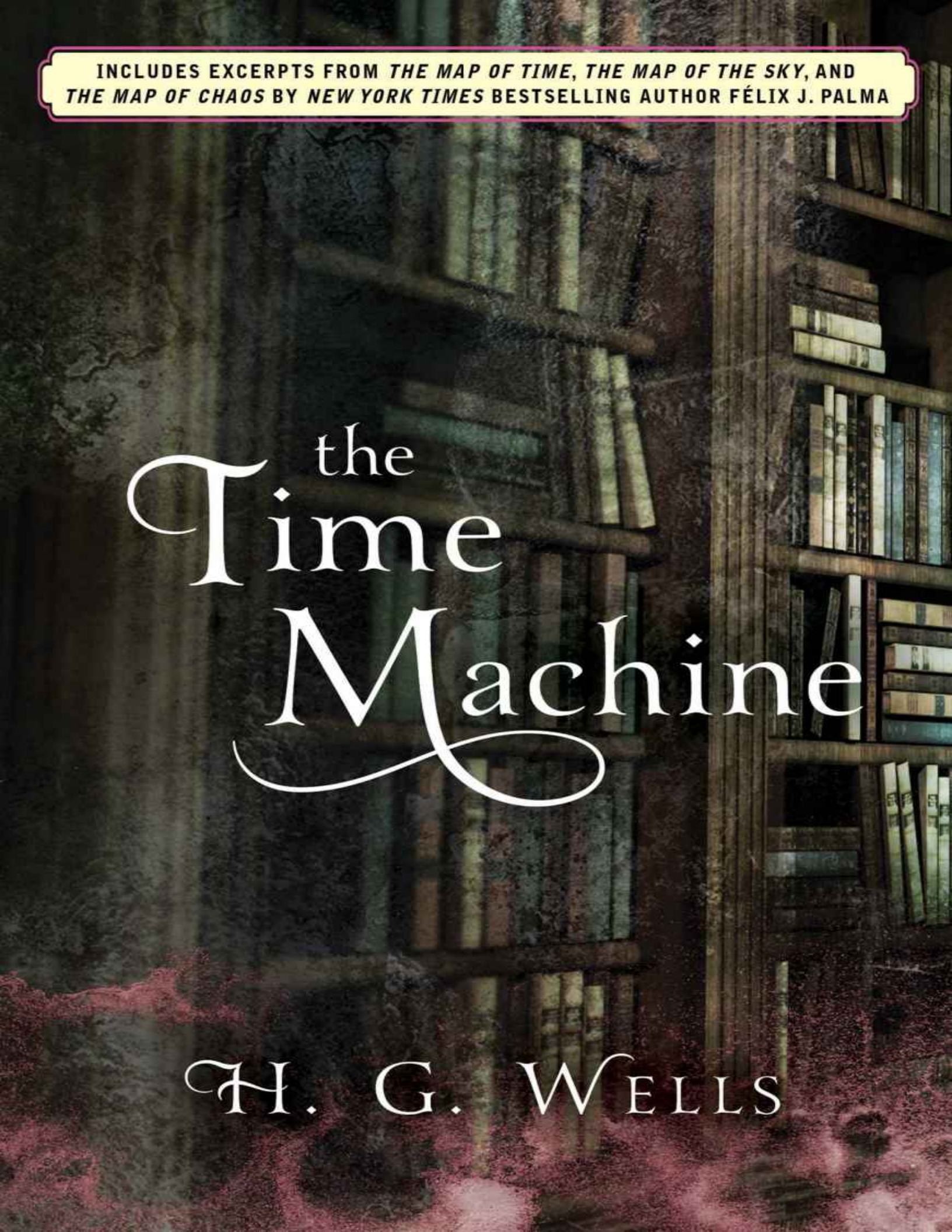
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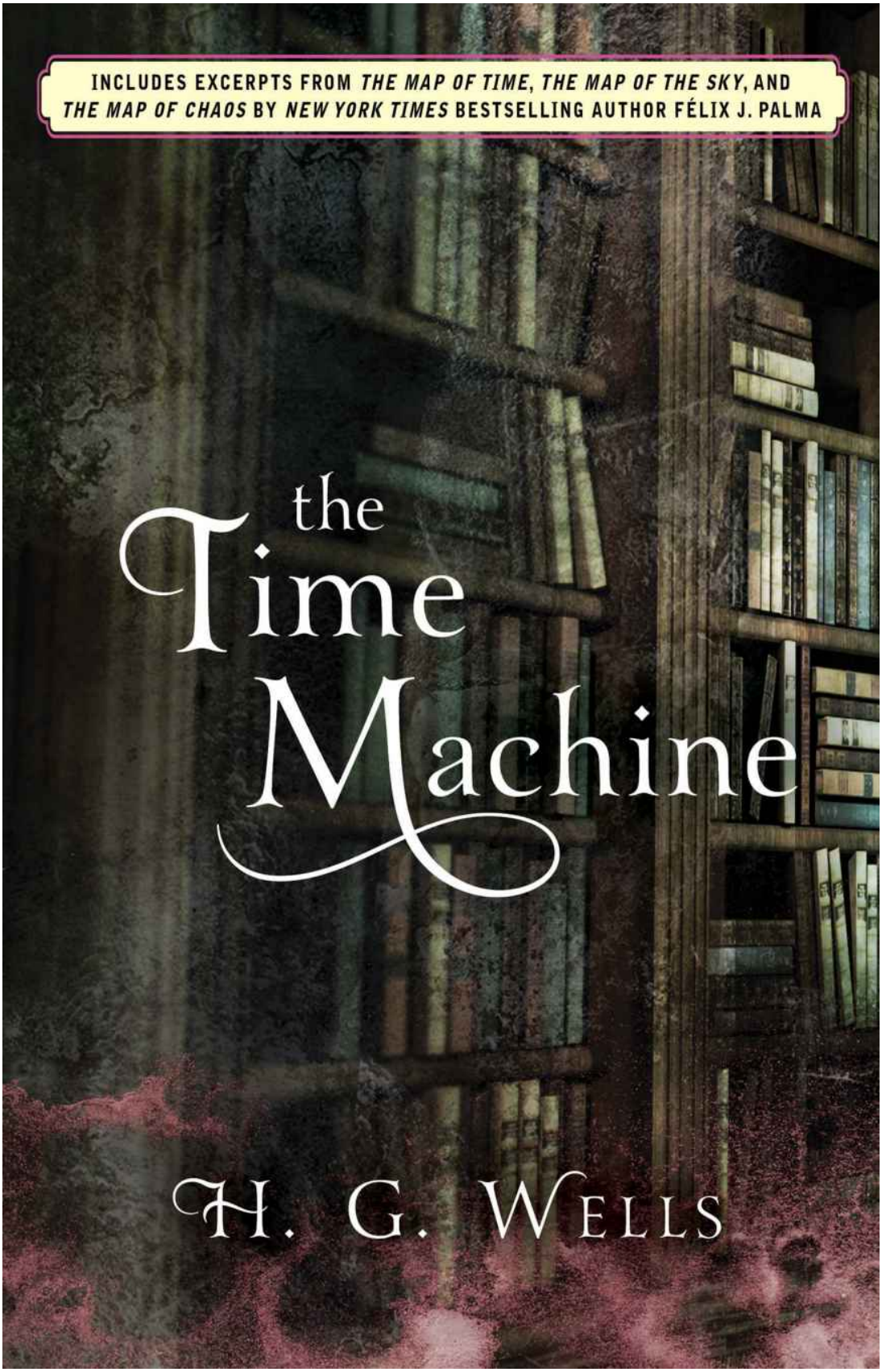
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The Time Machine

H. G. Wells

ATRIA PAPERBACK
New York London Toronto Sydney

I

THE TIME TRAVELLER (for so it will be convenient to speak of him) was expounding a recondite matter to us. His grey eyes shone and twinkled, and his usually pale face was flushed and animated. The fire burned brightly, and the soft radiance of the incandescent lights in the lilies of silver caught the bubbles that flashed and passed in our glasses. Our chairs, being his patents, embraced and caressed us rather than submitted to be sat upon, and there was that luxurious after-dinner atmosphere when thought runs gracefully free of the trammels of precision. And he put it to us in this way—marking the points with a lean forefinger—as we sat and lazily admired his earnestness over this new paradox (as we thought it:) and his fecundity.

"You must follow me carefully. I shall have to controvert one or two ideas that are almost universally accepted. The geometry, for instance, they taught you at school is founded on a misconception."

"Is not that rather a large thing to expect us to begin upon?" said Filby, an argumentative person with red hair.

"I do not mean to ask you to accept anything without reasonable ground for it. You will soon admit as much as I need from you. You know of course that a mathematical line, a line of thickness *nil*, has no real existence. They taught you that? Neither has a mathematical plane. These things are mere abstractions."

"That is all right," said the Psychologist.

"Nor, having only length, breadth, and thickness, can a cube have a real existence."

"There I object," said Filby. "Of course a solid body may exist. All real things—"

"So most people think. But wait a moment. Can an *instantaneous* cube exist?"

"Don't follow you," said Filby.

"Can a cube that does not last for any time at all, have a real existence?"

Filby became pensive. "Clearly," the Time Traveller proceeded, "any real body must have extension in *four* directions: it must have Length, Breadth, Thickness, and—Duration. But through a natural infirmity of the flesh, which I will explain to you in a moment, we incline to overlook this fact. There are really four dimensions, three which we call the three planes of Space, and a fourth, Time. There is, however, a tendency to draw an unreal distinction between the former three dimensions and the latter, because it happens that our consciousness moves intermittently in one direction along the latter from the beginning to the end of our lives."

"That," said a very young man, making spasmodic efforts to relight his cigar over the lamp; "that… very clear indeed."

"Now, it is very remarkable that this is so extensively overlooked," continued the Time Traveller, with a slight accession of cheerfulness. "Really this is what is meant by the Fourth Dimension, though some people who talk about the Fourth Dimension do not know they mean it. It is only another way of looking at Time. *There is no difference between Time and any of the three dimensions of Space except that our consciousness moves along it.* But some foolish people have got hold of the wrong side of that idea. You have all heard what they have to say about this Fourth Dimension?"[1]

"*I* have not," said the Provincial Mayor.

"It is simply this. That Space, as our mathematicians have it, is spoken of as having three dimensions, which one may call Length, Breadth, and Thickness, and is always definable by reference to three planes, each at right angles to the others. But some philosophical people have been asking why *three* dimensions particularly—why not another direction at right angles to the other three?—and have even tried to construct a Four-Dimension geometry. Professor Simon Newcomb was expounding this to the New York Mathematical Society only a month or so ago. You know how on a flat surface, which has only two dimensions, we can represent a figure of a three-dimensional solid, and similarly they think that by models of three dimensions they could represent one of four—if they could master the perspective of the thing. See?"

"I think so," murmured the Provincial Mayor, and, knitting his brows, he lapsed into an introspective state, his lips moving as one who repeats mystic words. "Yes, I think I see it now," he said after some time, brightening in a quite transitory manner.

"Well, I do not mind telling you I have been at work upon this geometry of Four Dimensions for some time. Some of my results are curious. For instance, here is a portrait of a man at eight years old, another at fifteen, another at seventeen, another at twenty-three, and so on. All these are evidently sections, as it were, Three-Dimensional representations of his Four-Dimensioned being, which is a fixed and unalterable thing.

"Scientific people," proceeded the Time Traveller, after the pause required for the proper assimilation of this, "know very well that Time is only a kind of Space. Here is a popular scientific diagram, a weather record. This line I trace with my finger shows the movement of the barometer. Yesterday it was so high, yesterday night it fell, then this morning it rose again, and so gently upward to here. Surely the mercury did not trace this line in any of the dimensions of Space generally recognized? But certainly it traced such a line, and that line, therefore, we must conclude was along the Time-Dimension."[2]

"But," said the Medical Man, staring hard at a coal in the fire, "if Time is really only a fourth dimension of Space, why is it, and why has it always been, regarded as something different? And why cannot we move in Time as we move about in the other dimensions of Space?"

The Time Traveller smiled. "Are you sure we can move freely in Space? Right and left we can go, backward and forward freely enough, and men always have done so. I admit we move freely in two dimensions. But how about up and down? Gravitation limits us there."

"Not exactly," said the Medical Man. "There are balloons."

"But before the balloons, save for spasmodic jumping and the inequalities of the surface, man had no freedom of vertical movement."

"Still they could move a little up and down," said the Medical Man.

"Easier, far easier down than up."

"And you cannot move at all in Time, you cannot get away from the present moment."

"My dear sir, that is just where you are wrong. That is just where the whole world has gone wrong. We are always getting away from the present moment. Our mental existences, which are immaterial and have no

dimensions, are passing along the Time-Dimension with a uniform velocity from the cradle to the grave. Just as we should travel *down* if we began our existence fifty miles above the earth's surface."

"But the great difficulty is this," interrupted the Psychologist. "You *can* move about in all directions of Space, but you cannot move about in Time."

"That is the germ of my great discovery. But you are wrong to say that we cannot move about in Time. For instance, if I am recalling an incident very vividly I go back to the instant of its occurrence: I become absentminded, as you say. I jump back for a moment. Of course we have no means of staying back for any length of Time, any more than a savage or an animal has of staying six feet above the ground. But a civilized man is better off than the savage in this respect. He can go up against gravitation in a balloon, and why should he not hope that ultimately he may be able to stop or accelerate his drift along the Time-Dimension, or even turn about and travel the other way?"

"Oh, *this*," began Filby, "is all—"

"Why not?" said the Time Traveller.

"It's against reason," said Filby.

"What reason?" said the Time Traveller.

"You can show black is white by argument," said Filby, "but you will never convince me."

"Possibly not," said the Time Traveller. "But now you begin to see the object of my investigations into the geometry of Four Dimensions. Long ago I had a vague inkling of a machine—"

"To travel through Time!" exclaimed the Very Young Man.

"That shall travel indifferently in any direction of Space and Time, as the driver determines."

Filby contented himself with laughter.

"But I have experimental verification,"[3] said the Time Traveller.

"It would be remarkably convenient for the historian," the Psychologist suggested. "One might travel back and verify the accepted account of the Battle of Hastings, for instance!"

"Don't you think you would attract attention?" said the Medical Man. "Our ancestors had no great tolerance for anachronisms."

"One might get one's Greek from the very lips of Homer and Plato," the Very Young Man thought.

"In which case they would certainly plough you for the Little-go. The German scholars have improved Greek so much."[4]

"Then there is the future," said the Very Young Man. "Just think! One might invest all one's money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and hurry on ahead!"

"To discover a society," said I, "erected on a strictly communistic basis."[5]

"Of all the wild extravagant theories!" began the Psychologist.

"Yes, so it seemed to me, and so I never talked of it until—"

"Experimental verification!" cried I. "You are going to verify *that?"*

"The experiment!" cried Filby, who was getting brain-weary.

"Let's see your experiment anyhow," said the Psychologist, "though it's all humbug, you know."

The Time Traveller smiled round at us. Then, still smiling faintly, and with his hands deep in his trouser pockets, he walked slowly out of the room, and we heard his slippers shuffling down the long passage to his laboratory.

The Psychologist looked at us. "I wonder what he's got?"

"Some sleight-of-hand trick or other," said the Medical Man, and Filby tried to tell us about a conjurer he had seen at Burslem;[6] but before he had finished his preface the Time Traveller came back, and Filby's anecdote collapsed.

The thing the Time Traveller held in his hand was a glittering metallic framework, scarcely larger than a small clock, and very delicately made. There was ivory in it, and some transparent crystalline substance. And now I must be explicit, for this that follows—unless his explanation is to be accepted—is an absolutely unaccountable thing. He took one of the small octagonal tables that were scattered about the room, and set it in front of the fire, with two legs on the hearthrug. On this table he placed the mechanism. Then he drew up a chair, and sat down. The only other object on the table was a small shaded lamp, the bright light of which fell upon the model. There were also perhaps a dozen candles about, two in brass candlesticks upon the mantel and several in sconces, so that the room was brilliantly illuminated. I sat in a low arm-chair nearest the fire, and I drew this forward so as to be almost between the Time Traveller and the fireplace. Filby sat behind him, looking over his shoulder. The Medical Man and the Provincial Mayor watched him in profile from the right, the Psychologist from the left. The Very Young Man stood behind the Psychologist. We were all on the alert. It

appears incredible to me that any kind of trick, however subtly conceived and however adroitly done, could have been played upon us under these conditions.

The Time Traveller looked at us, and then at the mechanism. “Well?” said the Psychologist.

“This little affair,” said the Time Traveller, resting his elbows upon the table and pressing his hands together above the apparatus, “is only a model. It is my plan for a machine to travel through time. You will notice that it looks singularly askew, and that there is an odd twinkling appearance about this bar, as though it was in some way unreal.” He pointed to the part with his finger. “Also, here is one little white lever, and here is another.”

The Medical Man got up out of his chair and peered into the thing. “It’s beautifully made,” he said.

“It took two years to make,” retorted the Time Traveller. Then, when we had all imitated the action of the Medical Man, he said: “Now I want you clearly to understand that this lever, being pressed over, sends the maching gliding into the future, and this other reverses the motion. This saddle represents the seat of a time traveller. Presently I am going to press the lever, and off the machine will go. It will vanish, pass into future Time, and disappear. Have a good look at the thing. Look at the table too, and satisfy yourselves there is no trickery. I don’t want to waste this model, and then be told I’m a quack.”

There was a minute’s pause perhaps. The Psychologist seemed about to speak to me, but changed his mind. Then the Time Traveller put forth his finger towards the lever. “No,” he said suddenly. “Lend me your hand.” And turning to the Psychologist, he took that individual’s hand in his own and told him to put out his forefinger. So that it was the Psychologist himself who sent forth the model Time Machine on its interminable voyage. We all saw the lever turn. I am absolutely certain there was no trickery. There was a breath of wind, and the lamp flame jumped. One of the candles on the mantel was blown out, and the little machine suddenly swung round, became indistinct, was seen as a ghost for a second perhaps, as an eddy of faintly glittering brass and ivory; and it was gone—vanished! Save for the lamp the table was bare.

Everyone was silent for a minute. Then Filby said he was damned.

The Psychologist recovered from his stupor, and suddenly looked under the table. At that the Time Traveller laughed cheerfully. “Well?” he said, with

a reminiscence of the Psychologist. Then, getting up, he went to the tobacco jar on the mantel, and with his back to us began to fill his pipe.

We stared at each other. "Look here," said the Medical Man, "are you in earnest about this? Do you seriously believe that that machine has travelled into time?"

"Certainly," said the Time Traveller, stooping to light a spill at the fire. Then he turned, lighting his pipe, to look at the Psychologist's face. (The Psychologist, to show that he was not unhinged, helped himself to a cigar and tried to light it uncut.) "What is more, I have a big machine nearly finished in there"—he indicated the laboratory—"and when that is put together I mean to have a journey on my own account."

"You mean to say that that machine has travelled into the future?" said Filby.

"Into the future or the past—I don't, for certain, know which."

After an interval the Psychologist had an inspiration. "It must have gone into the past if it has gone anywhere," he said.

"Why?" said the Time Traveller.

"Because I presume that it has not moved in space, and if it travelled into the future it would still be here all this time, since it must have travelled through this time."

"But," I said, "if it travelled into the past it would have been visible when we came first into this room; and last Thursday when we were here; and the Thursday before that; and so forth!"[7]

"Serious objections," remarked the Provincial Mayor, with an air of impartiality, turning towards the Time Traveller.

"Not a bit," said the Time Traveller, and, to the Psychologist: "You think. *You* can explain that. It's presentation below the threshold, you know, diluted presentation."

"Of course," said the Psychologist, and reassured us. "That's a simple point of psychology. I should have thought of it. It's plain enough, and helps the paradox delightfully. We cannot see it, nor can we appreciate this machine, any more than we can the spoke of a wheel spinning, or a bullet flying through the air. If it is travelling through time fifty times or a hundred times faster than we are, if it gets through a minute while we get through a second, the impression it creates will of course be only one-fiftieth or one-hundredth of what it would make if it were not travelling in time. That's plain

enough." He passed his hand through the space in which the machine had been. "You see?" he said, laughing.

We sat and stared at the vacant table for a minute or so. Then the Time Traveller asked us what we thought of it all.

"It sounds plausible enough to-night," said the Medical Man; "but wait until to-morrow. Wait for the common sense of the morning."

"Would you like to see the Time Machine itself?" asked the Time Traveller. And therewith, taking the lamp in his hand, he led the way down the long, draughty corridor to his laboratory. I remember vividly the flickering light, his queer, broad head in silhouette, the dance of the shadows, how we all followed him, puzzled but incredulous, and how there in the laboratory we beheld a larger edition of the little mechanism which we had seen vanish from before our eyes. Parts were of nickel, parts of ivory, parts had certainly been filed or sawn out of rock crystal. The thing was generally complete, but the twisted crystalline bars lay unfinished upon the bench beside some sheets of drawings, and I took one up for a better look at it. Quartz it seemed to be.

"Look here," said the Medical Man, "are you perfectly serious? Or is this a trick—like that ghost you showed us last Christmas?"

"Upon that machine," said the Time Traveller, holding the lamp aloft, "I intend to explore time. Is that plain? I was never more serious in my life."

None of us quite knew how to take it.

I caught Filby's eye over the shoulder of the Medical Man, and he winked at me solemnly.

II

I THINK THAT at that time none of us quite believed in the Time Machine. The fact is, the Time Traveller was one of those men who are too clever to be believed: you never felt that you saw all round him; you always suspected some subtle reserve, some ingenuity in ambush, behind his lucid frankness. Had Filby shown the model and explained the matter in the Time Traveller's words, we should have shown *him* far less scepticism. For we should have perceived his motives; a pork butcher could understand Filby. But the Time Traveller had more than a touch of whim among his elements, and we distrusted him. Things that would have made the frame of a less clever man seemed tricks in his hands. It is a mistake to do things too easily. The serious people who took him seriously never felt quite sure of his deportment; they were somehow aware that trusting their reputations for judgment with him was like furnishing a nursery with egg-shell china. So I don't think any of us said very much about time travelling in the interval between that Thursday and the next, though its odd potentialities ran, no doubt, in most of our minds: its plausibility, that is, its practical incredibleness, the curious possibilities of anachronism and of utter confusion it suggested. For my own part, I was particularly preoccupied with the trick of the model. That I remember discussing with the Medical Man, whom I met on Friday at the Linnaean.[1] He said he had seen a similar thing at Tübingen, and laid considerable stress on the blowing out of the candle. But how the trick was done he could not explain.

The next Thursday I went again to Richmond—I suppose I was one of the Time Traveller's most constant guests—and, arriving late, found four or five men already assembled in his drawing-room. The Medical Man was standing

before the fire with a sheet of paper in one hand and his watch in the other. I looked round for the Time Traveller, and—"It's half-past seven now," said the Medical Man. "I suppose we'd better have dinner?"

"Where's ———?" said I, naming our host.

"You've just come? It's rather odd. He's unavoidably detained. He asks me in this note to lead off with dinner at seven if he's not back. Says he'll explain when he comes."

"It seems a pity to let the dinner spoil," said the Editor of a well-known daily paper; and thereupon the Doctor rang the bell.

The Psychologist was the only person besides the Doctor and myself who had attended the previous dinner. The other men were Blank, the Editor aforementioned, a certain journalist, and another—a quiet, shy man with a beard—whom I didn't know, and who, as far as my observation went, never opened his mouth all the evening. There was some speculation at the dinner-table about the Time Traveller's absence, and I suggested time travelling, in a half-jocular spirit. The Editor wanted that explained to him, and the Psychologist volunteered a wooden account of the "ingenious paradox and trick" we had witnessed that day week. He was in the midst of his exposition when the door from the corridor opened slowly and without noise. I was facing the door, and saw it first. "Hallo!" I said. "At last!" And the door opened wider, and the Time Traveller stood before us. I gave a cry of surprise. "Good heavens! man, what's the matter?" cried the Medical Man, who saw him next. And the whole tableful turned towards the door.

He was in an amazing plight. His coat was dusty and dirty, and smeared with green down the sleeves; his hair disordered, and as it seemed to me greyer—either with dust and dirt or because its colour had actually faded. His face was ghastly pale; his chin had a brown cut on it—a cut half healed; his expression was haggard and drawn, as by intense suffering. For a moment he hesitated in the doorway, as if he had been dazzled by the light. Then he came into the room. He walked with just such a limp as I have seen in footsore tramps. We stared at him in silence, expecting him to speak.

He said not a word, but came painfully to the table, and made a motion towards the wine. The Editor filled a glass of champagne, and pushed it towards him. He drained it, and it seemed to do him good: for he looked round the table, and the ghost of his old smile flickered across his face. "What on earth have you been up to, man?" said the Doctor. The Time Traveller did not seem to hear. "Don't let me disturb you," he said, with a

certain faltering articulation. “I’m all right.” He stopped, held out his glass for more, and took it off at a draught. “That’s good,” he said. His eyes grew brighter, and a faint colour came into his cheeks. His glance flickered over our faces with a certain dull approval, and then went round the warm and comfortable room. Then he spoke again, still as it were feeling his way among his words. “I’m going to wash and dress, and then I’ll come down and explain things…. Save me some of that mutton. I’m starving for a bit of meat.”

He looked across at the Editor, who was a rare visitor, and hoped he was all right. The Editor began a question. “Tell you presently,” said the Time Traveller. “I’m—funny! Be all right in a minute.”

He put down his glass, and walked towards the staircase door. Again I remarked his lameness and the soft padding sound of his footfall, and standing up in my place, I saw his feet as he went out. He had nothing on them but a pair of tattered, blood-stained socks. Then the door closed upon him. I had half a mind to follow, till I remembered how he detested any fuss about himself. For a minute, perhaps, my mind was wool-gathering. Then, “Remarkable Behaviour of an Eminent Scientist,” I heard the Editor say, thinking (after his wont) in headlines. And this brought my attention back to the bright dinner-table.

“What’s the game?” said the Journalist. “Has he been doing the Amateur Cadger?[2] I don’t follow.” I met the eye of the Psychologist, and read my own interpretation in his face. I thought of the Time Traveller limping painfully upstairs. I don’t think any one else had noticed his lameness.

The first to recover completely from this surprise was the Medical Man, who rang the bell—the Time Traveller hated to have servants waiting at dinner—for a hot plate. At that the Editor turned to his knife and fork with a grunt, and the Silent Man followed suit. The dinner was resumed. Conversation was exclamatory for a little while, with gaps of wonderment; and then the Editor got fervent in his curiosity. “Does our friend eke out his modest income with a crossing? or has he his Nebuchadnezzar[3] phases?” he inquired. “I feel assured it’s this business of the Time Machine,” I said, and took up the Psychologist’s account of our previous meeting. The new guests were frankly incredulous. The Editor raised objections. “What *was* this time travelling? A man couldn’t cover himself with dust by rolling in a paradox, could he?” And then, as the idea came home to him, he resorted to caricature. Hadn’t they any clothes-brushes in the Future? The Journalist, too, would not

believe at any price, and joined the Editor in the easy work of heaping ridicule on the whole thing. They were both the new kind of journalist—very joyous, irreverent young men. "Our Special Correspondent in the Day after To-morrow reports," the Journalist was saying—or rather shouting—when the Time Traveller came back. He was dressed in ordinary evening clothes, and nothing save his haggard look remained of the change that had startled me.

"I say," said the Editor hilariously, "these chaps here say you have been travelling into the middle of next week! Tell us all about little Rosebery,[4] will you? What will you take for the lot?"

The Time Traveller came to the place reserved for him without a word. He smiled quietly, in his old way. "Where's my mutton?" he said. "What a treat it is to stick a fork into meat again!"

"Story!" cried the Editor.

"Story be damned!" said the Time Traveller. "I want something to eat. I won't say a word until I get some peptone[5] into my arteries. Thanks. And the salt."

"One word," said I. "Have you been time travelling?"

"Yes," said the Time Traveller, with his mouth full, nodding his head.

"I'd give a shilling a line for a verbatim note," said the Editor. The Time Traveller pushed his glass towards the Silent Man and rang it with his fingernail; at which the Silent Man, who had been staring at his face, started convulsively, and poured him wine. The rest of the dinner was uncomfortable. For my own part, sudden questions kept on rising to my lips, and I dare say it was the same with the others. The Journalist tried to relieve the tension by telling anecdotes of Hettie Potter. The Time Traveller devoted his attention to his dinner, and displayed the appetite of a tramp. The Medical Man smoked a cigarette, and watched the Time Traveller through his eyelashes. The Silent Man seemed even more clumsy than usual, and drank champagne with regularity and determination out of sheer nervousness. At last the Time Traveller pushed his plate away, and looked round us. "I suppose I must apologize," he said. "I was simply starving. I've had a most amazing time." He reached out his hand for a cigar, and cut the end. "But come into the smoking-room. It's too long a story to tell over greasy plates." And ringing the bell in passing, he led the way into the adjoining room.

"You have told Blank, and Dash, and Chose about the machine?" he said to me, leaning back in his easy-chair and naming the three new guests.

“But the thing’s a mere paradox,” said the Editor.

“I can’t argue to-night. I don’t mind telling you the story, but I can’t argue. I will,” he went on, “tell you the story of what has happened to me, if you like, but you must refrain from interruptions. I want to tell it. Badly. Most of it will sound like lying. So be it! It’s true—every word of it, all the same. I was in my laboratory at four o’clock, and since then… I’ve lived eight days… such days as no human being ever lived before! I’m nearly worn out, but I shan’t sleep till I’ve told this thing over to you. Then I shall go to bed. But no interruptions! Is it agreed?”

“Agreed,” said the Editor, and the rest of us echoed “Agreed.” And with that the Time Traveller began his story as I have set it forth. He sat back in his chair at first, and spoke like a weary man. Afterwards he got more animated. In writing it down I feel with only too much keenness the inadequacy of pen and ink—and, above all, my own inadequacy—to express its quality. You read, I will suppose, attentively enough; but you cannot see the speaker’s white, sincere face in the bright circle of the little lamp, nor hear the intonation of his voice. You cannot know how his expression followed the turns of his story! Most of us hearers were in shadow, for the candles in the smoking-room had not been lighted, and only the face of the Journalist and the legs of the Silent Man from the knees downward were illuminated. At first we glanced now and again at each other. After a time we ceased to do that, and looked only at the Time Traveller’s face.

III

"I TOLD SOME OF YOU last Thursday of the principles of the Time Machine, and showed you the actual thing itself, incomplete in the workshop. There it is now, a little travel-worn, truly; and one of the ivory bars is cracked, and a brass rail bent; but the rest of it's sound enough. I expected to finish it on Friday, but on Friday, when the putting together was nearly done, I found that one of the nickel bars was exactly one inch too short, and this I had to get remade; so that the thing was not complete until this morning. It was at ten o'clock to-day that the first of all Time Machines began its career. I gave it a last tap, tried all the screws again, put one more drop of oil on the quartz rod, and sat myself in the saddle. I suppose a suicide who holds a pistol to his skull feels much the same wonder at what will come next as I felt then. I took the starting lever in one hand and the stopping one in the other, pressed the first, and almost immediately the second. I seemed to reel; I felt a nightmare sensation of falling; and, looking round, I saw the laboratory exactly as before. Had anything happened? For a moment I suspected that my intellect had tricked me. Then I noted the clock. A moment before, as it seemed, it had stood at a minute or so past ten; now it was nearly half-past three!

"I drew a breath, set my teeth, gripped the starting lever with both hands, and went off with a thud. The laboratory got hazy and went dark. Mrs. Watchett came in and walked, apparently without seeing me, towards the garden door. I suppose it took her a minute or so to traverse the place, but to me she seemed to shoot across the room like a rocket. I pressed the lever over to its extreme position. The night came like the turning out of a lamp, and in another moment came to-morrow. The laboratory grew faint and hazy, then fainter and ever fainter. To-morrow night came black, then day again,

night again, day again, faster and faster still. An eddying murmur filled my ears, and a strange, dumb confusedness descended on my mind.

"I am afraid I cannot convey the peculiar sensations of time travelling. They are excessively unpleasant. There is a feeling exactly like that one has upon a switchback—of a helpless headlong motion! I felt the same horrible anticipation, too, of an imminent smash. As I put on pace, night followed day like the flapping of a black wing. The dim suggestion of the laboratory seemed presently to fall away from me, and I saw the sun hopping swiftly across the sky, leaping it every minute, and every minute marking a day. I supposed the laboratory had been destroyed and I had come into the open air. I had a dim impression of scaffolding, but I was already going too fast to be conscious of any moving things. The slowest snail that ever crawled dashed by too fast for me. The twinkling succession of darkness and light was excessively painful to the eye. Then, in the intermittent darknesses, I saw the moon spinning swiftly through her quarters from new to full, and had a faint glimpse of the circling stars. Presently, as I went on, still gaining velocity, the palpitation of night and day merged into one continuous greyness; the sky took on a wonderful deepness of blue, a splendid luminous color like that of early twilight; the jerking sun became a streak of fire, a brilliant arch, in space; the moon a fainter fluctuating band; and I could see nothing of the stars, save now and then a brighter circle flickering in the blue.

"The landscape was misty and vague. I was still on the hill-side upon which this house now stands, and the shoulder rose above me grey and dim. I saw trees growing and changing like puffs of vapour, now brown, now green; they grew, spread, shivered, and passed away. I saw huge buildings rise up faint and fair, and pass like dreams. The whole surface of the earth seemed changed—melting and flowing under my eyes. The little hands upon the dials that registered my speed raced round faster and faster. Presently I noted that the sun belt swayed up and down, from solstice to solstice, in a minute or less, and that consequently my pace was over a year a minute; and minute by minute the white snow flashed across the world, and vanished, and was followed by the bright, brief green of spring.

"The unpleasant sensations of the start were less poignant now. They merged at last into a kind of hysterical exhilaration. I remarked indeed a clumsy swaying of the machine, for which I was unable to account. But my mind was too confused to attend to it, so with a kind of madness growing upon me, I flung myself into futurity. At first I scarce thought of stopping,

scarce thought of anything but these new sensations. But presently a fresh series of impressions grew up in my mind—a certain curiosity and therewith a certain dread—until at last they took complete possession of me. What strange developments of humanity, what wonderful advances upon our rudimentary civilization, I thought, might not appear when I came to look nearly into the dim elusive world that raced and fluctuated before my eyes! I saw great and splendid architecture rising about me, more massive than any buildings of our own time, and yet, as it seemed, built of glimmer and mist. I saw a richer green flow up the hill-side, and remain there without any wintry intermission. Even through the veil of my confusion the earth seemed very fair. And so my mind came round to the business of stopping.

"The peculiar risk lay in the possibility of my finding some substance in the space which I, or the machine, occupied. So long as I travelled at a high velocity through time, this scarcely mattered; I was, so to speak, attenuated—was slipping like a vapour through the interstices of intervening substances! But to come to a stop involved the jamming of myself, molecule by molecule, into whatever lay in my way; meant bringing my atoms into such intimate contact with those of the obstacle that a profound chemical reaction—possibly a far-reaching explosion—would result, and blow myself and my apparatus out of all possible dimensions—into the Unknown.[1] This possibility had occurred to me again and again while I was making the machine; but then I had cheerfully accepted it as an unavoidable risk—one of the risks a man has got to take! Now the risk was inevitable, I no longer saw it in the same cheerful light. The fact is that, insensibly, the absolute strangeness of everything, the sickly jarring and swaying of the machine, above all, the feeling of prolonged falling, had absolutely upset my nerve. I told myself that I could never stop, and with a gust of petulance I resolved to stop forthwith. Like an impatient fool, I lugged over the lever, and incontinently the thing went reeling over, and I was flung headlong through the air.

"There was the sound of a clap of thunder in my ears. I may have been stunned for a moment. A pitiless hail was hissing round me, and I was sitting on soft turf in front of the overset machine. Everything still seemed grey, but presently I remarked that the confusion in my ears was gone. I looked round me. I was on what seemed to be a little lawn in a garden, surrounded by rhododendron bushes, and I noticed that their mauve and purple blossoms were dropping in a shower under the beating of the hail-stones. The

rebounding, dancing hail hung in a cloud over the machine, and drove along the ground like smoke. In a moment I was wet to the skin. 'Fine hospitality,' said I, 'to a man who has travelled innumerable years to see you.'

"Presently I thought what a fool I was to get wet. I stood up and looked round me. A colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone, loomed indistinctly beyond the rhododendrons through the hazy downpour. But all else of the world was invisible.

"My sensations would be hard to describe. As the columns of hail grew thinner, I saw the white figure more distinctly. It was very large, for a silver birch-tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a winged sphinx, but the wings, instead of being carried vertically at the sides, were spread so that it seemed to hover. The pedestal, it appeared to me, was of bronze, and was thick with verdigris.[2] It chanced that the face was towards me; the sightless eyes seemed to watch me; there was the faint shadow of a smile on the lips. It was greatly weather-worn, and that imparted an unpleasant suggestion of disease. I stood looking at it for a little space—half a minute, perhaps, or half an hour. It seemed to advance and to recede as the hail drove before it denser or thinner. At last I tore my eyes from it for a moment, and saw that the hail curtain had worn threadbare, and that the sky was lightening with the promise of the sun.

"I looked up again at the crouching white shape, and the full temerity of my voyage came suddenly upon me. What might appear when that hazy curtain was altogether withdrawn? What might not have happened to men? What if cruelty had grown into a common passion? What if in this interval the race had lost its manliness, and had developed into something inhuman, unsympathetic, and overwhelmingly powerful? I might seem some old-world savage animal, only the more dreadful and disgusting for our common likeness—a foul creature to be incontinently slain.

"Already I saw other vast shapes—huge buildings with intricate parapets and tall columns, with a wooded hill-side dimly creeping in upon me through the lessening storm. I was seized with a panic fear. I turned frantically to the Time Machine, and strove hard to readjust it. As I did so the shafts of the sun smote through the thunderstorm. The grey downpour was swept aside and vanished like the trailing garments of a ghost. Above me, in the intense blue of the summer sky, some faint brown shreds of cloud whirled into nothingness. The great buildings about me stood out clear and distinct, shining with the wet of the thunderstorm, and picked out in white by the

unmelted hailstones piled along their courses. I felt naked in a strange world. I felt as perhaps a bird may feel in the clear air, knowing the hawk wings above and will swoop. My fear grew to frenzy. I took a breathing space, set my teeth, and again grappled fiercely, wrist and knee, with the machine. It struck my chin violently. One hand on the saddle, the other on the lever, I stood panting heavily in attitude to mount again.

"But with this recovery of a prompt retreat my courage recovered. I looked more curiously and less fearfully at this world of the remote future. In a circular opening, high up in the wall of the nearer house, I saw a group of figures clad in rich soft robes. They had seen me, and their faces were directed towards me.

"Then I heard voices approaching me. Coming through the bushes by the White Sphinx were the heads and shoulders of men running. One of these emerged in a pathway leading straight to the little lawn upon which I stood with my machine. He was a slight creature—perhaps four feet high—clad in a purple tunic, girdled at the waist with a leather belt. Sandals or buskins—I could not clearly distinguish which—were on his feet; his legs were bare to the knees, and his head was bare. Noticing that, I noticed for the first time how warm the air was.

"He struck me as being a very beautiful and graceful creature, but indescribably frail. His flushed face reminded me of the more beautiful kind of consumptive[3]—that hectic beauty of which we used to hear so much. At the sight of him I suddenly regained confidence. I took my hands from the machine.

IV

"IN ANOTHER MOMENT we were standing face to face, I and this fragile thing out of futurity. He came straight up to me and laughed into my eyes. The absence from his bearing of any sign of fear struck me at once. Then he turned to the two others who were following him and spoke to them in a strange and very sweet and liquid tongue.

"There were others coming, and presently a little group of perhaps eight or ten of these exquisite creatures were about me. One of them addressed me. It came into my head, oddly enough, that my voice was too harsh and deep for them. So I shook my head, and, pointing to my ears, shook it again. He came a step forward, hesitated, and then touched my hand. Then I felt other soft little tentacles upon my back and shoulders. They wanted to make sure I was real. There was nothing in this at all alarming. Indeed, there was something in these pretty little people that inspired confidence—a graceful gentleness, a certain child-like ease. And besides, they looked so frail that I could fancy myself flinging the whole dozen of them about like nine-pins. But I made a sudden motion to warn them when I saw their little pink hands feeling at the Time Machine. Happily then, when it was not too late, I thought of a danger I had hitherto forgotten, and reaching over the bars of the machine I unscrewed the little levers that would set it in motion, and put these in my pocket. Then I turned again to see what I could do in the way of communication.

"And then, looking more nearly into their features, I saw some further peculiarities in their Dresden-china[1] type of prettiness. Their hair, which was uniformly curly, came to a sharp end at the neck and cheek; there was not the faintest suggestion of it on the face, and their ears were singularly minute. The mouths were small, with bright red, rather thin lips, and the little chins

ran to a point. The eyes were large and mild; and—this may seem egotism on my part—I fancied even that there was a certain lack of the interest I might have expected in them.

"As they made no effort to communicate with me, but simply stood round me smiling and speaking in soft cooing notes to each other, I began the conversation. I pointed to the Time Machine and to myself. Then hesitating for a moment how to express time, I pointed to the sun. At once a quaintly pretty little figure in chequered purple and white followed my gesture, and then astonished me by imitating the sound of thunder.

