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FOREVER IS NOT SO LONG

By F. Anton Reeds

- Given that much-sought knowledge of the future, how many would have courage to enjoy what life was to be theirs?

Illustrated by Orban

September, 1931.

The lights of Europe still burned.

The black hulk of Ploving Manor was broken by the squares of brilliant, friendly light from its many windows that gave the old country seat almost a cheerful aspect. From the stone terrace to the south of Professor Ploving's study long strings of bobbing, soft-glowing lanterns stretched across the close-cropped lawn to the dark outline of the orchard. Beyond the orchard was the pounding beat of the Channel.

On a platform under the lights young men and young women danced to the strange new throbbing music from the Americas. It was a pulsing tom-tom beat, that music, that called for a measure of gay abandon and a great deal of muscular dexterity. But not quite the same sort of abandon that their mothers and father had known. For those lovely women at the terrace tables and the gray-templed men at their sides had been the fabulous, almost forgotten "lost generation" of an almost forgotten "post-war" period. These young-

sters dancing under the English stars and pressing hands in the orchard's shadow were the fortunate chosen ones who would build at last the brave new world that had been their fathers' dream.

Stephen Darville stood in the shadows of a great clump of rhododendrons at the terrace edge watching the swirl of color on the lawn, his eyes searching the laughing crowd for a sight of Jean. His eyes found her and followed her across the lawn. When she came near he called her name.

She hurried to him and took his hands in a friendly tug.

"One dance together. Steve, before you go out to the workshop."

He shook his head.

"Just one," she pleaded.

He pressed her hands, watching the way the stiff sea breeze ruffled the gay silk kerchief at her throat.

"There's no time. Your father's waiting for me now."

"Confound father, confound you and confound science."

She laughed, but there had been a note of real annoyance in her voice.

Darville looked at the soft curve of her throat and the lighted sheen of her close-cropped brown hair and beyond the moving figures on the lawn. He suddenly wanted it all; the music and the laughter and the gaiety and the feel of her in his arms. But he wanted the other, too; the thing that awaited him out there in John Ploving's workshop. The feel of metal cold in his hands, metal that his own hands had helped to shape, and the crazy swaying of the thin needles on the control board before him. The age-old call of the twin, conflicting fires in the blood of youth—Duty and Romance.

She, too, was looking out toward the dancing couples. He took her impulsively in his arms and for a moment she clung to him.

"You can come back to me later on this evening when you and father are through," she whispered. He wanted to crush her to him, wanted to whisper "If I do come back, if there is a 'later on this evening' for me." But he only pressed her fingers lightly.

"Save me a dance," he said, and hurried away down the narrow path to Professor Ploving's shop.

The things that Professor Ploving and his young assistant did there in the shop were known only to themselves; even those in the immediate family had long ago learned to ask no questions and, above all, never to "snoop." Ploving was no more immune than others to longings for fame, but years of observing with his keen, analytical mind the affairs of men both in and out of laboratories, had taught him caution. A professor of the august University of London, even a professor of inde-

pendent wealth and impeccable family, could hardly dare lay himself open to ridicule.

Had he been seeking to release atomic energy he could have spoken glibly and weightily of corpuscular radiations and electrodes and atom-smashing and even the news-reporters would have managed to splash him upon the Sunday feature pages as a brainy and adventurous fellow and a chap to know. But let him once point to his much discussed mathematical equations on his theory of the time-curve and suggest that he intended to utilize his theory in a most practical way and the world, he knew, would shout "time machine" and "crackpot." For time machines, in 1931, were things to be left to H. G. Wells and to the rising crop of talented and imaginative English and American fantasy writers. It was no doings for a man of action and, above all, for a man of science.

Steve Darville closed the workshop door behind him, muting the tom-tom rhythms of the music from the terrace lawn.

The Ploving Tube stood with its small door, not unlike the door of a Channel transport plane, swinging open. The professor was beside it, wiping his glasses on a linen kerchief, trying to hide the nervousness that made the knotty blue veins of his hands jerk spasmodically. He had thrown open the small window at the south wall and through it Steve caught a glimpse of the rooftops of the newly-built Ploving Laboratories which lay just under the hill, almost beside the Channel. The laboratories that were to mean so much—or nothing.

