auditorium. A few hundred people and several minutes had streamed by when Karl Dobbs appeared.

Bonner said hastily, "We've lost Bloch—or he's lost us."

"Have you heard Disraeli?" Dobbs demanded.

Bonner blinked. "No. But I've heard a coyote howl and a lion cough. And once upon a time I listened as a bomb exploded. Have *you* heard Disraeli?"

"This man is another Disraeli," Dobbs declared. "A rough and unsophisticated Disraeli; his grammar

is nothing and his syntax is suspect, but. . . . *You* heard him upstairs; you know his power. He's a master of the spoken word. I think he knows his destination, and he's driving hard for it."

"Evelyn said something about his destination."

"I'm aware . . ." Dobbs paused for a double take. "What about Bloch?"

"Among the missing. Vamoosed. Over the hill."

"Hell and damnation!"

"Oh, quite."

"Drunk again?"

"Very possible; I'm told it is a weakness of his. He could be strutting about in some saloon, spouting Shakespeare at the top of his lungs. Another weakness."

Dobbs sighed his supreme disgust. "And you try to do a favor for the man!" He studied Steward for a moment and said, "I'll go back up there and look around." When the crew leader did not answer, Dobbs turned away, slipped around a group of men on the stairs and went up.

Benjamin Steward unexpectedly stiffened and Bonner whirled around seeking the threat.

The group of men descending the staircase had stopped on the wooden sidewalk, while two of their number looked—and one smiled—at Steward. The man towered over his companions, as he had done on the stage, and now he was wearing a tall black hat which exaggerated his height.

"Good evening, sir," the man said in greeting.

"Evening, Mr. Lincoln."

Steward felt ice in his veins. This was pushing his luck too far.

"I admit to some curiosity about you, sir. I would like to know your name and shake your hand."

"Steward, Benjamin Steward." And the Character

put out his hand awkwardly. "I didn't mean to be rude, Mr. Lincoln."

"Pshaw, I didn't consider it rudeness, Mr. Steward. I believe you did our splendid company a favor." He grinned with high humor and clasped Steward's hand in a powerful grip. "I fear I was talking too much, and you reminded me of that."

Steward squirmed with embarrassment.

"I'm right sorry to have made that impression, Mr. Lincoln. In truth, I was interested in another thing."

Owen Lovejoy was instantly alert.

"Yes?" Lincoln prompted.

"I reckon that speech was a real stem-winder. It held me like a magnet." Steward spoke guardedly, seeking a quick but polite end to the conversation. "And when it occurred to me what was happening—what you were doing to *me*—I turned around to study the others. I wanted to see if they felt the same thing, if they were affected in the same way. They were."

"That is a most pleasing compliment."

"A sincere one, Mr. Lincoln. I'm something of a judge of men, and you could charm an Indian in a medicine show."

Lincoln laughed pleasantly.

Lovejoy seized the opening. "You are one of our distinguished visitors, Mr. Steward? Your accent eludes me. From back East, I'll wager."

"And *win* the wager, Mr. Lovejoy. Cleveland."

"Cleveland? A fine city. But did you come all the way out here just to witness our meeting?"

"Yes."

"Humph. Quite flattering."

"I am a journalist, Mr. Lovejoy, And the people of Cleveland are keenly interested in the West. Interested in everything happening west of Cleveland.

I was asked to observe, to study, and to transmit my findings to my employer. Looking, and thinking, is my stock in trade."

"And are you also interested in politics, sir?"

"I have been, without much success."

"Humph."

Lincoln interrupted to ask, "Will you be in town a spell, Mr. Steward?"

"A short time, I expect," Steward said noncommittally. "My plans aren't complete."

"Well, now, we won't hold up your supper. But if you will be in town over the next day or so, Mr. Steward, I'd be happy to sit down and talk with you. I'd like to repay that favor. I expect you will find me around the courthouse, or in David's law office. Most days, anyway."

"Thank you, Mr. Lincoln. My pleasure."

Lincoln nodded amiably and the group moved away.

When they were a safe distance out of earshot, Bonner turned on Steward teasingly.

"For shame—you've changed history. Whittle will be furious."

"Whittle can take a flying jump at a lame—— How did I change history?"

"Well, you cut Lincoln off short with your twisting and squirming—studying the masses. I was watching you. He might have talked half an hour longer, maybe." Bonner squinted after the retreating figures. "No telling what else he would have said. A thousand things can happen in thirty minutes."

"And nothing can happen," Steward retorted. "I think we'd better skedaddle. I don't want to meet *him* again."

"Lovejoy is the man you don't want to meet again. You riled that man. You know what?" Bonner continued musingly. "I met Tamburlaine once. In 1390

or thereabouts. He wasn't pleased to see me—he thought I was somebody's tax collector."

They turned as Dobbs appeared on the stairs, alone.

"No," he said in answer to their unasked questions. "And he wasn't sleeping in the boojum, either. There aren't any up there."

Bonner craned his neck. "Where do you suppose they keep them? Out back?"

Steward continued to eye Dobbs.

"No," Dobbs said again. Bonner accepted the second reply as an answer to *his* question, but Steward had been concerned about the length of recording wire which would be found in the trash tomorrow. Dobbs had not seen the wire in the auditorium.

Steward walked away from the hall. His depleted crew followed him.

10

MISSING

BENJAMIN STEWARD led them on a circuitous route through the noisy, brawling town, well away from the courthouse square and the crowd already forming there. Dusk was falling, and with it the air was becoming appreciably cooler. Townspeople were beginning to appear in the streets with fiery torches, lending an eerie crimson glow to the deeper hues of the fading sun. The convention was entering its final stages.

Gaining the wide, dusty street leading to the water tower and the tavern, Steward turned his steps toward the rendezvous. He plodded along with drooping spirits, feeling the weight of Sam Wendy's ghost riding his shoulder.

"What in hell got into the man?" Dobbs complained. "We were doing all right."

"Whiskey," Doc Bonner said. "The whiskey those Chinamen served with the lunch this afternoon. Pure corn lightning!" He licked his lips in memory of the powerful drink. "I guess we should have left Bloch at home. Why did you pick him, Stew? There are plenty of other guys."

Dobbs growled, "We can do without that."

"Oh, never mind," Steward said patiently. He walked with his head down and his thumbs hanging in his pockets. "I pulled Bloch for the same reasons the two of you agreed to carry him. Bobby didn't

know it, but this was his last chance—the very last chance."

"Inside talk?" Dobbs asked quickly.

"Evelyn tipped me a couple of weeks ago," Steward confirmed. "Bobby was on the skids. The executive office had soured on him because of that Egyptian thing. Bobby horsed around and nearly lost them money—they could never forgive that. Cardinal sin. His fondness for liquor only made matters worse. Evelyn worried about *that* when I first pulled him."

"Well, there's his brother."

"Yes, there's his brother. And where is he now? You can bet that the brother's detention in a labor camp has been noted on Bobby's record. The taint spills over. Those jokers in the office believe heredity works in all ways and all directions. The brother is a slave laborer, ergo, Bobby should be—or will be—a slave laborer. I pulled him because I like him, and wanted to help him. The fact that he belongs to the guild is secondary."

"I'm sorry, Stew," Doc Bonner apologized. "I lack patience. I should have kept my big mouth shut."

"Never mind. We'll carry Bobby, and that's that."

Karl Dobbs steered the conversation into a new channel, working obliquely toward a scheme in the back of his mind.

"I am minded of my first shoot," he said ruminatively. "Away back when. And there never was a greener hand put into the field. A bumbling puppy. But I learned fast; that first shoot was an education.

"It was a double-pronged assignment, a banker's vacation and cost was no object. Our client was the Emperor's Museum and the government was paying the bill. Do you remember Solly Blaisdell? Solly was our new crew leader. There were four or five men in the crew because of the sheer size and scope

of the job, but like I said, cost is no object when the taxpayers must foot the bill.

"Our target was war chariots; light, two-wheeled battle chariots. The Emperor, or someone in the Museum, wanted to know their point of origin and the originator. We made the first jump into a country the ancients called Sumer, better than five thousand years back. There we found a king named Gilgamesh who had equipped his troops with chariots, but they weren't what we were seeking. This Gilgamesh used four-wheel carts, or abbreviated wagons, for his supply train.

"So we began jumping forward in easy stages, looking for the real target.

"We found them in a land called Hatti, or Hittui, and that is where my education began. The Hittites had the chariots; clean, fast and maneuverable spoked-wheel jobs that were real beauties. What's more, they used them to distinct advantage. We never found out who actually originated the idea, who reduced the four wheels to two and placed armed men in them, but the Hittites were the people who brought them to perfection. Because of the chariots they were a major power in the ancient world, and for a time they took on and whipped all comers. No kingdom's infantry could or would stand up to them."

Dobbs peered from the corners of his eyes to see if Steward was paying close attention.

"These Hittites had something else which surprised me, something that contributed to my political awareness. They practiced a form of government almost identical to our own. There were several city-states scattered over the countryside, and a federal power binding them all together. Strong kings brought more city-states into the fold, and weak kings lost them. And also like our present govern-

ment, the king ruled in collaboration with a council of nobles. A seesaw affair. A strong king bossed the council and was absolute ruler of the federal domain, whereas a weak king was bossed by the council and functioned only as a figurehead.

"That was when I first discovered that our Emperor, and his Senate, was not a brand-new product of the Second Revolution; not a wonderfully democratic form of government worth the terrible cost."

Dobbs waggled an admonishing finger. "Mind you, the schoolbooks have never claimed we thought of it first, but neither do they teach that it was practiced before, many times before. They merely give youngsters the idea that it is a priceless jewel, won with the spilled blood of their grandfathers, and drop the matter."

"So it turns out to be nothing more than a stale idea borrowed from prehistoric kings?" Steward mused

Dobbs pursed his lips judiciously. "I will admit the concept has been refined since then. We haven't had an assassination lately."

Steward continued plodding along the street. "I always figured the Senate held the whip hand."

"Maybe—maybe not," Dobbs said thoughtfully. "A moot point, at best. Keep a cynical eye on the election campaigns. A revelation. When the Senators are stumping the country for votes they rattle the drums and shoot off their mouths like zealous firebrands, but after election they are as docile as lambs. I suspect they have a working agreement with the Emperor. Anything goes during a campaign; they may berate him with impunity, attack his policies and question his sanity. But after re-election they crawl back to kiss his boots and knuckle under for another six years. Vote-getting hogwash. They don't really mean what they say, but they have to shout

something to prove they are alive and want the votes. I suspect the Emperor understands that, and closes his ears."

"*Oderint dum metuant,*" Steward quoted.

"Meaning what?"

"Let them hate, as long as they fear."

"Something like that, yes." Dobbs pulled at his itchy underwear. "Well—the Hittites. I am not done with them and their battle chariots. The shoot continued, digging in for a protracted study of Hatti, and my education increased. Point of the matter is, I next discovered the technique of the big lie."

"I sort of wondered what you were getting at," Steward admitted.

"So now you know. Misdirection and falsification. The really gigantic lie. This Hittite king, Muwatallis by name, was handed the dirty end of the stick by an old master of the big lie. And for about three thousand years history cheated Muwatallis out of his rightful reward. It was eventually righted, of course, but by that time the king couldn't care less. He had been dead so long even his bones were nothing.

"Muwatallis awoke one morning to hear the news that an enemy was striking for his throat. The Hittites had several enemies, and one or another neighboring kingdom was forever rattling the war drums, but this one was something big, and special. This one was a sockdolager.