"For a moment I was staggered, though the import of his gesture was plain enough. The question had come into my mind abruptly: were these creatures fools? You may hardly understand how it took me. You see, I had always anticipated that the people of the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand odd would be incredibly in front of us in knowledge, art, everything. Then one of them suddenly asked me a question that showed him to be on the intellectual level of one of our five-year-old children—asked me, in fact, if I had come from the sun in a thunderstorm! It let loose the judgment I had suspended upon their clothes, their frail light limbs, and fragile features. A flow of disappointment rushed across my mind. For a moment I felt that I had built the Time Machine in vain.

"I nodded, pointed to the sun, and gave them such a vivid rendering of a thunderclap as startled them. They all withdrew a pace or so and bowed. Then came one laughing towards me, carrying a chain of beautiful flowers altogether new to me, and put it about my neck. The idea was received with melodious applause; and presently they were all running to and fro for flowers, and laughingly flinging them upon me until I was almost smothered with blossom. You who have never seen the like can scarcely imagine what delicate and wonderful flowers countless years of culture had created. Then someone suggested that their plaything should be exhibited in the nearest building, and so I was led past the sphinx of white marble, which had seemed to watch me all the while with a smile at my astonishment, towards a vast grey edifice of fretted stone. As I went with them the memory of my confident anticipations of a profoundly grave and intellectual posterity came, with irresistible merriment, to my mind.

"The building had a huge entry, and was altogether of colossal dimensions. I was naturally most occupied with the growing crowd of little people, and with the big open portals that yawned before me shadowy and

mysterious. My general impression of the world I saw over their heads was a tangled waste of beautiful bushes and flowers, a long-neglected and yet weedless garden. I saw a number of tall spikes of strange white flowers, measuring a foot perhaps across the spread of the waxen petals. They grew scattered, as if wild, among the variegated shrubs, but, as I say, I did not examine them closely at this time. The Time Machine was left deserted on the turf among the rhododendrons.

"The arch of the doorway was richly carved, but naturally I did not observe the carving very narrowly, though I fancied I saw suggestions of old Phoenician[2] decorations as I passed through, and it struck me that they were very badly broken and weather-worn. Several more brightly clad people met me in the doorway, and so we entered, I, dressed in dingy nineteenth-century garments, looking grotesque enough, garlanded with flowers, and surrounded by an eddying mass of bright, soft-coloured robes and shining white limbs, in a melodious whirl of laughter and laughing speech.

"The big doorway opened into a proportionately great hall hung with brown. The roof was in shadow, and the windows, partially glazed with coloured glass and partially unglazed, admitted a tempered light. The floor was made up of huge blocks of some very hard white metal, not plates nor slabs—blocks, and it was so much worn, as I judged by the going to and fro of past generations, as to be deeply channelled along the more frequented ways. Transverse to the length were innumerable tables made of slabs of polished stone, raised perhaps a foot from the floor, and upon these were heaps of fruits. Some I recognized as a kind of hypertrophied[3] raspberry and orange, but for the most part they were strange.

"Between the tables were scattered a great number of cushions. Upon these my conductors seated themselves, signing for me to do likewise. With a pretty absence of ceremony they began to eat the fruit with their hands, flinging peel and stalks, and so forth, into the round openings in the sides of the tables. I was not loath to follow their example, for I felt thirsty and hungry. As I did so I surveyed the hall at my leisure.

"And perhaps the thing that struck me most was its dilapidated look. The stained-glass windows, which displayed only a geometrical pattern, were broken in many places, and the curtains that hung across the lower end were thick with dust. And it caught my eye that the corner of the marble table near me was fractured. Nevertheless, the general effect was extremely rich and picturesque. There were, perhaps, a couple of hundred people dining in the

hall, and most of them, seated as near to me as they could come, were watching me with interest, their little eyes shining over the fruit they were eating. All were clad in the same soft, and yet strong, silky material.

"Fruit, by the by, was all their diet. These people of the remote future were strict vegetarians, and while I was with them, in spite of some carnal cravings, I had to be frugivorous also. Indeed, I found afterwards that horses, cattle, sheep, dogs, had followed the Ichthyosaurus into extinction. But the fruits were very delightful; one, in particular, that seemed to be in season all the time I was there—a floury thing in a three-sided husk—was especially good, and I made it my staple. At first I was puzzled by all these strange fruits, and by the stranger flowers I saw, but later I began to perceive their import.

"However, I am telling you of my fruit dinner in the distant future now. So soon as my appetite was a little checked, I determined to make a resolute attempt to learn the speech of these new men of mine. Clearly that was the next thing to do. The fruits seemed a convenient thing to begin upon, and holding one of these up I began a series of interrogative sounds and gestures. I had some considerable difficulty in conveying my meaning. At first my efforts met with a stare of surprise or inextinguishable laughter, but presently a fair-haired little creature seemed to grasp my intention and repeated a name. They had to chatter and explain the business at great length to each other, and my first attempts to make the exquisite little sounds of their language caused an immense amount of amusement. However, I felt like a schoolmaster amidst children, and persisted, and presently I had a score of noun substantives at least at my command; and then I got to demonstrative pronouns, and even the verb 'to eat.' But it was slow work, and the little people soon tired and wanted to get away from my interrogations, so I determined, rather of necessity, to let them give their lessons in little doses when they felt inclined. And very little doses I found they were before long, for I never met people more indolent or more easily fatigued.

"A queer thing I soon discovered about my little hosts, and that was their lack of interest. They would come to me with eager cries of astonishment, like children, but like children they would soon stop examining me and wander away after some other toy. The dinner and my conversational beginnings ended, I noted for the first time that almost all those who had surrounded me at first were gone. It is odd, too, how speedily I came to disregard these little people. I went out through the portal into the sunlit

world again so soon as my hunger was satisfied. I was continually meeting more of these men of the future, who would follow me a little distance, chatter and laugh about me, and, having smiled and gesticulated in a friendly way, leave me again to my own devices.

"The calm of evening was upon the world as I emerged from the great hall, and the scene was lit by the warm glow of the setting sun. At first things were very confusing. Everything was so entirely different from the world I had known—even the flowers. The big building I had left was situated on the slope of a broad river valley, but the Thames had shifted perhaps a mile from its present position. I resolved to mount to the summit of a crest, perhaps a mile and a half away, from which I could get a wider view of this our planet in the year Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One A.D. For that, I should explain, was the date the little dials of my machine recorded.

"As I walked I was watchful for every impression that could possibly help to explain the condition of ruinous splendour in which I found the world—for ruinous it was. A little way up the hill, for instance, was a great heap of granite, bound together by masses of aluminium, a vast labyrinth of precipitous walls and crumbled heaps, amidst which were thick heaps of very beautiful pagoda-like plants—nettles possibly—but wonderfully tinted with brown about the leaves, and incapable of stinging. It was evidently the derelict remains of some vast structure, to what end built I could not determine. It was here that I was destined, at a later date, to have a very strange experience—the first intimation of a still stranger discovery—but of that I will speak in its proper place.

"Looking round with a sudden thought, from a terrace on which I rested for a while, I realized that there were no small houses to be seen. Apparently the single house, and possibly even the household, had vanished. Here and there among the greenery were palacelike buildings, but the house and the cottage, which form such characteristic features of our own English landscape, had disappeared.

"'Communism,'[4] said I to myself.

"And on the heels of that came another thought. I looked at the half-dozen little figures that were following me. Then, in a flash, I perceived that all had the same form of costume, the same soft hairless visage, and the same girlish rotundity of limb. It may seem strange, perhaps, that I had not noticed this before. But everything was so strange. Now, I saw the fact plainly enough. In

costume, and in all the differences of texture and bearing that now mark off the sexes from each other, these people of the future were alike. And the children seemed to my eyes to be but the miniatures of their parents. I judged, then, that the children of that time were extremely precocious, physically at least, and I found afterwards abundant verification of my opinion.

"Seeing the ease and security in which these people were living, I felt that this close resemblance of the sexes was after all what one would expect; for the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institution of the family, and the differentiation of occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force; where population is balanced and abundant, much childbearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the State; where violence comes but rarely and offspring are secure, there is less necessity—indeed there is no necessity—for an efficient family, and the specialization of the sexes[5] with reference to their children's needs disappears. We see some beginnings of this even in our own time, and in this future age it was complete. This, I must remind you, was my speculation at the time. Later, I was to appreciate how far it fell short of the reality.

"While I was musing upon these things, my attention was attracted by a pretty little structure, like a well under a cupola. I thought in a transitory way of the oddness of wells still existing, and then resumed the thread of my speculations. There were no large buildings towards the top of the hill, and as my walking powers were evidently miraculous, I was presently left alone for the first time. With a strange sense of freedom and adventure I pushed on up to the crest.

"There I found a seat of some yellow metal that I did not recognize, corroded in places with a kind of pinkish rust and half smothered in soft moss, the arm-rests cast and filed into the resemblance of griffins' heads. I sat down on it, and I surveyed the broad view of our old world under the sunset of that long day. It was as sweet and fair a view as I have ever seen. The sun had already gone below the horizon and the west was flaming gold, touched with some horizontal bars of purple and crimson. Below was the valley of the Thames, in which the river lay like a band of burnished steel. I have already spoken of the great palaces dotted about among the variegated greenery, some in ruins and some still occupied. Here and there rose a white or silvery figure in the waste garden of the earth, here and there came the sharp vertical line of some cupola or obelisk. There were no hedges, no

signs of proprietary rights, no evidences of agriculture; the whole earth had become a garden.

"So watching, I began to put my interpretation upon the things I had seen, and as it shaped itself to me that evening, my interpretation was something in this way. (Afterwards I found I had got only a half-truth—or only a glimpse of one facet of the truth.)

"It seemed to me that I had happened upon humanity upon the wane. The ruddy sunset set me thinking of the sunset of mankind. For the first time I began to realize an odd consequence of the social effort in which we are at present engaged. And yet, come to think, it is a logical consequence enough. Strength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness. The work of ameliorating the conditions of life—the true civilizing process that makes life more and more secure—had gone steadily on to a climax. One triumph of a united humanity over Nature had followed another. Things that are now mere dreams had become projects deliberately put in hand and carried forward. And the harvest was what I saw!

"After all, the sanitation and the agriculture of to-day are still in the rudimentary stage. The science of our time has attacked but a little department of the field of human disease, but, even so, it spreads its operations very steadily and persistently. Our agriculture and horticulture destroy a weed just here and there and cultivate perhaps a score or so of wholesome plants, leaving the greatest number to fight out a balance as they can. We improve our favourite plants and animals—and how few they are—gradually by selective breeding; now a new and better peach, now a seedless grape, now a sweeter and larger flower, now a more convenient breed of cattle. We improve them gradually, because our ideals are vague and tentative, and our knowledge is very limited; because Nature, too, is shy and slow in our clumsy hands. Some day all this will be better organized, and still better. That is the drift of the current in spite of the eddies. The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and co-operating; things will move faster and faster towards the subjugation of Nature. In the end, wisely and carefully we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs.

"This adjustment, I say, must have been done, and done well; done indeed for all Time, in the space of Time across which my machine had leaped. The air was free from gnats, the earth from weeds or fungi; everywhere were fruits and sweet and delightful flowers; brilliant butterflies flew hither and

thither. The ideal of preventive medicine was attained. Diseases had been stamped out. I saw no evidence of any contagious diseases during all my stay. And I shall have to tell you later that even the processes of putrefaction and decay had been profoundly affected by these changes.

"Social triumphs, too, had been effected. I saw mankind housed in splendid shelters, gloriously clothed, and as yet I had found them engaged in no toil. There were no signs of struggle, neither social nor economical struggle. The shop, the advertisement, traffic, all that commerce which constitutes the body of our world, was gone. It was natural on that golden evening that I should jump at the idea of a social paradise. The difficulty of increasing population had been met, I guessed, and population had ceased to increase.

"But with this change in condition comes inevitably adaptations to the change. What, unless biological science is a mass of errors, is the cause of human intelligence and vigour? Hardship and freedom: conditions under which the active, strong, and subtle survive and the weaker go to the wall; conditions that put a premium upon the loyal alliance of capable men, upon self-restraint, patience, and decision. And the institution of the family, and the emotions that arise therein, the fierce jealousy, the tenderness for offspring, parental self-devotion, all found their justification and support in the imminent dangers of the young. *Now*, where are these imminent dangers? There is a sentiment arising, and it will grow, against connubial jealousy, against fierce maternity, against passion of all sorts; unnecessary things now, and things that make us uncomfortable, savage survivals, discords in a refined and pleasant life.

"I thought of the physical slightness of the people, their lack of intelligence, and those big abundant ruins, and it strengthened my belief in a perfect conquest of Nature. For after the battle comes Quiet. Humanity had been strong, energetic, and intelligent, and had used all its abundant vitality to alter the conditions under which it lived. And now came the reaction of the altered conditions.

"Under the new conditions of perfect comfort and security, that restless energy, that with us is strength, would become weakness. Even in our own time certain tendencies and desires, once necessary to survival, are a constant source of failure. Physical courage and the love of battle, for instance, are no great help—may even be hindrances—to a civilized man. And in a state of physical balance and security, power, intellectual as well as

physical, would be out of place. For countless years I judged there had been no danger of war or solitary violence, no danger from wild beasts, no wasting disease to require strength of constitution, no need of toil. For such a life, what we should call the weak are as well equipped as the strong, are indeed no longer weak. Better equipped indeed they are, for the strong would be fretted by an energy for which there was no outlet. No doubt the exquisite beauty of the buildings I saw was the outcome of the last surgings of the now purposeless energy of mankind before it settled down into perfect harmony with the conditions under which it lived—the flourish of that triumph which began the last great peace. This has ever been the fate of energy in security; it takes to art and to eroticism, and then come languor and decay.

"Even this artistic impetus would at last die away—had almost died in the Time I saw. To adorn themselves with flowers, to dance, to sing in the sunlight: so much was left of the artistic spirit, and no more. Even that would fade in the end into a contented inactivity. We are kept keen on the grindstone of pain and necessity, and, it seemed to me, that here was that hateful grindstone broken at last!

"As I stood there in the gathering dark I thought that in this simple explanation I had mastered the problem of the world—mastered the whole secret of these delicious people. Possibly the checks they had devised for the increase of population had succeeded too well, and their numbers had rather diminished than kept stationary. That would account for the abandoned ruins. Very simple was my explanation, and plausible enough—as most wrong theories are!

V

"As I STOOD THERE musing over this too perfect triumph of man, the full moon, yellow and gibbous, came up out of an overflow of silver light in the northeast. The bright little figures ceased to move about below, a noiseless owl flitted by, and I shivered with the chill of the night. I determined to descend and find where I could sleep.

"I looked for the building I knew. Then my eye travelled along to the figure of the White Sphinx upon the pedestal of bronze, growing distinct as the light of the rising moon grew brighter. I could see the silver birch against it. There was the tangle of rhododendron bushes, black in the pale light, and there was the little lawn. I looked at the lawn again. A queer doubt chilled my complacency. 'No,' said I stoutly to myself, 'that was not the lawn.'

"But it *was* the lawn. For the white leprous face of the sphinx was towards it. Can you imagine what I felt as this conviction came home to me? But you cannot. The Time Machine was gone!

"At once, like a lash across the face, came the possibility of losing my own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world. The bare thought of it was an actual physical sensation. I could feel it grip me at the throat and stop my breathing. In another moment I was in a passion of fear and running with great leaping strides down the slope. Once I fell headlong and cut my face; I lost no time in stanching the blood, but jumped up and ran on, with a warm trickle down my cheek and chin. All the time I ran I was saying to myself: 'They have moved it a little, pushed it under the bushes out of the way.' Nevertheless, I ran with all my might. All the time, with the certainty that sometimes comes with excessive dread, I knew that such assurance was folly, knew instinctively that the machine was removed out of my reach. My breath came with pain. I suppose I covered the whole distance from the hill

crest to the little lawn, two miles perhaps, in ten minutes. And I am not a young man. I cursed aloud, as I ran, at my confident folly in leaving the machine, wasting good breath thereby. I cried aloud, and none answered. Not a creature seemed to be stirring in that moonlit world.

"When I reached the lawn my worst fears were realized. Not a trace of the thing was to be seen. I felt faint and cold when I faced the empty space among the black tangle of bushes. I ran round it furiously, as if the thing might be hidden in a corner, and then stopped abruptly, with my hands clutching my hair. Above me towered the sphinx, upon the bronze pedestal, white, shining, leprous, in the light of the rising moon. It seemed to smile in mockery of my dismay.

"I might have consoled myself by imagining the little people had put the mechanism in some shelter for me, had I not felt assured of their physical and intellectual inadequacy. That is what dismayed me: the sense of some hitherto unsuspected power, through whose intervention my invention had vanished. Yet, for one thing I felt assured: unless some other age had produced its exact duplicate, the machine could not have moved in time. The attachment of the levers—I will show you the method later—prevented any one from tampering with it in that way when they were removed. It had moved, and was hid, only in space. But then, where could it be?

"I think I must have had a kind of frenzy. I remember running violently in and out among the moonlit bushes all round the sphinx, and startling some white animal that, in the dim light, I took for a small deer. I remember, too, late that night, beating the bushes with my clenched fist until my knuckles were gashed and bleeding from the broken twigs. Then, sobbing and raving in my anguish of mind, I went down to the great building of stone. The big hall was dark, silent, and deserted. I slipped on the uneven floor, and fell over one of the malachite tables, almost breaking my shin. I lit a match and went on past the dusty curtains, of which I have told you.

"There I found a second great hall covered with cushions, upon which, perhaps, a score or so of the little people were sleeping. I have no doubt they found my second appearance strange enough, coming suddenly out of the quiet darkness with inarticulate noises and the splutter and flare of a match. For they had forgotten about matches. 'Where is my Time Machine?' I began, bawling like an angry child, laying hands upon them and shaking them up together. It must have been very queer to them. Some laughed, most of them looked sorely frightened. When I saw them standing round me, it came into

my head that I was doing as foolish a thing as it was possible for me to do under the circumstances, in trying to revive the sensation of fear. For, reasoning from their daylight behaviour, I thought that fear must be forgotten.

"Abruptly, I dashed down the match, and, knocking one of the people over in my course, went blundering across the big dining-hall again, out under the moonlight. I heard cries of terror and their little feet running and stumbling this way and that. I do not remember all I did as the moon crept up the sky. I suppose it was the unexpected nature of my loss that maddened me. I felt hopelessly cut off from my own kind—a strange animal in an unknown world. I must have raved to and fro, screaming and crying upon God and Fate. I have a memory of horrible fatigue, as the long night of despair wore away; of looking in this impossible place and that; of groping among moon-lit ruins and touching strange creatures in the black shadows; at last, of lying on the ground near the sphinx and weeping with absolute wretchedness. I had nothing left but misery. Then I slept, and when I woke again it was full day, and a couple of sparrows were hopping round me on the turf within reach of my arm.

"I sat up in the freshness of the morning, trying to remember how I had got there, and why I had such a profound sense of desertion and despair. Then things came clear in my mind. With the plain, reasonable daylight, I could look my circumstances fairly in the face. I saw the wild folly of my frenzy overnight, and I could reason with myself. 'Suppose the worst?' I said. 'Suppose the machine altogether lost—perhaps destroyed? It behoves me to be calm and patient, to learn the way of the people, to get a clear idea of the method of my loss, and the means of getting materials and tools; so that in the end, perhaps, I may make another.' That would be my only hope, perhaps, but better than despair. And, after all, it was a beautiful and curious world.

"But probably, the machine had only been taken away. Still, I must be calm and patient, find its hiding-place, and recover it by force or cunning. And with that I scrambled to my feet and looked about me, wondering where I could bathe. I felt weary, stiff, and travel-soiled. The freshness of the morning made me desire an equal freshness. I had exhausted my emotion. Indeed, as I went about my business, I found myself wondering at my intense excitement overnight. I made a careful examination of the ground about the little lawn. I wasted some time in futile questionings, conveyed, as well as I was able, to such of the little people as came by. They all failed to understand my gestures; some were simply stolid, some thought it was a jest

and laughed at me. I had the hardest task in the world to keep my hands off their pretty laughing faces. It was a foolish impulse, but the devil begotten of fear and blind anger was ill curbed and still eager to take advantage of my perplexity. The turf gave better counsel. I found a groove ripped in it, about midway between the pedestal of the sphinx and the marks of my feet where, on arrival, I had struggled with the overturned machine. There were other signs of removal about, with queer narrow footprints like those I could imagine made by a sloth. This directed my closer attention to the pedestal. It was, as I think I have said, of bronze. It was not a mere block, but highly decorated with deep framed panels on either side. I went and rapped at these. The pedestal was hollow. Examining the panels with care I found them discontinuous with the frames. There were no handles or keyholes, but possibly the panels, if they were doors, as I supposed, opened from within. One thing was clear enough to my mind. It took no very great mental effort to infer that my Time Machine was inside that pedestal. But how it got there was a different problem.

"I saw the heads of two orange-clad people coming through the bushes and under some blossom-covered apple-trees towards me. I turned smiling to them and beckoned them to me. They came, and then, pointing to the bronze pedestal, I tried to intimate my wish to open it. But at my first gesture towards this they behaved very oddly. I don't know how to convey their expression to you. Suppose you were to use a grossly improper gesture to a delicate-minded woman—it is how she would look. They went off as if they had received the last possible insult. I tried a sweet-looking little chap in white next, with exactly the same result. Somehow, this manner made me feel ashamed of myself. But, as you know, I wanted the Time Machine, and I tried him once more. As he turned off, like the others, my temper got the better of me. In three strides I was after him, had him by the loose part of his robe round the neck, and began dragging him towards the sphinx. Then I saw the horror and repugnance of his face, and all of a sudden I let him go.

"But I was not beaten yet. I banged with my fist at the bronze panels, I thought I heard something stir inside—to be explicit, I thought I heard a sound like a chuckle—but I must have been mistaken. Then I got a big pebble from the river, and came and hammered till I had flattened a coil in the decorations, and the verdigris came off in powdery flakes. The delicate little people must have heard me hammering in gusty outbreaks a mile away on either hand, but nothing came of it. I saw a crowd of them upon the slopes,

looking furtively at me. At last, hot and tired, I sat down to watch the place. But I was too restless to watch long; I am too Occidental[1] for a long vigil. I could work at a problem for years, but to wait inactive for twenty-four hours —that is another matter.

"I got up after a time, and began walking aimlessly through the bushes towards the hill again. 'Patience,' said I to myself. 'If you want your machine again you must leave that sphinx alone. If they mean to take your machine away, it's little good your wrecking their bronze panels, and if they don't, you will get it back as soon as you can ask for it. To sit among all those unknown things before a puzzle like that is hopeless. That way lies monomania. Face this world. Learn its ways, watch it, be careful of too hasty guesses at its meaning. In the end you will find clues to it all.' Then suddenly the humour of the situation came into my mind: the thought of the years I had spent in study and toil to get into the future age, and now my passion of anxiety to get out of it. I had made myself the most complicated and the most hopeless trap that ever a man devised. Although it was at my own expense, I could not help myself. I laughed aloud.

"Going through the big palace, it seemed to me that the little people avoided me. It may have been my fancy or it may have had something to do with my hammering at the gates of bronze. Yet I felt tolerably sure of the avoidance. I was careful, however, to show no concern and to abstain from any pursuit of them, and in the course of a day or two things got back to the old footing. I made what progress I could in the language, and in addition I pushed my explorations here and there. Either I missed some subtle point, or their language was excessively simple—almost exclusively composed of concrete substantives and verbs. There seemed to be few, if any, abstract terms, or little use of figurative language. Their sentences were usually simple and of two words, and I failed to convey or understand any but the simplest propositions. I determined to put the thought of my Time Machine and the mystery of the bronze doors under the sphinx as much as possible in a corner of memory, until my growing knowledge would lead me back to them in a natural way. Yet a certain feeling, you may understand, tethered me in a circle of a few miles round the point of my arrival.

"So far as I could see, all the world displayed the same exuberant richness as the Thames valley. From every hill I climbed I saw the same abundance of splendid buildings, endlessly varied in material and style, the same clustering thickets of evergreens, the same blossom-laden trees and

tree-ferns. Here and there water shone like silver, and beyond, the land rose into blue undulating hills, and so faded into the serenity of the sky. A peculiar feature, which presently attracted my attention, was the presence of certain circular wells, several, as it seemed to me, of a very great depth. One lay by the path up the hill, which I had followed during my first walk. Like the others, it was rimmed with bronze, curiously wrought, and protected by a little cupola from the rain. Sitting by the side of these wells, and peering down into the shafted darkness, I could see no gleam of water, nor could I start any reflection with a lighted match. But in all of them I heard a certain sound: a thud-thud-thud, like the beating of some big engine; and I discovered, from the flaring of my matches, that a steady current of air set down the shafts. Further, I threw a scrap of paper into the throat of one, and, instead of fluttering slowly down, it was at once sucked swiftly out of sight.

"After a time, too, I came to connect these wells with tall towers standing here and there upon the slopes; for above them there was often just such a flicker in the air as one sees on a hot day above a sun-scorched beach. Putting things together, I reached a strong suggestion of an extensive system of subterranean ventilation, whose true import it was difficult to imagine. I was at first inclined to associate it with the sanitary apparatus of these people. It was an obvious conclusion, but it was absolutely wrong.

"And here I must admit that I learned very little of drains and bells and modes of conveyance, and the like conveniences, during my time in this real future. In some of these visions of Utopias and coming times which I have read, there is a vast amount of detail about building, and social arrangements, and so forth. But while such details are easy enough to obtain when the whole world is contained in one's imagination, they are altogether inaccessible to a real traveller amid such realities as I found here. Conceive the tale of London which a negro, fresh from Central Africa, would take back to his tribe! What would he know of railway companies, of social movements, of telephone and telegraph wires, of the Parcels Delivery Company, and postal orders and the like? Yet we, at least, should be willing enough to explain these things to him! And even of what he knew, how much could he make his untravelled friend either apprehend or believe? Then, think how narrow the gap between a negro and a white man of our own times, and how wide the interval between myself and these of the Golden Age! I was sensible of much which was unseen, and which contributed to my

comfort; but save for a general impression of automatic organization, I fear I can convey very little of the difference to your mind.

"In the matter of sepulture, for instance, I could see no signs of crematoria nor anything suggestive of tombs. But it occurred to me that possibly, there might be cemeteries (or crematoria) somewhere beyond the range of my explorings. This, again, was a question I deliberately put to myself, and my curiosity was at first entirely defeated upon the point. The thing puzzled me, and I was led to make a further remark, which puzzled me still more: that aged and infirm among this people there were none.

"I must confess that my satisfaction with my first theories of an automatic civilization and a decadent humanity did not long endure. Yet I could think of no other. Let me put my difficulties. The several big palaces I had explored were mere living places, great dining-halls and sleeping apartments. I could find no machinery, no appliances of any kind. Yet these people were clothed in pleasant fabrics that must at times need renewal, and their sandals, though undecorated, were fairly complex specimens of metalwork. Somehow such things must be made. And the little people displayed no vestige of a creative tendency. There were no shops, no workshops, no sign of importations among them. They spent all their time in playing gently, in bathing in the river, in making love in a half-playful fashion, in eating fruit and sleeping. I could not see how things were kept going.

"Then, again, about the Time Machine: something, I knew not what, had taken it into the hollow pedestal of the White Sphinx. *Why?* For the life of me I could not imagine. Those waterless wells, too, those flickering pillars. I felt I lacked a clue. I felt—how shall I put it? Suppose you found an inscription, with sentences here and there in excellent plain English, and interpolated therewith, others made up of words, of letters even, absolutely unknown to you? Well, on the third day of my visit, that was how the world of Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One presented itself to me!

"That day, too, I made a friend—of a sort. It happened that, as I was watching some of the little people bathing in a shallow, one of them was seized with cramp and began drifting downstream. The main current ran rather swiftly, but not too strongly for even a moderate swimmer. It will give you an idea, therefore, of the strange deficiency in these creatures, when I tell you that none made the slightest attempt to rescue the weakly crying little thing which was drowning before their eyes. When I realized this, I hurriedly slipped off my clothes, and, wading in at a point lower down, I caught the

poor mite and drew her safe to land. A little rubbing of limbs soon brought her round, and I had the satisfaction of seeing she was all right before I left her. I had got to such a low estimate of her kind that I did not expect any gratitude from her. In that, however, I was wrong.

"This happened in the morning. In the afternoon I met my little woman, as I believe it was, as I was returning towards my centre from an exploration, and she received me with cries of delight and presented me with a big garland of flowers—evidently made for me and me alone. The thing took my imagination. Very possibly I had been feeling desolate. At any rate I did my best to display my appreciation of the gift. We were soon seated together in a little stone arbour, engaged in conversation, chiefly of smiles. The creature's friendliness affected me exactly as a child's might have done. We passed each other flowers, and she kissed my hands. I did the same to hers. Then I tried talk, and found that her name was Weena, which though I don't know what it meant, somehow seemed appropriate enough. That was the beginning of a queer friendship which lasted a week, and ended—as I will tell you!

"She was exactly like a child. She wanted to be with me always. She tried to follow me everywhere, and on my next journey out and about it went to my heart to tire her down and leave her at last, exhausted and calling after me rather plaintively. But the problems of the world had to be mastered. I had not, I said to myself, come into the future to carry on a miniature flirtation. Yet her distress when I left her was very great, her expostulations at the parting were sometimes frantic, and I think, altogether, I had as much trouble as comfort from her devotion. Nevertheless she was, somehow, a very great comfort. I thought it was mere childish affection that made her cling to me. Until it was too late, I did not clearly know what I had inflicted upon her when I left her. Nor until it was too late did I clearly understand what she was to me. For, by merely seeming fond of me, and showing in her weak, futile way that she cared for me, the little doll of a creature presently gave my return to the neighbourhood of the White Sphinx almost the feeling of coming home; and I would watch for her tiny figure of white and gold so soon as I came over the hill.

"It was from her, too, that I learned that fear had not yet left the world. She was fearless enough in the daylight, and she had the oddest confidence in me; for once, in a foolish moment, I made threatening grimaces at her, and she simply laughed at them. But she dreaded the dark, dreaded shadows, dreaded black things. Darkness to her was the one thing dreadful. It was a singularly

passionate emotion, and it set me thinking and observing. I discovered then, among other things, that these little people gathered into the great houses after dark, and slept in droves. To enter upon them without a light was to put them into a tumult of apprehension. I never found one out of doors, or one sleeping alone within doors, after dark. Yet I was still such a blockhead that I missed the lesson of that fear, and in spite of Weena's distress I insisted upon sleeping away from these slumbering multitudes.

"It troubled her greatly, but in the end her odd affection for me triumphed, and for five of the nights of our acquaintance, including the last night of all, she slept with her head pillowed on my arm. But my story slips away from me as I speak of her. It must have been the night before her rescue that I was awakened about dawn. I had been restless, dreaming most disagreeably that I was drowned, and that sea-anemones were feeling over my face with their soft palps. I woke with a start, and with an odd fancy that some greyish animal had just rushed out of the chamber. I tried to get to sleep again, but I felt restless and uncomfortable. It was that dim grey hour when things are just creeping out of darkness, when everything is colourless and clear cut, and yet unreal. I got up, and went down into the great hall, and so out upon the flagstones in front of the palace. I thought I would make a virtue of necessity, and see the sunrise.

"The moon was setting, and the dying moonlight and the first pallor of dawn were mingled in a ghastly half-light. The bushes were inky black, the ground a sombre grey, the sky colourless and cheerless. And up the hill I thought I could see ghosts. There several times, as I scanned the slope, I saw white figures. Twice I fancied I saw a solitary white, ape-like creature running rather quickly up the hill, and once near the ruins I saw a leash of them carrying some dark body. They moved hastily. I did not see what became of them. It seemed that they vanished among the bushes. The dawn was still indistinct, you must understand. I was feeling that chill, uncertain, early-morning feeling you may have known. I doubted my eyes.

"As the eastern sky grew brighter, and the light of the day came on and its vivid colouring returned upon the world once more, I scanned the view keenly. But I saw no vestige of my white figures. They were mere creatures of the half-light. 'They must have been ghosts,' I said; 'I wonder whence they dated.' For a queer notion of Grant Allen's[2] came into my head, and amused me. If each generation die and leave ghosts, he argued, the world at last will get overcrowded with them. On that theory they would have grown

innumerable some Eight Hundred Thousand Years hence, and it was no great wonder to see four at once. But the jest was unsatisfying, and I was thinking of these figures all the morning, until Weena's rescue drove them out of my head. I associated them in some indefinite way with the white animal I had startled in my first passionate search for the Time Machine. But Weena was a pleasant substitute. Yet all the same, they were soon destined to take far deadlier possession of my mind.

"I think I have said how much hotter than our own was the weather of this Golden Age. I cannot account for it. It may be the sun was hotter, or the earth nearer the sun. It is usual to assume that the sun will go on cooling steadily in the future. But people, unfamiliar with such speculations as those of the younger Darwin, forget that the planets must ultimately fall back one by one into the parent body. As these catastrophes occur, the sun will blaze with renewed energy; and it may be that some inner planet had suffered this fate. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the sun was very much hotter than we know it.

"Well, one very hot morning—my fourth, I think—as I was seeking shelter from the heat and glare in a colossal ruin near the great house where I slept and fed, there happened this strange thing: clambering among these heaps of masonry, I found a narrow gallery, whose end and side windows were blocked by fallen masses of stone. By contrast with the brilliancy outside, it seemed at first impenetrably dark to me. I entered it groping, for the change from light to blackness made spots of colour swim before me. Suddenly I halted spellbound. A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness.

"The old instinctive dread of wild beasts came upon me. I clenched my hands and steadfastly looked into the glaring eyeballs. I was afraid to turn. Then the thought of the absolute security in which humanity appeared to be living came to my mind. And then I remembered that strange terror of the dark. Overcoming my fear to some extent, I advanced a step and spoke. I will admit that my voice was harsh and ill-controlled. I put out my hand and touched something soft. At once the eyes darted sideways, and something white ran past me. I turned with my heart in my mouth, and saw a queer little ape-like figure, its head held down in a peculiar manner, running across the sunlit space behind me. It blundered against a block of granite, staggered aside, and in a moment was hidden in a black shadow beneath another pile of ruined masonry.

“My impression of it is, of course, imperfect; but I know it was a dull white, and had strange large greyishred eyes; also that there was flaxen hair on its head and down its back. But, as I say, it went too fast for me to see distinctly. I cannot even say whether it ran on all-fours, or only with its forearms held very low. After an instant’s pause I followed it into the second heap of ruins. I could not find it at first; but, after a time in the profound obscurity, I came upon one of those round well-like openings of which I have told you, half closed by a fallen pillar. A sudden thought came to me. Could this Thing have vanished down the shaft? I lit a match, and, looking down, I saw a small, white, moving creature, with large bright eyes which regarded me steadfastly as it retreated. It made me shudder. It was so like a human spider! It was clambering down the wall, and now I saw for the first time a number of metal foot and hand rests forming a kind of ladder down the shaft. Then the light burned my fingers and fell out of my hand, going out as it dropped, and when I had lit another the little monster had disappeared.

“I do not know how long I sat peering down that well. It was not for some time that I could succeed in persuading myself that the thing I had seen was human. But, gradually, the truth dawned on me: that Man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals: that my graceful children of the Upper-world were not the sole descendants of our generation, but that this bleached, obscene, nocturnal Thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all the ages.

“I thought of the flickering pillars and of my theory of an underground ventilation. I began to suspect their true import. And what, I wondered, was this Lemur doing in my scheme of a perfectly balanced organization? How was it related to the indolent serenity of the beautiful Upper-worlders? And what was hidden down there, at the foot of that shaft? I sat upon the edge of the well telling myself that, at any rate, there was nothing to fear, and that there I must descend for the solution of my difficulties. And withal I was absolutely afraid to go! As I hesitated, two of the beautiful Upper-world people came running in their amorous sport across the daylight in the shadow. The male pursued the female, flinging flowers at her as he ran.

“They seemed distressed to find me, my arm against the overturned pillar, peering down the well. Apparently it was considered bad form to remark these apertures; for when I pointed to this one, and tried to frame a question about it in their tongue, they were still more visibly distressed and turned away. But they were interested by my matches, and I struck some to amuse

them. I tried them again about the well, and again I failed. So presently I left them, meaning to go back to Weena, and see what I could get from her. But my mind was already in revolution; my guesses and impressions were slipping and sliding to a new adjustment. I had now a clue to the import of these wells, to the ventilating towers, to the mystery of the ghosts; to say nothing of a hint at the meaning of the bronze gates and the fate of the Time Machine! And very vaguely there came a suggestion towards the solution of the economic problem that had puzzled me.

"Here was the new view. Plainly, this second species of Man was subterranean. There were three circumstances in particular which made me think that its rare emergence above ground was the outcome of a long-continued underground look common in most animals that live largely in the dark—the white fish of the Kentucky caves,[3] for instance. Then, those large eyes, with that capacity for reflecting light, are common features of nocturnal things—witness the owl and the cat. And last of all, that evident confusion in the sunshine, that hasty yet fumbling awkward flight towards dark shadow, and that peculiar carriage of the head while in the light—all reinforced the theory of an extreme sensitiveness of the retina.

"Beneath my feet, then, the earth must be tunnelled enormously, and these tunnellings were the habitat of the new race. The presence of ventilating shafts and wells along the hill slopes—everywhere, in fact, except along the river valley—showed how universal were its ramifications. What so natural, then, as to assume that it was in this artificial Under-world that such work as was necessary to the comfort of the daylight race was done? The notion was so plausible that I at once accepted it, and went on to assume the how of this splitting of the human species. I dare say you will anticipate the shape of my theory; though, for myself, I very soon felt that it fell far short of the truth.

"At first, proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position. No doubt it will seem grotesque enough to you—and wildly incredible!—and yet even now there are existing circumstances to point that way. There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization; there is the Metropolitan Railway in London, for instance, there are new electric railways, there are subways, there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased till Industry had

gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into larger and ever larger underground factories, spending a still-increasing amount of its time therein, till, in the end—! Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth?

"Again, the exclusive tendency of richer people—due, no doubt, to the increasing refinement of their education, and the widening gulf between them and the rude violence of the poor—is already leading to the closing, in their interest, of considerable portions of the surface of the land. About London, for instance, perhaps half the prettier country is shut in against intrusion. And this same widening gulf—which is due to the length and expense of the higher educational process and the increased facilities for and temptations towards refined habits on the part of the rich—will make that exchange between class and class, that promotion by intermarriage which at present retards the splitting of our species along lines of social stratification, less and less frequent. So, in the end, above ground you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below ground the Have-nots, the Workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour. Once they were there, they would no doubt have to pay rent, and not a little of it, for the ventilation of their caverns; and if they refused, they would starve or be suffocated for arrears. Such of them as were so constituted as to be miserable and rebellious would die; and, in the end, the balance being permanent, the survivors would become as well adapted to the conditions of underground life, and as happy in their way, as the Upper-world people were to theirs. As it seemed to me, the refined beauty and the etiolated pallor followed naturally enough.[4]

"The great triumph of Humanity I had dreamed of took a different shape in my mind. It had been no such triumph of moral education and general co-operation as I had imagined. Instead, I saw a real aristocracy, armed with a perfected science and working to a logical conclusion the industrial system of to-day. Its triumph had not been simply a triumph over Nature, but a triumph over Nature and the fellow-man. This, I must warn you, was my theory at the time. I had no convenient cicerone in the pattern of the Utopian books. My explanation may be absolutely wrong. I still think it is the most plausible one. But even on this supposition the balanced civilization that was at last attained must have long since passed its zenith, and was now far fallen into decay. The too-perfect security of the Upper-worlders had led them to a

slow movement of degeneration, to a general dwindling in size, strength, and intelligence. That I could see clearly enough already. What had happened to the Under-grounders I did not yet suspect; but from what I had seen of the Morlocks—that, by the by, was the name by which these creatures were called—I could imagine that the modification of the human type was even far more profound than among the 'Eloi,' the beautiful race that I already knew.

"Then came troublesome doubts. Why had the Morlocks taken my Time Machine? For I felt sure it was they who had taken it. Why, too, if the Eloi were masters, could they not restore the machine to me? And why were they so terribly afraid of the dark? I proceeded, as I have said, to question Weena about this Under-world, but here again I was disappointed. At first she would not understand my questions, and presently she refused to answer them. She shivered as though the topic was unendurable. And when I pressed her, perhaps a little harshly, she burst into tears. They were the only tears, except my own, I ever saw in that Golden Age. When I saw them I ceased abruptly to trouble about the Morlocks, and was only concerned in banishing these signs of the human inheritance from Weena's eyes. And very soon she was smiling and clapping her hands, while I solemnly burned a match.

VI

"IT MAY SEEM odd to you, but it was two days before I could follow up the new-found clue in what was manifestly the proper way. I felt a peculiar shrinking from those pallid bodies. They were just the half-bleached colour of the worms and things one sees preserved in spirit in a zoological museum. And they were filthily cold to the touch. Probably my shrinking was largely due to the sympathetic influence of the Eloi, whose disgust of the Morlocks I now began to appreciate.

