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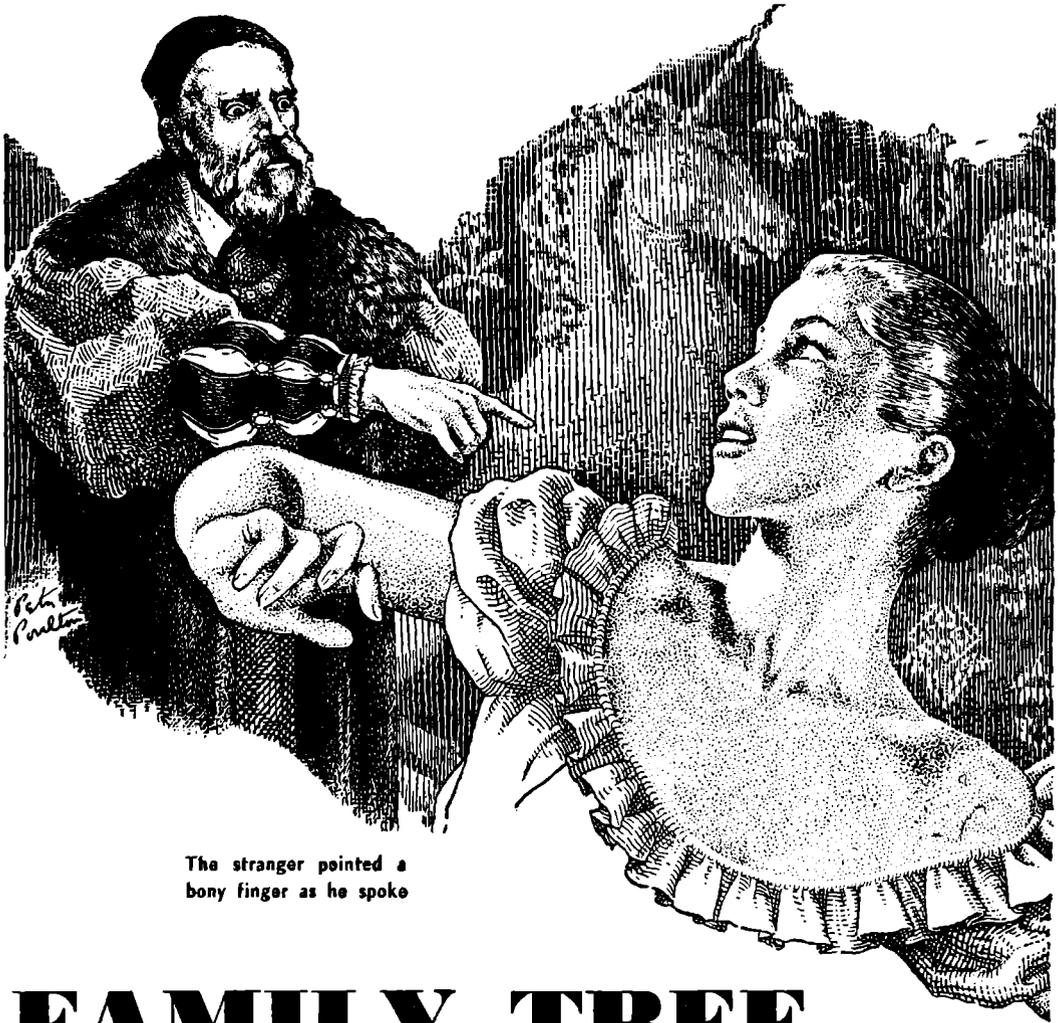
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The stranger pointed a bony finger as he spoke

# FAMILY TREE

By **BOYD ELLANBY**

**WE** HAVE come to the conclusion," said Professor Raphael Gilbert, "that all existence, whether past, present, or future, is simply a matter of probability."

Mrs. Gilbert turned the page of her book, and kept on reading. With her

free hand she fluffed out the curls of her bleached hair, and then twirled at the rings on her plump fingers.