"This enemy, an Egyptian king named Ramses something—Ramses Two, I think—was marching hell for leather up the coast with twenty thousand men, determined to wipe the Hittites off the map. And he stood a pretty good chance of doing just that, for Ramses had a fearsome reputation as a war lord; he had subdued every border tribe and small nation around him, as well as whipping his own country into

line. A man can work up a pretty bloody reputation by knocking over the weaker countries, and Ramses knocked them all.

"Well, sir, old Muwatallis wasn't much in sympathy with the idea of being wiped off, but he must have been frightened by the size and the thunder of the opposition. I admire him—he decided to fight.

"Our crew caught that battle, sight and sound. Stew, it was one of the bloodiest messes I've ever witnessed. Our films were never released to the public. I think the Emperor keeps them under lock and key; they reveal too well what happens when the underdog is threatened with his life.

"The ancients called it the Battle of Kadesh, and their books claim it was the first battle of world-historic importance. I'm no judge of that. But I will say that it shook the little world of four thousand years ago, and changed history for a long time afterward.

"This Ramses was a vain, arrogant man who figured he knew it all. He thought of himself as a military genius without equal. He'd never been licked, and perhaps he believed he never could be. But he made a frightful mistake.

"As he approached Kadesh, he split his twenty thousand men into four divisions and permitted them to become separated. That was his undoing. Two of the divisions crossed the river outside Kadesh and pushed northward to catch Muwatallis. The military genius thought the Hittite army was in full retreat. His other two divisions poked along south of the river, expecting to arrive in time to help pick up the booty.

"Now, Solly Blaisdell was no military genius, but he saw what was going to happen. And as green as I was, I guessed at it. Solly stationed the cameras here, and there, picking sites of advantage. He told

us what to watch for. And that jackass Ramses walked right into the bear's mouth. Muwatallis wasn't retreating, he was hiding in the forest watching Ramses make a fool of himself.

"Muwatallis let the first division cross the river and move about six miles up the coast. Then he fell on the second division and hacked it to bloody bits. The Egyptians had chariots, but they weren't the fast, deadly chariots of the Hittites. The Egyptians had but one warrior in each chariot, whereas the Hittites had two. And finally, the Egyptians were working a strange territory, whereas the Hittites were more or less at home. Muwatallis wiped out that second division in a matter of hours, and then wheeled to tackle the first.

"Ramses was swaggering along at the head of that first division, and the swagger very nearly cost him his life. He discovered what was happening to him when the survivors of the second came running pell-mell, in utter rout. The defeat was so complete, so great, and the confusion so widespread, that the fleeing survivors spread panic and disorganization among the first division. Wily old Muwatallis and his racing chariots were right behind the refugees. He caught that division with its britches down, and almost repeated the earlier debacle."

Dobbs stole a glance at his pocket watch. Time was running out. The preamble to his scheme was nearly completed.

"Well, to make it short, Ramses lost the day. He lost the battle, he lost maybe half of his men, and he lost the dream of bringing Hatti into the Egyptian empire. He did get away with his life—and he should have been thankful for that. He turned tail and ran for home. Thoroughly licked. But on the way home he concocted the big lie.

"The way he figured it, it just wouldn't do for

word to get around that the great Ramses had been beaten by an upstart king from the border regions. People would get the wrong idea. Prestige would fall away, and Ramses loved prestige. So he ordered all his scribes and poets to spread the word that he had *won* the battle. Completely and gloriously. He ordered that the news of his victory be spread throughout the land, that it be hacked onto monuments, written on clay tablets, and plastered on the walls. He wanted the history of that day wholly reversed, proving he was the winner and Muwatallis the beastly loser. It was done. Thoroughly and effectually."

"'Sdeath—a complete turnabout?"

"So complete and absolute that for three thousand years afterward the archeologists believed Ramses had won the battle of Kadesh. Firmly entrenched history.

"There's more. Muwatallis had concluded a peace treaty with Ramses, establishing the borders and putting the fellow back in his place, but the Egyptian version of that treaty—the version released to the public—subtly twisted everything to maintain prestige. The Egyptian version claimed the beaten Hittite king had come crawling on his knees for mercy, begging peace between the nations. And Ramses, the benign and peace-loving fellow, granted it. Henceforth he would let the Hittites alone.

"Several years later another king of Hatti pulled the noose tighter by marrying off his daughter to Ramses. The Hittite girl was to keep Ramses on the straight and narrow path, lest he forget his drubbing and begin making warlike moves. But, carrying on with the big lie, Ramses twisted the real truth of the marriage. He sent out word that the abject Hittite king, living in wretchedness and fear since the defeat of many years before, had given his daughter

to Egypt as a humble token of his love and respect for the mighty conqueror.

"And once more Ramses the bighearted accepted the girl as his ever-loving wife. He could easily afford these little courtesies as a sop to a beaten people.

"So that was the way it went for three millenniums. The vanquished was hailed as the victor, the falsehood was accepted as the gospel. Every artifact turned up by the archeologists attested it. Ramses the liar won, while Muwatallis the silent lost. And when the archeologists finally got around to digging up the real truth a long time later, none of the principals got excited. They were all dead."

"A frigid and calculating lie," Steward observed.

"The big lie worked, only too well."

"What did the Hittites think about it?"

"*Quien sabe?* What they thought is of little or no consequence. They didn't correct the matter, and the lie stood. As a nation, they were done in another hundred years or so. Hatti vanished. But where is Egypt today?"

"'Sdeath, the last time I looked it covered all of North Africa."

Dobbs nodded his agreement. "Ramses is still winning the battle of Kadesh."

"What purpose, this, sire?" Bonner wanted to know. "A most pleasant way to spend a long walk, I admit. But why?"

Dobbs looked at him. "File it away," he said with dry sarcasm. "And remember it some day when you have need of a big lie."

Bonner stared at the elderly man for long moments of vexation, and then shrugged it away.

Dobbs was content to drop the matter there. He felt certain he had scored his point, and was somewhat proud of the fancy spadework.

The trio continued along the dusty town street, seemingly the only men in the county seat who were moving in the wrong direction; traffic flowed past them toward the square.

Bloch was not waiting for them at the hitching rail and careful inquiries inside the tavern revealed that no one answering to his description had been there in recent hours. The phrasing of the answer aroused faint hope that he might have been seen there earlier, but the bartender dashed that hope by pleading a faulty memory and vast numbers of strangers wandering through his door. The man was quite certain he had not hosted a Shakespearean actor indulging in free performances.

The Characters regrouped outside the saloon and thought to examine the rail itself. There was nothing to indicate that Bloch had tarried there.

"'Sdeath!"

"He's off on a toot," Bonner said fretfully. "Let's admit it."

"Admitted," Dobbs replied wearily. "Now drop it."

They looked to Steward for a decision.

He was in charge for the duration of the shoot; the responsibility for the success or failure of the project and the welfare of the crew rested on him. Until they returned to the chamber and were dismissed, his word was the law.

Benjamin Steward scanned the dusky prairie. The sun had dropped while they strode the long dirt street, and now the night was poorly illuminated by a waning moon. A few early stars were out and a reddish planet burned low on the eastern horizon.

Nothing moved on that vast expanse of grassland—nothing but the dancing image of another Character, lost in another land and another time. The image was a haunting, pursuing wraith.

Steward closed his eyes to shut it out.

"Bonner," he said heavily, "go home."

"Now, say——"

"Go home. Pass the glad tidings."

"I'd rather stay and help."

"There's no sense in the three of us searching the town. We'd end up hunting for each other. Go home."

Helplessly, Bonner looked at Dobbs for aid.

Dobbs said tentatively, "Stew . . . ?"

"What?"

"We'd better match stories before he goes."

Steward snapped his fingers with annoyance. "That slipped my mind." He squinted worriedly at the moon. The wraith was there in ghostly silhouette.

"It goes like this," he continued after a moment's thought: "The four of us caught the speech, of course. Bloch was standing at the rear of the hall. Afterwards, he got separated from us in the crush, and failed to check in at the rendezvous. We aren't worried about him—yet—but you are going in with our three wires to protect the job. Dobbs and I will wait until midnight, if necessary. And that's about all you should know."

"That's all I know. What about Bloch's wire?"

"We'll fake one for him. Whittle doesn't know I brought along a blank. That'll keep Bobby clear."

Steward removed the extra spool of recording wire from his pocket. He slipped his own completed spool from the machine and passed it over to Bonner, then placed the empty spool in the mechanism.

"We'll use your version, Doc. Muffle it a bit. Bobby's recording shouldn't sound too good—it would make certain people suspicious."

"Hold it!" Dobbs said hurriedly, looking over his shoulder. "Not here. Some drunk might come running

out to see what's going on." He waved toward the empty prairie. "Move out."

"Good idea."

They trooped out to beyond earshot of the tavern and readied the machines. The prairie at night was quiet and pleasantly aromatic. Bonner set his recorder to play back and stood near the crew chief, while the miniature microphone concealed in Benjamin Steward's shirt collar picked up the lengthy address. They waited a long, tiring, and towards the end irksome, ninety minutes, transcribing the speech from one spool to another. Once again Lincoln's nasal voice mouthed the fiery words and ringing phrases, denouncing the abomination of human slavery, and once again his captured audience responded with thunder and wild enthusiasm to the oral magic. Lincoln's spell was slipping away from the three listening Characters. It may have been the mechanical limitation of the recorders, or it may have been hindsight, but they discovered the second rendition lacking in the splendor and freshness that marked the first, lacking in the delightful surprise caused by the turn of a word or phrase. It was a little less than inspiring, a step short of unqualified stimulation.

Bonner remembered to boost the volume at the end, when the occupants of the hall erupted in noisy acclamation. Bobby Bloch's supposed position at the rear of the room might have prevented a flawlessly clear recording, but his wire could not fail to be overwhelmed by what followed on every side.

The hour and a half of forced silence and inactivity was a strain on the nerves. Bonner snapped off his switch and let out an explosive breath.

"*That* comes out of Bloch's hide!" he promised grimly. "Let's don't do that again. There must be easier ways of making money."

Dobbs watched him pocket the three recorders and their contents. So much for the museum client.

Steward kept the faked spool. "I'll drive this one into his head, when I find him. In one ear and out the other." He waved toward the distant creek. "Now, git for home, Bruno."

But Dobbs had thought of something else.

"Stew . . ."

"What?"

"I would suggest that you walk out to the bullet with Doc. Write home, and ask them if Bobby came in alone. There's no telling where that fool is—he may have gone home—and you can't afford to overlook anything."

" 'Sdeath—that makes some sense. Okay."

"I'll wait for you here."

"*Right here,* Dobbs."

"Fixed."

Irritably: "*Don't* go chasing into town after him. And that's an order."

Dobbs remained unruffled. "I said I would wait here, Stew."

Steward blinked, then said quietly, "Sorry, Karl."

"Pay it no mind. Now, move out."

Steward turned without a further word and struck off across the night-shrouded prairie. The young May grass was soft and springy underfoot.

Bonner strode along beside him, keeping silent. He guessed at the turmoil in the crew leader's mind, but knew better than to comment on it. He did not envy Steward at this moment. Somehow, in some way, Steward had to locate Bloch in that swollen, boisterous town and get him home as soon as possible. He had to leap for the chamber himself before the time limit expired, else the deadline would be literally deadly. If Steward returned late, with Bloch, the reception would be frosty but it could be patched

over; if he failed that and returned shorthanded, the reception would be something more than frosty.

The air had taken on a decided chill, and Bonner drew his coat closer about him.

They reached the solitary oak tree standing guard over the creek and the projectile.

Wordlessly, Steward picked his way down the bank and reached into the machine for the chronograph key.

Query he tapped out in his slow fashion.