"The next night I did not sleep well. Probably my health was a little disordered. I was oppressed with perplexity and doubt. Once or twice I had a feeling of intense fear for which I could perceive no definite reason. I remember creeping noiselessly into the great hall where the little people were sleeping in the moonlight—that night Weena was among them—and feeling reassured by their presence. It occurred to me even then, that in the course of a few days the moon must pass through its last quarter, and the nights grow dark, when the appearances of these unpleasant creatures from below, these whitened Lemurs, this new vermin that had replaced the old, might be more abundant. And on both these days I had the restless feeling of one who shirks an inevitable duty. I felt assured that the Time Machine was only to be recovered by boldly penetrating these underground mysteries. Yet I could not face the mystery. If only I had had a companion it would have been different. But I was so horribly alone, and even to clamber down into the darkness of the well appalled me. I don't know if you will understand my feeling, but I never felt quite safe at my back.

"It was this restlessness, this insecurity, perhaps, that drove me further and further afield in my exploring expeditions. Going to the south-westward towards the rising country that is now called Combe Wood, I observed far

off, in the direction of nineteenth-century Banstead,[1] a vast green structure, different in character from any I had hitherto seen. It was larger than the largest of the palaces or ruins I knew, and the façade had an Oriental look; the face of it having the lustre, as well as the pale-green tint, a kind of bluish-green, of a certain type of Chinese porcelain. This difference in aspect suggested a difference in use, and I was minded to push on and explore. But the day was growing late, and I had come upon the sight of the place after a long and tiring circuit; so I resolved to hold over the adventure for the following day, and I returned to the welcome and the caresses of little Weena. But next morning I perceived clearly enough that my curiosity regarding the Palace of Green Porcelain was a piece of self-deception, to enable me to shirk, by another day, an experience I dreaded. I resolved I would make the descent without further waste of time, and started out in the early morning towards a well near the ruins of granite and aluminium.

"Little Weena ran with me. She danced beside me to the well, but when she saw me lean over the mouth and look downward, she seemed strangely disconcerted. 'Good-bye, little Weena,' I said, kissing her; and then, putting her down, I began to feel over the parapet for the climbing hooks. Rather hastily, I may as well confess, for I feared my courage might leak away! At first she watched me in amazement. Then she gave a most piteous cry, and, running to me, she began to pull at me with her little hands. I think her opposition nerved me rather to proceed. I shook her off, perhaps a little roughly, and in another moment I was in the throat of the well. I saw her agonized face over the parapet, and smiled to reassure her. Then I had to look down at the unstable hooks to which I clung.

"I had to clamber down a shaft of perhaps two hundred yards. The descent was effected by means of metallic bars projecting from the sides of the well, and these being adapted to the needs of a creature much smaller and lighter than myself, I was speedily cramped and fatigued by the descent. And not simply fatigued! One of the bars bent off into the blackness beneath. For a moment I hung by one hand, and after that experience I did not dare to rest again. Though my arms and back were presently acutely painful, I went on clambering down the sheer descent with as quick a motion as possible. Glancing upward, I saw the aperture, a small blue disk, in which a star was visible, while little Weena's head showed as a round black projection. The thudding sound of a machine below grew louder and more oppressive.

Everything save that little disk above was profoundly dark, and when I looked up again Weena had disappeared.

"I was in an agony of discomfort. I had some thought of trying to go up the shaft again, and leave the Underworld alone. But even while I turned this over in my mind I continued to descend. At last, with intense relief, I saw dimly coming up, a foot to the right of me, a slender loophole in the wall. Swinging myself in, I found it was the aperture of a narrow horizontal tunnel in which I could lie down and rest. It was not too soon. My arms ached, my back was cramped, and I was trembling with the prolonged terror of a fall. Besides this, the unbroken darkness had had a distressing effect upon my eyes. The air was full of the throb and hum of machinery pumping air down the shaft.

"I do not know how long I lay. I was roused by a soft hand touching my face. Starting up in the darkness I snatched at my matches and, hastily striking one, I saw three stooping white creatures similar to the one I had seen above ground in the ruin, hastily retreating before the light. Living, as they did, in what appeared to me impenetrable darkness, their eyes were abnormally large and sensitive, just as are the pupils of the abysmal fishes, and they reflected the light in the same way. I have no doubt they could see me in that rayless obscurity, and they did not seem to have any fear of me apart from the light. But, so soon as I struck a match in order to see them, they fled incontinently, vanishing into dark gutters and tunnels, from which their eyes glared at me in the strangest fashion.

"I tried to call to them, but the language they had was apparently different from that of the Over-world people; so that I was needs left to my own unaided efforts, and the thought of flight before exploration was even then in my mind. But I said to myself, 'You are in for it now,' and, feeling my way along the tunnel, I found the noise of machinery grow louder. Presently the walls fell away from me, and I came to a large open space, and striking another match, saw that I had entered a vast arched cavern, which stretched into utter darkness beyond the range of my light. The view I had of it was as much as one could see in the burning of a match.

"Necessarily my memory is vague. Great shapes like big machines rose out of the dimness, and cast grotesque black shadows, in which dim spectral Morlocks sheltered from the glare. The place, by the by, was very stuffy and oppressive, and the faint halitus of freshly shed blood was in the air. Some way down the central vista was a little table of white metal, laid with what

seemed a meal. The Morlocks at any rate were carnivorous! Even at the time, I remember wondering what large animal could have survived to furnish the red joint I saw. It was all very indistinct: the heavy smell, the big unmeaning shapes, the obscene figures lurking in the shadows, and only waiting for the darkness to come at me again! Then the match burned down, and stung my fingers, and fell, a wriggling red spot in the blackness.

"I have thought since how particularly ill-equipped I was for such an experience. When I had started with the Time Machine, I had started with the absurd assumption that the men of the Future would certainly be infinitely ahead of ourselves in all their appliances. I had come without arms, without medicine, without anything to smoke—at times I missed tobacco frightfully—even without enough matches. If only I had thought of a Kodak! I could have flashed that glimpse of the Under-world in a second, and examined it at leisure. But, as it was, I stood there with only the weapons and the powers that Nature had endowed me with—hands, feet, and teeth; these, and four safety-matches that still remained to me.

"I was afraid to push my way in among all this machinery in the dark, and it was only with my last glimpse of light I discovered that my store of matches had run low. It had never occurred to me until that moment that there was any need to economize them, and I had wasted almost half the box in astonishing the Upper-worlders, to whom fire was a novelty. Now, as I say, I had four left, and while I stood in the dark, a hand touched mine, lank fingers came feeling over my face, and I was sensible of a peculiar unpleasant odour. I fancied I heard the breathing of a crowd of those dreadful little beings about me. I felt the box of matches in my hand being gently disengaged, and other hands behind me plucking at my clothing. The sense of these unseen creatures examining me was indescribably unpleasant. The sudden realization of my ignorance of their ways of thinking and doing came home to me very vividly in the darkness. I shouted at them as loudly as I could. They started away, and then I could feel them approaching me again. They clutched at me more boldly, whispering odd sounds to each other. I shivered violently, and shouted again—rather discordantly. This time they were not so seriously alarmed, and they made a queer laughing noise as they came back at me. I will confess I was horribly frightened. I determined to strike another match and escape under the protection of its glare. I did so, and eking out the flicker with a scrap of paper from my pocket. I made good my retreat to the narrow tunnel. But I had scarce entered this when my light was

blown out, and in the blackness I could hear the Morlocks rustling like wind among leaves, and pattering like the rain, as they hurried after me.

"In a moment I was clutched by several hands, and there was no mistaking that they were trying to haul me back. I struck another light, and waved it in their dazzled faces. You can scarce imagine how nauseatingly inhuman they looked—those pale, chinless faces and great, lidless, pinkish-grey eyes!—as they stared in their blindness and bewilderment. But I did not stay to look, I promise you: I retreated again, and when my second match had ended, I struck my third. It had almost burned through when I reached the opening into the shaft. I lay down on the edge, for the throb of the great pump below made me giddy. Then I felt sideways for the projecting hooks, and, as I did so, my feet were grasped from behind, and I was violently tugged backward. I lit my last match… and it incontinently went out. But I had my hand on the climbing bars now, and, kicking violently, I disengaged myself from the clutches of the Morlocks and was speedily clambering up the shaft, while they stayed peering and blinking up at me: all but one little wretch who followed me for some way, and wellnigh secured my boot as a trophy.

"That climb seemed interminable to me. With the last twenty or thirty feet of it a deadly nausea came upon me. I had the greatest difficulty in keeping my hold. The last few yards was a frightful struggle against this faintness. Several times my head swam, and I felt all the sensations of falling. At last, however, I got over the well-mouth somehow, and staggered out of the ruin into the blinding sunlight. I fell upon my face. Even the soil smelt sweet and clean. Then I remember Weena kissing my hands and ears, and the voices of others among the Eloi. Then, for a time, I was insensible.

VII

"NOW, INDEED, I seemed in a worse case than before. Hitherto, except during my night's anguish at the loss of the Time Machine, I had felt a sustaining hope of ultimate escape, but that hope was staggered by these new discoveries. Hitherto I had merely thought myself impeded by the childish simplicity of the little people, and by some unknown forces which I had only to understand to overcome; but there was an altogether new element in the sickening quality of the Morlocks—a something inhuman and malign. Instinctively I loathed them. Before, I had felt as a man might feel who had fallen into a pit: my concern was with the pit and how to get out of it. Now I felt like a beast in a trap, whose enemy would come upon him soon.

"The enemy I dreaded may surprise you. It was the darkness of the new moon. Weena had put this into my head by some at first incomprehensible remarks about the Dark Nights. It was not now such a very difficult problem to guess what the coming Dark Nights might mean. The moon was on the wane: each night there was a longer interval of darkness. And I now understood to some slight degree at least the reason of the fear of the little Upper-world people for the dark. I wondered vaguely what foul villainy it might be that the Morlocks did under the new moon. I felt pretty sure now that my second hypothesis was all wrong. The Upper-world people might once have been the favoured aristocracy, and the Morlocks their mechanical servants: but that had long since passed away. The two species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding down towards, or had already arrived at, an altogether new relationship. The Eloi, like the Carlovingian[1] kings, had decayed to a mere beautiful futility. They still possessed the earth on sufferance: since the Morlocks, subterranean for

innumerable generations, had come at last to find the daylit surface intolerable. And the Morlocks made their garments, I inferred, and maintained them in their habitual needs, perhaps through the survival of an old habit of service. They did it as a standing horse paws with his foot, or as a man enjoys killing animals in sport: because ancient and departed necessities had impressed it on the organism. But, clearly, the old order was already in part reversed. The Nemesis of the delicate ones was creeping on apace. Ages ago, thousands of generations ago, man had thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine. And now that brother was coming back—changed! Already the Eloi had begun to learn one old lesson anew. They were becoming reacquainted with Fear. And suddenly there came into my head the memory of the meat I had seen in the Underworld. It seemed odd how it floated into my mind: not stirred up as it were by the current of my meditations, but coming in almost like a question from outside. I tried to recall the form of it. I had a vague sense of something familiar, but I could not tell what it was at the time.

"Still, however helpless the little people in the presence of their mysterious Fear, I was differently constituted. I came out of this age of ours, this ripe prime of the human race, when Fear does not paralyse and mystery has lost its terrors. I at least would defend myself. Without further delay I determined to make myself arms and a fastness where I might sleep. With that refuge as a base, I could face this strange world with some of that confidence I had lost in realizing to what creatures night by night I lay exposed. I felt I could never sleep again until my bed was secure from them. I shuddered with horror to think how they must already have examined me.

"I wandered during the afternoon along the valley of the Thames, but found nothing that commended itself to my mind as inaccessible. All the buildings and trees seemed easily practicable to such dexterous climbers as the Morlocks, to judge by their wells, must be. Then the tall pinnacles of the Palace of Green Porcelain and the polished gleam of its walls came back to my memory; and in the evening, taking Weena like a child upon my shoulder, I went up the hills towards the southwest. The distance, I had reckoned, was seven or eight miles, but it must have been nearer eighteen. I had first seen the place on a moist afternoon when distances are deceptively diminished. In addition, the heel of one of my shoes was loose, and a nail was working through the sole—they were comfortable old shoes I wore about indoors—so

that I was lame. And it was already long past sunset when I came in sight of the palace, silhouetted black against the pale yellow of the sky.

"Weena had been hugely delighted when I began to carry her, but after a time she desired me to let her down, and ran along by the side of me, occasionally darting off on either hand to pick flowers to stick in my pockets. My pockets had always puzzled Weena, but at the last she had concluded that they were an eccentric kind of vase for floral decoration. At least she utilized them for that purpose. And that reminds me! In changing my jacket I found…"

The Time Traveller paused, put his hand into his pocket, and silently placed two withered flowers, not unlike very large white mallows, upon the little table. Then he resumed his narrative.

"As the hush of evening crept over the world and we proceeded over the hill crest towards Wimbledon, Weena grew tired and wanted to return to the house of grey stone. But I pointed out the distant pinnacles of the Palace of Green Porcelain to her, and contrived to make her understand that we were seeking a refuge there from her Fear. You know that great pause that comes upon things before the dusk? Even the breeze stops in the trees. To me there is always an air of expectation about that evening stillness. The sky was clear, remote, and empty save for a few horizontal bars far down in the sunset. Well, that night the expectation took the colour of my fears. In that darkling calm my senses seemed preternaturally sharpened. I fancied I could even feel the hollowness of the ground beneath my feet: could, indeed, almost see through it the Morlocks on their ant-hill going hither and thither and waiting for the dark. In my excitement I fancied that they would receive my invasion of their burrows as a declaration of war. And why had they taken my Time Machine?

"So we went on in the quiet, and the twilight deepened into night. The clear blue of the distance faded, and one star after another came out. The ground grew dim and the trees black. Weena's fears and her fatigue grew upon her. I took her in my arms and talked to her and caressed her. Then, as the darkness grew deeper, she put her arms round my neck, and, closing her eyes, tightly pressed her face against my shoulder. So we went down a long slope into a valley, and there in the dimness I almost walked into a little river. This I waded, and went up the opposite side of the valley, past a number of sleeping houses, and by a statue—a Faun, or some such figure, *minus* the head. Here too were acacias.[2] So far I had seen nothing of the

Morlocks, but it was yet early in the night, and the darker hours before the old moon rose were still to come.

"From the brow of the next hill I saw a thick wood spreading wide and black before me. I hesitated at this. I could see no end to it, either to the right or the left. Feeling tired—my feet, in particular, were very sore—I carefully lowered Weena from my shoulder as I halted, and sat down upon the turf. I could no longer see the Palace of Green Porcelain, and I was in doubt of my direction. I looked into the thickness of the wood and thought of what it might hide. Under that dense tangle of branches one would be out of sight of the stars. Even were there no other lurking danger—a danger I did not care to let my imagination loose upon—there would still be all the roots to stumble over and the tree-boles to strike against.

"I was very tired, too, after the excitements of the day; so I decided that I would not face it, but would pass the night upon the open hill.

"Weena, I was glad to find, was fast asleep. I carefully wrapped her in my jacket, and sat down beside her to wait for the moonrise. The hill-side was quiet and deserted, but from the black of the wood there came now and then a stir of living things. Above me shone the stars, for the night was very clear. I felt a certain sense of friendly comfort in their twinkling. All the old constellations had gone from the sky, however: that slow movement which is imperceptible in a hundred human lifetimes, had long since rearranged them in unfamiliar groupings. But the Milky Way, it seemed to me, was still the same tattered streamer of star-dust as of yore.[3] Southward (as I judged it) was a very bright red star that was new to me; it was even more splendid than our own green Sirius. And amid all these scintillating points of light one bright planet shone kindly and steadily like the face of an old friend.

"Looking at these stars suddenly dwarfed my own troubles and all the gravities of terrestrial life. I thought of their unfathomable distance, and the slow inevitable drift of their movements out of the unknown past into the unknown future. I thought of the great precessional cycle that the pole of the earth describes. Only forty times had that silent revolution occurred during all the years that I had traversed. And during these few revolutions all the activity, all the traditions, the complex organizations, the nations, languages, literatures, aspirations, even the mere memory of Man as I knew him, had been swept out of existence. Instead were these frail creatures who had forgotten their high ancestry, and the white Things of which I went in terror. Then I thought of the Great Fear that was between the two species, and for

the first time, with a sudden shiver, came the clear knowledge of what the meat I had seen might be. Yet it was too horrible! I looked at little Weena sleeping beside me, her face white and star-like under the stars, and forthwith dismissed the thought.

"Through that long night I held my mind off the Morlocks as well as I could, and whiled away the time by trying to fancy I could find signs of the old constellations in the new confusion. The sky kept very clear, except for a hazy cloud or so. No doubt I dozed at times. Then, as my vigil wore on, came a faintness in the eastward sky, like the reflection of some colourless fire, and the old moon rose, thin and peaked and white. And close behind, and overtaking it, and overflowing it, the dawn came, pale at first, and then growing pink and warm. No Morlocks had approached us. Indeed, I had seen none upon the hill that night. And in the confidence of renewed day it almost seemed to me that my fear had been unreasonable. I stood up and found my foot with the loose heel swollen at the ankle and painful under the heel; so I sat down again, took off my shoes, and flung them away.

"I awakened Weena, and we went down into the wood, now green and pleasant instead of black and for-bidding. We found some fruit wherewith to break our fast. We soon met others of the dainty ones, laughing and dancing in the sunlight as though there was no such thing in nature as the night. And then I thought once more of the meat that I had seen. I felt assured now of what it was, and from the bottom of my heart I pitied this last feeble rill from the great flood of humanity. Clearly, at some time in the Long-Ago of human decay the Morlocks' food had run short. Possibly they had lived on rats and such-like vermin. Even now man is far less discriminating and exclusive in his food than he was—far less than any monkey. His prejudice against human flesh is no deep-seated instinct. And so these inhuman sons of men—! I tried to look at the thing in a scientific spirit. After all, they were less human and more remote than our cannibal ancestors of three or four thousand years ago. And the intelligence that would have made this state of things a torment had gone. Why should I trouble myself? These Eloi were mere fatted cattle, which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon—probably saw to the breeding of. And there was Weena dancing at my side!

"Then I tried to preserve myself from the horror that was coming upon me, by regarding it as a rigorous punishment of human selfishness. Man had been content to live in ease and delight upon the labours of his fellow-man, had taken Necessity as his watchword and excuse, and in the fullness of time

Necessity had come home to him. I even tried a Carlyle-like[4] scorn of this wretched aristocracy in decay. But this attitude of mind was impossible. However great their intellectual degradation, the Eloi had kept too much of the human form not to claim my sympathy, and to make me perforce a sharer in their degradation and their Fear.

"I had at that time very vague ideas as to the course I should pursue. My first was to secure some safe place of refuge, and to make myself such arms of metal or stone as I could contrive. That necessity was immediate. In the next place, I hoped to procure some means of fire, so that I should have the weapon of a torch at hand, for nothing, I knew, would be more efficient against these Morlocks. Then I wanted to arrange some contrivance to break open the doors of bronze under the White Sphinx. I had in mind a battering-ram. I had a persuasion that if I could enter those doors and carry a blaze of light before me I should discover the Time Machine and escape. I could not imagine the Morlocks were strong enough to move it far away. Weena I had resolved to bring with me to our own time. And turning such schemes over in my mind I pursued our way towards the building which my fancy had chosen as our dwelling.

VIII

"I FOUND THE Palace of Green Porcelain, when we approached it about noon, deserted and falling into ruin. Only ragged vestiges of glass remained in its windows, and great sheets of the green facing had fallen away from the corroded metallic framework. It lay very high upon a turfy down, and looking north-eastward before I entered it, I was surprised to see a large estuary, or even creek, where I judged Wands-worth and Battersea must once have been. I thought then—though I never followed up the thought—of what might have happened, or might be happening, to the living things in the sea.

"The material of the Palace proved on examination to be indeed porcelain, and along the face of it I saw an inscription in some unknown character. I thought, rather foolishly, that Weena might help me to interpret this, but I only learned that the bare idea of writing had never entered her head. She always seemed to me, I fancy, more human than she was, perhaps because her affection was so human.

"Within the big valves of the door—which were open and broken—we found, instead of the customary hall, a long gallery lit by many side windows. At the first glance I was reminded of a museum. The tiled floor was thick with dust, and a remarkable array of miscellaneous objects was shrouded in the same grey covering. Then I perceived, standing strange and gaunt in the centre of the hall, what was clearly the lower part of a huge skeleton. I recognized by the oblique feet that it was some extinct creature after the fashion of the Megatherium. The skull and the upper bones lay beside it in the thick dust, and in one place, where rain-water had dropped through a leak in the roof, the thing itself had been worn away. Further in the gallery was the huge skeleton barrel of a Brontosaurus. My museum hypothesis was confirmed. Going towards the side I found what appeared to be sloping

shelves, and clearing away the thick dust, I found the old familiar glass cases of our own time. But they must have been air-tight to judge from the fair preservation of some of their contents.

"Clearly we stood among the ruins of some latter-day South Kensington![1] Here, apparently, was the Palaeontological Section, and a very splendid array of fossils it must have been, though the inevitable process of decay that had been staved off for a time, and had, through the extinction of bacteria and fungi, lost ninety-nine hundredths of its force, was nevertheless, with extreme sureness if with extreme slowness at work again upon all its treasures. Here and there I found traces of the little people in the shape of rare fossils broken to pieces or threaded in strings upon reeds. And the cases had in some instances been bodily removed—by the Morlocks as I judged. The place was very silent. The thick dust deadened our footsteps. Weena, who had been rolling a sea-urchin down the sloping glass of a case, presently came, as I stared about me, and very quietly took my hand and stood beside me.

"And at first I was so much surprised by this ancient monument of an intellectual age, that I gave no thought to the possibilities it presented. Even my preoccupation about the Time Machine receded a little from my mind.

"To judge from the size of the place, this Palace of Green Porcelain had a great deal more in it than a Gallery of Palaeontology; possibly historical galleries; it might be, even a library! To me, at least in my present circumstances, these would be vastly more interesting than this spectacle of old-time geology in decay. Exploring, I found another short gallery running transversely to the first. This appeared to be devoted to minerals, and the sight of a block of sulphur set my mind running on gunpowder. But I could find no saltpeter; indeed, no nitrates of any kind. Doubtless they had deliquesced ages ago. Yet the sulphur hung in my mind, and set up a train of thinking. As for the rest of the contents of that gallery, though on the whole they were the best preserved of all I saw, I had little interest. I am no specialist in mineralogy, and I went on down a very ruinous aisle running parallel to the first hall I had entered. Apparently this section had been devoted to natural history, but everything had long since passed out of recognition. A few shrivelled and blackened vestiges of what had once been stuffed animals, desiccated mummies in jars that had once held spirit, a brown dust of departed plants: that was all! I was sorry for that, because I should have been glad to trace the patent readjustments by which the conquest of animated nature had been attained. Then we came to a gallery of

simply colossal proportions, but singularly ill-lit, the floor of it running downward at a slight angle from the end at which I entered. At intervals white globes hung from the ceiling—many of them cracked and smashed—which suggested that originally the place had been artificially lit. Here I was more in my element, for rising on either side of me were the huge bulks of big machines, all greatly corroded and many broken down, but some still fairly complete. You know I have a certain weakness for mechanism, and I was inclined to linger among these; the more so as for the most part they had the interest of puzzles, and I could make only the vaguest guesses at what they were for. I fancied that if I could solve their puzzles I should find myself in possession of powers that might be of use against the Morlocks.

"Suddenly Weena came very close to my side. So suddenly that she startled me. Had it not been for her I do not think I should have noticed that the floor of the gallery sloped at all.[1] The end I had come in at was quite above ground, and was lit by rare slit-like windows. As you went down the length, the ground came up against these windows, until at last there was a pit like the 'area' of a London house before each, and only a narrow line of daylight at the top. I went slowly along, puzzling about the machines, and had been too intent upon them to notice the gradual diminution of the light, until Weena's increasing apprehensions drew my attention. Then I saw that the gallery ran down at last into a thick darkness. I hesitated, and then, as I looked round me, I saw that the dust was less abundant and its surface less even. Further away towards the dimness, it appeared to be broken by a number of small narrow footprints. My sense of the immediate presence of the Morlocks revived at that. I felt that I was wasting my time in this academic examination of machinery. I called to mind that it was already far advanced in the afternoon, and that I had still no weapon, no refuge, and no means of making a fire. And then down in the remote blackness of the gallery I heard a peculiar pattering, and the same odd noises I had heard down the well.

"I took Weena's hand. Then, struck with a sudden idea, I left her and turned to a machine from which projected a lever not unlike those in a signal-box. Clambering upon the stand, and grasping this lever in my hands, I put all my weight upon it sideways. Suddenly Weena, deserted in the central aisle, began to whimper. I had judged the strength of the lever pretty correctly, for it snapped after a minute's strain, and I rejoined her with a mace in my hand more than sufficient, I judged, for any Morlock skull I might encounter. And I

longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one's own descendants! But it was impossible, some-how, to feel any humanity in the things. Only my disinclination to leave Weena, and a persuasion that if I began to slake my thirst for murder my Time Machine might suffer, restrained me from going straight down the gallery and killing the brutes I heard.

"Well, mace in one hand and Weena in the other, I went out of that gallery and into another and still larger one, which at the first glance reminded me of a military chapel hung with tattered flags. The brown and charred rags that hung from the sides of it, I presently recognized as the decaying vestiges of books. They had long since dropped to pieces, and every semblance of print had left them. But here and there were warped boards and cracked metallic clasps that told the tale well enough. Had I been a literary man I might, perhaps, have moralized upon the futility of all ambition. But as it was, the thing that struck me with keenest force was the enormous waste of labour to which this sombre wilderness of rotting paper testified. At the time I will confess that I thought chiefly of the *Philosophical Transactions* and my own seventeen papers upon physical optics.

"Then, going up a broad staircase, we came to what may once have been a gallery of technical chemistry. And here I had not a little hope of useful discoveries. Except at one end where the roof had collapsed, this gallery was well preserved. I went eagerly to every unbroken case. And at last, in one of the really air-tight cases, I found a box of matches. Very eagerly I tried them. They were perfectly good. They were not even damp. I turned to Weena. 'Dance,' I cried to her in her own tongue. For now I had a weapon indeed against the horrible creatures we feared. And so, in that derelict museum, upon the thick soft carpeting of dust, to Weena's huge delight, I solemnly performed a kind of composite dance, whistling *The Land of the Leal* as cheerfully as I could. In part it was a modest *cancan*, in part a step-dance, in part a skirt-dance (so far as my tail-coat permitted), and in part original. For I am naturally inventive, as you know.

"Now, I still think that for this box of matches to have escaped the wear of time for immemorial years was a most strange, as for me it was a most fortunate thing. Yet, oddly enough, I found a far unlikelier substance, and that was camphor.[2] I found it in a sealed jar, that by chance, I suppose, had been really hermetically sealed. I fancied at first that it was paraffin wax, and smashed the glass accordingly. But the odour of camphor was unmistakable.

In the universal decay this volatile substance had chanced to survive, perhaps through many thousands of centuries. It reminded me of a sepia painting I had once seen done from the ink of a fossil Belemnite that must have perished and become fossilized millions of years ago. I was about to throw it away, but I remembered that it was inflammable and burned with a good bright flame—was, in fact, an excellent candle—and I put it in my pocket. I found no explosives, however, nor any means of breaking down the bronze doors. As yet my iron crowbar was the most helpful thing I had chanced upon. Nevertheless I left that gallery greatly elated.

"I cannot tell you all the story of that long afternoon. It would require a great effort of memory to recall my explorations in at all the proper order. I remember a long gallery of rusting stands of arms, and how I hesitated between my crowbar and a hatchet or a sword. I could not carry both, however, and my bar of iron promised best against the bronze gates. There were numbers of guns, pistols, and rifles. The most were masses of rust, but many were of some new metal, and still fairly sound. But any cartridges or powder there may once have been had rotted into dust. One corner I saw was charred and shattered; perhaps, I thought, by an explosion among the specimens. In another place was a vast array of idols—Polynesian, Mexican, Grecian, Phoenician, every country on earth I should think. And here, yielding to an irresistible impulse, I wrote my name upon the nose of a steatite monster from South America that particularly took my fancy.

"As the evening drew on, my interest waned. I went through gallery after gallery, dusty, silent, often ruinous, the exhibits sometimes mere heaps of rust and lignite, sometimes fresher. In one place I suddenly found myself near the model of a tin-mine, and then by the merest accident I discovered, in an air-tight case, two dynamite cartridges! I shouted 'Eureka!' and smashed the case with joy. Then came a doubt. I hesitated. Then, selecting a little side gallery, I made my essay. I never felt such a disappointment as I did in waiting five, ten, fifteen minutes for an explosion that never came. Of course the things were dummies, as I might have guessed from their presence. I really believe that, had they not been so, I should have rushed off incontinently and blown Sphinx, bronze doors, and (as it proved) my chances of finding the Time Machine, all together into nonexistence.

"It was after that, I think, that we came to a little open court within the palace. It was turfed, and had three fruit-trees. So we rested and refreshed ourselves. Towards sunset I began to consider our position. Night was

creeping upon us, and my inaccessible hiding-place had still to be found. But that troubled me very little now. I had in my possession a thing that was, perhaps, the best of all defences against the Morlocks—I had matches! I had the camphor in my pocket, too, if a blaze were needed. It seemed to me that the best thing we could do would be to pass the night in the open, protected by a fire. In the morning there was the getting of the Time Machine. Towards that, as yet, I had only my iron mace. But now, with my growing knowledge, I felt very differently towards those bronze doors. Up to this, I had refrained from forcing them, largely because of the mystery on the other side. They had never impressed me as being very strong, and I hoped to find my bar of iron not altogether inadequate for the work.

I. It may be, of course, that the floor did not slope, but that the museum was built into the side of a hill. —ED.

IX

"WE EMERGED FROM the palace while the sun was still in part above the horizon. I was determined to reach the White Sphinx early the next morning, and ere the dusk I purposed pushing through the woods that had stopped me on the previous journey. My plan was to go as far as possible that night, and then, building a fire, to sleep in the protection of its glare. Accordingly, as we went along I gathered any sticks or dried grass I saw, and presently had my arms full of such litter. Thus loaded, our progress was slower than I had anticipated, and besides Weena was tired. And I began to suffer from sleepiness too; so that it was full night before we reached the wood. Upon the shrubby hill of its edge Weena would have stopped, fearing the darkness before us; but a singular sense of impending calamity, that should indeed have served me as a warning, drove me onward. I had been without sleep for a night and two days, and I was feverish and irritable. I felt sleep coming upon me, and the Morlocks with it.

"While we hesitated, among the black bushes behind us, and dim against their blackness, I saw three crouching figures. There was scrub and long grass all about us, and I did not feel safe from their insidious approach. The forest, I calculated, was rather less than a mile across. If we could get through it to the bare hill-side, there, as it seemed to me, was an altogether safer resting-place; I thought that with my matches and my camphor I could contrive to keep my path illuminated through the woods. Yet it was evident that if I was to flourish matches with my hands I should have to abandon my firewood; so, rather reluctantly, I put it down. And then it came into my head that I would amaze our friends behind by lighting it. I was to discover the atrocious folly of this proceeding, but it came to my mind as an ingenious move for covering our retreat.

“I don’t know if you have ever thought what a rare thing flame must be in the absence of man and in a temperate climate. The sun’s heat is rarely strong enough to burn, even when it is focused by dewdrops, as is sometimes the case in more tropical districts. Lightning may blast and blacken, but it rarely gives rise to widespread fire. Decaying vegetation may occasionally smoulder with the heat of its fermentation, but this rarely results in flame. In this decadence, too, the art of fire-making had been forgotten on the earth. The red tongues that went licking up my heap of wood were an altogether new and strange thing to Weena.

“She wanted to run to it and play with it. I believe she would have cast herself into it had I not restrained her. But I caught her up, and, in spite of her struggles, plunged boldly before me into the wood. For a little way the glare of my fire lit the path. Looking back presently, I could see, through the crowded stems, that from my heap of sticks the blaze had spread to some bushes adjacent, and a curved line of fire was creeping up the grass of the hill. I laughed at that, and turned again to the dark trees before me. It was very black and Weena clung to me convulsively, but there was still, as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, sufficient light for me to avoid the stems. Overhead it was simply black, except where a gap of remote blue sky shone down upon us here and there. I struck none of my matches because I had no hand free. Upon my left arm I carried my little one, in my right hand I had my iron bar.

“For some way I heard nothing but the crackling twigs under my feet, the faint rustle of the breeze above, and my own breathing and the throb of the blood-vessels in my ears. Then I seemed to know of a pattering about me. I pushed on grimly. The pattering grew more distinct, and then I caught the same queer sound and voices I had heard in the Under-world. There were evidently several of the Morlocks, and they were closing in upon me. Indeed, in another minute I felt a tug at my coat, then something at my arm. And Weena shivered violently, and became quite still.

“It was time for a match. But to get one I must put her down. I did so, and, as I fumbled with my pocket, a struggle began in the darkness about my knees, perfectly silent on her part and with the same peculiar cooing sounds from the Morlocks. Soft little hands, too, were creeping over my coat and back, touching even my neck. Then the match scratched and fizzed. I held it flaring, and saw the white backs of the Morlocks in flight amid the trees. I hastily took a lump of camphor from my pocket, and prepared to light it as

soon as the match should wane. Then I looked at Weena. She was lying clutching my feet and quite motionless, with her face to the ground. With a sudden fright I stooped to her. She seemed scarcely to breathe. I lit the block of camphor and flung it to the ground, and as it split and flared up and drove back the Morlocks and the shadows, I knelt down and lifted her. The wood behind seemed full of the stir and murmur of a great company!

"She seemed to have fainted. I put her carefully upon my shoulder and rose to push on, and then there came a horrible realization. In manœuvring with my matches and Weena, I had turned myself about several times, and now I had not the faintest idea in what direction lay my path. For all I knew, I might be facing back towards the Palace of Green Porcelain. I found myself in a cold sweat. I had to think rapidly what to do. I determined to build a fire and encamp where we were. I put Weena, still motionless, down upon a turfy bole, and very hastily, as my first lump of camphor waned, I began collecting sticks and leaves. Here and there out of the darkness round me the Morlocks' eyes shone like carbuncles.

"The camphor flickered and went out. I lit a match, and as I did so, two white forms that had been approaching Weena dashed hastily away. One was so blinded by the light that he came straight for me, and I felt his bones grind under the blow of my fist. He gave a whoop of dismay, staggered a little way, and fell down. I lit another piece of camphor, and went on gathering my bonfire. Presently I noticed how dry was some of the foliage above me, for since my arrival on the Time Machine, a matter of a week, no rain had fallen. So, instead of casting about among the trees for fallen twigs, I began leaping up and dragging down branches. Very soon I had a choking smoky fire of green wood and dry sticks, and could economize my camphor. Then I turned to where Weena lay beside my iron mace. I tried what I could to revive her, but she lay like one dead. I could not even satisfy myself whether or not she breathed.

"Now, the smoke of the fire beat over towards me, and it must have made me heavy of a sudden. Moreover, the vapour of camphor was in the air. My fire would not need replenishing for an hour or so. I felt very weary after my exertion, and sat down. The wood, too, was full of a slumbrous murmur that I did not understand. I seemed just to nod and open my eyes. But all was dark, and the Morlocks had their hands upon me. Flinging off their clinging fingers I hastily felt in my pocket for the match-box, and—it had gone! Then they gripped and closed with me again. In a moment I knew what had happened. I

had slept, and my fire had gone out, and the bitterness of death came over my soul. The forest seemed full of the smell of burning wood. I was caught by the neck, by the hair, by the arms, and pulled down. It was indescribably horrible in the darkness to feel all these soft creatures heaped upon me. I felt as if I was in a monstrous spider's web. I was overpowered, and went down. I felt little teeth nipping at my neck. I rolled over, and as I did so my hand came against my iron lever. It gave me strength. I struggled up, shaking the human rats from me, and, holding the bar short, I thrust where I judged their faces might be. I could feel the succulent giving of flesh and bone under my blows, and for a moment I was free.

"The strange exultation that so often seems to accompany hard fighting came upon me. I knew that both I and Weena were lost, but I determined to make the Morlocks pay for their meat. I stood with my back to a tree, swinging the iron bar before me. The whole wood was full of the stir and cries of them. A minute passed. Their voices seemed to rise to a higher pitch of excitement, and their movements grew faster. Yet none came within reach. I stood glaring at the blackness. Then suddenly came hope. What if the Morlocks were afraid? And close on the heels of that came a strange thing. The darkness seemed to grow luminous. Very dimly I began to see the Morlocks about me—three battered at my feet—and then I recognized, with incredulous surprise, that the others were running, in an incessant stream, as it seemed, from behind me, and away through the wood in front. And their backs seemed no longer white, but reddish. As I stood agape, I saw a little red spark go drifting across a gap of starlight between the branches, and vanish. And at that I understood the smell of burning wood, the slumbrous murmur that was growing now into a gusty roar, the red glow, and the Morlocks' flight.

"Stepping out from behind my tree and looking back, I saw, through the black pillars of the nearer trees, the flames of the burning forest. It was my first fire coming after me. With that I looked for Weena, but she was gone. The hissing and crackling behind me, the explosive thud as each fresh tree burst into flame, left little time for reflection. My iron bar still gripped, I followed in the Morlocks' path. It was a close race. Once the flames crept forward so swiftly on my right as I ran that I was outflanked and had to strike off to the left. But at last I emerged upon a small open space, and as I did so, a Morlock came blundering towards me, and past me, and went on straight into the fire!

“And now I was to see the most weird and horrible thing, I think, of all that I beheld in that future age. This whole space was as bright as day with the reflection of the fire. In the centre was a hillock or tumulus, surmounted by a scorched hawthorn. Beyond this was another arm of the burning forest, with yellow tongues already writhing from it, completely encircling the space with a fence of fire. Upon the hill-side were some thirty or forty Morlocks, dazzled by the light and heat, and blundering hither and thither against each other in their bewilderment. At first I did not realize their blindness, and struck furiously at them with my bar, in a frenzy of fear, as they approached me, killing one and crippling several more. But when I had watched the gestures of one of them groping under the hawthorn against the red sky, and heard their moans, I was assured of their absolute helplessness and misery in the glare, and I struck no more of them.

“Yet every now and then one would come straight towards me, setting loose a quivering horror that made me quick to elude him. At one time the flames died down somewhat, and I feared the foul creatures would presently be able to see me. I was thinking of beginning the fight by killing some of them before this should happen; but the fire burst out again brightly, and I stayed my hand. I walked about the hill among them and avoided them, looking for some trace of Weena. But Weena was gone.

“At last I sat down on the summit of the hillock, and watched this strange incredible company of blind things groping to and fro, and making uncanny noises to each other, as the glare of the fire beat on them. The coiling uprush of smoke streamed across the sky, and through the rare tatters of that red canopy, remote as though they belonged to another universe, shone the little stars. Two or three Morlocks came blundering into me, and I drove them off with blows of my fists, trembling as I did so.

“For the most part of that night I was persuaded it was a nightmare. I bit myself and screamed in a passionate desire to awake. I beat the ground with my hands, and got up and sat down again, and wandered here and there, and again sat down. Then I would fall to rubbing my eyes and calling upon God to let me awake. Thrice I saw Morlocks put their heads down in a kind of agony and rush into the flames. But, at last, above the subsiding red of the fire, above the streaming masses of black smoke and the whitening and blackening tree stumps, and the diminishing numbers of these dim creatures, came the white light of the day.

“I searched again for traces of Weena, but there were none. It was plain that they had left her poor little body in the forest. I cannot describe how it relieved me to think that it had escaped the awful fate to which it seemed destined. As I thought of that, I was almost moved to begin a massacre of the helpless abominations about me, but I contained myself. The hillock, as I have said, was a kind of island in the forest. From its summit I could now make out through a haze of smoke the Palace of Green Porcelain, and from that I could get my bearings for the White Sphinx. And so, leaving the remnant of these damned souls still going hither and thither and moaning, as the day grew clearer, I tied some grass about my feet and limped on across smoking ashes and among black stems, that still pulsated internally with fire, towards the hiding-place of the Time Machine. I walked slowly, for I was almost exhausted, as well as lame, and I felt the intensest wretchedness for the horrible death of little Weena. It seemed an overwhelming calamity. Now, in this old familiar room, it is more like the sorrow of a dream than an actual loss. But that morning it left me absolutely lonely again—terribly alone. I began to think of this house of mine, of this fireside, of some of you, and with such thoughts came a longing that was pain.

“But, as I walked over the smoking ashes under the bright morning sky, I made a discovery. In my trouser pocket were still some loose matches. The box must have leaked before it was lost.

X

"ABOUT EIGHT OR NINE in the morning I came to the same seat of yellow metal from which I had viewed the world upon the evening of my arrival. I thought of my hasty conclusions upon that evening and could not refrain from laughing bitterly at my confidence. Here was the same beautiful scene, the same abundant foliage, the same splendid palaces and magnificent ruins, the same silver river running between its fertile banks. The gay robes of the beautiful people moved hither and thither among the trees. Some were bathing in exactly the place where I had saved Weena, and that suddenly gave me a keen stab of pain. And like blots upon the landscape rose the cupolas above the ways to the Under-world. I understood now what all the beauty of the Over-world people covered. Very pleasant was their day, as pleasant as the day of the cattle in the field. Like the cattle, they knew of no enemies and provided against no needs. And their end was the same.

