

“Tryst In Time”

by

Catherine L. Moore

Astounding Stories

December, 1936

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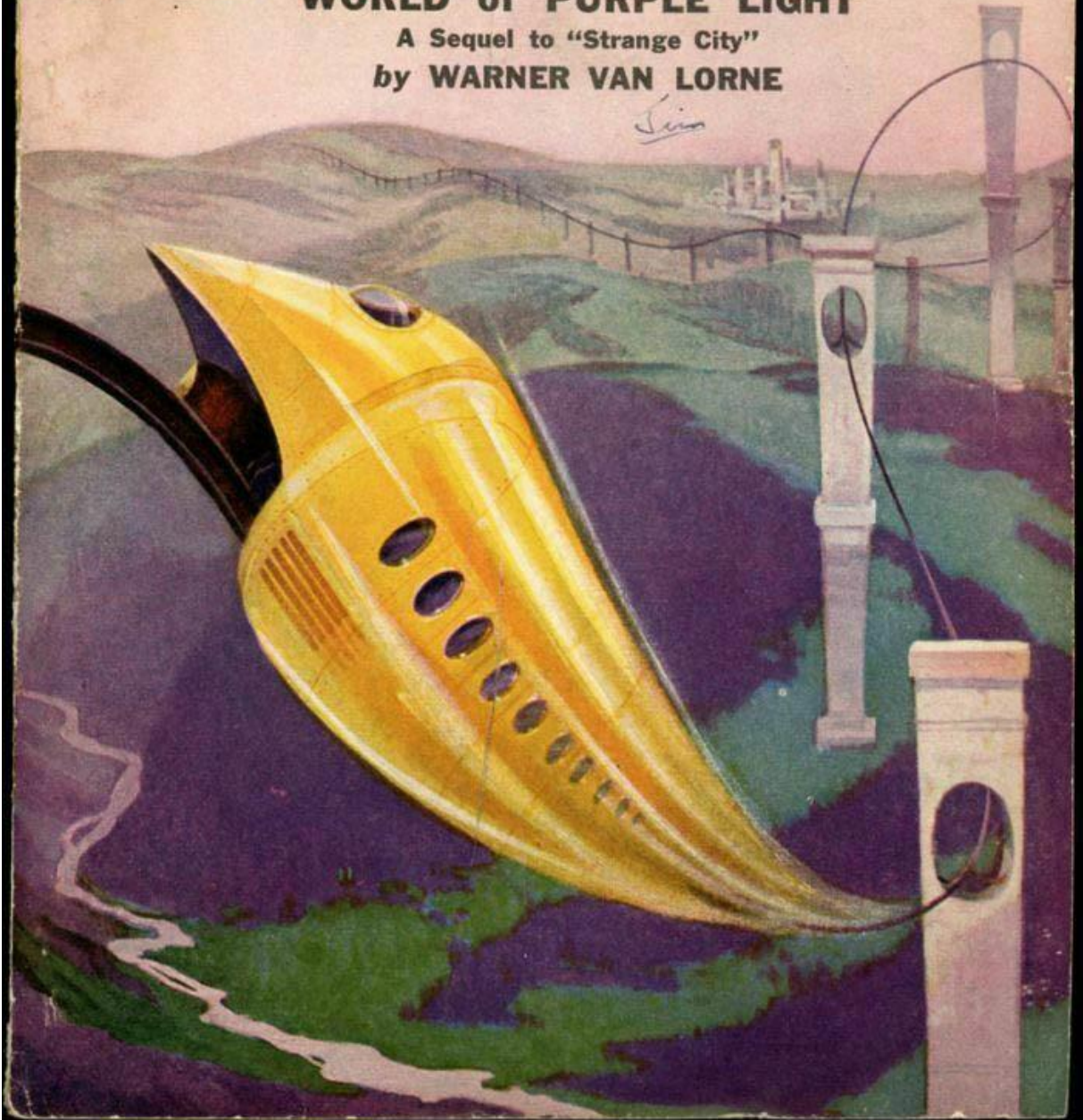
ASTOUNDING STORIES

WORLD of PURPLE LIGHT

A Sequel to "Strange City"

by WARNER VAN LORNE

Lein



On Sale Third Wednesday of Each Month

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ASTOUNDING STORIES

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TRYST in TIME

*Science opens the portals
to the only real adventures!*

by C. L. MOORE

ERIC ROSNER at twenty had worked his way round the world on cattle boats, killed his first man in a street brawl in Shanghai, escaped a firing squad by a hairbreadth, stowed away on a pole-bound exploring ship.

At twenty-five he had lost himself in Siberian wilderness, led a troupe of Tatar bandits, commanded a Chinese regiment, fought in a hundred battles, impartially on either side.

At thirty there was not a continent nor a capital that had not known him, not a jungle nor a desert nor a mountain range that had not left scars upon his great Viking body. Tiger claws and the Russian knout, Chinese bullets and the knives of savage black warriors in African forests had written their tales of a full and perilous life upon him. At thirty he looked backward upon such a gorgeous, brawling, color-splashed career as few men of sixty can boast. But at thirty he was not content.

Life had been full for him, and yet as the years passed he was becoming increasingly aware of a need for something which those years were empty of. What it was he did not know. He was not even consciously aware of missing anything, but as time went on he turned more and more to a search for something new—anything new. Perhaps it was his subconscious hunting blindly for what life had lacked.

There was so very little that Eric Rosner had not done in his thirty riotous years that the search for newness rapidly

became almost feverish, and almost in vain. Riches he had known, and poverty, much pleasure and much pain, and the extremes of human experience were old tales to him. Ennui replaced the zest for living that had sent him so gayly through the exultant years of his youth. And for a man like Eric Rosner ennui was like a little death.

Perhaps, in part, all this was because he had missed love. No girl of all the girls that had kissed him and adored him and wept when he left them had mattered a snap of the fingers to Eric Rosner. He searched on restlessly.

In this mood of feverish hunting for new things, he met the scientist, Walter Dow. It happened casually, and they might never have met a second time had not Eric said something offhand about the lack of adventure which life had to offer a man. And Dow laughed.