After a pause the key answered him with the precise and rapid sending of a practiced engineer. The pause warned him that Whittle was now standing by.

Ready.

Steward decided against asking for Bloch by name.

Anyone come home?

Who is missing? shot back at him.

"You jackass!"

Angrily, he tapped: *repeat query.*

The answer came grudgingly.

No one home. Who is missing?

Judge Crater.

Steward closed the key and pushed it away from him. He climbed the bank slowly and sat down. Bonner was seated on the grassy lip, dangling his legs over the side. For an indefinable space of time they stared at the brilliant stars and listened to the sound of running water. Steward was briefly thankful the moon had set while they were dubbing the extra wire. The dismal ghost was more difficult to see.

"Didn't think he would be there."

"No," Bonner agreed.

"He could have fallen into the creek."

"No such luck."

"Whittle's suspicious. Did you read him up here?"

"I read him. To hell with Whittle."

"They'll jump you when you go in."

"I know. To hell with them, too."

"Stick with the story; don't let them catch you in a slip."

"I'll stick. Like glue."

"And watch out for Evelyn—she's a sharpie. She knows I was on this end; she knows my key. And she has already guessed at Bobby by now. Don't tell her anything, even if she coaxes you. She'll try to."

"I don't coax easily."

They endured another and shorter period of star-gazing. The red planet was riding higher in the heavens.

"You think we'll ever get up there?"

"You mean the stars? That's fantastic."

"I suppose so. You may as well go home, Doc."

"Reckon so. What are you going to do?"

"Comb that town, of course."

"No, Stew—I meant, what are you going to do if you have to come home without him?"

"I haven't thought about that. I'm very carefully not thinking about it. I've already got one black mark on my record, you know."

"No." Bonner revealed his surprise. "I didn't know."

Steward did not elaborate.

He said gently, "It's getting late, Doc."

Bonner shrugged with embarrassment. He began an abortive motion to shake hands and then thought the better of it. The gesture might bring bad luck, more bad luck. Morosely, he slid down the creek-bank and crawled into the waiting vehicle. He held the door open a moment longer to utter a warning.

"Don't forget to wind your watch, Stew."

The Character waved him on his way. "Good night, sweet prince."

The machine door closed. Within seconds the

gossamer twinkling had faded and Bonner was gone.

After some minutes the empty bullet returned to its cradle among the tree roots. Steward stared at it unhappily. He sighed and got to his feet.

Sam Wendy's nagging shade rode him back to town, perched like a hard knot between his shoulder blades.

11

QUEST FOR A NEEDLE

KARL DOBBS was seated on the dusty ground, leaning against one of the hitchrail's supporting posts. Dobbs did not find it necessary to ask what information Steward had learned from the chronograph key. The negative answer was evident in the crew leader's manner.

Steward slumped down beside him.

"Tired?" Dobbs asked.

"Some, yes." He patted his pocket. "Three wires are safely home. They won't be found in the trash tomorrow."

"You didn't say anything to Bonner?"

"No; I decided against it. He's not the gabby kind, but it might slip. Tomorrow, or next year, it might slip out."

"Thank you," the older Character said.

"'Sdeath—I had to tell somebody. It was nagging me. Lovejoy still nags me. We had a conversation while you were hunting for Bobby upstairs. Everything was calm and gentlemanly; it could well account for tomorrow morning's encounter, and no lasting harm done. I suppose *that* was all there was to it, but he gets under my skin."

"I didn't hear about that."

"There was no chance to tell you. You were busy spinning tall tales about Ramses and Muwatallis."

"I was spading a garden," Dobbs said airily.

"Then consider it spaded."

"Tell me about the honorable Mr. Lovejoy."

Steward repeated the details of the encounter on the boardwalk. Dobbs mulled it over, nodding.

"It appears to account for his belligerance. He is suspicious of your talents, or more properly, those talents he believed you displayed this evening. And when he finds you still on the scene, tomorrow morning, he will think you are anxious to horn into his territory. That man is riding a fearful hobbyhorse; I think he is unbalanced. He would plunge this country into war tomorrow, if he had the power. He distrusts you because you are an inquisitive stranger, and because you've made friends with his man."

"Something like that, I guess." Steward massaged his legs. " 'Sdeath, but I'm tired."

"I can go into town for you."

"You can't satisfy my conscience."

"No—only save you some legwork."

"I'll go in."

"It's your show, boss. How long shall I stay?"

"Midnight."

Dobbs was taken aback.

"Confound it, Stew! That's only a few hours away."

"No later than midnight," Steward repeated firmly. "I'll be out to check with you. If Bobby shows, hold him here."

"And if he doesn't?"

"You will follow Bonner home. I'll keep on with it."

"I wish I could overrule you."

"You can't."

"Don't push that tolerance limit, Stew."

"I'm pushing it," Steward answered wearily, "but I aim to stay on the safe side."

Dobbs hesitated in awkward indecision, and then voiced a thought neither of them seriously considered.

"You could abandon him."

The silence between them was so deep and so prolonged that Dobbs wondered if the other had heard him. He felt ashamed of the suggestion, and was already wishing he could recall his words.

The muted sounds of drunken revelry came from the nearby saloon, blending with the greater but more distant noise of the townspeople packed around the courthouse square.

Steward played with a handful of dust. His eyes were shut tight.

"Karl," he said at last, "did you know a Character named Samuel Windermeer? A Dutchman? They called him Sam Wendy, and sometimes Windy Sam."

"I've heard of him," Dobbs replied noncommittally. He fidgeted with discomfort, knowing what was to come.

"They called him Windy Sam because he was just the opposite—the most closemouthed man I ever knew. One or two words an hour was his standard operating procedure. And he was a first-class field hand—put that down in the book. The best. I'll never understand why they tabbed me for crew leader, over him."

Dobbs said nothing to interrupt. He had known the Character.

Steward opened his eyes and then his fingers, to watch the fistful of dust trickle away.

"Sam was a good friend—not a close friend, but a good one. We knocked around together, did some fishing in the Erie, and joined a ball club now and then. I liked to pull him on shoots. He was reliable, and more than competent. That was Sam Wendy when he was alive."

Dobbs silently nodded his agreement.

Steward continued tautly, "I had to abandon Sam Wendy in a Roman arena. It was the hardest

thing I've ever done. It was like throwing away my wife, or my child.

"We were filming one of those bloody Roman circuses, a show put on to entertain a couple of royal lovers named Antony and Cleopatra. This was a couple of years before their suicides. Sam was handling the slaughter in the arena, while I concentrated on the royal couple. Just the two of us—that's all the crew we had in those days. I still don't know what happened or how it happened. I can't explain it. But . . .

"Suddenly, I heard Sam scream, and I jumped.

"Two men had him on the arena floor, two of those big Roman warriors—or perhaps they were slave warriors from some other country, I don't know. They were armed and Sam was not. One of the warriors had thrown a net around his legs, trapping him, while the other was cutting him to pieces with an ax. Literally cutting him to pieces. And there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

"Sam Wendy died while I watched. And except for that scream, he died in the same manner he had lived—without a useless word." Steward spread his hands in resignation. "No—I won't abandon Bobby."

"It was a foolish suggestion, Stew. I apologize."

"A thing like that can happen to a man only once, because after that first time he will do anything to prevent its happening again. I would have exchanged places with Sam, if that were possible."

Dobbs shot him a probing, curious glance, but did not comment.

"Sam Wendy's death accomplished only one worthwhile goal—it resulted in the doubling of minimum crews. The guild had been agitating for that a long time. Sam's death and my total failure to deliver the goods cinched it. There was no hope of recovering Sam's equipment, of course; it was broken with

his body. And I lost mine while trying to do something for him. Somewhere between that bloodthirsty, amorous couple and the arena wall, I dropped my camera. I never found it. So I jumped for home without a crewman, without equipment, without pictures—a complete washout. The client probably blew his stack. The office certainly did!

"I believe those bastards in the office regretted the loss of the equipment and films more than they regretted Sam's death. They cried as if the expense money were coming out of their pockets, rather than the company treasury. They put one of those big black marks on my dossier, and placed me on probation—as if that mattered to me, after losing Sam.

"But, meanwhile, the guild applied the screws. I was named to the negotiating committee, and taken along to every meeting to serve as the horrible example. I remember sitting for hours in the conference rooms, talking in circles and being painfully polite. All except me—I couldn't be polite. The wound was still fresh. We demanded four men on any shoot entailing an element of risk or doubt. They held out for three. Well, you know that score—we won, and the client pays the bill. To hell with that. If we'd had a four-man crew that day in the arena, somebody would have brought home the bacon. It wouldn't have saved Sam's life, but we would have accomplished what we set out to do."

Steward lapsed into a moody silence, thinking of Evelyn Kung.

He had not yet solved the riddle of Evelyn. He could not understand why Evelyn had shared his company for so long, why she had passively consented to their dating and playing together. He would always marvel at the woman's gentle temperament and her complete lack of rancor. Sam Wendy's death had struck him a stunning blow—but the ef-

fect on his wife was infinitely greater. And yet Evelyn had never sought to inflict on him any degree or kind of revenge for her husband's death.

Had she?

Benjamin shuddered, perhaps from the brisk, cooling wind blowing off the prairie. He rose to his feet.

"I can't shake Sam Wendy's ghost," he complained. "The bloody thing follows me on every shoot."

He deliberately turned his back on the wind to stare at the town. In there, the restless and shifting torches suggested a convention of fireflies.

"'Sdeath! How many saloons can they have?"

Dobbs stood beside him. "Eight thousand people can get mighty thirsty."

"In truth—but one useless actor can outdrink them, all eight thousand of them. And he's probably doing just that."

Contemplating the moving lights, Steward suddenly uttered a single, tight expletive.

"Yes," Dobbs agreed. "In spades." And then he added worriedly, "I don't mind your company, Stew, but Whittle's sand is running out."

Steward nodded tiredly and buttoned his coat. "Hold the fort, Karl. Time to saddle and ride."

"Midnight," Dobbs said in warning.

The Characters parted.

Karl Dobbs rested his weight on the hitching rail. His deliberative gaze followed the crew leader along the mean dirt street until the man vanished into the night. The exigency worried him.

Dobbs was a man given to sober contemplation, a man of advanced years who had learned from experience to anticipate, if possible, the coming actions and plan for them. The errors committed on this shoot were onerous and he constantly sought means to circumvent them.

The technicians had committed the first error.

They had actually committed two of them, but that initial mistake of dropping Steward into the creek was inconsequential. That was a fault of the cartographers, and a minor thing. The earlier and gravest blunder must be set down at the door of the men who had plotted the time-curve, and the engineers who translated it into action.

They had fouled Benjamin Steward by overshooting, by placing him a full day beyond the target date.

That had been a startling bungle.

Steward had walked the plains and the streets of the town on May 30, twenty to twenty-four hours beyond the actual target. Afterward, he returned to the chamber of report, and to gather his crew.

Whittle and the engineers committed a third mistake at that point. They allowed Steward to continue the shoot and accompany the crew to the target: May 29.

That should not have been done. Guild regulations and company policy to the contrary, Steward should have been taken off the shoot and kept at home. The second-in-command, or any other reliable Character for that matter, should have been placed in charge. For Benjamin Steward could not again cover the same ground on the same date without risk of meeting himself.

Whittle had overlooked the matter in the resultant confusion, but that was no valid excuse. And so far as he knew, a comparable situation had never before happened in company history, but that still was insufficient reason.

There *were* mechanical safeguards, of course. The nineteen-hour maximum tolerance set by the engineers would retrieve the bullet before the sun rose on May 30. That would prevent the missile from

fouling its own nest, and bring back its occupant to the chamber. But mechanical safeguards did not satisfy Dobbs.