"Suppose I pick up this pencil," said her husband. "I may choose to break it into two halves, or I may not. Perhaps the chances that I may break it

*When scientists try their hands at altering the past, they may find the old boys a little hard to handle. . . .*

are somewhat less than the chances of my leaving it intact. We may say, then, that the probability that an intact pencil will exist on this coffee table five minutes from now, is greater than the probability that two pieces of a broken pencil will exist. Each has a definite probability, and it is only in this sense that events exist in the future. We reasoned that the same principle might apply to the present as to the past. When our machine — Emmeline, what are you reading?"

His wife raised her eyes. "The *History of the Attelaths*." She turned another page.

Professor Gilbert threw the pencil onto the table, and clutched at his fringe of hair. He was a little man, short and thin. His voice was thin, too, but it was his habit to speak always with firmness and maximum volume.

"You know that book by heart," he said. "I am explaining to you the most tremendous discovery since nuclear fission, and you express no interest. Can't you forget the Attelaths for an hour?"

Emmeline shut the book, and picked up her knitting.

"It is not impossible that our new machine," her husband went on, "may be able to alter either the present or the past, as well as the future. When it is completed, in a day or two, I hope to have the evidence complete. The first trial won't be anything very ambitious; perhaps we'll just go back to yesterday and have a different horse win the Derby. If that is successful, we may try to probe a little into the future. To the dedicated student, my dear, all the mysteries of the universe will eventually reveal themselves."

Emmeline Attelath Gilbert held her knitting up to the lamp. "I'm afraid this wool is not exactly the right blue to match my eyes. But of course, the Attelath blue is such a *special* blue."

**P**ROFESSOR GILBERT felt his pulse begin to race, and his voice wavered. "A prophet is only without honor—" he

said. He reached for the book and hurled it across the room, where it hit the bookcase.

"Don't be childish, Raphael," said Mrs. Gilbert, "just because I get tired of listening to the details of your laboratory work. You always sound as if you were giving a lecture, and I do wish you wouldn't speak in garbled proverbs. You know I don't understand science, and yet you never want to listen to my own troubles. Can your miracle-working machine tell me what the probability is that I'll ever be able to join The Sons and Daughters of William the Conqueror?"

Her husband picked up the pencil and broke it in two. "Oh, Emmeline! Not that again!"

She began to cry. "I'm the only woman in the entire project who isn't a member, Rafe! I feel like an alien!"

"Then why don't you join and have done with it? You can trace your ancestry right back—"

"Yes, but only that one way! How can I admit to our friends that my own great-grandfather, twenty-six times removed, was a notorious dealer in unicorn's horns? Everyone would laugh at me. Everybody knows that the unicorn was a mythical beast, but even if it had ever been real, how could I admit that Roderick Attelath was arrested and put in prison, and sentenced to death because he sold *imitation* unicorn's horns, with a fraudulent guarantee? Oh, why couldn't Roderick Attelath have been a respectable man?"

"My dear Emmeline," said the Professor, "what can't be cured has to be put up with. Life ought to be bearable, even without membership in the club. I heartily wish, for the thousandth time, that the first Norman king of England had never existed. I am sick of ancestors, and I am particularly sick of the Sons and Daughters of William the Conqueror."

"And I'm sick of your science, and your eternal lectures, and your crazy time machines. I do think you might

show me a little sympathy, when all I want is to be able to hold up my head in our own community."

For ten minutes there was silence. Emmeline wiped at her eyes, and her husband played with the broken pencil. Then he looked up:

"Well, my dear, I've always had a sneaking admiration for the old scoundrel, disreputable though he may have been. But in ten years I've grown tired of having him always preempt the conversation. Suppose we simply abolish your great-grandpappy, twenty-six times removed."

"Don't try to be funny."

"There's many a true word spoken as a joke," said Professor Gilbert. "We will simply take the time segment in which he cornered the unicorn market, and decrease its probability to zero. Then he will never have done anything disgraceful, and you will no longer be ashamed to exhibit your family tree. I ought to be able to change something that happened in the Thirteenth Century just as readily as something that happened yesterday."