"I grieved to think how brief the dream of the human intellect had been. It had committed suicide. It had set itself steadfastly towards comfort and ease, a balanced society with security and permanency as its watchword, it had attained its hopes—to come to this at last. Once, life and property must have reached almost absolute safety. The rich had been assured of his wealth and comfort, the toiler assured of his life and work. No doubt in that perfect world there had been no unemployed problem, no social question left unsolved. And a great quiet had followed.

"It is a law of nature we overlook, that intellectual versatility is the compensation for change, danger, and trouble. An animal perfectly in harmony with its environment is a perfect mechanism. Nature never appeals to intelligence until habit and instinct are useless. There is no intelligence

where there is no change and no need of change. Only those animals partake of intelligence that have to meet a huge variety of needs and dangers.

"So, as I see it, the Upper-world man had drifted towards his feeble prettiness, and the Under-world to mere mechanical industry. But that perfect state had lacked one thing even for mechanical perfection—absolute permanency. Apparently as time went on, the feeding of the Under-world, however it was effected, had become disjointed. Mother Necessity, who had been staved off for a few thousand years, came back again, and she began below. The Under-world being in contact with machinery, which, however perfect, still needs some little thought outside habit, had probably retained perforce rather more initiative, if less of every other human character, than the Upper. And when other meat failed them, they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden. So I say I saw it in my last view of the world of Eight Hundred and Two Thousand Seven Hundred and One. It may be as wrong an explanation as mortal wit could invent. It is how the thing shaped itself to me, and as that I give it to you.

"After the fatigues, excitements, and terrors of the past days, and in spite of my grief, this seat and the tranquil view and the warm sunlight were very pleasant. I was very tired and sleepy, and soon my theorizing passed into dozing. Catching myself at that, I took my own hint, and spreading myself out upon the turf I had a long and refreshing sleep.

"I awoke a little before sunsetting. I now felt safe against being caught napping by the Morlocks, and, stretching myself, I came on down the hill towards the White Sphinx. I had my crowbar in one hand, and the other hand played with the matches in my pocket.

"And now came a most unexpected thing. As I approached the pedestal of the sphinx I found the bronze valves were open. They had slid down into grooves.

"At that I stopped short before them, hesitating to enter.

"Within was a small apartment, and on a raised place in the corner of this was the Time Machine. I had the small levers in my pocket. So here, after all my elaborate preparation for the siege of the White Sphinx, was a meek surrender. I threw my iron bar away, almost sorry not to use it.

"A sudden thought came into my head as I stooped towards the portal. For once, at least, I grasped the mental operations of the Morlocks. Suppressing a strong inclination to laugh, I stepped through the bronze frame and up to the Time Machine. I was surprised to find it had been carefully oiled and

cleaned. I have suspected since that the Morlocks had even partially taken it to pieces while trying in their dim way to grasp its purpose.

"Now as I stood and examined it, finding pleasure in the mere touch of the contrivance, the thing I had expected happened. The bronze panels suddenly slid up and struck the frame with a clang. I was in the dark—trapped. So the Morlocks thought. At that I chuckled gleefully.

"I could already hear their murmuring laughter as they came towards me. Very calmly I tried to strike the match. I had only to fix on the levers and depart then like a ghost. But I had overlooked one little thing. The matches were of that abominable kind that light only on the box.

"You may imagine how all my calm vanished. The little brutes were close upon me. One touched me. I made a sweeping blow in the dark at them with the levers, and began to scramble into the saddle of the machine. Then came one hand upon me and then another. Then I had simply to fight against their persistent fingers for my levers, and at the same time feel for the studs over which these fitted. One, indeed, they almost got away from me. As it slipped from my hand, I had to butt in the dark with my head—I could hear the Morlock's skull ring—to recover it. It was a nearer thing than the fight in the forest, I think, this last scramble.

"But at last the lever was fixed and pulled over. The clinging hands slipped from me. The darkness presently fell from my eyes. I found myself in the same grey light and tumult I have already described.

XI

"I HAVE ALREADY told you of the sickness and confusion that comes with time travelling. And this time I was not seated properly in the saddle, but sideways and in an unstable fashion. For an indefinite time I clung to the machine as it swayed and vibrated, quite unheeding how I went, and when I brought myself to look at the dials again I was amazed to find where I had arrived. One dial records days, and another thousands of days, another millions of days, and another thousands of millions. Now, instead of reversing the levers, I had pulled them over so as to go forward with them, and when I came to look at these indicators I found that the thousands hand was sweeping round as fast as the seconds hand of a watch—into futurity.

"As I drove on, a peculiar change crept over the appearance of things. The palpitating greyness grew darker; then—though I was still travelling with prodigious velocity—the blinking succession of day and night, which was usually indicative of a slower pace, returned, and grew more and more marked. This puzzled me very much at first. The alternations of night and day grew slower and slower, and so did the passage of the sun across the sky, until they seemed to stretch through centuries. At last a steady twilight brooded over the earth, a twilight only broken now and then when a comet glared across the darkling sky. The band of light that had indicated the sun had long since disappeared; for the sun had ceased to set—it simply rose and fell in the west, and grew ever broader and more red. All trace of the moon had vanished. The circling of the stars, growing slower and slower, had given place to creeping points of light. At last, some time before I stopped, the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat, and now and then suffering a momentary extinction. At one time it had for a little while glowed more brilliantly again, but it

speedily reverted to its sullen red heat. I perceived by this slowing down of its rising and setting that the work of the tidal drag was done. The earth had come to rest with one face to the sun, even as in our own time the moon faces the earth. Very cautiously, for I remembered my former headlong fall, I began to reverse my motion. Slower and slower went the circling hands until the thousands one seemed motionless and the daily one was no longer a mere mist upon its scale. Still slower, until the dim outlines of a desolate beach grew visible.

"I stopped very gently and sat upon the Time Machine, looking round. The sky was no longer blue. North-eastward it was inky black, and out of the blackness shone brightly and steadily the pale white stars. Overhead it was a deep Indian red and starless, and south-eastward it grew brighter to a glowing scarlet where, cut by the horizon, lay the huge hull of the sun, red and motionless. The rocks about me were of a harsh reddish colour, and all the trace of life that I could see at first was the intensely green vegetation that covered every projecting point on their south-eastern face. It was the same rich green that one sees on forest moss or on the lichen in caves: plants which like these grow in a perpetual twilight.

"The machine was standing on a sloping beach. The sea stretched away to the south-west, to rise into a sharp bright horizon against the wan sky. There were no breakers and no waves, for not a breath of wind was stirring. Only a slight oily swell rose and fell like a gentle breathing, and showed that the eternal sea was still moving and living. And along the margin where the water sometimes broke was a thick incrustation of salt—pink under the lurid sky. There was a sense of oppression in my head, and I noticed that I was breathing very fast. The sensation reminded me of my only experience of mountaineering, and from that I judged the air to be more rarefied than it is now.

"Far away up the desolate slope I heard a harsh scream, and saw a thing like a huge white butterfly[1] go slanting and fluttering up into the sky and, circling, disappear over some low hillocks beyond. The sound of its voice was so dismal that I shivered and seated myself more firmly upon the machine. Looking round me again, I saw that, quite near, what I had taken to be a reddish mass of rock was moving slowly towards me. Then I saw the thing was really a monstrous crab-like creature. Can you imagine a crab as large as yonder table, with its many legs moving slowly and uncertainly, its big claws swaying, its long antennae, like carters' whips, waving and

feeling, and its stalked eyes gleaming at you on either side of its metallic front? Its back was corrugated and ornamented with ungainly bosses, and a greenish incrustation blotched it here and there. I could see the many palps of its complicated mouth flickering and feeling as it moved.

"As I stared at this sinister apparition crawling towards me, I felt a tickling on my cheek as though a fly had lighted there. I tried to brush it away with my hand, but in a moment it returned, and almost immediately came another by my ear. I struck at this, and caught something thread-like. It was drawn swiftly out of my hand. With a frightful qualm, I turned, and I saw that I had grasped the antenna of another monster crab that stood just behind me. Its evil eyes were wriggling on their stalks, its mouth was all alive with appetite, and its vast ungainly claws, smeared with an algal slime, were descending upon me. In a moment my hand was on the lever, and I had placed a month between myself and these monsters. But I was still on the same beach, and I saw them distinctly now as soon as I stopped. Dozens of them seemed to be crawling here and there, in the sombre light, among the foliated sheets of intense green.

"I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs: all contributed to an appalling effect. I moved on a hundred years, and there was the same red sun—a little larger, a little duller—the same dying sea, the same chill air, and the same crowd of earthy crustacea creeping in and out among the green weed and the red rocks. And in the westward sky, I saw a curved pale line like a vast new moon.

"So I travelled, stopping ever and again, in great strides of a thousand years or more, drawn on by the mystery of the earth's fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away. At last, more than thirty million years hence, the huge red-hot dome of the sun had come to obscure nearly a tenth part of the darkling heavens. Then I stopped once more, for the crawling multitude of crabs had disappeared, and the red beach, save for its livid green liverworts and lichens, seemed lifeless. And now it was flecked with white. A bitter cold assailed me. Rare white flakes ever and again came eddying down. To the north-eastward, the glare of snow lay under the starlight of the sable sky and I could see an undulating crest of hillocks

pinkish white. There were fringes of ice along the sea margin, with drifting masses further out; but the main expanse of that salt ocean, all bloody under the eternal sunset, was still unfrozen.

"I looked about me to see if any traces of animal life remained. A certain indefinable apprehension still kept me in the saddle of the machine. But I saw nothing moving, in earth or sky or sea. The green slime on the rocks alone testified that life was not extinct. A shallow sandbank had appeared in the sea and the water had receded from the beach. I fancied I saw some black object flopping about upon this bank, but it became motionless as I looked at it, and I judged that my eye had been deceived, and that the black object was merely a rock. The stars in the sky were intensely bright and seemed to me to twinkle very little.

"Suddenly I noticed that the circular westward outline of the sun had changed; that a concavity, a bay, had appeared in the curve. I saw this grow larger. For a minute perhaps I stared aghast at this blackness that was creeping over the day, and then I realized that an eclipse was beginning. Either the moon or the planet Mercury was passing across the sun's disk. Naturally, at first I took it to be the moon, but there is much to incline me to believe that what I really saw was the transit of an inner planet passing very near to the earth.

"The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black.

"A horror of this great darkness came on me. The cold, that smote to my marrow, and the pain I felt in breathing, overcame me. I shivered, and a deadly nausea seized me. Then like a red-hot bow in the sky appeared the edge of the sun. I got off the machine to recover myself. I felt giddy and

incapable of facing the return journey. As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shoal—there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing—against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about. Then I felt I was fainting. But a terrible dread of lying helpless in that remote and awful twilight sustained me while I clambered upon the saddle.

XII

"So I came back. For a long time I must have been insensible upon the machine. The blinking succession of the days and nights was resumed, the sun got golden again, the sky blue. I breathed with greater freedom. The fluctuating contours of the land ebbed and flowed. The hands spun backward upon the dials. At last I saw again the dim shadows of houses, the evidences of decadent humanity. These, too, changed and passed, and others came. Presently, when the million dial was at zero, I slackened speed. I began to recognize our own petty and familiar architecture, the thousands hand ran back to the starting-point, the night and day flapped slower and slower. Then the old walls of the laboratory came round me. Very gently, now, I slowed the mechanism down.

"I saw one little thing that seemed odd to me. I think I have told you that when I set out, before my velocity became very high, Mrs. Watchett had walked across the room, travelling, as it seemed to me, like a rocket. As I returned, I passed again across that minute when she traversed the laboratory. But now her every motion appeared to be the exact inversion of her previous ones. The door at the lower end opened, and she glided quietly up the laboratory, back foremost, and disappeared behind the door by which she had previously entered. Just before that I seemed to see Hillyer for a moment; but he passed like a flash.

"Then I stopped the machine, and saw about me again the old familiar laboratory, my tools, my appliances just as I had left them. I got off the thing very shakily, and sat down upon my bench. For several minutes I trembled violently. Then I became calmer. Around me was my old workshop again, exactly as it had been. I might have slept there, and the whole thing have been a dream.

"And yet, not exactly! The thing had started from the south-east corner of the laboratory. It had come to rest again in the north-west, against the wall where you saw it. That gives you the exact distance from my little lawn to the pedestal of the White Sphinx, into which the Morlocks had carried my machine.

"For a time my brain went stagnant. Presently I got up and came through the passage here, limping, because my heel was still painful, and feeling sorely begrimed. I saw the *Pall Mall Gazette* on the table by the door. I found the date was indeed to-day, and looking at the timepiece, saw the hour was almost eight o'clock. I heard your voices and the clatter of plates. I hesitated—I felt so sick and weak. Then I sniffed good wholesome meat, and opened the door on you. You know the rest. I washed, and dined, and now I am telling you the story.

"I know," he said, after a pause, "that all this will be absolutely incredible to you. To me the one incredible thing is that I am here to-night in this old familiar room looking into your friendly faces and telling you these strange adventures."

He looked at the Medical Man. "No. I cannot expect you to believe it. Take it as a lie—or a prophecy. Say I dreamed it in the workshop. Consider I have been speculating upon the destinies of our race until I have hatched this fiction. Treat my assertion of its truth as a mere stroke of art to enhance its interest. And taking it as a story, what do you think of it?"

He took up his pipe, and began, in his old accustomed manner, to tap with it nervously upon the bars of the grate. There was a momentary stillness. Then chairs began to creak and shoes to scrape upon the carpet. I took my eyes off the Time Traveller's face, and looked round at his audience. They were in the dark, and little spots of colour swam before them. The Medical Man seemed absorbed in the contemplation of our host. The Editor was looking hard at the end of his cigar—the sixth. The Journalist fumbled for his watch. The others, as far as I remember, were motionless.

The Editor stood up with a sigh. "What a pity it is you're not a writer of stories!" he said, putting his hand on the Time Traveller's shoulder.

"You don't believe it?"

"Well—"

"I thought not."

The Time Traveller turned to us. "Where are the matches?" he said. He lit one and spoke over his pipe, puffing. "To tell you the truth… I hardly believe

it myself…. And yet…"

His eye fell with a mute inquiry upon the withered white flowers upon the little table. Then he turned over the hand holding his pipe, and I saw he was looking at some half-healed scars on his knuckles.

The Medical Man rose, came to the lamp, and examined the flowers. "The gynaeceum's odd," he said. The Psychologist leant forward to see, holding out his hand for a specimen.

"I'm hanged if it isn't a quarter to one," said the Journalist. "How shall we get home?"

"Plenty of cabs at the station," said the Psychologist.

"It's a curious thing," said the Medical Man; "but I certainly don't know the natural order of these flowers. May I have them?"

The Time Traveller hesitated. Then suddenly: "Certainly not."

"Where did you really get them?" said the Medical Man.

The Time Traveller put his hand to his head. He spoke like one who was trying to keep hold of an idea that eluded him. "They were put into my pocket by Weena, when I travelled into Time." He stared round the room. "I'm damned if it isn't all going. This room and you and the atmosphere of every day is too much for my memory. Did I ever make a Time Machine, or a model of a Time Machine? Or is it all only a dream? They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at times—but I can't stand another that won't fit. It's madness. And where did the dream come from?… I must look at that machine. If there *is* one!"

He caught up the lamp swiftly, and carried it, flaring red, through the door into the corridor. We followed him. There in the flickering light of the lamp was the machine sure enough, squat, ugly, and askew; a thing of brass, ebony, ivory, and translucent glimmering quartz. Solid to the touch—for I put out my hand and felt the rail of it—and with brown spots and smears upon the ivory, and bits of grass and moss upon the lower parts, and one rail bent awry.

The Time Traveller put the lamp down on the bench, and ran his hand along the damaged rail. "It's all right now," he said. "The story I told you was true. I'm sorry to have brought you out here in the cold." He took up the lamp, and, in an absolute silence, we returned to the smoking-room.

He came into the hall with us and helped the Editor on with his coat. The Medical Man looked into his face and, with a certain hesitation, told him he was suffering from overwork, at which he laughed hugely. I remember him standing in the open doorway, bawling good night.

I shared a cab with the Editor. He thought the tale a "gaudy lie." For my own part I was unable to come to a conclusion. The story was so fantastic and incredible, the telling so credible and sober. I lay awake most of the night thinking about it. I determined to go next day and see the Time Traveller again. I was told he was in the laboratory, and being on easy terms in the house, I went up to him. The laboratory, however, was empty. I stared for a minute at the Time Machine and put out my hand and touched the lever. At that the squat substantial-looking mass swayed like a bough shaken by the wind. Its instability startled me extremely, and I had a queer reminiscence of the childish days when I used to be forbidden to meddle. I came back through the corridor. The Time Traveller met me in the smoking-room. He was coming from the house. He had a small camera under one arm and a knapsack under the other. He laughed when he saw me, and gave me an elbow to shake. "I'm frightfully busy," said he, "with that thing in there."

"But is it not some hoax?" I said. "Do you really travel through time?"

"Really and truly I do." And he looked frankly into my eyes. He hesitated. His eye wandered about the room. "I only want half an hour," he said. "I know why you came, and it's awfully good of you. There's some magazines here. If you'll stop to lunch I'll prove you this time travelling up to the hilt, specimen and all. If you'll forgive my leaving you now?"

I consented, hardly comprehending then the full import of his words, and he nodded and went on down the corridor. I heard the door of the laboratory slam, seated myself in a chair, and took up a daily paper. What was he going to do before lunch-time? Then suddenly I was reminded by an advertisement that I had promised to meet Richardson, the publisher, at two. I looked at my watch, and saw that I could barely save that engagement. I got up and went down the passage to tell the Time Traveller.

As I took hold of the handle of the door I heard an exclamation, oddly truncated at the end, and a click and a thud. A gust of air whirled round me as I opened the door, and from within came the sound of broken glass falling on the floor. The Time Traveller was not there. I seemed to see a ghostly, indistinct figure sitting in a whirling mass of black and brass for a moment—a figure so transparent that the bench behind with its sheets of drawings was absolutely distinct; but this phantasm vanished as I rubbed my eyes. The Time Machine had gone. Save for a subsiding stir of dust, the further end of the laboratory was empty. A pane of the skylight had, apparently, just been blown in.

I felt an unreasonable amazement. I knew that something strange had happened, and for the moment could not distinguish what the strange thing might be. As I stood staring, the door into the garden opened, and the man-servant appeared.

We looked at each other. Then ideas began to come. “Has Mr.——gone out that way?” said I.

“No, sir. No one has come out this way. I was expecting to find him here.”

At that I understood. At the risk of disappointing Richardson I stayed on, waiting for the Time Traveller; waiting for the second, perhaps still stranger story, and the specimens and photographs he would bring with him. But I am beginning now to fear that I must wait a lifetime. The Time Traveller vanished three years ago. And, as everybody knows now, he has never returned.

EPILOGUE

ONE CANNOT choose but wonder. Will he ever return? It may be that he swept back into the past, and fell among the blood-drinking, hairy savages of the Age of Unpolished Stone; into the abysses of the Cretaceous Sea; or among the grotesque saurians, the huge reptilian brutes of the Jurassic times. He may even now—if I may use the phrase—be wandering on some plesiosaurus-haunted Oolitic coral reef, or beside the lonely saline lakes of the Triassic Age. Or did he go forward, into one of the nearer ages, in which men are still men, but with the riddles of our own time answered and its wearisome problems solved? Into the manhood of the race: for I, for my own part, cannot think that these latter days of weak experiment, fragmentary theory, and mutual discord are indeed man's culminating time! I say, for my own part. He, I know—for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made—thought but cheerlessly of the Advancement of Mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as though it were not so. But to me the future is still black and blank—is a vast ignorance, lit at a few casual places by the memory of his story. And I have by me, for my comfort, two strange white flowers—shrivelled now, and brown and flat and brittle—to witness that even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man.

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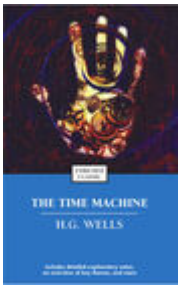

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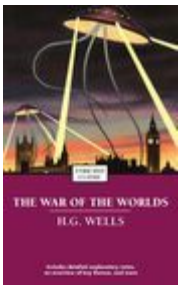

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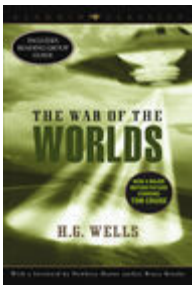

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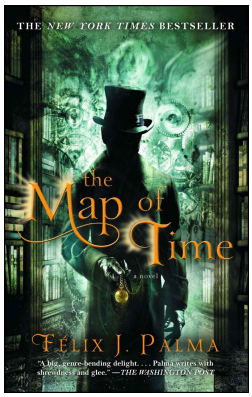

by

Félix J Palma

I

ANDREW HARRINGTON WOULD HAVE GLADLY died several times over if that meant not having to choose just one pistol from among his father's vast collection in the living room cabinet. Decisions had never been Andrew's strong point. On close examination, his life had been a series of mistaken choices, the last of them threatening to cast its lengthy shadow over the future. But that life of unedifying blunders was about to end. This time he was sure he had made the right decision, because he had decided not to decide. There would be no more mistakes in the future because there would be no more future. He was going to destroy it completely by putting one of those guns to his right temple. He could see no other solution: obliterating the future was the only way for him to eradicate the past.

He scanned the contents of the cabinet, the lethal assortment his father had lovingly set about assembling after his return from the war. He was fanatical about these weapons, though Andrew suspected it was not so much nostalgia that drove him to collect them as his desire to contemplate the novel ways mankind kept coming up with for taking one's own life outside the law. In stark contrast to his father's devotion, Andrew was impassive as he surveyed the apparently docile, almost humdrum implements that had brought thunder down to men's fingertips and freed war from the unpleasantness of hand-to-hand combat. Andrew tried to imagine what kind of death might be lurking inside each of them, lying in wait like some predator. Which would his father have recommended he blow his brains out with? He calculated that death from one of those antiquated muzzle-loading flintlocks, which had to be refilled with gunpowder and a ball, then tamped down with a paper plug each time they were fired, would be a noble but drawn-out, tedious affair. He preferred the swift death guaranteed by one of the more modern revolvers nestling in their luxurious velvet-lined wooden cases. He considered a Colt Single Action revolver, which looked easy to handle and reliable, but discarded it when he remembered he had seen Buffalo Bill brandishing one in his Wild West Shows. A pitiful attempt to reenact his transoceanic exploits

with a handful of imported Red Indians and a dozen lethargic, apparently opium-drugged buffalo. Death for him was not just another adventure. He also rejected a fine Smith & Wesson: that was the gun that had killed the outlaw Jesse James, of whom he considered himself unworthy, as well as a Webley revolver, specially designed to hold back the charging hordes in Britain's colonial wars, which he thought looked too cumbersome. His attention turned next to his father's favorite, a fine pepperbox with rotating barrels, but he seriously doubted whether this ridiculous, ostentatious-looking weapon would be capable of firing a bullet with enough force. Finally, he settled on an elegant 1870 Colt with mother-of-pearl inlays that would take his life with all the delicacy of a woman's caress.

He smiled defiantly as he plucked it from the cabinet, remembering how often his father had forbidden him to meddle with his pistols. But the illustrious William Harrington was in Italy at that moment, no doubt reducing the Fontana de Trevi to a quivering wreck with his critical gaze. His parents' decision to leave on their trip to Europe the very day he had chosen to kill himself had also been a happy coincidence. He doubted whether either of them would ever decipher the true message concealed in his gesture (that he had preferred to die as he had lived—alone), but for Andrew it was enough to imagine the inevitable look of disgust on his father's face when he discovered his son had killed himself behind his back, without his permission.

He opened the cabinet where the ammunition was kept and loaded six bullets into the chamber. He supposed that one would be enough, but who knew what might happen. After all, he had never killed himself before. Then he tucked the gun, wrapped in a cloth, inside his coat pocket, as though it were a piece of fruit he was taking with him to eat later on a stroll. In a further act of defiance, he left the cabinet door open. If only he had shown this much courage before, he thought. If only he had dared confront his father when it had mattered, she would still be alive. But by the time he did so, it was too late. And he had spent eight long years paying for his hesitation. Eight years, during which his pain had only worsened, spreading its slimy tendrils through him like poison ivy, wrapping itself around his insides, gnawing at his soul. Despite the efforts of his cousin Charles and the distraction of other women's bodies, his grief over Marie's death refused to be laid to rest. But tonight it would all be over. Twenty-six was a good age to die, he reflected, contentedly fingering the bulge in his pocket. He had the

gun. Now all he needed was a suitable place to perform the ceremony. And there was only one possible place.

With the weight of the revolver in his pocket comforting him like a good-luck charm, he descended the grand staircase of the Harrington mansion in elegant Kensington Gore, a stone's throw from the Queen's Gate entrance to Hyde Park. He had not intended to cast any farewell glances at the walls of what had been his home for almost three decades, but he could not help feeling a perverse wish to pause before his father's portrait, which dominated the hall. His father stared down at him disapprovingly out of the gilt frame, a proud and commanding figure bursting out of the old uniform he had worn as a young infantryman in the Crimean War until a Russian bayonet had punctured his thigh and left him with a disturbingly lopsided gait. William Harrington surveyed the world disdainfully, as though the universe were a botched affair on which he had long since given up. What fool was responsible for that untimely blanket of fog which had descended on the battlefield outside the besieged city of Sebastopol, so that nobody could see the tip of the enemy's bayonets? Who had decided that a woman was the ideal person to preside over England's destiny? Was the East really the best place for the sun to rise?

Andrew had never seen his father without that cruel animosity seeping from his eyes, and so could not know whether he had been born with it or had been infected with it fighting alongside the ferocious Ottomans in the Crimea. In any event, it had not vanished like a mild case of smallpox, leaving no mark on his face, even though the path that had opened up in front of his hapless soldier's boots on his return could only be termed a fortunate one. What did it matter that he had to hobble along it with the aid of a stick if it helped him reach his present position? For, without having to enter any pact with the devil, the man with the bushy moustache and clean-cut features depicted on the canvas had become one of the richest men in England overnight. Trudging around in that distant war, bayonet at the ready, he could never have dreamed of possessing a fraction of what he now owned. How he had amassed his fortune, though, was one of the family's best-kept secrets, and a complete mystery to Andrew.

* * *

THE TEDIOUS MOMENT IS now approaching when the young man must decide which hat and overcoat to pick from among the heap in the hall closet: one has to look presentable even for death. This is a scene which, knowing Andrew, could take several exasperating minutes, and since I see no need to describe it, I shall take the opportunity to welcome you to this tale, which has just begun, and which after lengthy reflection I chose to begin at this juncture and not another; as though I, too, had to select a single beginning from among the many jostling for position in the closet of possibilities. Assuming you stay until the end of this tale, some of you will no doubt think that I chose the wrong thread with which to begin spinning my yarn, and that for accuracy's sake I should have respected chronological order and begun with Miss Haggerty's story. It is possible, but there are stories that cannot begin at their beginning, and perhaps this is one of them.

So, let's forget about Miss Haggerty for the moment, forget that I ever mentioned her, even, and let's go back to Andrew, who has just stepped forth from the mansion suitably dressed in a hat and coat, and even a pair of warm gloves to protect his hands from the harsh winter cold. Once outside the mansion, the young man paused at the top of the steps, which unfurled at his feet like a wave of marble down to the garden. From there, he surveyed the world in which he had been brought up, suddenly aware that, if things went according to plan, he would never see it again. Night was gently spreading its veil over the Harrington mansion. A hazy full moon hung in the sky, bathing in its soft glow the immaculate lawns surrounding the house, most of them cluttered with flower beds, hedges, and fountains, dozens of oversized stone fountains decorated with excessively ornate sculptures of mermaids, fauns, and other mythical creatures. His father had accumulated such a large number of them because as an unsophisticated soul his only way of showing off his importance was to buy a lot of expensive and useless objects. In the case of the fountains his extravagance was excusable, because they combined to soothe the night with their watery refrain, making the listener want to close his eyes and forget everything except the sound of that hypnotic burble. Further off, beyond the neatly clipped lawns, stood the immense greenhouse, graceful as a swan poised for flight, where his mother spent most of the day marveling over the exotic flowers that sprouted from seeds brought back from the colonies.

Andrew gazed at the moon for several minutes wondering whether man would ever be able to travel there, as had the characters in Jules Verne and

Cyrano de Bergerac's works. And what would he find if he did manage to land on its shimmering surface—whether in an airship or shot out of a cannon or with a dozen bottles of dew strapped to his body in the hope that when it evaporated he would float up to the sky like the Gascon swashbuckler's hero? Ariosto the poet had turned the planet into a warehouse where lunatics' reason was stored in vials, but Andrew was more drawn to Plutarch's idea of it as the place where noble souls went after they left the world of the living. Like Plutarch, Andrew preferred to imagine that the moon was where dead people dwelled. He liked to picture them living at peace in ivory palaces built by an army of worker angels or in caves dug out of that white rock, waiting for the living to meet death and to carry on their lives there with them, exactly where they had left off. Sometimes, he imagined that Marie was living at that very moment in one of those grottos, oblivious to what had happened to her and grateful that death had offered her a better existence than life. Marie, pale in all that white splendor, waiting patiently for him to decide once and for all to blow his brains out and come to fill the empty space in her bed.

He stopped gazing at the moon when he noticed that Harold, the coachman, had followed his orders and was standing at the foot of the stairs with a carriage at the ready. As soon as he saw his young master descending the flight of steps, the coachman rushed to open the carriage door. Andrew had always been amused by Harold's display of energy, considering it incongruous in a man approaching sixty, but the coachman clearly kept in good shape.

"Miller's Court," the youth commanded.

Harold was astonished at his request.

"But sir, that's where—"

"Is there some problem, Harold?" Andrew interrupted.

The coachman stared at him for a moment, his mouth hanging ludicrously half-open, before adding:

"None whatsoever, sir."

Andrew gave a nod, signaling that the conversation was at an end. He climbed into the brougham and sat down on the red velvet seat. Glimpsing his reflection in the carriage window, Andrew gave a sigh of despair. Was that haggard countenance really his? It was the face of someone whose life has been seeping out of him unawares, like a pillow losing its stuffing through an open seam. In a certain sense, this was true. Although his face

retained the harmonious good looks he was fortunate enough to have been born with, it now resembled an empty shell, a vague impression left in a mound of ashes. The sorrow that had cast a shadow over his soul had taken its toll on his appearance, too, for he could scarcely recognize himself in this aging youth with hollowed cheeks, downcast eyes, and an unkempt beard who stared back at him in the glass. Grief had stunted him, transforming him into a dried-up, sullen creature. Fortunately, the cab began to rock as Harold, having overcome his astonishment, clambered up to his perch. This took Andrew's attention away from the blurred face sketched onto the canvas of the night. The final act of the disastrous performance that had been his life was about to begin, and he was determined to savor every moment of it. He heard the whip crack above his head and, caressing the steely bulge in his pocket, he let himself be lulled by the carriage's gentle sway.

* * *

THE CARRIAGE LEFT THE mansion and drove down Carriage Drive, which bordered the lush vegetation of Hyde Park. Gazing through the window at the city, Andrew thought that in less than half an hour's time they would be in the East End. This ride had always fascinated and puzzled him in equal measure, because it allowed him to glimpse in a single sweep every aspect of his beloved London, the world's greatest metropolis, the giant head of an insatiable octopus whose tentacles stretched over almost a fifth of the world's surface, holding Canada, India, Australia, and a large part of Africa in its viselike grip. As the handsome carriage sped east, the salubrious, almost countrified atmosphere of Kensington soon gave way to the crowded urban environment of Piccadilly, and beyond to the Circus where Anteros, the avenger of unrequited love, protrudes like an arrow fired at the city's heart. Beyond Fleet Street, the middle-class dwellings seemingly huddled around St. Paul's Cathedral gradually came into view. Finally, once they had passed the Bank of England and Cornhill Street, a wave of poverty swept over everything, a poverty that people from the adjoining West End knew of only from the satirical cartoons in *Punch*, and which seemed to pollute the air, making it foul to breathe as it mingled with the stench rising from the Thames.

Andrew had last made this journey eight years earlier, and since then he had always known that sooner or later he would make it again for the very

last time. It was hardly surprising then that as they drew nearer to Aldgate, the gateway to Whitechapel, he felt slightly uneasy. He gazed warily out of the window as they entered the district, experiencing the same misgivings as he had in the past. He had never been able to avoid feeling overwhelmed by an uncomfortable sense of shame knowing that he was spying on what was to him an alien world with the dispassionate interest of somebody who studies insects. Over time, though, his initial revulsion had turned into inevitable compassion for the souls who inhabited that junkyard where the city dumped its human waste. And, peering out of the window, it seemed as if there was every reason for him to feel that compassion still: London's poorest borough had changed relatively little in the past eight years. Wealth brings poverty in its wake, thought Andrew, as they crossed the ill-lit, rowdy streets, crammed with stalls and handcarts and teeming with wretched creatures whose lives were played out beneath the menacing shadow of Christ Church. At first, he had been shocked to discover that behind the dazzle of the city's façade there existed this outpost of hell where, with the Queen's blessing, human beings were condemned to live like beasts. But the intervening years had made him less naïve, so that he was no longer surprised to see that even as the advances of science were transforming the face of London and the well-to-do amused themselves by recording their dogs' barks onto the wax-coated cylinders of phonographs or conversed via telephone under the glow of Robertson's electric lamps, while their wives brought their children into the world still groggy from chloroform, Whitechapel had remained immune to all this progress, untouchable beneath its rotten shell, drowning in its own filth. A quick glance was enough to tell him that crossing into this world was still like sticking his hand into a hornets' nest. It was here that poverty showed its ugliest face, here that the same jarring, sinister tune was always playing. He observed a couple of pub brawls, heard screams rising from the depths of dark alleyways, and glimpsed a few drunks sprawled in the gutter while a gang of street urchins stripped them of their shoes. They exchanged glances with a pair of pugnacious-looking men standing on a street corner, the petty rulers in this parallel kingdom of vice and crime.

* * *

THE LUXURIOUS CARRIAGE CAUGHT the attention of several prostitutes who shouted lewd proposals to him, hitching up their skirts and showing their

cleavage. Andrew felt a pang of sorrow as he gazed upon this pitiful back-street spectacle. Most of the women were filthy and downtrodden, their bodies bearing the mark of their daily burden. Even the youngest and prettiest could not escape being stained by the misery of their surroundings. He was revisited by the agonizing thought that he might have saved one of these doomed women, offered her a better life than the one her Creator had allotted her, and yet he had failed. His sorrow reached a crescendo as the carriage rattled past the Ten Bells, emitting an arpeggio of creaks as it turned into Crispin Street on its way to Dorset Street, passing in front of the Britannia pub where he had first spoken to Marie. This street was his final destination. Harold pulled the carriage up next to the stone arch leading to the Miller's Court flats, and climbed off the perch to open the carriage door. Andrew stepped out of the coach feeling suddenly dizzy and was aware that his legs were shaking as he looked around him. Everything was exactly as he remembered it, down to the shop with grimy windows run by McCarthy, the owner of the flats which stood beside the entrance. Nothing he saw indicated to him that time also passed in Whitechapel.

"You can go home now, Harold," he told the coachman, who was standing in silence at his side.

"What time shall I fetch you, sir?" asked the old man.

Andrew looked at him without knowing what to say. Fetch him? He had to stifle a sinister laugh. The only thing fetching him would be the cart from the Golden Lane morgue, the same one that had come there to fetch what was left of his beloved Marie eight years before.

"Forget you ever brought me here," was his reply.

The somber expression that clouded the coachman's face moved Andrew. Had Harold understood what he had come there to do? He could not be sure, because he had never given a moment's thought to the coachman's intelligence, or indeed to that of any servant. He always thought that at the most they possessed the innate cunning of people who from an early age are obliged to swim against the current in which he and his class maneuvered with ease. Now, though, he thought he detected in old Harold's attitude an uneasiness that could only have come from his having guessed Andrew's intentions with astonishing accuracy. And the servant's capacity for deduction was not the only discovery Andrew made during that brief moment when for once they looked directly at each other. Andrew also became aware of something hitherto unimaginable to him: the affection a servant can feel for

his master. Despite the fact that he could only see them as shadows drifting in and out of rooms according to some invisible design, only noticing them when he needed to leave his glass on a tray or wanted the fire lit, these phantoms could actually care about what happened to their masters. That succession of faceless people—the maids whom his mother dismissed on the flimsiest grounds, the cooks systematically impregnated by the stable boys as though conforming to some ancient ritual, the butlers who left their employ with excellent references and went to work at another mansion identical to theirs—all of them made up a shifting landscape which Andrew had never taken the trouble to notice.

"Very well, sir," murmured Harold.

Andrew understood that these words were the coachman's last farewell; that this was the old fellow's only way of saying goodbye to him, since embracing him was a risk he appeared unwilling to take. And with a heavy heart, Andrew watched that stout, resolute man almost three times his age, to whom he would have had to relinquish the role of master if they had ever been stranded together on a desert island, clamber back up onto the carriage. He urged on the horses, leaving behind an echo of hooves clattering into the distance as the carriage was swallowed up by the fog spreading through the London streets like muddy foam. It struck him as odd that the only person he had said good-bye to before killing himself should be the coachman and not his parents or his cousin Charles, but life was full of such ironies.

That is exactly what Harold Barker was thinking as he drove the horses down Dorset Street, looking for the way out of that accursed neighborhood where life was not worth thruppence. But for his father's determination to pluck him from poverty and secure him a job as a coachman as soon as he was able to climb onto the perch, he might have been one more among the hordes of wretched souls scraping an existence in this gangrenous patch of London. Yes, that surly old drunk was the one who had hurled him into a series of jobs that had ended at the coach house of the illustrious William Harrington, in whose service he had spent half his life. But, he had to admit, they had been peaceful years, which he did when taking stock of his life in the early hours after his chores were done and the masters were already asleep; peaceful years in which he had taken a wife and fathered two healthy, strong children, one of whom was employed as a gardener by Mr. Harrington.

The good fortune that had allowed him to forge a different life from the one he had believed was his lot enabled him to look upon those wretched souls with a degree of objectivity and compassion. Harold had been obliged to go to Whitechapel more often than he would have liked when ferrying his master there that terrible autumn eight years ago, a period when even the sky seemed to ooze blood at times. He had read in the newspapers about what had happened in that warren of godforsaken streets, but more than anything he had seen it reflected in his master's eyes. He knew now that young master Harrington had never recovered, that those reckless excursions to pubs and brothels which his cousin Charles had dragged them both on (although he himself had been obliged to remain in the carriage shivering from cold) had not succeeded in driving the terror from his eyes. And that night Harrington had appeared ready to lay down his arms, to surrender to an enemy who had proved invincible. Didn't that bulge in his pocket look suspiciously like a firearm? But what could he do? Should he turn around and try to stop him? Should a servant step in to alter his master's destiny? Harold shook his head. Maybe he was imagining things, he thought, and the young man simply wanted to spend the night in that haunted room, safe with a gun in his pocket.

He left off his uncomfortable broodings when he glimpsed a familiar carriage coming out of the fog towards him from the opposite direction. It was the Winslow family carriage, and the bundled-up figure on the perch was almost certainly Edward Rush, one of their coachmen. To judge from the way he slowed the horses, Rush appeared to have recognized him, too. Harold nodded a silent greeting to his colleague, before directing his gaze at the occupant of the carriage. For a split second, he and young Charles Winslow stared solemnly at one another. They did not say a word.

"Faster, Edward," Charles ordered his driver, tapping the roof of the carriage frantically with the knob of his cane.

Harold watched with relief as the carriage vanished once more into the fog in the direction of the Miller's Court flats. He was not needed now. He only hoped that young Winslow arrived in time. He would have liked to stay and see how the affair ended, but he had an order to carry out—although he fancied it had been given to him by a dead man—and so he urged the horses on once more and found his way out of that dreaded neighborhood where life (I apologize for the repetition, but the same thought did occur to Harold twice) was not worth thruppence. Admittedly, the expression sums up the peculiarity of the neighborhood very accurately, and we probably could not

hope for a more profound appraisal from a coachman. However, despite having a life worthy of being recounted—as are all lives upon close scrutiny—the coachman Harold Barker is not a relevant character in this story. Others may choose to write about it and will no doubt find plenty of material to endow it with the emotion every good story requires—the time he met Rebecca, his wife, or the hilarious incident involving a ferret and a rake—but that is not our purpose here.

And so let us leave Harold, whose reappearance at some point in this tale I cannot vouch for, because a whole host of characters are going to pass through it and I can't be expected to remember every one of their faces. Let us return to Andrew, who at this very moment is crossing the arched entrance to Miller's Court and walking up the muddy stone path trying to find number thirteen while he rummages in his coat pocket for the key. After stumbling around in the dark for a few moments he found the room, pausing before the door with an attitude which anybody able to see him from one of the neighboring windows would have taken to be incongruous reverence. But for Andrew that room was infinitely more than some wretched lair where people who hadn't a penny to their name took refuge. He had not been back there since that fateful night, although he had paid to keep everything exactly as it had been, exactly as it still was inside his head. Every month for the past eight years he had sent one of his servants to pay the rent for the little room so that nobody would be able to live there, because if he ever went back, he did not want to find traces of anyone but Marie. The few pennies for the rent were a drop in the ocean for him, and Mr. McCarthy had been delighted that a wealthy gentleman and obvious rake should want to rent that wretched dwelling indefinitely, for after what had taken place within its four walls he very much doubted anybody would be brave enough to sleep there. Andrew realized now that deep down he had always known he would come back, that the ceremony he was about to perform could not have been carried out anywhere else.