His worried mind kept dwelling on the cancellation effect.

That was a pretty engineering term.

Actually it was only a theory, a paper bogey. And again, so far as his knowledge went, the occurrence had never happened in company history. But as a theory it remained dreadfully real.

The T-R engineers had explained it countless times in the jargon of their calling. In addition, they issued pamphlets and distributed pictorial charts interpreting the situation in primary terms understandable to morons—as they firmly believed most Characters to be. They hung reminders on the walls of the lounge, and still other reminders in the guild meeting halls. The theory was drilled into the skull of every recruit until his head ached, and was monotonously repeated to every Character who considered himself an old hand. Dossiers were carefully compiled and endlessly annotated; no field man was permitted to closely approach a previous target date covered by himself.

Calculated risks were necessary only where the advance man was concerned, and that risk was coldly analyzed and doubly hedged. An advance man was sent into the field to scout the target and prepare the way. His exploratory mission was confined to a few hours; the fewer the better. One or more days later, protected by mathematical and mechanical safeguards, that man returned to the field with his crew to complete the assignment. The scouting trip was safely behind him.

The theoretical threat was deceptively simple.

Two like objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Two like objects, meeting in the field,

did not collide. One simply canceled out the other.

The engineers had reams of computations to support their thesis. No one cared to put it to the test.

There was an equally grave parallel risk.

A man leaving the chamber to work in the field left an indelible track, a time-spanning nexus which linked him to his point of origin. It could be broken only by self-cancellation. The pictorial charts furnished by the engineers showed that man tied to the chamber as securely as the ancient deepsea divers were tied to the mother ship with air hoses. It was a striking illustration. Two duplicate Characters, accidentally in the field together, need not meet to cause a cancellation. The one need only stumble over the other's vinculum. It was as final as a severed air hose.

The T-R engineers had conquered time for pecuniary rewards, but they failed to solve the problem of collateralism.

Dobbs hunted through his pockets for the native cigar Steward had given him. He lit it, smelled it, tasted it and found it strong like the whiskey.

An incredible series of blunders, and what was to be done about them now? Little or nothing. They were done.

Bobby Bloch must be found, and Steward must leap for the chamber before the engineers pulled in their missile at the end of nineteen hours. That mechanical safeguard was the only one left him. No math-magic could erase the overshoot, nor protect Steward when he walked the streets of the town after sunrise tomorrow morning.

Dobbs smoked the cigar and watched the darkened street. Stray thoughts diverted his attention.

He had known Sam Wendy He had known that Sam was married, and he knew the identity of the woman.

Was Steward aware of that? Aware of her identity?

Dobbs glanced around at a distracting noise. An inebriated man lurched out of the tavern, stared at him owlishly and then wandered off up the street.

Another wisp of thought crept into Dobbs's mind.

He *could* write home and ask for a transfer of command.

It would entail explaining the full circumstances to Whittle, and it would place a second mark on Steward's dossier which would be difficult to erase, but he *could* ask that Steward be relieved and sent home, with himself taking charge of the search. That would eliminate all possibility of further risk to Steward.

He could . . .

Dobbs shook his head savagely, wiping away the thought as an evil, unethical thing. He could *not.*

For the second time in an hour a sense of shame engulfed him as thoroughly as immersion in icy water. His own weakness angered him.

He could not do that.

Like his earlier, impulsive words, it was an act which could never be undone, a blot never to be erased. An indelible stain. And it would be futile, hopelessly futile and stupid to attempt a reasonable explanation of his act when all of them—Steward, Bloch, Bonner and himself—were safely back in the chamber. Who understands the inutile interpretation when the danger had passed?

No, he could not pull Steward's command from under him. Benjamin Steward was worth a dozen useless Characters.

Bobby Bloch could rot on a labor squad in hell before he would be guilty of cutting Steward's throat by stealing his field authority.

Anxiously, Dobbs consulted his watch and was surprised to find only a few minutes gone. The growing apprehension was warping his time values.

He resumed his scrutiny of the long dark street.

Benjamin Steward began his tedious search at Major's Hall.

That was the last place where the missing actor was seen. After eating lunch at the Chinamen's tent, they had sprawled to rest on somebody's lawn. It might have been a vacant lot, or a small public park, or actually some honest citizen's front lawn—he didn't remember now. But whatever the identity of the real estate, it had been comfortable and tranquil; they took their ease on the peaceful greensward to digest the meal. They had not been molested.

Karl Dobbs had dozed in the warm shade; it was his habit to nap a lot when preparing for a night's work. Bonner and Bloch, finally exhausting a renewed debate on the merits of girly shows, had fallen back upon still another discussion of Shakespeare—the original Shakespeare, and not the upstart bard of the same name and calling who had appeared on the theatrical scene shortly after the Second Revolution. Mindful of their intrusion into a land of strangers, the two actors carefully avoided all mention of the latter-day imitator; they preferred to quote the old original, and to criticize his shortcomings in a very untheatrical manner. Bonner was of the opinion that the old bard was not above a snow-job, and had hired himself out as a character-assassin via his *King Richard III*.

Steward had listened to them for a while and then allowed his attention to wander; he wasn't particularly interested in either of the Shakespeares, although the first had provided a meaty collection of quips and quotes. With a full belly—and a warming shot of strong whiskey—it was more profitable to indulge in his own private vice: envy and speculation of the other man's world.

The afternoon hours had whirled away.

Dobbs eventually got them on their feet and pushed them toward the target; the overcautious and ever-watchful Dobbs whose prudence matched his advanced years. (What kind of old maid would the man be, as he neared the end of his second century of life?)

The quartet had separated outside Major's Hall, to join the milling throng spilling over the sidewalk and into the street while waiting to ascend the stairway. There had been some delay; the auditorium doors had not been opened until several minutes past the appointed hour. Finally, Steward mounted the steps, some paces behind Karl Dobbs. Bonner and Bloch were lost to sight, somewhere behind him, at that moment. He had not seen Bloch again.

Steward began his search at the hall.

The large auditorium doors were closed but not locked. The Character lit one of the lanterns he found on the landing and entered the hall. It was empty.

To plant an alibi—should someone discover him there—he knelt quickly and placed his pocket watch beneath one of the chairs. Thereafter he spent many minutes combing the entire area. He never found the spool from the recording machine, but he found bushels of trash, and the wire. Countless yards of the fine, silvery wire were strewn across the floor between two rows of seats. The stuff appeared to have been deliberately unwound from its spool and thrown away.

Steward wasted only a few seconds longer looking at the confounding wire, and quit the hall. He pocketed his watch, blew out the lantern and descended to the street.

Circling the building, he remembered Bonner's humorously intended reference to the public rooms at the rear of the structure, and checked them. Bloch

was not in either of the small shanties. Upon reaching the street once more, he turned east and walked to the end of the expanding business district, inspecting the interior of every illuminated shop or store open to his gaze. Few of them contained lights or people. The saloons and eating places required a more thorough search, so he entered and searched them.

Crossing the street, Steward repeated his routine as he worked his way westward, back toward the center of town; his route took him across the main street and on into the far western reaches. Bloch was not seen.

Steward gave special attention to the theater.

The evening's performance of *Fashion, or Life in New York* was nearly over, but the fusty box-office attendant insisted that he buy a full ticket if he wished to enter the theater. The Character purchased the ticket and went in. What little he saw of the play bored him. He studied the darkened house as well as he could, and waited until the curtain fell and the lights went up to be absolutely certain. Until this moment, he had been willing to bet that Bobby Bloch was in the theater, taking mental notes on his ancestral colleagues. The audience applauded sparingly and left. Bloch was not among them.

Still mindful of actors' habits, he went around to the stage door and bluffed his way in on the pretext of wanting autographs. He got the autographs on his program, but he got no glimpse of the missing man. Steward stalled for time until the troupe left the theater, and followed them to a nearby restaurant, knowing that there was usually an after-theater feed of some sort even if the performers had to buy it for themselves. Bloch did not appear for the party.

Steward resumed his lasting, weary search of the town streets, one forlorn street after another.

Hundreds of bragging, thirsty men filled the saloons, impeding his progress, but he pushed doggedly on. The noisy and unruly mob milling about the courthouse square still numbered in the thousands, and he had no recourse but to avoid it. To satisfactorily search that crowd seeking one familiar face would require hours, and that many hours he could not spare. The Character detoured around the square and took up the quest on the far side. He plodded the streets east and west, north and south. Setting caution aside, he explored the alleys. He stumbled across the vacant lots, looking under trees, probing the shrubbery, and inspecting the heaps of refuse which local citizens insisted on dumping in such lots. He poked among the stacks of lumber and piles of brick of half-completed buildings; rummaged through the incompleted houses, and pried into the seemingly deserted shacks which littered the town. Steward looked into the many livery stables, inquiring after a tipsy friend who might have sought sleep in their haymows. He walked out to the railway depot, to search the wooden seats for a sleeping form. He found—and entered—two houses of ill repute, and had time to wonder at the changes which would take place in the next seven hundred years. He was quickly but politely ushered out of a gambling hall when it was discovered he had come only to gape, not to play. Steward paused before the newspaper office and found it closed; stopped in at a dimly lit job-printing shop and found it occupied only by a printer turning out handbills. The printer gave him one.

And once again the Character chanced across the traveling medicine show, now open and vigorously operating. He gave scant attention to the show's proprietor and his weird spiel, to the brightly dressed but wooden-faced Indian standing at one end

of the platform, to the piebald horse tethered at the opposite end of the wagon. Steward scanned the audience. Bloch was not among them.

At this late hour he knew the business district of the town as thoroughly as a map maker. He could, if asked by the cartographers, not only lay out the streets in their proper order, but place each separate business establishment in its proper location. At this late hour——

Guiltily, Benjamin Steward looked at his watch and turned to run. It was more than an hour past midnight.

He sought out the street leading to the rendezvous and hurried along it. The unexpected lateness of the hour contributed to his dismay, and made it imperative that he send Karl Dobbs home.

Dobbs would not leave the rendezvous until Steward returned, empty-handed or otherwise, and by this time the older man would be alarmed at *his* absence.

12

ALIBI

KARL DOBBS was squatting on his heels beneath the hitching rail when Benjamin Steward returned from town. This time Dobbs did not vocally express his mounting anxiety when the crew leader reached him. It was a familiar character trait, and one that revealed the true depths of the man's concern. Dobbs had been frightened.

There was no greeting exchanged between them, and at first no words at all.

Steward sank down on his heels beside his companion, expelled a heavy breath of fatigue, and then toppled backward to sit down. His feet were aching. He pulled off the antiquated boots to massage the hurt.

The little tavern was still open and doing business, catering to a few late revelers who were loudly rehashing the evening's speeches. Their boisterous voices were annoying. Above the tavern the deep night sky was riotously afire with stars.

"Did you look in the theater?" Dobbs asked gently after an interval. "An empty stage fascinates him."

Steward nodded. "I looked."

Dobbs did not press further. He knew without

asking that Steward had covered the prairie town as thoroughly as a desperate and determined man could. Steward was that kind of Character, and now his physical weariness underwrote the completeness of his search. The missing actor could be anywhere. If he was still among the living, he could have moved from tavern to tavern only minutes ahead of, or behind, his pursuer. If Bloch was dead, he could be in any secret place where his assailants had thrown the body. He did not believe the actor was dead.

Dobbs held his silence and waited for Steward to speak his mind. The next move was his.

Presently, Steward said, "Disraeli?"

Dobbs was not caught by surprise.