Intricate calculations, founded upon his own theories of the "time-curve," had been utilized by Professor Ploving in creation of the Ploving Tube, a cylinder most undramatic in appearance. But the heart of the tube was the tiny Ploving Button, a small incised mechanism no more than an inch in thickness and a couple of inches in diameter. If the tube were to be a success, it must depend upon that one tiny button.

The button in the present tube was the result of nearly ten years of intensive labor. If it failed, another five to ten years would be needed to duplicate the experiment. According to his figures, Ploving felt the button capable of sending the tube no more than ten years into the future and return.

The professor's plan, based upon that single assumption, was unique.

Already the first wing of the new Ploving Laboratories was complete. There, in the building that would absorb nearly his entire fortune, the carefully assembled corps of young experimenters would work night and day to perfect the Ploving Button, although they could only guess at its ultimate purpose. Within ten years, if things went well, Ploving felt that a button should have been developed capable of opening the entire time-curve to the adventurous exploration of mankind.

"But I'm an old man," the professor had asserted in the confidence of the little workshop. "I've no time to be dawdling about for a decade waiting for something to happen."

The Ploving plan was as simple as it was astounding. He meant to use that single button already created to go ten years into the future, take the finished products of his laboratories—the Ploving Button of ten years hence—return with them to his own time and proudly present them to their creators, the technicians who were so far only fumbling with the problem of their perfection.

The technicians would "save" themselves ten years of labor and the new sweeping highway into the future and the past would be open to mankind within the life of its discoverer.

Only cold, inexorable logic kept the old man from insisting that he should be at the controls when the Ploving Tube met its first test. But logic was a god to whom the professor could always bow gracefully, if grudgingly, and logic certainly dictated the need for youthful co-ordination and strength during those fateful moments that could advance the scope of man's knowledge by a decade.

Ploving had conveyed his decision to his younger colleague only the day before in his characteristic way.

"You're elected, young man, by a unanimous vote of two."

Steve Darville, gazing past Professor Ploving to the moonlit scene beyond the window, wondered what changes ten years would have wrought. There could be little alteration in the immediate vicinity of the workshop, he knew, for the cautious professor had taken no chances. His iron law had decreed that nothing be erected or remodeled or torn away in the vicinity of the workshop; the provision, as an added precaution, being incorporated as the first item in his will.

The professor fumbled with his spectacles, managed at last to place them upon his nose at an unaccustomed angle, and coughed hesitatingly.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," Darville told him, and turned to the tube.

It was a moment made for drama, but there was no time for drama. He climbed into the narrow tube, strapped himself into the awkward jump-seat and carefully checked the dial readings on the control panel before him. He nodded without glancing out toward the professor, jerked his hand in a quick salute and closed the tube's door.

For a single moment he thought of the music and laughter out on the lawn beyond, the laughter and music he was missing tonight as he had been missing them for so many nights on end. But in the moment that he eased the control stick toward

him he knew that it had been a small price for this moment. One hour more, less than an hour, and there would be time again for music and laughter and cool arms—or no longer need of them.

The thin needles vibrated to life, swayed crazily across the faces of compact dials and as suddenly hesitated and stopped. To the man within the tube it seemed impossible that anything could have happened in those seconds. It was ludicrous; a moment more, he knew, and he must step out to face the heartbreak in the eyes of the kindly old man waiting just outside those thin metal walls.

To open that door required a kind of courage Darville had never needed before and for seconds he hesitated, prolonging the moment. What could he say to the broken man at the other side of that door, what would there be to say? His white-knuckled fist twisted the latch, threw the door open almost rudely.

The workshop was dark, save for soft moonlight that flooded across a section of the floor from a gaping hole in the roof and farther wall. Rubble lay in heaps over the shop; broken plaster and crumbled bricks and twisted, jagged fingers of steel.

He had to pick his way among them as he sought the old familiar path beyond that gaping splotch of moonlight.

The path, too, was strewn with rubble and beyond the path a black, pitted hole yawned among the broken, uprooted trees that had been the orchard—was it only a few minutes ago? Darville rubbed a hand across his face, pulling roughly at his cheeks with thumb and fingers. Instinctively he wheeled toward the booming reverberation of the Channel, toward the costly Ploving Laboratories that were his goal.