He opened the door and cast a mournful gaze around the room. It was a tiny space, scarcely more sophisticated than a shack, with flaking walls and a few sticks of battered furniture including a dilapidated bed, a grimy mirror, a crumbling fireplace, and a couple of chairs which looked as if they might fall apart if a fly landed on them. He felt a renewed sense of amazement that life could actually take place in somewhere like this. And yet, had he not known more happiness in that room than in the luxurious setting of the Harrington

mansion? If, as he had read somewhere, every man's paradise was in a different place, his was undoubtedly here, a place he had reached guided by a map not charting rivers or valleys but kisses and caresses.

And it was precisely a caress, this time an icy one on the nape of his neck, which drew his attention to the fact that nobody had taken the trouble to fix the broken window to the left of the door. What was the point? McCarthy seemed to belong to that class of people whose motto was to work as little as possible, and had Andrew reproached him for not replacing the pane of glass, he could always have argued that since he had requested everything be kept just as it was he had assumed this included the window-pane. Andrew sighed. He could see nothing with which to plug the hole, and so decided to kill himself in his hat and coat. He sat down on one of the rickety chairs, reached into his pocket for the gun, and carefully unfolded the cloth, as if he were performing a liturgy. The Colt gleamed in the moonlight filtering weakly through the small, grimy window.

He stroked the weapon as though it were a cat curled up in his lap and let Marie's smile wash over him once more. Andrew was always surprised that his memories retained the vibrancy, like fresh roses, of those first days. He remembered everything so incredibly vividly, as though no eight-year gap stretched between them, and at times these memories seemed even more beautiful than the real events. What mysterious alchemy could make these imitations appear more vivid than the real thing? The answer was obvious: the passage of time, which transformed the volatile present into that finished, unalterable painting called the past, a canvas man always executed blindly, with erratic brushstrokes that only made sense when one stepped far enough away from it to be able to admire it as a whole.

II

THE FIRST TIME THEIR EYES MET, SHE WAS not even there. Andrew had fallen in love with Marie without needing to have her in front of him, and to him this felt as romantic as it did paradoxical. The event had occurred at his uncle's mansion in Queen's Gate, opposite the Natural History Museum, a place Andrew had always thought of as his second home. He and his cousin were the same age and had almost grown up together, to the point where the servants sometimes forgot which of them was their employer's son. And, as is easily imaginable, their affluent social position had spared them any hardship and misfortune, exposing them only to the pleasant side of life, which they immediately mistook for one long party where everything was apparently permissible. They moved on from sharing toys to sharing teenage conquests, and from there, curious to see how far they could stretch the seeming impunity they enjoyed, to devising different ways of testing the limits of what was acceptable. Their elaborate indiscretions and more or less immoral behavior were so perfectly coordinated that for years it had been difficult not to see them as one person. This was partly down to their sharing the complicity of twins, but also to their arrogant approach to life and even to their physical similarity. Both boys were lean and sinewy, and possessed the sort of angelic good looks that made it almost impossible to refuse them anything. This was especially true of women, as was amply demonstrated during their time in Cambridge, where they established a record number of conquests unmatched to this day. Their habit of visiting the same tailors and hat makers added the finishing touch to that unnerving resemblance, a likeness it seemed would go on forever, until one day, without any warning, as though God had resolved to compensate for His lack of creativity, that wild, two-headed creature they formed suddenly split into two distinct halves. Andrew turned into a pensive, taciturn young man, while Charles went on perfecting the frivolous behavior of his adolescence. This change did not however alter their friendship rooted in kinship. Far from driving them apart, this unexpected divergence in their characters made them

complement one another. Charles's devil-may-care attitude found its counterpart in the refined melancholy of his cousin, for whom such a whimsical approach to life was no longer satisfying. Charles observed with a wry smile Andrew's attempts to give his life some meaning, wandering around secretly disillusioned, waiting for a sudden flash of inspiration that never came. Andrew, in turn, looked on amused at his cousin's insistence on behaving like a brash, shallow youth, even though some of his gestures and opinions betrayed a mind as disappointed as his own, despite his seeming unwillingness to give up enjoying what he had. Charles lived intensely, as though he could not get enough of life's pleasures, whereas Andrew could sit in a corner for hours, watching a rose wilt in his hands.

The month of August when it all happened, they had both just turned eighteen, and although neither showed any signs of settling down, they both sensed this life of leisure could not go on much longer, that sooner or later their parents would lose patience with this unproductive indolence and find positions for them in one of the family firms—though in the meantime they were enjoying seeing how much longer they could get away with it. Charles was already going to the office occasionally in the mornings to attend to minor business, but Andrew preferred to wait until his boredom became so unbearable that taking care of family business would seem like a relief rather than a prison sentence. After all, his older brother Anthony already fulfilled their father's expectations sufficiently to allow the illustrious William Harrington to consent to his second son pursuing his career of black sheep for a couple more years, provided he did not stray from his sight. But Andrew had strayed. He had strayed a long way. And now he intended to stray even further, until he disappeared completely, beyond all redemption.

But let us not get sidetracked by melodrama. Let's carry on with our story. Andrew had dropped in at the Winslow mansion that August afternoon so that he and his cousin Charles could arrange a Sunday outing with the charming Keller sisters. As usual, they would take them to that little grassy knoll carpeted with flowers near the Serpentine, in Hyde Park, where they invariably mounted their amorous offensives. But Charles was still sleeping, so the butler showed Andrew into the library. He did not mind waiting until his cousin got up; he felt at ease surrounded by all those books filling the large, bright room with their peculiar musty smell. Andrew's father prided himself on having built up a decent library, yet his cousin's collection contained more than just obscure volumes on politics and other equally dull

subjects. Here, Andrew could find the classics and adventure stories by authors such as Verne and Salgari; but still more interesting to Andrew was a strange, rather picturesque type of literature many considered frivolous—novels where the authors had let their imaginations run wild, regardless of how implausible or often downright absurd the outcome. Like all discerning readers, Charles appreciated Homer's *Odyssey* and his *Iliad*, but his real enjoyment came from immersing himself in the crazy world of *Batracomiomachia*, the blind poet's satire on his own work in an epic tale about a battle between mice and frogs. Andrew recalled a few books written in a similar style which his cousin had lent him; one called *True Tales* by Lucian of Samosata which recounted a series of fabulous voyages in a flying ship that takes the hero up to the sun and even through the belly of a giant whale. Another called *The Man in the Moon* by Francis Godwin, the first novel ever to describe an interplanetary voyage, that told the story of a Spaniard named Domingo Gonsales who travels to the moon in a machine drawn by a flock of wild geese. These flights of fancy reminded Andrew of popguns or firecrackers, all sound and fury, and yet he understood, or thought he did, why his cousin was so passionate about them. Somehow this literary genre, which most people condemned, acted as a sort of counterbalance to Charles's soul; it was the ballast that prevented him from lurching into seriousness or melancholy, unlike Andrew, who had been unable to adopt his cousin's casual attitude to life, and to whom everything seemed so achingly profound, imbued with that absurd solemnity that the transience of existence conferred upon even the smallest act.

However, that afternoon Andrew did not have time to look at any book. He did not even manage to cross the room to the bookshelves because the loveliest girl he had ever seen stopped him in his tracks. He stood staring at her, bemused, as time seemed to congeal, to stand still for a moment, until finally he managed to approach the portrait slowly to take a closer look. The woman was wearing a black velvet toque and a flowery scarf knotted at the neck. Andrew had to admit she was by no means beautiful by conventional standards: her nose was disproportionately large for her face, her eyes too close together, and her reddish hair looked damaged, and yet at the same time this mysterious woman possessed a charm as unmistakable as it was elusive. He was unsure exactly what it was that captivated him about her. It might have been the contrast between her frail appearance and the strength radiating from her gaze; a gaze he had never seen before in any of his

conquests, a wild, determined gaze that retained a glimmer of youthful innocence. It was as if every day the woman was forced to confront the ugliness of life, and yet even so, curled up in her bed at night in the dark, she still believed it was only a regrettable figment of her imagination, a bad dream that would soon dissolve and give way to a more pleasant reality. It was the gaze of a person who yearns for something and refuses to believe it will never be hers, because hope is the only thing she has left.

"Charming creature, isn't she?" Charles's voice came from behind him.

Andrew jumped. He was so absorbed by the portrait he had not heard his cousin come in. He nodded as his cousin walked over to the drinks trolley. He himself could not have found any better way to describe the emotions the portrait stirred in him, that desire to protect her mixed with a feeling of admiration he could only compare—rather reluctantly, owing to the inappropriateness of the metaphor—to that which he felt for cats.

"It was my birthday present to my father," Charles explained, pouring a brandy. "It's only been hanging there a few days."

"Who is she?" asked Andrew. "I don't remember seeing her at any of Lady Holland or Lord Broughton's parties."

"At those parties?" Charles laughed. "I'm beginning to think the artist is gifted. He's taken you in as well."

"What do you mean?" asked Andrew, accepting the glass of brandy his cousin was holding out to him.

"Surely you don't think I gave it to my father because of its artistic merit? Does it look like a painting worthy of my consideration, cousin?" Charles grabbed his arm, forcing him to take a few steps closer to the portrait. "Take a good look. Notice the brushwork: utterly devoid of talent. The painter is no more than an amusing disciple of Degas. Where the Parisian is gentle, he is starkly somber."

Andrew did not understand enough about painting to be able to have a discussion with his cousin, and all he really wanted to know was the sitter's identity, and so he nodded gravely, giving his cousin to understand he agreed with his view that this painter would do better to devote himself to repairing bicycles. Charles smiled, amused by his cousin's refusal to take part in a discussion about painting that would have given him a chance to air his knowledge, and finally declared:

"I had another reason for giving it to him, dear cousin."

He drained his glass slowly, and gazed at the painting again for a few moments, nodding his head with satisfaction.

"And what reason was that, Charles?" Andrew asked, becoming impatient.

"The private enjoyment I get from knowing that my father, who looks down on the lower classes as though they were inferior beings, has the portrait of a common prostitute hanging in his library."

His words made Andrew reel.

"A prostitute?" he finally managed to stammer.

"Yes, cousin," replied Charles, beaming with contentment. "But not a high-class whore from the brothels in Russell Square, not even one of the tarts who ply their trade in the park on Vincent Street, but a dirty, foul-smelling draggletail from Whitechapel in whose ravaged vagina the wretched of the earth alleviate their misery for a few meager pennies."

Andrew took a swig of brandy, attempting to absorb his cousin's words. There was no denying his cousin's revelation had shocked him, as it would anybody who saw the portrait. But he also felt strangely disappointed. He stared at the painting again, trying to discover the cause of his unease. So, this lovely creature was a vulgar tart. Now he understood the mixture of passion and resentment seeping from her eyes that the artist had so skillfully captured. But Andrew had to admit his disappointment obeyed a far more selfish logic: the woman did not belong to his social class, which meant he could never meet her.

"I bought it thanks to Bruce Driscoll," Charles explained, pouring two more brandies. "Do you remember Bruce?"

Andrew nodded unenthusiastically. Bruce was a friend of his cousin whom boredom and money had turned into an art collector; a conceited, idle young man who had no compunction in showing off his knowledge of paintings at every opportunity.

"You know how he likes to look for treasure in the most unlikely places," his cousin said, handing him the second brandy. "Well, the last time I saw him, he told me about a painter he'd dug up during one of his visits to the flea markets. A man called Walter Sickert, a founding member of the New English Art Club. His studio was in Cleveland Street, and he painted East End prostitutes as though they were society ladies. I dropped in there and couldn't resist buying his latest canvas."

"Did he tell you anything about her?" Andrew asked, trying to appear nonchalant.

"About the whore? Only her name. I think she's called Marie Jeanette."

Marie Jeanette, Andrew muttered. The name oddly suited her, like her little hat.

"A Whitechapel whore … ," he whispered, still unable to get over his surprise.

"Yes, a Whitechapel whore. And my father has given her pride of place in his library!" Charles cried, spreading his arms theatrically in a mock gesture of triumph. "Isn't it absolutely priceless?"

With this, Charles flung his arm around his cousin's shoulder and guided him through to the sitting room, changing the subject. Andrew tried to hide his agitation, but could not help thinking about the girl in the portrait as they were planning their assault on the charming Keller sisters.

* * *

THAT NIGHT, IN HIS bedroom, Andrew lay wide awake. Where was the woman in the painting now? What was she doing? By the fourth or fifth question, he had begun calling the woman by her name, as though he really knew her and they enjoyed a magical intimacy. He realized he was seriously disturbed when he began to feel an absurd jealousy towards the men who could have her for a few pennies, whereas for him, despite all his wealth, she was unattainable. And yet was she really beyond his reach? Surely, given his position, he could have her, physically at least, more easily than he could any other woman, and for the rest of his life. The problem was finding her. Andrew had never been to Whitechapel, but he had heard enough about the neighborhood to know it was dangerous, especially for someone of his class. It was not advisable to go there alone, but he could not count on Charles accompanying him. His cousin would not understand his preferring that tart's grubby vagina to the sweet delights the charming Keller sisters kept hidden beneath their petticoats, or the perfumed honeypots of the Chelsea madams, where half the well-to-do West End gentlemen sated their appetites. Perhaps he would understand, and even agree to go with him for the fun of it, if Andrew explained it as a passing fancy, but he knew what he felt was too powerful to be reduced to a mere whim. Or was it? He would not know what he wanted from her until he had her in his arms. Would she really be that

difficult to find? Three sleepless nights were enough for him to come up with a plan.

And so it was that while the Crystal Palace (which had been moved to Sydenham after displaying the Empire's industrial prowess inside its vast belly of glass and reinforced iron) was offering organ recitals, children's ballets, a host of ventriloquists' acts, and even the possibility of picnicking in its beautiful gardens that Andrew Harrington—oblivious to the festive spirit that had taken hold of the city—put on the humble clothes of a commoner lent by one of his servants, and examined his disguise in the cheval glass. He could not help giving a wry smile at the sight of himself in a threadbare jacket and trousers, his fair hair tucked under a check cap pulled down over his eyes. Surely looking like that people would take him for a nobody, possibly a cobbler or a barber. Disguised in this way, he ordered the astonished Harold to take him to Whitechapel. Before leaving, he made him swear to secrecy. No one must know about this expedition to London's worst neighborhood, not his father, not the mistress of the house, not his brother Anthony, not even his cousin Charles. No one.

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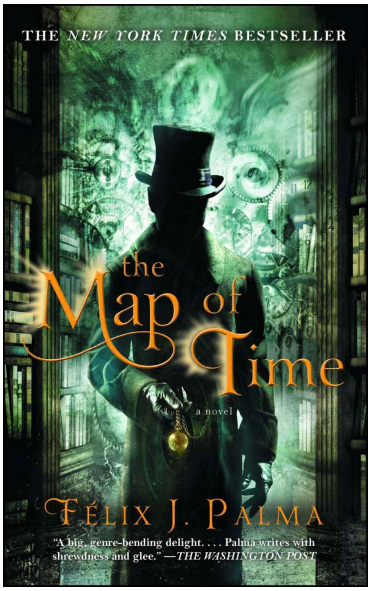

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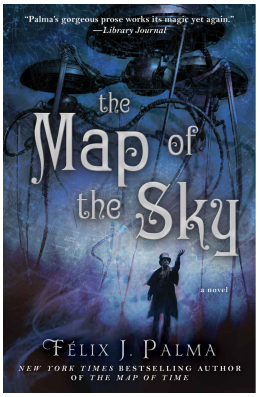

by

Félix J Palma

I

Herbert George Wells would have preferred to live in a fairer, more considerate world, a world where a kind of artistic code of ethics prevented people from exploiting others' ideas for their own gain, one where the so-called talent of those wretches who had the effrontery to do so would dry up overnight, condemning them to a life of drudgery like ordinary men. But, unfortunately, the world he lived in was not like that. In his world everything was permissible, or at least that is what Wells thought. And not without reason, for only a few months after his book *The War of the Worlds* had been published, an American scribbler by the name of Garrett P. Serviss had the audacity to write a sequel to it, without so much as informing him of the fact, and even assuming he would be delighted.

That is why on a warm June day the author known as H. G. Wells was walking somewhat absentmindedly along the streets of London, the greatest and proudest city in the world. He was strolling through Soho on his way to the Crown and Anchor. Mr. Serviss, who was visiting England, had invited him there for luncheon in the sincere belief that, with the aid of beer and good food, their minds would be able to commune at the level he deemed appropriate. However, if everything went according to plan, the luncheon wouldn't turn out the way the ingenuous Mr. Serviss had imagined, for Wells had quite a different idea, which had nothing to do with the union of like minds the American had envisaged. Not that Wells was proposing to turn what might otherwise be a pleasant meal into a council of war because he considered his novel a masterpiece whose intrinsic worth would inevitably be compromised by the appearance of a hastily written sequel. No, Wells's real fear was that another author might make better use of his own idea. This prospect churned him up inside, causing no end of ripples in the tranquil pool to which he was fond of likening his soul.

In truth, as with all his previous novels, Wells considered *The War of the Worlds* an unsatisfactory work, which had once again failed in its aims. The story described how Martians possessing a technology superior to that of human beings conquered Earth. Wells had emulated the realism with which

Sir George Chesney had imbued his novel *The Battle of Dorking,* an imaginary account of a German invasion of England, unstinting in its gory detail. Employing a similar realism bolstered by descriptions as elaborate as they were gruesome, Wells had narrated the destruction of London, which the Martians achieved with no trace of compassion, as though humans deserved no more consideration than cockroaches. Within a matter of days, our neighbors in space had trampled on the Earth dwellers' values and self-respect with the same disdain the British showed toward the native populations in their empire. They had taken control of the entire planet, enslaving the inhabitants and transforming Earth into something resembling a spa for Martian elites. Nothing whatsoever had been able to stand in their way. Wells had intended this dark fantasy as an excoriating attack on the excessive zeal of British imperialism, which he found loathsome. But the fact was that now people believed Mars was inhabited. New, more powerful telescopes like that of the Italian Giovanni Schiaparelli had revealed furrows on the planet's red surface, which some astronomers had quickly declared, as if they had been there for a stroll, to be canals constructed by an intelligent civilization. This had instilled in people a fear of Martian invasion, exactly as Wells had described it. However, this didn't come as much of a surprise to Wells, for something similar had happened with *The Time Machine,* in which the eponymous artifact had eclipsed Wells's veiled attack on class society.

And now Serviss, who apparently enjoyed something of a reputation as a science journalist in his own country, had published a sequel to it: *Edison's Conquest of Mars.* And what was Serviss's novel about? The title fooled no one: the hero was Thomas Edison, whose innumerable inventions had made him into something of a hero in the eyes of his fellow Americans, and subsequently into the wearisome protagonist of every species of novel. In Serviss's sequel, the ineffable Edison invented a powerful ray gun and, with the help of the world's nations, built a flotilla of ships equipped with antigravitational engines, which set sail for Mars driven by a thirst for revenge.

When Serviss sent Wells his novel, together with a letter praising Wells's work with nauseating fervor and almost demanding that he give the sequel his blessing, Wells had not deigned to reply. Nor had he responded to the half dozen other letters doggedly seeking Wells's approval. Serviss even had the nerve to suggest, based upon the similarities and common interests he

perceived in their works, that they write a novel together. After reading Serviss's tale, all Wells could feel was a mixture of irritation and disgust. That utterly childish, clumsy piece of prose was a shameless insult to other writers who, like himself, did their best to fill the bookshop shelves with more or less worthy creations. However, Wells's silence did not stanch the flow of letters, which if anything appeared to intensify. In the latest of these, the indefatigable Serviss begged Wells to be so kind as to lunch with him the following week during his two-day visit to London. Nothing, he said, would make him happier than to be able to enjoy a pleasant discussion with the esteemed author, with whom he had so much in common. And so, Wells had made up his mind to end his dissuasive silence, which had evidently done no good, and to accept Serviss's invitation. Here was the perfect opportunity to sit down with Serviss and tell him what he really thought of his novel. So the man wanted his opinion, did he? Well, he'd give it to him, then. Wells could imagine how the luncheon would go: he would sit opposite Serviss, with unflappable composure, and in a calm voice politely masking his rage, would tell him how appalled he was that Serviss had chosen an idealized version of Edison as the hero of his novel. In Wells's view, the inventor of the electric lightbulb was an untrustworthy, bad-tempered fellow who created his inventions at the expense of others and who had a penchant for designing lethal weapons. Wells would tell Serviss that from any point of view the novel's complete lack of literary merit and its diabolical plot made it an unworthy successor to his own. He would tell him that the message contained in its meager, repugnant pages was diametrically opposed to his and had more in common with a jingoistic pamphlet, since its childish moral boiled down to this: it was unwise to step on the toes of Thomas Edison or of the United States of America. And furthermore he would tell him all this with the added satisfaction of knowing that after he had unburdened himself, the excoriated Serviss would be the one paying for his lunch.

The author had been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that when he returned to reality he discovered his feet had taken him into Greek Street, where he found himself standing in front of the old, forgotten theater at number twelve. But do not be taken in by the look of surprise on Wells's face: this was no coincidence, for in his life every action had a purpose; nothing was left to chance or impulse. However much he now tried to blame his innocent feet, Wells had gone there with the precise intention of finding that very theater, whose façade he now contemplated with what could only be

described as somber rage. Consider yourselves welcome, then, and prepare for a tale packed with thrills and excitement, both for those ladies of a sentimental nature who will enjoy the romantic exploits of the charming and skeptical Miss Harlow, to whom I will have the pleasure of introducing you later on, and for the more intrepid gentlemen, who will undoubtedly tremble at the weird and wonderful adventures of our characters, such as this thin little man with a birdlike face, solemnly contemplating the theater. Observe him carefully, then. Observe his thin blond mustache with which he attempts to impose a more adult appearance on his childlike features, his finely drawn mouth and bright, lively eyes, behind which it is impossible not to perceive a sparkling intellect as sharp as it is impractical. In spite of his ordinary, less-than-heroic looks, Wells will play the most important role in this tale, the exact beginning of which is difficult to pinpoint, but which for him (and for our purposes) begins on this quiet morning in 1898, an unusually glorious morning, in which, as you can see, there is nothing to suggest to the author that in less than two hours' time, he will discover something so astonishing that it will forever alter his deepest-held beliefs.

But I will stop beating about the bush and reveal to you what you have no doubt been puzzling over for the past few minutes: why has Wells paused? Is he perhaps regretting the closure of the venue where he had spent so many nights enjoying the best stage plays of the time? Not a bit. As you will discover, Wells was not easily prone to nostalgia. He had come to a halt outside that old theater because, some years earlier, it had become home to a very special company: Murray's Time Travel. Do the smiles playing on the lips of some of you mean the aforementioned establishment is already familiar to you? However, I must show consideration to the rest of my readers, and since, along with the knowing smiles, I noticed more than a few raised eyebrows, no doubt occasioned by the company's curious name, I must hasten to explain to any newcomers that this extravagant enterprise had opened its doors to the public with the intention of realizing what is perhaps Man's most ambitious dream: traveling in time. A desire that Wells himself had awoken in the public with his first novel, *The Time Machine*. Murray's Time Travel's introductory offer consisted of a trip to the future: to the twentieth of May in the year 2000, to be precise, the day when the decisive battle for the future of the world would take place, as depicted on the billboard still attached to the side of the building. This showed the brave Captain Shackleton brandishing his sword against his arch enemy Solomon,

king of the automatons. It would be a century before that memorable battle took place, in which the captain would succeed in saving the human race from extinction, although, thanks to Murray's Time Travel, almost the whole of England had already witnessed it. Regardless of the exorbitant cost of the tickets, people had thronged outside the old theater, eager to watch the battle their wretched mortal existences would have prevented them from seeing, as though it were a fashionable new opera. Wells must have been the only man on Earth who hadn't shed a tear for that oversized braggart, in whose memory a statue had been erected in a nearby square. There he stood, on a pedestal shaped like a clock, smiling self-importantly, one huge paw tickling the air, as though conjuring a spell, the other resting on the head of Eternal, his dog, for whom Wells couldn't help feeling a similar aversion.

And so, Wells had come to a halt there because that theater reminded him of the consequences he had already unleashed by giving someone his true opinion of his novel. For, prior to becoming the Master of Time, Gilliam Murray had been a young man with somewhat more modest pretensions: he had wanted to become a writer. That was the time when Wells had first met him, three years earlier. The future millionaire had petitioned Wells to help him publish a turgid novel he had written, but Wells had refused and, unable to help himself, had told Murray perhaps rather more bluntly than necessary what he thought of his work. Not surprisingly, his brutal sincerity had turned the two men into enemies. Wells had learned a lesson from the experience: in certain situations it was better to lie. What good had come of telling Murray what he thought? And what good would come of telling Serviss the truth? he now wondered. Lying was undoubtedly preferable. Yet while Wells was able to lie unhesitatingly in many situations, there was one thing he couldn't help being honest about: if he didn't like a novel, he was incapable of pretending he did. He believed taste defined who he was, and he couldn't bear to be taken for someone whose taste was appalling enough for him to enjoy *Edison's Conquest of Mars*.

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LOOKING DOWN AT HIS watch, the author realized he had no time to dawdle at the theater or he would be late for his appointment. He cast a final glance at the building and made his way down Charing Cross Road, leaving Soho behind as he headed for the Strand and the pub where he was to meet Serviss. Wells

had planned to keep the journalist waiting in order to make it clear from the start he despised what he had done, but if there was one thing Wells hated more than lying about his likes and dislikes, it was being late for an appointment. This was because he somehow believed that owing to a cosmic law of equilibrium, if he was punctual, he in turn would not be made to wait. However, until then he had been unable to prove that the one thing influenced the other, and more than once he had been forced to stand on a corner like a sad fool or sit like an impoverished diner in a busy restaurant. And so, Wells strode briskly across the noisy Strand, where the hurly-burly of the whole universe appeared to be concentrated, and trotted down the alleyway to the pub, enabling him to arrive at the meeting with irreproachable punctuality, if a little short of breath.

Since he had no idea what Serviss looked like, he did not waste time peering through the windows—a routine he had developed to establish whether whomever he was meeting had arrived or not: if he hadn't, Wells would rush off down the nearest street and return a few moments later at a calm pace, thus avoiding the need to wait inside and be subjected to the pitiful looks of the other diners. As there was no point in going through this procedure today, Wells entered the pub with a look of urbane assurance, pausing in the middle of the room so that Serviss might easily spot him, and glanced with vague curiosity about the crowded room, hoping the American had already arrived and that he would be spared the need to wander round the tavern with everyone staring at him. As luck would have it, almost at once, a skinny, diminutive man of about fifty, with the look of someone to whom life has been unkind, raised his right arm to greet Wells, while beneath his bushy whiskers his lips produced a wan smile. Realizing this must be Serviss, Wells stifled a grimace of dismay. He would rather his enemy had an intimidating and arrogant appearance, incapable of arousing pity, than this destitute air of an undernourished buzzard. In order to rid himself of the inevitable feeling of pity the scrawny little fellow inspired, Wells had to remind himself of what the man had done, and he walked over to the table in an alcove where the man was waiting. Seeing Wells approach, Serviss opened his arms wide and a grotesque smile spread across his face, like that of an orphan wanting to be adopted.

"What an honor and a pleasure, Mr. Wells!" he exclaimed, performing a series of reverential gestures, stopping just short of bowing. "You don't know how glad I am to meet you. Take a seat, won't you. How about a pint?

Waiter, another round, please; we should drink properly to this meeting of literary giants. The world would never forgive itself if our lofty reflections were allowed to run dry for lack of a drink." After this clumsy speech, which caused the waiter, a fellow who unequivocally earned his living in the physical world, to look at them with the disdain he reserved for those working in such airy-fairy matters as the arts, Serviss gazed at Wells with his rather small eyes. "Tell me, George—I can call you George, right?—how does it feel when one of your novels makes the whole world tremble in its shoes? What's your secret? Do you write with a pen from another planet? Ha, ha, ha . . ."

Wells did not deign to laugh at his joke. Leaning back in his chair he waited for Serviss's shrill laughter to die out, adopting an expression more befitting a pallbearer than someone about to have lunch with an acquaintance.

"Well, well, I didn't mean to upset you, George," Serviss went on, pretending to be put out by Wells's coldness. "I just can't help showing my admiration."

"As far as I am concerned you can save your praise," Wells retorted, resolving to take charge of the conversation. "The fact that you have written a sequel to my latest novel speaks for itself, Mr. Ser—"

"Call me Garrett, George, please."

"Very well, Garrett," Wells agreed, annoyed at Serviss for forcing this familiarity on him, which was inappropriate to an ear bashing, and for the jolly air he insisted on imposing on the conversation. "As I was saying—"

"But there's no such thing as too much praise, right, George?" the American interrupted once more. "Especially when it's deserved, as in your case. I confess my admiration for you isn't an overnight thing. It began . . . when? A couple of years back, at least, after I read *The Time Machine,* an even more extraordinary work for being your first."

Wells nodded indifferently, taking advantage of Serviss having stopped his salesman's patter to take a swig of beer. He had to find a way of breaking off Serviss's incessant prattle to tell him what he thought of his novel. The longer he waited, the more awkward it would be for them both. But the American was unrelenting.

"And what a happy coincidence that just after you published your novel, someone found a way of traveling in time," he said, bobbing his head in an exaggerated fashion, as though he were still recovering from the shock. "I

guess you took a trip to the year two thousand to witness the epic battle for the future of mankind, right?"

"No, I never traveled in time."

"You didn't? Why ever not?" the other man asked, astonished.

Wells paused for a few moments, remembering how during the days when Murray's Time Travel was still open for business he had been forced to maintain an impassive silence whenever someone alluded to it with an ecstatic smile on his or her face. On such occasions, which occurred with exasperating regularity, Wells invariably responded with a couple of sarcastic remarks aimed at puncturing the enthusiasm of the person addressing him, as though he himself were above reality, or one step ahead of it, but in any event unaffected by its vagaries. And wasn't that what the hoi polloi expected of writers, to whom by default they attributed loftier interests than their own more pedestrian ones? On other occasions, when he wasn't in the mood for sarcasm, Wells pretended to take exception to the exorbitant price of the tickets. This was the approach he decided to adopt with Serviss, who, being a writer himself, was likely to be unconvinced by the former.

"Because the future belongs to all of us, and I don't believe the price of a ticket should deprive anyone of seeing it."

Serviss looked at him, puzzled, then rubbed his face with a sudden gesture, as though a cobweb had stuck to it.

"Ah, of course! Forgive my tactlessness, George: the tickets were too dear for poor writers like us," he said, misinterpreting Wells's remark. "To be honest, I couldn't afford one myself. Although I did begin saving up in order to be able to climb aboard the famous *Cronotilus,* you know? I wanted to see the battle for the future. I really did. I even planned mischievously to break away from the group once I was there, in order to shake Captain Shackleton's hand and thank him for making sure all our prayers didn't fall on deaf ears. For could we have carried on inventing things and producing works of art had we known that in the year two thousand no human being would be left alive on Earth to enjoy them—that because of those evil automatons, Man and everything he had ever achieved would have been wiped away as though it had never even existed?" With this, Serviss appeared to sink back into his chair, before continuing in a melancholy voice. "As it is, you and I will no longer be able to travel to the future, George. A great shame, as I expect you could more than afford it now. I guess it must

have pained you as much as it did me to find out that the time travel company closed down after Mr. Murray passed away."

"Yes, a great pity," Wells replied sardonically.

"The newspapers said he'd been eaten alive by one of those dragons in the fourth dimension," Serviss recalled mournfully, "in front of several of his employees, who could do nothing to save him. It must have been awful."

Yes, thought Wells, Murray certainly engineered a dramatic death for himself.

"And how will we get into the fourth dimension now?" asked Serviss. "Do you think it will remain sealed off forever?"

"I've no idea," Wells replied coldly.

"Well, perhaps we'll witness other things. Perhaps our fate will be to travel in space, not time," Serviss consoled himself, finishing up his pint. "The sky is a vast and infinite place. And full of surprises, isn't that right, George?"

"Possibly," Wells agreed, stirring uneasily in his seat, as though his buttocks were scalding. "But I'd like to talk to you about your novel, Mr. Ser—Garrett."

Serviss suddenly sat bolt upright and stared at Wells attentively, like a beagle scenting a trail. Relieved to have finally caught the man's attention, Wells downed the last of his beer in order to give himself the courage and composure he needed to broach the subject. His gesture did not escape Serviss's notice.

"Waiter, another round, please, the world's greatest living writer is thirsty!" he cried, waving his arms about frantically to catch the waiter's eye. Then he looked back at Wells full of anticipation. "So, my friend, did you like my novel?"

Wells remained silent while the waiter placed two more tankards on the table and cast him an admiring glance. Realizing he was under scrutiny, Wells automatically sat up straight, surreptitiously puffing out his chest, as though his greatness as a writer must be evinced not only in his books but in his physical appearance.

"Well . . . ," Wells began, once the waiter had moved away, noticing that Serviss was watching him anxiously.

"Well, what?" the other man inquired with childlike anticipation.

"Some of it is . . ." The two men's eyes met for a moment and a cavernous silence grew between them before Wells continued: " . . . excellent."

"Some. Of. It. Is. Excellent," Serviss repeated, savoring each word dreamily. "Such as what, for instance?"

Wells took another swig of his beer to buy himself time. What the devil was there of any excellence in Serviss's novel?

"The space suits. Or the oxygen pills," he replied, because the only salvageable thing in the novel was its paraphernalia. "They are very . . . ingenious."

"Why, thank you, George! I knew you'd love my story," Serviss trilled, almost in raptures. "Could it have been otherwise? I doubt it. You and I are twin souls, in a literary sense, of course. Although who knows in what other ways . . . Oh, my friend, don't you see we're creating something hitherto unknown? Our stories will soon move away from the common path of literature and forge a new one of their own. You and I are making History, George. We'll be considered the fathers of a new genre. Together with Jules Verne, of course. We mustn't forget the Frenchman. The three of us, the three of us together are changing the course of literature."

"I have no interest in creating a new genre," Wells interrupted, increasingly annoyed at himself for his failure to steer the conversation in the direction he wanted.

"Well, I don't think we have much choice in the matter," objected Serviss with finality. "Let's talk about your latest novel, George. Those Martian ships like stingrays floating over London are so startling . . . But first I'd like to ask you something: aren't you afraid that if, after you wrote *The Time Machine,* someone discovered a way of traveling in time, then the next thing will be a Martian invasion?"

Wells stared at him blankly, trying to decide whether he was in earnest or whether this was another of his crazy ideas, but Serviss waited solemnly for him to reply.

"The fact that I wrote about a Martian invasion doesn't mean I believe in life on Mars, Garrett," he explained frostily. "It's a simple allegory. I chose Mars more as a metaphor, to lay emphasis on the god of war, and because of its redness."

"Ah, the iron oxide in the volcanic basalt rock covering its surface like damned lichen and giving it that disconcerting appearance," Serviss replied, airing his knowledge.

"My sole intention was to criticize Europe's colonization of Africa," Wells resumed, ignoring him, "and to warn of the perils of developing new

weapons at a time when Germany is engaging in a process of militarization, which seems to me unsettling to say the least. But above all, Garrett, I wanted to warn mankind that everything around us, our science, our religion, could prove ineffectual in the face of something as unimaginable as an attack by a superior race."

He failed to add that, while he had been at it, he had allowed himself to settle a few old scores: the first scenes of Martian destruction, such as Horsell and Addlestone, were places where he had spent his rather unhappy childhood.

"And boy, did you succeed, George!" Serviss acknowledged with gloomy admiration. "That's why I had to write my sequel: I had to give back the hope you took away from Man."

And that hope was Edison? Wells thought, grudgingly amused, as he felt a vague sense of well-being course through him. He couldn't tell whether this was a result of the tankards starting to clutter the tabletop, or the little man's delightful habit of agreeing with every word he said. Whatever the reason, he couldn't deny he was beginning to feel at ease. He wasn't sure how they had succeeded in discussing the subject of Serviss's novel without incident, but they had. Although how could it have been otherwise, he asked himself, if the only word he had managed to mutter was "excellent"? Consequently, Serviss now believed this was Wells's true opinion of his novel, and he hadn't the energy to take issue with his own words. He didn't want to do that to Serviss. The man might deserve some punishment for having the nerve to write a sequel to his novel, but Wells didn't think he would derive any pleasure from exacting it. Then he recalled how the novel's outlandish humor, which, although clearly unintentional, had brought a fleeting smile to his lips several times while he was reading it. And although on various occasions he had hurled the thing against the wall, exasperated at such exemplary inelegance and stupidity, he had always picked it up and carried on reading. He found something oddly likable about the way Serviss wrote. It was the same with his absurd letters. Wells invariably ended up throwing them on the fire, yet he couldn't help reading them first.

"Didn't it occur to you at some point to give the story a different ending, one in which we managed to defeat the Martians?" said Serviss, interrupting his reverie.

"What?" Wells declared. "What hope do we Earthlings have of defeating the Martian technology I described?"

Serviss shrugged, unable to reply.

"In any event, I felt it was my duty to offer an alternative, a ray of hope . . . ," Serviss finally muttered, contemplating with a faint smile the crowd in the pub. "Like any other man here, I'd like to think that if someday we were invaded from the sky, we'd have some hope of survival."

"Perhaps we would," Wells said, softening. "But my mistrust of Man is too great, Garrett. If there was a way of defeating the Martians, I'm sure it would be no thanks to us. Who knows, perhaps help would come from the most unexpected quarter. Besides, why does it worry you so much? Do you really believe our neighbors from Mars are going to invade us?"

"Of course I do, George," Serviss replied solemnly. "Although I suppose it'll happen after the year two thousand. First we have to deal with the automatons."

"The automatons? Oh yes, of course . . . the automatons."

"But there's no question in my mind that sooner or later they'll invade," Serviss insisted. "Don't you believe, as Lowell maintains in his book, that the canals on Mars were built by an intelligent life-form?"

Wells had read Percival Lowell's book *Mars,* in which he set out this idea; in fact he had used it to substantiate his own novel, but it was a long way from there to believing in life on Mars.

"I don't suppose the purpose of the many millions of planets in the universe is simply to create a pretty backdrop," replied Wells, who considered discussions about the existence of life on other planets a pointless exercise. "Nor is it unreasonable to imagine that hundreds of them probably enjoy the conditions essential for supporting life. However, if Mars is anything to go by . . ."

"And they don't necessarily need oxygen or water," Serviss observed excitedly. "Here on our planet we have creatures, like anaerobic bacteria, that can live without oxygen. That would already double the number of planets able to support life. There could be more than a hundred thousand civilizations out there that are more advanced than ours, George. And I'm sure generations to come will discover abundant and unexpected life on other planets, although we won't live to see it, and they'll come to accept with resignation that they aren't the only intelligent, let alone the oldest, life-form in the Cosmos."

"I agree, Garrett," Wells conceded, "but I am also convinced that such 'civilizations' would have nothing in common with ours. We would be as

hard put to understand them as a dog would the workings of a steam engine. For example, they may have no desire to explore space at all, while we gaze endlessly at the stars and wonder if we are alone in the universe, as Galileo himself did."

"Yes, although he was careful not to do it too audibly, for fear of upsetting the church," Serviss quipped.

A smile fluttered across Wells's lips, and he discovered that the drink had relaxed his facial muscles. Serviss had extracted a smile from him fair and square, and there it must stay.

"Of course, what we can't deny is Man's eagerness to communicate with supposed creatures from outer space," Serviss said, after managing to make two fresh pints brimming with beer appear on the table, as if out of nowhere. "Do you remember the attempts by that German mathematician to reflect light from the sun onto other planets with a device he invented called a heliotrope? What was the fellow's name again? Grove?"

"Grau. Or Gauss," Wells ventured.

"That's it, Gauss. His name was Karl Gauss."

"He also suggested planting an enormous right-angled triangle of pine trees on the Russian steppe, so that observers from other worlds would know there were beings on Earth capable of understanding the Pythagorean theorem," Wells recalled.

"Yes, that's right," Serviss added. "He claimed no geometrical shape could be interpreted as an unintentional construction."

"And what about that astronomer who had the bright idea of digging a circular canal in the Sahara Desert, then filling it with kerosene and lighting it at night to show our location?"

"Yes, and a perfect target!"

Wells gave a slight chuckle. Serviss responded by downing the rest of his beer and urged Wells to do the same. Wells obeyed, somewhat abashed.

"The last I heard they are going to hang reflectors on the Eiffel Tower to shine light from the Sun onto Mars," he remarked, while Serviss ordered another round.

"Good heavens, they never give up!" Serviss exclaimed, thrusting another pint toward Wells.

"You can say that again," Wells seconded, noticing with alarm that he was beginning to have difficulty speaking without slurring his words. "We seem

to think here on Earth that beings in space will be able to see anything we come up with."

"As if they spend all their money on telescopes!" Serviss joked.

