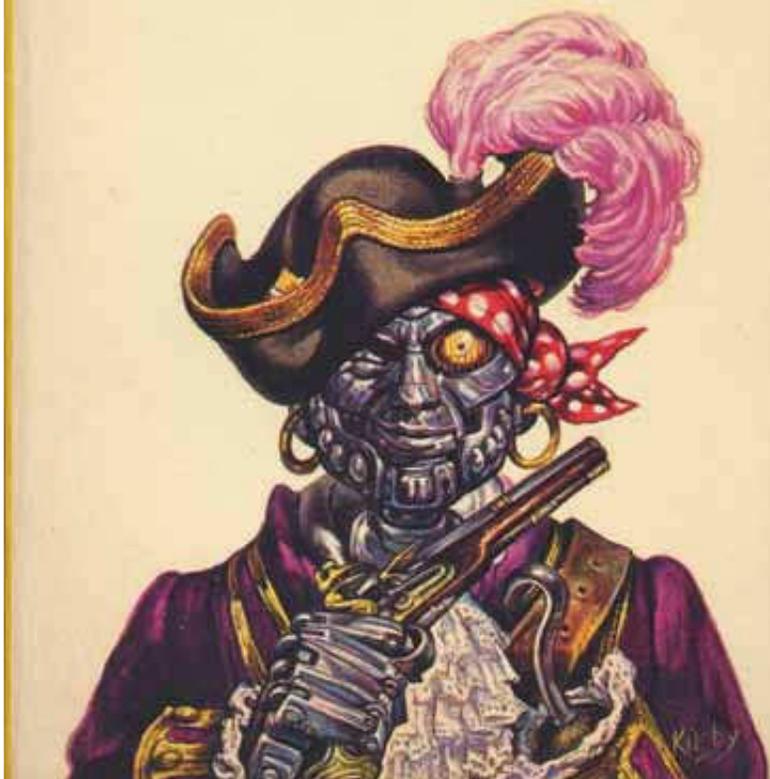


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RON GOULART **THE ROBOT IN** **THE CLOSET**

The walkie-talkie time machine



Roscoe poked his dial-laden chest with a metal thumb. "Let me tell you something, dimwit. We got us a very rough time itinerary blocked out. Checking out your Sara's roots is going to require guts, luck and the ability to deliver a well-placed smack in the snoot if need be. I don't want the kid coming to any grief, which is why I assigned her the best time machine we've got in stock, namely myself."

"I don't see how we're going to run into much trouble, Roscoe." Tim indicated the genealogy chart stuck to the wall. "The Tenbrook family tree is cluttered with decent, respectable and dull citizens. Year after year, decade after decade, they seem to have produced nothing but clergymen, doctors and interior decorators."

Roscoe made another rattling amused noise. "Holy smoke," he observed. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything."

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CHAPTER 1

There was a robot in the closet.

Tim Zackery stood in the living pod, fleezlined thermocoat dangling in one hand and wul mittens bunched up in the other, and stared in at the thing. He'd activated the door opener and there was the robot facing him.

It was nearly six and a half feet high, a good two inches taller than he was, and of a greenish copper color. Humanoid in shape and features, with very believable piercing blue eyes. There were all sorts of odd and unfamiliar dials dotting its metal front. Apparently it was turned off.

"Sara, there's a robot in the closet here," Tim announced.

"Oh, yes, that," Sara Tenbrook was hopping on one foot near the center of the living pod, halfway out of her hotvest, tugging off one of her mismatched thermosox. A slim, auburn-haired girl of twenty-three, very pretty and right now blushing as an aftereffect of the Sound wind they'd been running against.

Gingerly, Tim reached around the mechanism to deposit his coat on a prong. "You don't act stunned or astounded," he said, turning to face her.

"I was, more or less, expecting him." Sara, both of her sox off now, was standing in the exact center of a plyorug. She wiggled her toes as she shrugged the rest of the way out of her tufted vest.

"More or less?"

"Well, more, actually. We're renting him for the next two weeks." She, slim shoulders slightly hunched, crossed over to the wide handmade chart which was pasted to the sloping wall of the domed room with stickumstripz.

Dropping his mittens near the dispozhole, Tim eased over to the closet again to eye the dormant robot. He reached out a hand, briefly touched the machine man's surface. "Ah," he said. "Aha."

"Would you like a cup of carobcocoa? After a brisk trot on the runners' ramp it's always heartwarming to—"

"Aha!" repeated Tim, his fingers tapping and poking at the dials on the robot's broad chest. "2040 . . . 2038 . . . et cetera . . . 1971 . . . 1933 . . . et cetera . . . Sure, I see."

"This is why I arranged to have him delivered while we were out on our twilight run along the Sound," Sara explained, eyes still on the immense wall chart. "So you wouldn't scream and holler and stomp around exclaiming, 'Aha!' and, 'Oho!'"

"I haven't said, 'Oho!' once so far." He backed, slowly pushing the closet door shut on the newly arrived mechanism. "Nor have I screamed, whooped or hollered. However, Sara, I'll maybe do all that and more unless you explain why we have a time machine in our closet,"

Sara coughed into her hand. "Are you absolutely certain you don't want a steaming mug of—"

"That's what that thing lurking in there is. One of those damn robot-style time machines."

"Well yes, but—"

"I won't go. Nope, no, not one year backwards in time, not even a week. I am not going to go whizzing back through the years with you while you dig into the lives and times of your half-witted relatives. Nope."

"The Tenbrooks are a distinguished clan, you nurf." She whirled, hands on hips, to scowl at him. "Why, for countless centuries Tenbrooks have served their country and their—"

"I know, I know, Sara." He took a few cautious steps toward the young woman. "I've suffered through your tracing of your roots. Listened to you babble about Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook and Captain Firebrand Tenbrook and Sir Tobias Tenbrook and all the other goofy ancestors you've become obsessed with since you went back to—"

"Oho!" she said, hands clenching into fists. "At last we reach the peanut inside the nutshell, Tim. You've really never wanted me to return to school to earn my AEP degree so I can be considered an Adequately Educated Person and make my—"

"That's absolutely un—"

"My Lord, I'm almost twenty-four years old," she said. "You'd have been happy if I'd stayed with the Flyin' Music Hall escorting the Robot Rockettes from grange hall to grange hall all across the length and breadth of the Connecticut Sector of Greater New England. Sure, fine, that kind of robot and android you don't mind. Bunch of big-chested bimbos without an intelligent thought or a bright remark programmed into their nurfing heads. All they can do is kick their chunky legs while—"

"Sara, you're forgetting who was so fanatically supportive of you when you decided to quit piloting the Music Hall and return to Bridgeport Easy College. I've stood by you through thick and—"

"Why not? You teach at that half-witted place." She gave a scornful laugh, tossing her auburn hair. "Associate Professor of Nostalgia. My God, you're fast approaching thirty and you're still merely an associate—"

"Fast approaching thirty? Twenty-seven is your idea of—"

"Face it, you're zipping along toward the grave, yet you won't do a darn thing about—"

"Didn't I organize our whole Pop Cult Department? Talk my fellows into striking? Didn't I manage to get my own salary raised to nearly \$75,000 and—"

"But \$71,000 isn't that near. The man who drives the mulch wagon in this neighborhood earns that."

"So? You have to go to mulch school for three years to learn how to—"

"Wait! I am not going to let you sidetrack me," stated Sara. "Next week we are definitely and absolutely—"

"I thought we had a pretty good life going. We live in this comfortable five-pod home on the fashionable Connecticut side of the Long Island Sound. We own a skycar which could resell for—"

"But we don't even own this dumbo house. International Pepsi-Coke owns it. We're practically sharecroppers," she said. "Boy, if I came into some money I would—"

"Patience, huh? I won't earn just under \$75,000 forever." Tim moved nearer to her. "Another year or two and we should be in terrific financial shape. We can maybe even take out a five-year marriage contract"

"Would you really want to spend another five whole years with me?"

"Of course. We've gotten through two one-year cohabit permits, haven't we? And we still feel—"

"Tim, listen. It's very important to me, doing this, traveling back in time." She reached out, pressed her palms flat against his chest.

"I know, but—"

"I do really want to trace my family roots through history." She looked hopefully up at him. "And Full Prof Emerzon assures me that if I do, then my treatise on the Illustrious History of the Renowned Tenbrook Family will be certain to earn me a good grade."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "And when are you intending for us to take this jaunt?"

"Has to be next week, Tim, because that's the only period we're both off school."

"We were going to spend the winter vacation in the Miami Enclave," he reminded her. "We already made reservations with the HoJo computer in New Have—"

"Oh, I cancelled those, so don't fret."

"It's warm in the Miami Enclave. The Florida Sector government promises all Latin American guerrillas have been weeded out of there, the beaches are relatively trouble-free. We can swim, loll, take—"

"It's warm in San Francisco," Sara put forth.

Tim nodded. "Frisco Enclave's not bad. Still, I'd rather vacation in . . . Whoa! You don't mean Frisco Enclave, do you?"

"I mean San Francisco, California, in the month of April, 1906." Sara pushed away from him to point at the family trees which decorated their plaz wall. "I want to start there in 1906. We'll observe Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook first, since he's a key—"

"You plan for as to go to more than one past time zone?"

"We may as well do this right I'll show you the itinerary in a minute."

"How many different time periods?"

"Five or six probably."

Tim lowered himself into a floating neowood chair. "San Francisco in April of '06 in the last century," he said thoughtfully. "That'll be our first stop?"

"You'll love it there, Tim. It's a very exciting time in California history."

A frown was forming and deepening across his face. He scratched at his short-cropped black hair. "Something is nagging at my brain, Sara," he said slowly. "Something I'm trying to recall from some Nostalgia research I did. Didn't something truly awful happen in Frisco in April of 1906?"

Sara smiled in a small way. "Well, there was a sort of earthquake and then some fires which—"

"The Great San Francisco Earthquake!" He stood up. "The earth shook, the sky burned. The whole and entire city was destroyed, enormous chunks of choice real estate fell into yawning cracks in the earth, people—"

"Actually it was the subsequent fires that did most of the damage," Sara said. "If everything goes well, though, we'll be out of there before the whole city goes up in flames."

CHAPTER 2

She looked so innocent asleep. Tucked in on herself like a child, pretty face serene, reddish hair flared out on the aquamat. No hint in that calm lovely countenance that it fronted a brain capable of fouling up a terrific vacation in a perfectly safe section of the WarmZone. Nothing in that evenly rising and falling breast to indicate a heart beating behind it which was cold to his perfectly natural dread of traveling around in time.

"It's dangerous. Much worse than going into an unfortified patch of the Florida Sector or trying to travel across Bridgeport Limbo in a landcar."

Sara murmured and Tim realized he must have been talking to himself out loud.

He swung off the floating aquamat, made his way across the dimly lit sleeping pod. "I mean, I don't even feel secure unless I have a night light," he said to himself. "Obviously I'm not the best material for the rigors of time traveling."

The connecting-tube runners warmed automatically just before his bare feet trod on them. Shoulders tucked in, Tim wandered through the predawn house, through the rec pod and the cook pod and into the living pod.

The snow had ceased. Trickle of it were melting down across the plaza top of the dome.

Tim settled into a sewdocanvas chair, kicked out a bare foot at the large neowood trunk which housed his collection of Nostalgia cassettes. Sometimes when he couldn't sleep he'd play a few twentieth-century vidshows. His favorites were *Dragnet* and *Leave It To Beaver*, but this morning the anticipation of viewing them didn't cheer him much.

"Guess I'll simply sit," he decided.

"Geeze, Louise, is there any place in this hogwallow where a bloke can procure a cup of Java?"

Tim sat up to the extent that he ended up crouched several feet to the right of his chair.

The closet door whirred open. There was a slight clinking and rattling before the robot-style time machine came marching out into the room. He was wearing Tim's thermocoat. "Colder than a witch's kiss in here," the mechanism complained, rubbing his metallic hands together and producing a slippery grating sound. "Are you contemplating some sort of anchorite's existence or—"

"You're dormant. You can't—"

"Who put that bee in your chapeau?"

"You were standing in there earlier with your eyes looking glassy and not saying a damn—"

"Why shouldn't my glims look glassy, schmucko? They're made out of glass, the real stuff." The robot time machine strode to the center of the room. He was very light on his feet for a machine. "I kept mum so you and the missus could argue in peace. Not my place to butt into domestic squabbles. As I was telling Freud only last week, most family brawls—"

"Sigmund Freud? You know Sigmund Freud?"

"Do I look like I'd waste time hobnobbing with Lou Freud or Elvira Freud? Of course, dimbulb, I mean the one and only Sigmund. I was back in Vienna around the turn of the twentieth century, on a job, and I thought I'd drop in on Sig to give him a tip on maternal fixations. He and I got to—"

"Call him Sig, do you? The father of psychiatry. You go clunking in and yell, 'Hiya, Sig!'"

"I should kiss his foot and call him Your Holiness?" The robot settled into the chair Tim had abandoned. "You look like the type who starts the day with granola. Got any?"

"Machines don't eat."

"I'm not a robot in the strictest sense, schmo," the time machine explained. "I am officially known, by the way, as Roscoe/203/TA-Humaform Time Machine Model JSG 1343-X2. You can address me as just plain Roscoe. As I was telling Adam a couple weeks back, names are only—"

"You mean *the* Adam?"

"I'm going to chinwag with Adam Malin or Adam the Educated Baboon? The fella who shacked up with Eve in that garden, that Adam," said Roscoe with a slightly scornful expression on his metallic lips. "See, he and the missus were having some trouble naming all the things in the damn garden. Think of having to come up with the names for all the weeds alone. Ragweed was one of my suggestions, also goldenrod. Eve wanted to call it—"

"From what I've read about time travel, Roscoe, you're not supposed to do that sort of thing," Tim cut in. "There's the Time Travel Overseeing Commission, and they're very strict about people stumbling around in time and making unauthorized—"

"TTOC is about as imaginative as your Aunt Tillie," the time machine said.

"I never had an Aunt Tillie."

"Sure you did. I ran into her in nineteenth-century Cleveland only a few months back. Tillie Zackery, operated a house of ill repute that was always tottering on the brink of ruin because Tillie insisted on mixing sins of the flesh with a pioneering interest in vegetarianism. I told her you can't mix screwing with carrot cake and expect to—"

"Is TTOC aware of what you do?"

"Relax, henpecko. The Time Travel goons are as aware as I want 'em to be," Roscoe assured him. "Look, unless you take risks, you never pull free of the pack. First time I suggested to Hannibal he use elephants to cross the Alps he said to me, 'Man, you tryin' to jive me? I got me a mind to go upside your head.' Hannibal was black, but you probably know that from being so nostalgic. I persisted, pointed out that elephants, while lacking in the element of surprise, were—"

"I don't think Sara and I are going to go gallivanting through time, which is a nitwit notion at best, with the likes of you," Tim said firmly. "You're obviously a defective hunk of machinery. Probably need a tune-up."

"I'm the best time machine you've ever cast your peepers on, sirrah. Why, forsooth, I'm a crackerjack in my field."

"And how come you talk this way? Mingling slang from all different periods."

"What the use of traveling in time unless you allow some of it to rub off on you, cuz?" Roscoe shook his coppery head pityingly. "Next time I drop in on Spinoza I'm going to try to convince him a little time-tripping with me'll open his—"

"You can't do that. TTOC won't let you bring anything or anybody out of the past." Tim jabbed a finger in the direction of the time machine. "Anybody knows that. You take so much as a sliver of wood out of another century and you're going to screw up the whole course of history. The majestic flow of events will come out all cockeyed."

Roscoe's shoulders produced a squinking sound when he shrugged. "Some flow we got, buster," he said. "Some great frapping flow of progress. This is so nifty? Here it is Sunday, January 13, 2041, and we're freezing our goonies in an abode that looks like a pile of gigantic tits. A chicken coop perched almost on top of a body of water which is about 72 percent pet droppings and discarded plaz. And you claim we're sitting on the apex of civilization? Hooey, sez I."

"We're going to return you to the store. Turn you in on a new model."

Roscoe's laughter was like a cat howling in a barrel. It caused him to rock in his chair. "You're stuck with me, palsy walsy," he said as his mirth subsided. "All the papers are already filed, notarized and tattooed. The stodgy offices of the Time Travel Overseeing Commission grind awful dang slow, whelp, and if you try to start over again with a new boy you'll never make it in time to take off next week."

Tim started pacing in a circle around the seated time machine. "Where'd Sara rent you? She told me the name of the outfit, but I've forgotten."

"Windmiller Time Agency." Roscoe elevated his left buttock and a tiny door popped open. He fished out some faxpages, closed up and resettled in the chair. "Here you have copies of all the necessary papers and permits, kiddo. Everything is strictly kosher."

"Windmiller? Windmiller? That's the outfit over in New Stamford, run by a very unorthodox old coot named Dr. Rowland Windmiller. Christ, why did Sara go to him?"

"She cares enough to get the very best."

Snorting, Tim went striding over to the pixphone table. "I'll call Windmiller and—"

"You can't."

"I sure as hell can. You can't intimidate me."

"I meant Doc's hiding out," Roscoe informed him. "He's in Mexico, 1915, whereat he and his buddy, that newspaper hack Amby Bierce, are cutting up a few touches."

"Okay, when is he due back?"

"*Quién sabe?* as we say down that way." The time machine gave a rattling chuckle, spread his hands wide. "I imagine Doc won't surface until the alimony lawyers cease hunting for him."

Tim scowled. "Nobody pays alimony anymore. Our present fair and wise system of specified-term marriages has eliminated the old unjust—"

"Don't I know that, sweetheart? Me who's crashed weddings in every century since the whole business got rolling. By the way, if you're really looking for festive times you can't do better than the Hyperborean Age. Look up a pal of mine name of Conan if . . . ah, but I fear I stray from me topic. The lowdown on Doc Windmiller is this. He's fallen for a dame many years his junior and it's made him completely gaga. This is his seventh wife, too, and by now the old gent ought to know better. Anyhow, this wide-eyed, fantastic-chested twit bats her lamps and tells poor Doc she'd just truly love an old-fashioned wedding. Now your average sap would take that to mean at most a

white veil and a few fistfuls of rice flung. What's the simp do, however, but transport the girl back to 1876 for a really old-fashioned knot-tying. Wellsir, she's got him now and her attorneys claim the laws of 1876 apply and not our current ones. A real case to go down in the lawbooks. When I told Blackstone about it he near crapped in his bloomers. 'Gad, sir, what a ninny this—' "

"Okay, okay," cut in Tim. "I can't complain to Dr. Windmiller personally. There's got to be somebody running the office."

Roscoe poked his dial-laden chest with a metal thumb, causing a small bong sound. "*Moi*. I'm the head cheese," he announced, leaning forward. "Let me tell you something, dimwit. We got us a very rough time itinerary blocked out. Checking out your Sara's roots is going to be a ballbuster, requiring guts, luck and the ability to deliver a well-placed smack in the snoot if need be. I took a liking to the lady from the moment she first pixed our office the other am. I don't want the kid coming to any grief, which is why I assigned her the best time machine we've got in stock. Namely myself."

"I don't see how we're going to run into much trouble, Roscoe." Tim indicated the genealogy chart stuck to the wall. "The Tenbrook family tree is cluttered with decent, respectable and dull citizens. Year after year, decade after decade, they seem to have produced nothing but clergymen, doctors and interior decorators."

Roscoe made another rattling amused noise. "Holy smoke," he observed. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything."

"Listen, I love Sara," Tim told the time machine. "One of the consequences of that is I've had to listen to quite a bit of input about the Tenbrook family. Especially since she went back to college." He made another jab in the direction of the wall chart. "She's very enthusiastic about her roots and ancestry. There's not a fact in any historical source or archive she hasn't dug up and fed into our home computer. I can assure you, Roscoe, there's not a single branch of the family tree that isn't thick with respectable folk."

"How about Captain Firebrand Tenbrook? Did she tell you that mayhap the lad got his colorful nickname because he held charitable wienie roasts for seventeenth-century Caribbean tots?"

"He was noted for—"

The door chimes sounded.

Tim spun to face the one-way see-through front door. "Oy, it's Sara's awful uncle."

"How come this one isn't upright and God-fearing?"

"You can be upright and God-fearing and still be an asshole."

"True," the robot acknowledged as he crossed his legs with a clang.

Out in the early morn stood a small silvery-haired old man. He was wrapped in a poncho made of real seal fur. Over his eyes was a thick strip of black glaz and in his gloved hand he held a silver-tipped rod. Next to Sara's legally blind old uncle stood a large burly man with three ears.

"Brought his nitwit lawyers, too."

"Lawyers, plural?" Roscoe raised a wiry eyebrow.

"Yeah. That's Dibner, Keese and Mermillion. Used to be three separate assholes until they got blended together as a result of a freak teleport pad accident last year." He gazed, forlornly, at the

two visitors waiting outside. "Dibner and Keese and Mermillion jointly boarded a pad in Manhattan State, set the dial for sun-filled Acapulco and flipped the go switch. Their individual atoms got jumbled somehow and on the Mexico end only one composite guy emerged. Got a brilliant mind, made up of the best parts of three. They sued the hell out of ITT and won, but there was no way to unscramble them."

"I sense you're in there, Timothy," called O.O. Tenbrook in his high piping voice. He began whapping his sightrod at the door.

"Best usher the old boy in before he breaks his cane," advised Roscoe. "Some blind men are very amiable. Homer, for example, and Blind Lemon Jefferson are both sweethearts. Milton, on the other hand, is pretty much of a shit."

"Coming, Uncle Oscar." Tim activated the opening mex.

"Colder than a witch's kiss." The old man came lurching into the pod.

"In here, too," said Tim, "so I hear."

The tip of the rod swung up to inspect Tim's face. "Don't like your new moustache, my boy," said O.O. Tenbrook.

"I don't have a moustache, Uncle Oscar," Tim told him. "Must be a new crack in your lens. You ought to go easier on whacking things with your sightrod."

"We gave you similar advice," said Dibner, Keese and Mermillion as he crossed the threshold. "When you bopped that Salvation Army band, sir."

"Selling Xmas cards in mid-January, they deserved a thrashing."

The composite attorney's voice changed to a deep baritone. "I fear they now have grounds for a whopping suit against you, O.O. When you bent that fellow's electric trombone over his . . ." The voice all at once shifted to tenor. ". . . we'll bail you out of this scrape, O.O. All we do is slip the head office of the SA, say, fifty thou to . . . Damn it, Irv, won't you ever get bribes off your mind?"

"All three of you hush up in there," the old man ordered his attorney. He absently stroked the placard leading from the handle of his sightrod to his eyeband. "I don't suppose Sara is up yet. Girl always was lazy."

"It's barely six am, Uncle Osc—"

"Good thing she isn't. Counted on finding you alone so we can have a man-to-man talk, Timothy."

"This isn't really a legal problem," said Dibner, Keese and Mermillion in his deepest voice. "What say we slip into the kitchen pod while you gab and rustle up some grub? Boy, some scrambled eggsubs would really hit the old . . . Cmon, Leroy, you promised to cut down on the calories. We're already seven pounds overweight . . . How can we be overweight? Consider, if you will, the fact we're three full-grown men. Our combined weight could climb as high, say, as 525 pounds without—"

"Silence," advised the blind man. He waved his sightrod in the time machine's direction. "I imagine you're the gadget she's hired."

Roscoe inclined his metal head in a brief nod. "You're very perceptive for a guy with a big glob of mulch obscuring half of his lens."

O.O. Tenbrook gave his sightrod an angry shake. "The presence of this gadget, Timothy, confirms my worst fears."

"What is it you're afraid of?"

"That young Sara is letting her overzealous, though basically exemplary, fascination with the illustrious history of the proud Tenbrook family cloud her . . . Is something going wrong with your time machine?"

"I think he's laughing, Uncle Oscar," said Tim.

"Did you burst in here, with attorney in tow, to try to get me to talk Sara out of this time trip she's got her heart set on?"

"Exactly," replied the silver-haired blind man.