"What do you know about adventure?" he demanded. He was a little man with a shock of prematurely white hair and a face that crinkled into lines of derision as he laughed. "You've spent your life among dangers and gunfire—sure! But that's not real adventure. Science is the only field where true adventure exists. I mean it! The things that are waiting to be discovered offer fields of excitement like nothing you ever heard of. One man in a lifetime couldn't begin to touch the edges of what there is to know. I tell you I——"

"Oh, sure," interrupted Eric lazily. "I see what you mean. But all that's

not for me. I'm a man of action; I haven't any brains. Hunching over a microscope isn't my idea of fun."

THE ARGUMENT that began then developed into a queer sort of antagonistic friendship which brought the two men together very often in the weeks that passed. But they were to know one another much more intimately than that before the true urgency of what lay in the minds of each became clear to the other.

Walter Dow had spent a lifetime in the worship of one god—inertia. "There is a bedrock," he used to say reverently, "over which the tides of time ebb and flow, over which all things material and immaterial, as the layman sees them, change and fade and form again. But the bedrock remains. Complete inertia! What couldn't we do if we attained it!"

"And what," asked Eric, "is inertia?" Dow shot him a despairing glance.

"Everybody knows what inertia is. Newton's first law of motion is the law of inertia, stating that every body remains in a state of rest or of uniform motion in a straight line unless impressed forces change it. That's what makes people in a moving car swerve to one side when the car goes round a bend. It's what makes it so difficult for a horse to start a heavy load moving, though once it's in motion the strain eases. There's nothing that doesn't obey the law—nothing!

"But Newton didn't dream what measureless abysses of force lay behind his simple statement. Or what an understatement it was. Describing inertia by stating Newton's law is like describing the sea by saying there's foam on the waves. The inertia force is inherent in everything, just as there's moisture in everything. But behind that inertia, manifest so obscurely in matter, is a vastness of power much greater comparatively than the vastnesses of the seas which are the storehouses for the rela-

tively tiny amounts of moisture in everything you see.

"I can't make you understand; you don't speak the language. And I sometimes wonder if I could explain even to another physicist all that I've discovered in the past ten years. But I do very firmly believe that it would be possible to anchor to that bedrock of essential, underlying inertia which is the base upon which matter builds and— and allow time itself to whirl by!"

"Yeah, and find yourself floating in space when you let go." Eric grinned. "Even I've heard that the universe is in motion through space. I don't know about time, but I'm pretty sure space would block your little scheme."

"I didn't mean you'd have to—to dig your anchor right into the rock," explained Dow with dignity. "It'd be a sort of a drag to slow you down, not a jerk that would snatch you right off the Earth. And it'd involve—immensities—even then. But it could be done. It will be done. By Heaven, I'll do it!"

Eric's sunburned face sobered.

"You're not kidding?" he asked. "A man could—could drag his anchor and let time go by, and 'up-anchor' in another age? Say! Make me an anchor, and I'll be your guinea pig!"

Dow did not smile.

"That's the worst of it," he said. "All this is pure theory and will have to remain that, in spite of all I've bragged. It would be absolutely blind experimenting, and the very nature of the element I'm experimenting with precludes any proof of success or failure. I could—to be frank with you I *have*—sent objects out through time—"

"You have!" Eric leaned forward with a jerk and laid an urgent hand on Dow's arm. "You really have?"

"Well, I've made them vanish. I think it proves I've succeeded, but I have no way of knowing. The chances are countless millions to one against my landing an experiment in my own im-

mediate future, with all the measureless vastness of time lying open. And, of course, I can't guide it."

"Suppose you landed in your own past?" queried Eric.

Dow smiled.

"The eternal question," he said. "The inevitable objection to the very idea of time travel. Well, you never did, did you? You know it never happened! I think there must be some inflexible law which forbids the same arrangement of matter, the pattern which is one's self, from occupying the same space time more than once. As if any given section of space time were a design in which any arrangement of atoms is possible, except that no pattern may appear exactly twice.

"You see, we know of time only enough to be sure that it's far beyond any human understanding. Though I think the past and the future may be visited, which on the face of it seems to predicate an absolutely preordained future, a fixed and unchangeable past—yet I do not believe that time is arbitrary. There must be many possible futures. The one we enter upon is not the only way. Have you ever heard that theory explained? It's not a new one—the idea that at every point of our progress we confront crossroads, with a free choice as to which we take. And a different future lies down each.

"I can transport you into the past, and you can create events there which never took place in the past we know—but the events are not new. They were ordained from the beginning, *if* you took that particular path. You are simply embarking upon a different path into a different future, a fixed and preordained future, yet one which will be strange to you because it lies outside your own layer of experience. So you have infinite freedom in all your actions, yet everything you can possibly do is already fixed in time."

"Why, then—then there's no limit to

the excitement a man could find in navigating time," said Eric almost reverently. And then in sudden urgency, "Dow, you've got to fix it up for me! This is what I've been hunting!"

"Are you crazy, boy? This is nothing that can ever be proved safe except by the actual experiment, and the experiment could never return. You know that, don't you? From what blind groping I've done, it seems to me that time is not a constant flow, but an ebb and flux that can't be measured. It would be hard to explain to you. But you couldn't return—couldn't guide yourself. You wouldn't dare try it!"

"I'm fed up with certainty and safety! And as for returning, what have I here to return to? No, you can't scare me. I've got to try it!"

"Absolutely no," said Dow firmly.

BUT three months later he was standing under the great skylight of his laboratory, watching Eric buckle a flat metal pack on his heavy young shoulders. Though reluctance still lined the scientist's face, under its shock of white hair he was alight almost as hotly as the younger man, with the tremendous adventure of what was about to happen. It had taken weeks of persuasion and argument, and he was not wholly at ease even yet about the experiment, but the fever that burned in Eric Rosner was not to be denied.

Now that the way was open, it seemed to Eric that all his life he had lived toward this moment in the laboratory. The need for this launching upon time's broad river was what had driven him restless and feverish through the petty adventures which life had shown him. Peace was upon him now for the first time in months. There was something rather awe-inspiring about it.

"Look here," broke in Walter Dow upon the raptness of his mood. "Are you sure you understand?"

"I don't understand anything about

the works, and I don't much care," said Eric. "All I know is I'm to snap these switches here"—he laid big sunburned hands on the two rods at his belt—"when I want to move along. That will throw out the anchor. Right?"