Wells couldn't help letting out a guffaw. Infected by his laughter, Serviss began slapping his hand on the tabletop, causing enough din to elicit a few disapproving looks from the waiter and some of the other diners. These censorious looks, however, appeared not to intimidate Serviss, who slapped the table even harder, a defiant expression on his face. Wells gazed at him contentedly, like a proud father admiring his son's antics.

"Well, well . . . so, you don't think anyone would go to the trouble of invading a tiny planet like ours, lost in the infinity of the Cosmos, is that it, George?" Serviss said, trying to sum up once he had managed to calm down.

"I think it unlikely. Bear in mind that things never turn out the way we imagine. It is almost a mathematical law. Accordingly, Earth will never be invaded by Martians like it was in my book, for example."

"Won't it?"

"Never," Wells said resolutely. "Look at all the novels currently being churned out about contact with other worlds, Garrett. Apparently, anyone can write one. If future encounters were to take place with beings from outer space identical to the ones we authors have written about, it would be a case of literary premonition, don't you think?"

At this, he took a swig of beer, with the nagging impression that what he had just said was no more than harebrained nonsense.

"Yes," agreed Serviss, giving no sign that he considered Wells's disquisition outlandish. "Our naïve rulers will quite possibly end up believing that evil beings from outer space have filled our subconscious minds with these imaginings, by means of ultrasonic rays or hypnosis, perhaps in preparation for a future invasion."

"In all likelihood!" Wells burst out laughing, at which Serviss began slapping the table once more, to the despair of the waiter and the nearest customers.

"Consequently, as I was saying," Wells resumed after Serviss stopped making a din, "even if there is life on Mars or on some other planet in our vast solar system . . ." He made a grandiose gesture toward the sky and seemed annoyed to encounter the tavern ceiling with its plain wooden beams. He gazed at it in dismay for a few moments. "Damnation . . . what was I saying?"

“Something about Mars . . . I think,” Serviss added, looking up at the ceiling with equal misgivings.

“Oh, yes, Mars,” Wells remembered at last. “I mean, assuming there was life there, it would probably be impossible to compare it with life here, and therefore envisaging spaceships engineered by Martians is absurd.”

“All right. But what if I told you,” Serviss said, trying to keep a straight face, “that you’re mistaken?”

“Mistaken? You *could not* say I am mistaken, my dear Garrett.”

“Unless I was able to back it up, my dear George.”

Wells nodded, and Serviss leaned back in his seat, smiling enigmatically.

“Did you know that as a youth I was obsessed with the idea of life on other planets?” he confessed.

“You don’t say?” Wells retorted, a foolish grin on his face.

“Yes, I hunted through newspapers, treatises, and old essays looking for”—he pondered the best word to use—“signs. Did you know, for example, that in 1518 something described as ‘a kind of star’ appeared in the sky above the conquistador Juan de Grijalva’s ship, before moving away leaving a trail of fire and throwing a beam of light down to Earth?”

Wells feigned surprise: “Heavens, I had no idea!”

Serviss smiled disdainfully in response to Wells’s mockery.

“I could cite dozens of similar examples from my compilation of past sightings of flying machines from other worlds, George,” he assured him, the smile still on his lips. “But that isn’t why I’m convinced beings from the sky have already visited Earth.”

“Why then?”

Serviss leaned across the table, lowering his voice to a whisper: “Because I’ve seen a Martian.”

“Ho, ho, ho . . . Where, at the theater perhaps? Or walking along the street? Perhaps it is the queen’s new pet dog?”

“I mean it, George,” Serviss said, straightening up and beaming at him. “I’ve seen one.”

“You’re drunk!”

“I’m not drunk, George! Not enough not to know what I’m talking about at any rate. And I tell you I saw a darned Martian. Right in front of my very eyes. Why, I even touched it with my own hands,” he insisted, holding them aloft.

Wells looked at him gravely for a few moments before bursting into loud peals of laughter, causing half the other customers to jump.

"You are a terribly amusing fellow, Garrett," he declared after he had recovered. "Why, I think I might even forgive you for writing a novel in order to profit from—"

"It was about ten years ago, I forget the exact date," Serviss said, ignoring Wells's banter. "I was spending a few days in London at the time, carrying out some research at the Natural History Museum for a series of articles I was writing."

Realizing that Serviss wasn't joking, Wells sat up straight in his chair and listened attentively, while he felt the pub floor rock gently beneath him, as though they were drinking beer on a boat sailing down a river. Had this fellow really seen a Martian?

"As you know, the museum was built to house an increasingly large number of fossils and skeletons that wouldn't fit in the British Museum," Serviss went on dreamily. "The whole place looked new, and the exhibits were wonderfully informative, as though they really wanted to show visitors what the world was about in an orderly but entertaining fashion. I would stroll happily through the rooms and corridors, aware of the fact that numerous explorers had risked life and limb so that a handful of West End ladies could feel a thrill of excitement as they watched a procession of marabunta ants. A whole host of marvels beckoned from the display cases, stirring in me a longing for adventure, a desire to discover distant lands, which, fortunately, my affection for the comforts of civilization ended up stifling. Was it worth missing the whole theater season just to see a gibbon swinging from branch to branch? Why travel so far when others were willing to endure hammering rain, freezing temperatures, and bizarre diseases to bring back almost every exotic object under the sun? And so I contented myself with observing the varied contents of the display cases like any other philistine. Although what really interested me wasn't exhibited in any of them."

Wells gazed at Serviss in respectful silence, not wishing to interrupt him until he had heard the end of the story. He had experienced something similar himself on his first visit to the museum.

"On the second or third day, I began to notice that, from time to time, the head curator of the museum would discreetly lead groups of visitors down to the basement. And I have to tell you that among those groups I recognized a

few eminent scientists and even the odd minister. As well as the head curator, two Scotland Yard inspectors always accompanied the visitors. As you can imagine, these strange and regular processions to the basement aroused my curiosity, so that one afternoon, I stopped what I was doing and took the risk of following them downstairs. The procession walked through a maze of corridors until it reached a locked door. When the group came to a halt, the older of the inspectors, a stout fellow with a conspicuous patch over one eye, gave a command to the other one, a mere stripling. The younger man assiduously removed a key from a chain around his neck, unlocked the door, and ushered the group inside, closing the door behind him. I questioned several museum employees and found out that no one was completely sure what was inside the room, which they dubbed the Chamber of Marvels. When I asked the head curator what it contained, his response took me aback. "Things people would never have thought existed," he said with a self-satisfied grin, and then he suggested I carry on marveling at the plants and insects in the display cases, for there were some frontiers beyond which not everybody was ready to cross. As you will understand, his response angered me, as did the fact that he never extended me the courtesy of inviting me to join one of the groups that were so regularly given access to the unknown. Apparently I wasn't as important as all those great men of science who deserved a guided tour. And so I swallowed my pride and got used to the idea of returning to the States having only discovered what a group of insensitive bureaucrats wanted me to know about the world. However, unlike the museum's head curator, Fate must have considered it important for me to find out what was inside that chamber. Otherwise I can't understand how I got in there so easily."

"How did you get in?" Wells asked, astonished.

"On my last day in London, I happened to find myself in the elevator with the younger of the two Scotland Yard inspectors. I tried to persuade him to talk about the chamber he was guarding, but to no avail. The youth would give nothing away. He even refused my invitation to have a beer at a nearby pub, with the excuse that he only drank sarsaparilla. Well, who drinks sarsaparilla these days? Anyway, as we stepped out of the elevator, he said good-bye politely and began walking down the corridor toward the exit, oblivious to the deeply resentful look I was giving him. Then, to my astonishment, I saw him pause, his legs swaying beneath him as though he were suddenly unsure of where he was going, before collapsing like a

marionette with its strings cut. I was in shock, as you can imagine. I thought he had dropped dead before my eyes, from a massive heart attack or something. I ran over and unbuttoned his shirt collar with the idea of testing his pulse, only to find to my great relief that he was still alive. He had simply fainted like a lady whose corset is too tight. Blood was streaming down his face, but I soon realized it came from a cut on his eyebrow, which must have happened when he fell."

"Perhaps he had a sudden drop in blood pressure. Or was suffering from heat stroke," Wells suggested.

"Possibly, possibly," Serviss replied distractedly. "And then—"

"Or low blood sugar. Although I am inclined to think—"

"What the hell does it matter what it was, George! He fainted and that's that!" Serviss said, irritated, keen to go on with his story.

"I'm sorry, Garrett," said Wells, somewhat cowed. "Do carry on."

"Good, where was I?" muttered Serviss. "Oh, yes, I was concerned. But that concern soon gave way to something more like greed when I noticed a strange gold key decorated with a pair of pretty little angel's wings hanging from the inspector's neck. I immediately realized that the charming key was the one he had used to open the Chamber of Marvels."

"And you stole it from him!" Wells said, shocked.

"Well . . ." Serviss shrugged, unbuttoning his shirt collar to reveal a delicate chain from which hung the key he had just described.

"I couldn't resist it, George," he explained, with theatrical remorse. "It wasn't as if I was stealing a pair of shoes from a dead man. After all, the inspector had only fainted."

Wells shook his head in disapproval. Considering the liberal amounts of alcohol he had imbibed, this proved a perilous gesture, as his head began to spin even more, giving him the impression he was sitting on a merry-go-round horse.

Serviss went on. "That's how I got into the room where, for many reasons, they hide away all the things they don't want the world to know about. And, take my word for it, George, if you saw what they've got hidden in there, you'd never write another fantasy novel."

Wells looked at him skeptically, straightening in his chair.

"But that's the least of it," Serviss went on. "What really mattered stood in the corner of the room on a pedestal. An enormous flying machine. Very strange looking. And whether or not it could actually fly was a mere

suspicion in the minds of the scientists who had been privileged to examine it, as far as I could gather from reading the notebooks and papers listing all the details of the discovery, which I found lying on a nearby table. Unlike the *Albatross* in Verne's *Robur the Conqueror*, this machine had neither wings nor propellers. And no balloon either. In fact it looked more like a plate."

"A plate?" Wells asked in astonishment.

"Yes, a soup plate. Or to be more precise a saucer. Like the ones you Britishers use under your teacups," Serviss added.

"In short, a flying saucer," Wells said, eager for him to go on.

"Precisely. According to what I read in the notebooks, an expedition of some years past to the South Pole found the machine buried in the Antarctic ice. It appeared to have crashed into a mountain range inland, which is what led them to believe the thing could fly. Except they were unable to open it, because there was no hatch or anything resembling a door."

"I see. But what made them think it came from another planet?" Wells asked. "Couldn't it have been built in Germany? The Germans are always experimenting with—"

"No, George." Serviss butted in forcefully. "One look was enough to see the thing had been built using technology far superior to anything the Germans, or for that matter any country on Earth, could possibly possess. For example, there's nothing to suggest it is steam driven. But in any case, it wasn't only its appearance that made them think it came from space."

"Really? What then?"

Serviss paused for dramatic effect, using the opportunity to take a swig of beer.

"They found the machine not far from a vessel, the *Annawan,* that had set sail from New York Harbor on October 15, 1829, on an exploratory voyage from which she never returned. The ship had caught fire, and the crew had perished. The frozen bodies of the sailors lay scattered about, half buried in the ice. Most were charred, but those that weren't still wore a look of terror on their faces, as if they had been fleeing the fire . . . or who knows what other horrors. They also found the bodies of several dogs, their limbs mysteriously torn off. The members of the expedition described the scene as gruesome. But the real discovery came a few days later, when they found the probable pilot of the machine buried in the ice nearby. And I can assure you he wasn't German, George: I knew that as soon as I opened the casket where he's kept."

Serviss paused once more and gave Wells a warm, almost affectionate smile, as if to apologize for scaring him. Wells looked at him with as much trepidation as his drunkenness would allow.

"And what did he look like . . . ?" he asked in a faint voice.

"Needless to say, nothing like the Martians you describe in your novel, George. In fact, he reminded me of a darker, more sophisticated version of Spring-Heeled Jack. Have you heard of Spring-Heeled Jack, that peculiar jumping creature that terrorized London about sixty years ago?"

Wells nodded, unable to fathom what possible similarity there might be between the two.

"Yes, they said he had springs on his feet, which allowed him to take great leaps."

"And that he would spring out of nowhere in front of young girls, and caress their bodies lasciviously before disappearing again. Many depicted him as diabolical, with pointed ears and clawed hands."

"I suppose that was a result of the hysteria at the time," Wells reflected. "The man was probably a circus acrobat who decided to use his skills to sate his appetites."

"Probably, George, probably. But the thing in the museum reminded me of the monstrous version the illustrators of the more salacious newspapers and magazines produced. I saw copies of those old newspapers when I was a child, and Jack's appearance made my blood run cold. But, yes, perhaps that similarity is only visible to me, and it comes from my deepest fears."

"So what you are saying," Wells said, attempting to sum up, "is that there is a Martian in the Natural History Museum?"

"Yes. Only it's dead, of course," Serviss replied, as though somehow that made it less appealing. "Actually, it's little more than a dried-up kind of humanoid. The only thing that might offer some interesting revelations is the inside of the machine. Maybe it contains a clue as to the Martian's origins, or some maps of space, or something. Who knows? And we mustn't forget what a step forward it would be for human science if we were able to figure out how it worked. But unfortunately they can't open it. I don't know whether they're still trying, or whether they've given up and both machine and Martian are gathering dust in the museum. Whatever happens, the fact is, my dear George, that thing didn't come from Earth."

"A Martian!" Wells said, finally giving free rein to his bewilderment when he realized Serviss had come to the end of his story. "Good God in

Heaven!"

"That's right, George, a Martian, a hideous, horrible Martian," Serviss confirmed. "And this key can take us to him. Although I only saw him that one time; I haven't used the key since. I just keep it round my neck like a lucky charm, to remind me that there are more impossible things in the world than we story writers could ever imagine."

He unfastened the chain and handed it to Wells ceremoniously, like someone surrendering a sacred object. Wells examined it carefully with the same solemnity.

"I'm convinced the true history of our time isn't what we read in newspapers or books," he rambled, while Wells went on examining the key. "True history is almost invisible. It flows like an underground spring. It takes place in the shadows, and in silence, George. And only a chosen few know what that history is."

He deftly snatched the key from Wells and placed it in his jacket pocket. Then he said with a mischievous grin: "Do you want to see the Martian?"

"Right now?"

"Why not? I doubt you'll have another chance, George."

Wells looked at him uneasily. He needed time to digest what Serviss had told him. Or to be more precise, he needed a couple of hours for everything to stop spinning, for his head to clear so that he could judge the American's story rationally. Perhaps he might then refute it, for it was true that in his present alcoholic haze it felt extremely pleasant to believe that the impossible could form part of reality. Indeed, in his current state of calm euphoria, Wells rejoiced at the thought that the world he was compelled to live in had a hidden dimension, and that the frontiers erected by Man's reason to define its boundaries might suddenly collapse, mingling the two worlds to form a new reality, a reality where magic floated in the air and fantasy novels were simply true accounts of their authors' experiences. Is that what Serviss was saying? Was that nondescript little man guiding him, like the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland,* to his warren, where Wells would enter a world in which anything was possible? A world ruled over by a far more imaginative God than the current one? Yet that reality did not exist, it *could not* exist, much as it seemed to him now the most natural thing in the world.

"Are you afraid?" Serviss inquired, surprised. "Ah, I see, perhaps this is all too much for you, George. Perhaps you prefer your monsters to stay safely

within the confines of your imagination, where the most they can do is send a shiver down the spines of your readers. Perhaps you haven't the courage to face them in reality, off the page."

"Of course I have, Garrett," Wells retorted, irritated at Serviss's presumption. "It is just that—"

"Don't worry, George. I understand, I really do." Serviss tried to console him. "Seeing a Martian is a terrifying experience. It's one thing to write about them, and quite another to—"

"Of course I can face them in reality, confound it!" Wells cried, leaping unsteadily to his feet. "We shall go to the museum this instant, Garrett, and you can show me your Martian!"

Serviss looked up at him with amusement, then rose to his feet with the same gusto.

"All right, George, it's up to you!" he roared, barely able to stand up straight. "Waiter, the bill! And be quick about it, my friend and I have an appointment with a creature from the stars!"

Wells tried to dissuade him from another outburst, but Serviss had already turned toward the other tables.

"Does anyone here wish to accompany us? Does anyone else wish to see a Martian?" he declared to the astonished customers, spreading his arms. "If so, come with me, and I'll show you a bona fide inhabitant of the planet Mars!"

"Shut your mouth, tosspot!" someone bawled from the back of the room.

"Go home and sleep it off, leave us to eat in peace!" another man suggested.

"You see, George?" Serviss said, disheartened, hurling a handful of coins onto the table and weaving his way over to the door, head held high. "Nobody wants to know, nobody. People prefer living in ignorance. Well, let them!" He paused at the door, jabbing a finger at the customers as he tried not to fall over. "Go on with your miserable lives, fools! Stay in your rotten reality!"

Wells noticed a few burly looking characters making as if to get up, with what seemed like a none-too-friendly attitude. He leapt forward and began wrestling Serviss's skinny frame out of the pub, gesturing to the locals to keep calm. Out in the street, he stopped the first cab he saw, pushed Serviss inside, and shouted their destination to the driver. The American fell sideways onto the seat. He remained in that position for a while, his head

propped against the window, grinning foolishly at Wells, who had sat down opposite him in an equally graceless posture. The jolting of the coach as it went round Green Park sobered them slightly. They began laughing over the spectacle they had created in the pub, and, still fueled by drink, spent the rest of the journey inventing crazy theories as to why beings from Mars, or from some other planet, would want to visit Earth. The carriage pulled up in the Cromwell Road in front of a magnificent Romanesque Revival structure whose façade was decorated with friezes of plants and animals. Wells and Serviss got out and tottered toward the entrance, while the driver stared after them aghast. The man's name was Neal Hamilton, he was approximately forty years of age, and his life would never be the same again. For he had just overheard those two respectable, sophisticated-looking gentlemen confirm that life had been brought to Earth in vast flying machines by intelligent beings from outer space, whose responsibility it was to populate the universe and make it flourish. Neal cracked his whip and headed home, where a few hours later, glass in hand, he would gaze up at the starry sky and wonder for the first time in his life who he was, where he came from, and even why he had chosen to be a cabdriver.

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ENVELOPED IN A THICK haze, Wells allowed Serviss to lead him through the galleries. In his current state, he was scarcely aware of what was going on. The world had taken on a surreal quality: objects had lost their meaning, and everything was at once familiar and alien. One moment he had the impression of walking through the famous whale room, filled with skeletons and life-sized models of cetaceans, and the next he was surprised to find himself kneeling beside Serviss in the midst of a group of primates to escape the watchful eye of the guards. Eventually, he found himself staggering behind Serviss along the corridors in the basement until they reached the door the American had told him about at lunch, whereupon Serviss plucked the stolen key from his pocket. Unlocking the door with a ceremonious gesture, he bowed somewhat unsteadily and ushered Wells into the realm of the impossible.

Some things I would rather see sober, Wells lamented to himself, stepping cautiously over the threshold. The Chamber of Marvels was exactly as the American had described: a vast room crammed with the most wondrous

things in the world, like a vast pirate's treasure trove. There was such an array of curiosities scattered about that Wells did not know where to look first, and the irritating little prods Serviss kept giving him to speed him along through the fantastic display did not help matters. He observed that a great deal of what was there had been labeled. One revelation succeeded another as Wells found himself gazing at a fin belonging to the Loch Ness monster, what looked like a curled-up kitten inside a glass jar marked FUR OF THE YETI, the purported skeleton of a mermaid, dozens of photographs of tiny, glowing fairies, a crown made of phoenix feathers, a giant bull's head allegedly from a minotaur, and a hundred other marvels. The fantastical tour came to an end when, suddenly, he found himself standing before a painting of a hideously deformed old man labeled PORTRAIT OF DORIAN GRAY.

Still recovering from the shock, he noticed some familiar objects next to him: a chemical flask containing a reddish liquid, and a small sachet of white crystals. The label on it said: "Last batch of chemicals salvaged from the warehouse of Messrs. Maw, indispensable for making Doctor Henry Jekyll's potion." Almost without thinking, the astonished Wells grasped the glass beaker: he needed to touch some of these wonders simply to be sure they were not a figment of his drunken imagination, inflamed by Serviss's storytelling. He needed to know they existed outside books, tales, and myths. As he held the beaker, he could smell the sharp odor of the blood-colored liquid. What would he change into if he drank the mixture? he wondered. What would his evil side be like? Would he suddenly get smaller, would he acquire the strength of a dozen men, a brilliant mind, and an overwhelming desire for wicked pleasures, as had happened to Stevenson's Doctor Jekyll, in what he had always assumed was a made-up story?

"Hurry up, George, we haven't got all day!" the American barked, yanking Wells's arm and giving him such a fright that the beaker slipped from his hand and shattered on the floor. Wells watched the red liquid spread over the tiles. He knelt down to try to clean up the mess but only succeeded in cutting his hand on one of the shards of glass.

"I broke it, Garrett!" he exclaimed in dismay. "I broke Doctor Jekyll's potion!"

"Bah! Forget about that and come with me, George," Serviss replied, gesturing to him to follow. "These are nothing more than fanciful baubles compared to what I want to show you."

Wells obeyed, threading his way through the hoard of objects as he tried to stanch the cut. Serviss guided him to a corner of the large room, where the flying saucer awaited. The machine rested horizontally on its stand, exactly as Serviss had described, like an enormous upside-down soup plate, tapered at the edges and crowned with a dome. Wells approached the object timidly, overawed by its sheer size and the strange shiny material it was made from, which gave it the appearance of being both solid and light. Then he noticed the peculiar carvings that dotted the surface and gave off a faint coppery glow. They reminded him of Asian characters, though more intricate. What did they symbolize?

"It doesn't look like they've managed to open it yet," Serviss remarked over his shoulder. "As you can see, there are no openings, and it doesn't seem to have any engine either. Although it looks like it must be extremely easy to fly, and probably incredibly fast."

Wells nodded absentmindedly. He had just noticed the large table piled high with papers beside the machine. This was where Serviss had told him he had found the files documenting the amazing discovery. He approached it, mesmerized, and began rummaging through the piles of notebooks and documents. Among them two thick albums containing photographs and newspaper clippings stood out. During his random search, Wells came across the burnt vessel's logbook, kept by the captain, a man by the name of MacReady. The handwriting was plain, devoid of any flourishes, and suggested a man with a stern, no-nonsense character, in complete contrast to that of Jeremiah Reynolds, who had been in charge of that expedition to the South Pole, whose diary seemed much more rambling and unmethodical. Wells browsed through the numerous articles in one of the albums describing the terrible fate of what the press had nicknamed the Ill-Fated Expedition, which had set sail from New York bound for the Antarctic on October 15, 1829. With some alarm, Wells read a few of the lurid front-page headlines, accompanied by bloodcurdling photographs of the sailors' bodies and the remains of the vessel: "Who or *what* slaughtered the crew of the *Annawan*? What horrors are buried beneath the Antarctic ice?" Yet, as far as he could make out, none of the articles mentioned the two main discoveries: the flying machine and the Martian. In the second album, however, he found several photographs of the strange machine half buried in the ice, glistening against the menacing grey sky, as if a giant had dropped a shiny coin from a great height. Next to these was a pile of scientific reports, which Wells could

scarcely make sense of, and which by all appearances were secret and consequently had been kept from journalists and the public alike.

"Don't waste time on that, George. The important thing is in there," Serviss declared, breaking Wells's intense concentration and walking over to what looked like a wooden trunk covered in copper rivets, to which a small refrigerator had been attached. He placed his hands solemnly on the lid, turned to Wells, and said, with a mischievous grin, "Are you ready to see a Martian?"

Needless to say Wells was not ready, but he nodded and swallowed hard. Then, with exasperating slowness and a conspiratorial air, Serviss began lifting the lid, which let out a blast of icy vapor. When at last it was open, Serviss stood back to allow Wells to look inside. With gritted teeth, Wells leaned gingerly over the edge. For a few moments, he could not understand what the devil he was seeing, for the thing in front of him resisted any known form of biological classification. Unable to describe the indescribable, in his novel Wells had placed the Martians somewhere on the spectrum between amoebas and reptiles. He had depicted them as slimy, amorphous lumps, loosely related to the octopus family and thus intelligible to the human mind. But the strange creature in the coffin defied his attempts to classify it, or to use familiar words to describe it—which, by definition, was impossible. All the same, Wells endeavored to do so, aware that however precise he aimed to be, his portrayal of that creature's appearance would be nowhere near the truth. The Martian had a greyish hue, reminiscent of a moth, although darker in places. He must have been at least ten feet tall, and his body was long and thin, like an evening shadow. He was encased in a kind of skinlike membrane, which appeared to be part of his structure. This sprouted from his shoulders, covering his body down to the tops of his slender legs, which were made of three segments, like a praying mantis. His equally slender upper limbs also poked out from beneath the mantle, ending in what looked to Wells like a pair of sharp spikes. But the most remarkable thing of all was the Martian's head, which seemed to be tucked inside a hood of the same textured cartilaginous skin as the mantle. Although it was scarcely visible among the enveloping folds, Wells could make out a triangular shape, devoid, of course, of any recognizable features, except for a couple of slits, possibly the eyes. The presumed face was dark and terrifying and covered in protrusions. He thought he saw a thick cluster of cilia around the creature's jaw, from which emerged a kind of proboscis, like that of a fly, which now

lay inert along his long throat. Naturally, the Martian looked nothing like how he remembered the phantasmagoric Spring-Heeled Jack, Wells thought. Unable to stop himself, he reached over and stroked one of the Martian's arms, curious to know what the incredibly alien skin felt like. Yet he could not tell whether it was smooth or rough, moist or dry, repulsive or pleasant. Strange as it seemed, it was all those things at once. But at least he could be sure of one thing, Wells thought: judging from his expressionless face and lifeless eyes, the terrifying creature was dead.

"All right, George, it's time for us to get out of here now," Serviss announced, closing the casket lid. "It won't do to stay here too long."

Wells nodded, still a little light-headed, and took care to avoid knocking over any of the wondrous objects as he followed Serviss toward the door.

"Remember everything you've seen, George," Serviss recommended, "and whether you believe these marvels are real or fake, depending on your intellectual daring, never mention this room to anyone you wouldn't trust with your life."

Serviss opened the door and, after making sure the coast was clear, told Wells to step outside. They walked through the interminable corridors of the basement until they finally emerged on the ground floor. There they slipped in among the crowd, unaware that beneath their unsteady feet, inside the wooden casket, the skin of the creature from the stars was absorbing the drops of blood Wells had left on its arm. Like a clay figure dissolving in the rain, his shape began to change, taking on the appearance of an extraordinarily thin, pale, youngish man with a birdlike face, identical to the one who at that very moment was leaving the museum like an ordinary visitor.

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Once outside, Serviss suggested to Wells that they dine together, but Wells refused, claiming the journey back to Worcester Park was a long one and he would prefer to set off as soon as possible. He had already gathered that meals with Serviss were conspicuous by their lack of food, and he felt too inebriated to go on drinking. Besides, he was keen to be alone so that he could reflect calmly about everything he had seen. They bade each other farewell, with a vague promise of meeting again the next time Serviss was in London, and Wells flagged down the first cab he saw. Once inside, after

giving the driver the address, he tried to clear his mind and reflect on the day's astonishing events, but he was too drowsy from drink and soon fell asleep.

And as the eyes of that somnolent, light-headed Wells closed, inside a casket in the basement of the Natural History Museum, those of another Wells opened.

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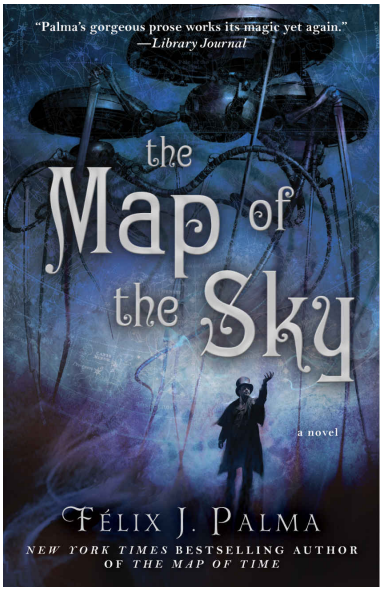

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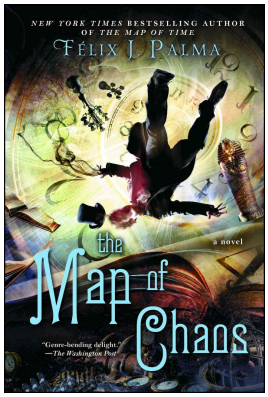

by

Félix J Palma

PROLOGUE

THE DEBATE WAS DUE TO commence in fifteen minutes when they glimpsed the Palace of Knowledge silhouetted against the golden canvas of twilight. The tiled domes of the vast edifice, soaring above the pointed rooftops of the London skyline, fragmented the sun's last rays into myriad shimmering reflections. Bloated zeppelins, aerostats, ornithopters, and winged cabriolets circled around like a swarm of insects, bobbing amidst the clouds. In one of those very carriages, gliding majestically toward the building, sat the eminent biologist Herbert George Wells, accompanied by his lovely wife. Or should I say, his intelligent, dazzlingly beautiful wife.

At that moment, the biologist looked down from his window. An agitated crowd thronged the narrow streets that snaked between the lofty towers studded with stained glass windows, and connected by suspension bridges. Gentlemen in top hats and capes prattled to one another through their communication gloves, ladies walked their mechanical dogs, children whizzed by on electric roller skates, and long-legged automatons made their way through the torrent of people, stepping over them with calculated agility as they went diligently about their errands. From the waters of the Thames, gilded by the sunset, tiny *Nautilus*es manufactured by Verne Industries would occasionally rise to the surface, like globefish, to disgorge their passengers on both banks of the river. However, as they drew closer to where the palace stood in South Kensington, the teeming anthill appeared to be moving in one direction. Everyone knew that the most important debate to be held in the Palace of Knowledge in the last ten years was taking place that evening. Just then, as if to remind the ornithopter's passengers, a mechanical bird flew by announcing the event with pompous enthusiasm before gliding toward the nearest building, where it continued its refrain perched on a gargoyle head.

Inside the flying machine, Wells took a deep breath in an attempt to calm himself and wiped his clammy hands on his trouser legs.

"Do you think *his* hands are sweating as well?" he asked Jane.

"Of course, Bertie. He has as much invested in this as you. Besides, we mustn't forget that his problem makes it—"

"What problem? Oh, come now, Jane!" Wells interrupted. "He's been seeing the best speech therapist in the kingdom for years. It's high time we stopped thinking he has a problem."

As though considering the matter closed, Wells settled back in his seat and gazed absentmindedly at the rows of sunflower houses colonizing Hyde Park, turning on their pillars in search of the sun's last rays. He wasn't going to admit to Jane that his rival suffered from that insidious problem (which, if necessary, he fully intended to make use of), for if the man trounced him, his defeat would be doubly shameful. But Wells wasn't going to fail. Whether or not the old man had his *little* problem under control, Wells outstripped him as a speaker. If he gave an inspired performance that evening, he would beat the old man hands down, and even if he didn't he would still triumph. Wells was slightly concerned that his opponent might win the public over with some of the syllogisms he used to spice up his rhetoric. However, Wells trusted the audience would not be blinded by a vulgar fireworks display.

Wells smiled to himself. He truly believed that his was the most significant generation to have walked the Earth, for, unlike those that had gone before, his held the future of the human race in its hands. Right or wrong, the decisions it made would reverberate through the centuries to come. Wells couldn't hide his enthusiasm at belonging to this exhilarating period of human history, when the world's salvation was to be decided. If all went well, that evening his name might be recorded for all time in the annals of History.

"It isn't vanity that makes me want to win, Jane," he suddenly said to his wife. "It is simply that I believe my theory is correct, and we can't waste time proving his."

"I know, dear. You are many things to me, but I have never thought of you as vain," she fibbed. "If only there were sufficient funding to back both projects. Having to choose between them is risky. If we're mistaken—"

Jane broke off in mid-sentence, and Wells said nothing more. His was the winning theory, he was certain of that. Although there were times, especially certain nights as he observed the lights of the city through his study window, when he wondered whether finally they weren't all mistaken; whether his world, where the quest for Knowledge controlled everything, really *was* the best of all possible worlds. During those moments of weakness, as he

referred to them in the cold light of day, he toyed with the idea that Ignorance was preferable to Knowledge. It might have been better to allow Nature and her laws to remain shrouded in darkness, to carry on believing that comets heralded the death of kings, and dragons still dwelled in unmapped territories . . . But the Church of Knowledge, the sole religion on the planet, whose Holy See was in London, brought together philosophy, theology, politics, and the sciences in a single discipline. It ruled men's lives from the moment they were born, encouraging them to decipher the Creator's work, to discover its components. It even compelled them to solve the riddle of their own existence. Under the Church's auspices, man had transformed the quest for Knowledge into his reason for being, and, in his eagerness to unravel each of the mysteries that made the universe beautiful, he had ended up peeping behind the curtain. Perhaps they were now simply paying the price for their recklessness.

A red carpet had been rolled out in front of the palace doors, and on either side a noisy crowd was brandishing every sort of placard while a dozen bobbies tried to contain their fervor. Since its construction, the cathedralesque building had been the stage of great symposia regarding the dimensions of the universe, the origins of time, or the existence of the super-atom, all legendary debates whose most memorable phrases and parries had passed into common usage. The ornithopter circled the palace towers, hovering for a moment before alighting on a clear area of street cordoned off for that purpose. The cleaner-spiders had made the windows gleam, and the mechanical pelicans had devoured the garbage in the gutters, leaving that part of the city spotless and crying out to be sullied anew. When the ornithopter had finally landed, a liveried automaton went to hold open the door for its occupants. Before stepping out, Wells glanced at Jane with a look of combined resolve and fear; she responded with a reassuring smile. The crowd burst into a unanimous roar of jubilation as he emerged from the vehicle. Wells could hear shouts of encouragement mixed with the booing of his rival's supporters. With Jane on his arm, he crossed the gauntlet that was the red carpet, following the automaton and waving to the public as he tried hard to project the serenity of one who considers himself far superior to his opponent.

They walked through the portal, which bore an inscription in huge bronze lettering: "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Once inside, the automaton led them along a narrow corridor to a

dressing room and then offered to take Jane to the VIP box. It was time for them to part. Jane went over to Wells and straightened his tie.

"Don't worry, Bertie. You're going to be fine."

"Thank you, my dear," he mumbled.

They closed their eyes and gently joined foreheads for a few seconds, each honoring the other's mind. After that intimate gesture, with which couples conveyed how necessary and enlightening the other's company was for them in their collective journey toward Knowledge, Jane looked straight at her husband.

"Best of luck, my dear," she told him before declaring: "Chaos is inevitable."

"Chaos is inevitable," Wells repeated diligently.

He wished he could leave his wife with the slogan used in his parents' day: "We are what we know," which so faithfully summed up the aspirations of their generation. However, since the discovery of the dreadful fate that awaited the universe, the Church had imposed this new slogan to raise awareness that the end was nigh.

After saying good-bye, Jane followed the automaton to the VIP box. As Wells watched her walk away, he admired yet again the miraculous sequence of genes that had created this woman, slender and lovely as a Dresden figurine, a sequence he had been unable to resist secretly unraveling in his laboratory, despite feeling that there was something oddly obscene about reducing his wife to an abstract jumble of facts and formulas. Before she disappeared at the end of the corridor, Jane gave him a final smile of encouragement, and the biologist experienced a sudden desire to kiss his wife's lips. He instantly chastised himself. A kiss? What was he thinking? That gesture had long been obsolete, ever since the Church of Knowledge deemed it unproductive and subversive. Gloomily, he resolved to examine his response at length once the debate was over. The Church encouraged people from an early age to analyze everything, including their feelings, to map out their inner selves and learn to repress any emotion that wasn't useful or easily controlled. It wasn't that love, or passion, or friendship was forbidden. Love of books or a passion for research was heartily approved of, provided the mind was in charge. But love between two people could take place only under strict surveillance. It was possible to abandon oneself freely to love (indeed, the Church encouraged young people to mate in order to perpetuate the species), but it was also necessary to spend time analyzing

love, examining its hidden motives, drawing diagrams of it and comparing them with those of a partner, presenting regular reports on love's origin, evolution, and inconsistencies to the local parish priest, who would help scrutinize those treacherous emotions until they could be understood, for understanding was what made it possible to control everything. And yet, none of those emotions survived such scrutiny. The more you understood them, the fainter they became, like a dream fading as you try to recall it.

Wells couldn't help admiring the Church of Knowledge's ingenious solution to this thorny issue. By insisting love be understood, it had created the perfect vaccine against love. Prohibiting love would have elevated it, made it more desirable, capable of fomenting uprisings, wars, and acts of revenge. In short, it would have brought about another Dark Era, which would only have stood in the way of progress. And what would have become of them then? Would they have gotten that far had they allowed their feelings to govern them? Would they have amassed all that Knowledge, which as things stood might prove their only route to salvation? Wells didn't think so. He was convinced that the key to the survival of the species lay in the judicious act of bridling mankind's emotional impulses, unshackling humans from their feelings just as thousands of years before they had been freed from their instincts. Yet there were times, when he watched Jane sleeping, that he couldn't stop himself from having doubts. Contemplating the placid abandon of her lovely face, the extreme fragility of her body momentarily deprived of the admirable personality that infused it with life, he would wonder whether the path to salvation and the path to happiness were one and the same.

Brushing aside these thoughts, he entered the dressing room, the tiny space where he must spend the last few minutes before walking out onstage. He stood in the middle of the room, choosing not to sit on any of the chairs. The door opposite led to the auditorium. Through it filtered the excited roars of the crowd and the voice of Abraham Frey, the celebrated moderator, who at that moment was welcoming the various dignitaries attending the event. Soon they would announce his name, and he would have to go out onto the stage. Wells ruefully contemplated the right-hand wall. He knew that on the other side of it, in the adjoining dressing room, his rival was doubtless listening to the cries of the audience resounding through the amphitheater with the same feigned determination.

Then Wells heard his name and the door opened, inviting him to abandon his sanctuary. He took a deep breath and strode forth onto the back of the

stage. Seeing him, the crowd burst into feverish applause. A couple of the recording orbs floating above the auditorium whirled over and began circling him. Wells raised his hands in greeting as he gave his most serene smile, imagining it being reproduced on the communication screens in millions of homes. He walked over to his lectern, which bore the stem of a voice enhancer, and spread his hands over its surface. One of the spotlights located above the stage bathed his puny figure in a golden glow. Five or six yards to his right, his opponent's lectern stood empty. While acknowledging the applause, the biologist took the opportunity to examine the stalls, separated from him by the pit, where a mechanical orchestra had started to play an evocative melody. Music creates order out of chaos, he thought, recalling the words of a famous violinist who had received the Church's blessing. Amidst the audience, Wells noticed banners and signs sporting his image as well as some of his famous sayings. Up above the rows of seats, beneath an enormous pennant with an eight-pointed star emerging from two concentric circles, Queen Victoria sat on her wheeled throne, in which she traveled everywhere of late. Next to her, on a less sumptuous throne, sat Cardinal Violet Tucker, the highest authority in the Church of Knowledge, who would preside over the debate. Her entourage sat in a cluster on her left, a flock of bishops and deacons with stern, embittered faces, who, together with the cardinal, made up the Budgetary Commission. That gaunt old lady, dressed in a black robe with gold silk buttons, and a sash and beret likewise gold, the color of Knowledge, would ultimately decide his fate. Wells noticed the goblet cupped in her right hand, which if the rumors were correct contained her anti-cancer medicine. On either side of the theater stood the boxes reserved for the authorities and prominent attendees, most notably Jules Verne, the French entrepreneur; Clara Shelley, the heiress to Prometheus Industries, a leading manufacturer of automatons; and various members of the scientific community. Wells could see Jane in the VIP box. She was talking to Doctor Pleasance, the wife of his rival, a handsome woman of about forty who, like Jane, worked as project director in her husband's laboratory.

Pacing up and down the stage between the orchestra pit and the lecterns was Abraham Frey, who wore a bronze helmet that had a voice enhancer projecting from its right side, leaving his hands free to perform their characteristic gestures. At that moment, he was introducing Wells's opponent, listing his many achievements over a long life devoted to the service of Knowledge. Inundated by this torrent of information, Wells was able to make

out the words “Knowledge Church College,” in Oxford, where his rival had given his celebrated lectures in mathematics and physics, and where Wells himself had studied. There, conversing between its ancient walls and strolling across its verdant meadows, the two men had forged an inspiring teacher-pupil relationship, and although Wells had finally chosen biology over physics, they had continued to meet regularly, incapable of renouncing a friendship they had both deemed fruitful enough to pursue. No one could have imagined that, in years to come, fate would make rivals of them. While in private this was a source of amusement to them, it in no way diminished the ferocity with which each defended his position during the many debates they had engaged in prior to the one taking place that evening, in which the Church would decide which of their projects was most likely to save the world.

“And now, Your Majesty, Your Eminence, leaders of the Church of Knowledge, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the distinguished physicist and mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.”