"I just came along for the ride," said Dibner, Keese and Mermillion, turning both his blue eye and his brown eye toward the entry to the cook pod. "We had some legal matters to attend to over in the Redding Ridge area, so O.O. suggested—"

"That's enough out of you," Uncle Oscar told his composite lawyer. "Now then, Timothy, traveling back and forth across the years is extremely dangerous. My concern, as dear Sara is my only extant relative, for the girl prompted me to come here and face the slurs and insults of this swell-headed bucket of bolts who—"

"Ask him how he knows about me." Roscoe steepled his fingers, creating a delicate ping.

Tim looked inquiringly at the tip of O.O. Tenbrook's stick, the lens of which was watching him. "Didn't Sara herself fill you in?"

"If I had to depend on Sara's information I'd never be able to act the proper uncle to the child," said the old man. "She's very guarded, a true loner like her late father. I'm, much as I hate it, often forced to resort to other methods to keep tabs."

"Aiming a soundgun at a private residence without a court order," remarked Roscoe, "is a crime punishable by up to six months in a Rehab Facility, unk."

"Not if there's a demonstrable familial connection," put in Dibner, Keese and Mermillion. "Take the case of Ma Malley versus Sonny Boy Malley, Junior Malley, Little Brother Malley—"

"Why, good morning, Uncle Oscar. I thought I recognized your ranting out here." Sara, wearing a short ployrobe over the top of a sea-blue sleepsuit and the bottom of a burnt orange one, had come quietly into the living pod.

Her uncle swung the tip of his sightrod toward the slim girl. "You don't have any more clothes sense than your late mother, Sara," he said. "Don't you realize sea-blue and burnt orange clash? And you're wearing one purple mukluk with one flesh-tone one."

"No. I couldn't find the mate to the purple one. The flesh-colored thing is actually my unshod foot."

"Wipe that mulch off your lens," suggested Roscoe. "Good morning, Miss Tenbrook, you're looking absolutely nifty. My old buddy, Gainsborough, would love to whip off a canvas of you exactly as—"

"Sara, dear, I admire your interest in our proud Tenbrook history, in the deep-rooted traditions of the family," said Uncle Oscar. "I believe, however, you'll be taking too great a risk if you go off into the past with a surly machine and an underpaid young man you picked up on campus."

"I picked Tim up before I ever returned to school Uncle." Sara's hands settled defiantly on her narrow hips. "We love each other. We're seriously considering a five-year-marriage deal. You can stick your—"

"Try the three-year first," advised Dibner, Keese and Mermillion.

"I didn't pay this friendly call to talk of romance, child. I want to warn you how foolhardy your contemplated trip in time is," persisted her blind uncle. "Why, in the twenty-six years since time travel was perfected and the Time Travel Overseeing Commission set up hundreds of chronic travelers have vanished, never to be—"

"The actual figure is forty-three," corrected Roscoe. "And sixteen of those didn't vanish, they just decided to set up house in the past. Take Ferman, who bought a nice little cottage in the Dark Ages. Last time I bumped into him he was happy as a—"

"I am prepared to finance a splendid vacation for you, Sara," offered Uncle Oscar. "You can even take your schoolteacher friend here. Any place in the world, or out to the moon or one of the space colonies."

Sara shook her head. "We are going back in time," she said evenly. "You're not going to keep me from finding the . . . from tracing my roots."

"My dear, the perils, the troubles you'll face, are—"

"We're going!" Tim moved to the door and activated the opening mex. "I suggest you and your lawyer depart."

Ignoring him, the old man asked Sara, "Won't you, please, reconsider?"

"No. Next week we are leaving for the past, Uncle."

"Foolish, ill-advised. Stubborn girl," muttered O.O. Tenbrook as he, swinging his stick from side to side, headed out. "I've done all I can."

Dibner, Keese and Mermillion took the old man's arm. "Can't we stick around for breakfast? Why go . . ."

Tenbrook kept moving through the new day, and his attorney followed him into his sleek black skycar. In seconds it was zooming away across the lightening sky.

Sara came over to hug Tim. "I'm happy you're on my side now." She kissed him on the cheek.

"I obviously can't be on Uncle Oscar's side."

"Complications and chicanery," said Roscoe with a tinny chuckle. "Gad, I'm going to get a real boot out of this particular escapade."

CHAPTER 3

Roscoe was jingling slightly as he held up the suitcase. "Herewith we have an authentic alligator gladstone, folks, a handsome and sturdy object that'd cost you at least a good two and a half bucks in any of the 1906 Frisco luggage shops," he explained, thumping it with his metal fingers. "Actually this is no more than a cleverly constructed plaz fake, turned out last month in China 3 by—"

"Why is it you're jingling?" Tim was standing, arms folded, as far across the living room from the robot time machine as he could. "Don't know if I want to go whizzing through the mists of time with a mechanism who's—"

" 'Tis merely more props for our jaunt, putz." Carefully placing the alligator suitcase on the floor, and bowing toward Sara, he tapped a compartment in his left buttock. When a tiny compartment popped open, Roscoe extracted a handful of money, paper and coins. "This should be ample cash for our brief stay in ought six. Meself, I always favor half eagles when I'm working around the turn of that particular century." He rotated a sample gold piece with thumb and forefinger, catching the midmorning light with it. "We'll be taking a handful of these nifty, albeit bogus, five-smacker pieces, seemingly minted right there in Frisco in 1901. Notice, Miss Sara, how believably worn and circulated each and every one appears. We'll also carry three hundred bucks in folding moola, mostly in these convincingly engraved McKinley Blue Seal tens, plus a few Sherman Red Seal fifties, the latter to impress the yokels. I'm also taking a half-dozen two-dollar bills, the 1896 model, which features a lady I take to be Liberty and her entourage lolling around in a mildly skin-mag pose, in case I want to light a cheroot whilst strolling through the splendid lobby of the Palace Hotel on Market—"

"That money's fake?" Tim inquired.

Roscoe, bending with silent ease, spread the currency and gold and silver coins out atop the suitcase. "With gold at \$2207.56 an ounce, it could be real?"

"We'll get in trouble passing spurious dough in the past That must violate a least one TTOC regul—"

"Whenever I can, I go back and retrieve the stuff." Roscoe took up the large plyowrapped package he'd arrived with that morning. I'll review the Time Travel Overseeing Commission's nitpicking rules with youse in half a mo, guv."

"Retrieve? You mean you steal back the—"

"There's a statute of limitations on petty theft, buster," the time machine told him. "After a hundred years or so, nobody's going to come looking for light-fingered Roscoe. Trust me."

Sara was sitting on the edge of a floating glaz slingchair. "Tim, let him proceed," she said now. "This is all really quite exciting for me. The preparations for the trip, the props, everything. So hush, don't heckle."

"All these exciting props happen to be prime examples of the coiner's art, damn it, Sara. Suppose we get arrested in 1906 for passing a bum flying eagle or—"

"Half eagle," Roscoe corrected. "I can see you're going to need a little briefing via the brainbox before zero hour tomorrow, bumpkin."

"You're not going to thrust my head into—"

"Tim, c'mon, please. Be amiable," urged the girl.

He made an unamiable sound.

Roscoe meantime had unseamed the large parcel "Behold this triumph of the costumer's art," he announced as he lifted a tweedy suit out of the bundle, "Known as a Norfolk suit, it consists of a belted coat, charming knickerbockers, wool hose, gleaming patent leather shoes, a fetching little tweed cap. To—"

"Nope, I won't go parading through 1906 wearing knickers," protested Tim.

"This spiffy outfit, lamebrain, happens to be mine," the time machine said. "For day wear only. I'm contemplating packing a suit of tails for evening wear. Caruso'll be in town and I have a fondness for hammy Italian tenors who—"

"You're going to wear clothes?"

"A naked robot in 1906, old bean, would cause a bigger frumus than a fake gold piece." Roscoe held the suit in front of him. "I have a nifty plaz face that goes with this outfit, complete with side-whiskers in the style which is nowadays known as Asimovs. The last time I was in the vicinity of Nob Hill the belles were all atwit—"

"What am I supposed to wear, then?"

After setting his own disguise aside, the time machine took something white and blue-striped out of the parcel. "We begin, sahib, with this impressive set of high-grade French-style balbriggan underwear. The shirt buttons up the front, drawers also button up the front and fit snugly around the calf because of the ribbed anklets. We use a haberdasher down in Free Cuba who whips this up out of spun plaz so you can't tell 'em from real cotton."

"Why should I deck myself out in a silly outfit like that?" demanded Tim. "Nobody's going to see my underwear."

"Listen, dimbulb, if I had my way you'd stay put right here in your sleep pit with your thermoquilt pulled over your head the whole time Miss Sara and I are away." Roscoe tossed the suit of authentic-looking 1900s underwear aside. "Since the memsahib insists you tag along, so be it. If there's one thing I won't have any of my crew look like, it's a tourist. When you travel in time with me, damnme, you look the part. From the skin up."

"We're going to do research on Sara's nitwit ancestors, not participate in orgies. I don't expect to undress in front—"

"Tim," said Sara softly. "Go on, Roscoe."

The time machine had a slight pout on his metal face. "You young people can go through the rest of the clothes while I'm attending to last-minute details." He dropped the remaining clothes on an armchair. "Let me recite to you the idiotic TTOC oath which they insist every temporal wayfarer must . . ." His eyes clicked suddenly sideways. "Hold your horses."

Sara asked, "What's wrong?"

Roscoe eased up to the door of the pod, put one glass eye to the spy hole. "I should've noticed that tree across the street before."

"There aren't any trees across the street," said Tim.

"Exactly." The robot yanked the door open, thrust out his right hand with forefinger pointed right at the weeping willow which had turned up in the lot across the way.

A thin sizzling beam shot out of the fingertip, hitting the tree and setting it aflame. The newly arrived tree burned swiftly, when it was half gone it gave off a series of loud popping sounds.

"Started sensing something fishy a few moments ago." Nodding, smirking, Roscoe turned his back to the door and kicked it shut with the heel of one metal foot. "That's what I get for acting like a pantywaist and getting all la-de-da about our costumes. Should have been aware of that spy gear long since."

"Your finger," said Sara, staring, "is it a . . . deadly weapon?"

The robot held up his forefinger, which was fading away from glowing red. "Not this one, no, Miss Sara," he answered. " 'Tis merely, forsooth, a matter disintegrator. But it only works on nonhuman stuff."

"You've got nine other fingers," mentioned Tim. "Are they all—"

"Heaven forfend," said Roscoe. "It's agin the rules for a time machine to travel armed. Tut tut."

"About the door," said Tim. "You opened it without touching the deactivator."

"Told you I was the best ruddy time machine money could buy," he said. "Or rent."

Sara asked, "Someone's been eavesdropping on us?"

"Again, yes, ma'am," Roscoe said. "Your curmudgeonly uncle, no doubt. I'd venture to say his interest here has not a bloomin' thing to do with family feelings. No, that lad's got his flinty heart set on finding the . . . Ah, but I was about to recite the TTOC oath for you."

Sara cleared her throat "Let me, first, clarify something for myself," she said. "It's about bringing stuff back from the past."

"Frowned on by the Commission." Roscoe went to the sprawl of costumes and picked up his tweedy cap.

"But something which is lost in time, that's fair game, isn't it?"

Adjusting the cap on the coppery head, Roscoe glanced around for a mirror. "This headgear'll make a much handsomer fit when I have my wig on," he said. "You're absolutely right, Miss Sara. Let's say you're time-exploring in Cleveland and you spot Timothy's dear old Aunt Tillie burying a barrel of silver dollars down under the kitchen floor of her bordello . . . This cap fails to look sufficiently jaunty when it comes down over my ear holes like this." Removing the cap, he spun it around on his finger. "Once Aunt Tillie buries that loot, it ceases to have a function in the flow of history. When you determine that it was never dug up from that day to this, then you hie yourself to the exact spot where you saw the old bimbo stash it and dig. There are a few other technicalities to worry about, but basically that's the approved way to avoid any temporal foul-ups."

"Did she really do that?" asked Tim.

"Do what?"

"Bury a barrel full of silver dollars?*"

"That was only a parable, my son, to illustrate one of the fine points of looting the past." Roscoe swung his head, gave Sara a clicking wink. "Besides which, numbskull, it's Miss Sara's family tree we'll be climbing down, not yours."

"You're right," said Tim. "This is strictly a research trip."

"Righto, guv." Roscoe positioned himself in the center of the pod, locked his hands behind his coppery back. "The famed TTOC oath goes as . . . What is that infernal caterwauling from without?"

"Firepatrol skytrucks," said Tim from one of the viewholes. "House across the street seems to have caught fire."

"That's what they get for letting spies set up shop on their environs," said the time machine. "I'll have to holler this dumb oath so you can hear it above the rookus. Ahem. I solemnly swear to abide, while making my awesome sojourn through time, by the steadfast rules of conduct laid down by the Time Travel Overseeing Commission. Firstly . . ."

CHAPTER 4

The air, when he got around to breathing again, felt incredible. Fresh and clear, better than anything the best circ system could produce. Tim brought up his free hand to rub at his temple and nearly knocked off his derby. Then he remembered Sara and forgot the pains in his bones and the cramps in his stomach. "Sara, you okay?"

She was on the other side of the robot time machine, holding tight to Roscoe's tweed-clad arm the way he'd instructed her before they'd commenced their journey backward. "Yes . . . yes, I'm . . . absolutely fine!"

Letting go of the time machine, Tim moved to the young woman and put his arms round her. "I heard a strange sound a second after we arrived."

"That was only the schmuck on the bike." Roscoe set down the luggage he'd carried back through time.

"What bike?"

"Yonder across the sward," amplified the time machine. "One can't always be absolutely certain there won't be someone about. Our sudden materialization here amidst the greenery of Golden Gate Park unsettled that bumpkin and he drove his wheel into an oak. Actually the appearance of time travelers through the ages had contributed to all sorts of folk beliefs. Once in Padua, while clad in drag as part of a rather complex time mission, I was mistaken for Our Lady of—"

"It was terrific, wasn't it?" Sara said to Tim. "Traveling back through time. It felt like having your first ten birthday parties all at once, and like experiencing an orgasm in a plummeting elevator and watching a houseful of vidwalls."

Tim massaged his temples again. "Gave me a headache and cramps."

"Oh, you had the same symptoms in Secure Mexico last fall. It's something about vacationing which—"

"I suggest," cut in the time machine, "we vacate this pastoral setting. The lad with the pretzel-like bicycle is ogling us in a strange and unsettling manner," He gathered up the two suitcases. "Buzz off, ya rubberneck!"

The three of them started across the green grassy field. It was a pleasant spring morning, Monday, April 16, 1906. A few hours less than two days away from the impending quake. Above the tops of the trees of the park showed the Victorian-style spires of a white hothouse.

"These darn shoes," complained Sara, taking Tim's arm. "Very tricky to walk in."

"The best spurious patent leather the Windmiller organization could come up with," said Roscoe.

Sara was wearing a full ankle-length skirt, a white blouse and a straw hat. Her hair was braided and piled on her head. "I'm just not used to heels this lofty."

"Ah, our carriage awaits," announced Roscoe, nodding in the direction of a closed carriage which was parked beneath a stand of pepper trees they were approaching. A small, faded man in a suit made up of the components of three suits stood on the road holding the reins of the two gray horses.

"How'd you arrange this?" Tim loosened his stiff collar.

"Whilst you two babes were getting into the appropriate attire this am, I whizzed back here to make various arrangements."

"You've already been back and forth in time this morning?"

"To a seasoned chronic argonaut, my boy, a little peregrination like this is nothing at all." The time machine snapped his gloved fingers, producing a muffled metallic ping.

"Better not do that in front of people," cautioned Tim.

"Hogwash," replied Roscoe. "I'm completely convincing as a human. Am I not, Miss Sara?"

"Yes, you're pretty believable. Almost handsome."

"Actually I'm basing my face on an actor who came to prominence in the Hollywood cinema of the 1930s. Chap name of Basil Rathbone. Ever hear of him, Timothy?"

"Yep. I taught a course in twentieth-century Sherlock Holmes movies couple semesters back," he answered. "You look a good bit more sinister. It's your beady eyes that contribute to that impression."

"Beady? These are my own orbs shining through the synskin, clunk."

"Exactly."

"No sibling rivalry, you guys."

Roscoe stepped forward and stowed the suitcases in the awaiting carriage. "Good morning, Dunn. Excellent day, what?"

"Ar, 'at ut is, guv." He used his grimy left hand to raise his ragged cap to Sara. "'Ope yer in fine fettle, mum."

"I am, thanks."

Tim, after scanning the carriage for a few seconds, helped Sara inside.

"Darn," she murmured, nearly tripping on her long skirt.

"To the St. Francis Hotel, Dunn." Roscoe followed them inside. He arranged himself on the leather seat opposite them and extracted a cigarette case of gleaming silver from the breast pocket of his Norfolk jacket

"This is all so exciting." Sara gazed out the window as they began to move. "Imagine, Tim, this is 1906. We're right here in the long-ago past . . . only it isn't. It's right now."

"It's also the eve of one of history's great disasters."

"We've nearly two days before we have to worry about that."

"Remember, kiddies," said Roscoe as he lit an Egyptian cigaret, "that every hour spent in the past means an hour lost in your own time. Since you're on a limited vacation, make each minute count. Last time I dropped in on Ben Franklin he was quite taken with one of my aphorisms on time and its use. 'Early to bed and early to rise, Ben,' I told the old boy, 'makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.' Darned if he didn't swipe it for—"

"Look at those marvelous houses," exclaimed Sara.

They were clear of the park and rolling along a residential street now. On either side of them rose wooden houses, two and three stories high, rich in intricate gingerbread trim, topped with cupolas and spires, guarded by wrought-iron fences. Through some of the bay windows you could see cozy parlors, cluttered with fat furniture.

"Very dull and bourgeois," remarked Roscoe, puffing on his cigarette. "You want to see some snazzy dwellings, you have to pop back to a place like Sodom. There's a—"

"What's our first stop," asked Tim, "after the hotel?"

"Miss Sara has three of her ancestors dwelling in the Bay City at the moment," said the time machine. "This afternoon, after a leisurely lunch at the renowned Palm Court of the Palace Hotel, we'll tour the town and take a gander at the abodes of each. Then tonight I've arranged for us all to . . . Ah, good morning, Mr. Mayor." The robot touched the brim of his cap and leaned his head a bit out the carriage window.

Passing in a buggy going in the opposite direction was a dark, curly-haired man, bearded and dressed in a sober gray suit. He, somewhat puzzled, returned Roscoe's bow and continued on his way.

"Mayor Schmitz. A first-rate scoundrel," explained Roscoe. "Little does he know it's all about to topple round his ears."

"His, but not ours," said Tim.

"Fear not, milksop, not one Frisco brick will dent your cabeza nor a single tongue of flame singe your whiskers. I'm here to see you get home safe and sound."

Sara reminded, "You were saying something about tonight, Roscoe."

"Ah, yes, tonight I have arranged for—"

"Hey!" exclaimed Tim, thrusting his head out the window and staring back. "Did you see that enormous poster on the side of that brownstone we just passed?"

"No, why?" Sara turned to squint out the rear window of the rattling carriage.

"It was an announcement for Colonel Pawnee's Wild West Show."

"Met the colonel once." Roscoe exhaled Egyptian smoke. "Closest he ever came to wild west was when he stepped in a cow plop on his maternal aunt's dairy farm in Modesto."

"The point is," said Tim, "there was also an insert drawing of a red-haired woman in one of those fringe suits. She had a Stetson on and a rifle over her shoulder. She was looking into a mirror and shooting out lighted candles behind her."

Sara said nothing.

"They had her name lettered beneath the portrait in red letters near a foot high," Tim said. "Polly Tenbrook, the Prairie Sharpshooter. Isn't that one of your relatives?"

"That might be Aunt Polly, yes," said Sara, folding her hands in her lap.

Roscoe chuckled. "Once down in Santa Cruz she missed a candle. Which is why Colonel Pawnee walks with that odd—"

"You told me your nitwit great great aunt or whatever was a distinguished actress, Sara."

"Well, a wild west show is certainly part of the American theatrical tradition."

"You implied she was appearing in Shakespeare and Molière."

"I don't know why I would've said anything like that. There are very few parts for trick shots in Shakespeare. Or Molière either, for that matter. I suppose I romanced her image some. Upgraded it"

Roscoe was making a little humming sound in his throat. "I always futz up my gears when I guffaw while smoking."

"You knew the true nature of Polly's profession?" Tim asked the robot.

"Peabrain, there is little or nothing that escapes my scrutiny," answered the time machine. "Now, if you'll but cease your heckling, varlet, I'll tell youse what I've set up for this evening."

Tim folded his arms, concentrating on the outside. A milk wagon was making its way up the cobble-stoned San Francisco street. A couple of barefooted boys in tattered knickers were lounging at the curb and skimming hunks of street tar at the weary-looking roan horse who was pulling the wagon. The ice in the wagon was already melting, leaving a trail of drops on the street.

"Yes, go on," urged Sara.

"We'll be consulting with Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook," said Roscoe. "We're expected at his Telegraph Hill domicile tonight at eight sharp."

"Posing as patients?" asked Tim. "Not all three of us?"

The time machine said, "Besides being an illustrious . . . umm . . . medical man, the good doctor is also noted for holding séances."

"Séances?" Tim looked from the robot to Sara. "You mean he's some kind of spiritualist? A con man who—"

"Uncle Ambrose was . . . is . . . he is a serious student of occult phenomena," said the young woman defensively.

"A quack. A carnival crook who rattles a tambourine with his feet while—"

"Please, Tim. Don't form an opinion until you've met the man and seen him at work."

Tim took a few careful breaths in and out. "Okay," he said.

"Fine." She touched his hand. "Are we likely to encounter my other uncle, Theo Tenbrook, at tonight's gathering, Roscoe?"

"I don't think so, Miss Sara," said the robot. "Mondays, Theo always plays piano at a bordello over on the Barbary Coast."

CHAPTER 5

The house loomed ahead of them in the early darkness, tall and narrow. Its gabled roofs slanted sharply, the weather vane leaned far to the left and the bird on it resembled a hunched carrion crow. A spiked wrought-iron fence, gritty with rust, surrounded a weedy and uncut lawn which fronted the Telegraph Hill residence of Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook. Crouched amidst the high grass was a statue.

"There's the heftiest Venus these old peepers have ever feasted on, forsooth," remarked Roscoe as he escorted Sara and Tim toward the doctor's oaken front door. "Zoftig for a fact and painted a most ungodly shade of green. That smirk on her pudgy puss don't help much either. Now the original Venus was a skinny bimbo, nothing much in the honkers department at all, and—"

"Venus was a mythical character," said Tim, turning away from the ungainly statue.

"Now she is, sure. But originally she was a broad running a holy roller dodge on one of the Greek islands," said the time machine. "Such was the power of publicity, even in ancient days, that little Venus Papadopoulos became a national celeb. One thing led to another, son of a gun, until today she's—"

"That piano playing," said Sara, halting on the top step. "Would that be Uncle Theo in there?"

"Nope, Theo's safely ensconced at Mama Grossman's Palace of Many Nations down on Pacific Street. The old skwack has a strange idea, by the bye, as to what constitutes international variety in doxies. Most of her girls hail from the Dakotas."

"Who is at the piano then?"

"Dr. Tenbrook claims it's the ghost of Chopin." Roscoe used the devil-head brass knocker. "But Freddie Chopin never had a left hand like that. Nor could he rag a tune to save his—"

"You act as though you believe this ancestor of Sara's really could summon up ghosts."

"That's no great task, my boy. Once in Denmark, while I was the weekend guest of Hamlet and his widowed mom, I conjured up the spook of his late pappy and much fun was had by—"

"Yeah?" The front door had opened to reveal a large, wide man in butler's livery. His low forehead was scribbled with deep scowl wrinkles.

"I am Maxwell Bodenheim," announced Roscoe. "These two clean-cut young folks are Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Lofton of Seattle, Washington. We are here, my good man, for the stance."