"As far as it goes, yes. That will increase your inertia sufficiently to make you immune to time and space and matter. You will be inert mentally and physically. You'll sink down, so to speak, to the bedrock, while time flows past you. I have in this pack on your back, connecting with the switches in the belt, the means to increase your inertia until no outside force can interrupt it. And a mechanism there will permit the switches to remain thrown until one small part, insulated from the inertia in a tiny time space of its own, trips the switches again and up-anchors. And if my calculations are correct—and I *think* they are—there you'll be in some other age than ours. You can escape from it by throwing the switches again and returning to inertia, to be released after an interval by the automatic insulated mechanism in your pack. Got it?"

"Got it!" Eric grinned all over his good-looking, sunburned face. "Everything ready now?"

"Yes—yes, except that—are you sure you want to risk it? This may be plain murder, boy! I don't know what will happen!"

"That's the beauty of it—not knowing. Don't worry, Walter. Call it suicide, not murder, if that helps you any. I'm going now. Good-by."

Dow choked a little as he gripped the younger man's hand hard, but Eric's face was shining with the fever to be gone, and at the last the scientist was almost reconciled by the sight of that rapt face. Almost he saw in the last instant before the switches closed a purpose vaster than his own, sweeping the work of his hands and the exultant

young man before him into a whole that fulfilled some greater need than he could guess.

Then Eric's hands dropped to his belt. One last instant he stood there, tall under the clear radiance of the skylight, blond and sunburned, the tale of his riotous, brawling life clear upon his scarred, young face, but upon it, too, a raptness and an eagerness that sent a quick stab of unreasoning hope through the scientist's mind. Surely success would crown this experiment. Surely all the vital, throbbing aliveness, the strength and seasoned toughness of this brawny young man before him could not snuff into nothing as the switches closed. Danger awaited him—yes, danger against which the gun at his belt might not avail at all. But splendor, too. Splendor— Envy clouded Dow's eyes for a moment, as the switches closed.

II.

PAST ERIC'S EYES eternity ebbed blindingly. Rushing blankness closed over him, but he was conscious of infinite motion, infinite change passing over him, by him, through him, as events beyond imagination streamed past that anchorage in inertia's eternal bedrock. For a timeless eternity it lasted. And then—and then—

A confusion of noises from very far away began to sound in his ears. That rushing blurriness abated and slowed and by degrees took on a nebulous shape. He was looking down from a height of about thirty feet upon a street scene which he identified roughly as Elizabethan by the costumes of those who moved through the crowd below him.

Something was wrong. The machine could not have worked perfectly somehow, for he did not feel that he was actually present. The scene was uncertain and wavery, like a faulty film reflecting upon an uneven screen. There must have been an obstruction some-

where in that particular time section. though what it was he never knew.

He leaned forward for a few minutes, looking down eagerly through the hazy uncertainty that shrouded the place. He did not seem to himself to be resting on anything; yet he was conscious of that forward bending as he looked down. It was inexplicable.

The noises rose up to him now loudly, now softly, from the shifting, pushing throng. Shopkeepers bawled their wares from both sides of the street. Apprentice boys darted to and fro through the crowd, waylaying passers-by.

A girl in a scarlet cloak flung open a window and leaned out to wave a message to some one below, her bright hair falling about her face. In the room behind her, dimly seen, another girl moved forward and flung both arms about her waist, laughing, dragging her back. Their merriment rose clearly to Eric's ears.

But all this was not real. That cloudiness hazed it over time and again, until his eyes ached from trying to follow what was happening. Regretfully, he reached for the switches at his belt, and in a breath the whole place shimmered and vanished. Oblivion in a torrent poured over him as the centuries plunged by over the bedrock inertia to which he was anchored.

The automatic workings of the time machine on his shoulders clicked on. Then the switches threw themselves and the blankness cleared from Eric's mind again. He found himself staring through a screen of leaves upon a grassy meadow through which tickled a small brook. He was tangibly, actually here this time, standing on soft turf and feeling stir of a breeze through the leaves.

Over the slope of the meadow before him dingy white sheep moved slowly. A little curly-haired boy in a brief leather garment leaned on the grass

drowsily, watching them. Sun lay yellow over the whole scene. It was peaceful and dreamy as an idyl, but for some obscure reason Eric's hands moved to his belt almost of their own accord, a feeling of disappointment stirring vaguely in his mind. This was not what he sought. Sought? Was he seeking? Almost one might think so, he told himself.

The thought troubled him as he clicked the switches at his belt. What was it that by its absence here made him dismiss the idyllic scene with a glance? He was hunting something, restlessly searching through the ages for—something. Then the tidal rush of the centuries over his anchorage blotted out wonder and all else in its oblivion.

SUNLIGHT like a physical blow crashed down about him—blazing hot sun that beat violently upon marble pavement and struck blindingly up again into his eyes. For a few seconds he was aware of nothing more than this intolerable glare. Gradually out of the blazing heat the lines of marble walls became clear about him. He stood upon the floor of a dazzling white marble pit about twenty feet square. Against the opposite wall lay a man whose naked, blood-spattered body was so still under the down-blazing heat that Eric could not be sure that he was alive.

He had seen this much before the rising babble of excited voices above him mounted loud enough to pierce his dazed surprise. He looked up. Leaning over the pit's rim were faces—faces and arms and here and there a trail of velvet robe, a bright scarf's fringe. They were the faces of aristocrats, fine and dissipated and cruel. But all expression was wiped from every one now.

In that first glance he had of them he thought they must be Romans. He had little to judge by save their hair dressing, and only a momentary glimpse of that; for, as he raised his head, his

eyes met the strange, smoke-blue eyes of a woman who leaned upon the marble rim just in front of him, and above. A little space separated her from those on each side. He had the swift impression that she was of higher rank than the rest—some fleeting touch of arrogance and pride in the face looking down on him. And it was a familiar face. Why he could not guess, but in that glimpse of her he was sure that he had seen those features somewhere before, and recently.

Then she lifted one bare arm upon whose whiteness the sun struck daz- zlingly, and pointed downward. From behind her came the sound of metal upon stone, and in the blinding light he saw a man's arm move swiftly. The sun struck upon a long shaft of steel. The spear was hurtling straight for his breast as his hands flew to his belt. The switches clicked, and in one great sweeping blur the whole scene vanished.