"A government leader in another country across the ocean," the older man explained, as if the afternoon conversation had occurred only a few minutes ago. "Alive now. This year. Powerful speaker, that Disraeli. Something of a liberal and a reformer. His best is still to come."

"Can Lincoln match him?"

"In power, in his native land, yes. In the finer points of education and intelligence, no. Were the two to meet, to debate before an impartial judge, Disraeli would prove himself the master. But in their respective lands the two are equals."

"Lincoln had you."

"I was spellbound, completely absorbed. Disraeli accomplished the same thing. Each of these men will reach the topmost goals, if they live."

"How much margin would you allow yourself?"

Again, Dobbs was not caught off balance by the abrupt change of tack. He had recognized Steward's preamble for what it was, a minor discussion of one subject while preparing to broach another.

Now, with one sentence unrelated to the others, he asked Dobbs to place himself in the imaginary

position of crew leader, and make a decision. How much of a safety factor would *he* allow himself between ending the search for Bloch, and retreating to the bullet to protect his own life.

Dobbs did not hesitate.

"At least ten minutes."

"I was thinking of a little less than that."

"Don't," Dobbs warned. "You should have at least ten minutes to clear yourself. You could use more."

"I swear to God, Karl, I can't abandon that crazy actor."

"You may have to," Dobbs answered harshly.

Steward rubbed his aching feet but said nothing. He studied the stars overhead, and pretended to find something of interest there.

Sam Wendy's bloody, severed image danced on the sky. Below the image, and disconcertingly near, he thought he saw Evelyn Kung's eyes studying him. They were mocking eyes.

"I found that accursed wire—again."

"Upstairs?"

"In the auditorium, thrown on the floor. No spool, no machine, no Character. Only the wire."

"I don't believe Bloch reached the auditorium."

"Probably not." Steward averted his gaze from the sky. "Karl, was anyone else in the hall when you went up to look for him?"

"There were four, perhaps five men standing about, talking. And one or two others sitting down."

"'Sdeath—and you didn't see fifty feet of wire strewn between the seats?"

"I did not. But remember that I was looking for a man; supposedly one standing on his own two feet. I watched the floor, but not under the seats."

"But the wire *might* have been there."

"It might, but it isn't likely. That much loose wire could trip a hundred delegates. I suspect the

wire was tossed after the room was cleared. Perhaps by one of those half-dozen men."

"Why?"

"Why does the world go around? They tell me somebody pushes it, and who am I to disagree?"

"That confounded wire worried me. I was angry about the overshoot, but that worked itself out all right; I was upset about the ruckus with Lovejoy, and that turned out to be molehills and mountains; but the wire *worried* me. One of us had to lose it and I had to find it; I couldn't take it back with me, and so I had to violate the rule about leaving foreign matter in the field. Does this world have spun wire of that caliber?"

"I don't know. Insufficient data."

"Well, they've got it now—fifty feet or more of it. If Whittle knew that, he'd send a squad of security police back for it! Cardinal sin, and all that." Steward twisted around to look at the town. "So we know *now* whose wire it is."

Dobbs said quietly, "Do you still have the extra spool?"

Steward hastily clapped his hand to his pocket.

"Yes."

"Very well, then we know whose wire it is. But I was wagering my sour money on your extra spool." Dobbs got up and stretched. "Stop whipping yourself."

"What are you talking about?"

"About you, about the decision *all of us* made to bring Bobby Bloch along on this shoot. We all participated in the decision because we all wanted to give him a hand; each of us felt bad about his brother, and each of us volunteered to carry him. We thought we could straighten out the lad. We thought wrong. Each of us will pay for making an error in judgment."

"I pulled him—it's on record."

"Bonner and myself will swear differently."

"You can't dispute Evelyn's records."

"We can confess our conversation and our agreement on the matter; we can insist on equal blame and equal sanctions."

"Fat lot of good that will do!"

"I expect no good to come of it, but I'm not one to welsh on agreements or bemoan bad judgment. My only regret is—well, Bloch will have to pay the piper. Severely." Dobbs sighed and consulted his watch.

Steward said, "I'm going back into town."

"I expected as much. You're a stubborn ass." And Dobbs put out his hand. "Give me the faked wire."

"Why?"

"Don't ask useless questions. Give it to me."

The Character handed over the extra spool.

"The time is ripe for another round in the battle of Kadesh," Dobbs explained. "Ramses is still winning."

"What goes?"

Dobbs grasped the end-loop between his fingers and deliberately pulled ten or fifteen feet of tightly wrapped wire from the spool. He gauged it with his eyes, judged it to be sufficient for his purpose, and then loosely rewound the spool. The result was what he wanted: a jumbled outer layer of wire, obviously hand-wound, overlaying the precise, tight layers packed onto the spool by the machine.

Oblivious of Steward's astonished stare, Karl Dobbs next rolled up his trousers, pulled back the long underwear and exposed the skin of his leg. He jabbed a long fingernail into the leg, tore the skin and drew blood. The recording spool was then smeared with the blood.

"What in the devil are you doing?" Steward demanded.

"Writing the big lie."

"Karl, have you shot your bolt?"

"Look alive, man, the buzzards are waiting for you in the chamber! Have you got your story ready?"

"What story?"

"Hell and high water, Stew, do I have to spell it for you? Bonner has already laid the foundation—we lost Bloch in the crowd after the speech, and haven't seen him since. My turn comes next. I'm going back in a few minutes and I'm taking this spool with me as exhibit A.

"When you searched the town a while ago you found strong indications of Bloch's death, remember? You found this unwound spool in the alley behind the auditorium. It had blood on it. Hold the spool—put your fingerprints on it. The scene in the alley gave clear evidence of a struggle, perhaps a fatal one. You fear the worst. Now, dang it, Stew, the rest is up to you!"

"Slow down, Karl."

"*You* can't afford to slow down," Dobbs retorted heatedly. He tapped his watch in warning. "About three hours from now the engineers will pull back that bullet, with or without you. You've got to hump it, son, and hump it fast. I'm going back to Whittle with a story that will give him high blood pressure. This spool will underwrite my story. But I'll tell it in such a way as to leave the ending open for you. Apparently, Bobby Bloch has been killed. But he might not be. You finish the story."

Steward shook his head groggily. "Cue me in. You've talked me to sleep."

"You are going back into that town once more tonight," Dobbs explained patiently. "You are staying in the field until the last ten minutes, hoping to

determine the truth. Is Bloch dead? Is the bloody spool and the scene in the alley reliable evidence? Or was it merely dropped under duress?

"If you *do* find that drunken bum, clean him out, brief him, and bring him back with you. Tell him what has happened, and then concoct a good story to cover us. Maybe, five years from now, we can all have a drink and a good laugh over it."

Nervously, Dobbs once more consulted his watch. "And if I don't . . . ?"

"If you *don't* find him, Stew, jump for the chamber before your time runs out. Hell and high water, man, do you realize you are pushing cancellation right now? I have no right to give you orders, but I'm going to give you one: *jump,* and be damned to the consequences! Jump for home, and report Bobby Bloch's death. Have something handy to back it up, something which will stave off an investigation by the security police. T-R won't spend money to shoot back and recover a corpse. *Will they?*"

Dobbs snapped the question, wanting it to bite.

"No," Steward answered tautly, "they didn't."

"Well and good. That will wrap it up! That will give Bloch one more chance of making something of himself, assuming he has any guts at all. He wouldn't live very long on the labor squads back home; perhaps he can manage to stay alive here. Find work. There's that Shakespearean troupe coming to town next week." Dobbs shook his head. "And I suppose I wish him luck when he sobers up in the morning. Luck. I have no other charity in my heart for him."

"I dunno, Karl. Whittle won't believe this."

"Go tell that to the Egyptians. Ramses will laugh in your face." He reached down and caught Steward by the coat collar, yanking him to his feet. "Whittle will have no other choice. By now, Bonner will have worried him. In a few moments I'll make him sweat.

You shock the living guts out of the man, if you come in without the actor. Make it bloody, but make it sincere. Now, dang it, son, hump!"

Hopping first on one foot and then the other, the Character replaced the boots on his distressed feet.

"See in what peace a Christian can die," he said with resignation. "I'll try, Karl, but if it doesn't work we all go to the salt mines."

"Have you never pulled a fast one on Whittle? Or the others?"

"Of course I have."

"Then pull one more, and let it be a reminder to our egos. Sentiment warps a man's good judgment." Dobbs was shaking his watch in the other's face. "And remember the time limit! Evelyn has no wish to be twice widowed."

Steward froze.

"That hurt," he said.

"I intended it to."

"We aren't married."

"Not yet."

"I wondered if you knew about it."

"I knew. Get along."

"You'd better give Bonner the soft word."

"Will do. Don't fret about *my* preparations; just make sure yours will stand scrutiny."

"Okay, okay, it will be bloody. And sincere. Well —so long, pardner."

"Ten minutes' margin, and no less," Dobbs warned again. "Double it if you are able; triple it. I'll stall those deadline-happy engineers as long as possible, but that isn't saying much. They'd rather take a beating than lose their precious machine, and Whittle *will* beat them if they do. They can't save you if you haven't returned when the limit expires, but they can save the machine. Remember that."

"Oh, stop preaching."

"If I were younger I'd thrash you."

"Scat," Steward told him. "It's getting late."

Karl Dobbs hesitated only a moment longer, to stare at his companion.

"I think it is a sign of weakness," he declared.

"What is?"

"Your cloying sentimentality."

He spun on his heel and stalked away into the night.

Steward grinned at his departing back. Dobbs was getting on in years and his empathy was showing.

Moving gingerly in the now uncomfortable boots, Steward stepped out into the dusty road for his fourth trip into Lincoln's town. The torchlights were dying away as the excitement ebbed and the townspeople prepared for bed. Their day in history was done.

Behind him, from somewhere on the darkened prairie, Dobbs suddenly shouted his name.

Steward whirled and raced toward the sound.

Dobbs was loping in to meet him, breathless.

"Stew!" the senior Character gasped, "did you think about the jail? Did you look in the jail?"

"*Jehoshaphat, no!*"

Dobbs wasted few motions. He quickly emptied his pockets of what little native money he possessed, passed over his pocket watch, and then removed an expensive ring from his finger. He crammed the valuables into Steward's hand.

"That's twice we've neglected the most obvious place. Go bail him out. Trot, son!"

"Karl, I must have rocks in my head."

"Time enough to examine your head later. Get that cretin out of jail and come home." Dobbs turned the man around and shoved him on his way. "I'll tell Whittle the same scare-story, but you bring in the happy ending."

Steward obediently trotted away on sore feet, slandering himself for having forgotten the jail.

Karl Dobbs picked his leisurely way across the night-clad prairie to the waiting machine. He knew a distinct sense of relief, and it pleased him to be able to bring a similar relief to Evelyn Kung.

13

THE LAUGHTER OF RAMSES

THE TOWN JAIL consisted of two small rooms, housed in an equally small building of insecure appearance.

The outer room served as a booking office and lounging place, masquerading under the euphemism of police headquarters. It contained a quaintly old-fashioned high-back desk pushed against the wall, a battle-scarred but solid chair tilted against the desk, a rack containing two shotguns on another wall, and a long bench covered with a dirty blanket. A smoky kerosene lamp clung to the ceiling.

The jailkeeper was sitting on the bench, still drowsy with sleep.

He picked at the edge of the soiled blanket, trying to gather his wits about him.

An iron grillwork separated the first room from the second. Its primary function seemed to be a divisionary line, to enable citizens to know at a glance which were the keepers and which were the prisoners. The solitary man snoring in the cell was a stranger.