The butler, brow wrinkling further, studied each of them in turn. "C'mon in and park in de parlor," he invited in his gruff voice. "Day's a pota tea an' some little dinky sanitches on da sideboard. Ya can help yerselfs."

"Sounds most appetizing."

"Aw, de sanitches is fulla seaweed an' it'd take a whole platter of dem to give a canary boid a case of heartburn."

He led them into a large parlor off the hall. At the room's center, resting on a thick Oriental carpet, was a round mahogany table. Claw-footed and covered with a fringed shawl, around it were six chairs. The edges of the room were thick with mismatched articles of furniture, including the

upright piano, now silent, which Sara had heard from the porch. There were bentwood rockers, wicker armchairs, tufted hassocks, stuffed birds, Greek vases filled with rushes and peacock feathers, little imitation marble statues under bell glasses.

"Look," whispered Sara, nudging Tim and indicating the far wall. "A Tenbrook portrait gallery."

There were five formidable oil paintings, each ornately framed in gilt, hanging on the peppermint-striped wall. No matter which portrait you started with, each gentleman portrayed seemed a few notches uglier than the one next to him.

"Sara, you're absolutely certain you're descended from this particular branch of the family?" Tim accompanied her over to the group of paintings. "Even taking the possibility of a strong mutation along the way, I don't understand how a lovely girl like you can have—"

"Well, the Tenbrook males tend to be a shade beefy. Our women, though, have always been noted—"

"Beefy? This lad here looks like an ox . . . what's the nametag say? Sir Tobias Tenbrook. He's one of the ones you're researching, isn't he?"

"Yes, and there's a great deal of character in his face." She gazed at the portrait of the eighteenth-century sculptor. "I see determination written on that solid face."

"What's written on the nose is rum and brandy," said Tim. "He spent more time in pubs than in his studio, I bet. Sure, a nose like that you—"

"Tim, please, the noses of my ancestors are . . . well, don't kid, huh?"

The piano began playing once more.

Tim spun, then sighed out a breath when he saw their time machine seated at the keyboard. "You shouldn't be playing stuff like that," he suggested after a moment. "It's anachronistic."

"Who in 1906 is going to know that? Besides, 'Cow Cow Boogie' is one of my showstoppers. I came near to winning the Rubinstein Piano Competition back in the late twentieth century with this very ditty. Then the judges, swayed by one of their more conservative members, opted to award the palm to—"

"Right in dere, lady." The butler was ushering in a slender blonde young woman. "De sanitches are on de sideboard under dat lousy pitcher of de dyin' gladiator."

"Thank you most kindly, yet I fear I am not at all in the mood for food or drink of any sort." She was dressed in a simple floor-length black skirt, white blouse and black jacket. Her bonnet came with a thick veil and there was no makeup on her partially hidden face. "My name is Jennifer Pendleton," she said in her soft, polite voice as she gave the three of them a small, sad smile. She sat in a bentwood chair, demurely.

"And I, my dear young lady, am Maxwell Bodenheim," Roscoe told her, stepping near. "These two lovebirds I have in tow are Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Lofton of Seattle, Washington." His plazcovered nose quivered twice as he bent over the hand the seated young woman had extended.

"Whom are you seeking?"

Sara said, "You mean whom are we trying to contact in the spirit world?"

The blonde Jennifer nodded, sniffing. "Myself, I hope to reach my recently deceased mother," she said. "Oh, she was a saint, the poor dear thing." Her slim shoulders hunched, she began to sob quietly into a lace handkerchief. "Up at the crack of dawn to prepare me a hearty breakfast and minister to my every need, working till dusk to keep our humble cottage spic and span, never once indicating she was slowly wasting away due to a dread disease. And I, blind little fool I was, never suspecting. Preoccupied with my burgeoning career as a teacher of the piano, heedless of the many sacrifices the old dear was making so that I might . . . oh, it's too awful to contemplate." A more violent wave of sobbing shook her body.

"There, there, my dear." Roscoe patted her back.

She blinked up at him. "My, you have exceptionally strong fingers, Mr. Bodenheim."

"That comes from long hours at the piano."

"You, too, play?"

" 'Tis my prime delight in this life." The time machine settled into a loveseat next to her. "Perhaps we can exchange musical anecdotes while awaiting the arrival of the esteemed Dr. Tenbrook."

"Right in dere, granpa."

"Dang you, mine poy." A tall, rumped man with a thick white beard came shuffling into the parlor. "Goot effenink, mine frents. Brofessor Ulrich Von Hemmelscamp, dot's I'm."

"The noted psychic investigator?" Roscoe rose and held out a gloved hand.

"Der same."

"Charmed, my dear professor. I happen to be Maxwell Bodenheim and this fetching young lady is the recently bereaved Jennifer Pendleton. Others from left to right, are Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Lofton of Seattle, Washington."

"Zeattle? Many happy times I spunt in dat dod-gozzled town, you bet."

Roscoe, after shaking hands with the old scholar, rubbed at his disguised nose. "Are you here in a professional capacity this evening, sir?"

"Yah, I want I shoult zee Dogtur Tenbrook hold a gosh-woggled stance," answered Von Hemmelscamp, "I hear he's der best und mit him fakink is nix."

"He has an excellent reputation in supernatural circles," said Roscoe.

Sara, after absently picking up a small round watercress sandwich, returned to look at the family portraits. When Tim joined her, she said, "You have to admit Captain Firebrand Tenbrook has an impressive face."

"His chins, at least, are. Three . . . no, four of them."

"Are you sorry we're doing what we're doing?"

"No, I'm happy, long as you're doing what you've wanted to do for so long," he answered. "Even so, I'm not going to pretend these Tenbrooks arrayed before us are any better-looking than they actually are."

"That's enough, drat it! Cut it out, you dunces!" A small man of fifty-six was entering the room. Clad in a gray suit and yellow waistcoat, he was floating feet first, some three feet above the floor. As he drifted toward the round table he gave the impression he was struggling with several invisible beings who were carrying him against his will. "Quits, huh, Prince? This lacks dignity. Drat it! That goes for you, too, Chief!

Ow . . . oh . . . oof . . . ha ha ha ha." Apparently invisible fingers were tickling his ribs.

He made a swooping dive, landed upright in a chair at the table. Smoothing his pompadored gray hair, straightening his four-in-hand tie and adjusting his waistcoat, he said, "Good evening. I am Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook."

Sitting in the darkened parlor, Tim felt as though the blackness were creeping up on him. He gave Sara's gloved hand a squeeze, but she did not return the pressure. His other hand was in the rough grip of Professor Von Hemmelscamp.

Dr. Tenbrook was still squabbling with his spirit-world contacts. "Fellows, pranks are all very well in their proper place. You, in one of your too-frequent whimsical moods, saw fit to carry me into the parlor this evening. This, I must point out, caused me to look the fool in front of a gathering of new patrons," he was saying into the absolute darkness. "I must insist that we have no further clowning and help the anxious Miss Pendleton to contact her departed—"

Brapppppp!

A trumpet materialized, glowing whitely, above the spot where Dr. Tenbrook must be sitting.

"You'll excuse me, ladies and gentlemen," he said, his voice pained. "They will have their little jokes. I suppose it's comforting to realize they'll still be fooling around in the hereafter and yet . . . Come, fellows, we have a chore to handle for . . . Ah . . . ah . . . ungh."

"Ach, he goes into a dod-svozled tranz," whispered the delighted professor.

"Me Chief Limping Bear," announced Tenbrook in a new, grunting voice. "What you wantum?"

Jennifer shifted in her chair, then said, "I wish to contact my dead mother. Her name is Heloise MacGrader. The reason it's not Pendleton is that she remarried a Captain—"

"Me findum old squaw, skinny squaw keepum hush."

"Eggsellent, eggsellent!" muttered Von Hemmelscamp.

Sara took her hand out of Tim's, returned it after a half minute and pressed her fingertips into his palm.

"Not in happy hunting ground," said Tenbrook in his Indian voice.

"What do you mean?" asked Jennifer.

"Your mama not in spirit world. Her no dead."

"Oh, is this some cruel jest? Why, I mopped the poor dear's fevered brow as she sank into oblivion."

"Mama not dead . . . um . . . funny business going on. Me no understandum . . . Mama want to talk to you anyhow . . . but not from happy hunting . . . umm . . . ung . . . What the hell do you want, daughter? Tugboat Tessie's too damn busy to waste . . . Ung . . . oooh . . ."

Thunk!

"Lights! Lights!" boomed the professor.

A chair tipped over; the electric chandelier blossomed.

Dr. Tenbrook had fallen forward, head resting on the table.

"I feel this is, somehow, all my fault," said Jennifer.

Sara stood. "What's wrong with Uncle . . . what's wrong with the poor doctor?"

"Only a faint." Roscoe was beside the spiritualist, taking his pulse.

"Hey, what you bums doin' wit' da doc?" The butler, glaring, came lumbering into the parlor.

"It's a dod-gozzled psychic shock," said the professor. "Many times haff I heard of it, bud neffer did I zee vun."

"I suggest, my good man, that you deposit the doctor in his bed. He ought to come around in a matter of moments and a good night's rest will more than cure him," the robot said. "The rest of us had best depart."

"My mother really is dead," said Jennifer wistfully. "I was so hoping to talk with her just one last time."

"Und you don't know der lady wot was named Tugboad Tezzie?"

"Most certainly not."

"Okay, all youse better scram," advised the butler. "When his nibs has one of dese fits, it's rest an' some brandy dat brings him round."

"I really am very sorry if it was at all my fault." The blonde reached up under her veil to dab at her eyes.

When they were in their carriage and clomping back toward the St. Francis Hotel, Tim asked, "What actually happened?"

"First things first," said Roscoe. "How'd you fare, Miss Sara?"

The girl gave a disappointed sigh. "Not at all well, I'm afraid. I took about three steps out of the parlor and ran smack into that gorilla in the butler suit. Even when I told him I was looking for a bathroom, he shooed me right back into the séance parlor."

"You snuck out of there?" asked Tim. "No wonder your hand was so unresponsive for awhile."

"An old medium's dodge, my boy," explained the time machine. "I provided a fake mitt for the lady."

"You could've warned me in advance. Here I was sitting in the dark fondling a hunk of plaz."

"I'm sorry, but I thought maybe you wouldn't approve of my exploring the doctor's house while he was occupied with the spirit business," said Sara. "See, I want to get hold of family records and the like. I can't simply come out and ask for the information."

"Prowling around in that place, tangling with that goon. None of it's safe, Sara."

"Maybe not, but I know damn well I'm going to find the . . . find out all about my ancestors."

"Why can't you just pretend to be a reporter for *Harper's* or *The Atlantic*? Reporters can ask all sorts of questions."

"But that isn't exactly honest, either."

"More so than housebreaking, or pretending to be Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Lofton of Seattle, Washington," Tim said. "Next time, Roscoe, let me pick the fake names. I don't feel I'm a Clarence type at all."

Sara reached out and touched his cheek. "I appreciate your going along with all this," she said. "It is, believe me, for the good of all of us."

Roscoe drew out his cigarette case. "We can only remain in this epoch another day or so."

"Yes, I know, and so far I haven't made much progress at all," Sara said. "I'm wondering if it wouldn't be best for the three of us to split up tomorrow. I'll keep researching Dr. Tenbrook, Tim can collect data on Polly Tenbrook and you, Roscoe, can gather material on Theo."

"That isn't safe," said Tim. "Going around alone in this particular era could be dangerous."

After lighting a cigarette with a wax match, Roscoe said, "We have other problems to consider, my pets."

"What do you mean?" asked Sara.

"The tear-stained wretch calling herself Jennifer Pendleton was a ringer," he told them. "I got a whiff of a perfume known as Martian Ecstasy while I was slobbering over her pinkies. A synth scent of our own day it is. That's why the doc had himself a fit trying to contact her mother. Jenny never figured he could really do it, but he's not quite the quack some believe him to be. Since it's 1906 her real mom hasn't even been born yet. Chief Limping Bear must've traveled ahead in time, his spirit that is, until he bumped into Tugboat Tessie. The old dear is a skyboat pilot in the Mississippi Redoubt."

"Then that girl is from . . . where we are?"

"Exactly, Miss Sara. Her real name, if she is truly Tugboat Tessie's sprig, is Burma Brandywine. She's a notorious bootleg time tripper, specializing in swiping antiques out of the past. Quite often she works in cahoots with a lad name of Brains Bohak. He, in addition to being a temporal thief, is a very effective assassin. One of his favorite gimmicks is dragging some victim back into time and doing him in. The past is a great place to hide a body. Under an onrushing glacier in one of the Ice Ages, for instance . . . but I digress. Burma Brandywine and Brains Bohak. It's been my sad experience that when you run up against a gang who have alliterative names, you are always in for an especially large soupcon of trouble."

"What does she have to do with us?" said Tim. "She's from our own time, but she could be here looking for loot."

"No, she's obviously working for Uncle Oscar," said Sara. "He's bent on beating us to the . . . darn."

The time machine exhaled smoke. "The old prof isn't exactly kosher either."

"He's a fake from our own time, too?"

"Not sure," answered Roscoe. "His whiskers are fake, that much I'm certain of. I sniffed the spirit gum he used to slap 'em on with. On top of which, his German brogue is pure Katzenjammer."

"Then everybody at the damn séance was a fake," said Tim.

"Just about," said Roscoe.

CHAPTER 6

The morning air was thick with the mingled scents of ginger, sandalwood, frying poultry and incense. Making her way along Grant Street, alone, was Sara. She felt somewhat more at ease in her 1906 clothes today and was confident she was passing for a Chinatown tourist. The narrow sidewalks were already crowded with sightseeing visitors and Chinese.

Two sailors brushed by her.

"It's awful early in the day for poontang, Stan."

"I tell you, Len, these Chinks'll do it any time. And for six bits tops."

Sara dodged a pigtailed Chinese who was carrying an immense wicker basket of laundry. Up ahead, by nearly a block, was Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook. She could still see his gray bowler bobbing through the clusters of people.

Somewhere, in one of the nearby twisting alleys, firecrackers began sputtering. From the below-the-street doorway she was passing drifted wailing Oriental music and the click of ivory counters.

"A gambling den," she decided.

"Silk kimono?" inquired a fat and smiling shopkeeper. His three surviving teeth were brown-stained, his eyes clouded. "Got him in your size."

"No, thank you."

"Buddha? Real jade."

Shaking her head, Sara kept on. She had the momentary impression someone was watching her. Risking a glance to her left, she discovered it was only a window tank full of goggle-eyed fish.

Perhaps she should have let Tim come along with her this morning. Not that there could be much trouble in Chinatown in broad daylight. The research Sara'd done on this period indicated a good part of Chinatown's sinister reputation was a fraud, a romantic fiction created for the tourists who flocked there.

A Chinese with one eye winked at her from the doorway of a tea shop.

Sara, eyes on her ancestor's bobbing bowler, increased her pace.

The real problem was, she wasn't quite ready to explain to Tim the actual reason for their trip backwards in time. Roscoe, whom she'd sworn to secrecy, knew.

You really ought to tell Tim, she said to herself. That's one thing people who love each other do; they're honest.

When she knew more. Then she'd tell him everything.

All the digging she'd done had convinced her Ambrose was the key man. If anyone knew the secret, he did. Polly Tenbrook, the trickshooter, most likely had nothing to do with it. Which was why it was safer to send Tim off to gather information on her.

Earlier this morning, hiring a carriage at Union Square, Sara had gone to the Telegraph Hill neighborhood of her ancestor's house. From across the street she'd watched the place, hoping for a

chance to look around should the doctor and his servant leave. When, an hour later, Dr. Tenbrook had come rushing out of his Victorian home in an agitated state, she decided she might learn something by following him.

"Where's Harpoon Louie?"

A husky seaman in a grubby peacoat had planted himself in her path. The hand which gripped her arm was tattooed with bright blue sharks cavorting.

"Let go of me, you nurf."

"You're his woman, ain't you? Sure, I seen you in the Bella Union with Louie only last week it was."

"You're mistaken." She kept her voice under control. "Please, I'm in a hurry."

"And I, miss, want that fiver Harpoon Louie's owed me . . . oof!"

She'd kneed him expertly in the groin, her long skirt hindering her hardly at all.

As the sailor doubled up, he let go of her to clutch at himself. "You must be his ladyfriend, treating a fellow like this," he muttered while sinking to the cracked sidewalk.

Sara hurried on.

She didn't see Ambrose Tenbrook. He'd been up on the next block when the tattooed seaman had waylaid her. Now there was no sign of him.

Walking even faster, she got to the spot where she'd last seen the doctor. It was in front of a narrow curio shop, the only window full of yellowed ivory Buddhas and packets of incense. Peering through the dusty window, she saw that Dr. Tenbrook wasn't inside the place. Immediately next to the shop was an alley marked Monsoon Lane. He might have turned down there.

"Better check on it. Darn."

The cobbled alley snaked along for about five hundred feet and ended against a blank brick wall. There were three doorways on its left side, two with signs in Chinese only tacked over them. There was one door on the right, nearly hidden by several high stacks of crates full of protesting chickens.

The chickens, white hens mostly, were packed six to eight to the small lathed crates. They clucked forlornly, perhaps sensing their fate, fluttering their wings as best they could, scattering loose feathers free of the wooden bars.

Sara was halfway along the alley when, from behind one high stack of crates, a hand shot out and caught hold of her.

The Bascom Hotel resembled an enormous wedge of wedding cake. Fronting on Columbus Avenue, it stood four stories high on a triangle of land at the edge of the Barbary Coast area. The hotel had been painted white some years before the turn of the century and was now a sooty cream color. A lone seagull, strayed from the not too distant Bay, was circling its flat roof when Roscoe alighted from his carriage in front of its gilded carved-wood doors.

"Meet me back here in an hour, Dunn."

The driver tugged at the brim of his cap. "Right yer are, guv," he said. "'Avin a bit of han hassignation, are yer?"

"Tut tut, Dunn. Such questions aren't proper between master and servant." Smiling, adjusting his yellow kid gloves, the disguised time machine strolled into the ornate lobby of the Bascom.

The registration desk was a large curve of marble, which supported two gilt-based lamps. No one appeared to be behind it. Sprawled in a huge Morris chair near one of the potted palms was a snoring fat man in a flowered bathrobe and silk top hat.

Roscoe strode up to the desk, lifted the small brass bell from atop it and gave a few enthusiastic peals. "I assure you," he boomed in a voice which had a trace of a French accent in it, "that the Count Erkmann-Chartrian is not a man to be kept waiting."

"Coming right up, coming right up." Diminutive fingertips appeared, grasping the other side of the marble-topped registration desk. A small, child-sized head followed. "Royalty don't cut no ice with me."

Scowling at the emerging midget, Roscoe said, "It was my understanding a suite would be ready the moment I arrived, my petite friend."

The midget eased his small backside onto a high stool, twisted his moustache as he eyed the time machine. "I was once a matinee idol," he said.

"The American public has never been noted for good taste." Roscoe drummed his fingers on the desk. "My staff was to have arranged for a suite in this establishment. It is to be large, quietly furnished and on the third floor facing your splendid bay. If you will be so kind as to—"

"What have you got in your glove, buddy, a fist full of nickels?"

Roscoe ceased his drumming. "I can assure you that Count Erkmann-Chartrian does not—"

"You sure you never heard of me during my heyday? Hell, I toured all over Europe and most other civilized parts of this old giddy globe. Most of the quality folks went absolutely wild over me," explained the midget desk clerk. "I was known as Major Small and thousands flocked to—"

"Will you kindly produce a bellman to escort me to—"

"Major Small caused a sensation in all the swell spots of the world. Such cosmopolitan cities as Karlovac, Meerut, Antofagasta, Delft, Bratislava, Zwolk, Nizhny, Bulawayo and Linz."

"Those are all tank towns, buster."

"Yeah, well, I've seen a lot of royalty, but I never laid eyes on a count like you," said Major Small. "Where, for another thing, is your luggage?"

"It was to have been conveyed here from the steamer. Do you mean to tell me those idiotic draymen haven't—"

"No luggage and you pay a week in advance, count. So fork over thirty bucks or scram."

Roscoe made a sneering sound. From an inner pocket of his Norfolk jacket he withdrew an alligator wallet and produced three ten-dollar bills. "Here you are, little sir."

"Gee, paper money. We don't see much of that out here."

"Now can you tell me if my suite on the third floor is ready?"

Major Small was holding a ten up to the light from one of the desk lamps. "Looks real."

"It is real, you peckerwood."

"So how about I put you up in the Presidential Suite on four, count? I know when your secretary telephoned he insisted on rooms on the third floor . . . By the way, was that guy suffering from the influenza? Talked like he was holding his nose."

"You don't know a brilliant impersonation when you . . . Ahem. I must insist on a room on your *third* floor."

"It's rather noisy up there at times, count" Major Small put the ten-dollar bills away under the counter. "The Bascom Hotel is, as our stylish décor hints, a high-class joint, even though we are in close proximity to the Barbary Coast. It pains me, therefore, to have to admit that the one blemish on our escutcheon happens to reside on the very third floor we been batting the breeze about."

"I am prepared to put up with a few blemishes if I can satisfy my desire to dwell on the third and not—"

"See, count, there's a guy name of Theo Tenbrook living on three. You never know when he's going to be in, since he pops off on dubious errands at all hours." Major Small rested a tiny elbow on the marble top and lowered his piping voice. "If you ask me, this Tenbrook guy's got something on Mrs. Bascom, otherwise the old crow wouldn't let him play his damn piano up there in a lowdown barrelhouse manner at all hours of the day and night."

"The third floor is what I carve. It's an obsessive sort of thing, but I insist on having my whim indulged." He produced another of his highly believable ten-dollar bills. "I'm sure this will persuade you to have me conveyed without further delay to a suite on the third floor."

Giving a tiny shrug, the major said, "Oakly doaks, count. Three it is." He put his cupped hands to his little mouth. "Rupert, front!"

After a moment a tall, slightly bent old man came shuffling into the lobby. He was wearing a faded bellhop uniform and cap. His arms were several inches too long for the jacket sleeves, his pale face was speckled with gray whiskers. "Rupert's took sick," he said. "I'm Rudolph, filling in."

"Sick? What do you mean sick?"

"Ailing, got big red splotches all over him and fuzz on his tongue," explained Rudolph. "Whereat is the gent's luggage?"

"Coming from the steamer." Major Small tossed a large brass key to the ancient-looking bellman. "Show the count to 301-302."

Rudolph gave a wheezing whistle. "The Royal Suite, huh? Ain't that something," he observed in his frail old voice. "Walk this way, sir, and I'll run you up in our elevator."

"I hope you enjoy your stay, count." The major disappeared behind the desk.

Roscoe rubbed at his plazcovered nose while the elevator cage rattled and sighed upward. Eyes narrowing, he studied the stooped bellman beside him. "Been in this line of work long, my man?"

"Most of my life, at one hotel or another, sir."

The Royal Suite consisted of three large rooms. The vast living room had a bay window which faced the San Francisco Bay. Stopping by it, Roscoe gazed out "Someone ought to build a span across that."

"That's what Emperor Norton used to say, but they wrote him off as a loony. Will there be anything else, sir?"

From the adjoining suite came the sound of piano music. A frilly and sentimental tune.

"Would that be the fabled Theo Tenbrook I hear tickling the ivories?"

"The same, sir," replied Rudolph, shuffling toward the door. "It's not so bad when he's in one of these romantic moods, so they say. The worst seems to be the military marches he's fond of playing in the wee hours. Well, good day."

Roscoe flung him a spurious coin. "Here you are, old fellow."

After the bellman had left, Roscoe went into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the ornate four-poster. He leaned until his ear was near the wall between his room and Theo's. The piano was still being played.

"There's a clinker." The robot winced. On the wall opposite, where it could be viewed by whoever occupied the bed, was a framed print showing a tiny blonde child lost in a snowstorm and as yet unaware that a ravenous wolf was stalking her across the windblown drift.

"The things one suffers for Spanish gold," said the time machine.

Theo finished the tune. Followed it with an Irish ballad.