After that came a blurry interval of unthinkable inertness. The centuries poured past. Then reality burst upon him again as the switches clicked off. He choked suddenly and gasped as air thicker and moister than the air of a tropical swamp smothered his lungs. He stood there for a moment struggling with it, forcing himself to evener breath- ing, as his bewildered gaze swept the scene before him.

He stood in a square of ruined walls that must once have been a small build- ing, though roof and sides had vanished now and little was left but a crumbling square outlining the long-fallen house. To one side a higher heap of stone, which was all that was left of the west- ern wall, obstructed his view of what lay beyond. Over the fallen blocks be- fore him he could see a vast paved square dotted with other buildings fallen into ruin. And beyond these, under a heavily clouded sky through which the obscured sun poured in a queer, grayly radiant light, buildings of barbaric col-

ors and utterly alien architecture lifted their Cyclopean heights, massive as the walls of Karnak, but too strangely con- structed to awake any memories.

Even at this distance he recognized those darker blotches upon the tremen- dous walls as the sign of a coming dis- solution. It was a city more awfully impressive than any he had ever dreamed of, standing gigantic under the low, gray sky of this swamplike world—but its glory was past. Here and there gaps in the colossal walls spoke of fallen blocks and ruined buildings. By the thick, primordial air and the swamp smell and the unrecognizable architec- ture he knew that he gazed upon a scene of immortal antiquity, and his breath came quicker as he stared, wondering where the people were whose Cyclopean city this was, what name they bore and if history had ever recorded it.

A MEDLEY of curious sounds com- ing nearer awoke him from the awed trance into which he had sunk. Feet shuffling over pavement, the clang of metal shivering against metal, hoarse breathing, and a strange, intermittent hissing he could not account for. It came from that part of the great square which the crumbling wall beside him hid.

That queer hissing sounded loud. Some one yelled in a growling guttural, and he heard the beat of running feet, staggering and uncertain, coming nearer. Then a figure that was a dazzle of white and scarlet flashed through the aperture in the crumbling wall where a door must once have been. It was a girl. Her choked breath beat loud in the narrow place, and the scarlet that stained and streaked her was bright blood that gushed in ominous spurts from a deep gash in her side. She was incredibly white in the sunless day of this primor- dial city. Afterward he could never re- member much more than that—her dazzling whiteness and the blood pump- ing in measured spurts from severed

arteries—and the smoke blueness of her eyes.

He did not know what she had worn, or anything else about her, for his eyes met the smoky darkness of hers, and for a timeless moment they stared at one another, neither moving. He knew her. She was that royal Roman who had condemned him to death in the sun-hot pit; she was the laughing, red-cloaked girl who had leaned from the Elizabethan window. Incredibly, unquestionably, they three were the same blue-eyed girl.

A yell and a scrambling sound outside roused her from her tranced stare. He wondered wildly if he had not seen puzzled recognition in her filming eyes in that one long instant before she swung staggering toward the door. He knew she was dying as she turned, but some inner compulsion held him back, so that he did not offer to support her, only stood watching. After all, there was no help for her now. The smoke-blue eyes were glazing and life gushed scarlet out of her riven side.

He saw her reel back against the broken wall, and again he heard that strange hissing as her right hand rose and from a shining cylinder grasped in it a long stream of blue heat flared. There was a yell from outside. A throbbing silence broken only by the spatter of the girl's blood on the pavement. And then something very strange happened.

She turned and glanced over her shoulder and her eyes met his. Something choked in his throat. He was very near understanding a great many things in that instant while her filming blue gaze held his—why he had felt so urgently all his life long the need of something he had never neared, until now— Words rushed to his lips, but he never spoke them. The instant passed in a flash.

The girl in that illuminating moment must have realized something yet hidden

from him, for her lips trembled and an infinite tenderness softened her glazing eyes. And at the same instant her hand rose again, and for the last time he heard that searing hiss. She had turned her nameless weapon upon herself.

In a flare of blue brilliance he saw her literally melt before his eyes. The stones glowed hot, and the smell of burned flesh filled the inclosure. And Eric went sick with a sensation of devastating loss. She was dead—gone—out of all reach now, and the universe was so empty that— He had no time to waste on his own emotion, for through the broken wall was pouring a mob of shambling things that were not yet men.

Big, hairy, apish brutes brandishing clubs and heavy stones, they surged in a disordered mob through the ruined stones. One or two of them carried curiously shaped rusty swords of no recognizable pattern. And Eric understood.

Dying, the girl would not leave even her untenanted body to their defilement. Pride had turned her hand to lay the consuming beam upon herself—an inbred pride that could have come only from generations of proud ancestry. It was a gesture as aristocratic and as intensely civilized as the weapon that destroyed her. He would have known by that gesture alone, without her flame-thrower or the unmistakable fineness of her body and her face, that she was eons in advance of the beasts she fled.

In the brief second while the brutes stood awed in the broken wall, staring at the charred heap upon the pavement and at the tall golden man who stood over it, Eric's mind was busy, turning over quick wondering and speculations even as his hands reached for the switches at his belt.

Her race must have reared that immense, unearthly city, long ago. A forgotten race, wise in forgotten arts. Per-

AST—2

haps not born of earth. And the hordes of brutish things which would one day become men must have assailed them as time beat down their Cyclopean city and thinned their inbred ranks.

This girl, this unknown, unimaginably far-distant girl, perhaps star-born, certainly very alien—had died as all her race must be doomed to die, until the last flicker of that stupendous civilization was stamped out and earth forgot the very existence of the slim, long-legged human race which had once dwelt upon her surface when her own primordial man was still an apish beast.

But—they had not wholly died. He had seen her in other ages. Her smoky eyes had looked down upon him in the Roman pit; her own gay voice had called across the Elizabethan street. He was very sure of that. And the queer, stunning sense of loss which had swept over him as he saw her die lightened. She had died, but she was not gone. Her daughters lived through countless ages. He would find her again, somewhere, somehow, in some other age and land. He would comb the centuries until he found her. And he would ask her then what her last long stare had meant, so meltingly tender, so surely recognizing, as she turned the blue-hot blaze upon herself. He would—

A deep-throated bellow from the doorway in the wall startled him out of his thoughts even as he realized their absurdity. The foremost of the brute-men had overcome his awe. He lifted a rusty sword, forged by what strange hands for what unknown and forever forgotten purpose there was no way of knowing, and plunged forward.