"What did the feller look like?" the jailer asked.

Steward struggled to conceal his exasperation.

"Thin," he explained patiently. "So thin, you'd think he was starving. His elbows stick out and his knees are knobby. About five feet, ten inches tall. Maybe a hundred and thirty pounds. Sallow skin, hollow cheeks and brown eyes. Long black hair—he needed

a haircut. And a long, sharp nose. It gets in the way when he tries to kiss a girl."

"What?" the startled jailer questioned.

"A big nose. He was wearing a dark grey coat and black trousers. Black boots—like mine. White shirt, no tie."

"You say he runs around kissing women?"

"*No.*"

"We ain't had no kissing-Johns in here lately." The jailer ran his fingers through unkempt hair. "There's been a peck of trouble in town tonight. That there convention, you know."

"I know," Steward said. "Have you seen him?"

"Seen who?"

"The man I am describing. My friend. He's missing."

"Well, I can't rightly say. There's been a dozen fellers in and out since noontime. What did you say his name was again?"

"Bobby Bloch."

The jailer got up off the bench, stretched and yawned, and then padded over to the rolltop desk. He moved the chair out of his way and opened a large, dog-eared daybook which in other times would be called a police blotter. Diffidently, the sleepy turnkey pushed his finger along a row of names. He was exasperatingly slow.

"Nope, mister, don't see no Bloch here. We got a Sullivan and a Hindenburg and two John Smiths and a Rosencrantz—and a whole mess of others—but nope, no Bloch." He glanced over his shoulder at Steward and grinned slyly. "Them two John Smiths ain't really John Smith. I knowed them both. They just don't want their wives to find out."

"Bully for them," the Character snapped. "Perhaps my friend didn't use his right name—perhaps

he didn't want me to find out. Concentrate on the description. Now, are you *sure?*"

The warder did his best to concentrate, which wasn't much of an effort in his drowsy condition.

"I just don't recollect the feller, no I don't." And then he added helpfully, "But if I see him, I'll hold him for you."

"Oh, thanks. How many drunks have been in here tonight?"

"Mister, they *all* were; it's that big convention." The turnkey pondered a moment and then jerked his thumb toward the occupied cell. "'Cept that feller back there. He got caught picking pockets. Of course, he was drinking some too, but he ain't in for that. Another feller turned him in because this feller lifted his valuables. They got to drinking together, you know, and the other feller found out *this* feller was the thief."

"I didn't know. Was the victim locked up as well?" Steward asked sarcastically. The nuance was lost on the jailer.

"You mean the feller what had his pockets picked? Why, sure. They was both drinking, and the other feller got to raising a fuss, so I locked them both up. But naturally, when the other feller sobered up and paid his fine, he got out."

"Naturally," Steward echoed. He could easily guess who pocketed the fines. The political convention must have proven a windfall for the police department as well as the town merchants. Steward buttoned his coat and moved despondently toward the door. An ancient epigram came to mind. "The oldest sins in the newest kinds of ways."

"What's that, now?"

"Just talking to myself," the Character shrugged. "I've got a long, hard trip ahead of me."

"No, I mean, what's that you said? Are you an actor too? It sounded like what the other feller said."

Benjamin Steward turned sharply.

"*What other fellow?*"

"My gosh, the one I been telling you about. The Hamlet man."

"'Sdeath! He is the man I'm looking for! He is Bobby Bloch."

"Nope, t'ain't so. His name was Julius Rosencrantz." The jailer searched his pockets and then proudly displayed a scrap of paper. "He gave me his autograph. He's an actor from Cleveland."

Steward almost shouted. "He *is* the man I want! Where is he?"

"Gone, I said. He up and paid his fine, and he's gone." The man revealed his confusion. "You sure his name ain't Rosencrantz? I got his autograph right here."

"His name is Bobby Bloch. Bloch is a Shakespearean actor from Cleveland. Perhaps Rosencrantz is a stage name."

The warder stared at his slip of paper.

"Well, he's the Hamlet man all right. He spouted Hamlet all the time he was locked up, 'cept when he was sleeping. I had to keep shushing him. He felt kinda mad about this other feller taking his valuables, and he got to hollering out the winder back there. I kept telling him to shush, but he didn't. When somebody'd come along the street, Mr. Rosencrantz would put his face up to the winder and holler at them. He'd holler, *Sweep on, you fat and greasy citizens!* Well now, folks don't take kindly to that."

"Where did he go?" Steward asked urgently. "Which direction? Did he say where he was going?"

"I don't recollect that he did. Nope. He just paid his fine, and give me this autograph, and walked out. He said I keep a good jail. Naturally, when I found

out he was a famous actor, I told him I was sorry about it all, but he said never to mind. He said he wouldn't a' given it for a wilderness of monkeys. That's good, ain't it?"

"That's ever so clever." Steward wanted to throttle the jailer. "*Which way?*"

"Over yonder, toward the courthouse."

Steward whirled and bolted for the door, to leave it yawning behind him. The turnkey shuffled across the room to close it.

"Them actors is sure a crazy lot."

The courthouse lawn was littered with discarded paper, spent torches and stubborn—or supine—humans. Men were gathered in small clumps, quietly discussing or loudly arguing speeches, issues and politics. An astonishing number of them were claiming to have been members of the Lincoln audience. Other men lounged on comparatively clean places on the grass, similarly engaged in debate. And a very few men, unable to navigate, were peacefully sleeping it off.

Steward knew the actor was not among those groups discussing politics—because no one of them was tall and thin and demanding attention in a loud voice—and so passed them by. Instead, he examined each of the sleepers, hoping to find his quarry stretched out for the night. And then with growing despair he turned again to the saloons and other business houses near the square; a number of them were still lighted and doing a dwindling business. A hasty glance at his watch warned him that he lacked the time for another thorough search, and must content himself with the nearer places.

Quickening his pace despite the gnawing pain in his feet and ankles, Steward hurried through the taverns. He entered each one, to briefly scan the interior

and march the length of the barroom; he took the time to step out the back door—or to whatever other accommodations for relief were offered—and glance around. The one familiar face was never there. Reversing himself, Steward would then hurry across the long room a second time and make his exit. The questioning stares of barmen were ignored. And the routine would be repeated at the next establishment.

He looked in the restaurants, tried again to enter the gaming hall, revisited the primitive game houses, passed the darkened theater, nodded at the late-working printer, and ran through the alleys. The medicine show had shut up shop.

The hunt went on and on monotonously, interminably. A creeping, hopeless exhaustion overtook the hunter. His feet were numb with pain.

Steward realized the end was near.

When an irritable and sleepy bartender slammed the doors in his face and announced a final closing hour, Steward quit. He was licked.

The bartender's symbolic act forcibly called to his attention the reality he had known for the last hour. He was not too surprised to discover that his dulled intellect had already accepted Bloch's loss as a fact; nor did he shrink when another part of his mind told him the unhappy consequences to follow. By now he was so utterly tired, so deadened in mind and body that he did not care. Let them do their damndest—he didn't care.

Ramses was beaten.

Bobby Bloch would have to be abandoned in the field.

The dispirited Character started home.

Bloomington's water tower and the Last Chance Saloon were behind him.

Plodding wearily across the lonely morning prairie,

Benjamin Steward knew his greatest depth of despair since the death of Sam Wendy. A flush of false dawn rippled the eastern sky, delineating the lines of despondency imprinted on his face. He shared a galling defeat with old Ramses, and would continue to share it with the ancient war lord, no matter how widespread the great lie.

The bitter knowledge of defeat would never die.

He noted but paid scant attention to a dimly seen herd of cattle grazing in the distance. They were now familiar objects. His thoughts turned inward, dwelling on the future—or fate—of Bobby Bloch, and upon the hell that would be raised when he returned to the chamber alone.

Bitterly, Steward recalled the wretched scene when he reported back without Sam Wendy.

Whittle's first reaction would be a highly emotional one—the crime of losing a man in the field would shock him, unnerve him, and leave him temporarily speechless. It mattered little that a careful story had been prepared, that confirmation of disaster was only minutes away and the lost Character was presumed dead. The castigation would come when Whittle found voice. It would continue as the news wormed its way upstairs into the executive offices, and it would not cease for a long, long time. Because this was a second offense, it might never stop.

Evelyn and the engineers would share the shock, but they would say nothing. Evelyn's critical silence would be the worst to bear. His solitary reappearance in the chamber would stun her, would ram into her consciousness the renewed knowledge that Benjamin Steward, the unreliable, was a widowmaker.

Evelyn's silent scrutiny would hurt deeply.

Whittle's censure would probably have a more lasting—and damaging—effect on his future employ-

ment, but all his words would not equal the contempt of Sam Wendy's widow.

Bitter, cheerless homecoming—an appropriate ending to a fouled and faulty shoot.

Steward came in sight of the murmuring creek and the naked roots of the great oak tree. The nearly invisible bullet was awaiting him.

Checking the time, he was surprised to discover there were more than ten minutes to spare. A vagrant fancy caught and held his attention. He looked at his feet.

Impulsively, Steward slid down the muddy bank and yanked off the pinioning boots. The socks followed. He thrust his smarting feet into the cold predawn water and almost cried out as the mixture of pleasure and pain raced through his tired body. After a tingling stab of agony the pain faded, leaving him with a delicious feeling of rapture. The water caressed his feet and acted as a catharsis to his troubled mind, lulling him.

The Character threw back his head to look at the sky. The last, lingering look at Mr. Lincoln's marvelous sky.

A splendid world.

Earth, sky, sight, sound, smell—heady stuff.

A world of fire and energy and force, filled with bustling, bumbling, sleepless people who were acutely aware of a revolution barely eighty years behind them; a world of brawling and enthusiastic people, happily unaware of still another revolution four hundred years in their future. They made and unmade governors and presidents with gusto, elected and tumbled congressmen with relish and delight, supremely confident of themselves and their destinies. Four centuries in the future their beloved liberties would come clattering down, and they would be per-

mitted to vote for senators of questionable choice while an emperor ruled the roost.

Steward stood erect on the creekbed, letting the water course over his knees. He sucked in a great mouthful of cold morning air. Mr. Lincoln's lucky world.

There, a herd of cattle becoming more distinct in the growing light. There, a town embroiled in robust, self-expression. And there, a solitary Indian grove with a column of smoke rising above the trees.

His eyes grew wide.

The smoke climbed steadily upward, unmoved by wind.

Steward leaped from the water. Boots and socks were forgotten as he clawed his way up the slippery bank and darted across the prairie. He ran with no thought of his suffering feet, with no thought other than the urgency of the moment.

From some distant farmhouse a rooster crowed garrulously. The false flush was gone, and the true dawn coming. The running man attempted to force more speed into his legs. A fear nibbled at his mind.

He charged breathlessly across the last few yards of open ground and plunged headlong into the timber, seeking a clearing which might contain a cabin or Indian teepee. Underbrush slowed his progress and now harsh, unseen debris on the timber floor cut into the soles of his feet like shards of glass. He kept going.

The timber was bright with the approaching day. The sudden and excited outburst of a dog guided him.

Steward swerved, running toward the dog.

He found the clearing because the animal was there, barking at his unexpected intrusion, and because Bobby Bloch was there, emoting in a loud, ringing, and happily drunken voice.

"Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men
Be-stride our down-fallen birthdom, each new morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out
Like syl . . ."

The speaker trailed off, gaping with dismay.

Steward shouted, "Bobby!"

A sudden silence enveloped the clearing. The dog ceased barking at the savage shout.

The Shakespearean actor, perched atop a tree stump like a preacher on a podium, had quit in mid-syllable to stare with consternation and surprise. The unforeseen appearance startled him.