Roscoe all at once jumped from the bed, swinging up his right arm.

He wasn't quite fast enough.

In the open doorway of his bedroom two people had appeared: A slender blonde young woman and a thickset man of thirty-five. Although they were fashionably dressed in the style of 1906, the weapon in the man's fist was from Roscoe's home time.

Before he could act and utilize any of the defense mechanisms built into him, the silvery gun hummed. A beam of glaring yellow light raced across the room to smack into the robot's chest.

CHAPTER 7

Tim, after adjusting his bowler hat at what he hoped was a serious angle, walked directly up to the gate in the high wooden fence. The sun was in its midday position, the enormous red words lettered on the whitewashed planks proclaimed *MACQUARRIE'S FUN GARDEN! Now Appearing . . . Colonel Pawnee's Original & Authentic Wild West Show! Complete with RED Indians! Daredevil Riders! PLUS The Darling of the Rifle Range . . . Deadeye Polly Tenbrook! Matinees Daily (Except Mondays)!*

Holding the feathered Indian headdress out a little farther from himself, Tim knocked on the gate with his free hand.

With a creak, the gate swung open inward. A waiter in a shiny tuxedo and frayed white apron stared out. "Not open yet."

"I'm from Golden Gate Costumers." Tim fluttered the feathers. "This is a rush order for Chief Sleeping Bear."

"That pansy. I'd have thought he'd prefer hair ribbons," said the lanky man. "A drunken Indian is bad enough, but an effete one is even—"

"As I understand it, a cat made off with his original headgear. If he doesn't get this replacement right away, this afternoon's show will be in jeopardy."

The waiter shrugged. "You'll find the old darling over in the tent area." He moved back, tugging the gate a few feet wider open. "Careful he doesn't sneak up on you and make an improper advance. These devils in moccasins are hard to hear."

"I'll be on guard. Thanks."

MacQuarrie's Garden was an outdoor restaurant and entertainment arena, with a hundred or more tables set out on a plank floor which gradually climbed up and away from a large circular area. The arena was thickly covered with fresh sawdust. Off to the right of the gateway stood a low wooden building which housed the kitchen and business offices. Far across the three acres encircled by the wood fence was an undeveloped field. Pitched on that were several dozen army-style tents. Wandering among them were Indians, cowboys, horses and assorted other Wild West performers.

Tim weaved his way through the empty tables and cut across the sawdust area, making sure to keep the headdress he'd purchased in a Mission Street pawnshop for \$1.75 held out in front of him.

He felt slightly guilty, since he wasn't doing exactly what Sara had suggested. According to her, he could best play his part in the researching of her roots by attending today's matinee of the Wild West show and turning in a detailed and vivid description of Deadeye Polly's sharpshooting act. "And try not to make it as matter-of-fact as those college reports you write," she'd told him. Tim assured himself, again, he wasn't going against Sara's wishes just because she'd made that, surprisingly, misinformed remark about his prose style.

Well, maybe that was part of it. More important, though, was his growing suspicion something was going wrong. Their reason for being here in the past . . . Sara was keeping something back about that. She'd made a couple of slips, so had their nitwit time machine.

"Brimstone!"

A portly gentleman had come flying through the air to land in the dirt at Tim's feet. He had shoulder-length silvery hair, a handsome goatee and moustache. His smartly fitting suit was of fawn-colored leather, rich with fringe and decorated with rivets of real silver and beads of turquoise.

Tim, whose mind had been briefly wandering in pursuit of his unsettling suspicions about what Sara and the robot were up to, noticed now an impressive white stallion pawing the grass a few yards away. A patient cowpoke stood near it, hands in jeans pockets.

"Fell off your horse, huh?" Tim helped the white-haired man to his booted feet.

"Fell? Fell! Fire and brimstone and eternal damnation, young fellow. That beast deliberately threw me hither."

"You must be Colonel Pawnee," Tim realized when he saw the man upright

Brushing at his fringed jacket, the colonel replied, "Could there be two such as I? Fiery inferno! Where else would you see a man attired thusly, his impressive countenance weathered by the wind and sun of the prairies and plains of the vanishing Western frontier, his keen eyes squinting slightly as an aftereffect of hunting bison and—"

"You do look something like Buffalo Bill," said Tim. "I've only seen pictures of him, of course, but—"

"Willy Cody? Why, rolling thunder, the man's a fraud, a poltroon and an opportunist. I am contemplating a lawsuit against him for so flagrantly swiping my idea for this original and—"

"Colonel," drawled the patient cowboy, "you want'er try ut again?"

Colonel Pawnee pulled his fringed white gloves on tighter. "I suppose I must."

"Wellsir, folks is kinda on the wonder an' all."

Thrusting his shoulders back, the colonel approached the now calm stallion. "Personally, Tucson, I feel my entrance in the blazing covered wagon is more than sufficient, not to mention damn impressive."

Shrugging, Tucson spit out tobacco juice. " 'Cept them newspaper waddies been needlin' you in the pages of the *Chronicle*, the *News*, the *Bulletin*, the *Call* and young Mr. Hearst's *Examiner*. Shucks, don't make no never mind to me an' the other wranglers whether you come into the arena in a blazin' wagon or on Blizzard here. But, dang, it seems to mean somethin' to these writer hambres. 'How come we never see Colonel Pawnee up on top of a hoss?' 'Can't the old bamboozler even ride a nag?' 'How'd he shoot all them buffalo—from the back of a train?' The general public's startin' to . . . other side, suh."

The colonel had been attempting to mount Blizzard from the animal's right side. "What's that, Tucson?"

"You gotta climb aboard from t'other side."

"Thunder and hellfire!"

Tim moved along. At the rear of the small tent city sat three tents which were considerably larger. This must be where the headliners lived. He wasn't exactly certain what he was hoping to

learn by eavesdropping on Sara's ancestor. But maybe he'd get a clue as to the real purpose of this journey back through time.

It was over an hour later that Tim saw a middle-sized young man come hurrying into the tent occupied by Polly Tenbrook. From old photographs San had insisted on sharing with him, he recognized this fellow in the checkered suit and cap as Theo Tenbrook. When Tim, who'd been ducked behind a stack of large packing cases next to one canvas wall of the lady sharpshooter's tent, moved, his left leg produced a loud snapping sound. He hunched, stretched his arms and crawled nearer to the canvas.

". . . it is, Polly," Theo was saying, his voice high-pitched and excited. "It's deuced upsetting."

"You're much too high-strung, Theo," Polly said "I sometimes wonder how you can climb over rooftops, sneak into the most fashionable of Nob—"

"Don't go babbling about my nocturnal career, Sis," he cut in. "What I'm trying to tell you is, someone's on to us."

"That's very unlikely dear. We've been quite smart."

"You never pay attention to what I'm saying. Listen now, Polly, the young lady who attended Uncle Am's séance last night is working with the coppers."

Tim eased closer.

"Which one? I can never see them too clearly, crouched in that cabinet and working the wires."

"The pretty little thing, the one who was a considerably more innocent image of you."

"That little redheaded snip? Looks like me? Why, her bosom couldn't possibly measure—"

"Enough of your vanity, Sis. That young woman followed Uncle Ambrose into the heart of Chinatown when he went to call on our fen . . . to call on Fang Gow."

"Perhaps she only wanted a private consultation, She didn't get much for her money last night, what with him pulling that faint and all."

"He claims it was on the up and up," said Theo. "This young lady followed him from his digs to Monsoon Lane. Fortunately, you can't tail Uncle without his catching on. Laying a snare, he caught this little snooper. Right now she's reposing in one of Fang Gow's many cellars."

Tim started to stand, angry. Getting control, he stayed where he was to listen.

"That wasn't a wise move, Theo. They'll have us all up for abduction."

"Bosh, girls are being stolen off the streets and sold into a life of vice all the time in Frisco. It is, dear sister, all part of a grand old local tradition," he said. "In this case, though, the dear thing won't languish long beneath Chinatown."

"Am's not intending too—"

"No, no, he's going to have her conveyed to his place on Telegraph Hill," her brother explained. "That little laboratory he keeps on the second floor is a splendid place to question curious investigators."

"Suppose she's working for Jack Darwin?"

"Uncle Am will find that out."

"Darwin's not a man I want to annoy."

"He's been deuced lucky working as a private inquiry agent," said Theo, laughing. "The Nob Hill swells have hired him to see if he can do better than the corrupt and bumbling police force in trapping the Society Cat Burglar. That was weeks ago and the Society Burglar remains uncaught."

"I don't like this new turn of things, Theo. Taking jewels, silver plate and gold from the rich is one thing, but—"

"There's one other item which has me a bit concerned. Just before I got the telephone call from Uncle I was practicing in my quarters at the Bascom. A deucedly odd row got going in the very next . . ."

Tim decided not to listen further. He had to get Sara back from Ambrose Tenbrook.

The way to do that was to get hold of Roscoe and then pay a call at the doctor's gingerbread mansion, Tim eased up out of his hiding place, started hurrying back the way he'd come. Bringing the robot time machine into this, despite his feelings about Roscoe, was going to be necessary. Rescuing Sara was pretty certainly going to require weapons. They'd better take advantage of all the tricky stuff that was built into the machine. Even if it meant being anachronistic.

When he reached the gate, the lanky waiter was still lounging nearby. "Couldn't find the old dear?"

Tim noticed he still had the feathered headdress. "Oh, it turns out the cat brought back the original one." He went rapidly out into the early afternoon street.

Suppose they couldn't free Sara, or even find her, until the quake hit. That was set for a few minutes after five this morning. Not all that far off.

"Wait a second." He halted on the sidewalk, glancing around at the fields and few scattered houses of this neighborhood of the Mission District.

Roscoe had been assigned to collect material on Theo. Logically, therefore, the robot ought to have followed him here to MacQuarrie's Fun Gardens.

But there was no sign of either the disguised time machine or his carriage. The sole vehicle in view was the buggy Tim'd hired for himself.

He went sprinting over to it and told the driver to rush him back to the St. Francis Hotel.

CHAPTER 8

Tim never reached the wide stairway which led up to the entrance of the St. Francis Hotel. He was still on the sidewalk in front of the towering structure when Dunn hailed him from the curb.

"Guv, hi arf ter speak ter yer." His cap was being twisted and throttled in his hands. Behind him his carriage horses waited with heads downcast and manes drooping.

Checking the gold watch he carried in his vest pocket, Tim found it was nearly two in the afternoon. "I have to see Ros . . . Mr. Bodenheim," he explained, halting. "Is he up in our—"

"Ow, hat's just hit, sir. 'E haint." Strangling his cap, Dunn stepped up onto the sidewalk. "Hit might be me hown bloody fault, guv, 'cept hi didn't see 'ow hi coulder 'elped none 'thout comin' to a bloody bad hend me hown self."

"What do you mean, did he have an accident?"

"Well, hi wouldn't call hit a haccident, sir. Not hexactly, since them blokes seems ter 'ave planned hit real careful like, don't yer know."

Tim took hold of the driver's arm. "What blokes?"

"Hactually, guv, hit were two chaps hand a laidy." Dunn started to shiver. "Hi wish, hi truly do, the bloomin' breeze hadn't come up."

Taking a deep breath, Tim said, "C'mon, Dunn, relax and explain to me exactly what's happened."

Dunn looked away, his gaze stopping for a few seconds on the monument to Admiral Dewey which rose above the trees and foliage of Union Square across the street. "When the bloody wind blew orf 'is 'at, it were 'orrible ter see," he said, quaking. "Hit up an' blew orf 'is 'air has well, do yer see?"

"You mean a bald man scared you?"

"Skin don't scare me, guv. But this chap 'ad a glass top to 'is bloomin' 'ead, 'e did," Dunn said with a gulp. "Hi could see 'is brains an' all plain has day."

"Brains Bohak," guessed Tim, recalling the description of the temporal outlaw Roscoe had given him "What'd this guy with the plaz . . . with the glass skull top do with Mr. Bodenheim?"

"'E took 'im. The free of 'em did, took poor Mr. Bodenheim houter the Bascom 'Otel, an' 'im staggerin' like a drunken lord an' 'owlin' like a banshee an' aquotin' poretry an' ol' parliamentary speches an' Lor' knows what offer nonsense. If hi 'adn't seen that bloke's hawful 'ead, hi'd figured as Mr. Bodenheim was honly taken drunk an' 'is friends was seein' 'im 'ome." Dunn shuddered. "But hi fear, sir, there's a lot more wrong than that"

"Yeah, you're right," agreed Tim. "Do you know where this gang took him?"

"Wellsir, has chilled and nery has hi were feelin' hafter observin' that bloke's gray an' slimey brains under glass, still hi 'ad the persistence an' presence er mind ter foller 'em," said Dunn proudly. "Hay fearful hexperience 'at were, too, follerin' the likes o' them inter the Barbary Coast, even though it were broad daylight." He tugged his cap back onto his head. "They all went inter a low dive known has Mammoth Martha's Melodeon wiff 'im. Gettin' hup me nerve, hi made me way

hup ter the swingin' doors for a bit of a looksee. By that time poor Mr. Bodenheim nor none of them was ter be seen, guv. Hi 'ad the wind up ter such han hextent that I never even went inside ter avail meself hof the generous free lunch counter."

"What do you know about Mammoth Martha's, the layout and who owns it?"

"Yer weren't intendin' ter go pokin' in there, was you?" Dunn took a few steps back, teetering on the curb before hobbling into the cobbled gutter. "Hi was figurin' more has 'ow yer'd get the bobbies in ter 'elp."

"There's not enough time for the police," said Tim. "So tell me about the place."

"Wellsir, despite a himpressive free lunch policy, the Melodeon 'as a general reputation for bein' a rotten dive," began the carriage driver. "Hit's a wide open 'ell 'ole, for sure, caterin' to a very rough clientele hand haint 'ardly a tourist spot the way some of them bistros in the Barbary Coast his. There's 'em 'at says many's the young lad who went there lookin' fer a fine time an' awoke ter find 'imself haboard a bloomin' ship bound fer Shanghai." He leaned in toward Tim, voice growing more confidential in tone. "Hi've 'eard as 'ow they halso 'as 'idden rooms way down below ground where hall sort hof devious work his carried on, sir."

Tim thrust a hand into his trouser pocket. If he went after Roscoe, Brains Bohak, a noted killer, might practice his trade on him. But in order to get Sara free of her crooked ancestors, he needed the robot's help.

They also needed a perfectly functioning Roscoe to take them back to their own time.

"Roscoe first," he decided.

He checked his watch again. A little more than fifteen hours left before the city would fall apart.

CHAPTER 9

Tim's tambourine rattled. Tucking it under his arm, he loosened the collar of his uniform and then adjusted his visored cap. Apparently no one had rented this Salvation Army uniform for quite a long time and the red-trimmed dark cloth smelled strongly of mothballs and dust. He was about to look at his watch again, then thought better of it. Not too sensible to flash gold right here on Pacific Street in the heart of the Barbary Coast. Just before getting out of Dunn's carriage a block from here, Tim had consulted the pocket watch. It had been a minute past four in the afternoon, meaning it was about five past now. Only a bit more than thirteen hours before San Francisco went blooey.

"Out of my way, parson." A husky man in ranch-hand garb elbowed by.

"Still time to repent, brother," suggested Tim.

"Fat chance." He pushed through the swinging doors of Mammoth Martha's Melodeon.

This was Tim's destination, too. The dive where Brains Bohak, who was more than likely in the pay of Oscar O. Tenbrook, had dragged the apparently fritzed Roscoe.

Down the block to his left two sailors came roaring out of the Bella Union.

"I tell you, Stan, they got 'em as young as thirteen."

"Ain't that illegal, Len?"

"Not in Frisco."

Laughing, they trotted into the Ace Hotel, which stood between the Paradise and the Melodeon.

"Pardon me, sir."

A thin young girl, not more than fifteen and freckled, was tugging at his uniformed arm. Her bonnet was decorated with imitation roses, she carried a wicker suitcase held up against her narrow chest,

"Yes, my child?"

"Could you direct me to the Elite Hotel, please."

Tim said, "That's a rather notorious place, young woman."

"Yes, I know, I'm seeking employment," she explained. "It's either this or a life of drudgery on a Modesto dairy ranch."

"You can't work at a place like the Elite."

"Easy enough for you to say."

Reaching into a pocket of his uniform trousers, Tim took out two of the believable twenty-dollar bills Roscoe had provided him with. "Listen, take these and get the hell out of San Francisco. Quick."

"What sort of proposition is this?" The girl didn't touch the money.

"Hurry up. Go back to the Ferry Building, jump on the first one headed for Oakland," he urged.

Tentatively she touched the plausible bills, then folded them into her gloved hand. "Forty bucks is an awful lot for a Salvation Army private to be handing out."

"I've had a very good day with my tambourine," he told her. "Now, hurry up. Go away, get clear of Frisco."

"I don't want to go back to Modesto."

"Forty dollars, given the monetary values of this era, will last you quite awhile. If you're smart you can get a job before it runs out and keep from becoming a hooker."

"You have an unusual turn of phrase for a—"

"Do you believe in premonitions?"

"Well, my Cousin Norbert dreamed once that—"

"Good, exactly. Being a highly religious sort, I often have visions." He put a hand on her thin arm. "I sense that if you don't get out of town damn quick, something rotten is going to befall you. Understand?"

She rubbed the folded bills across her freckled chin. "I suppose I could get some sort of nice job in Oakland, maybe in a department store."

"Of course. The important thing is not to dawdle. Take the first ferry out."

The young girl tucked the paper money away in her bodice. "I will. Thank you." She hesitated, then stretched up to kiss him on the cheek. Turning, she went hurrying away in the direction of the bay.

"Sentimental nitwit," he told himself. He walked on into Mammoth Martha's Melodeon.

He found himself in a huge, high-ceilinged room. Across the far end stretched a stage, masked at the moment by drawn green velvet curtains. There were at least seventy-five round tables on the saloon floor, each covered with a checkered cloth. Along the left wall was a bar, made of highly polished teak, behind which two bartenders were at work. Both of them were fat, had glossy hair parted in the middle and enthusiastic moustaches. Behind the bar hung an immense mirror framed in gilt. Roughly half the tables were occupied.

"Scram," suggested the nearest bartender.

"Sodom and Gomorrah," said Tim loudly and piously. "Yes, brothers, Sodom and Gomorrah looked like a Sunday school picnic ground when compared and contrasted with San Francisco. And of all the vile and sinful spots in this city by the bay, the vilest and most sinful is right here on the Barbary Coast,"

"Hogwash," said a man who had a hostess on each knee.

"Fortunately it is not too late to repent." Tim remembered his tambourine and shook it. "Otherwise . . . well, otherwise this whole darn city may be destroyed as a punishment for its wickedness."

Even if everybody in Mammoth Martha's did repent on the spot, the town was going up in smoke, anyway. But Tim wasn't allowed to mention that, since it would be a violation of the Time Travel Overseeing Commission rules. He could even get into trouble for telling that girl from Modesto to get out of town.

"All donations gratefully accepted." Tambourine held out, he commenced making his way among the tables.

He was hoping he'd be able to get into the back rooms, under the pretense of collecting funds. If Roscoe were being held here, there must be some clue as to where.

"You're new in this neighborhood, sonny." An immense woman in a beaded silk gown and a huge picture hat trimmed in real ostrich feathers had come waddling up to him. Her wide face was coated with dead-white powder and her lips and cheeks were painted a shade of red which was deep enough to pass for black in the dim light of the saloon.

"I am, ma'am. In fact, I just got transferred here from Modesto," he said, smiling fervently. "Do I have the pleasure of addressing Mammoth Martha herself?"

"You do, honey, you do." She laughed, caused ripples to travel up and down her three-hundred-pound body. "I'll tell you something, sonny, there's no need to annoy my customers. They're heathens for the most part, anyway. Let them concentrate on guzzling and fanny pinching, if you'll excuse my frankness. Come along back to my office and I'll donate a substantial sum to you for the good work of the Salvation Army."

"Why, I'd appreciate that, Mammoth Martha."

"You're a good-looking lad, young as well." She patted his upper arm. "In tip-top physical shape, I'd guess. Darn shame you took a vow of celibacy."

"No, I never did anything like that," he said. "You have me mixed up with the clergy."

"Indeed?" She reached around to pat his left buttock. "Do come along to my private office, honey. Right through that green door over there."

Tim crossed the saloon, opening the door. He stood inside to allow the enormous owner of the Melodeon to enter the corridor first.

"You go ahead, sonny," she said. "Second door on your left."

Tim entered the shadowy hallway. He'd taken five steps when he heard a clicking sound behind him.

"Bon voyage, sucker."

Before he could move, the floor opened beneath him and he dropped right down into a rectangle of blackness.

CHAPTER 10

". . . It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . Now there's an opening teaser for you, Charlie. That, trust me, is a real grabber which'll quite awe the groundlings . . . Excuse me, Timothy, my boy, I find myself a bit . . . pixilated . . ."

The first thing Tim thought of when he came to was the time. He ignored the vaguely familiar voice babbling somewhere in the damp underground room and tried to get his pocket watch out.

That proved to be impossible.

Tim, fully awakened now, discovered he was securely tied to a cane-bottom chair with thick shaggy ropes which reeked of both machine oil and sea brine. "What the hell time is it?"

The man sitting opposite him in the overstuffed armchair was wide and low-browed. He had a blaster rifle across his knees. "1906," he replied.

"I mean the hour."

"Ten goddamn minutes beyond my chow time."

"C'mon, what's the exact time?"

The guard consulted the watchdisc implanted in his wrist. "Ten in front of five."

"In the morning?"

"Naw, in the evening, palsy," he said, grinning. "You wasn't in snoozeland that long, even though you hit your coco a good one when Mammoth Martha sprung the trap door on you."

"I'm afraid, my boy, you find me in a sorry state," said Roscoe, who was trussed up in a chair against the far wall. One of his sideburns was gone, his cap was pulled down too far on his forehead and his Norfolk jacket was smeared with dirt. "They used a . . . my heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains my senses, as though of hemlock . . . Okay, Soc, don't listen to me. But, were I you, I wouldn't guzzle a drop of that stuff . . ."

"Roscoe, what the hell did they do to you?"

"Used a simple disabler on him," explained their guard. "It was, 'cording to Brains, only supposed to make him docile. Somehow, though, it must've jiggled his brainbox. He's been giving out all kinds of drivel since we grabbed him."

"A disabler? Shit, how are we going to—"

"Escape the quake? You ain't."

"Nonsense, my boy," said the time machine. "Don't let this lout discourage you. He happens to be, by the bye, a notorious heavy known as Slam Sidemann. You'll no doubt recollect my prior warning to be on the lookout for goniffs with alliterative names who . . . Awake! for morning in the Bowl of Night has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to flight . . . Not bad, Fitz, except it doesn't quite have the Persian zing, if you dig me . . . If you're really going to try to pass these little ditties off as being penned originally by that boorish mathematician who . . . Where was I, Tim? My mind has been . . . Ahem. Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. As for this surly and ill-mannered minion of Brains Bohak, why he's nothing but a . . . prickle, an arse-opener, a bald-headed hermit, a belly ruffian, a bumtickle, a crannyhunter, a dibble, a dingus,

a fiddlediddle, a gooser, a nocker, a pecker, a pillock, a radish, a ramrod, a quimstake, a rolling pin, a rumpsplitter, a truncheon, a peewee, a twanger, a yard, a yumyum, a ticklegizzard . . ."

"Impressive," observed Slam while the time machine, eyes glowing in an unsettling way, continued his mutterings. "I've traveled quite a bit back and forth through time, but I got to admit this gadget knows a hell of a lot of ways to call a guy a prick."

"Listen, you people are all obviously working for O.O. Tenbrook," Tim said. "I'm not sure why that old nitwit wants to disable our time machine and maroon us in '06. But he can't possibly want Sara, his own niece, to come to any harm. You've got to get at least Sara back to our own century before this whole damn city starts to burn."

Slam, one eye narrowing, leaned forward in his soft chair. "You know where the little lady is?"