Barely in time, Eric's hands closed on the switches and the stupendous, time-forgotten city swirled sidewise and melted forever into the abysses of the past.

In the mental and physical inertia that drowned him with its oblivion as the

current closed he waited moveless, and once more the centuries rushed by. The inexorable machinery clicked on. After a timeless interval light broke again. He awoke into more than tropical sultriness, the stench of mud and musk and welter of prehistoric swamps. There was nothing here save great splashing monsters and the wriggling life of hot seas. He flicked the switches again.

III.

THE NEXT TIME a broad plain surrounded him, featureless to the horizon, unrecognizable, and the next a horde of hairy, yelling men charged up a rocky hill upon whose height he had materialized. After that he visited and left in rapid succession a ruined temple in the midst of a jungle, a camp of ragged nomads with slant eyes and crooked legs, and an inexplicable foggy place through which reverberated the roar of staccato guns which sounded like no guns he had ever heard. Nowhere appeared the girl with the smoke-blue eyes.

He was beginning to despair, when, after so many flashing scenes that he had lost count of them, the darkness of rushing centuries faded into a dawning scene of noise and confusion. He stood upon the trampled earth of a courtyard, hot under the rays of a broiling, noon-high sun.

He heard shouts in an unknown tongue, the trample of horses' feet and the impatient jingle of harness, the creak of wheels. Through the shining dust that eddied, cloudlike, under the feet of the crowd that bustled about the inclosure, he made out a train of heavy wagons about which strange, short, bearded men swarmed in busy confusion, heaving crates and bales into the vehicles and calling in odd gutturals. Men on horseback galloped to and fro recklessly through the crowd, and the



There was something rather awe-inspiring about this launching upon time's broad river. In it the old scientist saw some purpose vaster than his own—

heavy-headed oxen stood in patient twos at each wagon.

Eric found himself in a corner of the low wall that circled the yard, and, in the tumult, quite unnoticed so far. He stood there quietly, hand resting lightly on the butt of his revolver, watching the scene. He could not guess where he was, in what land or time, in the presence of what alien race. The men were all little and dark and hairy, and somehow crooked, like gnomes. He had never heard a tongue like the gutturals they mouthed.

Then at the far side of the courtyard a lane opened in the crowd, and through it a column of the crooked brown men with curly-pronged pikes across their shoulders came marching. They had a captive with them—a girl.

A tall girl, slim and straight, high-headed. Eric leaned forward eagerly. Yes, it was she. No mistaking the poise of that high, dark head, the swing of her body as she walked. As she came nearer he saw her eyes, but he did not need the smoky blue darkness of them to convince him.

She wore manacles on her wrists, and chains clanked between her ankles as she walked. A leather tunic hung from one shoulder in tatters, belted at the waist by a twisted thong from which an empty scabbard swung. She walked very proudly among the gnarled soldiers, looking out over their heads in studied disdain. At a glance the high-bred aristocracy of her was clear, and he could not mistake the fact that her own people must be centuries in ad-

vance of the squat, dark race which held her captive.

The clamor had quieted now in the courtyard. Dust was settling over the long wagon train, the low-headed oxen, the horsemen stationed at intervals along the line. In silence, the crowd fell back as the soldiers and their aloof captive paced slowly across the courtyard. Tension was in the air.

ERIC had the vague feeling that he should know what was to come. A haunting familiarity about this scene teased him. He racked a reluctant memory as he watched the procession near the center of the great yard. A stone block stood there, worn and stained. Not until the tall girl had actually reached that block, and the soldiers were forcing her to her knees, did Eric remember. Sacrifice—always before a caravan set forth in the very old days, when the gods were greedy and had to be bribed with human lives.

His gun was in his hand and he was plunging forward through the startled crowd before he quite realized what he was doing. They gave way before him in sheer amazement, falling back and staring with bulging eyes at this sudden apparition in their midst of a tall, yellow-headed Juggernaut yelling like a madman as he surged forward.

Not until he had reached the line of soldiers did he meet any resistance. They turned on him in gutturally shouting fury, and he shot them down as fast as his revolver would pump bullets. At that range he could not miss, and six of the squat gnomes crumpled to the dust in a haze of blue gun smoke.

They must have thought him a god, dealing death in a crash of thunder and the hot blaze of lightning. They shrieked in panic terror, and the courtyard emptied like magic. Horses plunged and reared, squealing. Pandemonium streamed out of the inclosure,

leaving behind only a haze of churned dust, slowly settling. Through the shimmer of it, across the huddle of bodies, Eric looked again into the smoky eyes of that girl he had last seen under the stupendous walls of the time-buried city. And again he thought he saw a puzzled and uncomprehending recognition on her face, shining even through her terror. She fronted him resolutely, standing up proudly in her chains and staring with frightened eyes that would not admit their fear.

"Don't be afraid," he said in as gentle a voice as he could command, for he knew the tone would convey a message, though the words did not. "We'd better get out of here before they come back."

He was reloading his gun as he spoke. She still did nothing but stare, wide-eyed, rigid in sternly suppressed terror. There was no time to waste now trying to quiet her fears. Already he saw dark, bearded faces peering around corners at him. He skirted the heap of fallen soldiers and swung the girl off her feet. She gasped as his arms closed, but no other sound escaped her as he hoisted her over one shoulder, holding her there with a clasp around her knees so that he might have his gun hand free. With long, unhurried strides he left the courtyard.

A mud-walled village ringed the big inclosure. Serenely, he went down the dusty street, wary eyes scanning the building, gun ready in one hand and the chained girl slung across his heavy shoulder. From behind shelter they watched him go, tall and golden under the noonday sun, a god out of nowhere. Legends were to grow up about that noon's events—a god come down to earth to claim his sacrifice in person.

When he reached the outskirts of the village he paused and set the girl on her feet, turning his attention to the

shackles that bound her. The chains were apparently for ceremonial use rather than utilitarian, for in his powerful hands they snapped easily, and after a brief struggle with the metal links he had her free of chains, though the anklets and cuffs still gripped her limbs. These he could not loosen, but they were not heavy and she could, he thought, wear them without discomfort. He rose as the last chain gave in his hands, and stared round the wide circle of rolling hills that hemmed them in.