A half-dozen listening Indians who were seated around the stump craned their necks in curiosity.

"Bobby—jump!"

"*Aha,*" Bloch cried, pointing dramatically, "another lean unwashed artificer!"

"Come off that, you stupid idiot!"

The finger waggled in gentle reproval. "The dedicated does not leave his audience unfulfilled."

Benjamin Steward plunged through the circle of attentive Indians and seized Bloch's shirt front. He yanked viciously, and the actor hurriedly left the stump. Indians scrambled to get out of the way.

"Protest, I protest! These gentlemen have gathered here to be entertained. See, they are entranced."

Steward lacked the breath to answer. He gathered up speed and raced through the timber, retracing his route as best he could. Bloch followed clumsily and unwillingly, pulled along by the rough hand grasping his shirt.

The dog took after them in full cry.

Between gasps, the actor continued his futile protests.

"Hold up! Patience, sire, or I shall perish!" And he struggled desperately to insert an index finger under his collar and pry loose the clamp it made about his neck. "Succor! The speech will keep. I will ask Mr. Lincoln to run through it again."

"The speech," Steward gritted, "was yesterday."

They burst out of the grove.

Steward flung a worried glance at the eastern sky and found it ablaze. The distant tendrils of cirrus were changing to brilliant pink. He fought frantically to increase his speed. The prolonged exertion had overtaxed his weary body, and his lungs labored for air.

Bloch stumbled, and was hauled violently upright.

The actor's face and neck were assuming a purplish hue. He could no longer talk or even sputter, but he galloped along behind the crew leader with a tardy sense of urgency. A hint of what was happening penetrated the alcoholic fog.

The two men continued running.

Miserably short of the goal, the Character suddenly realized he was done.

The frightening, sun-bright morning closed in on them. Over the noise of their running feet, their laborious breathing, over the racket of the aroused dog came a new sound. It was heard only once.

A heavy, rocklike object fell into the waters of the creek with a resounding splash.

Steward did not pause in his stride.

In panic, he turned on his heel and fled, retaining only the presence of mind to drag the helpless thespian after him. The dog kept pace.

Long, agonizing and precious seconds were spent in regaining the shelter of the timber. It seemed incredibly far away. Steward sprinted deep into its

concealing fastness, until without warning he was tripped by the underbrush and thrown to the ground. Bloch fell on top of him. With his last bit of strength, Steward pinioned the other man's legs to hold him down and clapped a feeble hand over his mouth.

Then he closed his eyes and sobbed for breath, awaiting oblivion.

The dog raced around them, yelping furiously.

14

LET THE END TRY THE MAN

A TRANSIENT HUSH enveloped the grove.

Even the volatile dog was quiet for the moment and had settled down to a wary watchfulness, eyes and ears alert for any resumption of the strenuous game.

Inert and supine, Benjamin Steward lay on the timber floor with arms and legs cutflung, gazing passively at the swatches of bright sky seen through the treetops. He could discern the upper half of the smoke column climbing to meet the morning, while high above that the wispy strands of cirrus feathered the sky. Between the smoke and the clouds a hawk soared gracefully in the early sunlight. The view was idyllic and reassuring.

The Character rested.

He was content to lie there, uncaring and unmoving; content to watch the hawk glide through all eternity if that was the bird's desire. His legs felt like leaden weights and it was easier not to move them. His feet reflected torture. The agonizing band of steel which had encircled his lungs was freshly broken, and now he breathed gently and peacefully. The crushed shrubbery beneath his body was as agreeable as a soft mattress. Steward lay dormant, absorbing the soothing tranquillity of the timber.

Above him, the hawk sailed majestically through the Old Nation heavens.

Time passed him by as Steward dozed.

After a lengthy but unclocked interval a stealthy sound caught his attention, and he turned his head to seek out the source. The cause of the sound calmly stared him in the face. He and his companion were ringed by mute, curious Indians squatting around them.

Bobby Bloch lay nearby with his face buried in his arms. He was silently crying.

Steward returned his wary gaze to the natives. He knew that he could not defend himself against an attack by an Indian squaw at that moment. There were no weapons in evidence.

The Indians were staring at the two white men, not impassively and immobile as tradition would have it, but with frank inquisitiveness. They did not appear to be at all aroused or even warlike.

Steward grinned weakly and asked, "How?"

The troop inspected him briefly and then returned their attention to Bloch. Steward held no interest for them.

"Make talk," one of the Indians said brokenly to the actor. "Running tongue, more talk."

The Character relaxed and rolled his eyes back to the sky. The hawk pivoted and wheeled. It seemed to sail for endless miles without ever beating its wings. For some senseless reason Steward was reminded of Evelyn and the gaming house and the silly amusement they called the Chinese Water Torture. How many droplets of water would fall into the silver cup before it tipped of its own weight and closed a relay, causing a pretty Chinese girl to plunge into a tank of "icy" water? For how many hours could the hawk soar without moving its wings?

He dozed again as he watched the hawk and finally fell asleep, unaware that exhaustion had claimed him.

The hawk was gone from the sky.

A bright and glaring noonday sun pouring down into his unprotected face awakened him.

Benjamin Steward scrambled to his knees with alarm before he was fully awake. Only then did he rediscover where he was.

The Indians and their noisy dog had deserted them. There were sounds of life in the timber but it was at a distance. The column of smoke had dissipated.

Bobby Bloch sprawled on the ground nearby, as motionless as the rooted trees. The actor's face was a sickly white, his demeanor grave and depressed. Only his eyes moved in their sockets as Steward got to his feet and then stiffly bent to rub away the ache in his legs. Bloch did not speak.

The Character glanced around the small clearing —and then stared with open astonishment at his boots and socks. Mud from the creekbank still clung to the soles of the boots.

"'Sdeath, Bobby!"

Block's answering voice was so low as to be nearly indistinguishable. "I fetched them."

"Foolish risk, man."

"There is nothing to risk, now. It is done."

Steward looked toward the distant creek and the sentinel oak but they were not visible through the maze of trees. He had run deeper into the timber than he first believed. A shiver of cold fear rippled through him and he hugged his chest to ward it off.

"We're locked out," he whispered.

"Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once." Bloch dropped his eyes. "I am a coward."

"Locked out," Steward repeated. "Seven hundred years from home." He stared again at the muddy boots awaiting his feet. "Were the engineers wrong?"

"No," the actor said miserably.

Wonderingly, Steward gazed toward the unseen creek.

"*That one* canceled? That one out there?"

"He canceled."

Steward studied the unhappy actor. Prickly arrows of fear invaded the pit of his stomach.

"Did you see it happen?"

"No, thank God."

"Then how can you be sure?"

"One cannot quibble with the engineers."

"The engineers be hanged—I'm still among the living."

"The other one is not."

"How can you be sure?" was the repeated demand.

Bloch examined his pale and sweating palms. "At the briefing, you told us you reached the field at sunrise. Precisely sunrise. Evelyn said your field time was four hours and nineteen minutes." He glanced up at the towering crew leader and hastily looked away. "When you fell asleep, I crept to the edge of the woods to reconnoiter. To watch for you. I looked on the prairie, but you were not there. I waited for you to return from the town four hours and nineteen minutes later, but you did not come back. I went down to fetch your boots, and there was no indication of your presence. Nothing."

"My duplicate never reached the town?"

"Your duplicate did nothing but die. He canceled when he climbed the bank; or before; or later. What matter now?; it is done."

What was it like to die?

The mental image of those pictorial charts dangled in Steward's mind—those prophetic charts picturing two deep-sea divers suspended in the deeps at the ends of their air hoses. He was one of the luckless divers, and his duplicate who had entered the field

on the wrong day was the other. Binary Stewards, rotating at the end of a time line. He had sought refuge in the timber, hiding in fear and awaiting judgment. The duplicate fell afoul of the omnipresent nexus—had stumbled blindly over the invisible cord of the tardy *other* and ceased to be.

"'Sdeath!"

Why hadn't *he* canceled instead of the duplicate? For that matter, which of him was the original and which was the facsimile? He could not answer either question. He didn't know, and couldn't guess. That was a problem for the mathematicians, and he readily admitted to his ignorance. He knew only that *he* was still among the living—and damned glad of it. It was wise to be thankful for the bird in hand. There was the haunting certainty that neither of them would be alive at this moment if he had met his twin out there on the bank. And as for those waiting in the chamber, they would have no other recourse than to believe that both had canceled.

To them, Benjamin Steward was as dead as Sam Wendy.

Standing spraddle-legged in the Indian grove, standing now in the animated years of Lincoln's lifetime, he was dead to his colleagues, to the engineers, to Whittle, and Evelyn Kung. Dead as a doornail. Sam Wendy's widow could now acknowledge her revenge, if she wished.

The engineers at last possessed a kind of grim, demonstrable proof of their theories. The paper bogey had assumed a cloak of flesh and bones. They had no way of knowing the theory was only half right, that under a particular set of circumstances only one of the duplicates ceased to exist, but the proof in their hands was sufficient for their purposes. Because of faulty planning, a shoot had gone askew; because a field man failed to observe the tolerance

limits, a cancellation had been effected. A Character had finally, witlessly succeeded in erasing himself. Put that on the company books and raise the ante to the client. The triumphant engineers could hang grisly new reminders on the walls of the lounge.

"Poor wight!" he muttered softly.

The thespian raised his eyes. "Who?"

"The man who rolled out of the bullet this morning. The man who climbed the bank to admire the sunrise." Steward gazed up at the treetops. "I wonder if he lived long enough to see the sky?"

Bloch looked at the sky and then to the Character.

Humbly, he said, "I'm sorry, Stew. Does that have a meaning?"

"No—not now, it doesn't." The reply was tinged with harshness. "Give me time—plenty of time. Enough time to let the shock wear away. Maybe then." For however much he envied this young world, it was still a numbing jolt to find himself thrown bodily into it and confined there. Seven hundred years was a long way from home.

A whisper: "I regret it all, Stew. I regret it from the depths of my heart."

Steward ignored the whisper.

"What happened?" Bloch asked after a while. "Oh, I know what happened to me. I fell from grace. But . . . ?"

"We covered you," Steward said with some asperity. "When we missed you in the auditorium we guessed what had happened, and started covering up. Dobbs and Bonner faked a recording. Bonner went back first, with three recordings and a scare-story about you. The old foul-play alibi. Dobbs followed him a few hours later with a damaged spool—a spool coated with blood—and another story calcu-

lated to shake Whittle's teeth. They set the stage for your death scene."

"My death?"

"I was supposed to follow along and close the case, one way or the other. If I found you, I would bring you in alive with a harrowing tale of rescue in the nick of time, and all that. But if I failed to find you, I was supposed to go home with a big lie which would wipe you off the roster. The Ramses business. You would be a field fatality—irrevocably lost, with circumstantial evidence pointing to your death. The final cover. That was all we could do for you. Dobbs hoped you would take intelligent advantage of it and make a new life here."

The actor revealed his complete surprise.

"They believe me a mortality?"

"*Us,*" Steward retorted. "In the plural."

"But if they believe me dead, they will not send the security men after me!"

"They don't waste money on a corpse," Steward told him bitterly. "I suppose we should be thankful."

Bloch was again studying his hands, unwilling to meet the other's eyes. In the same low and intense voice he said, "I am grateful, Stew."

"Oh, stuff it."

The Character turned his back the better to mask his momentary disgust. He wished he could put the actor out of sight and out of mind for a few hours. He wanted time to think, time to orient himself. He wanted to try to comprehend and then appreciate the miscalculated miracle which had left him alive. He wanted solitude.

"What shall we do, Stew?"