"You mean—"

"You must realize, of course, that although I may be able to abolish Roderick Attelath, I can't guarantee to provide anyone in his place who is more admirable. You might find yourself being descended from a pirate or a horse-thief, instead. Are you willing to take that chance?"

Her blue eyes were hopeful, and she smiled. "Pirates are romantic, and nobody minds horsethieves much, any more. I could always say he was really a sort of Robin Hood character, not really bad, just a rugged individualist. Yes, I'd take a chance. And if it's all a matter of chance, who knows? I might find myself descended from a baron, or at the very least some member of the British aristocracy. Nobody could be worse than a shady drug dealer. But are you serious, Raphael?"

"My dear Emmeline, in the ten years that you have lived with me, surely you

have learned that I do not make empty boasts. The proof of the pudding, you know, is in the baking. My abilities and my modesty are by-words at the laboratory. You remember, I'm sure, what I predicted about the hydrogen bomb. You must admit—"

"Yes. Yes, Raphael," said his wife.

"Very well. The question is a simple one of probability. You ask me to alter a certain probability in the past. And I tell you I will. What was the name of that horse that won the Derby yesterday?"

"*Futurity*, dear."

His smile was like a full moon. "Tomorrow night, *Futurity* will have come in last."

IT WAS a week later that Professor Gilbert came home very late for dinner. He hung up his hat on the hall stand, walked into the living-room, and slumped into his cushioned chair without a word. He did not even unfold the evening paper, waiting for him on the table. He only stared at the fireplace.

"What's the matter, Raphael?" said Mrs. Gilbert. "Did something go wrong at the laboratory?"

"Yes."

"Oh dear! And things have been going so well all this week! I was hoping that maybe today—"

He shook his head. "The best laid plans of mice and men, my dear, gang oft awry."

"But you were feeling so confident! You made *Futurity* come in last, and *Azimuth* won the Derby."

"I know. I was most hopeful. But today, I tried to go back to the year Twelve-sixty, which I had calculated as being about the time this grandpappy of yours began to take a particular interest in unicorn's horns."

"Well?"

"Well, I set the dials and turned on the juice, and then the machine blew out most of its tubes. It was only luck that I wasn't killed."

"But what in the world could have

happened? Did you make a miscalculation?"

"Your husband, Emmeline, does not make miscalculations."

"Well, then, the tubes must have been defective. It's only a problem of getting new tubes, isn't it?"

Professor Gilbert frowned. "It wasn't a matter of defective tubes, whatever it may have been. Those tubes had been properly checked before they were put in the machine. They were all good, and with the kind of circuit I designed, seventy-five per cent of the tubes just couldn't blow. It isn't possible. Too many protective relays. It was most peculiar."

"You look awfully worried."

"I'm not worried. It's purely a technical matter, I'm sure. Your grandpappy is just proving to be a more difficult problem than I had anticipated."

Mrs. Gilbert tightened her lips. "I wish you wouldn't use that vulgar expression 'grandpappy'. You know he's not that closely related to me. He's simply a very undesirable remote ancestor. But if you can't do anything about him with your machine, why not admit it, and not lay the blame on my family? I might have known you'd give up."

"A Gilbert never gives up! Tomorrow I'll begin again. I'll put in extra heavy tubes this time, designed to carry fifty per cent more current, and we'll see what happens. Don't worry, Emmeline. It's always darkest just before the daylight."

The telephone rang. Mrs. Gilbert answered it. "What's that you say? Signed who? Oh, I think that must be for my husband. Just a minute."

Professor Gilbert took up the receiver. "Yes, this is he. Would you read that again, please? Would you read those signatures again, please. . . . You'd better deliver that telegram. No, the mail would be too slow. Right away, please."

He was waiting at the door, and he snatched the yellow envelope and opened it, while the delivery boy lingered.

"Any reply, mister?"

"No. No reply."