Followers of Wells’s rival broke into loud cheers as their idol’s name was announced. The tiny door to his dressing room opened, and an elderly gentlemen of about sixty emerged, waving to the public as he approached his lectern, just as Wells had done moments before. He was tall and thin, his white hair meticulously groomed, and his face possessed the languid beauty of a weary archangel. As he watched him, Wells couldn’t help feeling a sense of compassion. Clearly, Charles Dodgson would have preferred to be spending that magnificent, golden evening on one of his habitual boating excursions along the Thames rather than arguing with his former pupil about how best to save the world, yet neither man could shirk his responsibilities. They greeted each other with a stiff nod, and each stood quietly at his lectern, waiting for the moderator to begin. Frey called for silence, stroking the flank of the air with his hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he exclaimed in the baritone voice for which he was famous. “As we all know, our beloved universe is dying. And it has been for millions of years. Ever since the universe burst forth amidst a blazing cataclysm, it has been expanding at breakneck speed, but it has also been cooling. And that same cooling process that once nurtured life will eventually snuff it out.” He paused, plunging his hands into his jacket pockets, and started pacing up and down the stage, staring at the ground, like a man on a stroll daydreaming. “Subject to the three laws of thermodynamics,” he went on, “the galaxies are flying apart. Everything is

aging. Wearing out. The end of the world is near. Stars will burn out, magic holes evaporate, temperatures will descend to absolute zero. And we humans, incapable of continuing our work in this frozen landscape . . . will become extinct."

Frey gave a woeful sigh and began to shake his head silently, drawing out the suspense, until at last he exclaimed, almost in anger: "But we aren't plants, or helpless creatures that must resign themselves to a tragic destiny. We are Mankind! And having assimilated this terrible discovery, Mankind began to wonder whether there wasn't a way of surviving the inevitable, even the death of the universe itself. And the answer, ladies and gentlemen, was yes! But this does not mean we should challenge chaos like a suicidal warrior, defying Nature . . . and God. No, such a display of bravado would be absurd. It would be enough . . . to flee, to emigrate to another universe. Is that possible? Can we leave this condemned universe for another, more hospitable one and begin once again? And if so, how? Formulas have been scrawled on the blackboards of all the world's laboratories in an attempt to find out. But perhaps our salvation depends on one of the two exceptional minds here with us today."

Wells contemplated the audience, who were loudly applauding the moderator's speech. Placards and banners waved about like buffeted trees. Everyone there had been born into a world under sentence of death, and although they might not be around to experience the end Frey had so starkly depicted, the so-called Day of Chaos, they knew that their grandchildren or great-grandchildren would. All estimates now spoke in terms of a few generations, because the cooling of the universe was happening more quickly than had first been predicted. And was this the legacy they wanted to leave their descendants, a frozen universe where life was impossible? No, of course not. God had thrown down the glove, and Man had picked it up. The first thing Wells's mother had told him when he was old enough to understand was that everything he could see (which at that moment was the backyard of their house in Bromley, but also the sky and the trees peeping out from behind the wall) would be destroyed, because the Creator hadn't made the world to last forever, although he had been kind enough to give man a short enough life span so that he could have the illusion that it would. Like most young men and women of his generation, Wells had devoured countless books in his compulsive pursuit of Knowledge, spurred on by a romantic ambition to save the world. Could there be a more noble achievement? And perhaps, that very

evening, what had once been a child's naïve dream would become reality, for Wells was the leading proponent of one of the two most important theories about how to save humanity.

According to the lots they had drawn, the chairman invited Dodgson to open the debate. Before speaking, he took a sip of water. His old professor had never been one of those ruddy types brimming with energy and enthusiasm, but Wells could see how old age had blurred his features, giving him an air of painful fragility. He looked incapable of frightening a mouse. Finally, Dodgson balanced his glass on the lectern, gave the usual formalities, and launched into his speech:

"Since receiving the dreadful news that everything we love is destined to die, a single question has been floating in the air: Is it possible for us to engage the powers of science and flee this lost world for another? I say yes, dear audience, it most emphatically is. And I am here this evening to tell you how."

Dodgson was talking in a calm voice in order not to set off his stammer, doubtless on the advice of his speech therapist. That would render his discourse a little subdued, Wells reflected, whilst he himself could deliver his speech unhampered, thus endowing it with that theatrical vehemence that so easily roused the masses. Wells let the old man continue, waiting for the most opportune moment to interrupt him.

"As many of you know, on the evening when, in this very auditorium, following a memorable debate, it was established that the universe was dying, I was busy trying to find ways of injecting methane into Mars's atmosphere. My intention was to produce an artificial greenhouse effect on the red planet, raising its temperature and melting its surface to create lakes and rivers in preparation for a first human colony, so that if a meteorite struck Earth or we experienced another ice age we would have somewhere safe to go. Needless to say, the news about the end of the world changed the course of my research, and even my life. I forgot all about Mars, which was doomed like the rest of the universe, and, along with every conscientious scientist, I devoted myself to investigating ways of emigrating to a younger universe whose fate was not hanging in the balance. Ever since the illustrious Newton enlightened our minds"—at this the audience thundered "Hurrah for Newton!"—"we have all known that ours isn't the only universe, but, as countless studies and experiments have shown, it is simply another bubble in the ocean of infinity. Any law or equation that contradicts this truth is

doomed to failure and humiliation. Equally, we know that in this eternal ocean, bubbles are continually created and destroyed. Whilst this may bode ill for those of us who find ourselves in a dying bubble, it also provides a glimmer of hope, for as I speak, myriad universes are being born. And somewhere waiting for us out there is a luminous new world, the ideal place for an exiled civilization to build a new home. But how will we get there? How will we achieve what would undoubtedly be the greatest escape of all time? It is very simple: through the traditional method of opening a tunnel, something with which even the most ignorant convict is familiar. As I have discussed in my numerous articles, the universe is riddled with magic holes that possess an infinite gravitational force that sucks in anything around them. Is it not possible that these holes exist for a reason? Perhaps they are simply the Creator's subtle way of telling us how to free ourselves from his own snare. But what lies behind these holes? There are many theories, an infinite number, if you'll pardon the pun. But I am convinced that at the center of each is a tunnel connecting to another identical hole in another universe. Unfortunately, we have no way of traveling to any of those holes, because they are too far away from our planet, and their environment is too unstable. But that needn't be a problem, for what I propose to do is create a magic hole artificially in my laboratory. I am certain that in a controlled environment . . ."

"But, my dear Charles, your hole would be too small," Wells interrupted him at last. "I can't see the whole of humanity passing through it one by one. Even the Creator would lose patience. Besides, I can't speak for the audience, but personally I have no wish to be devoured, by a magic hole or anything else. You know as well as I do that the sheer force of gravity would make mincemeat of us. We would be sucked into its center and crushed to death." He paused for dramatic effect before adding with a mocking air, "In fact, the only use for your hole would be to dispose of the evidence of a crime."

Wells's quip, which he had rehearsed a hundred times in front of a mirror, elicited the predictable laughter from the audience. Charles, however, was unfazed.

"Oh, have no fear, George. None of that would happen if the hole was spinning, because the centripetal force would cancel out the gravitational force. So that anyone going into it, far from being crushed to death, would be sucked into a neighboring universe. It would be a small matter of balancing

the two forces to prevent the hole from fracturing. And once I achieved that, naturally there would be no need for the whole of humanity to pass through it. We would simply send ahead a few automatons, with the genetic information of every person on the planet codified in their memories. Once they reached the Other Side, they would construct a laboratory and implant the aforementioned data into living cells, thus replicating the whole of humanity."

"By the Atlantic Codex!" Wells feigned astonishment, although he was well acquainted with Charles's theory. "All I can say is I hope those puppets don't make a mess of things and we all come out with frogs' heads . . ."

A fresh round of laughter reached them from the audience, and Wells noticed Charles beginning to twitch nervously.

"Tha-Tha-That way the whole of humanity could pass through an opening the size of a ra-ra-rabbit hole," he attempted to explain.

"Yes, yes, only first you must create it, my friend." Wells assumed a weary air. "But tell me, isn't this all rather complicated? Wouldn't it be better if each of us were able to leap across to that universe for himself?"

"By all means, George, go ahead. Leap into another universe and bring me back a glass of water; mine's empty," Charles parried.

"I'd like nothing more than to quench your thirst, Charles. However, I fear that for the moment I am unable to oblige. In order to leap into another universe I need a grant from the Budgetary Commission."

"So, what you are saying is that today you can't take that leap, but tomorrow you can?" Charles inquired with a wry smile.

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," Wells replied cautiously.

"Then I fear you are bound to fail, my dear George, for there is no 'tomorrow,' only 'today.'"

The audience howled with laughter. Wells cursed himself for having walked straight into it but was undeterred.

"What I mean is I will succeed the day the Budgetary Commission awards me a grant." He pronounced the words slowly, after making sure he wasn't leaving himself open to any more of Charles's retorts. "For as you know, I am busy developing a miracle serum, a virus I have called 'cronotemia' in tribute to past experiments, when men from our Age of Enlightenment believed we could travel in time. Once injected, the virus will mix with our blood and the hormones secreted by our brain, producing a genetic mutation that will enable us to reach the other universe without the need to be taken

apart and reassembled on the Other Side. I am on the brink of perfecting the virus, of finding a stable solution that will reconfigure almost imperceptibly the molecular structure of our brains, allowing us to see what was hitherto invisible. As our learned audience doubtless already knows, all matter originates from the birth of our universe, and the atoms that make up our bodies are connected to other atoms on the far side of the cosmos. And if a particle floating around at the far side of the universe can communicate with us, then perhaps we can peer into that abyss, see what is behind it, and leap. Whether we like it or not, we are joined to those other worlds by an invisible umbilical cord. All we have to do is find the way to switch that connection from an atomic level to our macroscopic reality."

The debate went on for the remainder of the allotted hour amid witty asides, abrupt or barbed comments designed to ridicule or bamboozle the opponent, and even a few outbursts from Dodgson, who became increasingly flustered as he realized his ex-pupil was starting to win over the audience. In contrast, the biologist kept his cool throughout, smiling to himself as his rival became more and more excitable and his stammer began to render his speech almost unintelligible. Finally, just before the debate concluded, Wells uttered his much-rehearsed closing statement.

"A pinprick, a mere pinprick, of my serum is enough to make us superhuman, supernatural beings capable of living in any dimension. Trust in my project, Your Majesties, allow me to transform you into gods, and let us leave my dear opponent playing with his rabbit holes."

Charles was about to reply but was stopped short by the bell. The debate was over. The voice enhancers retracted into the lecterns, and Frey's voice could be heard celebrating their thrilling contest and inviting the Church of Knowledge to deliver its verdict. The orchestra struck up another evocative tune and the clerics conferred in whispers among the audience, but Cardinal Tucker immediately rose to her feet with the aid of her staff, and silence descended once more upon the auditorium.

"Having heard the two applicants for the Save Mankind Project Grant," she announced in her faltering voice, "we have come to the following decision: notwithstanding Professor Dodgson's celebrated wisdom, we believe that the task of saving us all must rest in the hands of the promising biologist Herbert George Wells, to whom I hereby extend my congratulations. May Knowledge guide your path, Mr. Wells. Chaos is inevitable!"

Wells felt his head spin as the theater exploded into triumphant roars on hearing the verdict. Hundreds of pennants bearing the Star of Chaos danced about like waves in a stormy ocean. He raised his hands, into which the fate of humankind had now been entrusted, saluting the excited audience, which immediately began chanting his name to loud cheers. He saw Jane and his team applauding and embracing one another in the box of honor, while Charles's wife remained in her chair, hands folded in her lap, oblivious to the surrounding uproar. Her eyes were fixed on her husband, who had lowered his head in defeat. Wells would have liked to comfort him, but the gesture would have been tasteless. Frey signaled to Wells, who walked over to him and allowed the chairman to raise his right arm as the audience cried out his name. Above the clamor, only Wells could hear Charles muttering angrily behind him:

"Eppur si muove."

Wells chose to ignore the reference to Galileo and instead gave a beaming smile, basking in the adulation of his supporters, who had started to descend from the rows of seats. A group of young girls climbed onto the stage and asked him to autograph their science textbooks. He did so with pleasure as he located Jane amid the crowd gathering to congratulate him in front of the stage and gave her a conspiratorial smile. Wells did not see Charles turn from his lectern and walk toward the dressing room door, nor did he notice the huge man who intercepted him before he was able to slip away. He was too busy drinking in his success. Charles could say what he liked, but Wells was the one who whose task it was to save mankind. That was what had been decided.

It took Wells eight months to hit on the magic potion that would enable the human race to flee to a neighboring universe without the need to dig any tunnels. Eight months, during which he and Jane and the rest of the team worked day and night, practically camping out in the state-of-the-art laboratory they had set up with the Commission's money. When at long last they thought they had synthesized the virus, Wells asked Jane to fetch Newton, the Border Collie they had acquired three months before. Wells had decided they should give a dog the honor of leading mankind's intended exodus rather than a rat, a guinea pig, or a monkey, for whilst the intelligence of the latter was more celebrated, everyone knew that dogs had the most developed homing instinct of any species and could find their way back even over great distances. So, if the leap was successful, there was a slight

possibility the dog might follow its own scent and leap in the other direction, and if that happened, they would be able to study any unforeseen side effects of the virus, as well as the physical toll it might take on the animal. Jane had regarded as less than scientific her husband's belief in the popular idea of canine loyalty, but when she first saw the puppy cavorting in the shop window, with its eager little eyes and an adorable heart-shaped white patch on its forehead, any doubts she had melted away. And so, little Newton arrived at the Wells's house, with the mission of vanishing into thin air a few months later, although before that happened nothing prevented him from being simply a pet.

When Jane appeared with the puppy, Wells placed him on the laboratory bench, and, without further ado, pinched his haunch and injected him with the virus. Then they shut him in a glass-walled room designed for that purpose, and everyone on the team observed him. If they weren't mistaken, the virus would travel through the bloodstream to the puppy's brain, where it would pierce the cells like a needle, introducing new elements that would heighten the brain's sensitivity to the point where, to put it simply, the dog would be able to see the thread that joined it to that other part of itself drifting on the far side of the universe.

They took turns doing six-hour shifts outside the glass-walled room, although Jane preferred to keep watch inside, playing with the puppy and stroking it. Wells advised her not to become too attached to the animal, because sooner or later it would disappear and she would find herself caressing the carpet. However, the days went by and Wells's ominous warning didn't come true. When the time limit they had set for the leap to occur ran out, they entered the phase where the likelihood of error began to grow exponentially, until one fine day Wells realized that continuing to wait in front of the window for the puppy to disappear was a question of faith or stubbornness more than anything else, and he announced that the experiment had failed.

Over the following weeks, they retraced one by one each step they had taken in engineering the virus, while Newton, freed from captivity, frolicked at their feet, showing no sign of physical decline, nor any sign of performing the miracle that would send shock waves through society. It had all looked foolproof on paper. The damned virus had to work. So why didn't it? They tried tinkering with the strain, but none of the modifications they made had the stability of the first. Everything pointed to that being the correct virus, the

only viable one. Then where was the error? Wells searched in vain, becoming increasingly obsessed with finding what had gone wrong, while it began to dawn on the others, including Jane, that the theory on which everything was based had been incorrect. However, Wells refused to accept that conclusion and would fly into a rage if any member of the team hinted at it. He wasn't prepared to concede defeat and determinedly kept up his research, growing increasingly irritable as the days went by, so that several members of his team were obliged to decamp. Jane watched him working feverishly in silence, ever more tormented and isolated, and wondered how long it would be before he conceded that he'd wasted the Church's funds on a misguided theory.

One morning, they received an invitation from Charles Dodgson to take tea with him at his house in Oxford. During the past months the two men had corresponded occasionally. The professor had benignly inquired how his ex-pupil's research was going, but Wells had been evasive. He had decided to tell Charles nothing until he had succeeded in synthesizing the virus and had shown that it worked by injecting Newton. Then he would write to him, or call him through the communication glove, and invite him to his house, bestowing on him the privilege of being the first scientist outside his team to discover that mankind had found a way of saving itself. But since Newton had not disappeared as he was supposed to, that call had never taken place. Two exasperating months later, Wells received the invitation from Dodgson. He considered refusing it but didn't have the heart. The last thing he wanted was to have to admit to Charles that the virus did not work. Jane told him he might benefit from his old friend's advice. Besides, Charles still lived at Knowledge Church College, Wells's alma mater, and perhaps the memories associated with those noble edifices would inspire him with new ideas, not to mention allow him to take a walk in the beautiful surrounding countryside, for it never hurt to get some fresh air. Wells agreed, not so much because the idea appealed to him, but in order to avoid an argument with his wife. He didn't even raise an objection when Jane suggested taking along Newton, who when left alone at home would amuse himself by chewing up cushions, books, or other objects accidentally left within reach of his jaws. And so, one cold January afternoon, an ornithopter left the couple and Newton in front of the college gates, where Charles was awaiting them, his carefully groomed hair mussed by the downdraft of the vehicle's propellers.

When the ornithopter had taken off again, Wells and Charles regarded each other for a moment in silence, like two men who had agreed to take part in a duel at dawn. Then they burst out laughing and embraced affectionately, slapping each other vigorously on the back as if trying to warm each other up.

"I'm sorry you lost the debate, Charles," Wells felt compelled to say.

"You mustn't apologize," Charles admonished. "Just as I wouldn't if you had lost. We each believe the other is mistaken, but provided you think me brilliantly mistaken, I don't mind."

Then Charles gave Jane the warmest welcome and excused his wife, Pleasance, who was busy giving a lecture. If her students didn't keep her too long, she might see them before they left.

"But what have we here?" Charles exclaimed, addressing the dog, who instantly began wagging his tail.

Before Wells could explain that it was a constant reminder of his failure, Jane said: "His name is Newton, and he's been living with us for the last five months."

Charles stooped to stroke the tuft of white hair between the dog's eyes while uttering a few words to it, which only Newton appeared to understand. After this exchange of confidences, the professor, smoothing down his tousled hair, led his guests through a small garden to his chambers near the cathedral spire. In one of the larger rooms, where the wallpaper pattern was of sunflowers the size of plates, a domestic automaton was arranging a tea set on an exquisitely carved table, around which stood four Chippendale chairs. Hearing them come in, the automaton swung round, placed its metallic palms on the floor, and walked over to them on its hands before reverting to the normal hominid posture and greeting them with a theatrical bow, doffing an invisible hat.

"I see you still can't resist reprogramming your automatons, Charles," Wells remarked.

"Oh, I'm just trying to give them a bit of personality. I can't abide those tedious factory settings." The professor grinned, and then, addressing the automaton, he added: "Thank you, Robert Louis. No one can balance the cups and saucers on the sugar bowl quite like you." The automaton acknowledged the compliment and appeared to blush, doubtless the result of another of Charles's additions to its original programming. Wells shook his head in amusement while Robert Louis, knee joints creaking, went over to the door to await further orders. Wells's domestic automaton was also an RL6

Prometheus, but it would never have occurred to him to give it a name using those initials, much less open up its skull and rearrange its wiring to give it the soul of an acrobat. Charles, on the other hand, was unable to accept things as they came; he had to put his stamp on them, and that was precisely why Wells had learned to appreciate him more than his other professors.

While Charles and Jane finished laying the table, Wells took the opportunity to stroll around the room. Alongside some of the most technologically advanced appliances (Wells saw a food warmer, a writing glove, a heat transmitter, and even a dust-swallowing mouse stretched out on a pedestal table, its innards exposed, as though Charles were halfway through performing a dissection) was a different type of object that offered a glimpse into the professor's more eccentric side, including some antique toys and a collection of music boxes. Wells walked over to where they were stacked on a shelf and stroked a couple of them the way he would a dozing cat, but he did not venture to open them, refusing to unleash their music and the minute ballerina that might lie squashed inside. At the back of the room a heavy curtain separated the formal part of the room from the *terra incognita* of the professor's laboratory.

Then Wells studied the walls, adorned with several of Charles's own drawings, illustrations from his textbooks on mathematical logic for children. Notwithstanding the playful spirit in which they were written, the Church, accustomed to indulging Charles's foibles, had given his books its blessing, for they were thought to help children develop their intelligence from an early age. Even so, fearing his reputation as a scientist might be compromised, Charles had taken the precaution of publishing them under the pseudonym of Lewis Carroll. He had written most of them whilst sitting on the banks of the river Thames, in the honey-colored spring light, for the professor was in the habit of boating on the river, gently cleaving its waters with his oars. More than once, when Wells was still his pupil, he had enjoyed the privilege of accompanying him.

"Come and sit next to me," Charles had said to him one afternoon on the riverbank, "and try to imagine a perfectly useless object."

"A perfectly useless object," Wells had repeated, sitting down with his back against the tree. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know how. Besides, what would be the use?"

"Oh, it's more useful than you think." Charles grinned and, seeing that his pupil was still puzzled, added, "I have something here that might help you."

He produced from his jacket pocket an ornate porcelain pillbox. He opened the lid by pressing a spring, the same as a pocket watch, revealing a tiny mound of golden powder. Wells raised his eyebrows.

"Is it . . . fairy dust?"

To Wells's astonishment, Charles nodded. It would never have entered Wells's head that his professor might take such a substance. It had been banned by the Church for more than a decade, because they thought it stimulated the brain in a negative way, inciting people to imagine unproductive things.

"Take some, and then try doing what I said," Charles exhorted, taking a pinch himself and raising it to his nostril. Then he offered the box to Wells, who hesitated.

"Oh, go on, George, be a devil. Why do you suppose humans have noses, to smell the lilies of the field?"

At last Wells took a pinch of the fairy dust and snuffed it into his nose as his professor smiled at him approvingly. Once the ritual had been consummated, Charles put the pillbox away, leaned back against the tree, and slowly closed his eyes.

"Now let your mind drift, George," Charles ordered in an excited whisper. "Find out how far you are able to go."

Amused, Wells grinned and leaned back as well, closing his eyes. For a few moments, he tried to do what Charles had said and imagine a perfectly useless object, but he couldn't stop his mind from reflecting about whether it was possible to diagnose a person's illness by analyzing his breath, as was done with blood or urine. It was something he had been speculating about for days. Vaguely disappointed, he thought of remarking to his professor that the fairy dust hadn't worked on him, but he decided to sit still with his eyes closed and wait for Charles to stir. He didn't want to interrupt him in case the professor was making his mind fly the way children flew kites. Wells concentrated on enjoying the delicious cool breeze riffling the water, amusing himself by trying to discover a break in the constant buzz of insects in his ears, and presently he started to feel drowsy. In his sluggish state, he noticed his mind begin to reel, and his thoughts rolled around in his head as they slowly began to lose all logic. He was momentarily seized with panic as he realized that each idea he formed instantly floated away, like a ship adrift, but he managed to calm down, telling himself that nothing bad was happening to his brain, that his altered state was an effect of the fairy dust, and he

abandoned himself to it with a sense of curiosity rather than fear. A flood of nonsensical images, as impossible as they were suggestive, began filling his head, swirling and intermingling to create outlandish configurations. He saw Martian airships flying toward Earth, invisible men, and strange creatures, half pig, half hyena. And he felt a stab of excitement. This was like riding a wild horse bareback. Mesmerized, he let the feeling intensify to see if he might not be able to ride a dragon, too. Wells had no idea how long he remained in that state, creating and demolishing stories, with only the logic of delirium as his guide. He assumed Charles was doing the same at his side, but when it began to grow cold and he opened his eyes, he discovered his professor gazing at him with a wry smile.

"What you've been doing is imagining, my dear George, and although there are many who believe it has no use, I can assure you it does. We are what we imagine," he declared, rephrasing the old motto. "You'll find out for yourself soon enough."

And so he had. That very night, while Jane was asleep, Wells had shut himself in his study and donned his writing glove. Only this time not with the intention of penning any essays or articles that might help advance mankind's understanding of the world. This time he was going to write down the tales inspired by the images he had glimpsed under the influence of the fairy dust. He took a deep breath and tried to conjure them, but it was as though his mind, having reverted to its natural state of rigidity, refused all attempts. After hours spent trying to regurgitate them, he gave up and went outside onto the patio. The night sky was swarming with dirigibles, but Wells had no difficulty making out the *Albatross,* the airship bristling with propellers commissioned from Verne Industries by one of the richest men on the planet: Gilliam Murray, known as the Master of Imagination, because, while his business card described him as an antiques dealer, everyone knew he was involved in the manufacture and sale of fairy dust. That rotund braggart controlled his increasingly vast empire from his flying fortress, without the ecclesiastical police ever having succeeded in infiltrating his impenetrable web of bribery, threats, and extortion. And so, immune to the world's highest authority, the omnipresent *Albatross* cast a tainted shadow over the London evenings, reminding men that if they wished to explore the limits of their imagination, all they needed to do was take a pinch of Gilliam Murray's golden dust.

Wells had never imagined he would one day go in search of the substance manufactured by that despicable individual, and yet, not without a sense of shame, this was precisely what he found himself doing the following day. Not wishing to importune his professor, he made his way to Limehouse, an area of the city inhabited by so-called Ignorants, those who had decided to turn their backs on Knowledge. Wells had been told it was easy to get the dust there, and he was not mistaken: he came away with a full pillbox. During the night, he locked himself in his study, snuffed a pinch of the powder, put on his writing glove, and waited. His mind soon began to reel, as it had on that golden afternoon he had spent with Charles. Three hours later, with only a vague memory of his fingers flickering incessantly over the paper, Wells discovered that he had managed to fashion a story. He repeated the ritual the following night, and the night after, and so on, until he had a pile of stories invented on a playful whim. He had no idea why he wrote them, only to let them molder in his desk drawer because he dared not show them to anyone, not even to Jane. He didn't consider them worthy examples of a craft capable of producing useful insights. The protagonists of his tales were scientists caught up in strange, unwholesome experiments that contributed nothing to society, ambitious men who used science for their own ends, who sought invisibility or turned animals into humans, and he doubted the Church would give them its blessing. Perhaps that was why he enjoyed writing them.

However, the guilty knowledge that he was deliberately and regularly producing something sinful began to plague him during his waking hours, especially when he encountered an ecclesiastical policeman in the street. Indeed, his anxiety reached such a fever pitch that one night he gathered up those stories, which he had begun to realize contained more wisdom than all the dry essays he wrote, and threw them on the fire. That pile of ashes put an end to several months during which he had acted like a madman, and not like the acclaimed biologist he was. From then on, he was content to behave the way society expected and scrupulously avoided spending any more golden afternoons with his professor.

Nine or ten years had passed since those rapturous nights. During that time, Wells had imagined nothing. At least nothing that wasn't related to making things work, such as the accursed virus, cronotemia.

Wells shook his head, ridding himself of those memories, and went over to the table to lend a hand. When they had arranged the tea things, the three of them sat down and began a pleasant conversation about this and that, which

Wells followed with a mixture of wistfulness and apprehension, aware that it was only a polite preamble before Dodgson ventured to ask about the thing that really interested him. When at last the conversation appeared to run out of steam, and a hush descended on them, Charles cleared his throat. Wells knew the moment had arrived.

"T-Tell me, George, how is your r-research going?" Charles asked, trying hard to control his stammer. "Y-You don't give much away in your letters."

Wells glanced at Jane, who nodded, encouraging him to come clean with Charles.

"Oh, excellently," Wells replied, with unerring enthusiasm. "I assure you it is progressing in leaps and bounds."

Charles looked at him skeptically.

"I-In leaps and bounds, you say? Is that a fact? I know you well, George, and from your tone of voice and posture, not to mention the fleeting look you just gave your dear wife, I would say the exact opposite is true. Look at you bolt upright in your chair, legs crossed, one swinging to and fro like pendulum. I-I'll wager you still haven't achieved any satisfactory results."

Wells looked slightly shamefaced and shifted in his chair, glancing once more at Jane, who nodded more forcefully this time. Then he turned to Charles, who was still smiling at him, and at last gave a feeble sigh.

"You're right," he confessed with a defeated air. "I'm at the end of my tether. We managed to synthesize the virus, only it doesn't work. I tried it on the dog"—he pointed to the constant reminder of his failure lying on the rug —"but without success. We've been over everything a thousand times but I still can't see what went wrong."

"A thousand times? Coincidentally, the same number of pieces a cup always breaks into when dropped on the floor . . . ," Charles jested, but when he saw that Wells made no attempt to laugh, he adopted a solemn expression, before adding, "Although I do understand, my friend. I sense you are on the verge of giving up."

"Absolutely not, Charles! That is unthinkable!" Wells declared, contemplating his wife's forlorn expression, which merely strengthened his resolve. "I assure you I shall carry on my research until I have discovered my mistake and put it right. The Church has given me the task of saving mankind and I have no intention of letting it down. If I did, I'd never be able to look myself in the face again."

“Y-You’d have great difficulty shaving if that were the case, George. But let’s not be overdramatic. Perhaps you are right,” Charles said reassuringly. Wells raised his eyebrows. “You must retrace your steps one by one, discover your mistake, and put it right.” He gave a mischievous smile. “E-Even if that means going farther back than you thought, right?”

Wells remained silent.

“It’s true, Bertie,” Jane said softly. “Perhaps the time has come to accept that . . . Charles’s theory is the correct one.”

Wells looked at his wife and then at Dodgson, who was waiting for a reply. Charles had drawn him into a trap, but he still wasn’t prepared to surrender.

“I’m afraid I can’t pronounce the words you wish to hear, Charles,” he replied with as much grace as he could muster. “My failure is only a temporary setback. My virus may not have worked, but I remain completely convinced we are on the right track. And that you could never succeed in creating a magic hole even if you had all the funding from the Budgetary Commission.”

Charles looked at him calmly for a few seconds, but then a smile gradually appeared on his lips.

“Is that really what you think? I wouldn’t be so sure if I were you.”

“What do you mean?” Wells asked uneasily.

“Much as I adore your company,” Charles said, looking at the couple with affection, “it isn’t my only reason for inviting you here. There’s something I want to show you. Something you say is impossible to create.”

Wells stared at him, bewildered. Charles gestured to the automaton.

“Would you mind drawing back the curtain please, Robert Louis?”

The automaton walked over to the curtain, on its feet this time, took hold of one end, and, moving in reverse, began to draw it back, revealing what was behind. Wells leapt from his chair as if someone had just screamed “Fire!” and Jane’s cup clattered into its saucer. Even Newton stiffened on the rug. It took a few seconds for them to understand what they were seeing, for it wasn’t something that was easy to grasp. Somebody had sketched a hole on the fabric of reality, an orifice measuring roughly two yards in diameter, which appeared to be gyrating slowly. Around it was a ring of shimmering, grainy mist, slightly ragged at the edges, while the center was an absolute black, a frozen blackness like the one threatening the existence of the universe. Right next to the hole, reality seemed to bend as though wanting to

pour through it. The hole was hovering about eighteen inches from the floor, above a metal stand bristling with levers and valves, and was surrounded by various complex constructions that seemed to be holding it in place.

"What the devil is this?" Wells spluttered.

"It's a magic hole, George," replied Charles.

Wells edged his way toward the phenomenon, closely followed by Jane, while Charles watched them from his chair with a satisfied grin. Wells let the purr of the machines calm his stupefaction and, keeping a safe distance behind the invisible boundary of the curtain, studied this rent in the air. The edges appeared to be made of gas, and because the hole curved slightly inward, it gave an impression of depth, although no sound came from within and all that could be seen was a dense, smooth blackness.

"You've done it . . ." Wells was incredulous.

Charles stood up and went over to join them.

"That's right, my friend: I've done it."

"But how? Where did you get the money to pay for all this?" Wells pointed to the machinery shielding the hole. "There's at least seven hundred thousand pounds' worth of equipment here."

"Eight hundred thousand, to be precise," the professor corrected him.

"But that's more than the entire Budgetary Commission grant!" Wells exclaimed, with mounting astonishment. "Unless you've inherited money from a string of rich uncles, I don't understand how you laid your hands on that amount . . ."

"My dear George, just because the Church has no faith in my project, it doesn't mean nobody does. A lot of people thought I was right—which is more than I can say for my friend and ex-pupil Herbert George Wells. And one of them happened to be wealthy enough to fund my research," Charles added enigmatically.

"Who the devil might that be?" George stammered.

A smile flickered across Charles's face for a moment.

"Gilliam Murray."

"You mean the Master of Imagination? Did he lend you all this money?"

Charles nodded, and Wells raised his hands to his head in disbelief. This was more incredible than the magic hole itself. Gilliam Murray . . . By the whiskers of Kepler, what had Charles got himself into? Everyone knew that Murray was one of the richest men on the planet, and the last person anyone should do business with.

"Are you out of your mind, Charles?" he cried. "You know what a reputation that crook has! I doubt very much he actually believes in your theory. And even if he does, do you really think he would use your magic hole for the common good? My God, Charles, your naïveté outweighs even your ingenuity!"

"What did you expect me to do?" Dodgson protested. "After the Church turned its back on me—thanks to you, *my dear friend*—Murray was the only hope I had of being able to continue my research."

"But at what price, Charles, at what price?" Wells said reprovingly. Dodgson pursed his lips in resignation. It was plain he, too, was unhappy about the action he had been forced to take. Wells felt sorry for the old man before him, who was shaking his head as he looked down at his shoes, like a child ashamed of its latest act of disobedience. Wells gave a sigh and inquired in a calmer voice: "When do you have to pay him back?"

"Well . . ." Charles hesitated. "A couple of weeks ago."

"What!"

"But that doesn't matter now, George!" Charles hastened to reassure him. "What matters is that I did it. I created a magic hole! Look, there it is. I was right, George, not you! Still," he added, contemplating Wells with a serious expression, "I didn't invite you here to crow over you but to ask you to put in a good word for me with the Church. The hole needs perfecting. It is stable enough to send simple objects, but I don't know what would happen with something as complex in information and energy as a man."

Wells looked at Dodgson, who was clasping his arm with a frail hand and gazing at him beseechingly. Then he glanced suspiciously at the hole.

"What do you suppose might happen?"

"I have no idea," Charles confessed. "I expect anyone who tried to pass through it would be crushed to death. But if you could convince the Church to back me, I'd be able to finish perfecting it, and I wouldn't need to worry about finding the money to pay Murray back, because I'd have more than enough to last the rest of my life. Will you do that, George? Will you help me? You can't deny my theory was the correct one."

Wells cast a weary eye around Dodgson's laboratory. Gathering dust in a corner, like a symbol of his ancient hopes, was the discarded model of the colony Charles planned to establish on Mars, east of Mount Olympus. Then he contemplated the hole, and Newton, still slumped on the rug, symbols of the ominous present.

“You’re right, Charles,” said Wells, nodding dolefully. “Your theory was correct, not mine. Have no fear. I’ll talk to the cardinals.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Charles replied. “I’m confident that in three or four months the hole will be ready. I only need to make a few slight adjustments.”

“A few slight adjustments? You don’t know how glad I am to hear it,” a voice behind them said.

Surprised to find they were not alone in the room, Wells, Charles, Jane, and even Newton turned their heads as one. Three men were standing in the doorway. Only the one in the middle was unarmed, yet he seemed the most threatening of them all. His splendid, bullish physique was hidden under a luxurious overcoat that almost swept the floor, and a self-satisfied smile played on his fleshy lips. The man on his left was a redhead, almost as tall as he was, and looked strong enough to juggle oxen. On his right stood a much younger man with a jutting jaw and a penetrating gaze. He looked agile rather than strong, capable of dodging all the oxen the redhead might throw at him. Both men were holding guns, marking them out as hired thugs of the man they were flanking, who in turn was pointing a strange device at Robert Louis. The automaton was standing next to the wall, where it had gone after drawing back the curtain, slumped forward like a rag doll, its arms dangling at its sides and the red light of its eyes extinguished. Wells supposed that, if pointed at an ornithopter, that thing could bring it down, and he couldn’t help wondering about the circuitry it contained.

“Mr. Murray, how nice to see you again!” Charles pretended to be pleased but made no move to approach him. “You’ve arrived in time for tea; please sit down and join us, if you wish.”

The Master of Imagination put his device away in his coat pocket and, remaining where he was, studied Charles for a few seconds, smiling at him almost affectionately.

“You’re too kind, Professor, only I didn’t come here to drink tea with you.”

“Naturally, naturally,” Charles said, glancing uneasily at Wells and Jane, who were standing close to each other only a few yards from the hole, scarcely daring to move. “I—I imagine you came for your money. I—I’m aware the payment was due a fortnight ago, but we scientists are the most absentminded people on the planet,” he laughed, twisting the hem of his jacket between his fingers. “Although you were kind enough to remind me in

your amiable and not in the slightest bit intimidating telegram, which makes my lateness all the more inexcusable . . . However, let us not dwell on that!" Dodgson declared excitedly. "As you can see, the m-magic hole is almost finished, and it is going make me extremely r-rich, so that I shall be able to pay you back double the amount you generously lent me. For any trouble I've caused—"

"Is that so?" Murray grinned from the doorway. "You are truly generous, Professor. Unfortunately, I'm not interested in your money."

With that, he walked over to the shelves containing the pile of musical boxes, wearing a smile of feigned curiosity. Despite his heavy build, his movements were effortless and possessed an almost sensual elegance. Charles, struggling to overcome his bewilderment, watched Murray run his finger over the lids of a few of the boxes.

"Do you have any idea how much I am worth, Professor?" he asked, lifting the lid of an ebony box and setting off a jingle imported straight from childhood. He let the melody float in the air for a moment before imprisoning it once more. Then he looked at Dodgson, who shook his head. "You don't? Neither do I: my fortune is incalculable." He pressed his lips together with an air of disappointment. "And yet, even with an incalculable fortune, I am unable to have everything I want. Alas, there are many things I cannot buy. Can you imagine what they are, Professor? No, I see that you can't . . . Perhaps that is because you have never needed them. I'm referring to dignity, admiration, respect . . ." Murray gave a chilling laugh while Charles contemplated him with mounting unease. "You look surprised, Professor . . . Perhaps you assume that a man in my profession wouldn't care about such things. But you see, I do care, I care a great deal." He sighed theatrically. "I'm tired of the hypocrisy of this world. You and countless others like you consume the drug I produce . . ." Dodgson and Wells exchanged worried looks. Like everyone else, they knew Murray had not amassed his fortune through being an antiques dealer, and yet, like everyone else, it suited them to pretend they didn't. However, the cards were on the table now, and the Master of Imagination's sudden display of honesty did not bode well. "The Church denounces me from its pulpits the world over," Murray lamented, "and yet conveniently looks the other way, allowing my business to enjoy the necessary impunity. Indeed, it often does more than look the other way . . . But I'm fed up with being the Church's scapegoat, and that of Cardinal Tucker and her entourage of putrid old fogies," he declared in a sudden

outburst of rage. “They need me because they *desire* the power I give them over the people, and the people need me because they *desire* the happiness I give them. And yet, to all of them I am *undesirable*! The devil incarnate! Ironic, don’t you think?” he asked them, putting on a sickly-sweet smile.

Wells swallowed hard. He no longer doubted that this scene was going to end badly for them, and yet he couldn’t help considering Murray’s impassioned speech with a sense of fascination, for what he had just said confirmed a surprising fact: the Church was covertly involved in the fairy dust industry. It was easy enough to go one step further and realize that the Church had devised a cunning plan to repress man’s imagination, the same way it had his capacity for love: it knew that preventing people from imagining would only make them want to imagine more, and so it had decided to make them doubt their capacity by creating a substance that artificially enhanced the imagination, and then making it illegal, so that it became at once fascinating and dangerous. Thus mankind had become addicted to fairy dust, convinced they needed it to be able to imagine, even though they had doubtless always possessed that gift. However, the Church still had to supply its devotees with the illegal substance, for it didn’t wish to eradicate entirely that quality in man, which, like love, could lead to Knowledge. Only in order to reap the benefits without losing control over its subjects, the Church had to transform it into a sordid, clandestine addiction. And that was where Murray, the Master of Imagination, came in: by having him traffic in the illegal substance, the Church remained untarnished. Murray wasn’t the first to have played that reviled but necessary role. The Church had produced other shadowy figures embodying everything that was despicable about the world, for each new generation. But it seemed Murray was to be the first to rebel against his fate.

“I’m tired of doing the dirty work for that bunch of old busybodies,” Murray went on, “while they go around pretending to despise me. I’ve had enough of grinding up fairies with my pestle and mortar so the world can go on imagining.” He gave an embittered laugh. “I don’t want to continue being the Master of Imagination. I don’t want to be remembered as the villain of the story when I die. No, I can think of a far better sobriquet. I want to be remembered as the Savior of Humanity! Could there be any greater achievement?” He grinned, his eyes moving from Dodgson to Wells, then back to Dodgson. “So, Professor, despite all your wisdom, you are a complete fool if you think I am simply going to accept your money and

discreetly step aside so that you can take all the glory. That's not how the story is going to unfold."

Murray looked into his eyes, waiting for a response.

"And h-how is it going to h-happen?" Charles replied at last.

"I'll tell you," Murray said calmly, still staring straight at him. "It will happen like this: the eminent Professor Dodgson will blow his brains out on the afternoon of the fourteenth of January 1898—that is to say, this afternoon—after battling with depression for months, having been defeated in a crucial debate by his former pupil"—here Murray grinned at Wells—"to see who would save the universe."

"My God . . . ," Jane murmured, moving closer to Wells, who wrapped his arms around her as he observed with dread Murray's thugs, their bodies gradually tensing as their boss went on.