"Do?"

"This is an alien world. What shall we do now?"

"We have the same choice we had at home, Bobby. We can live in it, or die in it."

They could still die in it, for despite all medical precautions a man could easily die in any world. They could be run down by a horse, fall from a building, be shot, or skewered, or scalped—or even burned as a witch, if this nation still burned witches and the male gender was no safeguard. They could live in it an extraordinarily long time if they were careful, for they had an almost miraculous advantage over the natives. The limbs of their bodies told of numberless inoculations to ward off disease, to prolong life.

"You do not think they will come for us?"

"Did they go back to pick up Sam Wendy's corpse? How many times must I repeat it—*no.* They've written us off. Like it or lump it, *this* is home now." Steward glared at the actor. "How did the pickpocket get your recorder?"

Bloch revealed his surprise. "Then you know?"

"I get around, Mr. Rosencrantz."

"It is a matter for weeping. I encountered the foul fellow in the street, as we were waiting to enter the hall. We struck up a friendly conversation. He left me after a space, and I did not miss the machine until I went to ascend the stairway. The machine, and my watch! I did not dare go up, then."

"So you got drunk."

"Indeed not, not then."

"Okay, you got drunk later. And landed in jail."

"How the blood burns! Aye, I encountered the disreputable thief a second time, later in the evening, and did remonstrate with him. The wretch. But the innkeeper ejected us from the premises . . . and, yes, we ended in durance vile. The trickster had already disposed of my treasures."

"The trickster dumped your spool of wire on the auditorium floor, after the meeting. We never found the recorder. And a fat lot of good it will do

him. Maybe he'll show it to somebody, and be burned for a witch. If they still burn witches around here."

Bloch attempted to conceal a shudder.

" 'I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano; a stage where every man must play a part, and mine a sad one.' "

"If you're smart," Steward pointed out irritably, "you will haul tail down to that theater and beg for a job. Any kind of a job. There's the girl show in town now, and a Shakespearean troupe coming in next week—the Booth Players."

"The Booth-Willoughby Players."

"Whatever the name, beg for a job. Beg or starve, Bobby. Play your sad part on the stage and stop feeling so damned sorry for yourself."

" 'What, must I hold a candle to my shames?' "

Benjamin Steward turned abruptly on his heel and strode away in disgust.

The day was dying.

Walking blindly through the timber, immersed in thought, Steward found himself at the outermost ring of trees.

The sun was setting, limning the distant town in sharp relief. Lamps glowed in the windows and lanterns flickered about the outbuildings. Nearer at hand the darkening sky was casting a dim curtain over the prairie and cool shadows reached for the woods that sheltered him. He glanced covertly at the creek and the oak tree standing guard beside it. Sam Wendy's wraith was a dim and fading thing.

Steward returned his gaze to the settlement.

"I've got three irons," he said aloud, "and that town is my forge."

The town contained a weekly newspaper, a man who would be president, and a speech no one would

accurately remember. Three irons to be heated with the fires of his past failures.

He had been a news editor before he signed on with Time Researchers, a second-rate and practically worthless editor because he was too slow, too lackadaisical. He couldn't meet the deadlines, couldn't keep pace with the hectic tempo. His dismissal had come as no surprise. And before the news job he had suffered a brief career as a second-rate politician. He was continually subject to a kind of disease called lack of money, and had precious little talent for public speaking. The political career was short-lived.

But down there in the sleepy town was a weekly newspaper lacking frequent, hectic deadlines; down there was a man headed for the presidency. That man might only suspect his destiny, or dream of it, but Steward *knew* it. Steward had that much advantage over him.

He aimed to try both the paper and the man.

He could write and edit when he was not pushed, and a country weekly should not be too fast for a slowpoke. He knew some of the things that would happen to the nation in the next half-dozen years, and that was an added advantage.

Meanwhile, he had an invitation from the future president, an invitation to drop in and talk. He aimed to do that, too. If the newspaper was his immediate goal, Abraham Lincoln and his Whitehouse was the long range one. Mr. Lincoln would have to be handled with care, for he was no fool, but it was just possible that Steward could latch onto the man's coattails and ride them all the way into the president's office. All the rulers of antiquity had ministers and cabinets, and the man who made himself the most useful before the fact stood the best chance of getting a position after election. Steward decided to make himself extremely useful, beginning at once.

Lincoln was a good man to latch onto. His election to the presidency could not be too many years away.

Admittedly, both he and Bobby Bloch were second-raters, but what was second-rate at home might be a little better here. This was an unsophisticated world.

Meanwhile, there was the provocative speech.

He dug into his pocket and produced the total amount of his worldly wealth. Two watches, a handful of silver dollars, and the expensive ring Karl Dobbs had given him. The Rosencrantz bail fund. It was all the stake he had in the new world but he thought he saw a means of increasing that stake, of multiplying it to his advantage.

It would be entertaining (and profitable) to contribute to a future legend.

To peddle copies of the cherished address.

Mr. Lincoln's soon-to-be-lost speech would be very definitely lost no matter what anyone did about it; it would remain lost for seven centuries until a set of wire recorders tracked down the man and his words. History confirmed that, and Benjamin Steward was not a man to refute history. This was an opportunity to turn a pretty penny. The speech could be printed up in booklet form and hawked about the countryside.

It would not be the correct speech, reproduced exactly as delivered, because despite his good memory he could not remember everything that had been said during those ninety hectic minutes. He doubted very much that even Mr. Lincoln could now recall what was said. So his version would of necessity be a paraphrasing which managed to retain the fervor and the patriotism—and of course the ring of authority. He could, at this moment, repeat long sections of the speech, sections which might astound Lincoln with their accuracy. Could Mr. Herndon do better?

A well-written, well-edited and tidily printed booklet would be his best introduction when seeking the newspaper job, and it could not hurt his future with Mr. Lincoln. After a few months, of course, his booklet would not sell. The ready market would dry up, and his and all the other versions would be disputed, challenged, and eventually ignored. History said that would happen. The speech would be truly lost and seven hundred years away some client would touch off a search.

But in the meanwhile he would increase his stake and latch onto one or two good jobs.

"Rich," he mused aloud, fingering the silver dollars. "I am rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

Steward turned at a sound. He expected Indians.

The actor had followed him.

"Did you speak, sire?"

"I spoke, Bobby. I am rich, and I am planning my invasion of Mr. Lincoln's Whitehouse. But now I'm hungry. I can look forward to a running feud with Owen Lovejoy—and let us hope we do not share the Whitehouse together—and already I'm missing Evelyn like sin. But I'm hungry. My belly growls."

Bloch glanced over his shoulder. Reflections of a campfire flickered in the heart of the timber.

"Come," he said, "and I will sing for our supper. The aborigines have revealed a fondness for the Bard."

Benjamin Steward motioned him forward.

"Lay on, Running Tongue."

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

DURING the winter of 1967-68, a copy of a small book entitled *Abraham Lincoln's Lost Speech* was discovered in an attic in New York. The finder was an assistant editor of Ace Books, whose interest was aroused by *this* book. The slim volume (only 55 pages) had been printed by The DeVinne Press (presumably of New York City) in a limited edition of 500 copies, and was published February 12, 1897, for the Republican Club of the City of New York. It was described as a souvenir of the Eleventh Annual Lincoln Dinner of that club, sitting at the Waldorf.

The colophon reads:

New York
Printed for The Committee
1897

Some anonymous editor—perhaps one of that Dinner Committee—offered a preface which best describes the curious book:

"The lost speech of Abraham Lincoln was delivered at the first Republican State Convention of Illinois, at Bloomington, on the 29th of May, 1856. The excitement caused among the audience by the speech was so great that the reporters forgot to take their notes, and for many years it was generally supposed that no record of the speech had been preserved. It appears, however, that Mr. H.C. Whitney, then a young lawyer of Illinois, did take notes of the speech, which he preserved; and after a lapse of forty years they were transcribed and were pub-

lished in 'McClure's Magazine' for September, 1896, together with a letter from Mr. Joseph Medill, of the 'Chicago Tribune,' who was present at the convention and confirms the accuracy of Mr. Whitney's report.

"By the kind consent of Mr. Whitney, and through the courtesy of Mr. S.S. McClure, the speech is now reproduced by the Republican Club of the City of New York as a souvenir of Lincoln for its Annual Dinner on the 12th of February, 1897."

This reproduction, or more properly reconstruction, is one of several such efforts that were published in the months and years following the convention speech. No one can now attest to its accuracy, of course, and every similar attempt at reconstructing the speech was doomed to failure: the general public simply refused to accept any version as a reasonably authentic one, preferring to believe (and help build) the new myth, the myth that a magic Lincoln had delivered an equally magic "lost" speech.

It is curious that H.C. Whitney waited forty years to publish his reconstruction in *McClure's Magazine.* The demand for the speech was almost instantaneous, in view of the fact that neither the Bloomington nor the Chicago newspapers reproduced it. The only excuse offered for the failure to report it was that popular one circulated to this day: the reporters present were so overcome by the greatness of the speech, and the mesmeric speaker, that they sat entranced with pencil and paper forgotten.

A smaller school of skeptics hold that the speech was only a rabble-rousing harangue, not worth reporting.

If we may assume for the moment that the Whitney reconstruction, as published in *McClure's* and reprinted in the Lincoln Dinner souvenir volume, is fairly accurate, then both schools of thought are

built on firm grounds. The speech *was* fiery, hard-hitting, sensational—and it was also rabble-rousing to an astonishing degree in that it played upon the fears of the audience, fears that first Nebraska, then Illinois, then the United States would turn to slave-holding as a way of life. The reconstructed speech has Lincoln slyly comparing Missouri horse thieves to slave-holders and slave-traders, slipping across the river to ply their nefarious trades in Illinois.

It also puts words into his mouth and beliefs into his head which many people today would heatedly deny.

H.C. Whitney quotes Lincoln as follows:

(Speaking of a statement made by Stephen Douglas:) "As matter of fact, the first branch of the proposition is historically true; the government was made by white men, and they were and are the superior race. This I admit." (A paragraph later:) "Nor is it any argument that we are superior and the negro inferior—that he has but one talent while we have ten. Let the negro possess the little he has in independence; if he has but one talent, he should be permitted to keep the little he has." (Speaking on a plank in the Whig Party platform:) "We allow slavery to exist in the slave states—not because slavery is right or good, but from the necessities of our Union. . . . and that is what we propose—not to interfere with slavery where it exists (we have never tried to do it), and to give them a reasonable and efficient fugitive slave law. . . . It was part of the bargain, and I'm for living up to it. . . ."

The speech was already "lost" in the newspapers of the following day.

In 2578 A.D., the curator of a private museum set in motion the machinery to recover the legendary speech.

W.T.

"A TIME TRAVEL CLASSIC!

"The book begins in a ruthlessly regimented world, 610 years in our future. The past is mainly legend, and Time Researchers will undertake to prove selected parts of it to satisfy the curiosity of historians.

"One such wants a recording of the great 'lost' speech of Abraham Lincoln made in Illinois on May 29, 1856....

"Tucker has done a fine job of contrasting the rigidly regimented future age with the frontier rawness of Lincoln's Illinois ...and the suspense builds steadily."

—P. SCHUYLER MILLER, *PITTSBURGH PRESS*

"Particularly rich in perils and paradoxes. Tucker lends vivid credibility to both 2578 and 1856, to his time-adventuring 'Characters' and to the six-foot-four speechmaker on the threshold of greatness.

"Fresh, new, genuine, odd, original."

—ANTHONY BOUCHER, *N.Y. HERALD TRIBUNE*

COVER ART BY LEO & DIANE DILLON