He felt suddenly sick and tired and old.

They, too, were gone; a single tall chimney, like a blackened finger against the moon-swept sky, was all that marked the site of the first great sprawling wing that had been the crux of Ploving's dream.

Ploving, Jean, where were they?

Blindly, almost running, Darville stumbled up the path toward the south lawn, then stood weak and trembling at the edge of the twisted, fire-scorched orchard, gazing toward the bulk of Ploving Manor across the lawn that had been, for him, only minutes ago aglow with the soft light of swinging lanterns.

The manor was in ruins; a black, blind, toothless hag squatting in sullen anger against the rolling meadow—windowless, fire-charred, forlorn. As though his body moved to some other will than his own, Darville walked slowly across that barren lawn toward the house.

He was almost within one of the gaping doorways, the doorway to old Ploving's study, before his keen eyes caught the faint glimmer of yellow

light from a single crack at the foot of the cellar stairs. Light meant human beings who could tell him the things he dreaded to hear yet must know. Running down the steps he tried the door and, finding it locked, beat upon it with his fists.

The crack of light suddenly expanded and through the partially opened doorway Darville saw the ugly snout of an automatic trained at his ribs. His eyes followed the uniformed arm upward to the insignia on the shoulder and to the stiff, tired face of the young officer who eyed him questioningly. The automatic waved him inside and the door was shut quickly behind him.

Within the smoke-filled room several men, all in uniform, sat about a table. Together they turned to stare at the newcomer. But it was the face of the lanky major with the shrapnel scar jagged across a cheek, that held Stephen Darville riveted. The major's lips were opened, as if to speak, and his eyes dilated strangely.

Darville watched the man shake his head to clear away the sudden paralysis; saw his eyes soften.

"Sorry," the major said, rising. "Terribly sorry. But fact is, you look remarkably like a chap I soldiered with in Flanders. Died the last night of Dunkirk. Blown to bits. Shame, too. A brilliant fellow. Scientist of promise, I believe, before the war. You're a good ten years or so younger of course, but the resemblance is uncanny."

The lanky major hesitated awkwardly.

"I say, you couldn't be— But no, I remember he was an only child."

The tension had broken. A stubby fellow in captain's uniform turned to his superior officer.

"You don't mean Darville, do you? Steve Darville?"

The major nodded.

"Funny," the captain said. "I never met Darville, you know. But last fortnight I bumped into his wife. Ploving her name was. Plucky. Air warden in the Dover area. Caught hell there. Lost an arm eight months ago, but do you know, she wouldn't quit. Not her. Back on duty and one of the best they've got."

Steve Darville stumbled blindly to the door and up the steps. Out on the path he did not turn to look back at the shell of the manor, black and gaunt and desolate against the sky.

His hands shook as he reset the dial readings and pulled the control. He saw the needles away and dance. He was hardly aware of it when they ceased swaying. Numbly he reached for the door latch.

Inside the workshop was the bright glow of bulbs. A stiff breeze blew in at the open window. Instinctively, Darville glanced at his wrist watch. He had been away, in that future that was not his future, for less than three-quarters of an hour.

Professor Ploving's eyes met his, read the frustration there. The older man said nothing, but put a hand out to the smooth surface of the tube and buried his face in his arm.

Darville slipped quietly out of the workshop and up the familiar path, moonlight-flooded between the orchard trees. At the orchard's edge he halted; stood listening to the gay abandon of the music and the voices, searching that blob of light and color for Jean. She was standing at the edge of the lawn, a little apart from the others.

Stephen Darville went to her quickly, smothered her cry of pleased surprise with a quick kiss and led her to the jerry-built dance floor. Together they caught the tom-tom rhythm, moved into the circling stream of the dancers.

"Steve," she said, her voice eager, "do you have to go back tonight?"

"Not tonight or ever," he said.

"Steve!"

"From now on, young one. I have time only for you."

"Steve," she cried. Her arm pressed him, her hand squeezed his. "We'll be the happiest people in the world, Steve. The happiest, gayest, most in love two people in the world. And we'll go on being that, Steve—forever."

Two trumpets were taking a hot chorus, un-muted, their notes sharp and high and quivering.

"Forever," he said.

THE END.