"It will be a great loss," Murray continued, a sardonic smile playing on his lips. "A terrible shock, Professor, but after a few months everyone will have forgotten. And then the millionaire Gilliam Murray will announce that his team of scientists has succeeded in creating a magic hole in their laboratory, just as the great Professor Dodgson had planned to do—a hole through which humanity will be able to escape its dreadful fate."

"What!" Charles exploded. "But the hole is *my* creation! I—I won't let you steal it!"

"Listen, Charles . . ." Wells tried to calm him, as he saw the two thugs raise their guns and aim at Dodgson.

"You won't *let* me?" Murray gave a hoarse, rasping laugh while Charles fidgeted nervously on the spot. "In case you hadn't realized, Professor, I didn't come here to ask your permission. I am Gilliam Murray, and I take what I want." He gestured to the redheaded giant. "Martin, please. Aim at the temple. Remember, it has to look like suicide."

The killer nodded and strolled over to where Charles was standing, unable to move. Wells made as if to help his friend but was stopped by the other man pointing his gun at him. Wells put his arms around his wife once more, and the couple watched the redheaded man press his gun against the old man's temple with theatrical delicacy. Dodgson, too bewildered and scared to do anything else, shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

"A few last words before you leave, Professor?" asked Murray, amused.

Charles scowled and tilted his head slightly, as though leaning against the gun that was about to kill him.

"W-When you don't know where you are going, one path is as good as any other," he replied.

Wells swiftly placed a hand over his wife's eyes, and everything went dark. Jane didn't see what happened; she only heard a blast, followed by the muffled thud of a body hitting the ground. Then silence. A few seconds later, cracks appeared in the darkness as Wells moved his fingers away from her eyes, and Jane saw Murray gazing impassively at Dodgson's outstretched body while the redhead stood over him, holding a gun with a wisp of smoke rising from it.

"My God, Bertie . . . ," she sobbed, burying her head in her husband's chest.

Murray turned to the couple.

"I have to confess, Mr. Wells, I wasn't expecting to find you here, accompanied by your wife, and"—he looked at Newton, who had started to bark ferociously—"your pet dog, so I'm afraid there is no part for you in my little play. But as I'm sure you'll understand, I can't let you live. And after I've killed you, I shall throw your bodies into the hole. As you said yourself, a magic hole is the perfect place to dispose of the evidence of a crime."

"Damn you, Murray," Wells hissed in disgust as he held on to Jane tightly. "I hope your *Albatross* sinks under your vast weight and crashes, preferably into the Church's Holy See."

Murray gave a loud guffaw, then signaled to the thug whose weapon was trained on Wells.

"Go ahead, Tom. It doesn't need to look like suicide, so you can shoot them anywhere. Oh, and kill that damned mutt while you're at it."

The young man answering to the name of Tom looked at the picturesque trio he was supposed to execute. He decided to start with the man. He cocked his pistol, extended his arm, and aimed at Wells's head. But Wells did not flinch. Rather than beg for mercy, close his eyes, lower his head, or improvise some last words, he stared straight at the youth. And for a split second the two men looked at each other in silence. Wells's bravery seemed to take the lad by surprise, or perhaps he was laughing to himself at this stupid display of courage, but in any event he delayed pulling the trigger. Wells guessed that, despite all his experience, the killer had never had to shoot someone who showed such dignity when helpless, moreover with the addition of a sobbing wife in his arms and a faithful hound at his feet. Realizing that the time it would take for the lad to pull the trigger was the

only time he had in which to act, he wheeled round, grabbing Jane by the arm and pulling her toward the hole. If they were going to go through it, better alive than dead.

"Jump, Jane, jump!" he cried, shielding her body with his as they bridged the short distance between them and the hole Dodgson had managed to tunnel into the air.

Wells feared he would receive a bullet in his back at any moment, but as he lunged forward and his body started to go through the hole, he knew the killer would not have time to shoot. Newton followed them, leaping through just as the orifice folded in on itself with a deafening roar. Then what could have been a gust of cosmic wind swept through the room, accompanied by a flash of white light that blinded the three men left behind.

After the thunderous explosion, a heavy silence fell. Murray blinked a few times and finally saw that the hole had vanished. All that was left of it were a few strands of mist hovering above the metal stand. It took several moments for him to realize he no longer had anything to trade in, and that he would never be the savior of mankind.

It seemed History wasn't going to happen the way he had imagined either.

• • •

"IT SEEMED HISTORY WASN'T going to happen the way he had imagined either," Jane read. It was a good way to end a chapter, she reflected with a satisfied smile before blowing on the paper to dry the ink. Leaning back in her chair, she observed with delight the freshly cut roses on her desk. She had picked them from the rosebush that very morning as the sky chose the colors of dawn and the cold night air still lingered on their petals.

At that moment, Wells tiptoed into her study with his habitual reverence, as though afraid his manly presence might disrupt the delicate feminine atmosphere floating in the room. He spent a few moments contemplating the charming orderliness around him, whose enchantment was so alien to him, and his eyes flashed as he caught sight of the scribbled pages on his wife's desk.

"What are you writing, my dear?" he asked with feigned nonchalance.

Ever since his wife had told him she wanted to turn one of their unoccupied rooms into a study, Wells had resolved to spend part of his extremely limited and valuable time trying to find out what his wife was

doing in there. Direct questioning had failed, because she merely replied with a shrug. Joshing hadn't worked either. "Are you drawing pictures of animals in there?" he had once asked, but Jane hadn't laughed the way she usually did when he said such things. Her silence was tomb-like, and since torture was not an option, Wells had been forced to resort to surprise incursions. Thus he had discovered that Jane went into her study to write, which wasn't much of a discovery, as he could almost have worked it out without having to go in there. She was hardly likely to use the room for breeding rabbits, practicing devil worship, or dancing naked. Besides, she had half jokingly threatened him with it. Now all he had to do was find out *what* she was writing.

"Oh, nothing of any interest," Jane replied, quickly hiding the sheets of paper in her desk drawer, the lock of which Wells had unsuccessfully tried to force open. "I'll let you read it once it's finished."

Once it's finished . . . That meant nothing. What if it was never finished? What if for some reason she decided not to finish it? What if the world came to an end first? If it did, he would never know what Jane had been doing during the three or four hours she spent in her study every day. Was she writing a diary? Or perhaps a recipe book? But why be so cagey about a recipe book?

"One of the things I most hate in life is couples who keep secrets from each other," Wells said, being deliberately dramatic.

"I thought what you most hated was the fact that no one has invented an electric razor yet," Jane chuckled. She went on talking to him as she took his arm and led him toward the door, trying not to give the impression she was getting rid of him. "But don't be such a grouch. What does it matter what I write? Your work is the important thing, Bertie, so stop wasting your time spying on me and get writing."

"At least you know what I'm writing," he grumbled. "I let you see everything I do, whereas you're . . ."

". . . an unfathomable mystery to you, and you can't bear it, I know. I already explained it to you once: this is the only way of keeping your interest in me alive. I have to stop you from deciphering me, dear. Because if you understood everything about me, you would soon tire of me and start looking for other *mysteries,* and your crowning work, your true masterpiece, would never be written . . . So go back to your study and leave me with my *trivial*

entertainments. They're not important. They aren't even as good as your earlier stories."

"Don't you think *I* should be the judge of that?" Wells retorted, surprised rather than annoyed at suddenly finding himself on the other side of the door. "But I suppose you're right, as always. I should get back to my work and—"

"Splendid, dear."

Jane gave her husband a parting wink and withdrew into her sanctuary. After shrugging, Wells went down to the ground floor, where he hid away in *his* study. Ensconced in his chair, he glanced wearily around him. Despite having placed all his books and knickknacks on the shelves as carefully as Jane, his room only gave off an atmosphere of sterile sedateness. However much he changed things round, the room never felt warm. Wells sighed and contemplated the sheaf of blank pages before him. He proposed to record on them all his hard-earned wisdom, everything he had seen. And who could tell: perhaps that knowledge might change the fate of the world, although Wells couldn't help wondering how much he was driven by altruism and how much by vanity. He reached for his pen, ready to begin his "crowning' work, as Jane had called it, while the sounds from the street and the neighboring park seeped in through his window, noises from a world that went by immersed in the smug satisfaction of believing itself unique . . .

1

THERE WAS NOTHING INSPECTOR CORNELIUS Clayton would have liked more than for the dinner Valerie de Bompard had organized in honor of the successful outcome of his first case to end in a sudden attack of indigestion on the part of all her guests, himself excluded, the sooner for him to remain alone with the beautiful countess. And why should such a thing not happen? he mused, raising his fork mechanically to his mouth. After all, such unfortunate incidents fell within the bounds of the possible, especially since the castle cook already had experience in these matters, having three months earlier almost poisoned the entire domestic staff by serving them rotten food. However, the guests were already well into their second course and none of them showed signs of feeling the slightest bit queasy. And so Clayton resigned himself to having to endure the wretched dinner to the very end, telling himself he might find it more bearable if he forgot about the countess momentarily and simply enjoyed the praise lavished on him by the other guests. Did he not fully deserve it? Naturally: he was there as assistant to the legendary Captain Angus Sinclair, head of the mysterious Special Branch at Scotland Yard, but it had been his ingenious plan, and not the vain prestige of his superior, that had finally freed the town of Blackmoor from the terrible curse that had been hanging over it for months.

They had been assigned to the case after the first human remains were discovered, so brutally savaged that even the London press had printed the story. The grisly murders had begun to take place at each full moon, a few days after the cook had nearly poisoned the servants at the castle. Hitherto, the bloodthirsty fiend had been content to disembowel a few cows and sheep, as well as an occasional forest creature. But the beast's ferocity, previously unseen in any known predator, caused the inhabitants of Blackmoor to live in fear of the terrible day when it would finally decide to feast on human flesh. Perhaps that explained why Valerie de Bompard had found it so difficult to engage replacements while her own staff was convalescing. The majority of

youngsters in the village had declined the offer, not only because the countess did not pay as promptly as one might expect of such a wealthy lady, but because the thought of working in the castle buried deep within the forest terrified them. Clayton could only sympathize when confronted for the first time with that sinister mass of stones that seemed to have been transported there from some infernal nightmare.

But he soon discovered that the inside of the castle was more daunting still. The dining hall, for example, was a gloomy chamber with lofty ceilings so immense that the fire in the hearth, above which hung a portrait of the countess, could scarcely warm it. In that imitation crypt, lined with tapestries and dusty coats of arms, the vast oak table not only made the guests feel somewhat isolated but forced them to project their voices like tenors on a stage. Clayton studied the four men whose unremarkable biographies could have been written on the back of a playing card: the stout Chief Constable Dombey, the cadaverous Father Harris, the prim Doctor Russell, and the corpulent town butcher, a Mr. Price, who had led the packs of hounds through the forests of Blackmoor. The day Inspector Clayton and Captain Sinclair had arrived from London to take charge of the case, none of these men had made them feel welcome, and yet now, three weeks later, they seemed anxious to help them forget this by smothering them with praise. Clayton glanced toward the end of the interminable table, to where the only person whose admiration he really wanted was sitting. The Countess de Bompard was studying him, an amused expression on her face. Did she consider him arrogant for accepting their praise with such disdain? Ought he to appear indifferent to his own exploits? How was he to know? He always felt terribly vulnerable when exposed to the countess's scrutiny, like a soldier forced during a surprise attack to leave his tent without his full armor.

Clayton glanced at his boss, who was sitting beside him, hoping to find some clue in his demeanor, but Captain Sinclair was busily devouring his roast beef, apparently oblivious to the conversation. Only occasionally would he shake his head distractedly, a stray lock falling across the sinister lens on his right eye, which gave off a reddish glow. It appeared that the veteran inspector had decided to remain in the background, abandoning Clayton to his fate. Clayton couldn't help cursing him for maintaining this stubborn silence now, when throughout their investigation he had talked endlessly, airing his wisdom and experience at every opportunity and adopting a new muddled theory each time a fresh aspect of the case arose.

The worst moment of all had been when the captain gave Clayton advice on romantic matters, giving rise to a scene of paternal solicitude the inspector found excruciatingly embarrassing. All the more so because Captain Sinclair, who was incapable of plain speaking, had employed so many metaphors and euphemisms that the two men had ended their conversation without ever knowing what the devil they had been talking about.

"In a nutshell: young as you are," Chief Constable Dombey was summing up, "you have a remarkable mind, Inspector Clayton. I doubt that anyone sitting at this table would disagree with that. Although, I admit that, to begin with, your methods seemed to me, er . . . somewhat impetuous," he declared, smiling at Clayton with exaggerated politeness.

The inspector instantly returned his smile, only too aware that the chief constable was unable to resist ending his speech on a critical note, making it clear to everyone present that although these two gentlemen from London had succeeded in solving the case, they had done so only by resorting to unorthodox methods, which he considered beneath him.

"I understand that my actions might have appeared impetuous to you, Chief Constable," Clayton said good-naturedly. "In fact, that was precisely the impression I wished to give our adversary. However, everything I did was the outcome of deep reflection and the most painstaking deductive reasoning, for which I am indebted to my mentor, Captain Sinclair here. He deserves all the credit," Clayton added with false modesty, bowing slightly to his superior, who nodded indulgently.

"Why, I understood that from the outset!" Doctor Russell hastened to declare. "It is with good reason that a doctor uses science on a daily basis in the pursuit of his work. Unlike the chief constable here, I didn't allow your youth and apparent inexperience to put me off, Inspector Clayton. I know a scientific mind when I see one."

The chief constable gave a loud guffaw, causing his enormous belly to wobble.

"Who are you trying to fool, Russell!" he protested, jabbing his fork at him. "Your scientific approach consisted in systematically suspecting all the townsfolk, including old Mrs. Sproles, who is nigh on a hundred and confined to a wheelchair."

The doctor was about to respond when the butcher piped up.

"Since you're mentioning everyone else's failings, Chief Constable, you might recall your own and apologize for having so readily cast aspersions on

others."

"I assure you, had you owned a cat instead of that enormous hound, I would never have—"

But before the chief constable could finish, the countess spoke up from the far end of the table. Everyone turned toward her in amazement, for Valerie de Bompard's tinkling voice had risen above theirs with the delicacy of a dove amid a flock of crows.

"Gentlemen, we are all understandably exhausted after recent events." She had a hint of a French accent that gave her words a charming lightness. "However, Inspector Clayton is our honored guest, and I am afraid we risk making his head spin with our petty squabbling. You will notice, Inspector," she addressed Clayton with an almost childlike zeal, "that I say 'our,' for despite having arrived in this country as a foreigner only a short time ago I already feel I am English. Not for nothing have the good people of Blackmoor clasped me to their bosom as if they had known me since birth." Despite the countess's friendly tone, her mocking words fell upon the gathering like a cold, unpleasant rain. "Which is why I should like to thank you once more, on behalf of everyone here, for what you have done for us, for our beloved Blackmoor."

She raised her glass between slender fingers, so daintily that it looked as if she had willed it to levitate. The others instantly followed suit. "Gentlemen, these have been evil and terrible times for all. For two years now, we have been living in fear, at the mercy of a bloodthirsty beast," she went on in a theatrical tone like a storyteller before an audience of children, "but, thanks to Inspector Clayton's formidable mind, the nightmare is finally over, and the evil creature has been defeated. I don't believe anyone here will ever forget the night of the fifth of February 1888, when the inspector freed us from our curse. And now, for God's sake, gentlemen"—her mischievous grin twinkled irreverently behind her raised glass—"let us once and for all drink a toast to Cornelius Clayton, the brave young man who hunted down the werewolf of Blackmoor!"

Since they were too far away from one another to clink glasses, they all raised their champagne flutes in the air. Clayton nodded graciously at the countess's words and forced himself to smile with a mixture of smugness and humility. The chief constable promptly proposed another toast, this time in honor of their hostess, and it was Valerie de Bompard's turn to lower her gaze with that shy expression that always made Clayton's heart miss a beat. It

might be worth pointing out at this juncture that the inspector did not consider himself an expert with the ladies—quite the opposite, though he did pride himself on knowing enough about human behavior to be able to claim with some authority that Valerie de Bompard had nothing in common with the rest of the female race, or indeed with humanity as a whole. Every one of her gestures was a fathomless mystery to him. The shy expression with which she had greeted the chief constable's toast, for example, reminded him less of the decorous behavior of a lady in society than the deceptive calm of the Venus flytrap before it ensnares the wretched insect alighting on its leaves.

As he sat down again, Clayton recalled the unease he had felt the first time he saw her. It had been as if he were in the presence of a creature so fascinating, it was hard to believe she belonged to the tawdry world around her. On that day, the countess had worn a sky-blue silk ensemble with matching gloves and had set it off with a wide-brimmed hat trimmed with an elaborate sprig of leaves and berries into which the milliner, in keeping with the fashion of the day, had tucked a miniature stuffed dormouse and several orange-winged butterflies, which seemed to embody the rebellious thoughts that must be bubbling inside her head. No, Clayton had not known what to make of the countess then, nor did he now. He had only succeeded in falling madly in love with her.

"So tell us, Inspector," said the vicar, interrupting Clayton's daydream. "Was it clear to you from the start which direction your investigation should take? I ask you because I imagine that, when dealing with the supernatural, one can choose from an almost infinite number of possible theories."

"Infinity isn't a very practical concept to work with, Vicar, unless our salary were to be augmented accordingly," Clayton replied. This brought a few laughs from his fellow guests, including, he imagined, the sound of tinkling bells. "That is why, when confronted with events like the Blackmoor atrocities, which are difficult to explain in terms of the established order of the natural world, we must first eliminate all possible rational explanations. Only then can we deem something supernatural, an idea to which my department is clearly open."

"That is what we should have done!" the doctor remarked ruefully. "Used a bit of common sense. Only, as in all small towns, Blackmoor is full of superstitious people, and we all know—"

"Oh, stop pretending you are any different, Russell!" the chief constable rebuked him once more. "I happen to know that you were more scared than

anyone. Your maid informed mine that you were melting all your spoons to make a silver bullet, because you claimed it was the only thing that could kill a werewolf. Where on earth did you come up with such a silly idea?"

The doctor was going to deny it but then chuckled instead.

"Well, I'll be damned, the cheeky little gossip! Yes, I confess to melting the teaspoons. And if you'd listened to a word I'd said during these past few months, Chief Constable, you wouldn't be asking me now how I came up with such a silly idea." He turned away from him and addressed Clayton in a more measured tone, as if speaking to an equal. "The fact is, Inspector, a French colleague of mine, with whom I correspond, told me about a gruesome animal that terrorized the region of Gévaudan in the last century. Many claimed it was a werewolf and that they only succeeded in shooting it down with silver bullets. That is why I melted nearly all our cutlery, much to my wife's displeasure."

"Well, you got a telling off for nothing, Russell," the butcher laughed.

"I am aware of that," the doctor snapped. "But who would have imagined that the werewolf terrorizing our town was in fact Tom Hollister dressed in that ridiculous disguise?"

Everyone looked toward the corner of the dining hall where the doctor was pointing, and a gloomy silence instantly descended on the room. Clayton watched the other guests shake their heads, each immersed in his own recollections as he gazed at the enormous wolf hide draped over a wooden easel, gleaming in the light of the candles dotted sparingly about the room. Sinclair had displayed it there like a trophy so the guests could examine it as they came in. And they had, with a mixture of horror and admiration, for the disguise was a work of art, worthy of an expert taxidermist. The enormous skin, which at first sight they had thought belonged to a giant wolf, was in fact made of several different pelts that had been carefully stitched together and then cut accordingly, with sections of it stuffed with hemp and straw to give the impression of a huge beast with bulging muscles. The forelegs had been stretched over a framework of jointed wooden bars until they vaguely resembled human limbs covered in thick fur, and each had tacked onto its end a glove that bristled with clawlike blades. The ensemble had been crowned with a wolf's head whose mouth had been fixed into a hideously ferocious growl. It came as no surprise that Hollister, who was sturdy enough to support the cumbersome disguise, could transform himself into a terrifying werewolf in anyone's eyes by draping it over his shoulders, fastening it to his

arms and legs with special leather straps, and using the animal's head as a helmet. Especially if he only appeared during the full moon, arching his back grotesquely and howling like a wild animal.

Clayton had also been taken in when he first saw the creature standing before him, huge and terrifying, and as he and the others chased it through the dark depths of the forest, his blood pulsing in his temples, his heart pounding in his chest, it was the certainty that they were pursuing a real werewolf that had mitigated his suspicions. Yes, it was a werewolf they were pursuing because, despite Sinclair's evasive answers when he had joined the Special Branch, Clayton knew that such fantastical creatures did exist. But the monster had turned out to be a hoax. Inspector Clayton could not help but feel that this cast something of a pall over his triumph, and he was no longer sure that joining the Special Branch had been the right decision. Perhaps he had been too hasty in accepting Sinclair's offer, having done so in the belief that a world closed to other mortals would open up to him. And yet his first "special" case had consisted of hunting down a yokel wearing an assortment of animal skins. Not to mention falling in love with a woman who lived in a sinister castle.

"How is it possible that the thing scares me even now?" the doctor admitted suddenly, breaking the silence.

He rose to his feet and, doubtless emboldened by drink, shuffled over to the disguise with a penguin-like gait.

"Be careful, Russell; take a silver teaspoon with you just in case!" yelled Price, waving his in the air.

The doctor dismissed the butcher's advice with a drunken flourish that sent him tottering toward the animal hide.

"Look out!" shouted Sinclair, leaping from his chair like a nursemaid watching over her wards at play in the park, his mechanical eye emitting a buzz of alarm.

The captain planned to take the disguise back to London, to the Chamber of Marvels in the basement of the Natural History Museum. This was where the Special Branch stored evidence from cases passed on to them because they defied man's reason. He wanted the skin, which he saw as an important part of their division's history, to reach the museum in one piece. When he saw the doctor regain his balance with no other consequence than the hilarity of the onlookers, his face relaxed and he smiled benevolently, although, since he was already on his feet, he decided to go over to the costume himself.

Chief Constable Dombey instantly followed suit, as did Price and Harris. Doctor Russell then launched into a scientific exposition of the methods used to create that handiwork, while the others, including Sinclair, felt obliged to nod diligently as the quack continued to show off his knowledge.

And while that impromptu conference was taking place around the disguise, back at the table Clayton finally plucked up the courage to look straight at the countess, from whom he was separated by a generous expanse of solid oak. Throughout all the weeks of his investigation, whenever he and the countess were together, whether in a room full of people or in a garden maze, Clayton's eyes would invariably end up meeting hers, those eyes that seemed to have been waiting for him forever, and whose mystery had begun to haunt his nights. For the inspector, who prided himself on his ability to read a man's thoughts from the way he knotted his tie, was utterly incapable of deciphering her gaze, which might have been expressing gentle adoration, the cruelest disdain, or even some unimaginable private hell. Perhaps all of those at once. And it was in those same eyes that Clayton was drowning now as he admired the countess, and she allowed herself to be admired as always with a smile, enveloping him in her dark, bewitching beauty, which transformed the voices of the other guests into a nonsensical babble, the dining hall into a hazy backdrop, and the entire universe into a distant, possibly imaginary place.

Clayton had never seen Valerie look as magnificent as she did that evening, or as painfully fragile. She was dressed in black and silver: her dazzlingly pale neck rose out of a velvet bodice that emphasized her proud breasts and matched her long calfskin gloves; her silver skirt fell in billowing folds that revealed a constellation of tiny diamonds. Seeing her seated there, illuminated by the shimmering candles, Clayton could not help thinking that, regardless of her indeterminate age, she resembled more than ever a girl queen, childish and capricious, cruel only by birthright. Realizing he was clutching his glass more firmly than usual, and fearing he might break it or do something even more stupid, like leaping onto the table and sprinting frantically toward the countess, swept along on the current of his confused desire, Clayton averted his gaze, and the room regained its movement, its sounds, its stubborn solidity.

"The fact is, the more I look at it, the more I admire it," he heard the doctor say. "A truly splendid piece of work, gentlemen. Look at this. The hide is perfectly tanned and uncommonly soft." He leaned forward and

sniffed one of the feet. “I’d say it was preserved using a mixture of arsenic and chalk, like in the old days.”

The butcher, to whom Doctor Russell’s explanations were beginning to sound like a lullaby, nodded and gave a deep sigh.

“That’s all very well, Doctor, but I can’t help wondering how a fellow like Hollister could make a costume like this and, more to the point, why he killed those three people. Alas, due to his tragic demise he will never be able to answer these questions. However,” he said, turning to Clayton, “you promised us you would, Inspector, and I think we are all so anxious to know.”

“With pleasure, gentlemen.” Clayton grinned, aware that the moment he had been waiting for throughout the meal had finally arrived.

He stood up from the table, avoiding the countess’s gaze, and gave a cursory glance at his audience, which was standing in front of the costume as if posing for a group photograph, a look of intense expectation on their faces.

“Well, I assume you want me to begin with the first question: How could someone as unsophisticated as Hollister produce this outstanding piece of taxidermy? There is a very simple answer to that, gentlemen: through books. As you know, once we discovered Hollister was the werewolf, Captain Sinclair and I searched his shack, where we found books on taxidermy, bestiaries containing images of werewolves, and a variety of substances and tools used in taxidermy. But why would anyone go to such lengths to commit a murder when there are many easier ways of doing it?” Clayton clasped his hands behind his back, pursing his lips ruefully, as if to say he didn’t know the answer to that either. Captain Sinclair smiled to himself at his subordinate’s weakness for theatrical pauses. “Let us consider for a moment what we know about Hollister’s character. Before he threw himself into the ravine, all of you considered him a harmless clodhopper, with just enough brains to resent the unlucky hand life had dealt him—something he used to complain about whenever he drank: he was forced to quit school because his parents died when he was still a boy, leaving only a mound of debt and a few acres of stony soil he would struggle to grow anything on. He was also an extremely good-looking young lad, although alas none of the ladies he courted, all of them of noble birth, deigned to show any interest in him. Apparently a poor wretch like him was aiming too high. Now, let us take a closer look at his victims: What did Anderson, Perry, and Dalton have in common?” Clayton observed his audience with a grin. “Their land was

adjacent to Hollister's but, unlike his, theirs was fertile. Thus my inquiries led me in that direction. And so I discovered that Hollister, in his eagerness to make money, had attempted to purchase their lands, but that his neighbors had never agreed to sell. Indeed, two of them, to whom Hollister's father had owed money, even threatened to seize his property if he didn't pay up. That must have been when the lad, at the end of his tether, cooked up his plan. A brilliant plan, in my view: he would kill his stupid neighbors in a manner that would not only divert suspicion from himself but would also compel the dead men's families to sell their land quickly and at a reduced price. Why? Because it was cursed. Because a terrible monster had begun prowling there, exacting a life at each full moon. But turning into a werewolf was beyond his capabilities, and so he resorted to using a costume, which, in order not to arouse suspicion, he was forced to make himself. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how poor, honest Tom Hollister became the werewolf of Blackmoor."

There was an awed silence. Even Sinclair, who was familiar with Clayton's exposition, seemed delighted by his performance. Satisfied with the outcome, Clayton looked straight at the countess and thought he glimpsed a fresh sparkle in her eyes.

"Brilliant, Inspector Clayton." She smiled. "An exposition as intelligent as it was entertaining. I have no doubt that a bright future awaits you at Scotland Yard."

Clayton acknowledged the compliment with a slight bow, preferring not to say anything that might break the spell of the unanimous admiration he had conjured around him, and wondered whether he hadn't at last managed to impress the countess. He had never been confronted by a woman like her before and was ignorant of the basic rules of refined courtship: after all, he was no more than a humble policeman, perhaps too lowly for her, or too young, or too unsophisticated, doubtless too much in love. He was not even sure whether it was possible to seduce a woman like Valerie de Bompard with his intellect, or what she might want from a man like him. A night of passion, a moment's amusement, a respite from loneliness, or perhaps an eccentric noblewoman's mere whim? He was hoping for a great deal more. But it was pointless to surmise. Very soon, the expectations Valerie de Bompard had been sowing in the air around him would either become a reality or would vanish forever. Because the case had been solved, they had caught the werewolf, and the next day their carriage would depart for

London . . . although perhaps with only one detective on board. Everything would depend on what happened once the dinner was over.

Clayton would have been happy to remain trapped in that instant for all eternity, his gaze intertwined with that of the countess and glimpsing in her smile the promise of a happiness he had never believed existed, but at that very moment the servants, who had doubtless been waiting outside the door for him to finish his speech, burst into the room carrying trays piled high with cakes, fruit, cheese, and bottles of liqueur. The inspector tried to conceal his irritation as he watched the guests heading for their places, more excited by the prodigious array of desserts than by Clayton's brilliant deductions, which moments before they had so passionately applauded. Accepting that he had been defeated by a pile of cakes, the inspector walked back to his seat with an ironic smile. As he passed the countess's portrait, he could not help glancing at it with a look of frustration. But no sooner had Clayton clasped the back of his chair than something deep inside made him turn toward the portrait once more. He took two strides and found himself standing before the canvas, indifferent to whether his sudden interest might puzzle the countess or the other guests. Suddenly, the rest of the world had disappeared beneath a veil of fog. All that remained was him and the painting, which had produced a stab of anxiety he found impossible to explain.

As the flurry of plates and glasses continued behind him, he strove to examine every inch of the canvas, which showed Valerie de Bompard in all her majestic beauty, standing beside a large table piled with neat stacks of books and papers. The day they had arrived at the castle, Captain Sinclair had praised the portrait to the skies, and afterward the countess had informed them it was the work of her late husband, the count de Bompard, a man of many talents, one of which, it seemed, was painting. In fact, the countess had posed for the portrait in her husband's study, and now Clayton could make out in the background, purposefully made hazy by the artist, a vast library whose uppermost reaches vanished into the odd-looking shadows that enveloped the ceiling. Thick, exquisitely bound volumes lined the shelves, alongside an array of objects that Clayton scarcely recognized save for one or two. There was a gilt telescope, a collection of flasks, bottles, and funnels arranged in order of size, an enormous armillary sphere, and . . . It took him a few moments to take in what was next to the sphere. When he did, an icy fear ran though his body like snake venom, while in his brain the whisperings of comprehension began to grow louder and louder.

The servants left the dining hall and Clayton returned to his seat, fearful his knees might buckle under him. What he had just discovered in the painting had turned his solution of the case upside down, and he could only watch in astonishment as the elements began to reconfigure. Clayton leaned back in his chair, each new puzzle piece like a stabbing pain in his entrails. When at last it was complete, he had to acknowledge with a mixture of surprise and dismay that this new configuration made more sense than the last one. His amazement nearly spilled forth in the form of a hysterical laugh, but he managed to contain himself. He took a long sip of brandy, followed by several deep breaths. The liquor calmed him somewhat. He must not give way, he told himself. He had to regain his composure, assimilate the discovery he had just made, and act accordingly.

Fortunately, the guests were still engaged in a trivial conversation about how delicious the meal had been, allowing Clayton to emerge gradually from the stupor into which the revelation had plunged him. He discreetly wiped the beads of sweat from his brow, and even managed to recover his smile, as he pretended to follow the conversation while avoiding everyone's gaze, in particular that of the countess. When Valerie had first shown him the Count de Bompard's painting, Clayton's eyes had focused on her image. The countess eclipsed everything around her, as she did in real life. But now he had seen all the details. The details . . . they were what decided the outcome of an investigation, even if as in this case it was something as ludicrous as a circle of mice holding hands and dancing.

"Imagine how long it must have taken Hollister to make that costume," Price was saying, "to hunt down enough wolves, and to stitch their pelts together alone at home! And all that without arousing the slightest suspicion! A terrifying thought, isn't it? I knew the lad quite well. He used to help me sometimes in the shop, and we'd often have a chat. All the same, I'd never have imagined—" He broke off in mid-sentence and shrugged.

Everyone nodded, sharing in the butcher's bewilderment, except Clayton, who, struggling to overcome his fear, was looking straight at the countess, anticipating her response. Valerie de Bompard, who was nodding like the others in a gesture of regret, caught the inspector's eye and as always held his gaze unflinchingly, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. Clayton knew he must first decide how to act on the information he had just stumbled across, then try to work out a plan before the end of the dinner. But, confronted with the countess's smile, he couldn't prevent a feeling of anger

from welling up inside him. *I have no doubt a bright future awaits you at Scotland Yard,* she had said to him, and the same words that had gladdened him before became like shards of glass piercing his heart. He felt his blood begin to boil.

"People are never what they seem," he heard himself say as though it were someone else's voice, his gaze still fixed on the countess. "We all have our secrets, and yet we're always surprised when we discover that other people do, too. Wouldn't you agree, Countess?"

Valerie was still smiling, but Clayton thought he perceived a glint of confusion in her eyes. Not fear—not yet. That would come later.

"Naturally, Inspector, we all have a hidden side we don't show others," she replied, making her crystal glass sing as she ran her finger round it swiftly but delicately. "However, if you'll allow me to make a distinction, there is a world of difference between the almost obligatory lies we all tell to protect our privacy and possessing the dual personality of a murderer."

Clayton nodded, as did the other guests, but he made sure the countess noticed the sardonic veneer to his look.

"In any event, there is something diabolical about the zeal with which Hollister embarked on the study of taxidermy," the vicar said, wandering off the subject, his cheeks ruddy from the alcohol. "All that sinister knowledge hidden away in his house: jars filled with strange, noxious substances, books on alchemy, medieval treatises . . . It brings to mind tales of witches and pacts with the devil. Even though the explanation for those dreadful murders has turned out to be human, I can't help seeing the mark of the Evil One imprinted on young Hollister's actions."

"The devil? Oh, come now, Father!" the chief constable spluttered, alarmed nonetheless.

"Unfortunately, Father Harris," Captain Sinclair interjected in a loud, clear voice, "I'm afraid that the hand of the Evil One in this matter is too far-fetched even for our jurisdiction."

The remark elicited a few chuckles, which Clayton ignored, leaning back in his seat, his gaze still locked with that of the countess. There was no question but that the inspector's manner had aroused her curiosity. No sooner had the laughter subsided than she turned to Sinclair.

"I couldn't agree more, Captain. The Evil One . . . I refuse to believe that men shun their natural goodness and the word of God for a creature like that billy goat that presides over witches' covens. In fact, I have always resisted

the idea that everything is exactly as it is depicted in folk tales. That is why I find your work so intriguing: it must be fascinating to investigate monsters and discover what lies behind them, the genuine truth about myths, their legitimate fantastical nature. Talk to us, Captain, tell us about your work."

"Er . . . I'm afraid that's impossible, Countess," Sinclair apologized, slightly startled. "Our work demands confidentiality and—"

"Oh, don't be so coy, Captain! This isn't a convention of sage old druids; we're in Blackmoor! Go on, make an exception, please," the countess implored, pouting flirtatiously. "I'm sure we'd all love to know about the workings of your remarkable division: Do you use new, revolutionary techniques, or on the contrary do you go out armed with crucifixes, holy water, and stakes carved from ash wood when you hunt down vampires? They say such creatures can turn themselves into bats or even mist."

"And can't set foot on consecrated ground," added the vicar.

"And have certain deformities, such as a protruding tailbone," interjected the doctor.

"And that they are born with the mother's placenta wrapped around their heads, like a turban," said the chief constable. Everyone burst out laughing.

When the guffaws had abated, the countess went on, contemplating the captain mischievously.

"Are all those things true, Captain? Personally, I find it hard to believe such creatures can be warded off with garlic, or that they have forked tongues," she said, poking the tip of hers suggestively between her lips.

"Well"—Sinclair cleared his throat, trying to hide his unease—"I'm afraid to say, Countess, that most of those things are no more than superstitions."

Everyone stared at the captain, expecting him to elaborate on that interesting topic. Sinclair gave a resigned sigh and sat up in his seat. Realizing that his superior was going to inflict on those poor people the same speech he had given him when he had joined the department, Clayton settled back in his own chair, silently thanking the captain for prolonging that interminable dinner. All of a sudden, he didn't want it to end: what awaited him afterward no longer seemed so enticing. He hoped the captain would go on talking until the next day, or the next month, to give him enough time to order his thoughts and decide what to do. For the moment, the only thing he knew for sure was that he had no intention of sharing his discovery with Sinclair. He wanted to interrogate the countess alone, so that she would be

able to answer all the questions bubbling inside his head, even if the majority of them bore no relation to the case.

"As you know, gentlemen, our department is responsible for looking into the supernatural, everything that is beyond man's comprehension," Clayton heard the captain explain as he ran his fingers over his dragon-shaped lapel pin. "Alas, as on this occasion, most of our investigations turn out to be hoaxes. This is something Inspector Clayton is starting to learn, isn't it, my boy?" Clayton felt obliged to nod in agreement. "But even the cases we can only explain by resorting to the fantastical show us that the supernatural rarely coincides with popular folklore. Werewolves are a perfect example. They first appeared in Greek mythology, but it wasn't until the Middle Ages that stories about werewolves began to proliferate. Our files contain a cutting from a German gazette dating back to . . ." Sinclair frowned, trying to recall the date.

"Fifteen eighty-nine," Clayton said wearily.

"Yes, precisely, fifteen eighty-nine. And it gives an account of children whose guts were ripped out by a supposed werewolf in the town of Bedburg. It is the oldest account we have, but by no means the only one. There are countless such stories. Hundreds, nay, thousands of cases that have only helped the werewolf myth grow. And yet myths are simply facts that have been filtered through the popular imagination, which has a tendency toward theatrical, nauseating romanticism that ends up distorting reality until it becomes unrecognizable. Thanks to those myths, and to penny dreadfuls like *Wagner the Wer-Wolf* or *Hugues the Wer-Wolf*, most people today think of werewolves as wretched creatures who at each full moon are transformed into wolves against their will and, overwhelmed by a terrible bloodlust, are driven to kill indiscriminately. Among the many other foolish notions, the power to turn into a werewolf is said to be obtained from drinking rainwater accumulating in wolf tracks, or from wearing a belt made from wolf hide, or from being bitten by another werewolf. Since you can verify the fallacy of the first two for yourselves, allow me to demonstrate the impossibility of the third by means of a simple calculation: if werewolves, like vampires, turned all their victims into creatures like themselves by biting them, before long the entire world's population would cease to be human. Reason allows us to refute the other fascinating traits with which folklore has endowed those creatures. The moon's influence, for example, is an idea that originates in the myths of southern France. I am sure you will all agree that running through a

forest during a full moon is much easier than in the darkest night, making it likely that the first time a murderer was branded as a werewolf, it was for the sake of mere convenience. In any event, we have known about the moon's influence since ancient times; its effect on the tide, the weather, men's mood, and, er . . ."

"Certain female complaints," Clayton suggested.

"Indeed, certain female complaints. And so, if werewolves did exist, the effects of the moon on their behavior would undoubtedly be the least fantastical aspect of their nature." Sinclair paused and then turned to the doctor with an ironical smile. "As for silver bullets being an infallible weapon against werewolves, Doctor Russell, I'm afraid that is something that, for the moment, only you and a handful of others know about. Perhaps one day it will become just another indisputable characteristic of those creatures. For that to happen it would suffice for authors to decide to use it in their novels. Although, frankly, the idea is so outlandish I doubt they ever will."

"So, are you saying werewolves don't exist?" asked Price, a man who preferred simple, definite conclusions.

"I didn't say that, Mr. Price," replied Sinclair, adding to the butcher's puzzlement. "I wouldn't presume to claim that something doesn't exist simply because I haven't seen it. All I'm saying is that if they did exist, they would bear little resemblance to the ridiculous creatures myths have turned them into," he concluded, pointing to the costume adorning the corner of the dining hall.

Of course not, thought Clayton, glancing at the woman seated at the head of the table.

And with that the conversation soon lapsed into a series of humdrum commentaries. Finally, the countess, encouraged by the inebriated Doctor Russell's raptures over each of the dishes served, summoned Mrs. Pickerton from the kitchen so that they might all congratulate her in person. The woman accepted their compliments with relief, saying she had been concerned the guests might have found some of her food bland, because a few months earlier a thief had raided the castle pantry, making off with several sacks of salt, which still had not been replaced. Everyone had to assure her heartily, almost swearing on Father Harris's Bible, that they had noticed no such lack, to the greater credit of her skills as a cook.

When Mrs. Pickerton had left the way she came, Clayton began thinking to himself. The salt had gone missing . . . This last tidbit came as an unexpected gift, which he duly registered. Now there was no doubt in his mind that he had solved the case. Until then, he had held on to the faint hope that he might be mistaken, but that hope had evaporated. He almost had the impression that everyone there could hear his heart breaking, like a walnut crushed under someone's boot.

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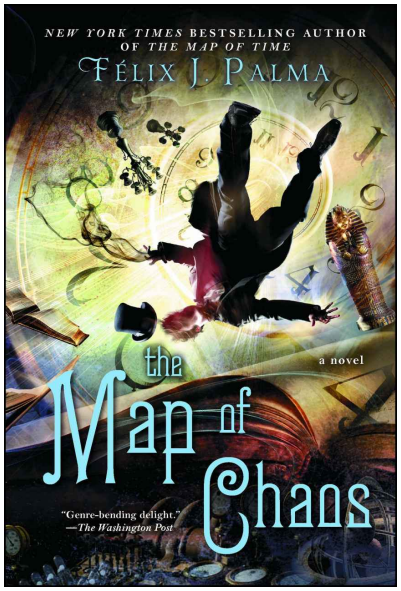

The Map of Chaos

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