"She ought—"

"Ixnay," warned Roscoe, whose mechanical mind had again stopped wandering. "Don't tell this gungel anything!"

"But somebody has to save—"

"Uncle Oscar doesn't want any of us to survive the upcoming upheaval, my boy," the time machine told him. "*Comprende?* His orders to Brains Bohak were almost certainly to see that all three of us were stranded here. If we're all destroyed when the walls come tumbling down, so much the better."

"Sara's damn uncle is an asshole, but he wouldn't let her get killed in—"

"He most certainly would, when the prize happens to be . . . To what cannot you compel the hearts of men, O cursed lust for gold! . . . Producing a rasping, whirring sound somewhere in the vicinity of his chest, Roscoe slumped and his eyes clicked almost shut.

"Obviously goofy," said Slam. "I wouldn't pay any attention to his advice, kid."

"Much as I hate to admit it, during his lucid moments he seemed to be making sense," said Tim. "So I'll pass on trusting you guys at all."

"You ain't being smart, palsy." Slam, keeping hold of his blaster rifle, stood. His boots made scuffling sounds on the concrete floor as he moved closer to Tim. "You tell us where Sara is, we'll guarantee she gets safely home before the big one hits Frisco at a few minutes after five tomorrow morn . . . Oof! Clunk!"

Tim had brought his head up, hard, into the leaning gunman's prominent chin. Slam jerked back, making angry grunts. Struggling in his chair, Tim tried to yank even one hand free. Enough to reach down and grab the blaster rifle Slam had dropped when he butted him.

"Smartass," said the guard, spitting out blood. "You made me bite my goddamn tongue." He came back, kicked out at him and sent Tim and his chair toppling over backwards. The chair cracked and broke into its components when it smacked into the hard floor. Tim felt the ropes holding him go slack. He wiggled, stretched and got quickly out of them and to his feet.

Slam was stooping to retrieve his lost weapon. "That really hurts, you know. Biting your own damn tongue."

Tim dived, tackled him around the knees. They both fell into the fat chair Slam had been using.

Just then the door of the underground room came smashing open.

"Enough of this," announced a deep, firm voice, "Don't move, either of you."

From his position sprawled under the heavy guard, Tim got a partial glimpse of the man on the threshold. He was tall, bearded, holding a Colt six-shooter in each strong hand. He was wearing a Salvation Army uniform.

"Shit, what now?" said Tim as he disentangled himself from Slam.

CHAPTER 11

"You there in the raiment analogous to mine," ordered the man with the twin guns, "please be so kind as to unpinion, if you would, your bedraggled companion."

"I'm not really one of your Salvation Army people, not an actual . . . soldier." Tim started for the comatose Roscoe. "This uniform I'm wearing is only sort of a disguise."

"Likewise mine, which, allow me to point out, is but one of several hundred cunning and artful dissimulations in my repertoire."

Roscoe's head jerked up, his eyes clicked all the way open. "Tonight, my boy, we must . . ." The eyelids snapped shut and he slumped once more.

"Roscoe, c'mon. Up and at 'em, huh?" He gave the trussed-up machine a nudge.

"I suggest we hasten your comrade to a medical practitioner."

"A good mechanic would be more—"

"My boy, get me to the Opera House," mumbled the dazed robot. "We must get there in time to hear Caruso and Fremstad in *Carmen* . . ."

"I'm impressed at encountering someone with, if I may so phrase it, an interest in the finer things. In my line of work one seldom, more's the pity, does."

"What is your line?"

"I am . . . Ah, don't attempt to retrieve that infernal weapon, brigand," he warned Slam. "A most unusual bit of craftsmanship it is, too, and no doubt is some new experimental device utilizing steam. Where was I? Ah, yes, sir, I have the distinct pleasure of being no less than Jack Darwin."

Nodding blankly, Tim said, "Oh, so?"

"You may be having trouble recognizing me because of my impenetrable disguise," suggested Jack Darwin.

"I think I've heard of you."

"Most certainly you have. Everyone on the Pacific Coast, as well as, I might modestly add, most of the denizens of the Eastern Seaboard, have heard of Jack Darwin, master detective."

Tim snapped his fingers. "You're the guy who's on the trail of the nitwit local Tenbrooks."

"Precisely," answered the master detective, "which is why I came bursting into this sin-ridden den to effect your succor. Now, if I may, allow me to reiterate my suggestion you untie your companion from his hempen entanglements. Time is fleeting."

"It sure as hell is," agreed Tim. "Is it okay if I use my pocketknife on these ropes?"

"By all means," said Jack Darwin. "My astute raticcinative sense has long since convinced me you're, at worst, but a helpless dupe in this nefarious conspiracy."

"You are going to get your toke in a sling," warned Slam, "if you futz around with the boss, palsy."

Jack Darwin laughed. "Threats, my friend, even when uttered in the argot of the underworld, have never been known to deter or even faze me," he explained, placing one six-shooter in his waistband and inserting the other between his teeth. "Allow me to further mention, should you be entertaining the slightest doubt, that I have trained for long and painful hours until I can fire this gun by pulling the trigger with my tongue."

"Somebody ought to've told you it ain't polite to talk with your mouth full," said the sneering Slam.

"Ha ha. I always appreciate a sense of humor in my adversaries," said Jack Darwin around the clenched gun. "You'll oblige me, sir, by turning your back to me. I shall then proceed to encumber you with the ropes discarded by our young dupe."

"Brains'll fix your skycart"

"Watch those damn anachronisms," said Tim, who had the time machine just about free of his bonds.

Roscoe stirred, babbling, ". . . tick tock . . . tick tock . . ."

"Try to stand," Tim urged him. "It'll help our retreat if I don't have to drag you."

"They also serve who only . . . Recite that again, John. I really don't think it scans. And, trust me, even you can't get away with a sonnet that's fifteen lines . . ." Rumbling, ratchetting, the time machine rose to his feet

"Good," encouraged Tim, getting in position to bolster the heavy robot if he lurched.

"*Voilà!* as they are wont to say across the sea." Jack Darwin transferred the six-shooter from between his bright, even teeth to his right hand. "This rascal, whoever he may be, won't be doing any peregrinating for the nonce. A year spent before the mast in my bygone youth made me a master of knots."

"You tied me too frapping tight, nurfhead," complained Slam. "My arms is getting all prickly."

"The life of crime isn't all cakes and ale," reminded the master detective as he stepped back from his handiwork. "The way of the transgressor must oft include prickly sensations in the limbs."

"Asshole," remarked Slam.

"If your bedazzled crony can be guided out of here," Jack Darwin said to Tim, "we can effect our departure."

"You can walk okay, can't you, Roscoe?"

". . . Tramp, tramp, tramp the boys are marching . . . Boots-boots-boots-boots-movin' up and down again! . . . Feets, do your stuff . . ." Eyelids half open and flickering, the robot began to walk.

Taking hold of his arm, Tim urged him in the direction of the doorway. "I'm not exactly sure why you rescued us from this setup, Mr. Darwin."

"I shall, I assure you, explain all once we are free and clear of this foul den," said the master detective. "For now let me simply mention that we still have a very busy night ahead of us."

"That we do," agreed Tim.

CHAPTER 12

Jack Darwin took off his pants.

While their carriage went clattering up from the Barbary Coast to the nearby Telegraph Hill area, the master detective explained the case he was working on. "The brains of the operation is Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook, of that fact I am almost absolutely certain," he told Tim, propping his alligator bag on his bare knees and drawing a pair of buckskin trousers from it. "My Wild West disguise will be precisely right for our evening's adventure."

Tim consulted his pocket watch yet again. It was nearly six-thirty. "Why, exactly, did you—"

"As I was saying, Dr. Tenbrook has been diabolically clever in the setting up of his burglary ring." He lifted his backside off the slightly bouncing leather seat to slip on the fringed pants. "Through his fraudulent spiritualistic sessions he learns all sorts of intimate details about his most wealthy customers, including, often, the very locations of their most prized valuables. He is also, as I'm certain you've by now surmised, in a position to know when his intended victims will be at home and when they won't. I quite soon established the fact that a goodly number of the targets of our Nob Hill catman were patrons of Dr. Tenbrook's currently fashionable stances. Furthermore—"

"Cuckoo, cuckoo," remarked the bleary-eyed Roscoe, who was sitting stiffly between Tim and the detective.

"Are you certain you don't want to drop your friend at a—"

"These spells pass. He'll be fine soon." He'd better be or they'd all spend their remaining days in twentieth-century San Francisco.

"At the sound of the cuckoo the time will be . . . later than you think," intoned the dazed time; machine. "Summer is acomin' in . . . the bird is on the wing . . . cover your noggins . . . cuckoo, cuckoo . . ."

Frowning, Jack Darwin took a white Stetson hat from his bag and adjusted it atop his head. "Furthermore, a majority of these audacious crimes actually took place while the victims were attending one of the insidious doctor's ghostly charades."

"So while he was putting on his spook shows, Theo Tenbrook was out hopping over rooftops and breaking into mansions?"

"Precisely, Tim." Jack Darwin fixed a wisp of beard to his strong chin. "This William Cody touch is what makes this particular disguise so convincing. Miss Polly Tenbrook, whenever she's in our fair city and can skulk away from her dramatic obligations, aids her brother. Oft times acting as lookout while Theo commits his bold deeds of looting."

"An illustrious family, sure enough," said Tim. "Not an honest one on this whole branch . . . But you still haven't quite explained why you rescued us."

"Throw out the lifeline, mother, the *Grosvenor* is sinking fast!" said Roscoe in a falsetto voice.

"When I first encountered you three, I suspected at once you were not what you pretended," explained Jack Darwin as he got into a fringed buckskin jacket. "I soon satisfied myself you were not new additions to Dr. Tenbrook's nefarious crew, and it therefore seemed likely you were fellow investigators bent on—"

"Hey! You were Professor Von Hemmelscamp . . . at that séance we went to."

"Eggsactly, mine poy," replied the master detective with a chuckle. "A very convincing and absolutely authentic Prussian accent and manner is one of the many—"

"Pure Weber and Fields," muttered Roscoe.

Tim said, "Okay, how did you know we were locked up under Mammoth Martha's?"

"Your addled friend here struck me at once as the most audacious of the lot," said Jack Darwin. "I decided, therefore, to follow him for a bit and ferret out any new leads he might be privy to. To which end I trailed him from your hotel on Union Square down to the Bascom. By cleverly bribing the true bellman, I was able to take his place. It was one of my more convincing impersonations, suggesting the various blights of age while—"

"No real old coot smells so strongly of spirit gum and face powder, hambone," put in Roscoe in a fairly coherent fashion. "When I'm back in tiptop shape I'll give you a few tips on the subtle art of—"

"I'm glad you're rallying," said Tim, nudging the robot. "Let him finish explaining, huh?"

"Spirit gum, Hans and Fritz dialects. Oy," said the time machine. "Even a dummox like Garrick never resorted to—"

"Concentrate on collecting your wits," advised Tim.

"My wits are in crackerjack shape, dimbulb, it's me dratted gears which are galley west and—"

"We'll discuss it in private later."

Jack Darwin nodded thoughtfully, making his false beard waggle. "A fascinating case for an alienist," he observed. "Well, back to my stirring narrative. Hardly had your poor unhinged friend here—"

"Listen, chumpo, I'm no more daffy than—"

"Knock it off, Roscoe." Tim nudged him again.

Jack Darwin continued. "Hardly had your associate settled into his suite when a rival gang of hooligans burst in upon him. I couldn't stand by and let a fellow investigator be kidnapped and, quite probably, sunk in the waters of the bay. Therefore, I cleverly trailed them to Mammoth Martha's, neatly disguised myself in a uniform of the Salvation Army and made my play. Our subsequent conversation satisfies me that I did the right thing and that you are indeed my peers in the investigative field."

"We are indeed," assured Tim. "Sent out, as I may have mentioned, by a well-known Eastern detective agency to look into the very crimes you're interested in. It's an honor to be working with a detective of your reputation and ability, Jack."

"Why, thank—"

"He couldn't find his fanny in the dark without a road map," said Roscoe.

"Thank you," said the master detective.

"Now that our associate, Miss Tenb . . . Miss Tennyson is in the clutches of Dr. Tenbrook, we're going to have to act. The time for careful and thoughtful ratiocination is over."

"Exactly, sir." Jack Darwin snapped his fingers and gave Tim a stalwart smile. The smile caused his beard to drop off his chin.

"You ought to switch to Elmer's glue; I use it exclusively." Roscoe retrieved the fallen beard and dropped it in the master detective's lap. "A little dab is . . . Oops, it hasn't been invented yet. Excuse it."

"Your associate, Tim, has an obviously brilliant mind. Yet at times I—"

"So do I. Now about Sara . . . Miss Tennyson. We have to get her out of that house by . . . well, damn soon."

"The kidnapping of this young woman gives us a perfect excuse for bold action. As you so wisely put it, Tim, the time for calm reflection and ratiocination has passed. Deeds not words are what is called for at this juncture." He restuck the Buffalo Bill beard to his strong chin. "Here's what I think has to be . . . Ah, but we've arrived at our destination."

Their carriage had clattered to a stop across the twilight street from the doctor's ramshackle Victorian mansion.

In a lowered voice Jack Darwin said, "Cleverly disguised as a member of Colonel Pawnee's own company, I should have no trouble gaining admittance to the house. Westlake will beyond a doubt mistake me for a cohort of Polly's and I can overpower him easily."

"Who's Westlake?"

"The butler, a low and cunning rascal if ever I saw one."

"We met him, but didn't get his name."

"Perhaps you know him under his alias of Spanish Fly Phil or Basher Donnie or—"

"Nope, haven't had the pleasure. Now, about the plan?"

"Ah, yes, action is paramount at this juncture." He gave his hat a final adjusting pat, "You two make your way around to the rear of the house. Should anything go wrong in my assault on the weaselly Westlake, which I sincerely doubt, burst in and come to my aid. Otherwise, once I've trussed him up and deposited him in a handy cabinet. I'll dash back and let you in. Together we shall charge the doctor's second-floor lab, where you have reason to believe Miss . . . Tennyson, is it? . . . is being held in durance vile. Give me a moment and then make your move for the back of this den."

"Okay, good luck."

"Try to see that your false whiskers don't fall off," added Roscoe.

Jack Darwin gave his cowboy hat a final pat and dropped from the carriage. He went strolling across the street, affecting a bowlegged walk. When he was roughly halfway across the weedy front yard someone opened a window on the second floor of the Tenbrook house.

A rifle barrel came poking out and started shooting at the disguised detective.

CHAPTER 13

The rifle cracked twice; Jack Darwin's Stetson went frisbeeing off his head. As the master detective dived into the high grass and weeds his goatee flew free and went spinning away on the twilight breeze.

Tim, meantime, dragged Roscoe out of the carriage door farthest from the doctor's house. "So much for the element of surprise."

"Even a nearsighted babe in arms could see through that—"

Ka-ping!

A rifle bullet had missed the ducked down detective and nicked the chubby Venus which decorated Dr. Tenbrook's overgrown lawn.

"Not a very good shot is Deadeye Polly," remarked Roscoe. "Most women aren't. Although Diana could work wonders with a bow and arrow. Could pot an apple off a feller's head eight times out of ten. She and I almost became an item back in Ancient Greece until—"

"Hit hain't safe haround 'ere! Giddyap!"

Their carriage went rolling away, leaving Tim and the robot hunkered down behind nothing.

"Come along, m'lad." Rising, the time machine tugged him to his feet. "We'll do some broken-field running and attack these louts from the rear. I picked up some nifty commando tricks over in South Africa during one of the many Boer—"

Ka-bam!

Crash! Ka-tinkle!

Jack Darwin, ducked down behind the Venus, had sent a shot from his revolver crashing into the upper pane of the window where Polly Tenbrook was stationed.

"Peckerhead!" she yelled out at him.

"Ah, associating with show folk has had an obvious negative effect on her," said Roscoe while he and Tim went skittering across the darkening street and into the weedy lot next to the Tenbrook house. "I was quite surprised once, while helping the divine Bernhardt to strap on her wooden leg, to hear the lass curse with a vocabulary that would have raised hackles on the Billingsgate docks or—"

Pong!

The time machine staggered, went weaving through the grass. His arms came up to flap a few times like stiff wings. His teeth hummed, his eyes flickered. Stumbling to his knees, he swayed and then thunked over on his side. "The wench is improving," he groaned. "Shot me right square in the . . ." He rolled over, face toward the sky, and lay silent in the high grass.

"Shit, where are we going to get spare parts in 1906?" Tim, who'd been down on his hands and knees since Polly's shot had smacked into Roscoe's metal chest, began to move ahead. The dusk was thickening, closing gradually in around him.

He crawled away from the fallen time machine, working toward the rear of the high narrow house. Before he reached the back door, it came snapping open. Out hurried Theo Tenbrook, Westlake the butler, Dr. Tenbrook and Polly.

"We're thinning them out, damn it," the lady trick-shot was complaining. "Let's make a stand—"

"My child, I fear the jig is up," said the doctor. "We're surrounded by Pinkertons, I am certain."

"We got to scram," added the butler.

"Agreed." Theo dashed for a lopsided shed, yanked open the plank door. Inside was a covered carriage to which two gray horses were hitched.

"We'll fight some other day." Dr. Tenbrook urged Polly toward the waiting carriage.

Tim eased slowly closer, striving not to rustle the grass or prickly weeds.

In another moment the four were in the dark carriage and it came rolling out of the shadowy shed and onto a gravel path.

"Where the hell is Sara? Didn't they take her with them?" Tim stood, ran for the back door, which still hung open.

He clomped up the back steps and into the dark hallway. There was a smell of gunfire in the house.

"Sara! Are you alive?"

"Yes! More or less." Her answer came from upstairs. "I'm tied to a chair, though."

Tim climbed the padded steps two and three at a crack. There was thin lamplight coming through an open doorway at the end of the upper corridor. He ran for that.

The young woman, hair fallen across her forehead, was strapped and tied into an ornate metal and leather dentist's chair in the white-walled laboratory. "It wasn't you she shot, then?"

"Nope, your illustrious ancestor didn't succeed in potting me."

As he hurried over to untie her, he glanced out the broken windows and saw Jack Darwin sprinting along in the wake of the escaping carriage. The master detective made an impressive leap, caught the rear of the carriage and hoisted himself onto its top.

"Your other respected ancestor, the good doctor, is pretty handy with knots. Very efficient, too, using both ropes and leather straps and . . . what's this one? A chain."

"One of his séance props. For ghosts to rattle," said Sara. "They didn't hurt me much, if you're interested."

He took out his pocketknife, started in on the thick yellow ropes first. "I am."

"You sound miffed."

"Miffed may not quite be the apt word, Sara."

"I had no idea we were going to get tangled up in Uncle Ambrose's criminal—"

"Yeah, but you knew he was a crook. Him along with the piano player and the sharpshooter." He sliced through one of the ropes. "Filling my innocent head with a lot of crap about how terrific all of 'em were, how distinguished."

"I romanced them some," she admitted. "That, really, was simply so you'd agree to come along."

"I know. You and Roscoe had to con me into making this jaunt." After cutting the last of the ropes away, he started unbuckling the heavy straps. "We're not doing research on your nitwit ancestors at all, we're looking for some kind of damn lost treasure."

Sara lowered her eyes. "It could be worth several million dollars," she said quietly. "When we find it, you won't have to teach if you don't want to. We can lead a life that's—"

"Listen, since I set foot in this era I've been dropped into pits, shot at, nearly shanghaied. You might, Sara, have given me a little advance warning."

"I wasn't anticipating so much . . . ouch."

"Sorry."

"Once we have the money we really can—"

"Whose dough is it?"

"Well . . . mine."

He unbuckled the final restraining strap. "What do you mean yours?"

"Mine and Uncle Oscar's. Since we're the only surviving heirs," Sara told him. "See, the gold disappears here in San Francisco, during the 1906 quake. I'm almost certain of that. I figured if I could get some clue as to where Uncle Ambrose kept it stored, then we could come back in our own time to dig it up. None of them returned to the city after the quake, so it must have been buried and lost at that time."

"How did this con man get several million in gold?"

"Originally it was pirate loot."

"Ah," said Tim, "gathered no doubt by that other pillar of society, Captain Firebrand Tenbrook. Back in the seventeenth century."

"Yes, he was sort of a pirate."

"This damn chain."

"It's made of rubber, actually. I think he keeps it around for the looks of it. The padlock is real, but I bet you can cut through the links."

Tim began trying that. "Uncle Firebrand had millions in stolen gold, huh?"

"In doubloons and that sort of thing."

"The result of a lifetime of looting, pillage and rapine."

Sara gave a small shrug, causing the rubber chain to jingle. "Most of the great family fortunes have shady beginnings," she said. "Anyway, this family treasure was handed down through the generations, ending up here in '06, far as I can tell. The references I dug up indicate nothing was

seen of it after this. Therefore, this seemed the best place to start our search . . . except we got all fouled up with their silly cat burglar business."

"Why'd a guy sitting on several million in Spanish gold bother with housebreaking?"

"I'm not sure. Perhaps the challenge of—"

"There, that takes care of the chain. Can you move?"

"Not very well. I'm pretty numb."

"I'll rub your wrists and ankles. We have to get moving out of here."

"You still sound sort of grouchy."

"Probably due to the fact that I *am* grouchy."

"I was, honestly, going to tell you the truth." She wiggled her fingers as he massaged her lower arm "But you tend to be so darn fussy about things."

"Things like stolen goods and housebreakers and kill-crazy riflewomen, yeah."

Sara sighed. "I didn't learn one darn thing," she said. "I'd almost believe the gold wasn't here, except those veiled references I came across sure made me think it was."

"Your dear Uncle Oscar," he told her, "is after the gold, too."

"All that eavesdropping he does on me, that's how he found out what we're up to."

"He sent a gang, headed by a guy name of Brains Bohak, to foul us up. Fortunately, with the help of a master detective named Jack Darwin, we may have shaken them off for now."

"Foul us up how?"

"They seemed anxious either to kill us outright or strand us here and let the earthquake and fire do it."

"They won't be able to strand us now." She made a wobbly attempt to stand. "Roscoe can take us back to our own era and we can work out our next trip into time." She frowned, noticing his unhappy face. "Our time machine is with you, isn't he?"

"Sure, he's right outside."

"Well, then we—"

"He's flat on his ass in the weeds," said Tim.

CHAPTER 14

The time machine lay silent, eyes wide open but unseeing, on the fourposter bed

Sara, sleeves of her white blouse rolled up, was leaning over his open chest. "His innards are quite a bit more complicated than those of the Robot Rockettes," she said while making another adjustment with the tiny electroscrewdriver in her hand. "Them I learned to fix darn well when I was piloting the Flyin' Music Hall."

"You're doing fine." Tim was standing next to her, holding the small toolbox they'd taken from one of Roscoe's backside compartments after getting him back to their rooms at the St. Francis Hotel. He used his free hand to sneak his gold watch out of its pocket.

"You can tell me," the young woman said.

"Which?"

"The time."

"Around four a.m."

"Give it to me exactly."

"Four twenty-one."

"Okay, we have almost another hour to get him back in working order."

"This hotel isn't going to collapse when the quake hits," he reminded. "I learned that from my brainbox briefing. Meaning we have as much time as—"

"C'mon, you know it's going to burn a few hours later. Just like a good part of the rest of San Francisco."

"A few hours extra you may need."

"Aunt Polly's slug didn't do any serious damage." Sara stood away from the injured time machine, rubbing the back of her hand across her perspiring forehead. "But coupled with what this Brains Bohak's gang did, it pushed poor Roscoe over the edge again. You sure my Uncle Oscar hired Brains?"

"Who else?"

"I guess so." Squinting slightly over the open tool kit, she selected a lazdrill. "I didn't think Uncle Oscar was quite that rotten. I've never at all liked him, but I've always tried to keep my dislike and loathing under control because it's not very nice to hate a blind person."

"Hating old O.O. Tenbrook isn't going to draw any criticism from me," Tim assured her. "I've mentioned this before, Sara, but are you absolutely sure you really belong to this Tenbrook clan? All the rest of them seem to be killers, crooks, scoundrels, rogues—"

"Archbishop Tenbrook was sainted, back in 1502."