HE DID NOT move a muscle until the hall door slammed, then he sank into his chair and read the message aloud:

"Professor Raphael Gilbert, Twenty-six Myrtle Street, New York, New York. You are hereby admonished to cease and desist from all further attempts to interfere in the life and pursuits of the honorable Roderick Attelath, our friend. Signed, Roger Bacon and Albertus Magnus."

"I don't care what you tell people about your own family," said Mrs. Gilbert, "but I do wish you wouldn't discuss mine with outsiders, and allow them to make fun of me. Where do you meet people with names like that, anyhow?"

Raphael Gilbert spluttered, and his lips trembled. The sounds he made finally became distinguishable. "I didn't—I don't know any—I never heard of—Just a minute!"

He plunged into his study and rushed to the big bookcase. He scanned the shelves and threw books to the floor. "Where is it? Why can't I ever find a book when I want it?"

"Where is what?"

"Never mind. Here it is." He snatched it from the shelf and turned to the index, but his hand shook so violently that he could barely read the print.

"Holy hydrogen!" he said. "It is the same century! Did you send me this wire, Emmeline?"

"Me?"

"But who else would know?"

"Why are you so excited, Raphael? You look quite wild. Who have you told about my ancestors?"

"Quiet, and let me read! Roger Bacon . . . Albertus Magnus . . . The greatest alchemists of history . . . thirteenth century . . . They were contemporaries of your great-grandpappy Attelath!"

"Then they couldn't have sent you that telegram, Raphael. They're dead!"

He read on, mumbling the phrases.

"Experiment . . . They predicted ships without sails . . . chariots without horses . . . the elixir of life . . . flying machines . . . transmutation of gold . . . Oh, I'm losing my mind!"

"Rafe, Rafe!" She patted his shoulder. "Somebody's playing a joke on us. Those men have been dead for centuries."

He wiped his glistening forehead. "I need a drink."

She brought the brandy from the cupboard, and he poured and drank a good two inches.

"There. You're right, my dear. I mustn't let myself get so keyed up. Just for a minute there, those names— Alchemy is a powerful word, I guess. But as you say, the men are dead, and anyway, surely they never had the power . . . The telegram must be some sort of crazy joke."

"Perhaps, Rafe, you'd better stay at home tomorrow, and rest? You don't seem quite yourself."

Professor Gilbert straightened to his full height. "Rest? Tomorrow? You do not know your husband, Emmeline. Tomorrow I rebuild the machine!"

**T**HE following night he was subdued. He ate very little dinner, and afterwards he sat silent for a long time. Emmeline was afraid to speak. After an hour, he poured himself a brandy, and roused himself from thought.

"Well, my dear, it didn't work."

"The machine?"

"Yes. Again, it didn't work. Several times we have set it for a chosen time sector, with complete success, just as we did in the case of *Futurity*. But whenever I set it for the time sector occupied by that drug-selling ancestor of yours, it simply blows its gaskets. I've never seen anything like it. But I've thought of another way to get around the difficulty. What we really need is a one-kilovolt tube on the output stage which will give it a boost sufficient to carry through any time sector in the surrounding thousand years, back-

wards, forwards, or sidewise, against any resistance."

"What do you mean, resistance? How could there be any resistance a thousand years ago? You're talking nonsense."

He jumped. "Out of the mouths of infants," he said. "Yes. Yes, of course I'm talking nonsense."

"Your friends at the lab may not mind, but I do wish that when you're talking with me you'd learn to separate fact and fantasy. I do not enjoy—"

She stopped. She knew, suddenly, that they were not alone. A bewhiskered old gentleman whom she had never seen before was standing with one elbow leaning on the television cabinet. A pill-box hat sat rakishly on his head, and the black robe over his wiry shoulders hung to the floor. His eyes, a peculiar, vivid blue, peered with intensity at Professor Gilbert.

The stranger pointed a bony finger and spoke, in a language which sounded to the astonished ears of the Professor like Latin, but a Latin which he could not understand at all. The shrewd eyes observed the gaping mouth of his host, and without a pause, he switched to English.