"What now?" he asked, looking down at her.

The uncertainty of his attitude and the query in his voice must have reassured her that he was at least human, for the look of terror faded a little from her eyes and she glanced back down the street as if searching for pursuers, and spoke to him—for the first time he heard her voice—in a low, lilting tongue that startled him by the hint of familiarity he caught in its cadences. He had a smattering of many languages, and he was sure that this was akin to one he knew, but for the moment he could not place it.

When he did not answer she laid an impatient hand on his arm and pulled him along a few steps, then paused and looked up inquiringly. Clearly she was anxious to leave the village. He shrugged and gestured helplessly. She nodded, as if in understanding, and set off at a rapid pace toward the hills. He followed her.

IT WAS a tireless pace she set. The metal circles on wrists and ankles seemed not to hinder her, and she led the way over hill after hill, through clumps of woodland and past a swamp or two, without slackening her pace. For hours they traveled. The sun slid down the sky; the shadows lengthened across the hills. Not until darkness came did she pause. They had reached a little

hollow ringed with trees. On one side of it a rocky outcropping formed a shelter, and a spring bubbled up among the stones. It was an ideal spot for a camp.

She turned and spoke for the second time, and he knew then why her language was familiar. Definitely it was akin to the Basque tongue. He had once had opportunity to pick up a little of that queer, ancient language, perhaps the oldest spoken in the world. It is thought to be the last remnant of the pre-Aryan tongues, and linked with vanished races and forgotten times. And the supposition must have been true, for this girl's speech echoed it in bafflingly familiar phrases. Or—he paused here—was he in the future or the past from his own time? Well, no matter—she was saying something all but incomprehensible about fire, and looking about among the underbrush. Eric shrugged off his speculations on the subject of tongues and helped her gather firewood.

His matches caused her a few minutes of awe-struck terror when the fire was kindled under the overhanging rocks of the hillside. She quieted after a bit, though, and presently pressed him to a seat by the fire and vanished into the dark. He waited uneasily until she returned, stepping softly into the light with a kicking rabbit in her hands. He never understood, then or later, how it was that she could vanish into the hills and return with some small animal unhurt in her arms. He could scarcely believe her swift enough to run them down, and she had nothing with which to make snares. It was one of the many mysteries about her that he never fathomed.

They skinned and cleaned the little beast with his hunting knife, and she broiled it over the smoldering coals. It was larger and stronger than the rabbits of his own day, and its meat was tough and sharply tangy.

Afterward they sat by the carefully banked fire and tried to talk. Her name was Maia. Her people lived in a direction vaguely eastward and about one day's journey away, in a white-walled city. All his attempts to learn in what age he found himself were fruitless. He thought from her almost incomprehensible speech that she was telling him how ancient her race was, and how it had descended through countless generations from a race of gods who dwelt in a sky-high city in the world's beginning. It was all so vague and broken that he could not be sure.

She looked at him a great deal out of grave blue eyes as she talked, and there was in their depths a haunted remembrance. He was to recall that look of hers more clearly than anything else about her, afterward. So many times he caught the puzzled, brooding gaze searching his face in troubled incomprehension.

He sat there silently, scarcely heeding the occasional low cadences of her voice. He was learning the grave, sweet lines of her young face, the way her eyes tilted ever so faintly at the corners, the smooth plane of her cheek, the curved line on which her lips closed. And sometimes the wonder of their meeting, through so many ages, came down upon him breathlessly, the realization of something too vast and strange and wonderful to put into words, and he stared into the sweet, familiar face almost with awe, thinking of those other grave, dark eyes and serene faces, so like hers, that ranged through time. There was a tremendous purpose behind that patterning of faces through the centuries, too great for him to grasp.

He watched her talk, the firelight turning that dearly familiar face ruddy, and shining in the deep, troubled blueness of her eyes, and a strange and sudden tenderness came over him. He bent forward, a catch in his throat, lay-

ing his hands over hers, looking into the memory-haunted depths of her eyes.

He said not a word, but he stared deep and long, and he could have sworn that sudden answer lighted in her gaze, for one swift instant blotting out that puzzled straining after remembrance and turning her whole face serene and lovely with understanding. The moment held them enchanted, warm in the deeps of something so breathlessly lovely that he felt the sting of sudden hotness behind his eyes. In that instant all puzzlement and incomprehension was swept aside and the answer to the great purpose behind their meetings hovered almost within grasp.

THEN, without warning, the girl's face crumpled into tears and she snatched her hands away, leaping to her feet with the long, startled bound of a wild thing and facing him in the firelight with clenched fists and swimming eyes. It was not rebellion against his clasp of her hands—surely she could see that he meant no violence—but a revolt against some inner enemy that dwelt behind the tear-bright blue eyes. She stood irresolutely there for a moment, then made a helpless little gesture and dropped to the ground once more, sitting there with bowed shoulders and bent head, staring into the embers.

Presently her voice began softly, speaking in little disconnected phrases that fell monotonously into the silence. He made out enough to understand her sudden revulsion against that strange and lovely oneness of understanding that had gripped them both. She was betrothed. She made him realize that it was more than the simple plighting of vows between lovers. He caught vague references to religious ceremonies, marriage of high priest and chosen virgin, temple rites and the anger of a jealous god. That much he understood.

She must fulfill the requisites of the

priest god's bride. No man must touch her until she came into the holy embrace of the church. She must not even know love for another man. And that, perhaps, was why she had pulled away from him in the firelight and struggled through tears with an inner enemy that reached traitorously out to the golden stranger who held her hands.

She was unshakable in her devotion to that concept. Eric had known, from the moment he first looked into her smoke-filled eyes, that she would be faithful to any ideal that stirred her. A girl like this had destroyed the body from which her soul was slipping, that barbarians might not defile it. A girl like this, imperiously royal and inflexibly cruel, had watched torture in a sun-hot pit, refusing to doubt her civilization's concept of the divine right of emperors over their subjects' lives. She was stubborn, this girl. Stubborn in her beliefs whether they were kind or cruel. She was of the stuff from which martyrs are made.