"Two good apples in the barrel isn't much."

"Well, I'm a Tenbrook. No doubt. Didn't you notice how much Polly looks like me?"

"In a rough sort of way maybe."

"She walks in beauty . . . boop boop ee doop . . ." murmured the robot.

"Hey, there's a good sign." Sara grinned. "I've got him at least muttering again." She continued with her repair work.

Tim crossed to the window and looked down at Union Square. All seemed calm and peaceful. A carriage was going by and when it was opposite the Dewey monument the horse suddenly shied. Front legs went up, hooves flashed.

"Premonition." Tim returned to the bedside.

". . . trust me, Abe. You'll look a hell of a lot better with a beard," Roscoe was babbling. "Just between you and me, I've been in on quite a few presidential campaigns . . ."

"Darn." Sara had her nose close to the open time machine. "I wish I was certain about what they used to frazzle him."

". . . did a little PR for a few kings, too." Roscoe's eyes were blankly staring at the high ceiling. "Where do you think Arty got the idea for that round table? He wanted to have 'em gather at a booth in a local tavern . . ."

"You've got his ego working anyway," said Tim.

She said, "By the way, do you hate me?"

"Nope."

"We could very well end up stranded here at the start of the twentieth century."

"The TTOC'll send a rescue team eventually."

"If we survive the quake and the fire and all." Deftly, Sara used a plazsolder gun on Roscoe's intricate interior. "I'm rigging an unorthodox splice, trying to bypass the damage. Although not recommended for extended and long-term use, it should fix him up well enough to get us home."

". . . how's that grab you, Marcel? We open with you eating some kind of silly cookie and then we do a flashback to your goofy childhood in . . ."

"Roscoe, can you hear me?" asked the girl.

". . . sure, the telephone idea is okay, Alex. But why don't you add that little gimmick I dreamed up? You can put it right there . . . Just a little slot to drop nickels in . . ."

Shaking her head, Sara asked, "Time is it?"

"Twenty to five."

"According to most authorities, the quake'll hit us at about 5:13."

"Keep working, don't worry."

"What's bothering me is a new idea I'm having," Sara said. "If I don't get him fixed before the big quake hits, it may jiggle some new damage into Roscoe."

"We'll be headed for home long before the quake."

"You're becoming an optimist."

"Gallows courage."

"There!" Laughing, she stepped back.

From inside the time machine came a faint sizzling sound.

Roscoe sat up. "Get the idea, Wash? This Van Winkle jerk takes a snooze that . . . Ah, Tim, Sara. Why for are youse gathered round me pallet like grieving kinsmen?"

Tim moved nearer. "How do you feel?"

"In the pink." The robot frowned down at his wide-open chest. "Ah, it all comes back to me now. Those rowdies in the pay of Uncle O. zozzled me and then Pretty Polly got in a lucky shot." He used a forefinger to probe his interior. "You've done a handsome job of remedying the damage, Miss Sara. It should enable us to make the jump back to 1814."

"1814?" said Tim. "Are you still dippy? We have to get Sara back to our own time. Before Brains Bohak and the rest catch up with—"

"Use your coco for something besides a hatrack, m'lad. Home is the last place we wish to be," said Roscoe as he modestly closed up his front. "That, putz, is exactly where they'll look next. We outwit them by hiding out in a safe spot I know of in Regency England. From there we can check on the other Teabrooks and get clues to the still, I presume, missing gold."

Sara said, "I didn't learn a darn thing. I don't suppose you did either."

"Alas, no," replied the time machine as he swung off the bed. "I was unfortunately incapacitated by the opposition before I could dredge up much info."

"If we could just come back here again, start over at April 16th and—"

"Not possible under the narrow Time Travel Overseeing Commission antiparadox regulations," said Roscoe. "We can pass this way but once."

"I had to go and foul up."

"Tut tut, Miss Sara, don't fret. We'll fall back on our contingency plan and search amongst your ancestors in other climes and times." He patted her slim back. "There's a strong possibility we'll find a clue to the eventual disposition of the booty when we visit 1814 England during the reign of King George the Goofy. That's where your dear old relative Sir Tobias Tenbrook hangs out, the rumpot."

"I felt sure I'd be able to find out about the treasure here in ought six," she said forlornly. "My research techniques aren't what I—"

"Five AM," mentioned Tim, his watch again dangling from his hand.

"Stow my toolkit in your pocket, I don't feel like dropping me trousers at the moment," said the time machine. "Both of you take hold of my supple and sturdy arms and we'll bid farewell to Baghdad by the Bay."

Sara gathered up her suitcase, Tim collected the rest of their luggage. Each got a grip on one of the time machine's arms.

After a moment Roscoe said, "This makes me feel deucedly inadequate. Next time I pop in on Sig Freud I'm going to have to talk over—"

"Why aren't we departing?" asked Tim.

"You've hit the crucial question square on the cabeza, sunshine."

"Aren't you completely fixed?" said Sara. "Did I do something wrong?"

"I feel a teensy weak spot in my chronic gyros, plus a booger of an itch in the crotch," answered Roscoe. "The itch we can ignore, but . . ." Freeing himself from their grip, he undid his shirt and popped the metal chest panel once again.

Sara leaned and peered inside. "Everything looks okay to me."

Poking a finger into himself, the robot said, "What ho, I do believe I've located the root of our problem. My left telekinetic gudgeon is frozen."

"How'd I miss that? I can fix it with—"

"No need, little missy." Roscoe held his left finger up in front of his face until it was humming and glowing a pale orange. He probed into his open chest with it. "There, that did it. And, what do you know, the itching's stopped, too. Catch hold, kiddies."

They did.

He set a destination, smoothed down his shirt front. "Off we go to jolly Albion."

Nothing occurred in the way of time travel.

"Nell's bells, I'm still on the fritz," complained Roscoe.

Tim fetched out his watch again. "We've only got about seven minutes before—"

The door of their room made an unusual sound.

Then almost all of it disappeared. Standing in the hotel corridor, a lazgun in his hand, was a stocky man in a tweedy suit. He smiled, tipped his bowler to them. The top of his skull was made of clear see-through plaz.

CHAPTER 15

Brains Bohak stepped through the remains of the door, elbow brushing at the dangling brass doorknob. "Raise your hands, one and all" he instructed. "You've caused us no end of trouble; escaping from my trusted hireling, tying him up so tight he's still too numb to—"

"Can it," suggested the blonde girl who came into the room after him. The stungun in each hand clashed with her demure 1906 floor-length skirt and black-trimmed jacket. "We've only got about five minutes to snarf these nerfs and haul ass out of here."

"The girl at the stance," recognized Sara.

"The notorious Burma Brandywine, wanted in at least three different centuries for heinous crimes and misdemeanors," said the time machine, his arms held high. "You folks had surprise on your side when last we met."

Brains put his hat back on, then tapped his gaudy vest. "Anybody who chooses to travel through time with a big bulky hunk of hardware like you deserves whatever befalls him or her. These microminiaturized strapon time machines are much more—"

"Stuff the sermon, Brains, we only got two minutes until the frigging quake hits." Burma aimed one stungun at Sara and one at Tim. "You're going to love the fire, if you wake up before it barbeques you."

The floor hopped.

The walls started to shake and throb.

"What the hell!" exclaimed the startled blonde.

Everything in the hotel room was rattling, quivering, striving and struggling to move.

"Hit the deck!" Roscoe advised Tim and Sara. His starched shirt front went rolling up, a small compartment in his lower abdomen flew open. Two tiny gun barrels came thrusting out. "Here's a surprise for you two loons."

Before the now shaking Burma could swing her shivering guns up to aim at him, a beam of dazzling golden light shot from one muzzle and found her chest.

Another beam from Roscoe's stomach guns slashed at the vibrating Brains, whose derby was clattering on his plaz head.

They both sighed, dropped their respective weapons in a dozing-off way and went thunking down to the fluttering floor.

"Lord." Sara rose from the spot where she'd dived.

Tim moved to her, got an arm around her shivering shoulders. Inside him an enormous unease was growing; he felt certain the floor was about to give way and drop both of them down and down into the bowels of the earth. "It's okay, it's okay. The hotel is going to hold, remember?"

The tremendous shaking and grinding began to slacken and slow. But then it accelerated, became worse and worse. The walls groaned, the flowered rug undulated. The panes in the windows, every one, popped, shattering into jagged shards which went spinning and falling to the rambling street far below.

Roscoe, moving in a sort of hopscotch fashion, was at the side of the stunned Brains Bohak. He was soon unfastening the man's vest and shirt front.

Tim became aware of a great roaring, uncertain whether it was the roar of the quake or something happening inside his head.

Brains Bohak made one quivering jerk and then vanished.

From the outside came the sounds of everything falling down. Bricks ceasing to be buildings, toppling into ragged piles, clacking and crumbling. Streets ripping open, cobblestones spewing up and flying.

"Roscoe, what the hell are you doing?"

"Nice pair of yonkers on this wench," remarked the robot while unbuttoning Burma's blouse and reaching into it. "Most mean-minded dames have teenie weenie kabobs. Although Lucretia Borgia had one fantastic set of—"

"They're wearing strapon time machines." Tim moved away from Sara. "We could use them to get clear of here."

"Redundant." Roscoe rubbed his hands together.

The unconscious Burma kicked both feet twice before fading away to nothingness.

Dust, from the ripping plaster and disintegrating mortar, was rising up from the ruined streets to come swirling in at their jagged windows.

"You tin-plated buffoon, you've gone and stranded us here!" accused Tim. "Sent them home and kept us here in the damn aftermath of the worst—"

"Horsepucky," said the time machine. "I didn't send either one of these bad actors anywhere near home. After jobbing each cheapjack little time machine so it'll go flooey once it delivers each of them to their destinations, I sent Burma to Spain of the well-known Inquisition and Brains to Cleveland in 1953, one of the dullest spots in all of recorded history. That'll give 'em pause."

Outside a horse screamed, a woman cried out, a child called for help.

The enormous spasms had wound down, everything in the room was still and silent again.

"An interesting postcoital feeling pervades after a really hangup quake." Nodding, Roscoe smiled with satisfaction.

"What are you smirking about?" demanded Tim. "You play a dumb practical joke on the opposition, leaving us stranded here to face fire, flame and—"

"Every cloud has a silver lining, dork," Roscoe told him. He held up his forefinger and middle finger. "This quake had two. Firstly, it distracted our foes long enough for me to get the drop on them. Secondly, and equally important, this little conniption of Ma Nature's jiggled me back to absolutely A-1 working condition, I trow."

"You sure?" asked Sara.

"Trust me." The robot held out his hands to them.

From below came a faint crackling sound. A fire was starting.

"Bon voyage," said Roscoe, taking hold of each of them, "if I do say so myself."

This time he worked.

CHAPTER 16

"Not those frocks, Miss Sara, only the ones on the left of yon wardrobe closet." Roscoe stood near the stone fireplace of the enormous bedroom, hands held toward the crackling blaze. "The rest belong to our host."

Tim was at one of the leaded windows looking out into the fog-shrouded grounds. "Host? What sort of nitwit—"

"Lloyd's okay," the time machine assured them. "He isn't sexually odd or anything, he simply enjoys dressing up in Regency ladies' clothes. He finds it easier to do that here in early nineteenth-century England than it was in our own day so—"

"We're the house guests of a queer illegal time-alien?" Tim turned away from contemplating the estate's wooded acres to frown at the robot.

"Lloyd isn't queer, except on the subject of clothes," said Roscoe patiently. "Oh, and be sure to address him as Duchess and not—"

"Couldn't we use some other spot for our Regency period headquarters?"

"We ain't going to find anyone else as simpatico as Lloyd . . . as the Duchess," Roscoe said. "He allows me to store some of my gear and props here, use his mansion as a waystation. On top of which, Miss Sara, we are only a scant fifteen miles from the domicile of your noted ancestor, Sir Tobias Tenbrook."

Sara lifted one of the gowns out of the wardrobe closet, held it up to her slim body. "All of these have such high bodices."

"That's the Empire style for you," said the time machine. "What you have there, though, is an evening gown rather than a walking gown, which is what's called for at this time of day. That pale fuchsia job ought to do. It's exactly your size."

She hung away the light blue gown, took out the one he'd recommended. "I'll look like a big scoop of sherbet in this thing," she said. "And besides I don't think I ought to wait around here in the Regency period while you two go risking—"

"Wait now," said Tim, holding up a hand. "We've already debated this, Sara. The Caribbean island where Captain Firebrand Tenbrook hangs out isn't safe for you."

"Tim, I appreciate your deciding to help me hunt for the lost treasure, but—"

"It's a contest between us and that nitwit uncle of yours. We're going to beat him to the gold."

"As I say, your new attitude really pleases me, but I can hold my own in any kind of frumus," she insisted. "Admittedly I was waylaid in Chinatown, but you fellas got swoozled by disablers and dropped through floors in low Barbary Coast dives and I don't think you fared much better than I did. Oh, and Aunt Polly darn near did you in, Roscoe."

"Ah, but we survived, little missy, eluded our cunning captors and effectively yanked your bacon out of the fire."

"Sure, with the help of that ridiculous private eye with all the false hair and dreadful accents. If he hadn't come stumbling into—"

"Sara," cut in Tim, "Roscoe and I are going to make certain the treasure actually does exist back in the seventeenth century. We should have done that in the first place. Once that's established, we'll hurry on back here to the winter of 1814 to see if it got as far as Sir Tobias Tenbrook. And we'll find out exactly what he does with the gold when he's forced to flee unexpectedly to America because of his amorous fooling around."

"Seems a shame," Sara said, laying the dress across the spoolbed. "A gifted sculptor like Uncle Toby being hounded out of England for nothing more serious than flirting with a married lady."

"A legion of married ladies," corrected Roscoe. "He put the boots to myriads of the ninnies whilst their lawfully wedded hubbies were away on various business, military and literary—"

"At least Uncle Toby never dressed up in drag and called himself duchess." She folded her arms under her breasts.

"Hey, don't get too sentimental about this guy," warned Tim. "Your Uncle Ambrose was planning to use all sorts of fiendish devices to make you talk; dear Uncle Oscar is the one who tried to have us all stranded in the wake of the quake. Thus far, Sara, we haven't had very much in the way of positive experiences with your uncles in any era."

Sara shrugged her left shoulder. "They can't all be nasty."

"Safer to go on the assumption they are."

She said, "I wonder what happened to Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook. He never, according to my research, went back to San Francisco after the quake."

"Jack Darwin chased the three of them nearly to the Nevada border," said the time machine, warming his backside at the fireplace. "Thus enabling them all to miss the rumble and subsequent conflagration. After that the trail leads to—"

Tap, tap, tap.

Sara glanced toward the heavy oaken door, "is that our host . . . hostess?"

"No snide pansy jokes, either of you." The time machine strode to the door and turned the ornate brass knob. "Ah, Duchess, you're looking absolutely fetching. Pale fuchsia really becomes you."

"You really think so, Roscoe?" The man in the light purple Empire style gown was forty-one, stocky. He wore a wig of auburn hair. "Um . . . hello, folks. I hope Roscoe explained about my hobby." He came into the guest room with a flat-footed stride. "I'd hate for you to get the wrong impression about me."

"No danger of that," said Tim.

"My real name is Lloyd Spinitch," the begowned man said, extending his hand. "Here I'm known as the Duchess of Waterbury."

Shaking hands, Tim asked, "Do the locals accept you as a duchess?"

"There are some pretty ugly duchesses," said Spinitch. "Besides which, I came here for the quiet and I don't circulate all that much. It's really quite wonderful. No skycars, no landcars, no skyvans, no tubeways. The only thing that makes any real noise is an occasional carriage driving up. Only this morning one of those . . ." He made a drawing in the air. "What do you call it, Roscoe?"

"Looks like a brougham."

Spinitch shook his head, causing his auburn tresses to toss. "That's one of the period details I still can't seem to get straight. I keep getting broughams mixed up with landaus and . . . That color doesn't exactly suit you, miss." He'd noticed the dress on the coverlet. "If I were you and had that marvelous slender figure and dark coloring, I'd deck myself out in whites and delicate blues."

"You think so?" said Sara.

"Oh, yes, certainly." Spinitch crossed the room, settled into a large comfortable armchair. "Did Roscoe explain to you why I'm here in 1814?"

"Sort of," said Tim.

"Not my hobby." He smoothed his frock. "I was, when I was Lloyd Spinitch . . . do you, by the way, have any idea what it's like to go through life with a name which sounds perilously close to that of a well-known vegetable? It's hell."

"People razzed you a lot?" Sara hung up the fuchsia dress.

"You'd think that on the highest level of New Chicago business top-flight executives wouldn't give you the razz, but they did," he said. "That's not, however, the main reason I dropped out of my century to retire here. The main reason for my defecting to this saner and more peaceful time was because of my eyesight and my allergies."

"Not sneezing anymore, Duchess?" asked the time machine.

"I'm not allergic to a blessed thing in this era," said Spinitch with a chuckle. "Have you two sampled the air? Stick your head out the window if you like and inhale a big whiff. Absolutely wonderful. No pollution at all. They don't even have trains yet . . . But I'm straying from my autobiographical account. I was Chief Vice President of MicroBug, Ltd."

"The multinational surveillance-equipment combine," said Tim. "They're worth—"

"A lot," said Spinitch. "Trouble was, our bugging devices kept getting smaller and smaller, you know. Well, call yourself MicroBug, you have to keep pace and go on turning out littler and littler eavesdropping gear. The damn stuff continued to get dinkier and teenier . . . finally I couldn't see any of our products. I tried new contacts, eye surgery, the best in electro-microscopic equipment. Nothing helped. I couldn't see the products anymore."

"Psychosomatic selective blindness," suggested the time machine.

"Could be," admitted Spinitch. "At any rate, I was having a devil of a time of it. My toadies would bring in a new breakthrough in microminiaturized spying gear and ask me embarrassing questions such as, 'How's the design strike you, chief?' and 'How's the color scheme hit you, L.S.?' I'd squint and strain, yet I couldn't see what they were holding in their damn tweezers or displaying on their dinky trays. I realized, with increasing dread, I couldn't keep up much longer. Sooner or later, since I was only guessing at what they were showing me, I was going to make a wrong judgment. Before that could even occur, though, my allergies did me in. It was on an especially polluted summer day some six months ago . . . that's six months twenty-first-century time. The Supreme Vice President of MicroBug summoned me to his office and pointed to a little plaz tray atop his immense tin desk. 'What do you think of these new experimental implant bugs, Lloydsie? Represent an investment of well over—' That's where I sneezed, while bent over the tray trying to see even one of the damn little dinguses. Turns out I sneezed seventy-six million dollars' worth of

experimental bugs away into the Supreme Vice President's thermorug. They only recovered, even after ripping up the entire carpet and rising an electrovac on it, seventeen million bucks' worth." He spread his stubby hands wide. "That was the very day I consulted my old friend Roscoe and the Windmiller Agency. Here I am, dressed like a duchess and happy as a clam."

"An inspiring yarn," said Roscoe. "Now, Duchess, Tim and I will proceed to deck ourselves out in togs suitable to 1699 and make a quick jaunt backwards."

Spinitch said, "Going in men's clothes?"

"Safer that way," said the time machine. "You can tell how pirates, privateers, freebooters, slavers and such are going to take a little innocent female impersonation."

"An intolerant age," sighed the former MicroBug executive. "But you . . . Miss Tenbrook, isn't it? . . . you'll be staying on here with me?"

After making a disappointed face, she answered, "Yes."

"We're sure to have some enjoyable times," said Spinitch. "I'll show you my entire wardrobe. I have two whole rooms full of the most exciting dresses."

"That'll be fine, I guess."

"Yo ho ho," said Roscoe. "Come along, Tim, m'lad, let us get suitably attired. Then it's off for piratical climes and times."

CHAPTER 17

"Bless you, my son."

"You're overdoing it," said Tim out of the corner of his mouth."

"Banana oil. You can't overdo this beatific stuff. Bless you, my dear."

It was a warm summer afternoon in 1699, the Caribbean sun beamed down on the British-held island of Janeiro. Roscoe, togged as an English bishop, was strolling arm in arm with Tim along a wide cobblestone street of the capital town of Portomalo.

"Seems to me," said Tim, almost stumbling, "that the essence of espionage is being unobtrusive." His buckle shoes were pinching his feet, his knee stockings felt prickly and his braided tricorne hat wasn't sitting exactly right on his curly wig. The iron tip of his ivory-headed cane kept bonking him in the ankle as he strove to swing it casually.

"Flapdoodle," Roscoe rejoined. "Take the Trojan horse caper. Was that subtle? I was along for the ride on that little shindy, although I got stuck with a lousy seat toward the arse end. Even so I got a good notion of how the whole operation worked."

They were walking between rows of tile-roofed, whitewashed stucco houses, aiming for the bright blue harbor a quarter mile away.

A shutter swung open directly above.

Tipping his mitre, the disguised time machine beamed upward. "Bless you, my—"

"Slops!"

Roscoe elbowed Tim up against a wrought-iron gate. "Flatten."

Splat! Splurge!

"Ah, the carefree life in this sultry clime. One can simply fling one's waste materials out the window." He guided Tim around the newly arrived mound of garbage.

"Is that a chicken head on top?"

"Don't go stepping on it, schmuck."

"Hasn't anybody invented sewers?"

"One of those many great notions that was invented and then forgotten," replied the time machine. "The garbage truck is also unheard of, although Leonardo and I once whipped up a snazzy set of designs for—"

"I've been thinking about Sara."

"Don't let romantic notions distract you from our mission on this tropic paradise."

"Thinking about is she safe with that faggot friend of yours?"

"Lloyd, how oft must I repeat, isn't the least bit gay, my boy. He simply loves to dress up in . . . Ah, bless you, sir. Eh? The mule as well? No sweat. Bless you both."

A cart, laden with bananas and pulled by a weary and foul-smelling mule, had rolled across their path as they emerged into the small sun-drenched plaza facing the blue sea.

"Okay, granting Spinitch might be straight," persisted Tim, "there's still Uncle Oscar to contend with and—"

"I've routed his minions, marooned them in some very tacky epochs."

"He's well off enough to hire a few new minions. If he sends some heavies against your crony . . . I'm wondering whether a guy in satin gowns can provide enough protection for Sara."

"Lloyd's tough as nails under that lace, fear not, sirrah," the robot assured him. "On top of which, Miss Sara is a pretty tough cookie herself. You really underestimate her capabilities, bucko."

"Oops!" He'd stepped on something which sent him sliding along the black stones at the edge of the quay.

"Only some stray fish guts." Roscoe caught his arm and righted him. "Let me give you a tip about promenading in the late seventeenth century. Watch where you're stepping." He led him down a twisting stone stairway to a lower-level dock. "Ah, fix your peepers on that display of ships. You'd no doubt toss your cookies over the side if you actually rode on one of 'em, but seen at a safe distance they make a handsome sight."

Anchored on the tranquil bay were several massive sailing ships, including a merchantman with intricate carving on its stern. Circling above them were gulls as white as clouds.

Something creaked behind Tim. He turned, saw what it was and took a hopping step forward into the robot's hard side. "There's a guy hanging over there on that thing."

Nodding, Roscoe said, "That's what they usually use gallows for."

"Who is he?"

"A pirate, no doubt."

"Don't they cut them down ever?"

"This particular gallows is here as a sort of a moral lesson. Very effective, considering they don't have neon," he said. "Ever since the English wrested this island from Spain in 1671 they've been very fussy about piracy in these waters. That is, piracy performed by my Spaniards, Dutchmen or Frenchies. English pirates, on the other hand, are considered a fine lot at the moment, admirable contributors to the economy of Portomalo and the whole blooming island."

"They tacked a sign on the poor bastard. Too faded now to read."

"A list of charges against him. Chief of which was the suspicion he was in cahoots with the Crimson Gull."

"Who is?"