"My name is Roderick Attelath, the progenitor of the timid Emmeline," said the hoarse voice. "I am come to admonish you. Cease immediately your attempts to interfere with my life and my arts. You are playing with toys which you do not understand. I warn you, the unicorn is not a mythical beast! I perceive that you have some power to tamper with events in other time sectors, but I must inform you that I, too, have powers, and I have two friends whose powers are even greater than mine. Shoulder to shoulder, we three resist you. Does not the world still tremble at the names of Roger Bacon of Oxford, and Albertus Magnus of Cologne?"

For one chaotic moment, Professor Gilbert wondered if he had been drinking too much. He clutched at his fringe of hair, and tried to remember. No, he

had had only one glass of brandy. But he must be logical. He was not drunk. If he was not drunk, then he must be imagining the presence of the old gentleman in the black robe. If he was imagining such an impossible thing, he must be having a nervous breakdown. Had Emmeline heard the voice? He wondered. Could she see the stranger? He looked at her and knew she did see him.

"Well?" said Roderick Attelath.

Professor Gilbert managed to relax his paralyzed throat. "Sir," he said, "I do not believe that you are Roderick Attelath. I do not know who you are, or where you found your funny clothes, or how you got into my living-room. But in any case, you cannot intimidate me. I will not have my scientific work interfered with, and no Gilbert can be coerced by any person from the past, the present, or the future."

The figure in the corner fastened his fur cape more snugly around his neck, and straightened his bowed shoulders. "It is war, then. So be it. I must go."

**H**E WENT. That is, Professor Gilbert blinked, and in the thousandth of a second it took him to blink, the old man had disappeared.

Emmeline stood up. She swayed, and clutched at the back of the chair.

"Raphael, what— Should we— I'd never have believed—"

He put his arm around her shoulders. "Let's not get worked up, my dear. We've all heard about collective hallucinations. We've just been concentrating our thoughts too much on one subject, and whatever we think we saw, we didn't see at all."

"I suppose not. But I wish I hadn't seen it."

"I do not feel in the least intimidated. I shall have my machine ready for action again tomorrow, or the day after."

It was three days later that Professor Gilbert came home early for dinner. He tossed his hat at the hook on the hall stand, scored a hit, and strode with firm steps to his accustomed chair.

"Tomorrow, Emmeline, you may get ready to send in your revised family tree. I've found the trouble, and tomorrow at ten we'll turn on the juice. It was a silly thing—a flaw in the circuit, after all. Too much load on a single tube. Simplest thing in the world."

Mrs. Gilbert glowed. "Thank you, Raphael darling. I knew you could do it if you really tried, with a mind like yours. Won't it be wonderful? Just what will happen? When tomorrow night comes, will the genealogical record show that Roderick Attelath was a perfectly respectable man?"

"Perhaps. Or there may not be any Attelath on your chart at all. It's hard to be sure. Remember, he may be replaced, and you may find yourself tracing your descent from the Great William through a smuggler or a pirate."

"Or a baron, or a prince! However it works out, it's sure to be an improvement over a dishonest dealer in unicorn's horn." She kissed his cheek. "Until tomorrow, then!"

Suddenly she grabbed at the mantle, her knuckles tight and white, her fingernails digging into the wood. She stared across the room. She cried out.

"Rafe! Rafe! I never noticed— Rafe, look! I can see right through the bookcase!" She stretched out a trembling hand. "I can see the roses on the wallpaper behind it." Her voice swelled to a shriek. "And I can see through you!"

Raphael Gilbert turned towards the bookcase, and a look of pure wonder came into his face. But his scientist's mind did not falter.

"There were giants in those days," he murmured. "Yes, Emmeline, I can see through you, too, and I can see right through the wall of our house."

"But what's happening to us?"

"Your grandpappy Attelath is stronger than we thought. It looks to me as if our probability, here, is slipping."

His voice dwindled.

"In fact, the probability of our being here at all, now, is probably less than zero, point zero, zero, zero, ze—"