They stood watch in turn over the fire that night, she insisting on her share of it with a grave certainty that brooked no opposition. What the dangers were which made it impossible for both to sleep at once he did not know. On those times when he dropped off into slumber the last thing his closing eyes saw was the girl Maia's figure, slim and round in her torn leather tunic, warm in the firelight, serene in her determination upon her life's ordered plan. Nothing could swerve her. She was so fine—An ache came up in his throat as he closed his eyes.

When he awoke in the morning she had brought in a brace of small, fat birds like quail and was preparing them at the edge of the spring. She smiled gravely as he sat up, but she said nothing, and she did not look at him any more than she could help. She was taking no chances with that traitor within.

In silence, they shared the birds she cooked over the embers. Afterward he tried to make her understand that he would take her as far as the gates of her city. At first she demurred. She knew this country well. She was strong and young, wise in the lore of the hills. She needed no escort. But Eric could not bring himself to leave her until he must. That moment of crystal understanding, the warm, sweet unity they had shared even for so short a breath had forged a bond between them that he could not bear to break.

And at last she consented. They spoke very little after that. They put out the fire and set off again over the rolling hills toward the bright patch on the sky where the sun was rising. All day they traveled. In her mysterious, secret way she found another rabbit when hunger came on them around noontide, and they paused to eat. In the afternoon the pack on his back that held that time machine began to irk Eric's Viking strength. She eyed it curiously as he hitched his load forward to ease its burden, but she said nothing.

Twilight was darkening over the hills when Maia paused on the crest of a little rise and pointed ahead. Eric saw a pattern of white houses ringed by a broken wall a little way distant upon the crown of a higher hill than the rest. And here she made it clear that she must leave him. He was not to accompany her within sight of the city walls.

He stood on the hilltop, watching her go. She did not look back. She walked lightly, surely, the long grass breaking like green surf about her knees, her head high and resolute. He watched her until she passed, a little far-off figure, under the broken wall, and its gateway swallowed her up out of his sight forever. And in his heart was a mingling of pain and loss and high anticipation. For he was growing increasingly

sure now that there was much more than chance behind these brief and seemingly so futile meetings with the one deathless, blue-eyed girl.

He laid his hands on the switches at his belt confidently as that proudly moving young figure vanished under the gate. He had lost her—but not for long. Somewhere in the veiled, remote future, somewhere in the unexplored past she waited him. His fingers closed over the switch.

DARKLY the rush of centuries swept over him, blotting away the hills and the green meadows between, and the nameless white city that was crumbling into decay. He would never see Maia again, but there were other Maias, waiting. Oblivion swallowed him up and his impatience and his dawning conviction of a vast purpose behind his journeyings, in the great grayness of its peace.

Out of that blankness a blue day dawned, bright over a moated castle's battlements. From a hilltop perhaps a quarter of a mile away he saw the surge of armored men under the walls, heard shouts and the clang of metal on metal drifting to him on the gentleness of a little breeze. And it occurred to him how often it was upon scenes of strife and sudden death that he chanced in his haphazard journeying. He wondered if they had been so thick in the past that the odds were against his coming into peaceful places, or if his own life of danger and adventuring had any influence upon the points in time which he visited so briefly.

But it mattered little. He looked around searchingly, wondering if another blue-eyed Maia dwelt near him in this medieval world. But there was nothing here. Green forest closed in at the hill's foot. Save for the castle there was no sign of civilization, no sign of men but for the shouting besiegers. Per-

haps she lived somewhere in this blue, primitive world, but he could not risk a search for her. She was elsewhere, too.

Suddenly he was awed by the certainty of that—the incomprehensible vastness of his certainty and of her presence. She was everywhere. From time's beginning to time's close—she was. No era had not known her; no spot on the world's surface had not felt the press of her feet. And though the infinite future and the infinite past held her, and the earth's farthest corners, yet in reality every incarnation of her was here and now, available to him with no greater interval between her countless daughters than the instant flash of the centuries that poured over him when the switches closed. She was omnipresent, eternal. He knew her presences in the oblivion that swallowed him as his hands gripped the switches again and the beleaguered castle melted into the past.

IV.

TWO CHILDREN were playing by a shallow river. Eric walked slowly toward them through the warm sand. A little girl, a little boy in brief tunics of soiled white. Perhaps ten years old they were, and absorbed in their play at the water's edge. Not until his shadow fell across their castle of rocks and sand did they look up. And the girl child's eyes were blue as smoke in her small, tanned face.

Those familiar eyes met his. For a long moment she stared. Then she smiled hesitantly, very sweetly, and rose to her bare feet, shaking the sand from her tunic and looking up at him still with that grave, sweet smile illuminating her small face and a queer hesitation checking her speech.

At last she said, "*Ou e'voo?*" in the softest, gentlest voice imaginable. It was remotely recognizable as a tongue

that might one day be—or once had been—French. “Who are you?”

“*Je suis Eric,*” he told gravely.

She shook her head a little. “*Zh n’compren—*” she began doubtfully, in that strange, garbled tongue so like French. But she broke off in her denial, for though the name was strange to her yet he was sure he saw recognition begin to dawn in the smoke-blue eyes he knew so well. “*Zh voo z’ai vu?*”

“Have you?” he asked her very gently, trying to distort his French into the queer sounds of hers. “Have you really seen me before?”

“I thought so,” she murmured shyly, bewilderment muting her speech until it sounded scarcely above a childish whisper. “I have seen your face before—somewhere, once—long ago. Have I? Have I—Eric? I do not know your name. I never heard it before. But your face—you— O, Eric dear—I do love you!”

Halfway through that speech she had changed her “*voo*” to the “*tu*” of intimacy, and the last of it came out on a little rush of childish affection, “*Eric, cher—zh t’aime!*”

Somewhere back among the willows that lined the shallow stream a woman’s voice called sharply. The sound of feet among dead leaves approached. The little boy jumped to his feet, but the girl seemed not to hear. She was looking up at Eric with wide blue eyes, her small face rapt with a child’s swift adoration. Ten years older and she might have questioned the possibility of that instant recognition, perhaps unconsciously checked the instant warmth that rose within her, but the child’s mind accepted it without question.

The woman was very near now. He knew he must not frighten her. He stooped and kissed the little girl’s cheek gently. Then he took her by the shoulders and turned her toward the woods into which the boy had already vanished.