Roscoe led him farther away from the dangling corpse. "No one knows the true identity of the Crimson Gull," he answered, one eye narrowed. "Except that he's a very unsporting chap who loots the treasure-laden ships of all nations. That sort of democratic attitude doesn't set well."

"If anybody gets suspicious of us, we could end up swinging from—"

"Curb your morbid fancies, junior," advised Roscoe. "I'm a seasoned time-hopper, I'll see to it no—"

"We almost got fricasseed in Frisco. My confidence in you isn't at an all-time high."

Roscoe was looking at the stone tower perched on the edge of the bay about a half-mile distant. "Notice yon tower? Built by none other than that civic benefactor, Captain Firebrand Tenbrook. That was after he allegedly reformed, was pardoned by the Limeys and made the governor of this palmy oasis in the Caribbean. Quite a lot of handsome artillery mounted up there."

"You figure the captain has the pirate treasure hidden on this island?"

"So the few hints Miss Sara found in the family records lead us to believe. The old rascal gathered in tons of loot during his heyday, and the main purpose of our little excursion is to make sure he does have most of it still. Then we can trace it through history to its final resting place. After which it passes into the comely hands of Miss Sara who will no doubt fritter it away on nincompoops such as you."

"The odds are, if the damn treasure exists at all, that it ends up with Sir Tobias Tenbrook in 1814, right? Then he takes it to America with him when he skips out of Barseshire."

"Thus runs the theory Miss Sara and I are using to guide us," answered Roscoe. "Could well be, however, a lot of crapola."

"Uncle Oscar doesn't think so."

"Most of that old dotard's ideas come from eavesdropping on your lady love." He guided Tim up another seawind-rubbed stone stairway and onto a new street.

This one was lined with tall palm trees.

"About tonight's . . . ouch!" Tim swatted a mosquito who'd gone sneaking across his perspiring forehead. "About the ball tonight at Captain Tenbrook's villa. You're sure we can crash it?"

"Crash isn't the word, laddie. You glimmed the splendidly done spurious letters of intro I brought, gems of the forger's art that introduce us as a couple of splendid fellows from Mother England. It'll be a piece of cake," the time machine assured him. "We arrive up at the villa at nightfall, show the old fart the letters and he welcomes us in with open arms. Whilst attending the doings, we slip away in the crush and give the whole blinking joint the onceover."

"Suppose he doesn't have the treasure stashed in his house?"

"I'm betting he does. Should that prove not to be the case, I'll get old Cap Firebrand aside and slip him a whiff of truthgas. He'll then confide the—"

"You can't do that, can you? I mean, TTOC regulations specify—"

"Stuff their regulations up the handiest bunghole, dopey." He halted in the middle of the street they were crossing, placed a beringed hand on Tim's shoulder. "We are talking about getting our mitts on a huge treasure, remember? Using a little TG isn't going to—"

"Oh, gracious, will you two fellas, please, please, move out of my way. I'm in a horribly dreadful hurry."

A gilded coach had clattered to a stop on the cobblestones of the street they were blocking. Its two white horses were snorting anxiously, pawing.

A young man in powdered wig and satin clothes was leaning unhappily out of the coach window, a scented silk handkerchief pressed to his classic nose. "Please, please, move aside. This whole area reeks positively of awful, awful fish."

"Forgive us, my son, and continue on your way with my blessing." Roscoe backed off, tugging Tim with him into the shadow of a palm tree.

The ornate coach resumed its journey uphill.

"That guy looked somewhat familiar," said Tim, watching the vehicle climb away from them.

"You've no doubt seen a portrait of him somewhere or other." Roscoe chuckled. "He's Rodney Tenbrook."

"Oh, Christ, yet another Tenbrook?"

"Foppish nephew of Captain Tenbrook," filled in the robot. "The lad lives in a villa of his own on money left by a set of dotting parents."

"Are we going to run into him at the captain's ball tonight?"

Roscoe replied, "One way or another."

"What's that mean?"

He chuckled again. "Knowing the future oft spoils things," he said. "Let us live life as it comes."

CHAPTER 18

"What do you think of this one?"

"Interesting." Sara was at a window of the music room. A hard rain was falling down across the night, hitting at the diamond-shaped panes.

"You don't think that tea roses clash with my complexion?" inquired Lloyd Spinitch, adjusting the gauze bonnet. "Since I do have a somewhat ruddy hue."

After a few seconds the young woman said, "Huh?"

Her host removed the rose-bedecked bonnet. "It's my hunch I'm overdoing my hobby." He let the bonnet dangle from his dropped hand. "Perhaps showing you all sixteen of my newest hats at once is too—"

"I'd like to borrow a carriage." She turned away from the night rain.

"First thing in the morning I'll instruct old Arends to—"

"Tonight. Now."

Spinitch puckered his face. "Not really safe," he told her. "The roads are dangerous after nightfall. Not just on account of the potholes, which are bad enough, but because of the highwaymen and brigands. At last report Galloping Dick and Wildfire Harry and Moonlight Jack and Dashing Duke were all said to be operating in the shire. You wouldn't want to encounter any of them while you're bumping along in my landau . . . or brougham . . . or whatever it is."

"I'd like to take a look at Sir Toby's place," she said. "If you could have someone run me over there for a bit, I won't stay very long. Only want to reconnoiter some."

Spinitch dropped the bonnet on the pile on the big mahogany table. "I gave Roscoe my solemn word—"

"He's only a piece of machinery. Oaths made to gadgets aren't legally binding," Sara said. "They've been gone all day and . . . well, I'm getting restless. If I can do a little poking around tonight, that's so much groundwork out of the way."

"Far be it from me to pry into your affairs, but the lot of you seem to be involved in something quite important."

Sara gave an agreeing nod. "Can I borrow the brougham?"

"It might actually be a landau. I can never get them . . ." He crossed to a substantial desk near a large glazed globe of the world. After giving the globe a halfhearted spin, Spinitch reached over to tug open the top drawer of the desk. "I'm not supposed to have these. TTOC rules plainly state they're an anachronism. Might cause a serious temporal imbalance or a minor paradox. Since I've broken several of their other rules, you might as well take one." He took a stungun from the drawer.

"Thanks." She came over and took the weapon. "I'll fetch my cloak and be ready to leave in five minutes."

"I just got in a lovely fur-lined cloak with a stunning bead trim. You're welcome to borrow it if—"

"The one Roscoe provided is okay, thanks." Patting his satin-clad arm, she pivoted and hurried out of the library with the stungun swinging at her side.

Out on the rainswept driver's seat the bundled-up old Arends said, "Arch garf bramble zung!"

Sara slid aside the glass screen separating them. "Are you ailing?" she asked out at him.

He reined up the two white horses. "Eh?" he asked, touching the beak of his soggy cap and then cupping his ear.

The rain was falling straight down through the dark branches of the trees which sheltered the narrow road, pelting the brougham top.

"You were producing some, even for you, funny noises," she said loudly. "I thought perhaps you were becoming sick, Arends."

"Nar, I were merely cursing, miss," he said, demonstrating further. "Garp arch zumble snug."

"Why exactly?"

"Account of 'em bloody highwaymen what is blocking the road just ahead."

"Oh." She saw them now, two cloaked and masked figures on dark stallions, drifting slowly toward them through the night rain.

"Suh-suh-suh-suh-ta-ta-ta-stand an-an-an-and duh-duh-duh-duh-deliver!" shouted the larger of the two highwaymen.

"Ar," whispered Arends over his shoulder to the girl inside the carriage, "I suspect we're dealing with Stuttering Dick himself. One of the worst of the knights of the road."

"Duh-duh-duh-duh-don'tmuh-muh-muh-muh-move an ni-ni-ni-ni-inch," warned Stuttering Dick, brandishing a pair of wicked pistols.

"That's quite a speech impediment," observed Sara.

"There is 'em what say he only has it when working at his trade, miss," said old Arends. "Being a rogue makes him all nervy, don't you know, and he starts to stammer something awful."

Stuttering Dick's horse snorted as they drew closer to the brougham. "Th-th-th-th-throw duh-duh-duh-duh-down all your muh-muh-muh-muh-money boxes, old skuh-skuh-skuh-skuh-scum," the hooded man ordered.

Arends cupped his ears. "Eh?"

"I suh-suh-suh-suh-said th-th-th-th-throw duh-duh-duh-duh-down your muh-muh-muh-muh-money boxes," repeated Stuttering Dick. "An-an-an-an-and thu-thu-thu-thu-then I ka-ka-ka-ka-called you an old skuh-skuh-skuh-skuh-scum."

"Are, you perishing idiot, we ain't a money box to our name. Look for yourself, man."

Sara was staring beyond Stuttering Dick at the second highwayman. He had a scarlet silk kerchief with eyeholes poked through wrapped around the upper half of his face. There was something familiar about him.

His horse suddenly shied, went tromping backwards on the muddy road. A low-hanging branch whipped at the second highwayman's broad-brimmed hat, sent it and his wig fluttering to the soggy ground.

"Brains Bohak," realized Sara when she saw the plaz skulltop and heard the rain pinging on it.

"Wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-well if you duh-duh-duh-duh-don't have a strongbox, huh-huh-huh-huh-how about a fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fat puh-puh-puh-puh-purse fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-full of guh-guh-guh-guh-gold?" Stuttering Dick pointed his left-hand pistol at the old man.

Inside the muff she held Sara had the stungun Spinitch had loaned her. She very carefully, one hand still gripping the hidden weapon, eased the latch open on the brougham door.

Then, while Brains Bohak was still several yards away and preoccupied with retrieving his hair and hat, she hit the door with her slim shoulder. Diving out into the wet night, she twisted in midair and fired at the highwayman.

Zzzzumm!

"Uh-uh-uh-uh-ouch!" cried Stuttering Dick. He folded up, swayed, stiffened and fell to the road with an oozy splash.

By that time Sara was into the woods and running as best she could in Regency costume.

"Holy moley, it's the Tenbrook girl!" she heard Brains Bohak exclaim.

She kept on retreating.

CHAPTER 19

Roscoe sipped his port wine. "1687," he remarked, "was not an especially good year for ports."

The grand ballroom of Captain Tenbrook's villa was brightly lit by three candle-rich crystal chandeliers. The floor was of highly polished hardwood, the drapes at the many windows were of thick purple velvet. The string orchestra consisted of seven aging Spaniards in formal attire.

Tim unobtrusively scratched at his black-stockinged calf while scanning the hundred or so richly dressed people in the immense room. "I don't notice Rodney Tenbrook."

"Never fear, he'll arrive."

"You're smug about something, Roscoe, and whenever you are it means—"

"Address me as bishop, my boy, or your grace. We don't want to blow our . . . Bless you, madam."

A fat countess had gone dancing by with a bemedaled admiral.

Tim, in a lowered voice, said, "Any idea where the captain may've hid the loot?"

The time machine took another sip of his wine, slobbered it across his placid tongue and then pointed a thumb at the floor. "I'm betting on the dungeons."

"Dungeons? Does he have fully equipped dungeons down there someplace?"

"They haven't been used in years, cluck," said Roscoe. "Traditionally pirate treasure is stashed either on an uncharted island or in the basement,"

". . . then, madam, so help me, we slit the rascal just here, do you see. That caused his innards to come spilling out in a most gratifying manner indeed," someone was bellowing nearby.

"Dear, my, how absolutely horrible," exclaimed a young woman in a flowing gown of silk and lace.

"Our host is waxing autobiographical," observed Roscoe.

Captain Firebrand, a large man rigged out in an impressive velvet suit trimmed with much lace, was addressing a circle of interested and admiring young women. He held a tankard of ale in one thick, freckled hand. "The rogue made a most droll spectacle, I assure you, ladies, trying to retrieve his insides and get them properly back inside his belly," he continued. "Ere he succeeded, I may tell you, we hauled him up and dropped him in the cauldron of boiling oil."

"Oh, how excruciatingly awful," giggled another of the women, drawing her lace shawl tighter around her bare shoulders.

"While the fellow was sizzling away at a most satisfactory rate, I ordered my first mate to apply the heated cookpot over his head," said Captain Tenbrook in his exuberant voice. "Ah, my dears, such a splendid sizzle the pot made as it settled onto his rascally head."

"What was the nature of the poor man's crime, captain?"

"Why, damn, he was caught, the blackguard, stealing an extra tot of grog, madam. Such a crime cannot be tolerated at sea."

Tim elbowed the robot. "Hear what he does to guys who just steal booze?" he whispered. "I bet you it goes even rougher with folks making off with his gold."

"We're not on the high seas now, Spanky, and ol' Cap Firebrand's long since retired," said Roscoe. "Besides which, let me remind youse again, we aren't going to pilfer the doubloons and such. We merely wish to make sure it exists."

"Ears, my dear?" the husky captain was asking. "Aye, I have an overflowing trunk full of naught but ears. Lopped each one, don't you know, from the evil heads of wrongdoers. Over fifty pairs are from cowardly pirates."

Tim tugged at his earlobe. "What say we start exploring?"

"Soon. The night is young."

"Well, can we at least leave the vicinity of his memoirs?"

"A stroll in the garden might be pleasant."

"Yes, madam, the first time I ventured to whap off an ear I made quite a botch of it. Took a goodly portion of the scoundrel's chin and . . ."

A six-foot-high wall circled the half-acre of formal garden off the ballroom. There were neat rows of trees and lush flowerbeds, stone benches here and there and a sputtering marble fountain topped by Neptune and a few pouting dolphins.

Roscoe pressed his fingertips together in a beatific way, gazing upward. "Are you up to climbing yon apple tree?"

"To what dire end?"

"Once ensconced in its leafy branches, you'll have a crackerjack view of the harbor and the tower which is supposed to defend it. The tower that keeps pirate raiders from pouring ashore and cutting all sorts of capers."

Tim gave the robot a scrutinizing look. "You expect something to happen to the tower?"

"Just shinny up and take a gander."

Setting his tricorne hat on a marble bench, Tim said, "Okay, give me a leg up."

"Alley oop."

Catching a low branch, Tim pulled himself up into the lowest crotch of the tree. Two apples shook free, one hitting the robot on the skull.

Bong!

"Let's exhibit a smidgen more deftness, laddie. Such telltale sounds might well betray me true nature."

Tim worked his way higher. "Well, what do you know?" he murmured as he gazed toward the night harbor a mile below.

He could see the defense tower quite clearly. Flames and smoke were spewing up high into the black of the night.

"How are the sights?" inquired the time machine from the ground.

"I suspect arson." Tim caught a sturdy branch, swung out on it and let himself drop to the mossy ground.

"Hark!" Roscoe pointed an elbow at the garden wall that faced the town.

Horsemen could be heard galloping up the road which led to the captain's villa.

"I suppose these fellas are hotfooting it here to warn Governor Tenbrook about the attack on the fortress."

"Appears like." The robot fussed with the skirt of his clerical disguise.

Stooping, Tim picked up one of the fallen apples. "Still too green." Tossing it aside, he sat on the bench next to his hat. "Pirate raid, huh?"

"I wouldn't be at all surprised."

"They'll sure try to loot all of Portomalo, including this joint."

Roscoe's head bobbed in agreement. "It'll be some show."

"Suppose some of the loot turns out to be Tenbrook's hidden loot?"

After sweeping Tim's tricorne into the grass, Roscoe arranged himself next to him on the marble bench. "We've got terrific seats for enjoying the whole spectacle," he said contentedly.

CHAPTER 20

"Obviously," decided Sara as she pushed her way through the rainy night forest, "the young ladies of this era weren't meant to do much cross-country running."

She'd long since abandoned her plush muff, was holding the undisguised stungun in her bare right hand. With her left hand she pulled her long cambric skirt high enough so that it didn't hobble her.

Halting by a sturdy and ancient beech tree, she listened. She heard the rain clattering down through the twisting branches, but nothing else. She knew Brains Bohak had dismounted and come crashing into the woods in pursuit of her.

There was no sound of him now.

Shivering, adjusting her dark cloak, the girl continued on. According to her calculations, based on research she'd done at home in her own time, the rambling old manor house occupied by Sir Tobias Tenbrook was not far off.

"I'm sort of fond of Roscoe, but he does tend to exaggerate his capabilities," she said to herself while continuing in a direction she was nearly certain was south. "Swearing Brains Bohack was stranded in the Dark Ages or Cleveland in the 1950s or some similar low point in history. Brains obviously repaired his strapon time machine a darn lot quicker than Roscoe anticipated, then popped here to 1814 to catch us when we came to spy on Uncle Toby."

The forest was thinning, Sara could make out lights through the rain. She should be nearing the road which would lead directly to Sir Toby's tumbledown estate. She slowed her pace, moving even more cautiously, and then came to a halt at the edge of a broad roadway.

Almost directly opposite loomed a complex of large plaster and timber buildings with steeply slanting gabled roofs. A large dangling wooden sign, which creaked in the rain-heavy wind, proclaimed this was the Dragon & Maiden Inn and Tavern.

Sara emerged from the woods and, staying close to the road edge, began walking in a direction which would take her to the vicinity of Sir Tobias Tenbrook's home. She held her gun hand hidden in the folds of her damp cloak.

In a flagstone courtyard next to the inn a large private coach was parked. The coachman, clad in a dark greatcoat, stood huddled in the arch of the entryway to the yard and puffed on a clay pipe.

The massive front door of the tavern came flapping open, letting out light, smoke and laughter. A portly gentleman was flung out into the rain by two large men in leather aprons. He splatted down in the muddy road, shaking a fist.

"Damn," he said, "genius always has a rough time of it."

A heavy walking stick was flung out after him, followed by a beaver hat and a gray greatcoat.

"In the future, sir, don't you be fondling Molly," advised one of the barmen.

"At least not in such intimate locations," added the other before slamming the tavern door.

"Obviously you know nothing about how a true artist works." Still seated in the mud, he reached for his stick and then began a puffing attempt to right himself.

Sara hurried across the road. "Might I be of help, sir?"

"Aye, you might indeed, fair nymph." He narrowed his small, blurred eyes. "Jove, but you look deucedly familiar, even in your present drowned mouse condition. Do I know you?"

"Not exactly, Sir Tobias." She got her palm under the elbow of her ancestor.

"You, however, are familiar with who I am." He puffed, grunted, groaned and got up. "My fame has extended the length and breadth of this land, with the unfortunate exception of the Dragon & Maiden . . . I know the wench who posed for yonder sign, by the bye, and a less maidenly . . . but I digress. You find me this way, my dear, because while within the tavern I attempted to determine the dimensions of the new serving wench. With the purely innocent intention of immortalizing her in marble, or at least plaster. Since no one understood how the muse can move a man, a most unseemly hullabaloo ensued."

Bending, Sara reached for his fallen greatcoat. "There are times when . . . Hey, Sir Toby!"

"Sorry, my dear. I was merely collecting data on your proportions. A habit of genius I fear," explained Sir Tobias Tenbrook. "As comely as you are of face, you lack the external proportions which most inspire me." He sighed, letting her drape the coat over his shoulders. "The lass within was more of the type. But when I made my preliminary scrutiny of Sally . . . or whatever her name was . . ."

"Molly." She bent, facing him this time, and got his hat.

"Ah, yes. Molly. Her buttocks, meaning no slight on any present company, were of epic proportions." Sir Toby arranged his mud-spattered hat upon his bald head. "Are you certain, miss, we are not kin? You wouldn't be the youngest daughter of my ne'er-do-well brother Will Tenbrook? No, you cannot be, since that lass has a most unsightly wen just above . . . This is most vexing. Who are you?"

"Well, it's possible we're related . . . distantly," Sara admitted. "My name is Sara Tenbrook."

"Zounds, it's a Tenbrook you are!" He laughed, clapping his large hands together. "Bless me, we must be related then, child. I know that my dear departed grandfather, Mad Harry Tenbrook, was the most fertile of men. He traveled all across this green isle, somewhat in the manner of a circuit-riding preacher, offering not religion but sowing his seed in every . . . Ah, but you'll soon take a chill if we don't get you before a roaring fire. Do you reside hereabouts?"

"Not exactly," she replied. "I'm a houseguest with Lloyd . . . with the Duchess of Waterbury."

Sir Tobias shuddered. "What an ungainly woman is she," he said. "Her looks are enough to curdle . . . may I offer you a ride there, my dear? But, say, how come you to be here now in such a sodden state?"

"My carriage was set upon by highwaymen," she said. "I managed to escape and make my way here."

"Rather than have you risk another encounter with brigands, I'll offer you the temporary hospitality of my home," he said. "Since we're relatives and you're somewhat thin . . . you can rest assured you'll be safe under my roof, child."

"Yes, I accept your kind offer, Sir Tobias."

He cupped his hands. "Lewis! You low sniveling cur, where are you?"

"Ready to serve, sire." The coachman, shaking out his pipe, came trotting over from the nearby courtyard. "You have but to call and I rush to your service."

"Lazy rascal . . . We're going to bring this lady to our home with us, Lewis."

Lewis scowled, toyed with the buttons of his steamy greatcoat. "Um . . . you did sorter promise Mrs? . . . um . . . that is, you vowed to your model . . . You know what I'm aiming at, sir. You weren't going to bring any more young wenches . . . um . . . guests home at late hours, begging your pardon for speaking up."

"You drooling ninny, can you not see that this sweet and virginal young thing is a near and dear relative of mine? Can you not detect the traditional Tenbrook beauty in her every feature?"

Lewis studied the girl's face for a few rainy seconds. "Now you mention it, sir, I do. She's the image of your dear cousin, Lady Thornwood . . . except she lacks the wen."

"Bring the coach here at once and no more blathering, Lewis," ordered the sculptor.

"Not wishing to exceed my place, sir, I do make bold to suggest we go to the coach instead," said the coachman. "I've been having the devil's own time with Hellspawn?"

"Who in the bloody devil is Hellspawn?"

"The chestnut, sir. Dampness makes him frightful prankish," explained Lewis, glancing toward the courtyard. "You may well recall, sir, that when first you purchased Hellspawn off them gypsies, I ventured to point out he looked most like a circus horse to me. This evening he's been cutting up something fierce, sir. When he ain't counting from one to five with his hoof, he's fetching sticks in his teeth."

"Very well, we'll go to the coach." Sir Tobias took Sara's arm and led her through the diminishing rain into the wide courtyard. "Is the beast likely to cut capers enroute home to Tenbrook House, Lewis?"

"Once I coax him back on the road, sir, he'll do splendid."

Inside the plush-lined coach, Sir Tobias said to Sara, "I'm most eager, my dear, to have you view my latest work."

"I look forward to that. What sort of statue is it?"

"I venture to declare, as perhaps ought not, that this is my finest work," he said, winking somewhat ponderously. "And, child, there's a little secret associated with it, which, since you're kin, I may just confide in you."

Sara took a slow breath in and out. "What sort of statue did you say it is?"

The coach started rolling out of the courtyard.

"Don't do that, Hellspawn," cried Lewis from the driving seat. "Drop that log and let's be off."

"The statue is a full figure depiction of Mrs. . . . of my favorite model," said Sir Tobias. "She stands in a classical pose and is the very image of the goddess of love. To my way of thinking, I have created the finest Venus to be seen in many a year."

CHAPTER 21

Three of them, shouting and cursing, came clambering over the garden wall. No, four of them. The last of the pirate quartet was delayed because his cutlass, which he carried clutched in his yellowish teeth, got tangled in some clinging vines. They were dirt-smearing, weatherbeaten men, wearing bright sashes and head scarves. Three had full beards, two wore eye patches, three had jagged facial scars, one was missing three and a half fingers and another had a hook instead of a left hand.

"A good deal of work-related accidents in the piracy trade," observed Roscoe.

"These guys are with the Crimson Gull?"

"They are," answered the robot. "The main body is attacking the house proper, these louts are going to handle the outbuildings."

Waving swords and pistols, the pirates went tramping and clamoring across the formal garden of Governor Tenbrook's villa. One of them, the fellow who'd come over the wall last, noticed Tim and the time machine sitting on the marble bench.

Dropping away from his mates, he came stalking over. "Ar, a fine pair of mollycoddle landlubbers, I see." He scratched his swarthy cheek with the tip of his hook, glaring at them with his single, and bloodshot, eye. "I'll relieve you two vermin of all that's valuable."