“Go to your mother,” he told her

softly. And he laid his hands again on the switches. She was beginning to know him, he thought, as the river bank swirled sidewise into nothingness. Each time they met the recognition grew stronger. And though there was no continuity in their meetings, so that he seemed to be jumping back and forth through time and this child might be the remote ancestress or the far descendant of his resolute Maia, yet somehow—by no racial memory surely, for it was not down a direct line of women that he progressed, but haphazardly to and fro through their ranks—somehow they were beginning to know him. Oblivion blotted out his puzzling.

OUT of the rushing dark a steel-walled city blazed into sudden, harsh life. He stood on one tower of its many heights, looking out and down over a dizzy vista of distances that swam with the reflections of sunlight on steel. He stood still for a moment, shading his eyes and staring. But he was impatient. Something instinctive in him, growing stronger now and surer of itself as this strange chain of circumstance and meeting drew on to its conclusion, told him that what he sought lay nowhere in this section out of time. Without a glance around the stupendous steel marvel of the city he gripped the switches once more, and in a shimmer and a dazzle the shining metropolis melted into oblivion.

A burst of wild yelling like the voices of wolves baying from savage human throats smote through the darkness at him even before the sight of what was coming. Then a plank flooring was under his feet and he looked out over a tossing surface of tousled heads and brandished fists and weapons, toward another platform, this of stone, the height of his across the thunderous sea of the mob. The crackle of flames was mounting even above that roaring. On the other platform, bound to a tall,

charred stake, ringed with fagots and rising flames, the blue-eyed girl stood proudly. She was very straight against the pillar, chin high, looking out in disdain over the tumult below.

For the breath of a second Eric glanced round him, snatching at straws in a frantic effort to find some way of saving her. On the platform behind him speechless amazement had stricken dumb a little party of men and women in brightly colored garments of 16th Century cut. They must have been nobles, viewing the burning from this favored seat. Eric wasted only one glance at their stupefied surprise. He swung round again, his desperate eyes raking the mob. No hope there. It clamored for the tall girl's life in one tremendous, wolf-savage baying that ripped from every throat there in a single blending roar.

"Witch!" they yelled. "Death to the witch!" in an archaic English that he understood without too much difficulty, a blood-hungry baying that brooked no denial. They had not seen him yet. But the girl had.

Over their heads, through the little shimmering heat waves that were rising about her already in veils of scorching breath, her smoke-blue eyes met his. It was a meeting as tangible almost as the meeting of hands. And like the grip of hands so that gaze held, steady and unswerving for a long moment—burning witch of old England and tall young adventurer of modern America gazing with sure recognition in the eyes of each. Eric's heart jumped into a quickened beating as he saw the sureness in those smoke-blue eyes he had gazed into so often. She knew him—without any question or doubt she recognized him.

Over the wolf-baying of the mob he heard her voice in one high, clear scream.

"You've come! I knew you'd come!"

At the sound of it silence dropped

over the crowd. Almost in one motion they swung round to follow her ecstatic stare. And in the instant of their stricken surprise at the man they saw there, tall and golden against the sky, a figure out of no experience they had ever had before—the witch's voice rang clear.

"You've come! O, I knew you would, in the end. *They* always said you would. *They* knew! And I must die for the knowledge I got from *Them*—but by that knowledge I know this is not the end. Somewhere, some day, we will meet again. Good-by—good-by, my dearest!"

Her voice had not faltered, though the flames were licking up about her, and now, in a great burst of crimson, they caught in the fagots and blazed up in a gush that enveloped her in raving inferno. Choked with horror, Eric swung up his gun hand. The bark of the report sent half the crowd to its knees in terror, and he saw through the flames the girl's tall figure slump suddenly against her bonds. This much at least he could do.

Then, in the midst of a silence so deep that the creak of the planks under his feet was loud as he moved, he sheathed the gun and closed his hands over the switches. Impatience boiled up in him as the prostrate crowd and the flame-wrapped witch and the whole ugly scene before him reeled into nothingness.

He was coming near the goal now. Each successive step found recognition surer in her eyes. She knew him in this incarnation, and he was full of confidence now that the end and the solution was near. For though in all their meetings there had been barriers, so that they two could never wholly know one another or come into the unity of love and comprehension which each meeting promised, yet he knew very surely that in the end they must. All this had not been in vain.

In the oblivion that washed over him was so sure a consciousness of her omnipresence—in all the centuries that were sweeping past, in all the lands those centuries washed over, throughout time and space and life itself, her ever-present loveliness—that he welcomed the darkness as if he embraced the girl herself. It was full of her, one with her. He could not lose her or be far from her or even miss her now. She was everywhere, always. And the end was coming. Very soon—very soon he would know—

HE WOKE out of the oblivion, blindly into darkness. Like the fold of wings it engulfed him. If he was standing on solid earth, he did not know it. He was straining every faculty to pierce that blinding dark, and he could not. It was a living darkness, pulsing with anticipation. He waited in silence.

Presently she spoke.

“I have waited so long,” she said out of the blackness in her sweet, clear voice that he knew so well he did not need the evidence of his eyes to tell him who spoke.

“Is this the end?” he asked her breathlessly. “Is this the goal we’ve been traveling toward so long?”

“The end?” she murmured with a little catch of mirth in her voice. “Or the beginning, perhaps. Where in a circle

is end or beginning? It is enough that we are together at last.”

“But what—why—”

“Something went wrong, somewhere,” she told him softly. “It doesn’t matter now. We have expiated the forgotten sins that kept us apart to the very end. Our troubled reflections upon the river of time sought each other and never wholly met. And we, who should have been time’s masters, struggled in the changing currents and knew only that everything was wrong with us, who did not know each other.

“But all that is ended now. Our lives are lived out and we can escape time and space into our own place at last. Our love has been so great a thing that though it never fulfilled itself, yet it brimmed time and the void to overflowing, so that everywhere you adventured the knowledge of my present tormented you—and I waited for you in vain. Forget it now. It’s over. We have found ourselves at last.”

“If I could only see you,” he said fretfully, reaching out into the blackness. “It’s so dark here. Where are we?”

“Dark?” the gentle voice laughed softly. “Dark? My dearest—this is not darkness! Wait a moment—here!”

Out of the night a hand clasped his. “Come with me.”

Together they stepped forward.

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