"My son, do you not recognize my raiment?" Roscoe slowly rose. "I happen to be Bish—"

"More fool you then, you piece of muck," said the pirate with a wave of the cutlass he'd removed from between his teeth. "For I am an atheist and to me you're no different than this simpering sod beside you."

"I told you this getup would make me look like a sissy," Tim told the robot.

"Enough babble," said the pirate, clamping the sword back between his teeth. "Leg had zur moggin ur ull slig urp troes."

"Beg pardon?" said Roscoe.

The pirate tugged the cutlass out of his mouth. "I never could figure how some of me mates managed to carry on a coherent conversation with one of these stuffed in his gob." He spat twice on a rosebush. "I was saying . . . hand over all your bloody valuables or I'll slit your gizzards for you."

From inside the villa came a medley of new sounds. Women screaming, men shouting, glass breaking, furniture toppling, coins clinking into loot sacks.

"Even an avowed agnostic ought to think twice about robbing the church, young man," said Roscoe.

Spitting again, the pirate placed the point of his blade to Tim's Adam's apple. "Give over all your money and jewels."

"Listen, don't let the wig fool you. I don't wear any jewelry."

"Money then, my bucko, and be damn quick about it. Me mates are getting one hell of a lead on me when it comes to looting and raping."

Tim slid a hand into an inner coat pocket "We're going to have to sort this," he explained as he produced a fistful of money. "Otherwise there'll be all sorts of anachronisms. My fault, really, for not sorting it better, but we've been hopping around quite a bit. Anyway, here're a few doubloons, and a sovereign that you can have. These next I'll have to keep since they're Liberty-head silver dollars and won't be legal tender for another two hundred years or so. Same goes for this stuff, which is actually Monopoly money left over from one of my Nostalgia courses. Okay, and here's another gold coin that looks like it might pass and then—"

"Man, think you I mean to stand here like a ninny while you winnow your holdings?"

Roscoe peeled off a glove. "Here's a little something which might interest you, son." He extended his metal middle finger.

"Ar, I've never had a bishop give me the finger before. All goes to prove me point about . . . oof!"

A tiny beam of golden light had gone jumping from the time machine's finger to the scarred forehead of the raiding pirate.

He started to jiggle, dropping his cutlass. He followed his weapon after a few quivering seconds, collapsing with a wheezy moan into a flowerbed.

"Stuff your moola away, schmuck, and come along with me."

"You're tinkering with the course of history when you go using—"

"Believe me, I've seen a lot more of the course of history than you have, and a little tinkering wouldn't hurt." The robot took hold of his arm and hurried him along a white-graveled path. "I'd expected we'd be able to watch most of the festivities from our fifty-yard-line seats, but that lunkhead screwed us up." They were nearing a wooden gate in the rear wall of the night garden. Well, we'll simply go out to this new vantage point a bit earlier than I'd—"

Kaboom! Karump!

Things were exploding inside the villa. The red tiles from part of the ballroom roof went shuffling up into the night. The screaming was louder; men were joining in.

After Roscoe'd pulled them both down behind a stand of brush some fifty feet behind the villa, Tim asked, "You had some advance information, didn't you?"

"Couple of historians I know visited this particular day a few years back and I recalled what they'd told me," he answered. "Perhaps you've come across their microbook, entitled *Every Boy's Bedside Book of Vicious Pirates*. Picked up by the Cheap Sensation of the Month Club for a hefty figure, serialized in the *Lipreader's Digest* and—"

"So what's going to happen?"

"Judging by the snippets of info these two fellows let drop . . . and a better argument against mixed marriages you have never seen. I mean, Gil is a Tibetan Buddhist and Archie is a Druid. Wellsir, the spats those two have over—"

"The Tenbrook treasure. Tell me of that."

"I surmised, using some inductive talents I honed at the side of Sir Artie Doyle whilst holed up in Victorian Limeyland, I figured the *Crimson Gull* was going to raid Portomalo this very night.

Not only that, he'd loot Captain T's domicile and carry off the gold. Ergo, as my chum Euclid is forever saying, I wanted to be on hand to confirm that."

Tim started to stand. "If the damn Crimson Gull swipes the—"

"Down in front." Roscoe tugged him back into a crouch. "Have you not figured out who the Gull is? Lawsie me, Marse Tim, I tumbled to that on my first visit to this era. If the local authorities didn't have brains akin to Buffalo patties, they'd have noted the same clues I did and solved the mystery of the Crimson Gull's identity long since."

"I've never even seen the guy. So how can I—"

"By using the old cabeza, schmucko." Roscoe held up his still uncovered forefinger. "Haven't you ever read any penny dreadfuls or dime novels or . . . what did they call 'em in the period you're supposed to be an expert on? Pulpwoods, yes. Had you read any pop lit, my boy, you'd know that the mysterious avenger is always the least likely suspect. He's the guy who's been mincing around and camping and acting like a first-class queen in his everyday persona."

"Hell, half the guys on this island look like fairies to me," said Tim. "All these wigs and lace and swishing around."

"Yeah, but who really overdoes it?" The time machine gazed hopefully into his face. "Here's a hint . . . We saw the very lad earlier today."

"Rodney Tenbrook. He's the Crimson Gull?"

"Beyond a shadow of a doubt."

"So that keeps the fortune in the Tenbrook family," Tim said. "All we have to do here is confirm that he really does snatch it and then determine where it goes next. That ought to be easy."

"Except for one thing," said a soft voice behind them.

Shaking his head, Roscoe turned to look back. "My sensors are still not in tiptop shape, I fear," he said. "I didn't hear you come skulking up at all, my dear."

A female pirate, complete with sash, headrag and heavy boots, stood a few feet behind them; She held two pistols, one aimed at each.

"I didn't know the Crimson Gull had a lady accomplice," said Tim, raising his hands.

"He doesn't," Roscoe rubbed at his nose as he raised his hands. "This wench is really Burma Brandywine, her golden tresses dyed, her lily-white complexion stained a sea-tanned brown."

"You know, Roscoe/203/TA-Humaform Time Machine Model JSG 1343-X2, you almost got me burned at the stake back in Spain. I materialized, thanks to you, in the bedchamber of the Grand Inquisitor and it took a hell of a lot of cajoling of that old goat to convince him I wasn't a demon and save my butt," said Burma. "I also got three lousy hangnails fixing up my strapon time machine. So I really owe you one, buster."

CHAPTER 22

In the darkness below, the town of Portomalo was burning, its buildings blazing like huge bonfires.

"You bozos'll be taken for just a coupla more victims of this pirate foolishness," Burma Brandywine explained. "Even those TTOC mothers'll figure you got caught in the middle."

"Wounds won't be consistent," Roscoe pointed out. "You may fool the local constabulary, lass, but not a crack Time Travel Overseeing Commission forensic squad."

"Geez, do you think I'm a dumbunny?" She waved one of the pistols. "These buggers ain't disguised lazguns, they're the real thing."

"Very thorough, I must admit." The time machine glanced back toward the rear of the burning villa.

An ox-drawn cart was creaking uphill toward the place.

"The oldgay is about to amscay," Roscoe mentioned in a whisper to Tim.

When Tim turned he saw a lithe figure leap to the top of the garden wall. He wore a crimson hood over his head, was waving a cutlass. The fire was reflected in the burnished blade.

"By gad, sirrah! I'll show you there's plenty of fight left in this old sea dog yet." With a massive grunt Captain Firebrand Tenbrook boosted himself up atop the wall. "I'll slice off your tallywag, skewer your tarriwags, slit your gully and worse! Not even the Crimson Gull is a match for the Firebrand, I warn you."

The Gull laughed. "I've no wish to do you harm, old man."

"Harm me, is it? Why, I'll chop up your twanger before you can blink an eye, by gad!" So saying the hefty captain lunged at him with his sword.

The Crimson Gull, laughing again, easily avoided the thrust and gave the old captain a whack across the backside with the flat of his blade.

"Hey, quit ogling the sideshow," ordered Burma, annoyed. "Pay attention to me so I can shoot you."

"Burma, my child," said the robot, "what say we negotiate a peaceful settlement? If you abandon your foolhardy plan to knock us off, I'll see to it neither the TTOC nor the Federal Police go hard on you in—"

"The TTOC and the FP can kiss my fanny," suggested the girl. "As for you two poor ginks, you aren't in a position to do diddly."

On the garden wall the Gull and the captain continued to slash at each other, swords clanging.

Wang!

"A charming young person such as yourself," continued the time machine, "was meant for a better life than this, Burma. Racing from century to century, doing untold mischief, never a moment to sit and contemplate. Is this what the philosophers mean by the good life? Nay, it—"

"Stuff it." She aimed one of the pistols at Tim, the other at Roscoe.

"There's something else you've overlooked," Tim said quickly. "Sara's still at large. Even if you momentarily fool the TTOC, she'll alert them to the—"

"Nertz." Burma smiled coldly. "Right this minute Brains is in 1814 England snuffing out that flat-chested little bitch."

Tim frowned at Roscoe. "Looks like you didn't strand either of them for long."

"Believe me, my boy, when I say I'm definitely embarrassed by my apparent lack of dexterity in—"

"Hey, listen! I know where it is and . . . oh oh."

Sara, still wearing her Regency cloak and gown, had materialized a half dozen feet to the rear of Burma.

When the startled lady outlaw spun to see what was happening, Tim jumped her.

He got hold of her around the waist, at the same time slapping one of the pistols from her grasp. They both fell over into the brush and he grabbed at the other gun.

Zzzummm!

"Take advantage of up-to-the-minute technology when ere you can." The robot lowered his stun finger.

"You're overprotective." Tim disentangled himself from the slumped and unconscious Burma. "I just about had her wrestled into submission when you go and—"

"Hello," interrupted Sara. "Nice to see you. I suppose you're wondering why I'm here."

Straightening up, Tim said, "That's right. How did you manage to show up in 1699?"

Spreading her cloak with both hands, she said, "I borrowed a strapon time machine. Because I wanted to tell you guys about—"

"Miss Sara, have you no sense?" Roscoe clucked and gave her a sour look. "Risking your pretty neck with inferior equipment like—"

"At least it doesn't sass me and talk back," she said. "Listen now, the reason—"

"Gadzooks!"

Up on the garden wall the laughing Gull whapped the captain in his middle. This propelled the retired pirate over into his formal garden.

The Crimson Gull went bounding along the wall, leaping into the oxcart.

A door in the wall swung open and members of his pirate crew came struggling out with three large and heavy chests.

"Yonder goes the treasure, Miss Sara," said Roscoe. "The dumpy chap who just took a nosedive into the petunias is your Uncle Firebrand and the cavorting chap with the red flour sack over his coco is Uncle Rodney. You arrived a bit late for intros, though in plenty of time to see the loot, which lies in those coffer, being transferred from one branch of the Tenbrook clan to the other."

Sara made an impatient noise. "That's not important," she told them. "Because I found out where the gold coins and all end up in England. Uncle Toby had them and I know what he did with them."

Tim said, "You weren't supposed to go near him until we—"

"If I'd waited around home, you two would be lying dead in the weeds right now. But don't bother to thank me," Sara said. "Anyway, Sir Tobias Tenbrook was in possession of the treasure, which was still worth over a million pounds in 1814 . . . imagine what that'll be in our own day. Well he was fearful lest, when he skipped the country to avoid trouble because of the various married ladies he was fooling around with, he wouldn't be able to sneak the dough out. So he prepared a special statue of his major lady love in a classical pose. A hollow statue depicting her as—"

"Venus!" exclaimed Tim. "That nitwit statue on Dr. Tenbrook's lawn in San Francisco."

Sara nodded and laughed. "It's chock-full of gold," she said. "Or it should be, since there's no evidence Dr. Ambrose Tenbrook ever spent anything like a million bucks."

"Look alive, me hearties, for we must sail with the dawn!"

"So that's Uncle Rodney," said Sara. "Wonder what he looks like without the hood."

"You're not missing much." Tim took her hand. "How did you come by a time machine? It must be Brains Bohak's, since Burma Brandywine told us he was hunting you in Regency England."

"By the way, Roscoe, you didn't do a very terrific job of incapacitating the opposition team," she said.

"Boy, you are sure shoveling the old guano on my poor noggin, memsahib," complained the time machine. "To paraphrase a great twentieth-century statesman . . . 'What'll you do when you don't have Roscoe to kick around anymore?' "

"I'm not trying to hurt your feelings," she said. "Although when he showed up on that woodland road done up as a highwayman, I couldn't help thinking, 'Well, Roscoe's fouled up again.' "

Tim asked, "Where's Brains now?"

"In a little house behind Sir Toby's manor, all tied up in rope. Sort of a gazebo thing, only they call it, I think, a folly," the girl explained. "I dodged him in the woods, but darned if he didn't reappear at Sir Toby's place. I heard him sneaking around outside the studio and I slipped out and used a stungun on him."

"How'd you get a—"

"That nice Mr. Spinitch loaned me one of his. I never did give it back." She took it from beneath her cloak, showed him. "What I did, after telling poor Uncle Toby I had to step out for a breath of air, was coldcock Brains, stash him in the folly and usurp his time machine."

"Didn't that unsettle Uncle Tobias?"

"I didn't vanish anywhere near him," she said. "Besides, I'm sure he's used to having young ladies scoot away from his place."

"Might I suggest, Miss Sara, if you'll lower yourself to traveling with me once again, that we skip on out of here before any more of these pirate laddies try to do us harm?"

"Yes, that'll be fine," she said to the time machine. "What we have to do now is get back to our own time and then out to the Frisco Enclave. That statue is full of gold and we have to locate it at the ruins of Dr. Tenbrook's house and dig it up." She paused, moving nearer to Tim. "I'm happy to find you extant"

"I feel much the same about you." He put his arms around her, deftly avoiding the lump of the stungun she was clutching.

"Let's save the mush for a later date," advised Roscoe. "Take hold, kiddies, and we'll dash for home."

CHAPTER 23

Sara made a small forlorn sound. "Yes, unfortunately, it is," she said, leaning forward in the passenger seat.

Below them in the Frisco Enclave twilight was a block-square little park. "Yep, it does seem to be the spot where Dr. Tenbrook's mansion once stood."

"It is. I double-checked all sorts of maps and things when we stopped off at home in Connecticut this morning."

"With all that activity down there," said Tim, who was at the controls of their U-Fly-Um skyvan, "we can't land or unload our rented telek gear and lazaspades and—"

"Please skirt this zone!" their radio all at once requested.

Dangling ahead in their path was a Frisco Police skywagon.

Tim hit the hover button on the control dash.

"Due to the authorized political rally now taking place in People's Park #26, no private craft may fly over," the police informed them through the radio speaker.

Nodding at the unseen cop behind the tinted skywagon cabin glaz, Tim punched out a new flight pattern.

Their rented skyvan swayed and then went flying, at an altitude of five hundred feet, away from the park which had replaced Dr. Tenbrook's neighborhood years ago.

"What sort of political rally is it?" Tim guided the craft toward a landing on a side street nearby.

"The biggest neon placard I spotted mentioned the Gay Democratic Party."

The skyvan settled gently into a space and made a low satisfied moan.

"That's right, the Enclave is still sixty percent Diff's."

"The rally can't last forever. We'll simply wait."

Tim said, "We can go take a look at the park now."

Sliding out on her side of the van, Sara said, "I was somewhat surprised Roscoe decided not to come along."

"We can handle this alone." Tim joined her on the pastel walkway. "He wasn't a bad companion back in the past, but we don't need him in our own time."

"He's sweet."

"Roscoe? That foul-mouthed, arrogant mass of—"

"In his own special way, sweet." She took Tim's hand and they walked along the tree-lined street for the park. "There's a possibility, you know, the statue's long gone."

"You've found no record of its being moved."

"If somebody swiped it, they might not've advertised the fact."

"We know for sure that Dr. Tenbrook, Polly and Theo never came back to San Francisco after the quake," he reminded. "And those old photos you came across show a large ground crack running right through his yard and no statue in sight. Meaning it more than likely fell into a hole opened by the earthquake."

"What about us! What about us!" A group of burly men in black plazleather suits were shouting in unison at the edge of the park grounds. Their glowletter signs identified them as members of the Gay Teamsters.

"Oh, shut up, you malcontents!" hooted a clutch of bearded men whose sweatunics labeled them members of the Gay Communist Party.

"We don't take crap from pinkos!" A Gay Teamster swung his sign, ball bat style, at the nearest bearded man. "Over this way." Tim led Sara clear of the incipient brawl.

"Look at the fools," commented a young man in a military uniform rich with swastikas.

"Gay Nazi Party," whispered Sara, reading the young man's arm insignia.

"What we need is Gay Concentration Camps!" shouted the Gay Nazi.

"Shut up, you fascist twit!" suggested a thickset woman in the outfit of the Gay Longshoremen. "Or I'll bust your snoot!"

"I'd like to see that!"

"Then take a look at this!"

She swung, connecting with the Gay Nazi's nose.

Up on the distant floating speakers platform the Gay Democratic Party's candidate for governor of Cal North was saying, "What is a Gay Balanced Budget, you ask? Let me make this perfectly clear. If my Gay Solar Reutilization Plan goes into effect . . ."

Fights were erupting all through the darkening park.

"Look out, look out!" warned a Gay Barber. "Here comes the Riot Squad!"

A police skyvan was dropping down nearby. A door flipped open and a dozen officers with crowd stunners came trooping out.

"Let's withdraw until this is over." Tim took Sara by the arm.

"Hope this riot doesn't extend all night."

"The cops are stunning them fast," Tim said. "Look, there's another bunch unloading over—"

Zzzzunmmmm!

A million needles blossomed inside him. Then a million more. His lungs seemed to swell and explode. Tim tried to hold on to Sara but she wasn't there. There wasn't anyone or anything.

A fuzzy blackness surrounded him. He fell.

CHAPTER 24

"It's there, it's there."

Tim was looking at the girl, but not exactly seeing her. He became increasingly aware of where he was. Details filled in, clarity spread out around him. He was in the back seat of their skyvan. Deep night showed outside the one-way windows.

Sara came in suddenly sharp and clear, smiling hopefully, brimming with excitement. Her eyes were wide and glistening.

"New perfume," he said, tongue still a bit furry and leaden. "How come you're wearing new perfume?"

She sniffed. "That must've been the Gay Stevedores." She touched his cheek. "Are you—"

"What Gay Stevedores?"

"Three very nice hulking fellows who helped me carry you back here so the cops wouldn't include you in the roundup."

"I am almost okay," he decided. "Except my head is made of very fragile glaz."

"Listen, it's there." She gave his hand a guarded squeeze.

"Venus?"

"Venus and the gold," she said. "Can you function?"

"I'd like to get the stuff telek-loaded into the van right soon."

"While I was stunned, you went exploring?"

"After they cleared everybody out of the park, yes. That was around about midnight," Sara told him. "I used the detecting gadget and you ought to have heard the elated noise it made, like a dishwasher getting its jollies. The gold is there, a lot of it. Some four feet down. With our lazaspades we can dig it out in minutes and then—"

"Whoa now, Sara." He yawned a few times, which caused him to see a star-spangled roof for several interesting seconds. "Didn't the police leave guards in the park? Usually after a frumus like—"

"They did, yes," she answered. "Which is why we have to move right along. I think they'll stay unconscious until at least dawn, but I'm not exactly sure if they have to report in at intervals."

"You stungunned some policemen?"

"Only five of them."

"That's a crime, isn't it? Even in a liberal spot like Frisco Enclave."

"Suppose so," she said, shrugging. "Now let's get to digging."

"First we have to move the skyvan over to—"

"That's done. Right after I decked the cops I moved it."

"Say, those are park trees out there and not street trees."

"We're only a dozen feet from the exact spot."

He took a careful deep breath. "Okay, let's proceed." The park went spinning when he stepped outside and his head seemed on the verge of exploding. Then the last of the aftereffects of being stunned by the police passed away.

Sara handed a lazaspade to him. "I'll show you the exact spot to start dig—"

"Hold off," he warned.

"Huh?"

"Someone's creeping this way," he said quietly. "I heard a twig snap."

"Darn, it must be Uncle Oscar or his toadies coming to foul us up again."

"Stay ducked inside the van, with your stungun ready."

Her head moved down out of range. "Be careful, Tim."

Taking out his own stungun, he crouched and went zigzagging toward the shrubs where he'd heard the telltale noise.

"Skulking ain't your strong suit, palsy."

"Roscoe?"

The robot rose up out of the shrubs. "How many other light-footed time machines do you know?"

"I thought you were on a new assignment for the Windmiller Agency."

"Not so." He stepped out onto the damp predawn-grass. "I simply had a few loose ends to take care of before I could return to your sides to witness the finish of this caper."

"Tim?" called the girl. "Is that who I think it is looming up?"

" 'Tis indeed I, Miss Sara."

"We were afraid you might be Uncle Oscar or his goons." Sara, carrying her lazaspade, hopped out of the skyvan.

"Ah, yes, lovable old Oscar O. Tenbrook." Roscoe made his tinny laughing sound. "I fear, dear child . . ." He interrupted himself to laugh and slap his metal knee.

Ka-bong!

Tim said, "You've been up to no good, right? It has to do with Sara's uncle."

"Should've thought of this at the outset," replied the time machine. " 'Twould have saved one and all a good deal of heartache. However, as I'm always telling Tom Edison whenever I drop in, you can't rush inspiration. It comes when it comes. Besides which, I couldn't have sprung this particular scam until now anyhow."

Sara approached. "Did you do something nasty to Uncle Oscar, the poor old man?"

"Poor old man? The old coot tried to have us killed or worse at various choice locations in the past. He even authorized them to try to destroy me."

"What exactly have you—"

"Uncle Oscar has a new profession," said the robot, producing another hearty laugh. "He's now a barrister."

"A lawyer?" said Tim.

"Yes, indeed. Uncle O.O. is now part of the firm of Dibner, Keese and Mermillion. An integral part." He guffawed, hugging himself. "Excuse my levity on such an occasion, folks. One should never let one's own jokes break one up. It's bad style. A point Lenny Bruce always makes whenever I drop in on him in this very city in the 1960s."

"What did you do to Uncle Oscar?" asked Sara.

"*Moi?* I did nothing, pet." The robot spread his hands wide. "The teleport platform it was that did the real job. Blended the old darlin' right in with Dibner, Keese and Mermillion. He's joined the group and is part of the comp."

"The chances," said Tim, "of such an accident happening twice to the same people is . . . how did you do it?"

"Easy, with only a few minor adjustments of the teleport platform they used to go to Cuba."

Sara eyed him. "Why were they journeying to Cuba, Uncle Oscar and his poor lawyers?"

Pong!

Roscoe snapped his fingers. "Doggone, missy, I'm telling this yarn all wrong. I should've given you the background before the punch line."

"You conned them somehow," accused Tim.

"In a manner of speaking. Although it was Doc Windmiller did most of the talking. He's back from Mexico, did you hear? He persuaded his latest wife to settle for the Aztec Treasure of Cibola instead of alimony. After he shipped her back to the sixteenth century to collect it, he was in an unusually cheerful mood," explained the robot. "When I suggested he pixphone your dear uncle, Miss Sara, and offer to sell you out, Doc Windmiller jumped at the chance to test his thespian abilities."

"You convinced Uncle Oscar the gold was in Cuba and not here?"

"Exactly, Tiny Tim. We persuaded the old dear that the loot had never reached Frisco but had been buried in Cuba by a nephew of Rodney Tenbrook's during the Spanish-American War." He coughed into his metal hand. "You see, nobody is easier to con than a crook. It seemed perfectly logical to O.O. Tenbrook that a basically loyal machine such as I could be bought. For a handsome fee."

Sara was silent and thoughtful for several seconds. "It's not exactly nice," she said. "What you did. Nor legal."

"Alas, no."

"But after all he tried to do to us . . . the hell with Uncle Oscar."

"May I now assist you in unearthing the treasure-laden Venus?" asked the time machine.

"I'll get you something to dig with," said Sara.